CHAPTER 5

CRUCIAL DESCRIPTION OF A SOCIAL, CULTURAL, POLITICAL APPROACH:

PART I – Sumaiya and the Imagined Hypothetical Situation

1. INTRODUCTION

To exemplify a crucial description I have selected Sumaiya Desai’s case. It was the only case that engaged a multiplicity of projects in one classroom. Sumaiya was dedicated and committed to both the approach and to her diverse pupils. She was deeply reflective, keenly interested in research, produced considerable data on her own, and ran the project for almost the entire six week period of teaching practice. The decision to confine the study to this particular case was influenced by the wealth of data available; and because the production of the crucial description seemed to allow for transparency, transformacy, exemplarity and generativity.

The description is presented chronologically with this chapter focusing on the account that precedes Sumaiya’s entry into the school, the imagined hypothetical situation of mainly her third and fourth year of study before teaching practice began, and as she prepares to enter school. Hence, this chapter makes visible how a social, cultural, political approach to a school mathematics curriculum was introduced and developed in teacher education through the data related to Sumaiya. In the next chapter the description focuses on her work in the arranged situation as Sumaiya attempts to realise project work in a mathematics classroom. The reader, without doubt, observes the imagined hypothetical situation and the happenings in the arranged situation through my eyes as I make the selection and organise the data, and through the lens of the theoretical landscape. However, if this description is indeed crucial then the possibility remains open for the reader to see something different in the description as I preserve the voices of participants, while also rendering my own interpretations open for scrutiny. To this end I offer a broader sweep of the data.

This crucial description of project work as it was unfolded in Sumaiya’s classroom is constructed from a wide range of data sources (as described in Chapter 2) that refer specifically to Sumaiya’s work and thoughts. It includes: data collected during the course work when student teachers undertook a variety of different tasks (see also Vithal, 1997); notes of preparation sessions held prior to teaching practice; a pre-teaching practice interview held at the university; a pre-project interview held
at the school; transcripts of 7 classroom lessons video or audio taped; 8 post lesson interviews; a post-teaching practice interview with the school teacher; a post-teaching practice interview with Sumaiya held at the university; project report produced by Sumaiya for assessment; all lesson plans and notes produced by Sumaiya during the project; transcription notes by Sumaiya on a pre-project interview with the school teacher; responses and analysis of a pre-project questionnaire administered to the pupils and post project interviews with pupil groups; transcription notes from lessons audio-taped by Sumaiya; pupil’s written work and diaries, group work charts; Sumaiya’s journal; videos of a focus group interview and of a presentation made to the Ph.D. students as a reference group; background questionnaire profiles of Sumaiya and the school teacher; notes, poster and paper prepared for conference and seminar presentations; and the researcher’s journal. It is also important to add that although I present data in this description only from that related to Sumaiya, the different levels of analysis in this thesis are not free of what I have experienced, observed and reflected on in the other projects for which I also have data. I do, however, confine myself to evidence from this description for the analysis that follows.

The development of student teachers’ imagined hypothetical situation began in the third year of their mathematics education major when they began to learn about a social, cultural, political approach to the curriculum (among others), and continued into the fourth and final year of their bachelor degree (see Chapter 2; Vithal, 1997). This part of the description is important because it serves to frame, explain and better understand Sumaiya’s actions and reflections later in the arranged situation. It makes visible Sumaiya’s imagined hypothetical concerns, thoughts and reasoning as she proceeds in constructing classroom curriculum experiences. Through this data, it is possible to discern changes in student teachers’ imagined hypothetical situation as we approach the classroom. For example, in their third year, as they envisioned themselves as practicing teachers in a distant future, they constructed a “theoretical” or “ideal” practice. In their fourth year, with the teaching practice session imminent, a somewhat different set of constraints and issues emerged and were prioritized. Once in the classroom, on meeting the teacher and pupils, these changed again. Each of these phases is captured in this chapter and demonstrated through Sumaiya’s work.

2. ABOUT SUMAIYA

From her first year at university, I was aware of Sumaiya in my mathematics education class, in the way that some students make their presence felt. She sought my assistance and engaged me both inside and outside the lecture room. By her own admission, she was initially scared of doing mathematics education as a major at university and constantly sought advice about her programme choices and progress. I watched her grow from a timid first year student to a confident and critical final year student, a period through which we shared numerous conversations. She spoke openly and honestly about her growth, both personal and academic, and questioned me about the choices I had made in my life. Sumaiya spoke of how even at home