

A Response to *From Another Angle*

By Elaine Replansky Smith

[Elaine Smith is a Learning Support Teacher for 3rd graders in a Pennsylvania public school.]

Quotations:

Margaret Himley (Chapter 6, *From Another Angle*)

- “The purpose of the Descriptive Review is not to fix or explain that child, but to make the child more visible by coming to understand him or her more fully and complexly as a particular thinker and learner.” (pg. 127)
- “It’s hard to value their difference” (pg. 127)
- “She and the other participants share a collective act of learning in giving each other the respectful time and attention the processes require and in rewarding that effort with understanding and renewed spirit.” (pg. 134)

Response:

In a way, the Descriptive Review process goes against what I am asked to do daily. Specifically, I am asked to collect data about “special needs” students that I teach reading and math to. The “data” I am asked to collect on a student weekly or monthly are: DRA levels (which includes comprehension on given stories and an instructional level, an oral reading fluency test (which is collected by how many words correctly read in a one minute time period), digits correct per minute on leveled computation tests, Key Math formal assessments, and GRADE/GMADE formal assessments (group reading or math diagnostic exams). I give the tests, I analyze them, I chart them, I file them. The results lack what I am really looking for. What is going on with this learner? How do they think? How can I reach them? What has happened before they were my student? What will happen when he/she leaves my class? I am responsible for proving that a student is in need of specially designed instruction. I need to prove without a doubt that there is something “wrong” with the child. The tests (with the exception of the Key Math test) give no indication what to do with the data collected. My heart or instinct tells me to question the assessments, look beyond numbers and statistics, and do what the learner needs. It is my intuition that drives me and, I feel, makes me a strong educator.

I wish I had more time to spend to really look and listen to my students. I also wish that there was less time assessing, leaving more time for teaching. There is always another agenda. I have to collect the data. The first quotation that struck me in Himley’s chapter was “The purpose of the Descriptive Review is not to fix or explain that child, but to make the child more visible by coming to understand him or her more fully and complexly as a particular thinker and learner.” (pg. 127) I love it! I could have the space to actually just explore, to have input, and to grow as an educator. I can not get out of my district mandates, I do them as a good employee does, but I spend every possible moment making what I consider good use of my time. I talk to my students. I think about their successes and difficulties. I use my gut and ignore the data charts. This led me to another passage from Himley that stood out for

me. “She and the other participants share a collective act of learning in giving each other the respectful time and attention the processes require and in rewarding that effort with understanding and renewed spirit.” (pg. 134) Sounds like an educational spa day.

The second quotation I selected from Himley was “It’s hard to value their difference” (pg. 127). I went to a school for my last two years of high school for students with “learning differences”, or learning disabilities, as most commonly known. Our “differences” were never considered to be something “wrong” or something to be “fixed”. We were taught to explore ways that helped us be successful. I know I write better on a computer, where I am able to write and erase and spell check to my heart’s content. There was never one way to learn at my school and never one way to demonstrate something you accomplished. Why should someone have to pay \$25,000 for someone to be taught the way they learn? Shouldn’t all students be set up for success rather than failure?