

The Effective Principal

Book Review by Gina Kaplan, Pennsylvania

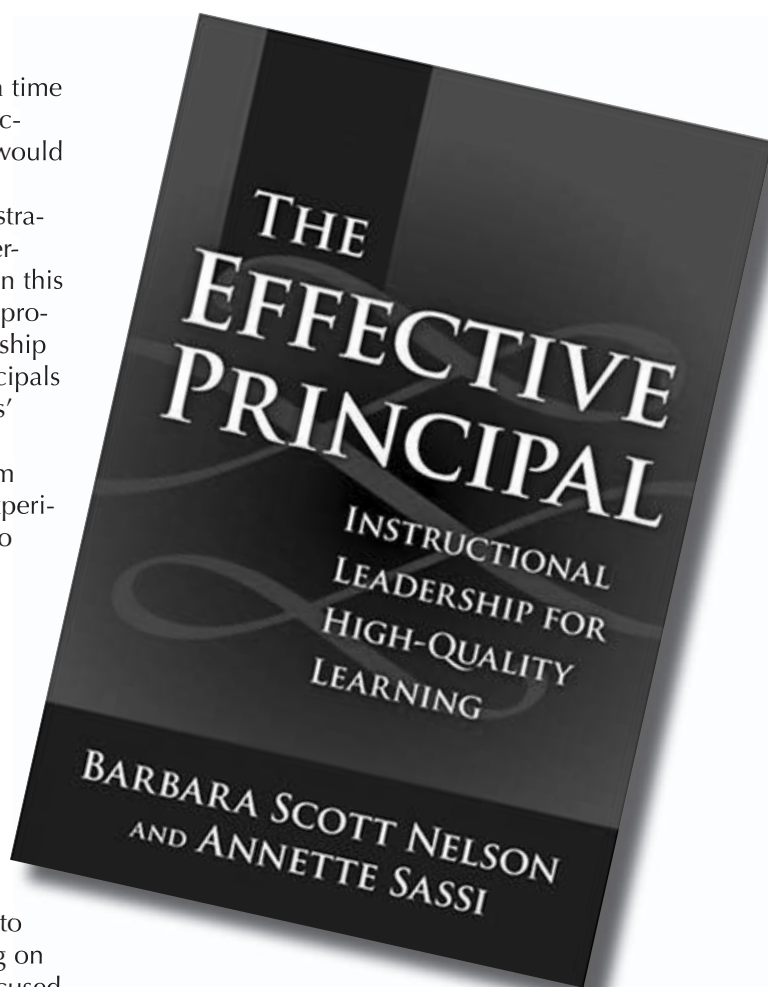
I received my administrative certification at a time when principals were expected to be instructional leaders. I thought I knew what that would look like but, as a first year principal, I found myself easily getting caught up in the “administrative” rather than the “academic” track of leadership. *The Effective Principal* pulled me back. In this book, Barbara Scott Nelson and Annette Sassi provide concrete examples of instructional leadership by investigating the way in which several principals observe and provide feedback to their teachers’ math instruction.

Educators, just like the students with whom they work, vary in the prior knowledge and experience they bring to the table. When it comes to the study and teaching of mathematics, some elementary teachers shy away from skills that they themselves are not comfortable with. Administrators with similar apprehensions might observe a math lesson with a superficial awareness of conceptual understanding and focus more on whether or not students were able to complete the task or solve the problems.

In mathematics, conceptual understanding must support algorithmic skills. In *The Effective Principal*, Nelson and Sassi take us into several classrooms where teachers are working on mathematics instruction. Each case study is focused on the principal’s observation, understanding and feedback to the teacher. Nelson and Sassi discuss how the principal’s level of content knowledge impacts the focus of the observation and the feedback provided to the teacher. In each case a deeper understanding of pedagogy and content leads to more focused feedback to the teacher, greater impact to teaching and learning, and improved student success.

I was contemplating my instructional leadership after reading *The Effective Principal*. As I worked with my third-grade teachers to review their benchmark data, they identified a weakness in the areas of place values and subtraction with regrouping. One teacher insisted that she “teaches” the concept every day (equating additional practice with re-teaching). Another seemed more open to trying an alternative approach. Although both stated they had used manipulatives in the past, they were wary of going back to hands-on with the State test looming in the background.

With Nelson and Sassi in mind, I continued to push the conversation trying to identify where the



conceptual understanding of these third graders had broken down. I questioned how continuing to provide algorithmic practice, which had not been successful for the past six months, would help prepare students for the test let alone for future learning in mathematics. The teachers finally came up with a plan for addressing the two areas of weakness and a cooperative way of supporting both classes.

I believe that *The Effective Principal* is a wonderful tool to help administrators become true instructional leaders and learners. As such, Nelson and Sassi state, “they engage in instructional leadership from a stance of inquiry, that is, a stance of curiosity about how children learn, how teachers teach, why certain instructional strategies work the way they do, or why the teachers in the schools have such a variety of ideas about instructional practice.” ■

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