April 3, 1974, is a date I will always remember. It was the day an F5 tornado demolished my new home of only six months. I was 10 years old with five younger brothers and sisters. Dinner was in the oven, and we were playing in the driveway collecting hail. At that time, we had no idea that hail was sometimes a precursor to violent tornadoes. As my mother was finishing her phone conversation with my grandmother, she called us to the dinner table. Then suddenly the phone went dead. She heard a loud noise, which she later described as a train, and looked out the back door and saw the tornado coming. She yelled into the kitchen for us to run to the basement; we did. As soon as my dad reached the last step, the house was blown away. Walking up the steps and seeing daylight where a house once was will change your perspective on natural disasters forever.

Many of my students will also have a date, August 29, 2005, engraved in their mind. Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast and destroyed a region. Unlike a tornado that hits suddenly, the fear and panic of an approaching hurricane starts days earlier. Two of my students, twins named Tyron and Byron, retell the story of their exhausting 15 hour car ride to safety in Houston, while one of my girls, Nenisha, tells of the harrowing five days in the Superdome without food, water and, as she likes to point out, deodorant. The physical pain and mental anguish endured by the students before the hurricane was exacerbated after the hurricane. I do not need to recount the terrible atrocities that were endured and the many mistakes that were made. The fact that so many of the students have survived and are forging a new life for themselves is a testament to their resilience.

For well over six months after the tornado, my three brothers, two sisters, parents and I lived with my grandparents. We slept three to a bed, but we were with family. My grandparents’ home was close enough that I could still go to my same school. After the storm, mom found my school uniform waving like a flag from the top of a tree branch. I was excited about not having school, as if it was a snow day, not realizing the stability and security that school provided me. Nevertheless, mom knew, just as I know because of my experience, that providing a safe and secure school environment would be a key for the students of Hurricane Katrina.

Before Nenisha was even out of the Super Dome in New Orleans, Tyron and Byron were already registering for school. The twins were eager to get into a routine at school and after they saw the football program, were ready to play. They had lots of attention thrown on them immediately with newspaper articles and television morning shows. They became an asset to the community and carved a niche for themselves. Others have not been so lucky.

Over the next month, Louisiana students would come and attend our and other schools in the Houston area. As they struggled to find a place to live and survive, school was secondary to their basic needs. I worked with my students in trying to create a nurturing environment and a place where they could feel safe, and maybe for 50 minutes, be a teenager. We talked about New Orleans schools and how they were different from Eagle High School. I remember Byron telling me about a new student from Dallas at their old school in New Orleans. Everyday he was beaten up by the kids until he went back to Dallas. He laughed and said, “We are tough.”

William, who went to the same school as the twins, said, “My high school experience has changed because of Katrina by being in another location. My education has also changed because we get books in Houston. In New Orleans, we didn’t bring books home. All we had were class copies. And, the students were fighting everyday.”

Many conversations with students from New Orleans about losing their homes, their possessions and their school, revealed how they were frustrated, tired and felt helpless. I did not find it surprising when fights broke out at many of the Houston area schools. So why were others surprised that this was happening on campuses? These were (continued on page 18)
The Effective Principal

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” role 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 problem.

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 context 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 weary 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 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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