# Testing hunches about low achievement

*This extract is modified from the paper Timperley, H.S. (2011). Knowledge and the leadership of learning. Leadership and Policy in Schools.10, 1-26. 2011*

This Auckland school was participating in professional development in writing using an inquiry process. The principal was particularly skilled in eliciting, testing and challenging teachers’ hunches about low achievement.

The conversation below was recorded for research purposes at the request of the researcher. During the recorded meeting the principal challenged the teachers’ expectations of some Pasifika students and tested the hunch with them that the topics they asked the students to write about were likely to be uninteresting to the students and that the way they were teaching may be contributing to the students’ low achievement. He began:

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| Principal: | When you first saw the writing results for the group in March what was your first reaction? How did you interpret that data? |
| Teacher 1: | It reinforces what I had seen in their first writing [assessment] for me that there was little structure in the surface features … so it was in my opinion very low but predictable. |
| Principal: | So it reinforced what you had already picked up in the first weeks. …. So let’s have a look at what’s been happening in the classroom between these assessments. |

They discussed the appropriateness of the writing tasks provided for these students, many of whom had recently arrived from Samoa. It became evident that the teachers were setting writing tasks that were familiar to themselves, rather than to the students, even though the importance of student interest was espoused.

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| Teacher 1 | I think for me the most empowering thing, particularly for the Samoan children, is making it enjoyable and relevant to them actually wanting to write. |
| Principal | So I think that is the challenge, isn’t it? .... You made an interesting comment earlier, a fair and honest comment, about how you feel much better if there is something in the story they are reading that you can relate to. But how would you feel, for example, if your students brought ideas to their writing that were way out of kilter with anything you had experienced? How would you cope with that? |
| Teacher 2 | You encourage your questioning. I think that works very well. |
| Principal | The reason I raise this is because I feel that some of our kids from other cultures struggle with what they are writing for European teachers like us. I am not saying that we deliberately make it difficult for them, but I suggest that maybe if they had ideas that are different from ours, they may not be comfortable to express them. When you are familiar with an experience that you can relate to, you can involve other kids in the discussion, develop vocabulary and work with them to structure them. I guess my challenge is when they bring along something that is really different to what you believe or what you have experienced, it’s difficult to do this. Maybe that’s what is holding them back a bit in their writing? Is that a fair comment? |

The teachers agreed and they discussed the possibility of using the Samoan teacher as a resource to address this issue. The principal concluded the meeting with a question about his own role and the expectations the teachers could have of him as a school leader. How he did this relates to the previous section on relationships.

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| Principal | Ok, so what help can I give you? Because here I am giving you a group of kids, I say to you, “Right you two teachers are going to be responsible for lifting the student achievement target data of these kids in writing.” I don’t really consult you very much on it. What specific things can management do to help you? |
| Teacher 2 | I think this sort of discussion is really good, because that gives you the support – much better than having a formal sort of meeting and assessing writing because this helps me with what I am doing. |