

**Genuine inquiry: Widely espoused yet rarely enacted**

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**Abstract**

The concept of inquiry is central to contemporary discussions of teacher and leader professional learning and problem-solving in inter-personal contexts. However, while few would debate its value, there has been little discussion of the significant challenges inherent in engaging in genuine inquiry. In this paper, we distinguish between genuine and pseudo-inquiry, and define the former as motivated by an open-minded stance and desire to learn. We argue in our literature review, that while both forms of inquiry may share the same linguistic features, deeper analysis of underlying thoughts and motives is required to distinguish the two types of inquiry. We then report a descriptive study of how 13 school leaders (in a simulated setting) inquired into their concerns about a teacher's behaviour. The analysis of their conversation transcripts showed that they engaged in limited genuine inquiry. Leaders' capacity for genuine inquiry was constrained by their judgmental thinking, tendency to avoid negative emotion, and desire to maximize staying in control of the conversation. Implications for further research on inquiry and for leadership development are discussed.

**Keywords**

Leadership, Inquiry, Conversations

## **Introduction**

The concept of inquiry is central to contemporary educational discussions of teacher and leader professional learning. Inquiry enables educators to identify, share, and critique the assumptions that underpin their leadership and pedagogical practices (Byrne-Jimenez and Orr, 2007; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009; Malone, 2008). Through the sharing of theories and beliefs, the inquiry process can prompt individuals to challenge prior assumptions and broaden the possibilities for positive change (Byrne-Jimenez and Orr, 2007).

There is considerable evidence that the potential of inquiry for professional learning and improvement is difficult to realise. Although it is claimed learning occurs through the exploration of diversity and conflict, many professional learning communities have been observed to suppress conflict and to promote an ‘illusion of consensus’ thus limiting the potential to relate on a deeper level (Grossman et al., 2001; Horn and Little, 2010).

In this paper, we examine the nature of inquiry, the value of openness that drives genuine inquiry, and the challenge of engaging in inquiry that is truly genuine. We focus our examination on inquiry that occurs in interpersonal rather than intrapersonal contexts. Intrapersonal contexts of inquiry are those in which individuals reflect on their practice through, for example, contemplation and reading. Interpersonal contexts are those that involve inquiry as a part of face-to-face interaction. In educational settings, these

interpersonal contexts can involve conversations between educators about issues of teaching and learning and this is the context in which this study was conducted.

***Genuine inquiry as open-mindedness***

In this section, we define genuine inquiry and pseudo-inquiry by linking them to the concept of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness has been variously described as a cognitive, personal, intellectual or epistemic virtue (Riggs, 2010). Discussions about the value of openness can be traced back through many educators and philosophers including Freire, Dewey, and Aristotle (Roberts, 2011). Open-mindedness is characterized by openness to learning in contrast to resistance to new ideas or information, excessive certainty about one's own ideas, and unreflective rejection of other people's ideas (Roberts, 2011).

Open-mindedness involves being critically rather than uncritically open to alternative possibilities (Hare, 2006b). This distinction is important, because uncritical openness admits such undesirable qualities as the 'ready acceptance of new ideas' and an 'inability to adopt and maintain a firm belief' (Hare, 2006b: 9). We concur with Hare and others (see for example, Spiegel, 2012), that open-mindedness does not preclude holding firm views. What it does demand, is a readiness to re-examine these views in the face of alternative information and new evidence. Such re-examination involves a willingness to think again

despite having formulated a view, 'and to be concerned to defuse any factors that constrain one's thinking in predetermined ways' (Hare, 2006a: 116). Open-mindedness demands that people hold 'a general epistemological outlook of fallibilism, a recognition that we are sometimes mistaken' (Hare, 2009: 38). This requires a willingness to acknowledge that one's beliefs could be incomplete or misinformed. Critical examination of evidence is an important aspect of open-mindedness.

We consider acts of inquiry not underpinned by a commitment to open-mindedness as 'pseudo-inquiry'. We use the term pseudo in the sense of 'supposed or purporting to be but not really so; false, not genuine' (Oxford English Dictionary, 1991). Thus, while pseudo-inquiry has the surface characteristics of inquiry, it is not driven by a desire to learn. Genuine inquiry requires conversations to be motivated (either consciously or unconsciously) by a desire to learn and to be driven by a stance of open-mindedness.

The motives for people's inquiry may be signalled by the questions they ask. Many questions are not driven by curiosity or a desire to learn, but by the desire to communicate one's own point-of-view in an indirect, rather than a more, direct manner. There are several forms of pseudo-inquiry. In one form, questions are used to disguise assertions and requests that the speaker does not wish to make more directly. For example, when a leader asks a teacher "Don't you think it's time to change that mathematics unit that you have been

teaching for the past nine years?” they are unlikely to be genuinely inquiring into the reasons why the teacher continues teaching the same material. Instead, they are likely implying that it is indeed time for the teacher to change the unit. Using questions as a way of disguising one’s own viewpoint is probably very common. For example, Stone and colleagues observe that people use questions to cross-examine each other, and these questions tend to ‘emerge from a purpose of trying to persuade the other person that you are right and they are wrong, rather than trying to learn’ (Stone et al., 1999: 174). The advice of these authors is ‘if you don’t have a question, don’t ask a question’ (Stone et al., 1999: 172). In a second form of pseudo-inquiry, people ask questions to which they already know the answer. This occurs in classrooms when teachers ask questions and students are expected to guess what is in the teacher’s head. This type of questioning might better be described as ‘testing’ rather than inquiry. We would regard it as pseudo-inquiry, because the teacher is not motivated by a desire to learn whether the undisclosed answer is correct.

### ***Critique of the research***

Much research to date on inquiry conversations in education focuses on its surface features. This is a limitation, since these features do not provide insight into underlying motives, and thus make it difficult to distinguish between genuine and pseudo-inquiry. In the following section we explain these limitations.

***The linguistic features of inquiry in conversations.*** Researchers in several different disciplines and professions have investigated the linguistic features associated with inquiry in interpersonal communication. For example, asking open-ended questions has been identified as one of the most effective forms of inquiry (Deppermann and Spranz-Fogasy, 2011). Interestingly, asking closed-questions has also been shown to be an effective feature of inquiry, such as when a doctor asks “Can you rate your pain on a scale of one to ten?” These types of questions can enable practitioners to get information quickly so that they can take appropriate action (Bushinski and Cummings, 2007). Some research, however, suggests that if one really wants to hear the other person’s point-of-view, one should not ask any questions at all (Dillon, 1990). Dillon suggests that a pause or declarative statement can be more effective than questions when finding out what others are thinking.

While a large body of research has examined the linguistic features associated with interpersonal inquiry, it remains the case that none of these reliably identify genuine inquiry. The various modes for inquiring (e.g. asking open- or closed-questions, pausing, making declarative statements) do not necessarily represent inquiry, let alone inquiry that is genuine and open to learning.

***Barriers to genuine inquiry***

In this section, we draw on research in social and cognitive psychology to explore conscious and unconscious barriers to genuine inquiry.

***Cognitive biases.*** Genuine inquiry requires open-mindedness, yet research in social and cognitive psychology shows that we often process information in ways that indicate a closed, rather than open-minded approach. First, people tend to engage with new information in ways that confirm their pre-existing convictions (Hart et al., 2009). This confirmation bias means that people pay more attention to and are better at recalling information that confirms rather than disconfirms their prior beliefs (Lilienfeld et al., 2009). Confirmation bias produces a false sense of certainty, which can reduce the need to inquire and learn from others.

A second and related barrier to genuine inquiry in conversations is attribution bias. This refers to systematic errors people make when they explain and evaluate their own and others' behaviours (Manusov and Spitzberg, 2008). We frequently attribute motives, intentions and beliefs to others, keep them private, and assume they are correct. Our sense of certainty precludes genuine inquiry into the accuracy of these attributions. The incorrect assumptions that people make about other people's points-of-view contribute to

considerable misunderstanding, conflict and unresolved problems (Krauss and Morsella, 2000).

Unconscious and almost automatic cognitive biases reduce the capacity for genuine inquiry. While these automatic reasoning processes enable swift response, having metacognitive awareness and thoughtfully interrupting biases is likely to be essential in order to promote genuine inquiry in interpersonal contexts.

***Perceptions of risk.*** In the context of conversations, perceptions of risk can cause people to avoid inquiring into issues that they fear might surface negative emotional reactions. The tendency to unilaterally protect oneself or the other person from difficult emotional issues has been well documented (Argyris, 1990). Unilateral protection of self and others is seen in such interpersonal behaviours as non-disclosure or partial disclosure of one's true concerns, reading body language rather than directly inquiring into others' reactions, and assuming rather than directly inquiring into others' point of view (Argyris, 1990; Bridges, 1992).

Such unilateral protection and the associated avoidance of genuine inquiry are evident in research on how healthcare workers engage in 'end-of-life' conversations with their patients. Workers are often reluctant to inquire into their patients' experiences and wishes (Bushinski and Cummings, 2007). Patients are more likely to disclose their understanding

of their situation to caregivers who demonstrate preparedness to listen and discuss end-of-life issues (Griffie et al., 2004). While this context is very different from that of school leadership, the latter also requires leaders to take the risk of raising and inquiring into difficult issues involving relationships and performance adequacy. There is considerable evidence that public testing of assumptions can be perceived as ‘intolerably risky’ (Argyris and Schön, 1974: 80). There are two sorts of risk: one is of upsetting the relationship, and the second is of being challenged. When people are motivated by the desire to confirm rather than test their beliefs and assumptions, they are unlikely to take such risks (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

***Limited skill in genuine inquiry.*** Another barrier to effective inquiry is a lack of interpersonal communication skills. Recent research suggests that educational leaders are more skilled in advocating their own point-of-view than in inquiring into that of others (Authors, 2011; Authors, in press). The context for this research was two scenario-based conversations. In the first, newly appointed principals met with a parent with a complaint about her daughter’s teacher. Six months later, those same principals spoke to a teacher about whom a parent had laid a complaint. The analysis showed that in both cases, the leaders were more skilled at advocating their own position, than inquiring into the other’s point-of-view. Of the six interpersonal skills that were evaluated, three involved inquiry:

seeking a deeper understanding of the other person's point-of-view, checking one's interpretation of the other's point-of-view, and being open to examination of one's own assumptions (Authors, 2011). In the context of complaint conversations, these inexperienced principals demonstrated limited inquiry skills—one consequence was that little progress was made in resolving the problem being addressed.

In attributing these results to a lack of skill, we invoke both the behavioural and cognitive features of skill. It is not the case that these leaders do not know how to ask open-ended questions, how to check the accuracy of their understanding, or how to inquire into other's reactions. Rather, the thoughts they have in their head prevent them from doing so, and it is these cognitive processes that limit their genuine inquiry. For example, they do not check others' reactions because they fear they might disagree; they feel stuck when the parent or teacher raises objections to their position and this feeling prevents them from formulating probe questions; they do not check their understanding of the other because they cannot remember what they said; and they cannot remember because they were thinking about what they could say next (Authors, 2011; Authors, in press). Therefore, lack of skill, understood as both behaviour and associated reasoning processes, is a major barrier to genuine inquiry.

## **Method**

In this study, we applied our distinction between genuine and pseudo-inquiry to the analysis of a challenging conversation between education leaders and a teacher about aspects of the teacher's behaviour. Our purpose was to examine the quality of leaders' inquiry and the extent to which that inquiry was informed by values of open-mindedness. Framed by a normative theory of genuine inquiry, we explored the quality and function of leaders' inquiry through examination of transcripts of their conversations, analysis of what they were thinking at the time (undisclosed thoughts), and their reflections on the conversations written following the conversation. The inclusion of thoughts and reflections enabled us to access the motives underlying instances of inquiry, and thus, to make judgments about the extent to which they were genuine. Our specific research question was: To what extent do leaders engage in genuine inquiry in a challenging conversation?

## ***Participants***

The study involved 13 educational leaders enrolled in a university graduate program in educational leadership who volunteered to participate in this research. The female (n=9) and male (n=4) leaders held senior management positions in their schools. Those positions included principal, deputy principal, senior teacher, department head, and curriculum leadership roles. Eight of the leaders were working in primary schools and five were in

secondary schools. Participants had been in senior management roles for varying lengths of time (four had less than two years senior management experience, six had three to five years and three had six to ten years' experience). The majority of the leaders were between 31 and 50 years of age.

### ***Procedures***

Participants were informed they would have a conversation with a female actor playing the role of a teacher. The actor was trained by the researchers through practice conversations to be as consistent in her responses to the leaders as possible. The actor was also an experienced educator who had spent significant time in schools over the past twenty five years and undertaken conversations of a similar nature with leaders in four previous research settings. Participants in previous research described her interactions with them as feeling authentic and real (Authors, 2010). Conversations were scheduled over a two-day period, and each conversation took place in an office furnished to resemble that of a school leader. Participants arrived about 15 minutes before their scheduled conversation, were asked if they had any remaining questions, and offered refreshments. Five minutes before their appointment, they were given the written scenario which formed the basis of their conversation and told the duration of the conversation would be eight minutes.

Conversations were intentionally short as these are the types of interactions that leaders

have in real life situations with their staff. They then entered the room where their conversation was video recorded. All conversations were based on an identical scenario (Appendix 1).

Immediately after the conversation, each leader was asked to complete a self-assessment of their interpersonal skills in a private room adjacent to where they had been recorded. The assessment comprised 11 ratings on a 5-point effectiveness scale. The four items about the quality of the leader's inquiry comprise the self-assessment data reported in this paper. The self-assessment task took approximately five minutes to complete.

One week following filming and completion of the self-assessment task, each participant was given a transcript of their conversation. The right-hand side of the page comprised the transcript of the actual conversation between the leader and the teacher (actor). Leaders were asked to first read the full transcript, and then to recall any thoughts and feelings they had but did not express during the conversation. They were then asked to write these thoughts in the blank left hand column (LHC) alongside the lines to which they applied. This procedure (adapted from Argyris and Schön, 1974), is referred to as the LHC.

Leaders were also asked to write up to half a page explaining what they had wanted to achieve in the conversation, and how they had intended to achieve it. We refer to this as their espoused theory for the conversation. All data were collected as part of a four-week

block on interpersonal effectiveness in the graduate leadership course in which they were enrolled.

***The scenario***

The written scenario was designed to be equally relevant to leaders in primary and secondary schools (Appendix 1). Its authenticity and face validity was established by asking leaders from both school types to provide feedback on early drafts, and to approve the final version. Several iterations of drafts were produced and evaluated by leaders before leaders unanimously agreed that the scenario accurately reflected real situations they encounter with their staff. Timing was standardised at eight minutes to provide close approximation to the demands of having brief but important conversations in actual leadership practice. The choice of scenario enabled us to engage leaders in an authentic challenge within a simulated context (Lampert et.al, 2013). The scenario, which is written from the leader's point-of-view, describes a teacher who has been arriving late and is ill-prepared for recent data sharing meetings. This behaviour is holding up some critical decisions the group needs to make. The scenario is challenging, in that it raises the possibility of providing negative feedback to the teacher and evoking the defensive and emotional reactions that frequently accompany such feedback. Following their

conversations, many participants spontaneously commented that the scenario represented a situation they commonly faced in their job.

The leader in the scenario makes three key claims about the teacher (Judy): that she is late; that she is unprepared; and that these behaviours are having an unacceptable impact on the group. No matter how apparently self-evident these three claims are, the normative theory of inquiry we have outlined requires the leader to be open-to-learning about their validity, and about the extent to which Judy accepts them as accurate. The conversation is not 'real' in that it is with an actor rather than colleagues in an actual situation, however this context still provides opportunities for participants to engage in three sorts of genuine inquiry: inquiry into the accuracy of the leader's assumptions about what has happened; inquiry into Judy's explanations about what has happened; and inquiry into her views of what needs to be done next. It also provides opportunity for pseudo-inquiry if the truth of the claims is assumed, rather than publicly tested, or if the leader is unable to disclose the reasons for their concerns.

It is important to be aware of the distinction between the substantive concept of genuine inquiry, and the methodological artifact of data gathered from simulated or acted contexts rather than authentic 'on the job' contexts. The decision to use a context that is simulated or acted to understand the substantive concept of genuine inquiry was intentional

and is well supported by research in other fields as a valid procedure.

Simulation has a long history in research and training as a way of examining behaviour and preparing learners for authentic interactions in real life contexts. Our use of a scenario-based conversation enabled the assessment of skills in a controlled, safe and forgiving environment that permitted errors without high stakes consequences (Issenberg et al., 2005, Maran and Glavan, 2003). In addition, having a conversation with an actor using a purposefully designed scenario enabled us to provide a common conversation context for all participants and thus control the variable of task difficulty (Allison and Allison, 1993: 38).

Some might argue that responses to scenarios rather than real situations cannot provide insight into how participants would respond in authentic contexts. However, research indicates that what matters is the degree of fidelity between the simulation and authentic context. Research in the aviation industry, for example, reveals that the fidelity of cockpit simulators in their capacity to accurately replicate instrument and cockpit environments contributes to the effective generalisation of pilot skills from simulator to real life situations (Maran and Glavin, 2003). Research in medical education reveals that there is no difference between the performance of anesthetists in simulated routine conditions and their actual performance in real life routine situations (Weller et al., 2014). Attaining as much

similarity as possible between the simulated environment and the actual environment is important.

Although absolute replication of an authentic context through acting or simulation is unlikely to be achievable (Issenberg et al., 2005), much can be done to ensure that scenario situations are very similar to real life experiences. For example, in this research the scenarios were designed to resonate with participants' on-the-job experience and to reflect similar issues to those they face in their schools. Furthermore, the actor was trained in responding as a teacher would in real life. Participant reactions confirmed the face validity of the simulation situation.

### ***Data sources***

The data sources were transcripts of the conversations leaders had with the actor (Judy), leaders' annotations about their unspoken thoughts and feelings during the conversation (referred to as the 'left hand column'), their written espoused theory for the conversation, and their self-assessment of their inquiry skills.

***Effectiveness of inquiry skills.*** Four items were used to self-assess the effectiveness of participants' inquiry skills (Table 2). Each item described an aspect of genuine inquiry, and

thus reflected our normative model of open-minded testing of assumptions and exploration of others' thinking. Leaders were asked to rate how effective they were by rating each item from 1 (ineffective) to 5 (outstandingly effective). The reliability and structure of this measure was established on a larger sample of 77 educational leaders comprising newly appointed principals, senior leaders from primary, intermediate, and secondary schools, and district leadership personnel. Calculation of a Cronbach's alpha showed a high (0.83) level of reliability (Field, 2009). This level of scale reliability enables us to report these results in terms of total scores on inquiry. To explore the structure of the inquiry measure, a confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method was undertaken. Good model specification was achieved with the Chi-square statistic, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Gamma hat, ( $\chi^2(2) = 3.844$ ,  $p = .146$ ; CFI = .983; GAMMA = .988). While the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) indicated poor fit (.110), the lower bound of a 90% confidence interval was .000, and PCLOSE indicated a close fitting model ( $p = .199$ ). This further suggests that the four items were measuring a single construct which we call genuine inquiry.

### ***Data analyses***

The first step in the analysis was to repeatedly read all 13 transcripts to gain an overall sense of the quantity and quality of inquiry. This preliminary reading led us to distinguish the following three categories of transcript:

- 1) No inquiry. This category contains transcripts with no inquiry of either the genuine or pseudo variety;
- 2) Pseudo-inquiry. Transcripts in this category contain some inquiry but no examples of genuine inquiry;
- 3) Pseudo inquiry and limited genuine inquiry. These transcripts contain some initial genuine inquiry, but it is not sustained or pursued in depth.

We expected to include a fourth category for conversations containing sustained genuine inquiry but since no conversations fitted this classification, our typology was restricted to three categories. Classification was based on both the actual conversation transcript and the LHC, as it was necessary to review the match between the leader's motives and behaviour in order to make judgments about open-mindedness. Inquiry that may have been intended as genuine (e.g. the LHC indicates a desire to understand the other's perspective) but which did not achieve this (e.g. ended up telling the teacher what the problem was) was classified as pseudo-inquiry.

In the second step, we identified patterns evident within each of the categories that might help to explain the presence or absence of genuine inquiry. We chose to use the entire transcript as the unit of analysis, because inquiry continues throughout a conversation and strands of inquiry are sometimes dropped and then picked up at a later point. To make the unit of analysis any smaller, may have meant missing these inquiry sequences. We were not concerned in our analysis with the linguistic features of inquiry, such as whether questions were closed or open, the use of pauses and inquiry through declarative statements. Instead, we focused on the presence or absence of a stance of open-mindedness by the leader.

Introductory inquiries into the teacher's day and health, such as "How are you?" and "Have you had a busy day?" were not coded as inquiry, as they were not directly related to the focus of the conversation.

## **Findings**

The main finding of this study is that leaders engaged in minimal genuine inquiry. One conversation involved no inquiry of any sort, two conversations involved inquiry but it was all pseudo, and ten conversations were predominantly pseudo inquiry. While much inquiry, as signalled by such linguistic feature as questioning, was common place, our analysis of the unspoken thoughts and feelings revealed considerable closed rather than open-

mindedness. Self-assessment data indicated that the leaders themselves were aware of their limited capability in genuine inquiry.

***Leaders rarely engage in genuine inquiry***

The type of inquiry evident in the conversations ranged from none at all to the inclusion of several intentional openings for genuine inquiry. However, none of the conversations contained sustained genuine inquiry.

***Conversations involving no inquiry***

In one of the 13 conversations, there were no examples of either genuine or pseudo-inquiry (Leader 12). This behaviour was congruent with her espoused theory for the conversation. She wrote “It was imperative that this data [required in scenario] was received from Judy and her involvement in the meetings was vital to the success of the program. My objective for the meeting was to ensure Judy understood the importance of her data contribution and participation in the process, and that she submit her data in a timely manner.” Her espoused theory for the conversation was to gain compliance and for Judy to understand the importance of submitting her data. There was no mention of wanting to find out why it appeared she was not submitting her data, or what Judy’s underlying concerns were. The conversation did not involve any inquiry into either Judy’s views or the leader’s own views.

**Table 1.** Extract from L12 conversation involving no inquiry.

Leader's unspoken thoughts and feelings	Conversation Transcript
<i>Déjà vu yet again...</i>	<b>L12:</b> Then we need to look at processes and where we can support you, and support the students in achieving those objectives.
<i>You have been often in this meeting...</i>	<b>Judy:</b> Okay. So, I'm hearing what you're saying. I don't, I'm not meaning to be combative I'm just saying I think with national standards, and NCEA [the National Certificate in Educational Achievement] and all the other things that have been done to us, really, without very much consultation, we're just staring down the barrel of becoming assessors, and when do we actually get to teach you know, and I think it's a pain.
<i>If workload was the problem then why not state the issue previously?</i>	<b>L12:</b> I appreciate that. I hear where you're coming from, but the objective for us is to collect this data, and we have been for quite some time. We need your data. And I'd appreciate if that could be provided at the earliest possible opportunity. At our last meeting you didn't have any data, and as you, as I've explained, the importance of this data is paramount.
<i>Acknowledge her claim however diplomatically request her data input.</i>	<b>Judy:</b> Hm.
<i>Make a firm request; leave her in no doubt of what is being asked Touch on attendance record. I was a bit weak on delivery.</i>	<b>L12:</b> And I would appreciate if that could be organized. In the last (pause), the last few times where you've attended the meeting, you have been late.

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Leader's unspoken thoughts and feelings	Conversation Transcript
<i>Valid excuse but no further detail on 'why' is given.</i>	<b>Judy:</b> Oh, I've been late twice, and I did apologize both times.
<i>Emphasize the need for team approach. We work hard and help each other when necessary.</i>	<b>L12:</b> And it's just not coming across as a team player. As you appreciate this area of the school, we all work together; we all support each other...

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This section of the transcript is typical of the way Leader 12 continually advocated for what she wanted without inquiring into Judy's understanding, the 'reasonableness' of her own demands, or possible ways of addressing the concern. Leader 12 was aware of her limited skills in inquiry and rated herself as minimally effective (2) for each inquiry skill. This was the lowest self-rating of all 13 leaders.

### ***Conversations involving pseudo-inquiry***

Two leaders conducted an entire conversation in which none of their inquiry was genuine (Leaders 6 and 10). There were several common features to their pseudo-inquiry. They asked questions without disclosing the reasoning that motivated their questions. Their lack of openness about the thinking that framed their questions limited their inquiry to a private rather than more robust public test of their views. Indeed, for many leaders, up to one third

or even half the conversation would have taken place before they disclosed their concern. Leader 6 completed the entire conversation without disclosing her concern at all.

Loaded questions were a common feature of the inquiry of Leaders 6 and 10. For example, instead of stating their view that having hard copies of data would help with planning and teaching, Leader 10 asked: “So do you not think having hard copies of data would help you plan your teaching, help you plan for the next lesson?”. Because neither of these leaders engaged in any genuine inquiry it was difficult for them to understand Judy’s position, and they were unable to arrive at an agreement on how to proceed. These conversations were completely void of genuine inquiry, the majority of the conversations were predominantly pseudo-inquiry with some unsustained attempts at genuine inquiry.

***Conversations involving pseudo inquiry and limited genuine inquiry***

Most leaders (10) engaged in limited genuine inquiry. A common pattern in this category was for leaders to initiate what might be genuine inquiry, but to retreat from it quickly. One motive for pseudo-inquiry was the leader’s desire to appear concerned and supportive to the teacher. For example, Leader 8 makes an insincere offer of help.

**Table 2.** Extract from L8 conversation with insincere concern.

Leader's unspoken thoughts and feelings	Conversation Transcript
<i>I really hope she does not take me up on this offer, because I have more than enough to do already</i>	<b>L8:</b> But I'm just wondering whether, is there anything I can do to help you with it [getting the data]?

Another pattern of pseudo-inquiry involved leaders making broad generalized inquiry into the other's wellbeing, asking questions such as: "I'm just wondering how you are coping?" Analysis of the LHC indicated that this type of inquiry was motivated more by the leaders' desire to avoid the difficult issue and keep the teacher on-side, than from a genuine interest in their well-being. Where genuine inquiry was present it was not sustained. For example, a leader might begin to uncover Judy's views, or to question their own, but would then ignore Judy's response or change the topic.

### ***Self-assessment of inquiry skills***

Leaders rated their inquiry skills as 'minimal' to 'satisfactory' (Table 3). This is higher than we would regard them, given the absence of sustained genuine inquiry.

**Table 3.** Leaders’ self-ratings of effectiveness in inquiry.

Aspect of inquiry	Mean	SD
I inquired into the reasons for the other person’s point of view	3.31	0.947
I explored the other’s doubts and disagreements	2.46	0.967
I ensured we sought to understand the cause of the concern before trying to solve it	3.46	0.967
I detected and checked assumptions about the cause of the concern	2.62	0.650
<b>Total Inquiry</b>	<b>2.96</b>	<b>0.883</b>

*Note:* Effectiveness of skills was rated on a five point scale: 1 = Ineffective, 2 = Minimally effective, 3 = Satisfactorily effective, 4 = Highly effective, 5 = Outstandingly effective

Leaders rated themselves as least effective at inquiring in the face of difference. This is not surprising, given what we know about how confirmation bias focuses attention on information that confirms, rather than disconfirms, prior points-of-view. The leaders’ highest rating was given to inquiry that sought out causes prior to investigating solutions. The fact that this rating was still less than satisfactorily effective indicates the overall low level of skill that these leaders believe they displayed in this conversation.

***Constraints on genuine inquiry***

We now discuss some possible constraints on genuine inquiry. When leaders hold judgmental thinking, avoid negative emotion, and try to maintain unilateral control in the conversation it is difficult for them to engage in genuine inquiry.

***Judgmental thinking limits genuine inquiry.*** The LHC revealed the negative judgments some leaders made about the teacher, for example, that she was making excuses to “save face” (Leader 8), or that she was disorganized (Leader 2). These untested negative judgments reduced inquiry into the teacher’s views because they were treated as self-evident. For example, the LHC in the following extract suggests that Leader 1 judges the teacher as not knowing what she is talking about, not competent in her work, and possibly not knowing much about learners.

**Table 4.** Extract of a conversation where Leader 1 holds untested judgmental thoughts

Leader's unspoken thoughts and feelings	Conversation Transcript
<i>Why didn't you say something to us earlier? I'm not convinced you know what you're talking about.</i>	<p><b>Judy:</b> ... I'll admit it okay so I'm old school, you know, I've got a problem with that. I think sometimes we just collect it [data] for the sake of collecting it. I'd much rather do formative stuff than this. I mean what does it inform us?</p> <p><b>L1:</b> How much do you know of your, of the learners in your classroom?</p>
<i>Onto it? If you were 'onto it' you would have completed the task given to you, but you didn't</i>	<p><b>Judy:</b> I reckon I'm pretty on to it with the learners in my classroom.</p>
<i>Okay, let's see what you know about the learners</i>	<p><b>L1:</b> You're pretty on to it?</p> <p><b>Judy:</b> Yeah.</p>

In this conversation Leader 1 could explore what leads Judy to believe that much of the data the school collects is not used for formative purposes. However, the leader's judgmental thoughts side-track the leader from genuinely inquiring into Judy's views about the value of data. Private censoring of judgmental thoughts about Judy meant that there were many discrepancies between leaders' private thoughts and public speech. These judgmental thoughts (evidenced in the LHC) were a barrier to the leaders' capacity to genuinely inquire.

***The avoidance of negative emotion limits genuine inquiry.*** A second barrier to genuine inquiry was the desire to avoid upsetting the teacher. One leader appeared to spend the entire conversation avoiding possible negative emotion (Leader 6).

**Table 5.** Extract of a conversation where Leader 6 avoids negative emotion

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Leader's unspoken thoughts and feelings

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Conversation Transcript

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*A broad issue first will ease her into the conversation. How is she really doing?*

**L6:** yeah and how are you going in your classroom?

**Judy:** Good, yeah good. My seniors are good, my Year Nines are pretty on to it, pretty full on. I've got a couple of pretty full on classes there. Well when we did the rolls I knew that I was going to have some personalities like that.

**L6:** Do you mean Max?

**Judy:** I do

**L6:** He's lovely isn't he?

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Leader's unspoken  
thoughts and feelings

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Conversation Transcript

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*Make her feel comfortable.  
Don't alarm her or make her feel  
singled out  
Is she coping?  
I will link it to appraisal then she has  
to do it*

**Judy:** Yeah, he's great

**L6:** Yeah nice. I just wanted to, just to chat and just to catch up to see where you're at. I also wanted to gauge how you're going in your classroom and how you're going with teaching and learning. And I have been speaking to everyone in our team as part of their appraisal I wanted to just check in with them and see if there's anything that I can help them with.

**Judy:** Okay

*You need the coaching*

**L6:** Or anything that I can coach them alongside with

**Judy:** Yeah, sure

*Obviously, you have not done your  
reporting.  
Change tack. Am I being negative?  
I need to win her back*

**L6:** And for you to reciprocate some of that conversation. And some of the questions I've been asking are these, like name one really positive interaction that you've had with a student in your class

**Judy:** Okay, I had a really positive interaction with a student in my class today.

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Reading through the transcript of Leader 6 you would not know that she had a specific concern about the missing data. She spent a lot of time asking questions that were only vaguely related to this concern. Instead, she diverged into more general issues, probably because she wanted to: “Make her [Judy] feel comfortable, don’t alarm her or make her feel singled out.” The problematic outcome of this strategy was that Leader 6 never communicated her concern regarding the teacher’s disengagement from the school-wide process of using student data. Later in the conversation her LHC says: “tread softly, need to make her [Judy] feel safe and included.” The conversations drifted in multiple directions as Leader 6 continued to “tread softly” and avoid asking about the data for fear of upsetting Judy. At no stage in the conversation did Leader 6 genuinely inquire into the validity of her own or Judy’s views. Leader 6’s desire to avoid negative emotion meant she neither communicated her concern nor learned anything about the circumstances that had led to it.

***The desire to stay in control limits inquiry.*** Several leaders attempted to make a rapid leap to a solution without first investigating what the problem was. This approach is typical of novice problem solvers and contrasts with the approach taken by experts who spend considerably more time analysing the problem prior to committing to action (Glaser et al., 1988). The problem with not inquiring into cause, and jumping quickly to a leader-instigated solution strategy, is that the solution may not fit the problem. Leaders did not

seem aware of this pattern. When asked how effective they were at “seeking to understand the concern before trying to solve it” two leaders rated themselves as outstandingly effective (5) and four as highly effective (4). Our qualitative analysis leads us to disagree with these self-ratings as we did not see evidence of these leaders effectively seeking to understand why Judy had not brought the data.

The motive that led to this approach was leaders’ desire to control the situation so that their problem of gaining access to the teacher’s data was solved as quickly as possible. Given such motives, genuine inquiry into objections to one’s position is precluded for it would risk derailing the leader’s unilateral plans.

Sometimes the LHC revealed that leaders actually agreed with Judy’s concerns about the use of data. For example, Leader 8 noted in her LHC that: “I hate being in these situations where I actually do agree with the opposition’s arguments [about the perceived lack of value of the data].” Because the leader was determined to get the teacher to comply, and feared that disclosure of her own doubts might bolster the “opposition,” she hid her own views while continuing to persuade the teacher to comply with a process that she herself was not committed to. When the goal was to gain compliance, both disclosure of and inquiry into doubts and disagreements were ruled out.

## **Implications**

We have provided a critical perspective on the concept of inquiry and argued that a distinction, based on the virtue of open-mindedness, is needed between genuine and pseudo-inquiry. While interpersonal inquiry, in contexts of professional learning and problem-solving is highly valued, our research suggests that genuine inquiry in situations of anticipated difference and disagreement at least, is relatively rare. When conversations are risky and likely to arouse negative emotions, genuine inquiry is overtaken by the desire to win, and to do so while avoiding risk and negative emotion.

Although this study has been conducted on a small sample of educational leaders' it confirms prior research with business (Argyris, 1990) and educational leaders (Authors, 2011; Authors, in press) that shows the limitation of leaders' inquiry skills when holding challenging conversations. The leaders in this study did not engage in sustained open-minded inquiry, instead ignoring or bypassing views that were contrary to their own. The fact that leaders tried to gain and maintain unilateral control in these conversations limited their capacity for genuine inquiry. Their inquiry was driven by their own frequently undisclosed agenda and that agenda was not responsive to the concerns of the other party. Paradoxically, their failure to inquire into the other party's views contributed to their difficulty in gaining the teacher's compliance.

Our decision to collect data on the leaders' unspoken thoughts enabled us to make the distinction between genuine and pseudo-inquiry and to identify some of the barriers to genuine inquiry. We were surprised by the extensive pattern of pseudo-inquiry and the degree to which leaders sought to avoid negative emotion. Given the leaders were aware they were talking with an actor, and that there would not be any actual consequences of their conversation, we thought they would not be so driven to win and to avoid negative emotion.

Research in other fields (e.g. Caird et al., 2008) indicates that participants are likely to perform better in a context in which they are aware they are being observed (scenario situation) than in real life contexts. From this perspective, findings from the current study are important as limitations in genuine inquiry may be even more pronounced in real life situations. We plan in future research to explore the same research questions using real conversations to see whether this is the case.

The implications of these findings may go well beyond the school context because cognitive biases are a significant factor in the escalation of disputes and misunderstanding at an individual, societal and even global level (Bruneau and Saxe, 2012). It has been claimed that "if one were to attempt to identify a single problematic aspect of human

reasoning that deserves attention above all others, the confirmation bias would have to be among the candidates for consideration” (Nickerson, 1998: 175).

Developing leaders who are more effective in their inquiry, especially in the face of difference, will require interventions designed to reveal and interrupt existing patterns of pseudo-inquiry. Hare (2006a: 117) maintains that genuine inquiry ‘involves struggling against preconceived ideas, hasty conclusions, and other factors that distort and undermine our efforts, in a determined effort to arrive at whatever beliefs, interpretations, explanations, theories, policies, or value judgments seem warranted.’ Being open-minded and engaging in genuine inquiry demands people are aware of cognitive biases yet this awareness is ‘hard knowledge to come by, and harder still to accept’ (Riggs, 2010: 183). One goal for leadership development might be to develop open-mindedness in challenging conversations by helping participants to privately identify assumptions, raise objections to their own positions and design informal tests of their views. Once they can do this in private, then they could learn how to identify and test assumptions in interpersonal contexts, supported by intensive coaching and feedback (Schön, 1991). Without such interventions, the current espousal of inquiry processes in professional learning and interpersonal problem solving is unlikely to be realised.

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***Appendix 1***

***Scenario: A teacher fails to meet a leader's expectations.***

Over the past two months the staff have been focusing on using student data to inform teaching and have been having data-sharing meetings. You have noticed that Judy, one of the teachers you are responsible for, tends to be late and ill prepared for these meetings. For example, last week Judy was supposed to bring student assessment data but came without it. This behaviour is affecting the amount of material the group can get through and is holding up critical decisions. You have asked Judy if you can have a few minutes with her to talk about this.