E-MAIL AS AN ARENA FOR AUTHORING A DIALOGICAL SELF AMONG GIFTED YOUNG ADOLESCENTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes a qualitative study that investigated young adolescents' self-constructions within the context of online (email) communication. Drawing from dialogical perspectives of self as multiply-situated and complex phenomena, the study focused on the everyday narratives of individual young adolescents interpreted as different "I" voices. With the assumption that computer mediation offers cultural relevance and empowerment to young adolescents, techniques of personal journal writing were used in combination with email as an alternative to face-to-face methods. Twelve participants aged 10 to 14 years were recruited online and by word-of-mouth with an invitation to write freely about their lives over a six month period in a participant-led email journal project. The role of the researcher was to develop a supportive voice of listener/responder that was intended to facilitate the emergence of participants' own 'self' voices within an interactive space for relatively autonomous self-expression. Data as email texts were analysed using a close listening method that synchronised with the theory by revealing multi-layered patterns and shifts of voices in order to give a nuanced understanding of participants' self and other evaluations. The paper shows that narrative methods used online and in concert with dialogical concepts have potential to heighten self-reflection and strengthen agency as a means to access rich and nuanced data from young adolescent individuals. The study's findings contribute to a growing interest in the use of dialogical concepts to explore the ways people engage in active meaning-making while embedded in their specific social and cultural environments.

KEYWORDS: Dialogical Self, narrative methods, authoring, gifted young adolescents, email

The contemporary study of self and identity represents an epicentre of interest in what it means to be a complex and multiply situated self—an elusive notion in terms of empirical research. In particular, early adolescence represents a complex confluence of issues in terms of self-discovery and existing approaches to identity research struggle to account for this complexity. However, recent calls for finding integrated and person-level ways to focus on the micro-processes of identity (Valsiner, 2009; Meeus, van de Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) represent an important new direction in

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terms of studying self during early adolescence. Given the general relevance to all young adolescents of trying to accurately reflect their lived realities, methods are needed that account for 'ontological flux' as a regular experiential aspect of being a person. Inevitably, any shift towards understanding the person as a whole raises ontological questions about what it means to be a self and invokes methodological dilemmas around subjectivity and how it is that we can come to *know* our research subjects (Doucet & Mathner, 2008). Therefore, at the heart of debate about better ways of understanding human complexity there is a common thread—the primacy of subjectivity as experienced *within* a social context and the subsequent implications for methodologies.

In seeking synergistic approaches to self study, the integration of dialogic concepts with narrative methods can offer a promising pathway for approaching dynamism and multiplicity of selves. Specifically, the present work applies concepts relating to a dialogical self, first expounded by Hermans, Kempen and Van Loon (1992), in order to explore everyday self and other constructions among young adolescents. Set against a backdrop of concerns over the ways that 'self' among young adolescents is filtered through developmental and psychological discourses and their associated methodologies, the aim of the paper is threefold. First, to demonstrate that narrative methodologies can be utilized within young adolescents' own computer-mediated environments in such a way as to maximise and facilitate autonomous expression. Second, to propose that the narrated selves of young adolescents can be amplified when psycho-analytic tools of 'listening' are applied as part of a shared dialogical space occupied by the participants and researcher. Third, to use examples from data to show that written email text interpreted as specific *I* voices can generate valuable insights into the social contexts and the self-trajectories of individual participants.

The article begins by reviewing some of the broader challenges to methodologies that face identity study among young adolescents in general. Next, the meaning of "gifted" in the present context is addressed in terms of its categorical significance as a construct with identity implications. A brief critique of current approaches to understanding gifted persons contextualizes the study— however; the paper focuses on the ways that specific youngsters assigned this category see themselves and their worlds, rather than on giftedness *per se.* Hence, in an effort to veer away from *a priori* assumptions about what it means to be gifted (including the researcher's own world view), the research focus was based on an open invitation to *tell* about oneself, rather than on being asked specific sociological questions. The study was based on two key assumptions —1) that societal ascriptions and expectations of giftedness behaviours and dispositions might differ from individuals' preferred versions of self during early adolescence; and 2) that a research context designed to facilitate opportunities for self-selecting self-reflection would encourage expressions with a

distinctly ontological character (i.e., relating closely to matters of self and one's place in the world). The narrative methods of personal journal writing via Internet mediation (i.e., email) are presented as having uniquely dialogical qualities with potential to yield diverse and rich data. A study overview includes a description of data analysis, followed by excerpts from four participants whose responses as authors were selected to demonstrate a nuanced array of multiple "I" voices. The paper concludes by advancing the importance of the interplay between theory and the methodologies that treat individual young adolescents' everyday realities and their self-constructions as diverse, unique and fundamentally interactive phenomena.

Early adolescence —a complex time of self-discovery

It is widely accepted that early adolescence in western societies represents a fertile and complex time of self-definition and that it embraces multiple realities. Yet much research about young adolescents fails to capture the multiple dimensions of self and identity, and most interest in identity research is focused on older adolescents and emerging adulthood (Schwartz, 2008). From a developmental perspective, early-to-middle adolescence is recognized as a time when heightened sensitivity to social emotional factors impacts judgements and decision-making (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). Typically, young adolescents are caught in the crosscurrents of the different demands to appease adults and their own need for praise and popularity from peers that come together to form a unique pressure (Harter, 1999). As examples, the challenge of balancing adult and peer-related identities can involve the desire to be a good student on one hand and "cool" or "attractive" simultaneously on the other (Roeser, Galloway, Casey-Watson, Keller & Tan, 2008). Specific concerns reported by regular young adolescents include the stresses attached to the status of friendships, time management, money issues, body image concerns, family problems and school grades (Roeser et al., 2008). Additionally, many young adolescents are found to be living one reality at home, another amongst peers, and a different one at school that may include being treated like a small child (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007). Having to juggle these multiple realities is found to put pressure on the adaptive strategies of young adolescents as they struggle to negotiate who they are (Smyth, 2006). Adaptive strategies are the ways that students respond to the pressure to continually modify, resist or accept the meanings they attribute to themselves compared with those that are constructed by others (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Smyth, 2006). As a daily lived reality, this time of heightened social awareness is accompanied by the need to put different parts of the self puzzle together—such as being a valued friend, a competent student, a dutiful son or daughter and an admired performer in areas of talent. Therefore, it appears especially pertinent to young adolescents that the 'who am I' question can be likened to a "dilemmatic space" because of the pressing need to actively navigate through an array of choices that produce identity tensions and conflicts (Bamberg, 2010).

New ways of study: Synthetic methodology

Finding innovative ways to account for the confluence of multiple aspects of self and identity is an ongoing challenge—especially to researchers interested in *how* self-formation occurs during early adolescence. If one's goal is to address the uniqueness of personal experience among young adolescents, the legacy of the post-modern fragmentation of theories about self and identity makes research in this field a daunting prospect (see Vignoles, Schwartz & Luckyck, 2011). While there are moves towards integrating the divisions within identity and self study, closing the gaps that currently exist between different perspectives and their methodological traditions appears a bridge too far. One case in point is the unhelpful stand-off between qualitative and quantitative methods within the psychological traditions (see Valsiner, 2009) that inform many of our understandings about adolescence. Too often, when the same phenomenon is studied using qualitative methods (such as narrative testimony) compared with statistical data, different and confusing pictures can emerge that obfuscate our view. For instance, when distinctions are made between physical and psychological constructs such as "early" pubertal development, they yield very different outcomes when studied qualitatively compared with the quantitative data (Pinto, 2007). As a consequence, the prevailing popular discourse around early puberty is that it is "psychologically and behaviourally endangering" (Pinto, 2007, p. 532). Yet, over and over we are shown that one person's "crisis" can be another's "catalyst" for fortifying and understanding the self. Hence, issues that are very salient for many young adolescents and likely to have long term impacts on self-formation remain notoriously difficult to disentangle. At the very least, perspectives and methodologies that emphasize individual agency in knowing about and in having a capacity to transform the self are far more likely than reductive approaches to better represent young adolescents' realities.

While it is suggested that a conflux of methods that include 'person-centred' options will lead to "stronger and more persuasive conclusions" about the multiple aspects of self and identity during early adolescence (Schwartz, 2008, p.8), this is by no means an easy answer. Having to work across disparate frameworks is difficult, as observed by Guerra, Williams and Sadek (2011) in their mixed methods investigations into the relationship between adolescent bullying and victimization. Additionally, it is safe to assume that adolescents may not necessarily have explanatory ability to say 'who' or 'what' they are, which creates problems around the reliance on traditional approaches to self-reporting. Hence, in recent efforts to examine young adolescents' identities through longitudinal self-report questionnaires, the shortcomings found in this approach point to finding ways to access the underlying processes behind identity formation (Meeus, et al, 2010). According to Meeus and colleagues (2010, p. 1579), future research is needed that focuses on the "micro processes of identity" by tapping into day-to-day lives of individual young adolescents. As it stands, the question of what

a meaningful sense of self *is* to young adolescents continues to depend on one's conceptualization of identity and/or self and our subsequent methods of choice.

Giftedness as a construct with identity implications

The present focus on gifted[1] rather than regular young adolescents is because giftedness as a construct involves social, cognitive and affective dimensions known to impact a developing sense of self during early adolescence (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Moon, 2006). In western cultures, giftedness generally refers to the potential for, and the demonstration of, advanced abilities in one or more areas, such as intellectual, creative, socio-affective, or sensorimotor (Gagné, 1995). While conceptions of giftedness have broadened considerably in recent times (see Shavinina, 2009; Sternberg & Davidson, 2005), interest usually centres on individual capacity for high achievement in socially valued ways and how it can be facilitated. As a field of study, the nature of giftedness research has been shaped by ideas about the measurability of intelligence advanced by the early twentieth century researchers William Stern (1912) and Lewis Terman (1922). Contemporary notions of giftedness thus revolve around a population routinely identified according to traits and a tradition of psychometric measurement that invokes unresolved tensions about "who is and isn't gifted" (Brown, Renzulli, Gubbins & Siegle, 2005, p.78).

Importantly, how giftedness is constructed can affect our ideas about what constitutes success and failure and how we might expect gifted youngsters to aspire and to behave. Reflecting this concern, some from within the field of giftedness study claim that categorising the uniqueness and diversity of gifted children is reductionist and culturally inappropriate (Cramond, 2004). A two year long study that involved the input of 258 gifted children found a "striking range of attributes and needs" amongst the profiled students and concluded that the gifted label is "intrinsically compartmentalizing" because it provides a "snapshot" of a state instead of addressing giftedness as a process (Keen, 2005, p. 208). Yet, gifted identification is frequently guided by the discourse of traits and characteristics that can be variously found across wide-ranging literature, and checklists are used for inclusion in special programs based on intellectual and non-cognitive traits of 'typical' gifted children. Therefore, attempts to arbitrarily define gifted young adolescents can be interpreted in themselves to be marginalizing if they do not take account of the individual's own unique experiences.

Despite broader awareness of the value of applying holistic models to understanding gifted persons and their hopes and aspirations, the giftedness discourse is stubbornly reductive. While there is growing interest in the development of systems-

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[1] In this study, gifted young adolescents were those already identified according to accepted Australian guidelines that link multiple measures of assessment to a defensible definition of what it means to be "gifted". The most widely accepted definitions of giftedness in Australian schools draw from Gagné's (2003, 2009) Differentiated Models of Giftedness & Talent (DMGT, DMGT 2.0).

based approaches (Schick, 2008; Ziegler, 2005; Ziegler & Phillipson, 2012), the multi-factorial models that focus on the different components of giftedness, exemplified by Gagné; (2003; 2009) and (Heller, Perleth & Lim, 2005) continue to hold sway. The prevailing narrative is that when giftedness is dissected into its measurable component parts, these component parts viewed together are meant to facilitate the predictions of above-average or excellent achievements. In many respects, the dilemmas facing giftedness study reflect the challenges facing psychology described by Valsiner (2009), where scientific efforts to reduce human lived experience to components have led to an impasse. Hence, any applications of idiographic principles that highlight the uniqueness of individuals (see Dai, 2009) within qualitative studies that lead us to "the meaning of participants" are slow to emerge (Coleman, Guo & Dabbs, 2007, p.55).

Ultimately, this positivist stance has filtered into educational perspectives that are informed by narrow bands of study focusing on age-graded benchmarks where local and international comparisons of gifted high achievers performances are reflected as test marks (see, for example, the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] in Dracup, 2011). Yet, how to quantify specific self and identity issues such as the fluctuations in context-specific responses that might determine what an individual finds to be meaningful or motivating remains outside the realm of these datasets. Inevitably, when the language of cut-off scores and percentiles drives the school-based agenda for social recognition, the requirement to meet external measures of achievement becomes a hard notion to budge. Given the narrowing effect that reductive paradigms can have on personal and social ascriptions of self, there is little wonder that many gifted adolescents prefer to hide their achievements and that they have a higher than typical need for counselling (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Moon, 2006).

Gifted young adolescents: lonely and misunderstood

Given the intensity of social comparison that occurs during adolescence, being defined by principles of "differentness" can prove intrinsically alienating (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Hébert & Kelly, 2006; Moon, 2006). To add to a sense of feeling disconnected from others, gifted young adolescents are known to express intense idealism, where worry about issues such as war, poverty and injustice cause distress when others do not share these concerns (Webb, Amend, Webb, Beljan, Guerrs, & Olenchak, 2004). However, gifted young adolescents seldom are asked about their lives outside of counselling and educational contexts and their perspectives are often reported on their behalf by well-meaning adults (von Károlyi, 2006). Moreover, since gifted children are known to spend more time alone and to engage with rich inner worlds of thought (Winner, 2000), they may engage less in socially-mediated opportunities for self-formation. School-based research unhelpfully acts as a "dominant form in a minority world" (Morrow, 2008, p. 51) and the knowledge about gifted young adolescents that comes from studying them in school as a group gives insufficient

attention to individual differences (Robinson, 2006). It is no surprise, then, that gifted young adolescents are reported to feel lonelier and more misunderstood than their typical age-peers (Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007). While this is a brief overview of the complexities that face gifted young adolescents in the process of self-discovery and in their opportunities for expressing a meaningful sense of self, it suffices to underscore a legacy of positivism.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinnings for this study drew from dialogical perspectives. Within the diverse field of self-study, dialogism offers a flexible paradigm for approaching the multi-faceted and dynamic aspects of self. Dialogism typically refers to the tradition of seeing all human meaning as being formed and expressed in dialogue (Bakhtin, 1929/1973, 1981, 1986) but is not restricted to this view (see Grossen, 2010). As one interpretation of dialogism, the concept of a "dialogical self" conceived by Hermans, Kempen and van Loon (1992) is a useful framework for examining human experiences in terms of multiplicity, stability and movement in self. In narrative terms, Bakhtin (1929/1973) expands James's (1890) notion by making it possible for a single person to live in a "multiplicity of worlds" and become an author for each one (Hermans, 1996, p. 33). According to this view, inner psychological processes such as thinking, feeling and imagining intermingle with the exchanges that happen through our social connections forming a complex structure of "self-positions" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). The assumption is that we can make visible the nuances and multiplicities that are a regular aspect of living complex daily realities through expression of voices that can form *I*-positions, each reflective of a particular evaluative stance towards self and others (Hermans, 2001a; 2001b). Since this network of different voices is believed to make up who we are, the "Who am I?" question always implies "Who am I in response to others?" (Hermans, 2003). In a pragmatic sense, such a view promotes the deeper understanding and appreciation for how connected we all are to each other in a way that may be especially relevant to adolescents exposed to globalization and increasing uncertainty (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). However, the theory has attracted criticism for its lack of empirical work in showing the dialogical relationships between voices (Bamberg & Zielke, 2007) and in offering accessibility for its concepts (Puchalska-Wasyl, Chmielnicka-Kuta, & Oles, 2008). Yet, despite the theoretical pitfalls in explicating the concept of "voice" (see Bertau, 2008), the narrative base of the theory as an interactive and dynamic view of self opens a pathway beyond the reductive language of traits and components.

The treatment of voices as social and individual phenomena that are also *perceivable* expressions of personal meaning (Bertau, 2008) underscores their empirical relevance. Since narrative researchers view the stories we tell about ourselves as active, purposeful constructions (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009; Riessman, 2008) the emphasis on

personal agency intersects with the notion of "I" as an 'author' with many "voiceable perspectives" (Hermans, 1996, p. 42). Even though verbal exchange is only one aspect of dialogic communication, narrative study upholds what we say about ourselves and about others as a primary pragmatic route to understanding important processes of self-making (e.g., Wagoner's [2008] work on remembering). And since societal context provides the voices of others (Hermans, 1996) it can be expected that processes of authoring would reveal the voices of peers, media, popular culture and significant adults among young adolescents' social networks (i.e., absorbed into their inner 'networks'). Thus, the aim to interrogate a narrator's intentions and imaginations is underpinned by the assumption there will be many voices and subjectivities in play—including those of listeners and readers who bring their own agendas (Riessman, 2008). Simply put, voices are purposeful, and it is important to ask *what* they are doing, and *why* they are doing it in order to gauge the effects they are likely to have on both teller and audience. In sum, conceiving of a young person's self as an array of voices, each with varying levels of autonomy and authority that determine the kinds of selves under continual construction, offers an agency-based lexicon with which to work.

Of particular relevance to self-making as a narrative act (see Bruner, 2002), is that the principles of narrative and dialogue allocate much importance to emotions as primary evaluative processes. Narratives are always more than mere reports because emotions are usually engaged when events are being evaluated and interpreted (Hermans, 2002; Josselson, 2006; Maybin, 2006; Riessman, 2002). Thus, the involvement of emotions in making judgements means that a personal narrative involves passion and feelings instead of a detached point of view (Hermans, 2002). For instance, study focusing on the emotional talk of children aged 9-12 years found emotional expression to be self-defining because it linked with self-understanding and the development of coping skills (Bokanek, Marin & Fivush, 2008). Hence, there is a symbiosis between personal explanatory narratives and the ability to engage emotions in a self-regulatory manner. Furthermore, the capacity of a personal narrative to set up an emotional connection with an audience can lead to empathy and better shared understandings (Chase, 2005; Elliott, 2005). Thus, personal narratives give information about selves who are emotionally engaged in relating to themselves and their environments by telling others what they are feeling and what they value most in their lives. For the present study, the personal narratives that gifted young adolescents constructed were thus seen as temporary descriptions and value judgements that make some kind of point to an intended real or imagined audience.

The study

As a narrative inquiry into individual young adolescents daily lives, the aim of the study was to gain insights through examining the emergence of a diverse array of 'self' voices. The questions for the study are based on the assumption that the

participants' individual everyday narratives would reveal self-relevant information expressed in, not one, but various voices, and that tensions and multiplicity within selves would emerge.

The main question was: *How do gifted young adolescents express voices of self in their email journals?* Additional questions that gave focus to the main question were: *What key voices emerged? What kinds of selves did they construct?*

The aim of these questions was to open up different possibilities compared to traditional approaches for what it meant to be a self for young adolescents.

Study context

The context for this study was the out-of-school-setting that involved participants' own choice of their personal email environments in order to appeal to a sense of privacy and autonomy. Each participant was free to decide where they would be most comfortable, with selections at times including Internet cafés and libraries as well as home computers. The focus on participants' lives out of school represented a shift away from dominant school and peer-based discourses known to limit what young adolescents are willing to disclose about themselves in this institutional setting (Maybin, 2006; Smyth, 2006). Furthermore, in seeing self among young adolescents as multiply situated, the study recognized that school represents only one of many realities that young adolescents might inhabit. Therefore, the choice of an out-of-school setting using virtual communication was an effort to bolster agency among participants and to foster the freedom to express themselves on their own terms and across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

Participants

Twelve participants aged between 10 and 14 years were invited to engage in a journal project for the duration of six months. There were six boys and six girls, who had each been previously identified as gifted within their own educational settings based on their various academic, musical and sporting performances. The selection of 12 participants was intended to allow for representation from a variety of educational contexts without over-stretching the researcher's anticipated capacity to pay close attention to each individual email relationship as a time-consuming and intricate process. The participants drew from settings that embraced both urban and rural contexts within South East Queensland, a large well-populated region in Eastern Australia. The settings included public and private schools that were single-sex and co-educational, as well as a selective Academy and also homeschooling.

Recruitment

The recruitment process took place online using email and by posting on websites sponsored by the national body of the Australian Association for the Education

of Gifted and Talented Ltd. (AAEGT). Conference fliers and direct emailing to educationists, parents and state bodies (affiliates of the AAEGT) yielded a list of key resource people, including teachers, school psychologists, educational consultants, and gifted program co-ordinators who acted as agents for contacting and negotiating with parents of prospective participants. Since parents were the main gatekeepers in the out-of-school context, the maintenance of mutual trust and respect between parents, researcher and the participants was critical to the success of the study. A recruitment package was sent to each candidate, including details of the study's aims and scope as well as consent forms to be co-signed by participants. Parents then acted as mediators in terms of ensuring their sons and daughters understood the implications of their involvement in the study and that their commitment to the writing process was their own decision. Next, candidates and parents were invited to a focus meeting as a relaxed forum for meeting me in person and for any final clarifications. This focus session was not used to gather data but as a way to literally focus on the task ahead and to offer an introductory experience that was friendly, non-threatening and empowering to participants.

Instructions to participants

The instruction to participants was an ostensibly simple invitation to write freely about themselves and their lives, with emphasis on the importance of *being themselves* as far as it was comfortable. Participants were advised to not disclose private family information and that the researcher was obligated to report divulgences of harm to authorities. Parents were asked to ensure that their son or daughter would have genuine opportunities to write freely without parental monitoring or intrusion (beyond an occasional reminder to write). Within these parameters the participants were aware they could discuss topics chosen to reflect what was relevant and meaningful to them and that they would not be asked any specific questions. However, because the participants understood the purpose of the research they knew there would eventually be a potentially much larger public audience to their words requiring judgement on their part in terms of what was or was not *tellable*. Subsequently, the participants used their own password-secured email accounts, selected (or not) their own pseudonyms and decided on their own writing schedule and content. Overall, the aim was to support participants' agency and willingness to self-disclose and to share information as much as possible through the self-regulated operation of their personal email accounts.

My role as researcher—the voice of listener/responder

I was not known to participants prior to recruitment and my self- representation was as a friendly and non-judgemental professional person who was interested in hearing about the participants' lives and experiences. Studies with young adolescents recommend a 'naïve' stance since participants are more likely to respond positively to adults who do not presume expert status about their lives (Clandinin, Huber, Huber,

Murphy, Orr, Pearce & Steeves, 2006; Maybin, 2006). The adoption of this stance guided the nature of my responses to participants' emails which focused on building trust as a crucial aspect in the formation of a personal dialogical relationship with each participant. In terms of dialogic engagement in an online environment, the building of ongoing trust and communication equates to "I am responded to, therefore I am" (Markham, 2005, p. 795). Responses were designed to be supportive but to not guide future decisions about the style and content of their entries—e.g., "It's great to hear from you! Thanks for writing when you are so busy. I love to hear your news". Techniques of 'mirroring' were used that borrowed from counselling contexts (e.g., Geldard & Geldard, 2008) in order to reflect the participants' tone (e.g., upbeat, pensive, jubilant) and to be encouraging and affirming. According to Markham (2005), a balance must be struck between fostering a relationship with participants that helps the expression of their lived realities while at the same time attending to one's own influence in shaping the outcomes of the study. The aim was to create an open yet organised space where participants were guaranteed an appreciative and non-judgemental response to their email inside 24 hours. Thus, in acting as a voice of listener and responder to each email, my goal was to progressively build trust and to form an emotional bond while remaining a minimally intrusive external voice within participants' writing.

Methods

The participants composed and sent personal emails written in journal genre to the researcher over a period of six months. The selection of methods represents an attempt to gain flexible and person-level access to the participants' lives in their own choice of computer-mediated environment. Hence, the research design incorporated narrative techniques of personal writing in journal genre within the electronic environment of email in order to create a synergy for relaxed self-disclosure.

Blending traditional journals and email

The placement of journals within an online (email) was intended to enhance the personal and social aspects of self that self-reflective writing in combination with being online can imply. In this study, a journal is a text document produced by individuals about themselves as a "regular, personal and contemporaneous record of daily life" (Alaszewski, 2006, p.1). As a method, the journals functioned as self-report instruments used to investigate the "social, psychological, and physiological processes" experienced by participants within everyday situations (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p.579). Because journals are contemporary records (meaning they are recorded in the present), they can capture the "here and now" of what is meaningful to participants without placing demands on recall (Alaszewski, 2006; Bolger et al., 2003). Furthermore, in terms of the aims of the study to tap into processes, the inherent aspect of "self-surveillance" in journals (Bolger et al., 2003) was deemed likely to facilitate a type of

self-reflection-based reporting that supported the articulation of frequent self-statements. Additionally, the journals link to the theoretical perspective as a form of dialogue that sought to communicate with an audience and that interactively involved the researcher as a listener/responder. Journals thus served as a genre for self-reflective writing and as report mechanisms intended for an immediate and future audience with features that were enhanced by placement in an email setting.

The use of email supports the establishment of online rapport with participants in ways that appear especially relevant to young adolescents as a group (Strom & Strom, 2009). As a tool for qualitative research, the removal of power associated with the physical absence of the researcher gives email a distinct advantage over face-to-face interaction (Hewson, 2008; James & Busher, 2006; Reid, Petocz & Gordon, 2008).Whereas concepts of asynchrony in dialogue can denote power imbalances caused by "interactional dominance", as explained by Hermans (2001a, p. 264), the power distribution in an email setting can be configured in the participant's favour (Dillon, 2010). Since email tends to be used asynchronously, it allows a young person to take time to think about their words and to edit and change their responses (Hewson, 2008; Reid, Petocz & Gordon, 2008). Although email asynchrony can impede "conversational flow", it enables the creation of reflective opportunities that encourage the generation of more elaborate and deeply-considered accounts (Hewson, 2008, p.555). Since younger participants may choose to converse differently from adults, email as a form of dialogue can be more reflective of the way the writer forms thoughts and ideas, especially when not pressured by the researcher's presence or in having to take their turn (Dillon, 2010). Therefore, the participants' emailed journals were intended to facilitate dialogue between what the authors wanted to say, which self was saying it, and who was intended to hear.

Data and analysis

The data were comprised of single sets of personal email texts. Data provided by 12 participants yielded 202 scripts in the form of digital journal entries written and lodged as email across a period of six months. Data presented in a wide variety of styles that ranged from lengthy examples of iterative reflection to quickly constructed texts that were characterised by a tone and appearance of spontaneity. Scripts were thus highly variable in size, appearance and content and thus presented as a diverse range of texts. For example, some participants sent digital images or YouTube videos, or used emoticon symbols and flamboyant fonts to enhance their writing. Since participants had been responsible for their own styles and schedules, there was a high variance in the numbers of entries per participant, ranging from six to 36 across the arc of the writing phase. The frequency of writing is shown in Table 1 (on p. 13).

Each individual entry was analysed using the Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003)—a systematic approach that involves multiple readings of

Table 1. *Participant pseudonyms and writing frequency*

Pseudonym	June	July	August	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Total
Wildcatgirl 10 years, girl	******	**	**	***	**	****	**18**
Moochie 10 years, girl	****** ***	***** ****	***	****	*****	***	**33**
Dragonlover 11 years, boy	***	*		**	*	****	**11**
Allimax 12 years, girl	******	***** ****	***** *****	***	****	***	**35**
Midas Well 12 years, boy	******	**	**	**	*****	**	**19**
Chanel 12 years, girl	**	***	*		***	***	**12**
Fateboarder 12 years, boy	****	****	*			*	**10**
Piggy-in-the-middle 12years, girl	*****	***	**	**	**	*	**15**
Lexie 13 years, girl	**	***	**		***	****	**14**
Random 13 years, boy	**		**		*	*	**6**
Bruce 13 years, boy	*******	****	*****	****	**	**	**24**
Frederick 14 years, boy	**	**				*	**5**

text that can provide the researcher with a set of interpretations of multi-layered "voices" rather than coded categories. Proponents of its use claim that the techniques of close listening represent a move away from reductive approaches to narrative data that have in the past led to static representations based on predetermined or mutually exclusive categories (Doucet & Mauthner, 2008; Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). A key advantage of the listening approach is that it facilitates access to tacit knowledge and to implicit feelings and responses that may not be readily articulated by certain groups and individuals. Applications with adolescent populations can be found in Brown's (2003) investigations into anger among teenage girls, Spencer's (2006) work with mentoring processes between adolescents and adults, and Kiegelmann's (2007) exploration of identity among college-age adolescents (Kiegelmann, 2007).

The scope of the Listening Guide goes well beyond the explicit "I" statements by tapping into the subtle and nuanced voices that emerge to show the patterns and the relationship between voices. This is a complex and rigorous procedure that involves extended periods of reflexive examination in order to build a feel for each individual participant's meanings and to extract patterns and sequences. Each of the close "listening" steps was marked in highlighter and copious notes were made as texts were iteratively re-visited countless times in order to track the dynamic relationship that exists between different voices. For example, a voice of anger or anxiety might emerge in a single script, yet over a dozen entries and readings, relationships and tensions between certain "I" voices could be determined (e.g., excitement about holidays linking

to the release from pressure to 'perform' at school). Even when digital images were used, such as a "fat giraffe" to protest the first opening of a MacDonald's franchise in Africa, they were accompanied by text so that the author's intentions were able to be interpreted. Therefore, when the "I" is 'heard' in context with all other features of the text, including tone (i.e., the expressive timbre—see Bertau, 2008) links and tensions can be tracked across a series of entries. The readings thus revealed certain "I" voices that could be characterised by tone, topic and intention in order to yield a nuanced interpretation.

"I" as author: the self-observer

As narrating authors about themselves, the participants consciously chose to become self-observers of their own processes of thinking, acting and feeling. From a DS perspective, when a person actively engages with being a self-observer, it is believed to support unity within the self through making meaningful connections across different aspects of his or her life (Hermans, 2003). In the present application, being "I" as author represents the process of self-reflectively separating from the typical daily 'stream' of experiences, (invoking William James' [1890] metaphor for consciousness, also re-visited by Valsiner [2008]), so as to write about those experiences in a considered fashion. Hence, as a lens for the analysis, the interpretation of voices represents temporary states brought on by self-reflection.

Since participants were briefed to *be themselves* as much as possible, they were free to choose the information they wished to share. Subsequently, the participants reported a diverse range of thoughts and opinions that emerged as critical social and political commentaries about broader society (often prompted by media reports); details about personal interests (especially passions); self-descriptions (both positive and negative); school and social engagements; and descriptions of future plans. The position of "I" as author adopted by each participant thus emerged in diverse and highly evaluative expressions characterised by self-reflection and the apparent effort to be a "good" storyteller (i.e, to communicate well to others).The following excerpts were chosen as examples of voices in four participant's self and other evaluations that show their responsiveness to social context and their efforts to 'fit'. The sections in bold text serve to highlight active use of "I" as a focal point of analysis.

Lexie

Lexie was 13 years old and homeschooled for the duration of her writing. Being homeschooled meant that Lexie's mother facilitated an open curriculum of learning experiences that involved personal research projects, excursions to museums and galleries—and the search for a suitable school placement. She was a self-aware and introspective writer and her emails were strongly characterised by an 'observer' stance and a truth-seeker's voice. The tensions in her voices were mostly related to conflicts between scepticism about an uncertain world and her desire to be optimistic and embrace her own future.

Excerpt 1 demonstrates a self-assessment Lexie made of herself following a visit to a prestigious school that enjoyed a good reputation and where the principal was very persuasive. Having described her own negative perceptions of the school that included teachers who looked like "a Picasso painting", Lexie asserted her own judgements about herself as well.

Excerpt 1: "I" as reality accepter

I am sure I have inherited my fathers' genetic code for reality acceptance rather than mum's conviction that the good and worthwhile is here, it just needs to be found. Out of my 4 siblings, 2 have a really happy and bright perspective (Name)(her personality is rather over the top at times though with excitement) and (Name) 2 have a guarded appraisal of most things (Names) and I am somewhere in the middle of them. (Entry 12 20/11)

Lexie described herself as one who was positioned mid-way along a spectrum of reality acceptance in her family, thus exhibiting a significant self-assessment as a result of her sceptical voice that had rejected the evaluations of key adults around her. Her voice of resistance had shifted to a voice of self-affirmation in her conclusions that served to strengthen and affirm her ability to rely on her own judgements.

Excerpt 2 demonstrates one of Lexie's efforts to decide where she might fit in terms of a future career. After listing her requirements that included "stimulation of the brain" and "an employer who will accept my logical thinking", she cited other women as external voices who inspired her goals.

Excerpt 2: "I" as self-reliant

I know the "Business World" can provide me with all of my preferences but it may also be a little too-fast paced for my liking. I understand why business people go at the speed they do, I probably would be able to adapt to their situation with time and fit right in. Women like Condoleezza Rice, Hilary Clinton, Angela Merkel and Anita Roddick have achieved much in their lives and I asked myself why I wouldn't be able to do exactly the same, maybe even more, by learning from their mistakes. I know that if I want something changed I have to try and change that situation, not rely on others to make a difference or wait for the problem to fix itself. But I do know that one person can make a change and a difference. (Entry 7 29/8)

Lexie made a strong self-statement by revealing her career choice depended not only on what suited her needs but that it must also be something that "made a difference". The tensions in her voices mainly related to feelings of uncertainty and insecurity expressed earlier as she began her analysis of her career options stating; "a small part of me started to panic". Lexie's aspirational voices intertwined with the voices of prominent female role models to prompt voices of realism, where she affirmed a self who must adapt and "fix" problems herself in order to succeed. Her exploration thus pointed to a well-developed awareness of a self whose future plans were modelled on achiever women's voices in a way that bolstered her own need for self-reliance.

Excerpt 3 shows a later entry where news of the Global Financial Crisis had begun to escalate and Lexie re-assessed her desire to enter the business world. She

concluded by voicing her insecurities about the future, fuelled by the external voices of her parents and her regular access to media bulletins.

Excerpt 3: "I" as escapist

I wonder if Barack Obama has the determination and capability to save the American economy and therefore the rest of the world's financial system? I am not sure whether he is too inexperienced to repair the damage from the current President, George W. Bush for his country. Though, only time will tell. I wonder how our elderly population would feel hearing all of this upsetting news and feeling if another recession will occur again and if their grandchildren will have to live the same way they did when they were a child. I listen to my parents talking about what jobs will disappear and how the property market will be impacted and I just wonder how on earth did it come to this? Greed. Exceptional single minded greed. …It makes me want to read "Anne of Green Gables" again! Escape to a different world and time where the words fiscal ramifications, branding, paradigm shift and procurement didn't exist! (Entry 9 19/10)

Lexie's voices showed tensions across entries between one voice expressing a desire to engage with the world and another that rose up to want to shut the world out in response to growing societal voices of uncertainty. She had thereby shifted from an "I" who looked forward to her future, progressed to an "I" who felt concern for the social implications, and then moved to an "I" who sought to escape. The ambiguity she felt in being drawn to business but being sobered by its potential downside caused a seemingly unresolvable tension that sparked her voice of escapism.

Piggy-in-the-middle

Piggy-in-the-middle was 12 years old and she attended an all-girl's private school in a large regional centre. Her pseudonym derives from her email address and was symbolic in regard to her talents in both academic and athletic areas, causing her to struggle to balance and maintain her achievements. Piggy-in-the-middle's writing style was characterised by spontaneity, emotional candour and an absence of gloss.

Excerpt 4 draws from her first email where she first gave an account of her ambiguous relationship with her friends, deeming herself both "wild" and "conservative", and then she asserted her dedication to training as a state grade athlete.

Excerpt 4: "I" as dedicated athlete

Training has also been hard. I am doing some sort of sport everyday of the week! Monday - PE and hurdles, Tuesday - sprint training and PE, Wednesday - Sport, Netball Training and PE, Thursday - gym work and throws training, Friday - Sprint Training and PE, Saturday - Netball and occasionally sprint training, Sunday - all sorts like netball, sprints, just stuff at home. I think I'm starting to stress my parents out with all this training I want to do! I imagine they'd spend a bit of money on petrol and the Skins they buy me! (Entry 1 24/6)

The positioning of "I" in this excerpt as a sequence of "I am", "I think", "I want", and "I imagine" established Piggy-in-the-middle's claim to a sense of dedication and ownership of her training regimen. The active "I am doing" told of her daily

involvement with "hard" training as a way to assert her willingness to work hard to reach her goals. She made it plain that it is training that she *wanted* to do (thrice in succession) independently of the external voices of her while her parents. Her own voice of dedication as a self-initiator of her athletics activities thus formed a strong self-statement that conveyed passion for her talent.

Excerpt 5 demonstrates a 'watershed' event that shifted the balance in Piggy-in-the-middle's management of her dual commitments. Her efforts to maintain her academic grades (she was in an extension class for academically advanced students) took its toll and she was forced to re-evaluate her priorities.

Excerpt 5: "I" as shifter of priorities

*This week has been insanely unorganised and complicated. **I think it has also been a pretty emotional week as well for me.** We had our sport carnival yesterday. **I was so desperate to do well I didn't think of all the things that might have happened.** Of course, these then happened to me in my second event of the day - triple jump. **I had just come from my 200m final - which I completely blew - I ran a slow time and wasn't focused. I still came second though. M (name of arch rival) tripped during our heat together, and she was so upset about it. It's funny how your enemies can become such close friends in such little time. Anyway, I was crying (I even felt bad about crying - I felt so selfish) because I stuffed my 200m, and I had my first jump at triple. I fouled because my run up wasn't right. Then on my second jump, I started to jump and rolled my ankle and fell into the sand. Our head of sport had to carry me off because I couldn't walk. I then went home and cried some more.** Dad and I decided not to do anymore school sport so **I can focus on my schoolwork.** (Entry 10 9/8)*

Piggy-in-the-middle was explicit in her self-awareness about the intensity of feeling she had for her talent area by describing her view of herself as an athlete with words like "desperate" and "emotional". She did not gloss over the situation for an audience, including that she was physically carried from the track and subsequently denied the age champion award. Despite her self-critical voice, her words were imbued with a 'coping' tone, where the recognition of her own desperation to win triggered a shift of priorities (in concert with the external voice of her father). Piggy-in-the-middle thus drew from her emotions as a pivotal prompt to re-evaluate her best way forward.

Excerpt 6 was written after completion of her final assessments for the year and where her voices were a cross-current of happiness, relief and a sense of achievement.

Excerpt 6: "I" as achiever

I am so happy!!! I handed in my last assignment today, so I'm done for the year!!! I think I did pretty well in all my assessment. *After we finished the dance choreography task, we got an assignment and I thought mine was pretty good. I get my results back on Monday. Music was totally different. I did a shocking job in my guitar performance, so I redid it and got a B+. That's good, because I got a B+ on my super hard music test and A's for the last term so **I get an A- overall. I'm really happy with that because I am not a very musical person.** [more subject details and results].English has been quite hard for me. I got an A in the first half of the assignment and I handed in the second part today. It was a picture book defence, defending why we had created our picture book a certain*

*way. **Japanese has been very successful for me. I got an A on my oral and I got an A and an A- on my reading and writing exam. I was so pleased with my science assignment. I got an A+! I think that means I get an A or an A+ overall! In maths I did the same. For my first test I got an A and for the second one I got an A+. (Name), my maths teacher showed me that I would get an A+ overall.** (Entry 16 21/11)*

Piggy-in-the-middle's final stage entry excludes a lengthy mid-section detailing her various subject performances with a tone of relief and satisfaction. The explicit voice of happiness to emerge in relation to good grades opposed an earlier claim of "hating school" made in the face of mounting assessment pressure and in the wake of abandoning the sports she loved. Piggy-in-the-middle's voices of relief and happiness about her grades also related to her pride at having accomplished important goals across a range of areas, including those where she perceived herself as not especially talented, and as a 'payoff' for her decision to quit athletics.

Chanel

Chanel had just turned 12 years old and had recently withdrawn from regular schooling due to ongoing unhappiness with an inadequate curriculum. Her homeschooling took place in a capital city that gave regular access to a range of facilities such as a national library, many galleries and museums, a science centre and historic government buildings. Her pseudonym derived from an interest in Parisian life and culture and her views on 'slow food', unhealthy Australian lifestyle habits and the importance of a healthy body and mind were email themes.

Excerpt 7 demonstrates the way that Chanel voiced concern for young babies that she feared were being given a poor start to their lives. Chanel's critical voices were often focused on a perceived wrong-doing, especially where children and innocent parties were involved.

Excerpt 7: "I" as critical social commentator

***The first time I saw a toddler in a pram drinking coke I was sure that it was an illusion, a glaring sun shining in my eyes but when I doubled back and saw the baby that could barely walk was gulping down that chemical concoction I really feared for what will become of this generation.** More than eat fast we need to change fast. It's unreasonable to think that this type of food would ever be banned. **I think it's because people don't have alternatives, it's called convenience food because it is convenient and fast food because that's how a lot of people tend to live their lives now. When I was in France I saw a different type of lifestyle,** people everywhere, in business, in the schools, in the fields stop in the middle of the day and sit and eat together, shops and tourist venues are closed, men get off their tractors and on old, strong wooden tables under large, shady trees they share bread, meat, cheese and wine. In the homes after they eat they often rest or sleep then they go back to their lives.* (Entry 3 2/7)

Chanel used a dramatic storyteller's voice to convey her disbelief at seeing a "toddler" consuming a "chemical concoction" (Coca-Cola) presumably given by an adult, who, by implication, should have known better. Chanel's "I think" statement prosecuted the removal of choice from a whole generation who are not given

alternatives, thereby positioning herself as a person who had spent time in a different culture (who was thus in a position to compare). Her self claim was that her own awareness had been raised and she was a person who valued having healthy "alternatives". As a strategy, Chanel moved from specific incidents (the sighting of the child) to widen her arguments in order to deliberately make the scope and the message of her disapproval (of fast, convenience foods) all the more powerful.

Excerpt 8 draws from an entry about Chanel's introduction to Distance Education (as an alternative to mainstream schooling), revealing her voices of anger, frustration and disappointment at again facing inadequate formal learning provision.

Excerpt 8: "I" as frustrated learner

*I wasn't able to do any work until recently because of the packing and moving, but when I was able to sit down and do the booklets I realised that they were horrifically easy! They were talking about nursery rhymes and syllables in English, easy and repetitive algebra in math and science was talking about cells in baby words. **Then I had an English telephone lesson only to find that my classmates couldn't identify Ireland off a map, pronounced repetitive…. ree-peetative and took 5 minutes to list how many types of tenses there are! I thought I was going insane! And I've been put up into year 8, the advanced class? Mum only signed me up so I could accelerate and do the HSC early. If I wasn't going to the Academy next year I would reach new limits of frustration that has never been seen before!** Imagine if the teachers from 40 years ago knew what was happening now? Kids can slip through the system with no effort now, from k-12, get easy marks, leave school with a good recommendation and then into uni undetected to hit the brick wall. **…I wonder about people like me who are stuck with parents who are not as supportive, what happens to them? I know they disengage but what must their thoughts be every day as they gouge deeper ruts in the treadmill of their life.*** (Entry 6 25/8)

Chanel voices of anger appeared both considered and "in the moment" as she gave a highly evaluative response to the issue of the unsatisfactory curriculum content. Her anger showed in her short and purposeful introduction, her choice of adjectives ("horrifically easy", "baby words") and in her derisive tone ("…ree-peetative"). Her voice then purposefully shifted to embrace "people like me" as she recruited the voices of others to expand upon her own dissatisfaction. Her self claim was that she needed learning opportunities that were a genuine challenge to her ability that in this instance were being unmet.

Excerpt 9 shows Chanel's response to a media report about an incident of animal cruelty that she found very upsetting and that sparked her thoughts on violence.

Excerpt 9: "I" as abhorrer of violence

*I want to talk to you about animal cruelty, **I am really upset as yesterday I was disgusted when I heard that a group of 4 teenage vandals broke into an animal reserve and attacked some flamingos including one who is 75 and blind in one eye!** He has lived there all his life in complete harmony and safety! And now he is in a critical condition. **How does their mind work? What happened to create monsters like this? I can't begin to imagine.** Animal cruelty and abuse should have harsher punishments and now, looking*

at my sisters' cute little puppy, who is the embodiment of innocent trust - **I don't have anywhere to go to in my mind to work it out**. *I've occasionally seen the animal rescue Miami on Austar, and the state that the animals were in before they were rescued, it was inhumane, it is just like abusing a human, I don't see a differentiation, animals live, breathe, smell, feel, hear and see, they have needs, they feel pain....Why is the punishment for animals less severe? Where I would like change is for animal abusers to receive long jail sentences with no exemption for teenagers.* To some it may seem harsh, but they know it's wrong and that it's a crime. Some parents actually teach their children how to be dysfunctional, alcoholics leading lives filled with violence and depression. Children are growing up watching domestic violence, anger being taken out by shouting, slaps and smacks for the children and pets alike and so they find either a weak wife or an alcoholic husband and the cycle continues. **The Government say they are doing something and they are but it is not enough. There needs to be a program to reach out to those in need of help, we need to find a way around lack of funds, privacy acts, all the fullstops. With each generation the scars become worse, the violence becomes a way of life and there is no going back. People who could have succeeded and have a great life are now suffering under a type of parent induced dictatorship, some even take their own lives. This problem affects a whole line of victims for generations, the pets who suffer abuse, the children with a scarred, violent background, the wives who suffer domestic violence and miss out on their life and the husband/father who grew up with his father abusing and going to jail, getting out and doing it all over again. Mind you these are the few who are caught. All the trauma that is in these cycles, all the many ways that is could be slowed down at least if it can't be stopped right away.** (Entry 10 4/11)

Chanel's explicit voices of outrage and disgust were emphasized by her use of rhetorical questions intended to convey her opinions about certain kinds of people to whom she could not relate. Her voices of incomprehension then shifted to consider the causal links that might explain the atrocity, showing her grasp of the "cycle" of violence that went beyond the external voices of media. In so doing, she revealed her own ontological stance of there being no "differentiation" in her mind between animals and humans, and that she was, in general, fervently against violence. A voice of powerlessness emerged in her frustration about government inaction, which then shifted to some hopefulness in the potential for commitment to slow the problems of intergenerational violence.

Midas Well

Midas Well was a talented public speaker and his pseudonym was a tongue-in-cheek reference to his decision to join the research on the expressed motivation that it might help others 'like him'. He was 12 years old and turned 13 years in the final two months of writing. Midas Well attended a regular co-educational high school and he was placed in an advanced English, Maths and Science program that he balanced with music competitions and soccer.

Excerpt 10 illustrates the interest that Midas Well took in the Australian political scene and it was selected to demonstrate the acerbic tone he used to voice his disapproval of a change in prime ministers.

Excerpt 10: "I" as critical political commentator

Also another piece of irony that I carry around with me is called our grand Prime Minister Mr Kevin Ironic Rudd. I have to say whatever unnoticeable good that he seems to be doing he just shoots it down in my books. I can't help but notice that over the ten or so months he has been in office every bad thing that has happened has apparently been "Johnny's Fault". I don't know about you but I'm pretty sure that John Howard isn't the Prime Minister any more? *Interest rates, inflation and all things damaging to a political profile have been fobbed off as the ignorance of the previous government. While that ploy may be plausible for the first month, perhaps at a stretch the 3rd month, after 10 and a bit months in power* ***I don't think I'm the only one sick of him not getting on with his job****.* (Entry 16 21/10)

A feature of Midas Well's negative assessment of the prime minister was his tone of sarcasm and the explicit voice of irony, shown in the first line. His self claim was as a person who sees through the rhetoric and deception (ploys) of politics and who believes that leaders should take responsibility. Midas Well frequently used a voice of irony to express his dissatisfaction with adult authority in general.

Excerpt 11 demonstrates the self-critical voice that Midas Well directed towards his own efforts to achieve that rarely met with his satisfaction. The context is during a week long music eisteddfod where his success sparks a reflection on his motivations.

Excerpt 11: "I" as perfectionist

… ***I played a hard study relative to this exam, and didn't play it well by my standards.*** *…. And as it turned out,* ***I did get first****….for the first time ever!* ***But one thing that I would rather be able to do other than get first, is to walk off and be happy with what I played. (I can say I've never done that) Maybe this is what drives me to do better….but it would be nice every now and then to be happy with what I've done. I went straight back into the warm up room and replayed the section I stuffed up before I came back and listened to the other performances. I feel I really didn't deserve to win,*** *but I guess a wins a win…* ***Some people really love the accolades they receive when they do something good, but for some reason I detest it*** *…* ***I only do things like eisteddfods, exams, comps etc. for myself, to continually prove myself to me. I've found out that ultimately…I'm the hardest person to please myself. Being self critical applies to everything, sport, school etc., and many people find it annoying, but it is what makes me strive harder…..and that will never change. I do it for me and no other reason…. People already think I'm a nerd without advertising it*** *to the whole school community.* (Entry 9 2/8)

Midas Well appeared genuine in his self-criticisms even though it may have served the dual purpose of justifying to an audience his involvement in public competitions despite his claim to "detest accolades". Having encountered a tension between a need to compete and a discomfort with prizes, Midas Well attempted to resolve his dilemma by providing a self-reflection on his reasons for entering competitions—as if to account for any inconsistency. His shift to a general analysis of his own difficulties in pleasing himself conveyed a voice of perfectionism, where his win did not feel deserved and his self-criticisms brought him social disapproval (i.e.,

being thought of as a "nerd"). He thus revealed his sensitivity to external voices from peers—where perceived (or real) lack of social acceptance caused inner tensions.

Excerpt 12 draws from an entry written after Midas Well's participation in a week long enrichment camp for gifted students held in the state capital that drew from a variety of schools. Prior to his attendance, Midas Well had expressed a voice of growing cynicism about school and his change to real world experiences provided a welcome circuit-breaker.

> ***Excerpt 12: "I" as enjoyer of 'real world' learning***
>
> ***I was a bit unsure of how it was going to be at first … I must confess I was worried that I'd be stuck with a bunch of "typical nerds"!*** *It's funny because I have an ongoing discussion (more likely an argument!) with my friends at school because they insist that I am a nerd! I fight a losing battle.....but anyway,* ***I really enjoyed the week. It was an experience in itself just to spend a week in (City name)….I particularly enjoyed visiting the law courts; it was fascinating to see the inner workings of our Queensland Legal system in the Supreme Court, and even managed to see how ridiculous some of the rulings were.*** *[Describes a case] There is so much we did it would be impossible to recount the whole thing.* ***I loved the QIMR, and the Physics demo at UQ****....and I even got to see my brother as he was coming out of an exam so that was great.* ***I enjoyed the Queensland Art Gallery, I didn't like Sydney Nolan's art that was every where, in fact I hardly looked at the art at all. I just sat by the big rectangular lake thing, enjoyed the quiet and relaxed!*** (Entry 12 23/9)

Midas Well's initial reluctance to go to the camp for gifted students was based on his "ongoing" battle with peers labelling him a "nerd", thus affirming his resistance to inclusion in that unpopular category. This tension was soon resolved as he discovered the enjoyment in having an authentic opportunity to be engaged and even fascinated by the schedule of activities that were specially designed to be enriching. Midas Well thus re-positioned his voices to embrace this particular opportunity to have stimulating experiences and his voices of concern about being a "nerd" were (temporarily) silenced.

Discussion

The challenges in conveying the nuances of complex personal narratives and in doing justice to participants' multi-faceted and diverse selves were daunting for researcher and authors alike. For present purposes, discussion focuses on three areas—the specific responses to context, the significance of emotional expression and the apparent value to participants of engagement with research methodologies that strengthen agency and accommodate their diversity.

In terms of context, each participant gave a prismatic and unique view of his or her life both in and out of school. However, there were significant differences between the voices that emerged in relation to the school-based and the homeschooled environments that assert the influence of external voices as shaping forces. Specifically, the focus on marks and assessment as a measure of achievement appeared restrictive to the participants from mainstream schooling contexts in terms of the types of learning dialogues it fostered. While Piggy-in-the-middle's synopsis of her end of year marks

offers a small glimpse, there was evidence of the routine pursuit for top marks amongst all the school students—typified by one participant's comment: *"anything less than 100% is crap for me"*. Furthermore, the study gave evidence about the discord that mixed societal reactions to achievement creates for gifted young adolescents who feel powerless to control others' perceptions (Assouline & Colangelo 2006). For instance, Midas Well's opposition to the "nerd" image affected his decisions and demeanour regarding his learning opportunities. The external voices of peers had infiltrated his attitudes to being seen as "gifted" at school and caused a sense of differentness that he perceived as damaging to his social reputation. Often, a 'pathology' discourse is associated with frequently misunderstood expressions of giftedness, such as intensity of feeling, perfectionism and excitability that can appear in disconcerting ways (Webb et al, 2004; Moon, 2002). However, it should be noted that Midas Well's internal voices of perfectionism, while "annoying" to others, were shown to be self-motivating, highlighting the importance of understanding the multiple facets to this experience. The study nevertheless flags concerns about the implications for a healthy sense of self that come from being routinely subjected to arbitrary measures.

In contrast, the two homeschooled participants discussed many diverse issues across a corpus of 26 emails without a single mention of assessment or scores, suggestive of their freedom to participate in a more flexible approach to their daily lives. Lexie and Chanel each gave lively and thoughtful analyses of world events (e.g., the post-Obama election; the global financial crisis), local issues and individual people that showed a less parochial scope of influences in their writing. In the excerpts shown, Lexie's opinion of a privileged educational setting and Chanel's biting criticisms of Distance Education, each demonstrate confidence in their own judgements in challenging the prevailing governance of key adults. It may be that with the benefit of time for uninterrupted discussions and lengthy bouts of research interspersed with engagement in stimulating learning experiences, the homeschooled participants enjoyed more autonomy in their everyday lives. However, while 'silent' voices are empirically difficult to demonstrate, the absence of responses to peers and the lack of descriptions about shared friendships may have represented a voice of social loneliness. On the other hand, the home-school environment appeared to free each of these participants from putting energy into defending themselves from negative peer scrutiny. Hence, these contexts exemplify differences in dialogical encounters—one with a school-based focus on marks and the other as conducive of self-determination and the chance to engage in more open and expansive thoughts.

A regular feature of the voices that appeared in participants' emails was the extent to which emotions were intrinsic to the kinds of self and other evaluations they made. The reciprocity between a dialogical self and emotions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) was borne out in the ways that participants used emotions to clarify their thoughts and to position themselves relative to others. Participants used their emotions to guide their decisions and to assert their beliefs—typified by Piggy-in-the-middle's choice to resolve the duality she experienced in trying to manage two talents areas and in Chanel's stance against violence. While research has shown the benefits to regular young adolescents of placing their emotions within an expressive explanatory

framework (Bohanek et al, 2008) a social bias exists against exploring the so-called "non-cognitive" aspects of giftedness (see Olenchak, Gaa & Jackson, 2009). According to Olenchak and colleagues (2009), changes in societal perceptions are needed about the role that affective aspects play in the emergence of abilities and in what we consider to be a "successful" person. Concurring with this view, this study found that participants were fortified by their emotions, whether it was through frustration about an imperfect performance or in being motivated to strive, the evaluative filter of emotions mobilized their goal-seeking voices. Authoring was thus found to facilitate the recognition and the regulation of emotions, suggestive of a need to actively encourage gifted young adolescents to identify and draw on their emotions as important personal resources.

Through the methodology, participants in this study were supported in having certain kinds of exploratory conversations (with themselves and with me) that encouraged a "language of construction" (Berzonsky, 2011, p.57). The combined effects of a supportive listener who provided a moderating and affirming influence with the tools of personal email created an environment of heightened self-reflection. The participants were thus enabled to express different and oppositional points of view as part of their regular thinking with the confidence to choose their topic and without fear of disapproval. Moreover, since expression of self voices is not about specific outcomes, the participants were framed within processes of forming self-affirming thoughts. Hence, the writing process was gradually transformed through the dialogical relationship between reflective writing and listening into a positive forum for self-discovery. Because the participants were motivated to make their emails newsworthy, they would think about what to write in the gaps between writing—one participant referred to this as *"writing in my mind"*. As evidence of their commitment, they wrote late at night when they were tired, they wrote before and after important events, they wrote when they were excited and they wrote when they were bored. They shared about births and deaths in the family and they shared their holiday experiences abroad and at home. They wrote when it was inconvenient, such as on the eve of moving house and when overseas camping ground internet was unreliable. They described disappointments and pleasures, frustrations and triumphs, and when words were inadequate, they sent images and You Tube videos—e.g., *"In my music I've been pretty busy this week. I uploaded three more videos. You can see them at:* www.youtube.com/softshredding. *Enjoy!"*. The obvious motivation to write affirms the workability of the methods—specifically, the asynchronous nature of the email communication, the desirability of being online, and the sense of being seen as interesting to others created a built-in incentive to continue the dialogical (to and fro) relationship. Hence, while the self-making effect of putting thoughts, feelings and personal realities into words has been widely recognised in narrative practice (e.g., Bruner, 2002) more emphasis is perhaps needed on the importance of time and practice in how it emerges.

The shortcomings to the described approach mainly relate to the task of representing tension-laden and seemingly ambiguous aspects of self for young adolescents being open to countless interpretations. Additionally, since the participants' emails were intertwined with the researcher's voice and mediated by personal

computers, the analysis of personal narratives as text-based accounts provides a limited view of the dialogical relationship. As a consequence, I would caution against the conflation of personal narratives as a privileged self-construction resource.

In terms of future directions, the study points to much potential in using integrated (e.g., online) approaches that include personal writing online to access individual responses to phenomena such as stress, passion, spirituality, and mentoring relationships. Specifically, any focus on the transformative potential of personal agency would be highly beneficial. Such inquiry could be especially useful among gifted young adolescents for monitoring a range of intrinsic processes such as the relationship with a talent, creativity or the micro-processes of underachievement that impact self-definition. At a broader level, giftedness study could be undertaken using dialogical principles that emphasise the expression of giftedness as a dynamic process instead of a fixed state. This may better implicate the quality of the social relationships and interactions that surround a young person and lead to different ways of framing what it means to be gifted, what it means to succeed and how best to support giftedness in individuals.

Conclusions

This paper set out to explore one way that theories of dialogue in combination with the use of narrative methods online can be used to invigorate understandings of self-formation among gifted young adolescent individuals. By engaging participants in a process of becoming authors of their own realities, the use of email was shown to offer a convenient and empowering means of communication for describing everyday experiences and perceptions to the researcher. Findings show that the prevailing social milieu is implicated in the kinds of self-construction that is made possible and available for gifted young adolescents, and that significant tensions surround issues of achievement and social acceptance. Findings also challenge the mainstream assumption that self among gifted young adolescents is more about doing than feeling, since participants' voices showed strong affective links in their desire for success within different areas of endeavour. The study contributes to conversations about how the placement of self within a context of dialogical processes highlights the effects of social forces (external voices) on a growing sense of self. By seeing the selves of gifted young adolescents as linked dialogically to others and having multiple and changing qualities, we can look for ways to support personal agency as well as mutual responsibility. Therefore, a dialogical perspective applied within narrative study provides an alternative and positive avenue for viewing self formation within specific contexts.

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