

Gifted young adolescents and email: Developing a personal language of *self*

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Abstract

This paper reports on the use of email as a means to access the self-constructions of gifted young adolescents. Australian research shows that gifted young adolescents may feel more lonely and misunderstood than their same-age counterparts, yet they are seldom asked about their lives. Emerging use of online methods as a means of access to individual lives and perceptions has demonstrated the potential offered by the creation of digital texts as narrative data. Details are given of a qualitative study that engaged twelve children aged between 10 and 14 years, who were screened for giftedness, in a project involving the generation of emailed journal entries sent over a period of 6 months. With emphasis on participatory principles, individual young adolescents produced self-managed journal entries that were written and sent to the researcher from personal computers outside the school setting. Drawing from a theoretical understanding of self as constructed within dialogic relationships, the digital setting of email is proposed as a narrative space that fosters healthy self-disclosure. This paper outlines the benefits of using email as a means to explore emotions, promote reflective accounts of *self* and support the development of a personal language for self-expression. Individual excerpts will be presented to show that the harnessing of personal narratives within an email context has potential to yield valuable insights into the emotions, personal realities and experiences of gifted young adolescents. Findings will be presented to show that the co-construction of self-expressive and explanatory narratives supported by a facilitative adult *listener* promoted healthy self-awareness amongst participants. This paper contributes to appreciative conversations about using online methods as a flexible and practical avenue for conducting educational research. Furthermore, digital writing in email form will be presented as having distinct advantages over face-to-face methods when utilised with gifted young adolescents who may be unwilling to disclose information within school-based settings.

Keywords: email; gifted young adolescents; voices; self construction.

INTRODUCTION

Emerging interest in the use of online facilities for conducting research offers promise in terms of flexibility and adaptability to more conventional qualitative approaches (Hine, 2008). The extent to which everyday life has become saturated with multi-media technologies has significantly opened up the possibilities for research within educational settings (Coffey, Renold, Dicks, Soyinka & Mason, 2006). Not only can online technologies be used to gain access to individual lives, there is also the potential to seek multi-vocal stories in digital form that challenge conventional educational narratives (Coffey et al, 2006). Given their unprecedented access to emergent technologies, young adolescents may be an ideal group to engage with forms of Internet-based research.

This paper describes a way of using online (*email*) methods in order to access the complex and layered personal accounts of *self* amongst gifted young adolescents. A combination of the everyday convenience of email with the traditional journal was found to yield thoughtful self-disclosures as constructed versions of self amongst individual participants of a study. Specific extracts from email journal entries will show the ways that two gifted young adolescents reflectively constructed a personal sense of self. Email will thus be presented as a flexible means to gain out-of-school access to the daily realities of gifted young adolescents.

Self versus ‘social reputation’

Primary empirical studies reveal that children’s social interactions mediated by emergent technologies create dynamic and active connections that challenge previous notions of how children relate (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). Indeed, online venues give young adolescents dynamic and interactive avenues for self-making that also offer potential for specific kinds of research engagements (Davies, 2006, Seale & Abbott, 2007). For example, the use of online journal, (or *weblog*), entries have provided researchers with ways to enter and observe peer-based communication amongst young adolescents (Moininan, 2006; Scheidt, 2006). However, such restricted access sites can be difficult to work with and are not always ideal for achieving depth and thoughtfulness amongst participants (Moinian, 2006). When peer-based communications are involved, concerns have recently been expressed about the tendency for young adolescents to establish a ‘social reputation’ rather than explore more considered accounts of the self (Carroll, Houghton, Khan & Tan, 2008, p. 791). While peer-directed online interaction represents a particular form of social dialogue that can be informative, it is typically characterised by “slick and colloquial” language (Davies, 2006, p. 216). Therefore, how do we find appropriate online spaces for fostering the production of *thoughtful* personal accounts amongst individuals? When the aim is to promote reflective and deeply considered personal meanings, email is an online context that can offer simple yet effective possibilities (Hewson, 2008).

Gifted young adolescents – developing a language of *self*

Young adolescents in general have a remarkable capacity to describe themselves and their worlds in ways that we do not always manage to acknowledge and take seriously. Indeed, loneliness and disconnection have appeared in young adolescents in general within Australian high schools (Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Despite access to various forms of technology as an affordance in terms of autonomy and identity (Holloway & Valentine, 2003), many young adolescents continue to struggle with their multiple realities. During this liminal phase for negotiating important attitudes to self, life and learning, some groups may experience unique challenges. Specifically, gifted young adolescents have been found to feel even more lonely and isolated than their typical age-peers (Vialle, Heaven & Ciarrochi, 2007). It appears that giftedness adds an extra dimension to the task of building identity. Both loneliness and anger are reported amongst this group who experience the added burden of juggling the demands and expectations that accompany being “gifted” (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Moon, 2006). Of particular concern is that any popularity advantages that may

accompany advanced abilities tend to disappear with the transition to high school where critical choices are made to hide giftedness and talent in favour of social acceptance (Moon, 2006; Rimm, 2002).

Unfortunately, research that directly involves the voices of gifted children is scarce because the field of Gifted Education lags in the area of qualitative research (Coleman, Guo & Dabbs, 2007). However, online methods that combine personal writing may offer promising avenues for qualitative study. Journal approaches, for instance, have been found to be very beneficial forms of online communication amongst gifted middle school students (Siegle, 2007). Personal writing, in particular, is a recommended way of helping gifted students clarify their problems, feelings, perceptions and aspirations (Davis & Rimm, 2004). It helps to create a sense of agency and positive self-concept when areas of tension, stress, and anxiety-related to self-concepts and peer-group relations can be clarified. Therefore, as an approach to research, this paper suggests the use of emails in journal format as one way of gaining access to gifted young adolescents own versions of themselves, i.e. in their own words.

The problem of voice

At this point, we return to the vexing question of voice within social sciences research. Typically, discussions about *voice* emerging from within rights-based discourses are based on the assumption of a singular *voice* that one can *have* or *give* to others. There are many examples across the literature within children's research relating to concepts of children having or being given a voice (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006; Hill, 2006; Soto & Swadener, 2005). Within educational research, the notion of "student voice" has become a prominent theme in guiding educational policy and thinking (Bragg, 2007). However, problems arise when adults interpret on behalf of children what it means to have, or give, a voice (Eder & Fingerson, 2002; Komulainen, 2007). Furthermore, ideas about a singular voice stem from the larger belief that we are somehow also fixed and static ourselves and thus do not recognise the dynamic nature of children's identities (Aitken, Lund & Korjholt, 2007). Yet, when *voice* is conceptualised as a pluralistic concept, the possibilities for accounting for more dynamic and multi-storied ways of approaching our lives significantly alter.

Multiplicity in identity - Dialogic perspectives

The belief that we can have a multiplicity of voices stems from the original idea of polyphony and the notion that who we are is formed in dialogue (Bahktin, 1981). Put simply, we interactively engage in the daily process of forming and expressing a multitude of opinions, or *voices*. Within this dialogic view, there is a constant exchange of voices, within our own interior worlds of thought as well as in our conversations. In theory, we adopt 'I' positions on different matters, where each forms a different voice with its own distinctive narrative (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992). Hence, our behaviours and responses occur as a network of different voices, each equally valid versions of self which help to explain why we think and react as we do. These voices are amenable to examination within a variety of settings and cultural contexts, including online environments (Hevern, 2004; Ligorio & Pugliese, 2004). Therefore, looking at how we voice ourselves as part of a dialogic network provides a useful framework for understanding the contradictions and complexities that shape *who* we are.

Studies applying a pluralistic and dialogic notion of voices to investigate the lives of young adolescents have provided significant insight into individual self-constructions. For example, investigations into children's transitions from childhood to early adolescence found they engaged in "moment-by-moment" negotiations of ways they presented themselves and that they were much more highly evaluative in the content of their speech than was expected (Maybin, 2006, p.3). Other explorations have shown the ways children's lives 'bump up' against those of teachers as a process of self-formation, highlighting the significance of dialogic relationships in fostering important knowledge about one another (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Orr, Pearce, Steeves, 2006). These studies serve to demonstrate the value of understanding the ways children dynamically engage in on-going meaning-making as an interactive, or *dialogic*, process.

Using email as a research tool and a process

Examining voices in email makes sense for a variety of reasons. As a research tool, email has been found to have advantages over face-to-face methods (Hewson, 2008; James & Busher, 2006). Email can support the establishment of online rapport with participants in ways that appear especially relevant to young adolescent populations. In the first instance, email tends to be used asynchronously, which allows young people to take time to think about their words, edit and change their responses (Mann & Stewart, 2002). While aspects of "conversational flow" may be lost, reflective opportunities are created that encourage more elaborate and deeply-considered personal accounts (Hewson, 2008, p.555). Furthermore, young adolescents like the non-confrontational features of email, as found in earlier work by Livingstone and Bober (2004), where researcher absence was preferred. In this way, email can address important issues of power imbalance between the researcher and participants (Hewson, 2008; James & Busher, 2006). Furthermore, email is considered an indispensable tool amongst many young adolescents, who run multiple email accounts in order to manage their daily lives (Richardson, 2006). Proponents of conducting research with children and young people have emphasised the importance of finding everyday, routine ways of accessing their preferred modes of expression and communication (Christensen, 2004; Greene & Hill, 2005). Thus, email can be considered as a mainstream part of regular individual daily practices. Hence, email-facilitated research has potential to tap into valuable information related to young adolescent's experiences, interests and values.

'Listening' for voices

The benefits of listening for voices within research are similar to those within any social setting. Put simply, listening helps us to understand others. When listening is applied as a systematic and rigorous process within identity study, the purpose is to give traction to an understanding of matters of *self*. One way to *listen* as part of research design is through a method of analysis that accommodates different layers of voices. This can be achieved using a technique called The Listening Guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003). Such an approach assumes that there is a multiplicity in how people respond in different situations that will appear in the rising and falling of more than one voice across narratives (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). The underlying principles of this approach arose from dissatisfaction with coding systems as a means to examine complex psychic processes. For example, important concepts

like loneliness and bullying cannot be well accounted for. Use of the Listening Guide can be found in investigations into mentoring relationships between adolescents and adults (Spencer, 2006), explorations of anger in adolescent girls (Brown, 1998) and examinations of women's transitions to the workplace (Balan, 2005). It is a particularly useful approach when there are concerns that participants might not speak directly or explicitly about themselves and their situations (Doucet & Mathner, 2008). For instance, listening approaches within adolescent identity studies have been found to uncover an 'institutional' voice (Kiegelmann, 2007). Therefore, as an approach to specific populations who may not readily disclose information, or who are undergoing transition, listening can detect 'hidden' as well as explicit meanings.

The study context

The following section reports on aspects of a narrative study that engaged gifted young adolescents in a project where they were asked to write about themselves and their lives over an extended period. The aim of the project was to seek personal versions of *self*.

Participants

Twelve participants aged between ten and fourteen years sent emails written as journals to the researcher over the course of six months. There were six boys and six girls. Participants had been selected for their giftedness according to Australian national guidelines¹ and thus were considered a special population. Participants were recruited out of the school setting using word of mouth, conference fliers and online methods. Key resource people within schools who were in a position to facilitate researcher contact - such as teachers, school psychologists, educational consultants, and program co-ordinators were also canvassed.

Methods

Narrative methods were used in the form of emails written and constructed as self-narratives. Participants were invited to write freely about themselves and their lives, selecting their own schedule and writing focus. They were asked to not disclose private family information and were informed that divulgements of harm would require the researcher to take further action. Participants were otherwise free to discuss topics of their choosing with the aim of uncovering what was most relevant and meaningful to them. To facilitate the aim of accessing relatively candid accounts, use of participant's own password-secured email supported their autonomy as well as self-disclosure. Participants thus engaged in self-initiated use of their personal home computers and email accounts to compose and send entries to the researcher. As researcher, I represented myself as a 'naïve outsider' (Maybin, 2006, p.15), who used her first name, was friendly and who would not pass judgement. Each email received a response, since providing responses in an online setting is necessary in order to build trust and rapport (Mann & Stewart, 2002). Responses were designed to provide appreciation and affirmation, and participants did not 'reply'.

¹ In Australia, giftedness is determined through a combination of qualitative and quantitative measures that link to a defensible definition of giftedness (DEST, 2005). The most generally accepted definitions of giftedness draw from Gagné's (2003) Differentiated Model of Giftedness & Talent (DMGT).

I thus assumed no expert status about the lives of young adolescents and took every opportunity to reinforce *their* own expert status as knowing best about themselves.

EXTRACTS

The following extracts are a very small sample of over two hundred journal entries that were sent in email form to the researcher. Each participant sent an average of eighteen entries across the arc of the writing phase. The following extracts show examples of the ways in which two participants expressed emotion and provided self-reflective commentary.

Exploring emotions

Extract 1

Moochie is 10 years old. She was overtired and stressed facing an oral presentation that she had invested in for a whole term. Her mother tried to help but she resisted, thereby adding further to Moochie's dilemma because she was aware of being unappreciative. Moochie ended up crying and berating herself.

I'm feeling really horrible right about now. It's late I'm tired, I've just been on camp and to a fishing trip and I've got an oral to do tomorrow with a powerpoint presentation. It's meant to be 2-3 min but of course mine is 5 min and 44 sec. When mum tries to help me cut some of it out I really don't want to because I made the powerpoint all term and the oral today out of my report. *It makes me really angry because everything has gone wrong at the last minute.* I hate myself and I don't want to do my talk at all. Mum thinks it's great and really good and everything. She sat with me to help me try to work it out for half an hour and we both missed our favourite tv show. Mum offered for me to take the day off and go to work with her and relax but I said I would have to do my talk anyway and catch up on what I missed out on and I would feel guilty - *it seemed to me like cheating.* Mummy was only trying to help me. I hate myself and I'm crying. Sorry I haven't been writing a lot lately there hasn't been anytime. I s'pose everyone says that though. It seems like I'm making excuses for myself.
(M10/6)

Moochie demonstrated her ability to sum up her situation quite objectively but was unable to stop her emotions flooding in because of tiredness. Her *achiever* voice was telling her that her efforts "all term" would not be recognised and her voice of *perfectionism* insisted that they ought to be. The voices of *anger*, *anxiety* and *guilt* cut across the whole situation and caused conflict because Moochie knew her mother was only trying to be supportive. Tension also occurred between the voice of *anxiety* that made her feel tempted to find a way out and the *ethical* voice that told her she would be cheating. Finally, the voice of commitment in the role of the research participant emerged at the end, and the whole entry also conveyed an *honest* voice – one that showed willingness to openly self-examine.

Excerpt 2

Moochie wrote again the following day and because she was yet to give her oral presentation her demeanour had not improved. She related a classroom incident where her stress response again brought her to tears.

I had been on camp and my classmates - we had a lot to catch up on. They let us out late so we were late for art- my favourite subject. When I got there and was all set up and everything and painting, my can which was on an easel, fell onto the table on top of my paint palette.

When I lifted up my canvas which I had been working on all term there were two huge splodes of blue and yellow. The dark blue was all over my light green on the canvas. I had started dry-brushing it black and teal then there was solid blue all over it. My eyes filled with tears but I pushed them back. I tried to wash it off but it wouldn't work. My art teacher tried to wash it off. Most of it came off but some was still there. It covered the tip of my light green hair -now it was practically blue. It looked different to all the other bits I had done. I hated it all of it. Every time I tried to fix it it only looked worse and worse. I looked at it, sat in my seat and cried silently. Some of my friends at my table noticed I think but they didn't do anything and I didn't care. The assistant art teacher tried to take some photos of me doing my art work and the other people at my table and she didn't notice I was upset. I didn't want her to take photos of me when I was upset but I couldn't do anything. I hate it hate it hate it. Then we had to go to music band and I hate it. I wish we didn't have to do it.

(M 11/6)

Moochie's underlying voice of anxiety about her oral pervades her whole entry. She was 'out of kilter' for the whole day because of this worry. "I" statements show how she was first buoyed by the prospect of catching up with her friends but moved into a gradual decline in how she was feeling about herself and her day. Across entries she became upset when things went wrong, especially when her sense of achievement was affected. *Perfectionism* again rose up as a strong voice. But at the same time, she portrayed herself as a person who tries to fix things and who is aware of the causes of her distress. Again, she used the word "hate" to vent her feelings.

Excerpt 3

Several months on, Moochie again faced challenges to her coping. During a particularly busy period, she chose to vent her feelings about her "slack" peers and "mean" teachers.

I'm getting really impatient with the girls at school, (even in the cluster groups Yr 6&7) at their learning disabilities and practically how they are slack, loud and always seeking attention. It seems that 50% is as much as they can give when others give 110% consistently. I am feeling bugged as we have primary spectacular (primary school performance and I mean big time!!!) and this week we have 3 50 min lessons to take notes and write an essay with a minimum of 5 paragraphs including Intro and Conclusion on the Titanic. As well as next week the knowledge test on the Titanic. We have been doing maths tests, I was at Optiminds on Sunday followed by hockey break up and then Yr 6 play in the park and I might just say I'm sick and tired of everything. I'm even annoyed by my sister doing all these little things but *I'm trying to cope* as at the moment I'm doing 2 projects at once and both for very strict and to a certain degree MEAN teachers. One is Health and one is Science!!!!!!!!!!!! I hate both of those subjects but hey I've got to do it whether I like them or not. This weekend it is my sister's school fair and I can't wait to hang out with my friends without my parents stalking us!!!!!!!!!!!! hahaha. (M 1/9)

Moochie expressed a voice of *frustration* with others at school that were not pulling their weight and was also feeling stress about assignments for subjects and teachers she did not like. In the midst of her anxiety, a voice of *self-regulation* emerged (in italics) as she was aware of trying to cope. She was looking forward to the weekend and an opportunity to spend time with friends away from parent gaze, expressed as a voice of *independence*.

Reflective accounts of self

Extract 4

Lexie is 13 years old and was homeschooled during the writing phase of the project, which means she was mentored in a comprehensive learning program by her mother. Lexie was in a position to spend long hours uninterrupted by typical school routine, which may have accounted for the high incidence of reflective commentary she made in her entries. The following extracts present a montage of topics of interest, each revealing a concluding position, or *voice*, that forms a strong reflective statement of self.

I love bookmarks! Bookmarks give me a release of happiness and joy. It's fun when I find even one bookmark that I haven't seen before. There are so many different types of bookmarks. Sometimes I feel that I could be missing-out on receiving some by not going to bookshops and bookmarks places. But then I look at my collection and I'm happy again. I had never had a collection or obsession before and I can't believe that I hadn't started collecting bookmarks earlier. Bookmarks just crept up from behind me. I don't have any favourites with my bookmarks, I love them all. I only have a few sets, the rest are individual ones. My collection has both bought and free bookmarks, I have them on nearly every subject, ranging from beaches to moons, from cats to penguins. *I sometimes wonder what I would collect if it wasn't for bookmarks and even why I collect at all. Maybe it's to express myself in ways that words can't.* (L 22/6)

Lexie has explored her penchant for being a collector, describing the emotions that are sparked by this hobby in a variety of voices – *happiness, joy* and *obsession*. She used the word “obsession” to describe her interest, indicating that she is aware that her feelings about being a collector may go beyond a perception of normalcy. However, the phenomenon of having an interest that “crept up from behind” demonstrates remarkable insight into the mystery of being ‘a collector’. She has recognised also that her passion is a form of self-expression, with “I”, as collector, forming an overall statement of self.

Extract 5

In the following month, Lexie wrote several lengthy accounts of her first encounter with a non-mainstream religion. Here is a brief excerpt of her reflections:

I have recently had the experience of spending some time with a family who practice the Mormon Religion and it made me think. Of many things. Of families, of religion and how we all fit into this world we live in. I was born into and raised a Catholic. I was baptized at 3 weeks. In my opinion, society generally only accepts mainstream religions such as Roman Catholic, Anglican or Uniting, these all being Christian related. People who belong to fringe religions such as Mormons or Buddhists are excluded from the acceptance into society that the other religions naturally have. Previously to my day at the Mormon gathering, I had only preconceived ideas of the religion, of what I had taken in from people around me. But they were lots of fun as they organized games and played with everyone and I did not hear a swear word once, very unusual as school and everywhere else is ruled by an obvious need to show how many times in one sentence you can fit these meaningless words. Although I have only had a brief encounter with this religion it has made me aware of how easy it is to be judgmental. *I don't want to be like those people who criticize without knowing the truth*, I want to be able to accept everyone for their differences and acknowledge their contribution to the world and for them to recognize me as I make mine. (L 16/7)

Lexie's capacity to place her encounter within the context of "how we all fit into this world we live in" revealed a characteristic capacity to be an observer and thinker. She voices herself ultimately as a *truth-seeker*, a person who wants to approach other groups in a non-judgmental way, and be afforded the same respect. What is also captured here is a voice of *transition*, where she is shifting her beliefs.

Extract 6

The next month, Lexie's interest turned to her future. She reflectively examined the prospects for a career option in business.

For the past few years I haven't been able to decide what my future career will be. For some time I wanted to be a lawyer, but I think that that was mainly from the influence of a movie I had seen at that present moment in time! Following that, I threw myself in the business world. I entertained myself with the several business channels on Austar and I regularly visited websites such as Bloomberg, CNBC and the Business Channel Australia. This being a few months ago I have learnt a lot more about the occupation and by doing so realised that it is a good quality job but it would not satisfy every need that I desire as a lifetime career for me. Some of these needs are:

- Stimulation of the brain, mind and body
- A certain amount of ink used on my pay check
- An employer who will accept my logical thinking
- A job that provides promotions and class

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 am aware that there will or can be problems in every workplace but I know that if those circumstances arise it would just be a matter of the people around you. *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.* (L 29/8)

The voices that emerged during this reflection showed significant levels of self-awareness. In the first instance, Lexie was aware of the influence of external voices coming from popular culture, i.e. a movie, in shaping her feelings about a career. She also cast herself as a researcher, a person who will investigate and seek information upon which to make a decision. After consideration of what her criteria for seeking a career might be, she finally positioned herself as a *problem-solver*, hence expressing an *agentic* voice that would shape her attitudes.

DISCUSSION

When statements of *self* were sent as emails to the researcher they were characterised by a high incidence of emotional expression and reflective statements. Being able to explore and express different points of view away from the blaze of social scrutiny gave participants a relatively 'safe' space to reflect on themselves. If the desire to meet peer approval is driven by an urge to impress others, as suggested by Carroll et al (2008), it is reasonable to conclude that it simultaneously creates limitations on the kind of self it is possible to convey. However, digital journals that are written and lodged in a way that avoids the inevitable risks of exposure to peer judgement appear to support the formation of a particular language for self-expression. Therefore, the outcomes of this study indicate that young adolescents need time to build a language intended also for *themselves*.

Furthermore, this study emphasises the importance of having time to think when writing electronically as a critical element in creating a particular kind of reflection-based data. The present approach was characterised by a specific *asynchronous* pattern, where the researcher responded within 24 hours, but the participants decided how long they would take before writing another entry. This created a space that allowed participants time to reflectively construct and lodge their next email. Hence, while participants were responding to the researcher in a general sense, they were not actually *replying* to the researcher in terms of content. However, the responses did prove to build rapport within the virtual setting, as claimed by Mann and Stewart (2002) but it was the reflection time that appeared to be a key factor in producing a quality entry. Therefore, claims that the asynchronous nature of online devices, such as email, facilitates considered responses appear well-supported (Hewson, 2008). Present findings suggest that the email format mediates in order to help create an edited and dialogic way of promoting the process of self-reflection.

In addition, the capturing of self-narratives over extended time may stand a better chance of capturing different voices in the one individual, as well as the states of flux that are being experienced. This is in contrast to one-off interviews, for example, that may only provide a small glimpse, or one kind of voice. The extracts shown here show the significance of being able to record fluctuations, and, indeed, stability - as part of a personal sense of *self*. For example, Lexie constructed a sense of *self* where the concept of 'truth' became clarified for her. On the other hand, Moochie was able to vent her emotions in a way that did not necessarily indicate a non-coping attitude. Therefore, the opportunity for extended writing created potential for multi-voiced self-reflection and exploration of emotions to occur over time.

The claims that young people do not reveal themselves readily within institutionalised settings such as school (Hill, 2006; Maybin, 2006) resonate well with the use of online data gathering as a means to access a more multi-faceted view. Furthermore, gains in self-awareness may also help insulate against a perceived need amongst young adolescents to conform at any cost in order to maintain a sense of peer and social acceptance. It is reasonable to suggest, then, through a process of becoming more self-aware, gifted young adolescents may be able to make a stronger and more effective representation of themselves that is less reliant on the interpretations of others.

Conclusions

This paper outlined a small-scale attempt to show how person-level information can be provided by gifted young adolescents within a research context. There are three main conclusions. First, gifted young adolescents are appreciative of qualitative approaches that ask for their opinions and perceptions. Specifically, they respond positively to the use of online techniques as an alternative to face-to-face methods. Second, online data gathering appears to cater for heterogeneity and agency amongst gifted young adolescents. The provision of flexible and creative research spaces not bound by school settings allows participants to act autonomously. Third, to facilitate the development of a language of self-representation amongst gifted young adolescents, access to 'safe' co-constructed spaces for them to explore and reflect appears supportive of this aim. While the involvement of a non-judgemental adult who applies specific listening strategies is a positive enhancement to this approach, an important step in developing self-awareness amongst young adolescents is believed to be the act of explaining themselves, *to themselves*.

Overall, this paper attempted to show the value of using a digital environment as part of a flexible qualitative approach. When used in the manner shown, a combination of traditional journal methods and online (email) tools has potential to yield well-considered, complex and reflective personal accounts of self.

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