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Gimmelife: Listening for dialogic voices in the email self-narratives of gifted young adolescents

Lisette Dillon
Queensland University of Technology

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Abstract

The art of listening for voices within narrative research is a positive endeavour that has specific value within research design and subsequent approaches to analysis. This paper details an investigation into the dialogic nature of voices among gifted young adolescents who engaged in the co-construction of email-generated self-narratives. Data are drawn from a study involving ten adolescents, aged between ten and fourteen years, diagnosed as gifted according to Australian guidelines. Individual participants were asked to produce self-managed journal entries written and sent as asynchronous emails to the researcher who was the sole recipient and respondent. Within this approach, specific techniques of listening were used to examine a series of multi-vocal narratives generated over a period of six months. This paper proposes that an adaptation of the everyday convenience of email with the traditional journal format as a self-report mechanism creates a synergy that fosters self-disclosure. Individual excerpts are 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. Furthermore, the co-construction of self-expressive and explanatory narratives supported by a facilitative adult listener appeared to promote healthy self-awareness amongst participants. This paper contributes to narrative exploration in two distinct ways: first, in using online methods for gaining access to the everyday, emotional realities of participants; and, second, in demonstrating the value of listening as a narrative technique for uncovering layers of voices across a body of texts produced over time. These methods represent an innovative attempt to move beyond face-to-face approaches and away from a focus on content and coding techniques that might oversimplify complex emotions.

Keywords

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Introduction

There is little doubt that finding ways to facilitate the voices of research participants remains a central challenge within narrative research. Interest in the different realities created in text logically invokes the awareness that readers should be able to *hear* their informants, in their own words (Hunt and Sampson 2006). Based on the premise that the art of listening rests at the heart of how well we represent the words entrusted to us

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within a context of narrative study, the aim of this paper is to look closely at ways to *listen*. For while we each may share the simple desire to speak and be listened to, being heard demands more from researchers than the simple desire to listen. Inevitably, the task of one person conveying subjective meaning to another occurs as 'imperfectly successful communication' (Archer 2003: 155). However, achieving closer symmetry between listening and being heard can be supported through specific research methods conducive of this aim. Listening is thus presented with two foci: 1) as a positive enterprise within narrative research generally, and 2) as a method of analysis that can be successfully applied within a digital environment.

This paper describes aspects of a study that aimed to capture the voices of a specific group of adolescents by using narrative techniques of traditional journaling facilitated by email. The purpose of the investigation was to *listen,* as a desirable practice and as a methodology, to the ways individuals constructed their own versions of self. As an overview of how the paper is structured, I first discuss the reasons for selecting gifted adolescents as a special population who might benefit from participation in narrative research involving close listening. Next, I explain what is meant by dialogic voices in order to make plain what it is that the researcher actually listened for. Then email is discussed as a research tool which, in combination with journal-writing, can help create a synergy for self-disclosure among respondents. The analysis section includes an explication of how *listening* works as a method of analytic interpretation. This is followed by a small selection of data excerpts to show how the researcher attempted to *hear* respondent's voices through the use of specific listening techniques. Finally, concluding comments emphasise the value of listening within narrative research, as both concept and method.

Young adolescents and giftedness
Young adolescents can present a trove of issues related to identity, yet they are seldom taken seriously due to focus on older adolescents and young adults (Schwartz 2008). There are significant levels of alienation found among young adolescents in Australian high schools linked to escalating pressures to negotiate complex relationships and to juggle different realities (Smyth and McInerney 2007). Giftedness, however, can create extra challenges when it comes to the 'Who am I?'question. In Australian settings, giftedness is mostly determined through a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures such as ability and aptitude testing and teacher/parent/peer checklists. Usually, individual schools are responsible for their own identification and programs, typically drawing from widely accepted models such as the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (Gagné 2003). However, there is often a reliance on *expert* narratives that do not always include an understanding of the experiences of individual young persons.

It appears that the typical struggle for peer acceptance in early adolescence is further complicated by having to manage the demands and expectations that accompany being 'gifted'. In fact, the impact of giftedness on social-emotional development during adolescence results in a higher than average need for counselling reported among this group (Assouline and Colangelo 2006). Contributing factors include negative teacher attitudes and a general atmosphere of anti-intellectualism known to undermine the gifted young person's motivation and self-concept (Geake and Gross 2008; Cross 2008). As a

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result, decisions can be made to suppress talent, and to *hide* in an effort to seek social acceptance (Rimm 2002). Indeed, the sense of being different from age peers that heightens during early adolescence was found in a recent Australian study to produce higher than typical levels of sadness and loneliness among gifted individuals (Vialle, Heaven and Ciarrochi 2007). Yet, qualitative methods such as seeking personal narratives have been slow to emerge in giftedness study and the voices of individual children seldom appear (Coleman, Guo and Dabbs 2007).

However, we cannot assume that young adolescents have access to the same vocabulary that adults might use to convey different experiential aspects of their lives. This may be especially relevant when some of the complex and difficult emotions associated with giftedness are involved (Wallace 2006). Nevertheless, many gifted youngsters possess 'narrative giftedness' (Porath 2006: 148), meaning they are skilled storytellers who are likely to respond well to opportunities to tell about themselves. It is thus reasonable to think that efforts to form a satisfying sense of self amongst gifted young adolescents can potentially find helpful expression in narrative form, whilst also informing a research audience.

Dialogic voices

When wanting to examine the voices of a particular group, it is first necessary to clarify what voices we are talking about. Typically, discussions about *voice* that have originated from within rights-based discourses imply that a *voice* is something that one can *give* to children as if a static piece of property (Komulainen 2007). The focus of this paper is on dialogic voices, which differs from the idea of *voice* as a singular entity that one can have or be given. Dialogic perspectives recognise and accommodate multiplicity by embracing the idea that we interactively build a sense of *many voices* occurring in everyday language. In contrast to other discursive approaches, such dialogue includes a network of inner thoughts (*voices*) as well as externally directed conversations. These voices express *who* we are; hence, identity is referred to as 'self'. In this way, an investigation of 'self' can be an empirical study of self-construction as expressed in an array of different voices (Hermans 2008).

Narrative researchers have shown the value of adopting a more interactive, or *dialogic*, understanding of the ways children engage in self-making as a dynamic process. For instance, a narrative inquiry into children's voices found participants to be highly active and evaluative in negotiating their senses of self while transiting into adolescence (Maybin 2006). Others have demonstrated how children respond dialogically as they negotiate and form identities whilst 'bumping up' against those around them (Clandinin et al 2006). Furthermore, dialogic approaches that integrate techniques of listening for voices are particularly useful amongst adolescent groups who may not speak explicitly about their feelings and experiences (Kiegelmann 2007). Hence, it has been well demonstrated that important insights into young identities can come through applying pluralistic and dialogic concepts to personal narratives.

Narrative methods
Achieving self-disclosure in emails
As a tool for interaction, email format is highly dialogical and has significant benefits when it comes to self-disclosure. Since it is typically used asynchronously, email helps to create reflective opportunities that encourage the generation of more elaborate and deeply considered personal accounts (Hewson 2008). Within a research context, the asynchronous nature of email can allow young people to take time to think about their words and to edit and change their responses (Mann and Stewart 2002). Furthermore, online studies conducted with adolescents found a factor in their preference for email use was linked to the less intimidating physical absence of the researcher (Livingstone and Bober 2004). Hence, the creation of a non-threatening email relationship between the researcher and participant can address important issues of power imbalance (Hewson 2008; James and Busher 2006). Additionally, many adolescents use multiple email accounts to run their daily lives (Richardson 2006). Given the importance of finding access to everyday, routine ways of expression and communication when conducting research with children (Greene and Hill 2005), email meets this requirement. Email-based research can thus offer a non-confrontational and engaging avenue for accessing narratives related to young adolescents' personal realities.

Journals as ontological documents of self
As a narrative space for capturing a young person's own versions and beliefs about him- or herself, the personal journal can be a powerful ontological, or *self*-focused, document. There are several important features surrounding the benefits of journal-keeping within sociological research and within the study described in this paper. For instance, journals are a contemporaneous and ongoing record with potential to chronicle what is most immediate and meaningful in a person's life (Alazewski 2006). While a typical focus within autobiographical narrative research is on remembered lives, journals offer a way to minimise the burdens and distortions that come with having to accurately remember. Also notable is the access to important facets of taken-for-granted life that can be gained, along with insights about patterns of responses that emerge across time (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli 2003). Furthermore, the researcher can *participate* in the lives of their respondents in a minimally intrusive way whilst enabling maximum reflection of the author's thoughts to occur (Alazewski 2006). Since journaling as a genre facilitates the use of highly self-referential language it thus offers privileged access to the narrators' perceptions about themselves and their world (Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli 2003). Researchers using journal techniques with young adolescents find that self-authoring promotes self-awareness and agency (Burton and Carroll 2001). The act of writing about the self brings focus to bear through putting thoughts into words, helping young adolescents to develop a personal sense of self and audience.

Analysis
Listening as a concept and method
In this paper, close interpretive reflections are conceptualised as principles of *listening*. The purpose of listening is not to uncover 'real selves' but rather to do justice to the multi-faceted nature of participants and the ways they choose to construct and represent themselves. In the present context, *listening* was applied as an interpretive focus on the meanings of participants in order to determine what constituted a *voice* and the kinds of

selves these voices were constructing. However, there are many challenges to listening for voices, including the need for methods that address and embrace 'ontological flux' and the possibility of 'endless interpretations' (Doucet and Mauthner 2008: 404). The method used in the study reported in this paper is the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al 2003), which involves multiple readings of text in order to hear different aspects of meaning that emerge as layers of voices. This approach requires researchers to identify various voices that 'rise, fall and intertwine' within the narrative data (Sorsoli and Tolman 2008: 495). As a result of this process, analysis of emails yielded categories of *voices* and *selves* that emerged from the participants' scripts individually and across the body of texts.

Importance of intonation
A key aspect in listening for *voices* is to shift emphasis from what is being said to how it is being expressed, here referred to as *intonation* (Bertau 2008: 100). As narrators, we adopt an evaluative stance towards both situation and audience. In other words, we make judgements about how we feel about what is happening and about whoever is listening and how they are likely to respond. Thus, what we say is imbued with an 'expressive timbre' that reveals information about the social evaluations we make (Voloshinov 1981: 305). However, traditional forms of narrative data analysis focus on content and forms of coding that can oversimplify complex social and emotional experiences (Sorsoli and Tolman 2008). Listening, on the other hand, shifts emphasis to hearing how meaning is expressed to include what may be 'beyond words' in terms of the intentions of the narrator.

The following extract shows how an expressive font (original in vibrant fuchsia) conveyed voices of excitement, relief and anticipation. A content approach might categorise holidays as a topic or theme — perhaps aggregated even further to include holiday activities. However, in the context of this example, the participant had previously expressed voices of resistance to the pressure attached to a school-based (and parental) expectation to achieve in visible and measurable ways. In the instance shown, the understanding of the palpable relief and excitement that accompany school *ending* (as much as holidays *beginning*) would be lost.

It's Holidays!!!

(Wildcatgirl 22/9, original formatting)

Using the Listening Guide: flexibly and reflexively
As a tool for listening, the Listening Guide possesses both flexibility in how it is used and reflexivity in how the researcher learns to listen to his/her own self as an integral part of the analysis process. The architects of the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al 2003) emphasise that while this method is designed to provide a pathway into the psyche of

others, it is intended as a flexible framework. Therefore the interplay between theory and data is meant to guide the interpretations and allow for the Listening Guide to be used in many different ways (Sorsoli and Tolman 2008). For example, Brown's (2003) use of the Listening Guide to explore fighting among adolescent girls focused on anger as a relational phenomenon. Anger, a stereotypical hallmark of poor emotional regulation, was carefully re-scripted as the main thread in a complex story of resistance to what were perceived as negative socialising forces. Through techniques of listening, Brown (2003) lifted a canopy on simmering awakenings to external forces to show a highly developed and strategic awareness of social injustice among teenage girls. However, in the study reported in this paper, participants were invited to write freely about themselves on the premise that it may be a more fruitful approach than asking specific sociological questions. Thus, the patterns of voices thought of as 'I' *positions* were anticipated to occur in greater randomness and diversity than might be expected in a more focused inquiry.

The study — Listening to the participants
In order to create a context and to introduce the participants' excerpts, a brief outline of the study is now included.

Participants
There were 10 participants, including five boys and five girls aged between 10 and 14 years, who wrote journal entries over a period of six months. Participants had already been screened for giftedness through their own individual school processes. Recruitment was carried out through expressions of interest using email, websites and conference fliers directed towards educationists, parents and gifted organisations. Participants and parents were fully informed about the research purpose which included requirements that participants write freely about themselves and be as autonomous and self-initiating as possible in their level of involvement. Hence, participatory aspects such as negotiating the frequency and length of entries and choosing own pseudonyms were features of the study.

Role of the researcher
My role was to receive emails and to send affirming and appreciative responses to participants within twenty-four hours. I did not know the participants prior to the study but spent some time with preliminary email correspondence to help establish trust before commencement of writing. My portrayal to participants was as a 'naïve outsider' who was genuinely interested in their lives and who could be called by her first name (Maybin 2006: 15). The intention was to affirm participants' own authority in being *expert* about themselves.

The data — How listening was done
The following section shows the four Listening Guide steps used to analyse data excerpts in order to demonstrate the multi-layered approach to listening that underpins this method. These steps occurred as separate readings which involved detailed note-taking and colour underlining: Reading 1 for context and reflexivity; Reading 2 for 'I' statements; Reading 3 for layers of *voice*; and Reading 4 for narrative synthesis.

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The excerpts shown use the pseudonyms chosen by participants. In cases where they chose to *not* have a pseudonym, names were derived from individual email addresses.

Reading 1: Context and reflexivity

As a first logical step, we ask 'What is happening here?' This reading helps to orient to events and circumstances in the participant's life in a way that resonates with grounded theory approaches (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). Apart from seeking to understand the setting that surrounds the participant's responses, there is interest in developing a sense of recurring and unfolding voices that might emerge across a series on entries.

The following extract was written by a 12-year-old girl in an academic extension program at an all-girl's school. Piggy-in-the-middle was also a state grade athlete. Her previous entries had been laced with expressions of anxiety over her perceptions of her levels of success. This final stage entry included a substantial mid-section detailing and reflecting on her various subject performances. The significance of a contextual understanding is that the participant had perceived herself across a body of entries as having struggled to achieve. Without the regular monitoring of context, the significance of the voice of *happiness* to emerge would not appear as counterpoint to the *anxiety*evident in earlier entries. The contextual readings allowed the sub-story to emerge, where a voice of *relief* could also be juxtaposed with the happiness, signalling her response to the release from pressure — as well as a sense of having achieved certain goals.

Excerpt 1: 'Piggy-in-the-middle' (12 years old)

> 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…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+. Mr Turner, my maths teacher showed me that I would get an A+ overall. (Entry 16 P 21/11)

Reflexivity is embedded in Reading 1, referring to a process whereby the researcher examines how his or her own assumptions might affect the interpretations and subsequent written presentation (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). Thus, as an integral part of the listening process, the researcher *listens* to his/her own responses to what the participant is saying. In this way, biases, irritations and other emotional responses to the text are acknowledged and factored into the interpretive process.

An example of reflexivity is in the next excerpt (Excerpt 2) showing comments in response to an awareness of my growing concern about a participant's emerging *disillusionment*. The participant was a 12-year-old boy who attended a regular high school. His pseudonym 'Midas Well' is a word play that relates to his initial choice to become involved in the research.

Excerpt 2: 'Midas Well' (12 years old)

> I thought I "might as well" write now right here, if that is at all understandable! The first week back at school has been surprisingly enjoyable for me, as I swap subjects around for this semester. Home Ec. Business Ed and Music are all new on the menu, along with my new science teacher. I am quite surprised at the amount of difference that a new science teacher makes. Funnily enough, I shall refer back to that little portion that I wrote quite loosely on the term relativity. Until I have had another science teacher to compare with my old one, I can't decide whether she is good or bad at teacher. Although I didn't like her style of teaching, I couldn't say whether or not it was a bad style of teaching. It says something about how narrow minded we as people are, our minds are so limited that we (without proper instruction) cannot really discern things from one another. There are so many questions raised that one could drive themselves crazy if they thought about them too hard. But I suppose all this incoherence is my way of saying that is so much easier and more enjoyable to learn with a better teacher. (Entry 8 MW 21/7)

Despite the upbeat tone in this excerpt, his typically analytical style of writing frequently attempted to conceal a growing sense of de-idealisation with schooling and with the perceived incompetence of teachers. The following notes to accompany this entry show reflexivity in the way my own 'worry' about the participant is flagged. I declared (to myself) a sympathetic concern that also served as a reminder to remain objective:

> His attempt at humour is good to see because he finished last term sounding disillusioned… He is sounding more positive but I worry about his fragility. (21/7)

Reading 2: What is the 'I' saying?

This reading focused my attention on the active 'I' who positioned himself at the centre of the narration. It is through explicit or implied 'I' statements that the narrator amplifies their own terms and reveals most about who they believe themselves to be (Doucet and Mauthner 2008). In this way, the reading for 'I' allowed me access to the kind of self that was emerging as a narrative construction. As a central concept within Dialogical Self, the power of the 'I' translates readily to 'I' *positions* which may actually be different or contradictory, showing the multiple and sometimes conflicting roles of 'self'.

The following excerpt shows sentences with 'I' underlined (by the researcher) as they occurred naturally in text, thus left in context with the whole entry. This excerpt demonstrates the self-referential and self-evaluative nature typical across texts, affirming the ontological (self-focused) character of the narratives. Yet this excerpt also illustrates the importance of maintaining the holistic character of the entry as it tells a 'self' story that is complex and nuanced.

Excerpt 3: 'Adamant' (12 years old)

Well, it's been quite a busy week with the Eisteddfod… I played a hard study relative to this exam, and didn't play it well by my standards. Then this boy on the horn gets up and plays his concerto piece which goes forever and no surprises, wins the section. But for the first time ever I didn't get a place or a highly commended….because the adjudicator said that because this boy's standard was so high, he couldn't justify giving out the other places. So, I had a few days to contemplate this before I played next in the Pop Jazz section, which he was also performing in. Again, I didn't play it perfectly, but added a bit of improvisation here and there, and to my surprise came second, behind none other! Funnily enough, I have never got an individual first, because this guy has been in every section ever since I started, and I have always settled for second…. 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.(A 2/8)

Here is a simplified overview of the 'I' under construction. Adamant is an 'I' who:enjoys challenge; takes competition seriously; compares himself with others in his talent area; expects a high standard of himself; likes to win; is both self-critical and perfectionist. Reading 2 thus gave vital clues in how the participant went about addressing the 'What kind of person am I?' question.

Reading 3: What voices can be heard?
With an eye and an ear attuned to the previous steps, Reading 3 goes further in extracting author intentions. To reiterate, the theoretical view of voices here applies, where voices are explicit and implicit 'I' *positions* adopted and expressed by the participant. The following excerpt gives an example of many layers of voice explicated by multiple readings, high-lighting and note-taking. The complex layers of voices found are listed underneath in order of their occurrence, also including non-explicit voices, such as a sense of powerlessness, the silent voice of the parent, and voices attached to roles.

Excerpt 4: 'Chanel' (12 years old)

When I first heard that the beautiful city of Venice was sinking I was shocked. I thought about all the hundreds of years of labour and love that it took to create this heavenly city, and what would become of it? Buried under the surface of the world. Shielding itself. Never to be seen again; loved; admired; dreamt about. Every century, a bit more than a centimetre of this great city is engulfed with crushing tides. I wondered about the royalty, the famous, and the infamous that walked through the halls of the Doges palace. The magnificent artwork that dances around the walls and ceilings.The golden-tipped turrets that pierce the crisp Venetian air, all of it, gone. It will never again produce playwrights, artists,

musicians, singers, writers. The beautifully detailed masks; Carnivale. The magnificently coloured glass that will lie shattered, under the sea for all time.
   But all the treasure in Venice combined does not make up for the looming grey cloud overhead of losing the heart of Venice. The family traditions, the city's friendliness, what makes Venice, Venice.That heart that welcomes the weary traveller to stay. The heart of Venice that will crumble and fall, never to be seen again, and I wonder what is being done to stop it, and it is all that I can do from running and trying to pull it back up with my bare hands. I hope that the government has enough funding and initiative to do something. I hope that there have been programs set up to save what is left. I hope there are marine associations to salvage what has already fallen in. Saving what is left is what I expect to be done. But is it?
I think. I want. I hope, a Venice forever. (Entry 1 Ch 1/6)

As a guide to 'hearing' these voices in text, it was important to not only focus on individual words and phrases but to also become attuned to expressive tones that appeared to indicate the author's intentions. For example, in Excerpt 4, Chanel built a sense of loss through her use of staccato sentence patterns: *Never to be seen again; loved; admired; dreamt about.* By repeating these patterns, she conveyed a sense of angst as well as an imperative to take action. To illustrate the complexity that can emerge as layers of voices in one entry, the following list was uncovered in the above entry.

Layers of voices
Idealism (a desire to endlessly preserve iconic cultural sites in a perfect world)
Disillusionment (the realisation that some beautiful things are inevitably lost from the
         world through neglect and change)
Critical social commentator (disapproval about societal/political neglect)
Powerlessness (the dependence on more powerful adults to intervene)
Aesthetic (the art-lover; the appreciator of beauty)
Author (who is writing in a compelling way so as to raise awareness; using her
         emotionality to gain effect)
Persuasion (the awareness that appealing to emotions is persuasive)
Pragmatism (the understanding that some things are inevitable)
Political commentator (who believes that governments are sometimes inept and cannot
         be relied upon to take action when needed)
Young adolescent (who belongs to her generation; believes that previous generations
         neglected to take action to save Venice; expects governments to fix problems)
Sadness (feeling sad about something special that may be lost forever)
Hopeful (hoping that salvage is possible)
Parent (her mother, the homeschooling mentor who discusses global topics)
Research participant (who writes to inform and persuade a potential audience).

Reading 4: Linking the micro to the macro
A synthesis of each entry was provided in order to show the dominant forces that frame the narrative. The main voices and influences found within each reading were brought together to show the dialogical relationships between the previous steps. It is the synthesis process that encapsulates the main voices and selves under construction and

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thus provides the essential ingredients for answering the research questions relating to participants' identity processes. Additionally, larger links can be made between the individual and macro issues (or *meta*-positions), such as a sense of powerlessness that can occur within dominant ideologies. This appeared across the age-range of participants.

The next excerpt was chosen to show that quite short entries from younger participants could still yield a substantial amount of synthesis. Here, the participant reported that she felt excluded during a visit from her mother's best friend, who happened to also be her godmother. She strategically began her entry using the title 'my Godmother' instead of [name] in order to assert her role as the *goddaughter* who felt entitled to share in visiting rights. As feelings of exclusion mounted, she resisted going along with the plan to have McDonald's in lieu of visiting the Thai restaurant (*resistance*). Once aware that her godmother planned to leave without spending any time with her, she felt *powerless* and *devalued* in the role of the goddaughter in which she had chosen to attach significance. She thus made a clear statement about wanting this role (and herself by association) to be taken more seriously. The dominant voices that emerged surrounded *resistance* about being excluded from the adult's plans that had positioned her as the powerless recipient of 'unfair' treatment. Therefore, the *micro* situation surrounding a simple protest (not being included at dinner) reverberated with a larger, or *macro,* narrative about children her age being considered *less important* than adults.

Excerpt 5: "Wildcatgirl" (10 years old)

> Hi It's W
> Yesterday my Godmother (my mum's best friend) came to stay over night. They decided that they would go out to Thai for dinner. They said that my sisters and I would be dropped off at Nanna's house and get Macdonalds for dinner, but *I didn't want it* so mum dropped me off at Nanna's and picked me up later. And guess what I just found out! Mum and T. are going to do some shopping in the city and then T. is going home. *I think it's so unfair. I didn't get to spend any time with her.*
> From W (W 9/6)

Reflective commentary

This section intends to further explicate the journey that the researcher undertook as a *listener*. During the initial phase of reading the texts, the main task was to familiarise with the general gist of the participant's meaning as well as *listen* for what could be described as a *voice*. Through this close listening process, voices appeared as positions that the participants adopted relative to specific contexts, each producing a certain kind of narrative, or story within a story. In review, a voice is not always fully articulated through words, since dialogic processes include non-verbal meanings. Hence, progressive readings revealed certain voices that could be characterised by tone, topic and intention. For example, a participant's description of feeling stressed about a school assessment task could be straightforwardly interpreted as an expression, or voice, of *anxiety*. However, some voices appeared as an 'understory', where a clipped tone may have indicated repression or anger (Sorsoli and Tolman 2008). Or indeed, divulgences were avoided altogether (a voice of silence) where deliberate attempts to make light or to

conceal anxiety were interpreted as a way to position the audience (including parents) as being unsafe. Midas Well, for instance, adopted a quite jaunty tone in his discussion about a new teacher but it was clear from successive entries that his learning was a very serious matter that relied heavily on the quality of teaching. These voices, drawn specifically from Reading 3 of the Listening Guide analysis performed on each text, were then explored for their *keyness*, referring to their relevance to the aims of the research.

Once the different types of voices had been reiteratively identified, the next step was to consider how each individual was describing and constructing him/herself. During the final phase of analysis, Readings 2 and 3 — 'I' statements and voices — were simultaneously reviewed to affirm patterns of self in each text. The drawing together of the multiple voices showed a more comprehensive understanding of how the individual was constructing him- or herself as the 'ear' changed for what the researcher could hear in the text. Therefore, throughout analysis, there was a progression from being involved with — in effect, 'deafened' by — the actual voices, to hearing what they said about the person and their life. In this way, parts of the *self* puzzle began to fall into place making it possible to identify the key areas of self-construction.

For example, when the voice of *anxiety* was attached to a theme of assessment, the link to seeing oneself as a person who needed to *achieve* was created. The voice of anxiety thus could be linked to a self who expected to perform or achieve to a standard set by self or others. In the extract, the 'I' (Reading 2) represented a person who felt anxious about face-to-face performance-based assessment. A self-aware voice of anxiety (Reading 3) that emerged related to a self who liked to do well in assessment tasks as a measure of achievement.

> I had my AMEB speech and drama exam today (in front of an examiner) and it was so scary we were there waiting at school in a queue forever. *I swear to god I am the queen of stressing.* (Moochie, 10 year old girl, 31/5)

Following verification across successive entries, this participant was found to be constructing a self who was oriented towards being an *achiever* in other contexts as well as those specifically involving face-to-face performance. Hence an *achiever self* emerged who expressed voices of stress and anxiety surrounding her perceived need to perform well across a range of endeavours. In this context, an interpretation was made that linked a self who achieves to one who also periodically expresses *voices* of stress and anxiety. Throughout, a key aspect of the Listening Guide in the present application shows an essential merging beyond discrete steps in order to bring the kind of 'I' being *voiced* into closer relationship with the self that was being constructed. Therefore, successive listening allowed the researcher to discover aspects of identity that may not have emerged through the asking of specific questions. In this way, *listening* within a context of narrative research helped to yield complex data as well as to support participants to find a personal language of self-expression.

Conclusions
This paper focused on the value of *listening* within narrative research, showing simultaneously the adaptability of narrative concepts to an email environment.

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Specifically, the combination of journal-writing concepts facilitated by email has potential to access the lives of individual young adolescents in a flexible and fruitful manner. Analysis showed that young adolescents' own narratives of choice yielded important information into the ways that individual participants constructed a sense of *self*. Participants revealed a capacity to be highly evaluative in their opinions and viewpoints, to an extent that may be underestimated within mainstream schooling. Significant voices of anxiety, frustration and resistance to adult agendas emerged, specifically linked to a sense of achievement that only comes through quantifiable ways, such as school-based assessment. Thus, this inquiry presented narrative listening methods as having the benefits of yielding complex data as well as supporting the social-emotional growth of the participants. Overall, this paper affirms the ongoing value within narrative research of *listening* — as both an ontological stance and as a method of analysis.

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