

How Do Middle School Youth Express Themselves? An Exploratory Action Research Study

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ABSTRACT

Learning more about how young people express themselves to develop their voice is essential to establishing methods to grow action-focused citizens. An under-researched population due to age and identification, 136 middle school gifted and talented (GT) students collaborated with the teacher-researcher in an exploratory action-research study to self-report on expression through a written survey. The categories of “Speaking”, “Appearance”, “Other”, “Speaking + Appearance”, and “Speaking + Appearance + Other” ranked highest, with an emphasis on sharing opinions and insights, clothing as an expression of personality, and sports and hobbies as expressions of self, being the most frequently reported. Gifted youth express themselves in various combinations of all reported categories (speaking, appearance, artistic, written, and other). Still, the results emphasize a collaboration of three main categories alone and in conjunction with each other (speaking, appearance, and other). More research comparing the nuanced components of categories (types of art, physical endeavors, etc.), as well as comparing gifted and non-gifted adolescents, is needed to determine whether this reflects all youth or whether factors that separate gifted and non-gifted youth in development play a role in divergence. Adults who interact with this population in any setting will benefit from the knowledge gained to foster engagement and facilitate opportunities for youth to share their voices in their own world. Using tailored results from their own class survey could help teachers collaborate with their students to develop a learning environment that encourages open discussion of issues that youth want to actively address and change.

Keywords

Youth, gifted, expression, identity, middle school, education

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1. Introduction

Early adolescence, from 10 to 14 years old, is a journey toward independence in many areas of life, yet it is also a road marked by pressure to conform. According to Visser and Hoogeveen⁵⁴, without a nurturing and supportive environment, youth are likely to choose conformity over individualistic expression. To better understand who they are, young people need to explore who they could be within the societal constructs of their upbringing and the social roles they are a part of, with a sense of safety and security. According to Erickson¹⁸, middle schoolers, moving from early into middle adolescence, are exploring independent thinking while growing into the phase of pushing back on external expectations:

Thus, mid-adolescence constitutes a developmental phase during which young people learn to stand up for their own values and beliefs and resist changing them in the face of peers who pressure them to do otherwise. Eventually, adolescents integrate their reflected-upon values and beliefs with those that their social group and society present to them. This integration of self and societal values constitutes the foundation of adolescent identity formation (198)²⁰.

Self-expression is the authentic sharing of thoughts and feelings, “allow[ing] others a glimpse into their personalities, preferences, personal styles of interacting, and ways of thinking”². Kim and Ko³¹ define expression as “expressing one’s thoughts and feelings ... through words, choices or actions (3)”. How middle schoolers express themselves comes in a variety of forms:

“I express myself through my music and through my subtle actions like taking anger walks or playing games with family.” - Participant 120

Expression is diverse and can be challenging to categorize.

Intertwined with self-expression is identity. Identity is a “person's perceptions and beliefs about themselves, as well as their role within society (282)”⁵⁷ or, more simply, “[Beliefs] about ‘Who I am’ and ‘Who I want to be’ (306)”⁵⁵. Identity is who a person believes themselves to be (values, beliefs, ideas, etc.), and expression is how a person shows it to others. As ideas and beliefs about one’s self change, the expression may evolve to reflect better the inner journey toward a deeper understanding of oneself. The words and thoughts expressed become manifestations of identity, whether through speech, writing, or action, as self-expression becomes a vehicle for presenting one's identity. The importance of self-expression in developing identity cannot be overstated during this transition.

1.1 Importance of Self-Expression

“Through a language, human beings can communicate or transfer thoughts, ideas, and knowledge from one person to the other (604)”³⁷. Writing, poetry, speaking, oration, and even graffiti are forms of expression that add emotion to words, connecting with more than just the producer. Art, whether in poetry, painting, music, or dance, transforms written and spoken words into images and movements, striking chords in our minds, bodies, and souls. Fashion, as expressed through clothing, makeup, and accessories, showcases individual and group expression that transcends words. Through service, protest, games, behaviors, and leadership, actions constitute expression by putting thoughts into motion.

Expressing oneself during adolescence is vital because it plays a role in psychosocial development. The development from 12 to 18 years of age falls into the “identity versus role confusion” stage, in which adolescents explore who they are, what they believe, and what they value¹⁸. It is an independent process of deciding where to stand between childhood teachings and what to value as an adult. The ultimate goal is independence of thought and confidence in oneself.

A young person’s identity is crafted by discerning life experiences and their role in shaping and sharing their values and beliefs. The lenses of self and society tint this vision, interplaying to create a narrative arc during adolescence²⁰. Granic et al.²⁰ further support this narrative, common in the middle school setting, that these identities can be accepted by peers when considered mainstream but rejected when viewed outside of the adolescent norm, thereby shifting the young person’s perceptions of their place in the world. Self-expression plays a vital role in further developing and cementing identity, and is often evident in online and school settings.

1.2 Youth and Self-Expression Arenas

Social media and school are two areas where middle schoolers find an outlet for their thoughts and ideas, places where feedback is readily available and often shapes their future identity and beliefs. The potential broad reach of these areas of life can act as a springboard for sharing and boosting individual growth and connection with others. Social media, prevalent in today’s society, is the first topic considered here regarding expression and identity development.

Acknowledging the “negative mental health effects of spending too much time on [social media]”⁵² and a platform for cyberbullying as avenues for concern⁴², much research has viewed social media as supportive in a space for youth expression, activism, and political engagement, as it allows young people to connect with like-minded people on topics they find important in their lives³⁴. According to a research analysis, pegu and Gogoi³⁹ concluded that social media is “integral in shaping youth’s self-image and identity (6)”. Pew Research Center⁴⁰ found in 2018 that many youth feel social media gives them an “outlet to express their opinions and emotions, and connect with people who feel the same way (5)” and “a voice that can reach many people (6)”. Barta and Andalibi³, focusing on TikTok as a social media platform, found that youth embraced it for its:

[S]hift away from text toward a moving image, emphasizing media consumption and creation instead of a personal profile to express one’s true self through “unfiltered” and “quirky” videos, algorithmic personalized content, and options for anonymity in combination with visibility that encourages people to share (377)²⁵.

Social media platforms can act as a megaphone, amplifying adolescents’ voices and perspectives, allowing them to connect with like-minded peers and build community, share similar emotions, and address everyday struggles.

One participant in Barta and Andalibi’s³ 2021 study described TikTok as freeing, “I feel like, especially on TikTok, they post a lot more about problems they’ve been facing for who knows how long. Now, TikTok is [an] outlet for them to speak up about it and get the word out (14)”. This online forum for sharing struggles and support is also evident in how young people pick their social groups IRL (in real life) to build community.

Uhls et al.⁵³ and Subrahmanyam and Smahal⁴⁷ contended that online platforms “reflect, complement, and reinforce off-line relationships, practices, and processes (S68)”⁵³, supporting the following conclusion from Granic et al.²⁰:

[M]id-adolescence constitutes a developmental phase during which young people learn to stand up for their own values and beliefs and resist changing them in the face of peers who pressure them to do otherwise. Eventually, adolescents integrate their reflected-upon values and beliefs with those that their social group and society present to them (198).

School reinforces relationships in an arena that youth cannot simply turn off like phone notifications. In school, youth explore who they are through their interactions, behaviors, and influences⁵⁵. Middle school years can be a challenging time for values and self-esteem, as a stage marked by increased vulnerability and change, accompanied by a heightened emphasis on social comparison and independence^{1, 7, 16}. The average middle schooler is extremely curious, questioning, and uncertain about their emerging independence and critical thinking (44)^{7, 17}. In this area full of peers, each on their own journey of self-discovery, behavior in and out of class and words spoken and written can be both supported when solicited and discouraged when they push the boundaries of what is acceptable in school. What one person wears can either idolize or ostracize them. Participating in activities can be a social lifter or a negative label for middle school youth. All these forms of communicating likes, interests, and passions can feel like judgment, both positively and negatively. Depending on the group of people who matter most to the student (friends, teachers, athletes, musicians, etc.), their form of expression can grow and change rapidly until they settle on what and whose opinion matters most to them. Exploring the uniqueness of these groups is important to identity formation and expression at this pivotal developmental stage.

Through this interplay of wanting to stand apart and as part of the crowd, understanding more about middle school youth and their sub-populations, with their own unique characteristics and developmental divergences, such as gifted and talented (GT) youth, is critical to supporting them in finding their identity and place in the world. This research is essential to educators for a better understanding of the perspectives and development of their GT students, as these students possess unique characteristics that naturally position them for creative leadership in and out of the classroom. GT developmental differences vary from those of non-GT peers in several social, emotional, and academic aspects, and should be taken into consideration when examining expression.

1.3 Unique Characteristics of GT Youth

According to the National Association for Gifted Children³⁸ and the Texas Education Agency⁴⁹, gifted and talented students have the potential to perform at higher levels than peers and to exhibit high capacity in intellect, creativity, artistic expression, leadership, or particular academic areas. To realize their unique potential, gifted students require modifications to their educational experiences. Kaya³⁰ summarized many characteristics of gifted learners, including traits that lend themselves to discussion regarding expression, creativity, and emotion, as seen below:

- Asynchronous Development
- Curiosity and Observing

- Overexcitability and Alertness
- Creativity and Divergent Thinking
- Imagination
- High sensitivity and empathy
- Leadership skills (576)

These characteristics are not prevalent in all gifted students. However, infinite combinations of such traits within GT students set them apart from their peers and play a role in their self-expression and identity formation.

1.3.1 Asynchronous Development. As early as 1942, Hollingworth²⁷ noted a gap between faster cognitive development in GT students and their psychosocial development. Many GT students connect more effectively with adults than with their classmates, often developing at an asynchronous pace that differs from that of their non-GT peers. Gifted youth expressing opinions on topics beyond their peers' realm of awareness or understanding is another divergence. GT youth "both detect and comprehend the world in complex ways that differ significantly from age-expected norms (8)"¹². Renati et al.⁴³ noted "these children are precocious in reaching major developmental milestones ... lead[ing] them to acquire more extensive and in-depth knowledge than their same age peers, as well as the ability to think abstractly, confronting complex and emotionally activating concepts (2)".

1.3.2 Curiosity and Observing. Gifted youth, characterized by constant questioning and intense focus on specific areas of interest, gain a deeper understanding of the world around them. Hays²⁶ found that gifted youth scored significantly higher than their non-gifted peers in interest-based curiosity and on the Need for Cognition scale, developed by Cacioppo and Petty⁶, which measures epistemic curiosity (9; 105). From a qualitative perspective, Hays²⁶ also noted common themes of curiosity innate in gifted youth with "an overwhelmingly positive conception of curiosity ... that curiosity can be self-perpetuating" (106).

1.3.3 Overexcitability and Alertness. A gifted student can exhibit a variety of overexcitabilities: intellectual, imaginal, and sensual, to name a few. Dabrowski's¹⁰ Theory of Positive Disintegration has been confirmed in recent research, which suggests that overexcitabilities in gifted youth are significantly higher than in their non-gifted peers^{23, 33, 41, 56}. These gifts lead to more creative thinking, a greater care for others, and a broader awareness of both the small and large picture in life.

1.3.4 Creativity and Divergent Thinking. Closely connected with overexcitabilities, creativity and divergent thinking in gifted youth further set them apart from non-gifted peers. According to Spawi et al.⁴⁵, gifted youth are "fluent, original, flexible, and elaborate thinkers (1124)". Thus, many GT inventories evaluate divergent thinking alongside creativity as components of giftedness. Chen and Cheng⁸ building upon the work of Karwowski and Lebeda²⁹, Mathisen and Bronnick³⁶, Stolz et al.⁴⁶, Du et al.¹⁴, and Zhang et al.⁵⁸, said, "As an important predictor of creativity, creative self-efficacy is a type of creative self-belief, which is an individual's confidence and belief in one's own creative ability and is a key factor affecting an individual's creative output (1)". This self-belief manifests as identity traits and is evident in creative

self-expression, as Dereli¹³ found, correlating with divergent thinking, creativity, and imagination indicators as predictors of giftedness (170).

1.3.5 Imagination. According to Dereli¹³, “Creativity is always said to involve imagination (159)”. Imagination, another characteristic of giftedness, is closely intertwined with creativity, curiosity, and other traits commonly associated with gifted individuals. Divergent thinking utilizes imagination to generate innovative ideas and theories, thereby enriching the range of perspectives on challenges. “[Thanks] to imagination, which is a mental power, they can produce many designs and solutions for many social problems in their minds, turn them into dreams and test them (158)”¹³. Imagination is essential for solving real-world issues and is often associated with high levels of empathy and sensitivity towards people and the world around us.

1.3.6 High Sensitivity and Empathy. Closely connected with overexcitabilities, high sensitivity and emotional empathy also characterize gifted youth. A gifted child’s thinking is the collaboration of deep thought and rich emotion that leads to great potential for achievement, “provid[ing] a myriad of possibilities (1)”⁴⁸. Gifted youth are passionate about ideas and thoughts, wanting to share this intensity with others to change the world. Closely connected to overexcitabilities, these individuals can become fixated on a task or challenge, considering its impact on themselves and others. These emotional intensities set GT youth apart from their peers and often give them insights that manifest as leadership skills.

1.3.7 Leadership Skills. Seeing “problemtunities”, a term coined by David Langford³², being “solutionaries”, a term popularized by adrienne maree brown⁵ in her book *Emergent Strategy*, and the ability to motivate others to act⁴⁵ are traits of giftedness that can distinguish the person as a leader. Giftedness encompasses leadership aptitude and grit. GT youth can identify deep problems and develop unique and inventive solutions, while also inspiring others to take action for change. According to Spawi et al.⁴⁵, and supported by earlier research^{9, 11, 21, 28}, gifted students are often leading trailblazers, “innovative problem solvers, having strong communication skills, being flexible in thought and action, able to remain motivated while facing a challenge, feeling connected with peers who have similar interests and abilities, and able to motivate others (1125)”.

A gifted child may be any combination or degree of these traits; perhaps the middle school girl who is motivated to rid the ocean of trash, setting up her own donation station in the library, advertising the fundraiser on announcements, and creating posters to spread the word. Maybe the 13-year-old boy who speaks wiser than his years gets very excited when he finds an online search engine that not only connects the searcher with the desired information but also works toward reforesting areas that were once lush, begins an email writing campaign to get the local school district to consider unblocking the site and promoting it from a social consciousness framework. Even a group of students feeling unduly punished for a dress code they find restrictive, outdated, and targeted, meeting with school district officials and opening up lines of dialogue to effect change. All exhibit signs of giftedness. Given the traits that distinguish GT youth from their peers, it is of interest to any adults involved in the education of GT students to explore how this population’s perspective on life and forms of expression help connect with and grow these young people.

2. Study Background

This study explored how GT youth in a middle school GT elective course express themselves. The setting for this study was a middle school in a suburban district in central Texas. The selection of this setting and population for the study was due to the age group's developmental journey of discovering themselves, their beliefs, and their place in the world.

The course began in August 2022 and concluded in May 2023, covering the fall and spring semesters. According to district guidelines, students identified as GT based on results from norm-referenced ability tests (both verbal and non-verbal) could register and participate in the elective course in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. Class sizes were larger in 6th grade (approximately 115 students total) and became smaller in later grades (62 and 29 students in 7th and 8th grade, respectively). The course teacher was also the researcher for this study.

The middle school GT elective course developed to best address the unique potential and developmental needs of GT students compared to non-GT peers. The focus was to support the growth of these students and build community, while accounting for the unique characteristics not common among non-gifted and talented students, as mentioned earlier. Through participation in a GT elective, these students were encouraged to take risks and dig deeper to explore and share their curiosity about the world in a safe environment. Thompson and Pfeiffer⁵⁰ compiled evidence-based findings from research, concluding that creativity, one aspect of giftedness, is best facilitated in a class setting that is physically and psychologically safe for students to feel comfortable and share freely, without concern for ridicule, and with the freedom to explore diverse topics in different ways (63). To facilitate this cooperative and supportive educational atmosphere, collaboration, ideation, and openness to various perspectives were encouraged. Throughout the study, the course focused on working collaboratively with students to develop projects and activities that fostered critical thinking skills and awareness of the world around them, aiming to cultivate care for self, others, and the world. The teacher-researcher facilitated learning opportunities for the participants, with projects ranging from addressing immediate classroom needs, such as a lack of space due to overcrowding, to broader community needs through service learning, and, finally, focusing internally on personal development and sharing.

This research aimed to evaluate self-expression and identity from the perspective of middle school GT students. The uniqueness of the gifted student compared to their peers may play a role in when and how they become more aware of their beliefs and desire to express them in ways that make them feel most comfortable. As a population, this age group and its identification as GT have not been widely studied in youth voice development, leaving space for new insights into this demographic.

3. Methodology

3.1 Purpose

This study clarified how middle school GT youth expressed themselves.

3.2 Research Design and Methodology

This research was an exploratory action-research study that examined a group of youth, aged 11-14 years, identified as gifted and enrolled in the middle school gifted and talented elective, and their self-reported expressions and identities. The goal, in alignment with research by Guest et al.²², was to explore self-expression and identity through classroom activities before

crafting future projects with the students to enhance not only the learning experience but also the individual student's voice growth. Applied thematic analysis was employed to facilitate the review of responses and code them. Participants enrolled in the course engaged in in-class activities to help clarify their voice and motivate them to find topics they were passionate about taking action on. An exploratory action research model was employed, with the teacher-researcher guiding students as they worked collaboratively to plan projects, discuss voice, and determine focal points and assessments within the class period. The study design evolved as GT students and the teacher-researcher reflected and refined the direction of the activities each quarter (approximately 9-12 weeks in duration) to best address the students' needs. The use of journals, artifacts, and benchmark reflections, informed by students' preferred methods, led to changes in the study.

In January 2023, research began with 136 students with written parental consent to participate in the study (72 sixth graders, 40 seventh graders, and 24 eighth graders). All participants completed the initial survey, and the information gleaned from responses was shared with students as warm-ups and during class discussions, eliciting unstructured yet valuable insights into students' ideas and thoughts on issues and concerns important to them. Throughout all these projects and activities, students reflected via journaling, drawing, and discussion, whichever they felt most comfortable with, processing how things in class interconnected with their lives and the lives of others. In May, the researcher administered a second survey to all participants. The following is a description of the study, its methodology, results, and implications for further research.

All participants identified as gifted according to district-set standards as determined by results from the CogAT, NNAT3, parent/teacher surveys, observation data collection, and enrollment in the GT elective course. The campus overall had an even split between white and Hispanic students (44% each), with 19% identified as economically disadvantaged⁴⁴.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Characteristic	Category	n
Gender	Male	85
	Female	47
	Trans-masculine, non-binary, they/them, all pronouns	4
Grade	6	72
	7	40
	8	24
Ethnicity	American Native or Alaska Native, Hispanic	1
	American Native or Alaska Native, White or Caucasian	1
	Asian	6
	Asian, Hispanic	1
	Black or African American	3
	Hispanic, Black or African American	2
	Hispanic, White or Caucasian	38
	Multi-race	9
	Multi-race, Hispanic	3
	White or Caucasian	72
Total		136

Data collection tools included pre- and post-study surveys with researcher-designed questions to gauge changes in definition and perceptions of power and voice over time. The survey questions elicited self-reports of forms and frequency of expression. Questions pertained to issues the participants were concerned with and passionate about changing, comfort with sharing opinions and ideas, and frequency and forms of expression used. Questions also focused on the definition of self, importance/passion for concern/issues in life, expression, and the definition of youth voice. This study focuses on self-reported responses to the types and degrees of self-expression.

Table 2*Identity Survey Questions*

Identity - Identity is who you are.	How do you express your identity (i.e., who you are, what is important to you, etc.)?
Describe in detail how you express your identity through:	Speaking (i.e., method of speaking, topic, location, audience, etc.)
	Writing (i.e., blog, vlog, social media, journal memes, etc., topic, location, audience, etc.)
	Art (i.e., method of art - painting, drawing, song, music, songwriting, instrument, etc., topic, location, audience, etc.)
	Appearance (i.e., clothing, make up, hair, nails, etc.)
	Other (ways not listed, such as sports, hobbies, etc.)

3.2.1 Data Analysis. Using applied thematic analysis, the researcher analyzed the survey responses to develop the codes as participants answered the same questions, and the primary concern was with “presenting the stories and experiences voiced by study participants as accurately and comprehensively as possible (14)”²². The researcher then utilized the mixed-methods software Dedoose to organize the data, identify co-occurrences, and establish prominent themes, ideas, and patterns.

Table 3*Example of Code and Theme Analysis*

Data Segment	Code	Theme
<i>Talk to friends who are fellow republicans and my dad. I wear, for the clothing section, some "don't tread on me" shirts, "come and take it" is another. - Participant 19</i>	Talking Sharing of Opinions/Insights Sharing with Groups Politics Clothing	Speaking Appearance
<i>Drawing/Creating art. Decorating my room. Creating characters that portray myself/problems I have. - Participant 35</i>	Drawing Creating Issues/Problems Art	Artistic Writing
<i>I guess by playing sports and video games related to sports I express myself as an athlete. - Participant 13</i>	Sport Video Games Athlete	Other

3.2.2 Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness. Ethical considerations for using students as participants include obtaining informed consent on behalf of both the student and their family, engaging in conversations to disclose research aims beforehand, providing the option to request removal from the research, and offering the option to withdraw from the GT elective course. The IRB committee, school, and district approved the study. All data was guaranteed to be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. The researcher would connect any participants experiencing unforeseen trauma as a result of study participation immediately with the school counseling service for assistance.

The involvement of GT students as study participants acknowledges that this is a subset of youth within this age and demographic. Care is needed when extrapolating findings and applying them to a larger population than they may represent. Also of concern is the historical inequity in the qualifications of GT students. While the district in this study has shown growth in its identification of marginalized students as GT, according to the Director of GT and Enrichment Services, groups such as Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, and emergent bilinguals are underrepresented in GT-serviced courses and not reflective of the district student population (personal communication, March 22, 2024). The researcher is also outside the participants' age group, which may affect analysis based on observations; thus, the risk of bias as a person outside this population cannot be ignored.

4. Presentation of Results and Findings

4.1 Overview of Themes

The survey themes expected in the research were “Speaking”, “Appearance”, “Artistic”, “Writing”, and “Other”. These themes covered a wide range of ways in which youth typically express themselves. “Speaking” pertained to the sharing of ideas or thoughts aloud. “Appearance” was evident in physical representations of beliefs through clothing, makeup, hair, etc. “Artistic” used art in a variety of forms (from visual to performing, among others) to share opinions. “Writing” referred to the use of storytelling online or on paper to share personal statements. “Other” included expressions outside the previous categories that the researcher did not consider beforehand but were prevalent in participant responses (ex., sports, hobbies, volunteering, etc.). While all themes were evident in responses, three independent themes and two combinations of these were most prevalent in the research: “Speaking”, “Appearance”, “Other”, “Speaking + Appearance”, and “Speaking + Appearance + Other”.

Table 4

Self-Reported Forms of Identity Expression

Top Self-Reported Forms of Expression (avg % of responses)	1st Admin Responses	2nd Admin Responses	Total Overall Responses
Speaking (15%)	20	18	38
Appearance (5%)	6	6	12
Other (5%)	8	6	14
Speaking + Appearance (7%)	5	14	19
Speaking + Appearance + Other (8%)	9	13	22

4.1.1 “Speaking”. “Speaking” pertained to verbalizing ideas and thoughts, whether in person, online, or via other forms of oral communication (such as speeches, vlogs, etc.). According to the data, fifteen percent of all participants identified “Speaking” as their sole form of identity expression. Notably, of the 38 responses related to “Speaking” independently of other themes, 49% expressed speaking as sharing opinions and insights, with 32% also focusing on sharing with groups, such as family and friends.

4.1.2 “Appearance”. “Appearance” focused on the way in which a person shows others in the world their beliefs and what matters to them, including clothing, makeup, hair, etc. Five percent of participants self-reported “Appearance” as their form of expression, with 15% of those reporting that outward appearance reflected their inner selves.

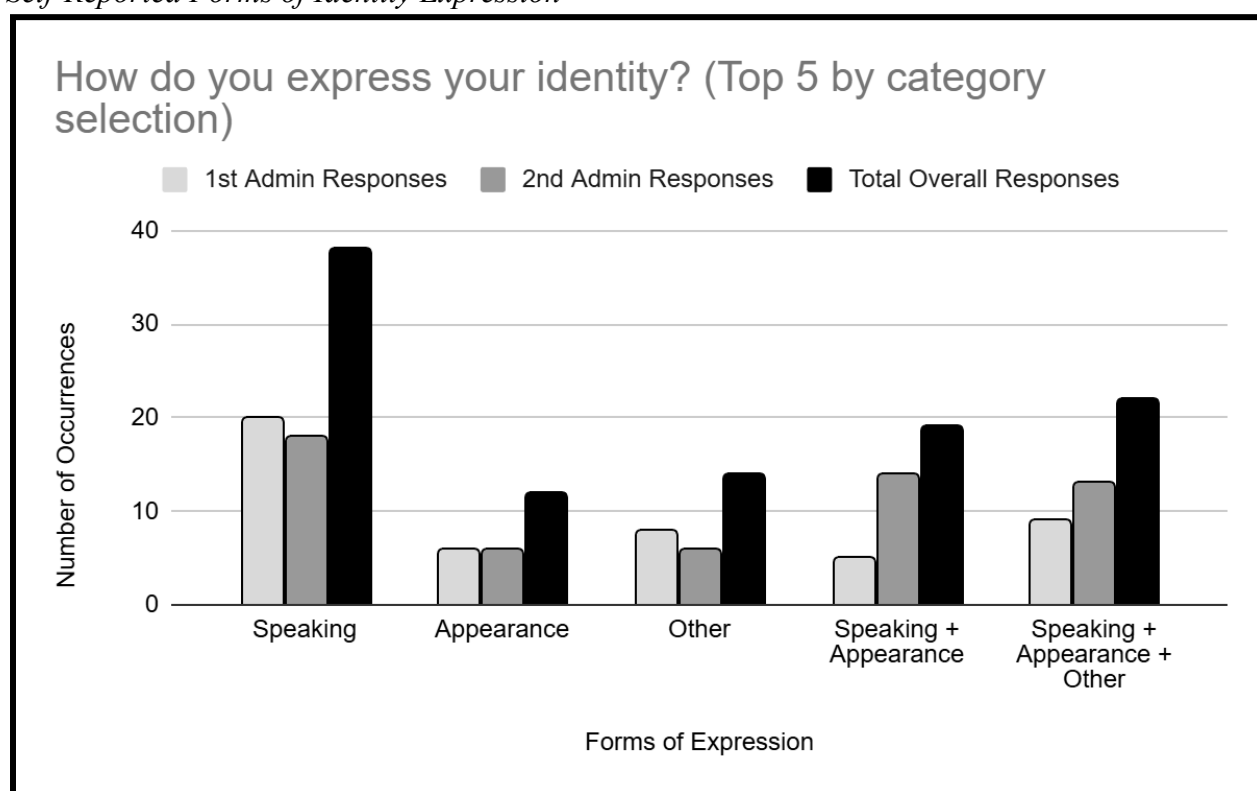
4.1.3 “Other”. “Other” captures ways in which participants express themselves outside of the previous categories, ways that may not have been considered by the researcher beforehand, but in which participants are just as passionate about (such as sport, volunteering, etc.). Similar to “Appearance”, 5% of participants self-reported “Other” as their form of expression, with 29% expressing themselves through sports and hobbies, and 29% reporting that gaming was their method of expression.

4.1.4 “Speaking + Appearance”. By combining responses to create themes, the code of opinions and insights was high for “Speaking + Appearance”, reflecting similar occurrences in the themes of “Speaking” alone and “Speaking + Appearance + Other”. The codes of sports and hobbies ranked highest for “Appearance,” as seen in unique personalities evident in clothing branded with or through sports and hobbies (e.g., jerseys, video game shirts).

4.1.5 “Speaking + Appearance + Other”. For “Speaking + Appearance + Other”, “Other” was expressed through sports and hobbies (reflective of “Other” alone, and “Appearance” seen through clothing and dress). “Speaking” in this combination also involved sharing opinions and insights with friends and family, along with tone and presentation on passionate issues, which occurred most frequently.

Fig. 1

Self-Reported Forms of Identity Expression



5. Discussion of Findings

5.1 Categories of Expression

5.1.1 “Speaking”. This category entails the verbal sharing of beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and concerns by the participant.

“Enthusiastic and funnily, the topic can be almost anything, location can be almost anywhere, and the audience of friends, family, and classmates” - Participant 45

“When one is to express themselves by speaking; they must say what matters truly. It would be insane for one to preach something while do another, although this happens more often than not in society. So, I quite often when expressing my views will do so in a philosophical way with like minded peers.” - Participant 102

The high prevalence of sharing of opinion and thoughts with family and friends, presumably people of comfort and trust, reinforces the fact that young people at this stage of adolescence are developing a sense of unique identity from others and a desire to be heard^{4, 18, 24}. These findings also underscore the importance of providing safe spaces and having people serve as sounding boards as pre-teens transition into teens and adults.⁴ A unique characteristic of GT youth, asynchronous development, is evident in Participant 102 exploring expression through the dichotomy of saying one thing and doing another, all the while setting their manner of sharing as “philosophical” and with “like minded peers”, not the usual colloquialisms for the middle school years.

5.1.2 “Appearance”. This category concerns how the participant expresses their beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and concerns through nonverbal means, such as clothing, accessories, hairstyle, and makeup.

“You can tell I am outgoing and have quite a bit of friends by how [I] look” - Participant 1

“I sometimes express myself through clothing by wearing shirts and sweatshirts with some of my favorite things on them.” - Participant 98

Appearance as a vehicle for expression of inner feelings and emotions affirms previous research^{15, 35, 51}. Clothes and accessories are expressions of identity, revealing likes, thoughts, and even what matters in life. Heightened awareness and recognition of those around them, and the drawing of correlations between their appearance and friendships, are other GT characteristics seen in Participant 1’s response.

5.1.3 “Other”. This category encompasses how the participant shares their beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and concerns in ways that are not previously considered or easily categorized through speaking, writing, artistic creation, or appearance in ways that are not previously considered or easily categorized.

“[I] express my myself through video games sort of as a coping mechanism” - Participant 106

Sports and gaming ranked high among participants as ways they express their identity through their activities and leisure time. It is essential to note that this form of expression is often perceived as associative (with a team or culture) and behaviorally controllable (through attitude and work ethic). High sensitivity, another GT characteristic, is referenced from the use of video gaming as a coping mechanism.

5.1.4 “Speaking + Appearance” & “Speaking + Appearance + Other”.

“I can be really loud when I am talking to friends.” & “I can wear bright clothes on days I am happy and basic clothes on days that are not the best.” - Participant 15

“I say my true thoughts no matter what.” & “I make little adjustments to my appearance to make my outside represent my inside.” - Participant 100

“I like telling stories to my family and friends.” & “I wear comfortable clothing because I am always tired.” & “In soccer I express myself by helping out my team mates and doing the best I can.” - Participant 80

Through combinations of “Speaking”, “Appearance”, and “Other”, participants reported weaving who they are in more aspects of their lives, strengthening their expression of thoughts and ideas. The combination of multiple layers of expression, rather than a single method, suggests that the participant is either more comfortable sharing their identity with others or has a deeper connection to their belief system and a desire to share what is important to them. Participant 60 highlighted this in their responses:

“When I think something is off, or if there is a better way of doing stuff, I WILL speak up! Theater has helped with me actually being comfortable doing this!” & “I wear something that represents my culture, like Guatemalan clothing, Texan stuff, and other things that show who I am!” & “Hobbies like drawing, writing, and sports are really big ways that I express myself!”

The credit given to a middle school theater course for speaking up on what matters, expressing culture through dress, and using actions through drawing, writing, and sports exemplifies that expression often combines multiple facets of their lives.

Overall, “Speaking”, “Appearance”, and “Other”, whether individually or in collaboration, were the prominent categories of expression reported, essential aspects of self-expression for educators to be aware of when working with middle school GT students. Many of the GT characteristics are evident throughout the responses as well.

5.2 Limitations

This study was limited to a niche population: all GT students in a specific middle school enrolled in the GT elective course in a central Texas city. More research is needed to determine the universality of these findings and whether they reflect the broader GT population, as well as to conduct a comparative study of non-gifted youth in this age range and school. In addition, comparing findings across different educational settings, geographical regions, and diverse ethnic communities could provide further insight into youth expression and the potential roles that such differences play. Outside the scope of this research, yet still important to consider moving forward, is the connection between youth and expression at home and settings other than school, and how it may play a potential role in the degree of motivation to share their voice. Further research on the degree of comfort with oneself and comfort with sharing, as reflected in responses, will provide deeper insight into the connection between the strength of belief and the

strength of expression. Finally, how GT traits correlate with forms of expression would be insightful to best tailoring to the needs of this population.

6. Conclusion

Of particular interest to the researcher was that more participants did not report writing as a form of expression, given that social media posting is more prominent in this demographic than among the educators working with them. It may be because sharing voice via speaking through words in video format on their social media platforms (such as YouTube and Instagram) is a more preferred form of expression than typing their thoughts (such as on Facebook). Learning more about this point could help educators find better ways for youth to demonstrate their learning beyond traditional paper-and-pencil (or fingers-and-keyboard) methods, thereby increasing engagement and connection in the classroom.

Gifted youth express themselves in various combinations of all reported categories (speaking, appearance, artistic, written, and other). However, the results emphasized an interweaving of three main categories alone and in conjunction with each other (speaking, appearance, and other). This interconnectedness suggests either that the participants are secure in their identities and beliefs and desire to present their authentic selves to others, or that they are most comfortable sharing in a variety of ways overall. The findings also suggest that, despite age and developmental differences from their peers, GT youth in the middle school setting are demonstrating the importance of creating their own belief system and sharing it with others.

Comparing nuanced components of categories (types of art, physical endeavours, etc.) will provide further insight into how expression shows up in youth, GT and non-GT alike. Analyzing gifted and non-gifted adolescents is necessary to determine if the results of this study apply to all youth or if factors that distinguish gifted and non-gifted youth in their development contribute to the divergence. More research into how middle schoolers develop their identity and comfort with expressing it could help all adults working with youth foster and support this development, focusing not only on the self but also on society as a whole. Interviews with young people who consider themselves successful in working with adults and organizations to effect change will shed light on what is needed to bridge the intergenerational collaboration gap often observed both inside and outside of schools.

On this journey of discovery, as young people grow into their own identities, adults need to be receptive to their unique perspectives and opinions. Given that GT youth may be more advanced than their peers in creativity and leadership skills, acknowledging the weight of their voices in conversations about what affects their lives is prudent for supporting change. By ignoring or downplaying the life experiences of young people, particularly those with advanced empathy and a knack for inventive and divergent solution thinking, adults and institutions supporting youth are not only missing the opportunity for a more profound impact but also teaching young people that their thoughts do not matter. To foster a sense of citizenship that empowers young people to effect change, society needs to instill trust in them to be changemakers before they reach adulthood.—teaching young people to not only care about the world but also to act for the change they want to see in the world.

To quote Mahatma Gandhi¹⁹, “If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change”. As adults, if we can be more welcoming to young voices in decision-making, we could see the world change in turn. More diverse voices are needed, and young people are demonstrating from their loud exasperations in class to their more subtle

messages through appearance that they want to be heard. Adults seeking to better connect with young GT students and organically develop a learning environment that engages, supports, and facilitates growth beyond facts and figures must learn new ways to encourage students to share their experiences, thoughts, and ideas, benefiting both the child and the adult alike. By embracing students' sharing, educators are showing youth that their opinions and thoughts are powerful and matter. Knowing these ways of communicating will ignite excitement for learning and transfer of knowledge as they become changemakers in the world, starting today.

7. Declarations

7.1 Ethical Approval

All methods, from development of research to analysis and synthesis, were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations of the Prescott College Institutional Review Board.

7.2 Consent to Participate

Written consent to participate in this research was given by all participants and their legal guardians.

7.3 Consent to Publish

Written consent to publish findings from this research was given by all participants and their legal guardians.

7.4 Data Availability

Restrictions apply to the availability of this data due to confidentiality considerations. The data are, however, available from the author upon reasonable request.

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