

Puddle Jumping: How do young children manage their grief following the death of their sibling and how do mothers use continuing bonds to maintain their children's relationship in the living world?

'Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Education by Debbie Joanne Ravenscroft'.

Acknowledgements

No one person can author a thesis alone; it is dependent on the goodwill, the support, and the love of a whole village.

I am privileged to be loved by my village; a community of family and colleagues.

Creating a thesis is a little like being a mum. It is demanding work, rewarding, chaotic, emotional, full of pride, and learning curves, where mistakes are made, and forgiveness is found. It is often lonely and fraught with self-doubt but balanced with feelings of joy and excitement.

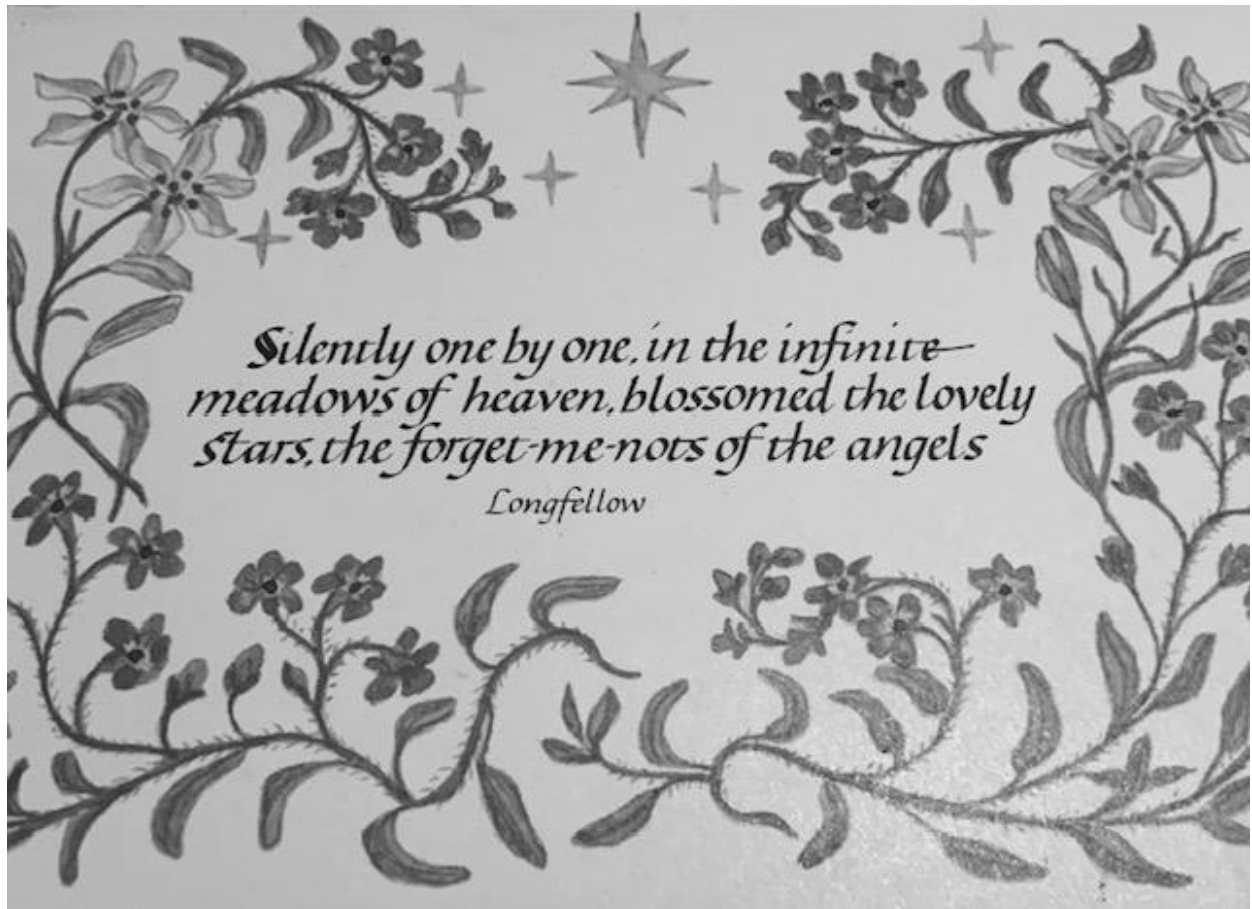
My beautiful sons, Edgar & Teddy; always remember that as siblings you are each other's greatest gift.

To my husband Richard, I will miss you asking me “how many words today love?” every evening and your cheery optimism and reassurance whether I say I have written one word or a thousand.

The goodwill and support from the mothers who shared their stories with me. Their stories which are filled with such love, hope, strength, and fragility are the heart of this thesis; the siblings who came before, the siblings who shared the living world, the siblings who came after and never knew each other and the siblings who died; each one adored and thought of every day.

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For the children



Abstract

This thesis examines the narratives of four mothers who are bereaved of one of their children and are parenting living children. The study used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the lived experiences of bereaved siblings through the stories told by their mothers. Previous research exploring the impact on children following the death of a sibling, indicates the potential long-lasting impact on their emotional wellbeing, but there is a scarcity of research which focuses on the younger child and the practice of continuing bonds by their mother. A review of the literature focuses on the traditions, rituals and practices enacted by mothers as they endeavour to create or to maintain relationships between all their children; those who have died and those in the living world.

A case study approach has been adopted across four case studies and includes semi-structured interviews with each child's mother using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to demonstrate their lived experiences. Rich narratives allow an insight into how young siblings can manage their grief and maintain a relationship with their sibling. Analysis of the data revealed the importance of this sibling relationship and the ways in which the children's mothers incorporated the memories of their dead children into their lives of their living children. The data revealed that grief is felt even when a sibling was not known in the living world and that living siblings share stories and memories and are an important part of continuing bonds. Mothers spoke with love, hope, and confidence about all their children and of their determination to ensure their siblings remained in each other's lives. The thesis also demonstrates the tensions felt amongst educational professionals and western society in talking to young children about death and how their voice can become silenced, contributing to their grief.

Mothers play a key role in forging and maintaining the bond between their living and dead children, but further research in this area is needed.

Summary of Portfolio

This is a summary of modules undertaken during completion of the Doctor of Education. Before beginning the thesis, these taught modules were assessed and what follows is an overview of the assignments.

Research Methodologies for Professional Enquiry

This was the first assignment written at Doctorate level where I considered what it is to be a researcher alongside my full-time position as a Senior Lecturer in Education and introduced me to the language and terminology used by researchers. This assignment stemmed from a small-scale research project engaging postgraduate students and spoke of their experiences undertaking an early year's teaching course. I undertook several interviews, where I examined aspects of identity, quality, and professionalism. The data offered me an insight as to how early years practitioners gained a sense of worth which is often denied within a political and societal landscape.

Social Theory and Education

At this point I was still uncertain as to the direction the thesis might eventually take. This module asked me to select a theorist of my choice and to demonstrate their ideas in relation to an area of practice. I rarely venture outside of early years practice and professionalism regarding reading and so this certainly challenged my thinking. I chose Dewey and reflected on his ability to treat the classroom like a working laboratory. As educators, we can become very rigid in teaching; indeed, students who come to university have had this experience at school and become unsettled when their routine is altered without notice. I considered how my teaching could become more responsive and less rigid in its format and in its reality.

Creativity in Practice

This assignment required both a written task and a practical element. I had to think carefully as creativity and art is not my natural space and yet on reflection, I realised that is not strictly true. I have always loved images of children; children have fascinated me, and I am often in awe at the beauty of childhood on display in photographs. I contacted a local community garden who hold a toddler session once a week and asked if I could photograph the children at play in the natural environment. It was a lovely experience; there were no posed photographs and no narratives. The module tutor questioned a lack of text to

accompany the photographs in the feedback, but I believed in the power of the image and the ability of the viewer to interpret the images in their own way. Photographic images showed children in uproar and joy as they 'cooked' in the mud kitchen and in quiet solitude as they contemplated the plants and flowers around them. The written aspect explored how children can learn and develop in an open and free environment and how creativity can be found in unexpected places. Children rarely have freedom or agency, and this intended to show how empowerment can be achieved in the simplest environment.

Cultural Practices

This was the assignment where the thesis idea began to take shape. I had become intrigued about an image posted by a bereaved mother on Facebook. The image showed a very young child kissing the grave of his dead sister and the accompanying blog explored children's behaviour in a cemetery and the continued bond between the dead and the living. Using Klass's (1996) theory, I undertook an interview with the mother where we explored this often-taboo subject. Her openness, honest and candid discussion led me to understand the importance of the cultural aspect of talking to very young children about death. I knew at this point that I wanted to know more about this subject and its impact on how young children begin to understand death and maybe more importantly why as a society we would prefer that they did not.

Institutions, Discontinuities and Systems of Knowledge

In this assignment, I explored the notion prevalent in the English education system that there is a difference between nursery and Reception and where this stems from. I had observed practice in a privately-owned day nursery in an affluent part of Cheshire where there was a demarcation between children in the general nursery space and those who were approaching their fourth birthday. This identity was constructed through provision of a Pre-School classroom which was out of bounds to other children and staff who were not allocated a role within. The children in this classroom wore a uniform and were collectively known as "Pre-School" rather than individual children. I explored what happened to the nursery staff when they crossed this invisible line from 'nursery' to 'pre-school' and how their manner and attitude towards the children became one of a teacher rather than a practitioner.

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“Once you are real you can’t be unreal again. It lasts for always” (Williams,1992, p4)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite working in some capacity with young children for over thirty years, thinking about bereaved young children is new area of professional curiosity for me, but one which is underpinned by a lifelong held interest in young children and their lives.

Over the last few years, as my own self-awareness of childhood trauma has increased, I have become sensitive to the fact that bereavement has not been part of my professional life in any way. I am a Senior Lecturer in a university setting and much of my teaching is with experienced early years practitioners working in the private, voluntary, and independent sector with children aged 0-5 years. Teaching involves many aspects of child development and family partnerships, and yet the notion of the bereaved child has never been included or professionally discussed. My life has revolved around caring for children but children who are full of life, full of vitality, and I have cared for and supported children through the happiness and the sadness of their lives. I have worked in the early years sector for over thirty years and have never had a conversation or discussion regarding bereaved young children. This exposes a significant gap in education curriculum; formative experiences in young children’s lives reveal the importance of raising the impact of children bereaved of a sibling in education and how they understand this loss. Talking openly about death is still deemed to be taboo in the United Kingdom and even more so when the death is that of a child, and so raising awareness to support professionals and the family is crucial to meet the needs of the child.

This thesis explores the use of the cemetery as a habitus for bereaved mothers and their living children. The cemetery as a sacred space has a marked difference between the quiet, reverent resting places of my family members in the United Kingdom and that of my father in Northern Italy. The rows of uniform headstones in England with Local Authority rules and regulations regarding grave decorations and the writing on the stone contrasts sharply to the exuberant and vivid displays in Italy where the family’s wealth determines the scale and extravagance of memorials, but regardless all are adorned with floral tributes, photographs

of the deceased and religious icons. Death is acknowledged here, and the deceased are remembered with obvious love and affection and bonds are continued.

There is no doubt that this is an emotive area of research and acknowledges my position as having insight into a bereaved child's life and provides knowledge drawn professionally. Being aware of the emotionally laden nature of this research where conversations of child loss are heard is imperative. Rager (2005) argues that researchers should acknowledge the stress which may accompany such subjects and take steps to mitigate the effects to ensure issues are managed effectively. Naturally, my own life will not be on hold whilst conducting this qualitative research and I have no way of knowing of any additional stress which may occur, but emotional engagement as a qualitative researcher is becoming more prominent; qualitative data collection can be heart-breaking, but acknowledging this is essential (Ragar, 2005).

The importance and challenge of outlining my own positionality is highlighted by Holmes (2020) who argues that recognising one's own ontological and epistemological beliefs can be difficult with an expectation from supervisors that students are already aware of their positionality and can easily put it in to words. Positionality influences how research is conducted and the results it gains with aspects being associated with the individual's own values and beliefs. Of particular importance to this study is the recognition of undertaking research with participants around sensitive subjects (Shaw et al,2019).

I began to work with young children in 1988 in a position as a teaching assistant in a primary school. Primary schools are environments where families matter; siblings often attend the same school and parents are invited to be active participants in school life. Teachers and teaching assistants need to understand the outside of the classroom lives of the children and families who attend and are often confidants to parents who seek to ensure their child's emotional wellbeing is taken care of.

Despite this, the subject of child bereavement was never raised or discussed in my working life and as a result my career in early years spanning thirty years was devoid of any understanding of this catastrophic event in children's lives and the long-term implications for their emotional and physical health.

In 2003 I opened my own private day nursery and in the following year a requirement was made from the government that at least one member of staff in each setting in England held the Early Years Professional Status qualification to raise the quality of staffing in the sector. This requirement drew on the findings from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (Sylva et al., 2004) which reported that having trained teachers in key positions improved children's outcomes. As this status required an undergraduate degree and I had not had a university education, I enrolled on to a Foundation degree at a local university and gained a first degree in 2010 and followed this with a master's degree in 2013 which led to a career change. This career shift included a lecturer position in Early Childhood Studies, at a college of further education and then in my present role at a university in the Northwest of England. I teach across a broad range of modules on programmes which are dedicated to the lives of children and their families and yet despite the contemporary issues discussed including attachment and trauma, the bereaved child has still not been included for discussion. One hope is that research studies such as this one will open discussions into including child bereavement as a specific topic of study within education and early years curricula.

Undertaking an EdD programme was a natural educational and career progression for me, but I had no real clarity over an area of interest until the completion of an assignment which explored culture. At this time, I was aware of a family who were bereaved of their first child and used social media to raise the profile of child bereavement and sibling loss and how they continued a relationship with their dead child as parents and then with their subsequent living child. A small-scale piece of research was undertaken with the mother exploring the culture of talking with young children about death and my interest in the sibling relationship between dead and living children contributed to my decision to focus my thesis in this area.

My married life of twenty-five years has been inextricably linked with the death of my husband's mother and the long-lasting impact of childhood bereavement to his emotional resilience, but this had never been part of any professional thinking or research. Having never considered children's behaviour in relation to death, I became fascinated by an unusual phenomenon which began to appear more prominently in social media posts from bereaved mothers. A blog written by the mother who had supported my research previously shared her happiness and pride of how her very young son was beginning to understand

how to behave in a cemetery. Entitled 'Kisses for Big Sister' she started the blog with the acknowledgement that not everybody would understand these family traditions and there would be some who thought this behaviour odd and yet she found hope in this experience: hope that her son would develop a relationship with the sister he would never know in the living world; that her grave would be a place where the two could connect throughout his life and that he would find normality and comfort visiting her sleeping place. The piece ended with a question for those reading the blog: *'I'd love to know how you feel about children in particular visiting sleeping places of loved ones, it genuinely is an interesting topic for people to discuss, even if it is a taboo subject for some'* (Thompson,2017). The narrative of a developing relationship between siblings who have never met in the living world and the rituals and traditions enacted by their family, provoked a strong sense of interest to me and raised many questions about the life and development of this little boy and how his mother would continue to develop the bond between her dead child and her living child.

This way of living where connections and relationships are maintained is known as continuing bonds. As a grief theory, continuing bonds signalled a change in basic assumptions in bereavement research. First raised in Klass, Silverman and Nickman's 1996 seminal text, the theory revolutionised the way in which bereavement and grief were perceived. The continuing bonds theory challenged the notion that to grieve is to sever the bonds with the deceased as a pathway to forming new attachments. Individuals and families construct and maintain their bonds with the dead within a series of nested narratives (Steffen, 2022). These interactions support individuals to begin to make sense of their loss not in a closely related vacuum, but in one which extends through their interactions with others which includes their family, their tribe, their nation, or their religion.

The more I read about sibling loss, both in published literature and through social media platforms, the more evident it became that the practice of continuing bonds is more common than I had anticipated. Whilst I became interested about how parents continued the bond with their dead child, the blog post by the bereaved mother led me to also question how siblings' relationships were affected and how parents managed the expectations of siblings and whether they had any true understanding of how their young children grieved, because if they did not, inevitably the children's emotional wellbeing could be compromised. Siblings, particularly in the younger age group, are often overlooked in

bereavement research in the United Kingdom. These children endure lifelong reactions to their grief creating challenges both in their physical and emotional health and wellbeing. (Funk et al. 2017). In addition to young siblings' grief being one of the least researched areas of all family bereavement, younger children are at a significant disadvantage as their development stage restricts their understanding of death (Torbin, 2011).

1.1 The Importance of the Research and defining the Research Issue

And so, understanding bereaved children in the context of sibling loss can be complicated. It disrupts childhood as we know it, it makes people feel uncomfortable and thus unwilling to discuss its impact and yet sibling loss is not hidden away; indeed, it has existed historically through literary classics and films as authors and producers acknowledge that children do die and that their siblings grieve. Bereaved children in the 21st century face a myriad of challenges, but children can be supported if parents or guardians, mental health advocates and the education system are grief aware. The death of the sibling can be a catalyst to secondary losses which may include friends and communities. In addition, children may also lose their routine and more importantly the protection of their adults which can lead to a lack of motivation and challenging behaviours to solve future problems (Goldman, 2004).

Authors of childhood bereavement place the sibling and their death in diverse ways, but each suggests a fundamental theme in all sibling-loss narratives: that of disruption. As DeVita-Raeburn (2004, p75) argues:

It isn't supposed to happen this way. What we expect of sibling relationships is varying degrees of competition, love, loyalty, friendship, ambivalence, conflict, and support that waxes and wanes through our lives and is available if we want it. When that story line is cut off abruptly, the world and all our assumptions about it get thrown in the air. It's a violation.

The language used exposes the rawness and chaos which surrounds sibling-loss and the need for storytelling to own the loss and to answer the myriad of questions which arise. Despite this, research, and government policy (NHS England, 2015) tends to overlook the early years age groups and instead focuses on children who are of school age and the potential disruption to their academic success. Locating research evidence which explores bereavement in young children is problematic and whilst early years education has

contributed to understanding many aspects of the holistic wellbeing of the young child following the death of a sibling, this study argues for closer collaboration between professionals in health, educators, and society as a whole and a more open forum of communication about young, bereaved siblings to ensure that siblings are not forgotten grievers.

Chapter 2 exposes the scarcity of literature which explores the lived experiences of bereaved siblings and the practice of continued bonds. A lack of current related literature offers challenges in being able to offer both knowledge and assessment of young children's emotional health. Continuing bonds remains a new understanding of grief and when combined with a lack of uncertainty about how families grieve, misunderstandings and fear around topics of death with young children emerge. Of importance in both society in general and in the educational system is the assertion that children re-grieve in accordance with their developmental stage. Paris et al (2008) posit that if adults can distinguish childhood grief from that of an adult, counsellors, and educators are better equipped to recognise the unique features of young children's grief.

1.2 Research Aims and Questions

Although it could be considered that the focus of the study centres on the child who has died, at its heart are the siblings; these surviving siblings include those who knew their brother or sister; those who are continuing a bond with a sibling who they had not had the chance to meet and the dead sibling whose presence continues to shine in their family's lives. This is a controversial area of study as there is common thinking that a bond can only continue symbolically if it existed in the first place (Meyer & Carlton-Ford, 2017; Kempson and Murdock, 2010). This study therefore concerns itself with how deceased children remain real in that their families and siblings interact with them, sense their presence and create and maintain a relationship with them. The participants in this study are parents who have endured the death of a child and have nurtured children either through the death of their siblings or who have nurtured a symbolic relationship with them as a subsequent child. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to describe how families remember a child who has died and to explore the effect of the loss of a sibling on young members of the family; those who had a living relationship with the dead child and those who did not.

This study explores the issue of bereaved young children to better engage society and education in ensuring that children's grief is recognised and supported. Everyone who is in contact with a grieving child needs to be competent and confident in their interaction and communication to ensure their emotional wellbeing is protected.

1.3 Main Research Question

Puddle Jumping. How do young children manage their grief following the death of a sibling and how do their mothers use continuing bonds to maintain their children's relationships in the living world?

Drawing from this, this study has three key research questions:

1. How do mothers engage in tender conversations about the death of a sibling with their children to offer solace during their grieving process?
2. What strategies do mothers use within continuing bonds practices to uphold a relationship between their deceased and living children, and how might these approaches be subject to scrutiny?
3. How do subsequent siblings establish and sustain a connection with a sibling they did not know in the living world?

The study has three research objectives:

- to explore parent perceptions of sibling loss in young children both for the siblings who knew each other and those who are later born to support their emotional wellbeing
- to understand how parents, use continuing bonds to maintain and to develop a relationship between their living children and their deceased child
- to analyse how subsequent children are supported at home and at school to maintain or develop a relationship with their dead sibling using continued bonds

1.4 Thesis Structure

Chapter One will offer an introduction to the theoretical foundation of the thesis and includes my positionality within this study. Chapter Two will offer a review of bereavement literature; it includes the theoretical perspective of Klass et al (1996) in the field of continuing bonds and theoretical perspectives in attachment and grief from Bowlby

(1969,1973,1980). The review also explores trauma informed practice and the notion of adverse childhood experiences.

Chapter three outlines the methodology for the thesis. It provides a rationale for the use of an inductive qualitative methodology using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as methodological philosophy in addition to the specific research methods used. This chapter reflects on the inherent ethical considerations of this thesis and, the process of data collection and analysis. Chapter four presents the case studies and introduces the participants. Chapter five provides the raw data in descriptive form and provides analysis within the chosen themes. Chapter six concludes the thesis with summarised findings and recommendations. It offers recommendations, highlights the limitations of the study, and concludes with final thoughts and reflections.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

“They say time heals all wounds, but that assumes that grief is finite” (Clare, 2011, p155)

2.1 Introduction

Understanding of the use of continuing bonds by young siblings and their families following the death of a child is still in its infancy. Advances in understanding bereavement theories have allowed more open conversations about death to be held in society in the United Kingdom, supported in part by a cultural shift where a range of associated bereavement groups and reflections from individuals on social media can be openly viewed. Nonetheless, the literature highlights the scarcity of research with children aged 0-7 years who are bereaved of a sibling. As a result, young children’s grief is kept hidden and is not fully understood by the society in which they live. (Kempson & Murdoch, 2009). Sibling grief is also inextricably linked to parental grief which will be discussed further in this chapter.

The following literature explores traditional and contemporary issues which are connected to early childhood and bereavement theories. The literature reviewed will consider the holistic nature of bereaved young children’s education and health and how parents and educators respond to their grief. The main theoretical perspectives are Continuing Bonds (Klass,1996) and Attachment Theory (Bowlby,1969). Theories of attachment and loss are important when endeavouring to understand young children’s bereavement as they cover a

person's lifespan demonstrating the impact and influence of the child's loss and how their health and education are affected. Acknowledging the importance of this is highlighted throughout the literature review which identifies how children who are bereaved of their sibling can be better understood and in turn be better supported both within society and their educational life. The literature review highlights how in comparison to a body of work understanding parental bereavement, sibling grief is less acknowledged despite childhood grief reactions differing in their manifestations and duration. It is pertinent to note that this review draws on literature of seminal studies which could be considered as dated. These studies however offer an important history of bereavement research and trace a journey of young children's grief and offer a wider understanding of where continuing bonds in contemporary literature can be positioned. Bolton et al (2016, p59) note that "Sibling bereavement is an experience with very sparse literature and thus the consequences of losing a sibling are unclear". Outdated literature therefore remains valid whilst highlighting the scarcity of contemporary literature which explores sibling's grief. Such synthesis of grief literature therefore compensates for the lack of evidence based academic research into young sibling's grief.

2.2 Grief Work

In endeavouring to untangle the complexities of young children's grief, it is pertinent to explore early attachment theories and their relation to bereavement research. Sibling relationships hold a unique and lifelong bond; siblings use each other to cement their identity and to develop their own understanding of their environment; they are playmates and confidantes (Devita-Raeburn, 2004). Despite the significance of the positive sibling relationship often advanced in theoretical literature, not all siblings fit in to the ideal model. Siblings can experience separation through parental conflict or breakdowns of family structures and further understanding of the sibling relationship from early to adulthood would be advantageous in understanding the structure and function of sibling relationships. Towers (2023) acknowledges the uniqueness of the sibling relationship but notes that whilst siblings can draw comfort and friendship from each other, for some it can be a relationship fraught with hostility and complexities. Whilst intimacy is not guaranteed, Tower (2023) posits that despite any separations or non-communication, siblings "are highly unlikely to be relegated to 'ex' or 'used to be' relations and as such siblings are thus considered

permanent members of each other's relational webs" (p176). It is this anticipated duration of a relationship between siblings which means the death of one is so significant to the other; it is a relationship which Davies (2019) calls 'sticky' where despite separation or distance, the sibling relationship remains central to many young people's lives.

The death of their sibling creates a multiple of loss in addition to potential loss of care from their grieving parents (Cohen & Katz,2014). Early attachment figures such as that of a sibling offer children a sense of security and belonging which in turn supports them to engage with the world around them with confidence and assuredness. Understandably, the death of a significant attachment figure creates a profound void, but how the bereaved grieve and the conceptualisation of grief therapy are determined by how we adapt to loss and how the culture and society which surrounds us understands grief. Simply put, grief can be defined as "The response to the loss in all of its totality – including its physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and spiritual manifestations – and as a natural and normal reaction to loss" (Hall, 2014, p1).

Grief work can be traced firstly to Freud's classical paper Mourning and Melancholia (1917) where Freud explored the question about how humans come to terms with the death of a person who we love (Woodward,1990). Being without religion Freud was unable to seek blame or retribution following the death of his daughter to Spanish flu. He was unable to acknowledge any spiritual or transcendent connection but could not then find a theoretical perspective to attach his grief to. He therefore proposed that grieving or mourning is a job or a process of labour where affectional attachment is withdrawn and only then can it be redirected elsewhere. Once that process has been completed, the bereaved can become free and unencumbered by loss again. Freud's purpose in this seminal paper was to distinguish between mourning and melancholia and to focus on the latter rather than the former; it offers a clear difference between the two (Klass, 1996; Woodward, 1996).

Freud's theory was accepted by others who saw grief as being a defined process that required a simplistic and short treatment for grief. (Parkes, 2002). However, Parkes (2002) highlights the limitations of this theory in that some bereaved people experience chronic grief where there seemed no end to the grief. In this way, it was society that deemed the appropriate length of grief rather than the bereaved individual and so a lack of ownership

was created where those who were grieving had to conform. In Western society, the bereaved remain under pressure to conform to a set of norms which circumscribe their grief rather than supporting it. Social rules govern how the bereaved express their grief and those who do not comply can suffer shame and judgement (Harris et al, 2010).

Prominence of grief types in literature centre around the prevalence of prolonged or complicated grief disorders (Rosner et al., 2021; De Stefano et al., 2021; Wilson et al, 2022). However, anticipatory grief determined as “a phenomenon consisting of the phases of mourning, coping, interaction, planning, and psychological reorganisation in response to the imminent loss of a loved one” (Najafi et al. 2022,p) can be considered particularly within this study. First introduced by Lindemann in 1940, anticipatory grief offered a safeguard against the effect of sudden loss. The aim in anticipatory grief was to reduce the emotional demands of sadness through preventative interventions. Importantly, when a child presents with a terminal or life-threatening illness, parents employ strategies as protective mechanisms. Anticipatory grief involves these strategies; coping and reorganisation methods and the preparedness of parents to allow their child a ‘good death’. Parents can be supported to engage in practices which facilitate anticipatory grief including memory making, sharing stories, and saying goodbye. Kochen et al., (2020) note “these practices support anticipatory grief, since they foster emotional preparedness, allow parents to adjust slowly to the fact that their child is dying, and help to create lasting memories for parents to cherish after death” (p17).

Disenfranchised grief can be viewed as grief that is not acknowledged or validated by society or a family’s support system. Loss is not recognised, and society expresses displeasure at how grief is or is not expressed. Society can hinder families of their right to grief through perceived cultural attitudes. In the same way that any society across the globe can influence the rules by how people live, society can also influence rules around what grief is and these rules can be explicit or subtle. Families may not be aware of the wider cultural attitudes until they suffer a loss themselves. Disenfranchised grief determines who can receive support and validation for their grief. Literature exposes an anomaly in research regarding disenfranchised grief; there is a scarcity of literature which explores the trauma of

sibling loss and demonstrates the nature of the forgotten griever. Conceptualised by Doka (1989) the theory of disenfranchised grief is defined as

Grief that results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned. In short, although the individual is experiencing a grief reaction, there is no social recognition that the person must grieve or a claim for social sympathy or support.

Doka's theories acknowledge that whilst grief may be in existence, society may be unresponsive and therefore those who are bereaved are not offered the right or more importantly are not offered a grieving role. (Doka,2008). Yet, Attig (2004) argues that Doka does not articulate what is meant by a "right" to grieve. Rights are afforded to those who society deems worthy of grief without the interference or question of others, therefore it is understood that mourning is a role of the bereaved and that they are entitled to behave in an expected way which fits with the norms of their culture. Grief in this way offers a protection to the bereaved; they are allowed to grieve in their own way and others are not expected to interfere, but disenfranchised grief "violates the mourner's right to grief" (Attig,2004 p198).

Parkes's own studies (2002, 2013) led him to confirm the claim that some pathological forms of grief existed, but a solution was not readily available. From here, the challenge of studying grief became difficult; there were too few studies on what could be considered as normal grief and how long it lasted or whether there were patterns or specific behaviours to it. Harris and Edmonds (2022, p25) argue that mourning and grieving are not the same and offer their thoughts "We could see grief as the internalised psychological process unique to each individual, whereas mourning is the outward expression of that grief, represented in socially recognised and/or community-based funeral rites and traditions."

The psychological theory of attachment was first proposed by Bowlby in 1958 when he described the behaviours exhibited by young children when they were separated from their mother. The theory of attachment can offer a purposeful framework in endeavouring to

understand the emotional impact of separation and loss and how the bereaved can process their grief (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2022). Bowlby hypothesised that these extreme forms of behaviour; screaming and clinging were displays of an evolutionary mechanism designed to enhance and ensure the survival of the child by ensuring its proximity to its mother. Securely attached children become adults who can manage the complexities of relationships and navigate ways to detach and to reunite, but death brings no possibility to reunite; links and bonds are permanently broken. Bowlby's four attachment styles are deemed to determine how adults manage their grief and indicate potential stages that children may also proceed through during bereavement. Through observations of young children separated from their mother, Bowlby, and Robertson (1952) identified a distinct process of sequential actions displayed by the children as they processed the separation. Observations which were filmed and documented saw young children manage their loss through extended periods of distress and then as the separation continued, the children moved to a phase of anger and despair and then into acceptance and recovery where new relationships were tentatively created. Critics of Robertson's work acknowledge its importance particularly around how young children are cared for in a hospital environment, but also determine that this work is not new nor decisive (van der Horst & van der Veer, 2009) and in turn cannot profess to be ground-breaking nor a seminal approach to further understanding the impact of grief when children are separated from a significant person. Despite this, it is difficult to disagree that the delineation of phases of grief experienced by young children observed by Robertson and Bowlby (1952) was an area not previously understood or observed. Stroebe (2002, p127) contends that Bowlby's work on grief "rescued the bereavement research field from the limitations of psychoanalysis and the dominance of Freud, whose paper 'Mourning and melancholia' had set the stage for decades of research to come".

In seeking to explore cultural attitudes to death, Klass (1996) observed a shift in thinking around death from a romantic perspective to a modernist approach where the bereaved need to recover and return to their normal lives. Modernity therefore exposes a detachment from the deceased where the breaking of bonds is a necessity if normality is to be resumed. Central to this theory is the shift away from collective expressions when

dealing with death and towards a more private meaning making centred around the individual. McCormick (2015, p25) argues that “the sequestration of death is possible, because the institutions and structures of modernity hides death away in hospitals, funeral homes and cemeteries, which has the effect of sequestering death from collective experiences and discourses”.

Klass (1996) suggests that Bowlby hypothesised this to be a form of separation anxiety where those who have been bereaved continue to seek proximity to those who are lost, but that when the loss is realised to be permanent, continued attempts to maintain a connection are deemed as inappropriate. Bowlby’s initial fascination with how children’s mental health is impacted by maternal deprivation is a significant influencer of attachment theory in the field of bereavement. His critics argue that Bowlby only fixated on the temporary loss suffered by the child rather than the irrevocable loss following death. However, Harris and Edmonds (2022) disagree and argue that this was not Bowlby’s thinking at all. Rather, it was a way to maintain an affection and presence of the deceased person and to “integrate the loved one – his or her legacy, memory and continued psychological presence – into one’s own identity and plans for life” (Harris & Edmonds, 2022, p27). In seeking to further explore the relationship between the two, Stroebe (2002) endeavoured to answer the paradox of grief work; how to distinguish between the positive process of working through grief versus the negative process of rumination and in doing so proposed the Dual Process Model. Stroebe (2002, p9) defines this as a process of oscillating “a complex process of confrontation and avoidance of the positive and negative emotions and cognitions associated with loss on the one hand and its consequences for ongoing life on the other “. The DPM proposes a lived experience where the bereaved can move between a state of loss orientated behaviours such as grief work and the breaking of bonds and restoration orientated behaviours such as moving forwards, becoming distracted from grief and taking on their new identity.

In relation to children’s grief, the theoretical model of the Dual Process Model has limitations but can serve to explore bereavement from the individual’s perspective to one

that includes the family as part of the grieving process. Ho Chan et al (2022) identify that the unique sibling bond may bring complex mental health challenges to the individual child but also reflects on how the ability to cope and adjust following the death of their sibling is dependent on the relationship and dynamic held by the child's immediate family. The ability to oscillate between the two 'states' is a key proponent of the DPM, but the suggested every day experiences are not those which a child would engage in.

The perception first considered by Kubler-Ross (1969) that those who are bereaved need to work through the grief is well known and extensively considered throughout bereavement literature. However, there are varied opinions as to whether grief processes are successful in supporting the bereaved to cope with their loss. Romanska (2023) argues that Kubler-Ross' 5 Stages of Grief model was not intended for griever – rather for chronicling the transitions of those who are dying. Such models offer hope for a growth-orientated evolution to recovery after the death of a loved one.

Undoubtedly, a loss as significant as that of a child or a sibling is associated with both mental and physical health challenges. Stroebe and Schut (1999) suggest that understanding adaptive versus maladaptive coping mechanisms should allow for a better understanding of the impact of traumatic grief and in turn offer ways to reduce the risk in those who are most vulnerable in their grieving journey. Stroebe and Schutt (1999) acknowledge Bowlby's (1979) thinking that grief must be worked through to allow the *attachment* to become an eventual *detachment* through "rearranging representations of the lost person" (p2) but argue that at the same time it is only the physical absence of the person which is readjusted rather than the bond itself.

2.3 Cultural Attitudes to Grief in the Western World

Human beings are defined by their relationships and the loss of any relationship but particularly that of a child can precipitate an overwhelming sense of loss and confusion. There are memories, a vocabulary and a life constructed around being a parent and in some respects for the younger child, these attributes apply to their relationship with their sibling. In the Western world, culture suggests that grief navigates through a series of stages which

ultimately results in an end. The grieving process is envisaged as a severing of the tie that binds us to the deceased releasing us to move forwards alone. It is a metamorphosis from a grieving caterpillar to a refreshed and new butterfly. But grief is not linear. It continues, and we travel alongside it rather than journey through it. Psychologists Holland and Neimeyer (2020) argue that the five-stage model persists in grief work due to the underlying framework of the 'monomyth'. Analysed by Joseph Campbell, the monomyth or Hero's Journey sees the main protagonist overcome a series of challenges and obstacles to eventually succeed and return home wiser and more knowledgeable. Romanska (2023) argues that this model offers closure and hope in a growth orientated passage towards grief recovery. The domination of this story throughout literature and film feeds into the narrative that the bereaved can seek enlightenment through a series of stages and can emerge recovered and renewed.

Rosenblatt (2003, p31) states that there is no "pan human category for understanding death" it is culturally embedded in rituals, practice and beliefs including what is worn and what is said and the social context in which death occurs. Rituals and expressions of continuing bonds can be seen across many cultures. Dreams of the deceased, photographic treasures, and mementoes, holding on to possessions or a sense of their presence are all recorded and observed in a growing body of literature in countries across the world. And yet Western attitudes to death remain shrouded in silence and taboo. In traditional cultures across the globe, the dead never leave the living; when a parent lives with a child for a long time, they become part of an extension of oneself and "when they die, you are asked to imagine something your limited, human brain struggles to process" (Romanska, 2023, np).

Despite death being a universal experience, there is no universal agreement about how humans grieve, although there are commonalities across cultures with multi-faceted controversies around the course of grief and the expectations afforded to how people grieve. Western cultures are wedded to a modernist approach to grieving in contrast to previous centuries where a more romantic view of death was constructed. Aries (1974) argues that despite the outspoken nature of human sciences regarding politics, life, and religion for example and whilst literature has continued its discourse around death "ordinary men have become mute and behave as though death no longer existed" (p537). Death was once an accepted part of life; death had such a significance it became the job of

satirists to mock those who sought to deny the evidence of dying. Death was controlled by the dying – even in children – and the rituals performed involved the priest as only one of several participants. Ariès (1974) determined that the public came to accept death and the presumption was this would be done discreetly and with dignity, but in doing so

modern society deprives man of his death, and how it allows him this privilege only if he does not use it to upset the living. In a reciprocal way, society forbids the living to appear moved by the death of others; it does not allow them either to weep for the deceased or to seem to miss them (p545).

As society moved into the twenty first century, a fear of aging and a phobia of death became more prominent in a culture which had its focus on youth and youth culture. Death became taboo and yet the reasons for this appear scarce in literature. Botilca (2021) suggests that the cultural mindset of a particular society plays a significant role in how we determine a relationship with death and dying and that our current mindset views death as something to be avoided. In seeing death as a taboo subject in the twenty first century, Botilca (2021) argues that “as a cultural whole, we create this aura of mystery and misery surrounding death and its ‘constituents’: dead bodies, death practices, rituals, grieving, and mourning” (p17). And yet, communities need to come together to share the process of grief and grieving for it is too much of a burden for one person to face alone (Doughty,2015). Arguably, facing one's own mortality is challenging but as Doughty (2015, p5) says contemporary society hides death so well “you would almost believe we are the first generation of immortals”.

Whilst it is human nature to seek comfort from others during times of grief, all cultures approach and define the rules for how the community or society comes together to support those who are bereaved and mourn. Markin and Zilcha-Mano (2018, p20) define culture as “the set of learned behaviours and beliefs that characterise a society or group of people” and that grief within a Western culture can be invalidated but agree that how grief is expressed depends on the specific cultural context in which the death takes place. Death related rituals in Western culture provide a structured method to mourn and way for the bereaved to express grief. Such rituals may involve the way that the body is managed post-mortem, time limits for mourning and actions carried out at specific points for example anniversaries or birthdays (Smid and Boelen, 2022). Whilst there remain certain rituals and

time structures in relation to death and grieving, in recent times a shift in cultural attitudes to the dead, including the death of a child, is gaining prominence. Although the death of a child in developed countries is rare, it is acknowledged that coping with the death of a child is done through a series of practices and rituals which are culturally shaped. Harris and Edmonds (2022) suggest for example that a funeral “brings perspective and a shared sense of belonging at a time when all seems lost” (p13). Regardless of their cultural background, people around the world have planned and created memorials and rituals to honour their dead loved one over thousands of years. Such rituals allow a space and opportunity for the bereaved to be amongst their community and to bring the inevitable notion of death into the thoughts of the living. Some cultures celebrate death at certain points in the year as death is confronted with an affirmation of life, but if grief and celebrations appear to be uncomfortable partners, this is because “in the United Kingdom and throughout much of the Western world we have lost a fully human and meaningful perspective on our journey through life into death” (Harris & Edmonds, p16). Cultural rituals in whatever form they may take, offer the bereaved and grieving a structure and familiarity amidst the chaos of loss. These shared rituals of grief can create shared meaning amongst families and indeed wider communities and even nations (Neimeyer et al, 2009).

Geertz (2017) suggests that culture is a code; it involves a series of rules which its members comply with and believe in. In this sense it becomes public as its meaning is shared amongst others who are aware of the code. There is no requirement to mimic a set of practices or to become aligned with a culture, simply because it is a context rather than a power. What culture can do however, is to connect us to the lives of strangers and in doing so allow us to step into their culture and begin to understand their code so that we can converse with them. Geertz’ notion of sacred symbols has resonance with this study in that they store meaning; the cemetery for some parents holds a power with the ability to offer a framework to define their experience. Undertaking the family’s cultural practice of holding their dead child in the living world offers a way to express feeling and act as a guide in supporting subsequent siblings. Geertz (1993) suggests that sacred symbols

function to synthesise a people's ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they

have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (p89).

Symbols have challenges in their definition as individuals assign their own meaning to symbols and therefore, they can be used for anything which signifies something to someone; Geertz (1993, p91) notes that symbols become tangible embodiments of “ideas, attitudes, judgements, longings, or beliefs”. This has resonance for the symbolic sibling and for parents who practice continuing bonds. Their actions and longing will not resonate with every other bereaved parent, but their symbolic elements are intrinsically linked with their cultural acts. Whilst similarities remain, each culturally situated symbolic act is potentially unique to each bereaved parent and subsequently the experiences of the living siblings.

Underpinning Geertz’s idea that views culture as the entire way of life of people, Swindler (1986) proposes a theory of a toolkit and suggests a definition of culture as “publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning” (p273.) The toolkit presents an image of a place for parents to store symbols, stories, rituals, and family held traditions and values. In theorising this notion, Swindler considers Bourdieu’s insistence that traditions steeped in culture can only be understood if they are able to be seen unfolding over time. For Bourdieu, culture provides structures where individuals can develop strategies. For families grieving the loss of a child, their culturally shaped habitats of continuing a bond with their living children evidences the causal role culture plays in human lives.

Human beings strive to maintain a status quo in their lives to ensure predictability rather than uncertainty and chaos with the most important aspect of stability being drawn from those relationships with other people. Death brings shock and fear which leaves us unable to attribute meaning to what has happened. Smid (2020 p2) draws on the writing of Fuchs (2018) who observes that a bereaved person experiences “a fundamental ambiguity between presence and absence of the deceased. He or she lives as it were in two worlds.” This holds similarities to the notion of accommodation and assimilation in that over a gradual period, the bereaved begins the process of accepting and adjusting to the loss. A significant step in this loss is the culturally situated identity of self; the bereaved person has a new identity created and is marked with a new name and yet across cultures there is no recognised name for the parent bereaved of their child or the child bereaved of their sibling.

Smid (2020) draws on the bereaved person's culturally situated life story and identity change to explain meaning attribution, acknowledging that death and loss are imbued with different meanings that influence how individuals and families' function and that whilst some loss survivors can readjust their lives quickly, others become involved in the process for many years. Despite this cultural framing that grieving is an individual process, Silverman, Baroiller & Hemer (2020) argue that the mourning process is situated within communities and grief is better understood as being intersubjective where interactions exist between cultural narratives situated in communal and interpersonal interactions construct meanings of the deceased's life and death and the position and narrative of the bereaved within their community.

Understanding where the child is culturally situated during family mourning can support society's wider knowledge of grief and siblings and consider the relationship of attachment to child mourners. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979) offers a framework to describe how a child is positioned in relation to their innate attributes and their environment and how these in turn influence their growth and development. Chachar, Younas & Ali (2021) note that it is relevant and purposeful to apply Bronfenbrenner's theory to consideration of children's grief. The systems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model demonstrate how the surviving or subsequent siblings are affected directly by the emotional resilience of their parents. For educational settings, responding to children's experiences with death can prove challenging. Holland (2008) argues that western culture can manage and cope with large outpourings of public grief, managing the private grief of children and their parents is difficult and still considered to be taboo. As contemporary society strives to protect children's innocence and emotional welfare, death is considered a life event that children cannot understand and therefore should not be concerned with. Holland (2008) further posits that teaching staff need to be death aware, so they can fully respond to the needs of the children in their care, but teaching staff also need to be aware of attachment styles as Stroebe and Schutt (2002) contend that children who are securely attached are less likely to suffer complicated or prolonged grief.

2.4 Rituals

Following the loss of a person who is loved, many cultures including Western culture engage in a series of rituals post death and post funeral. As Romanoff and Terenzio observe, "Rituals are cultural devices that facilitate the preservation of social order. They provide ways to comprehend the complex and contradictory aspects of human existence within a given societal context" (1998, p698). Rituals post bereavement can be thought of a way for the mourners to have a structure and an order at times when chaos and disorder prevail. Rituals can offer a pathway to ease anxiety with Romanoff (1998) arguing that rituals are imbued with distinguishing characteristics and power which are part of symbols which may be versions of societally constructed meanings. Rituals surrounding the dead changed following World War 1 when the dead were controlled by professionals and experts. As a result, death lost its intimacy where mourners had always conducted personal, community-based rituals and mourning traditions. Romanoff and Terenzio (1998) argue that mourning rituals are on the decline and that bereavement rituals have deteriorated which can lead to hidden grieving and poor resolution of grief particularly when the death violates social norms for example the death of a child. Supporting families and children in their bereavement rituals and acknowledging that they are long term processes may lessen the impact of any negative behaviours in children as they age, but for young children there can be a limited number of resources available. Harris & Edmonds (2022) expose a contradiction in modern grieving rituals; rather than hiding the dead away, children can be supported to memorialise their sibling through personal rituals and that these continuing bonds are a way to express grief in a healthy way as opposed to being viewed as pathological. In a small-scale study of three hundred parent-bereaved children for example, Fristad et al (2001) revealed that the children who had been fully involved in the post death rituals and rites fared better emotionally than the children denied these.

Rituals which pertain to the death of a child can be viewed as unique and significant. Parents fiercely hold on to their grief, enact rituals, and create traditions because to relinquish their grief would mean relinquishing their child; this chronic effect of grief ensures that the child and their memory remains alive and afloat. It is relevant to refer to the symbolic rituals which are connected to funerals as this is dictated by the value a culture

holds for a child's life and in turn the significance of their death. The funeral and burial ceremony are culturally diverse, but most families bereaved of a child throughout the Western world hold some form of ceremony which has commonalities, but little is known about how children respond to these rituals. The value of involving children in the funeral and rituals surrounding the death of a loved one are still emerging in contemporary literature with existing literature still predominantly focusing on reactions following the death of a parent rather than the sibling.

A 1999 study by Holland known as Project Iceberg (Holland, 1999) explored the bereavement period experienced by children on the death of a parent and included their emotional response and understanding to the funeral. Responses demonstrated that children had little agency about the rituals and actions taken by adults one their loved one died; rather, bereaved children were sent away with a lack of knowledge about the death. Holland (1999) argued that whilst children did not require therapy, they did require an explanation in clear and unambiguous terms about the death and the rituals which would follow. Attendance at the funeral was deemed to have value in supporting children to accept the reality of the death with Holland (1999) recognising the complexity of children feeling isolated or excluded from the key events following the death of their parent. The funeral is a place for children to celebrate the life of their sibling and to observe their family and friends sharing stories and sharing their grief. This enables young children to view normal and healthy grieving and acts as a template for their own emotional responses. Harris & Edmonds (2022) suggest that the societal view that death and the funeral should be hidden and not openly talked about comes with a cost

Without a communal sense of the need for ongoing rituals to honour and remember the dead, the bereaved are at risk of prolonged or complicated grief, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health problems. Crucially, without ritual – large or small, public, or private – we are in danger of losing that essential and continuing personal bond we have with our loved one (p16).

Further post death rituals are contained in memorialisation in the cemetery which is dependent on how individuals understand the concept of bereavement which is particularly poignant for children. Woodthorpe (2011) suggests that those who participate in graveside memorialisation follow two distinct patterns of grieving; bereaved people engage in these

activities either to work through their grief or maintain an ongoing bond with the deceased person. Critically, the behaviour of the deceased at the cemetery can be indicative of society's views of normal grief expression; Woodthorpe's participants expressed the view that there is a normal way to grieve and that it has a time limit on it and those who maintain a bond through ritualistic and long-term grave visiting and gift bringing are seen to be pathological. Symbols including those on display in the cemetery are visible throughout rites and rituals performed following a death and have universal understanding. The cemetery and the use of a headstone for example alongside associated symbolic decoration are visible throughout the last century. The drive to preserve the memory of the child is powerful and is represented in sometimes startling and vivid ways in contrast to the more muted adult memorials.

Early 19th century graves depicted angels and cherubs signifying the death of a child or even the child themselves represented into a stone effigy are replaced in more contemporary times with etchings or images of the child into the headstone itself. Grave goods today can be seen in cemeteries in the shape of balloons, toys, artefacts, and photographs used to "underscore the vitality and interests of the child who once lived" (Edgette, 1997, p8). The contemporary cemetery in Britain has a demarcation of adult and child death. The child cemetery is a visual and startling example of continuing bonds as families celebrate their children's birthdays and anniversaries in a sea of windmills, streamers, balloons, and flags filling its own cultural space; but these symbolic representations of childhood joy and happiness sit incongruously amidst a place of grief and death.

The cemetery can also be a vehicle for the development of sibling relationships and a place where conversation can take place and memories can be shared. The graveside and its material artefacts can therefore be considered to provoke and support grieving children's questions and conversations which surround the death of their sibling. (Fauske, 2022). Whilst burial sites and funeral rituals have been the focus of cultural research, Francis et al. (2000) argue that the behaviour of those who visit graves has been under researched by those interested in exploring and understanding their own societal norms. Whilst studying a broad section of people who visited graves, Francis et al (2000, p37) acknowledged that "for all communities studied, deceased kin are considered members of the existing family. The

ideal of fulfilment of reciprocal obligations between parents and child, wife, and husband continues throughout life and beyond the grave.”

Actions performed at the graveside have a common cultural thread and offer an insight into the ongoing dialogues between the living and the dead with relationships re-enacted and connections retained and made anew, however, memorialising someone who was never known is the situation for subsequent siblings. The cemetery can be a place where relationships and memories are forged through family rituals, conversations, and the use of grave goods which can evoke memories and strengthen the sibling bond. Inscriptions written on children’s graves can also be indicators of the ritualistic practice of continuing bonds. The child’s grave can become a place where relationships can be built and maintained despite the briefness of their existence in life. Fanos, Little & Edwards (2009) explored the rituals undertaken by families following the death of child. Siblings recounted that the child’s grave was visited on anniversaries and holidays and that their parents left grave goods associated with the time of the visit for example Christmas trees or party balloons; this memorialisation gave the children a connection and a focus to talk to their parents about their dead sibling and as such enabled the family to remember and honour the deceased, but also acted as a way to keep them alive within their family unit.

Societal responses to a child’s death are a curious event in Western culture exposing a paradox amongst those who grieve and those who consider bereavement. (Rosenblatt, 1988; Klass,1996). Few would argue that the death of a child is a catastrophic event for any parent and that grief is intense and long lasting. Janusz et al note

The death of a child is an experience leading to the most disorganised mourning process in comparison with responses to the death of other loved ones...it also carries the risk of disturbing the emotional development of other children in the family (2018 p31).

However, there appears to be an undercurrent in the Western world which is suggestive that the grieving parent is abnormal or atypical in their grieving; parents who wish to keep their dead child as part of their sibling group hold on to their grief, for to relinquish it would mean to begin to forget. This chronic grief ensures that the child and their life remain alive and alight within their family and are celebrated and spoken about in the same way as living children are. If society underestimates the experience of child loss, parents can be left

feeling frustrated and angry about how they are expected to feel. The death of a child is different from other bereavements; these differences set parents and siblings apart from other people who struggle to identify and name grief. (Hindmarch,2009).

A series of small-scale studies are referred to by Youngblut and Brooten (2021) in seeking to determine children's feelings about what they wished they had done differently following their sibling's death. Children's responses across three studies (Fanos et al, 2009; Jonas-Simpson et al, 2015) evidenced that children placed importance on the rituals and traditions associated with continuing bonds. Children's coping strategies include being involved in the funeral and maintaining a link to their sibling through keeping possessions and photographs. Some children felt a sense of presence and felt the dead sibling watching over them although Jonas-Simpson et al (2015) also reported that these children expressed discomfort that their sibling could see what they were doing.

2.5 Young children and grief

Over the last decade, a significant body of work has arisen exploring child grief following a bereavement. Despite this, significant gaps exist in literature of studies which involve the thoughts and experiences of young children, potentially due to the ethical and methodological difficulties associated with this type of research (Lytje & Holliday, 2022).

Suffering a bereavement can be devastating to both adults and children, but adults are better at managing loss due to their mature cognitive thinking. Ferow (2019) argues that children have unique difficulties in processing loss for several reasons including a lack of cognitive verbal skills and a lack of support from their grieving parents and that siblings experiences a more detrimental loss due to the nature of their relationship. Anderson (2020) observes that children experience several disadvantages in their grief work and argues that it is important that young children's grief is appropriately recognised. In recognising that children need sensitive adults around them when they are faced with bereavement, Anderson (2020) also notes that a child is also at a disadvantage because "they lack exposure to experiences that teach them that pain gradually subsides, and life goes on" (p25). Goldman (2012) argues that there are three defined interactive components which can be used to assess a grieving child and that the "flowing and overlapping of these components create a complex world for the grieving child" (p173). Goldman (2012) notes these to be individual factors which include a child's cognitive and developmental stage and

their previous ability to cope under stress and any experience with death. Death-related factors are personal to the death experienced by the child including the type of death, contact prior to death and involvement in any post death rituals and traditions. The support system component includes the child's family, school, and support of their grief process. Recognising the signs of a child's grief requires an understanding of the common signs so that adults closest to the child can reinforce that their feelings whether they be physical or emotional are normal and the child can then be reassured to reduce feelings of anxiety and distress.

Children's perceptions of death are important when considering childhood grief. There are differing thoughts of theorists in their understanding of whether young children have the cognitive capacity to understand death and to grieve (Brooten & Youngblut, 2017). Whilst Freudian theories suggest that children lack the capacity to grieve in a manner suggested by Kubler-Ross (1969), Bowlby (1969) theorised that babies as young as six months were attuned to loss and so could mourn in a similar way to their parents. However, Lancaster (2011) posits that young children may not fit in to Kubler-Ross' proposed categories; rather they do not view death as a permanent state and may seek their deceased sibling in their familiar and previously shared environment.

What is understood about children and death is concerned with how death is comprehended and the child's experiences following their loss. Children aged between five and ten years of age are understood to have developed an understanding of death which is rational; they are aware that death is permanent and can make links between non-functionality and causality. Gaining mastery of these complex concepts is dependent on a child's holistic development and life experiences and therefore Paul (2019) argues how a child understands death varies in accordance with their experiences. Therefore, depending solely on ages and stage can "only offer a limited understanding of children's relationship with death, yet may contribute to a death-taboo by shaping practice around how adults engage with children" (p2). The way in which children process grief and in turn develop a way to represent death is of interest to those concerned with child development and yet the recognition of childhood grief is only a recent area of research. Death is complex "as it has interweaving biological, socio-cultural, spiritual and emotional elements" (Longbottom & Slaughter, 2018, p3). Longbottom and Slaughter (2018) further explore the terminology

surrounding death and highlight that children first master biological concepts and then acquire layers of spirituality which progress onto the complex understanding of the reality of death with the possibility of an afterlife. Although there appears to be a broad pattern of acquiring knowledge and understanding of death, young children perceive death in the narratives told by their parents. In her seminal text *On Children and Death*, Kubler-Ross (1983) asserts that when children are faced with the terminal illness of their brother or sister, they should be fully involved in the care of their dying sibling and rather than being shielded, they can also be given specific tasks if their sibling is dying at home. Further, Kubler-Ross (1983) states that siblings, regardless of their age, should be welcomed when the family say goodbye to the child who has died.

Young children – those three and under *are* capable of grief and as such their loss must be recognised. Although their cognitive development is immature, young children actively feel the loss of someone close to them despite not being able to fully grasp the causality or permanence. Young children are sensitive to changes in their parents' emotions and can perceive the seriousness of the situation and so parents who become consumed by their grief, may unwittingly neglect their young child's grief and in doing so delay their healing and grief process (Ferow, 2019; Norris-Shortle, Young & Williams, 1993). Between the ages of five and eight children may be able to comprehend death including its irreversibility and its causality, but Klass (1996) argues that the three requirements for mourning - understanding death, the ability to form a genuine attachment and a mental representation of the attachment figure may indicate that children who have never formed an attachment to their sibling are unable to truly mourn their death.

For children, grief is intertwined with their developmental process and therefore it is not unusual to see more evidence of grief after a period of around six months. Grief is not linear, nor does it have a defined age and so a child's response to their loss will alter as they mature, and their thinking becomes more concrete rather than abstract. (Holland, 2008)

Alongside the development process and cognitive thinking, children's understanding and response to death varies from culture to culture (Rosenblatt, 1977), but explaining, teaching, and supporting a child who is grieving can reduce negative responses which can be attributed to the death of a loved one. Children's ability to make sense of complex concepts is linked to their age and ability to think in concrete rather than abstract terms. Piaget's

stages are one of the most influential theories of how children's cognitive reasoning changes with maturity, however, children can comprehend some aspects of what death means if they are exposed to it within their family unit. In the United Kingdom children are rarely exposed to narratives or experiences which explore death and dying; indeed, it could be argued that whilst adults have the capacity to understand and rationalise death, our society still views it as a taboo subject and one which children should be shielded from. Children in the United Kingdom are less likely to be confronted with death, unlike children who are exposed to conflict, ill health or natural disaster and are therefore less likely to be engaged in conversations about death and dying (Jacobs et al, 2011). Normal grief can be viewed as an adjustment or process in response to the bereavement and is viewed as an eventual emotional disengagement from the deceased (Packham et al, 2006) and this attempt to reaffirm the new world constructed due to loss is by no means experienced by all who are bereaved; for many the process of grief is one which fits comfortably enough into the narrative we hold of how life is or should be. Death in these circumstances may offer a minor impact into our day-to-day routine and emotional scaffolding that we have in place, but when a child in the family dies, the assumptive world is shattered and the search for meaning in the aftermath can lead to traumatic and prolonged grief which becomes all consuming. Grief because of such trauma may cause disturbance in a child's ability to follow a pattern of normal grief. This is exacerbated when there is a poor understanding of how children grieve and so there is a tendency to impose adult models of grief which lead to confusion and further hinderance to the normal grieving process. Furthermore, children's grief over a sibling's death becomes inextricably linked with their parent's grief, but young children lack the capacity to sustain mourning and so a complex world exists for them with an increased possibility of developing a pathological grief reaction (Crehan, 2011). Sibling bereavement remains one of the most distressing adverse childhood experiences and is compounded by the disruption to the family unit including the emotional availability from parents. Children's immature cognitive development can interfere with their understanding of permanence and as such makes for a unique feature of childhood grief. (Dalton et al, 2022; Paris et al, 1995). Young children are unable to process a loss in the same way as an adult does and therefore ritualistic events may not hold the same relevance. The cognitive developmental stages which children experience places them at considerable disadvantage

in their understanding of loss and grief “Children’s grief is like a fierce storm at sea, bringing devastation that lasts long after the funeral” (Torbic, 2011, p67).

Pre-school children are dependent on their parents to help them to navigate their grief and to create a new and healthy life within the family context. Due to their limited verbal capacity, young children may display grief through their behaviour and play, with research previously focussing on somatic reactions manifesting themselves in physical disturbances in appetite, sleep, and overall holistic health. (Bugge et al, 2014; Crehan,2004). What is striking however, about children’s grief is their ability to oscillate; the pressure of grief in young children can quickly overwhelm their immature emotions and their inability to verbalise their feelings and so young children jump in and out of grief as a protective mechanism (Crossley, 2000). Children can pick up their grief and quickly put it back down, like jumping in and out of puddles, but “what sustains children in the grieving process is the love that surrounds them” (Mallon, 2018). The dual model of coping with loss (Stroebe and Schut,1990) is evident here as children shift between loss-orientated behaviour and restoration-orientated behaviour and authentic mourning arguably only happens when a child is mature enough to have some concrete understanding rather than an abstract concept of death. Mallon (2018) explores the first behaviour being connected to grief work and all-consuming mourning whereas the latter relates to creating distractions from grief and continuing with usual routines and day to day life “the bereaved child often oscillates between these like a pendulum swinging between opposite points” (Mallon, 2018, p12).

Children’s engagement with grief can be a challenging issue for adults to explore due to stigma surrounding engaging in conversations of death with young children and a lack of associated literature (Salinas, 2021). Adults may feel that it is their responsibility to shield children from sadness or mistakenly think that children are not able to comprehend loss and should be excluded from the conversations which surround it. Adults may believe that children will ask questions they are unable or too uncomfortable to answer and so isolate the child from comprehending death and dying. Tracewski and Scarlett (2022) argue that the behaviour of adults can deny children the “ability to establish a future in which they can live a healthy new normal without the deceased in it” (p204).

As a society who embraces children’s innocence and happiness, there can be confusion and dismay when a child exhibits adverse behaviour and presents as angry and disorientated.

Nonetheless, children retain the memory of their loved sibling onwards through their life and should have this relationship nurtured and supported if that is their wish. Children need to be actively helped to nurture the memories of their sibling; the adults around them need an awareness and understanding of how to undertake this challenging task whilst coping with their own grief. Supporting children through the mourning process is critical if children's grief is to remain healthy. Fogarty (2019) refers to the magical thinking of children where the child believes that they are responsible for the death and therefore must seek a way to rectify the loss experience; magical thinking may lead the child to believe that they are mourning, but they have created an unhealthy way to grieve. What is evident for children in Fogarty's research is the anguish they feel is determined by how their parents respond to the varied way in which children grieve, for example if a child's lack of obvious grieving is criticised, a paradox is created whereby the bereaved child defines a normal grief reaction as abnormal and attaches magical thinking thereby creating long term, complicated mourning. (Fogarty, 2019; Ciesla, Popp & Bunn, 2015; Bellieni, 2022). If parents are to meet their grieving child's needs whilst in mourning themselves, they need to understand the unique and complex communications of their child and what support they need and yet there remains little research regarding how grieving parents can manage the needs of their grieving child. (Bugge et al, 2014). Bereaved parent and child communication is known to improve children's wellbeing and yet there are challenges for parents who are grieving themselves; the support children receive from their parents when mourning a sibling is of importance as both will be feeling deep distress which can affect supporting communication. This communication is particularly important to sibling griever as they are considered invisible mourners due to the perceptions in society that they are too young to grieve or seek to hide their grief so they do not upset their parents further which can then lead to feelings of guilt once their grief surfaces (Rossetto, 2015; Toller, 2011; Kenny et al, 2020).

For parents, talking to their young children following the death of their sibling can be fraught with tension and anxiety. For the younger child, picture books can be a way to engage young children in managing their grief; a favourite story book for example can depict imagery of death in age-appropriate pictures and use death related text. This interplay between textual and visual can provide familiar and relevant topics to a child and allow

children to use the picture book to communicate their grief, but also to remain connected to their experience. Furthermore, the story can be retold and revisited as many times as needed. In recognising that children can mourn for prolonged periods of time and can pick up their grief at certain points as they become older, Wiseman (2012) notes that experiencing grief in childhood is distressing, but picture books which combine imagery and text can offer a useful resource to help children make sense of their experiences. Whilst further research is needed to explore the role of picture books in supporting young children to manage their grief, Wiseman (2012) recognises that literature can have an important part in guiding children through their feelings.

2.6 Childhood Trauma

Trauma is what happens when an experience overwhelms a person and challenges their usual way of coping; at this point, the body activates its stress system and prepares the brain to flee, fight or freeze (Music, 2020). Trauma is unpredictable and can happen through shock, misadventure, or an overwhelming experience. In usual circumstances when a child experiences a traumatic event, their nervous system can calm down once the perceived danger has passed with the reassurance and support of an adult. However, for some children, their ability to regain a sense of calmness is interfered with when they experience on going elevated levels of stress. The notion of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) was introduced by the ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) Study team (Felitti et al, 1998) and transformed how professionals thought about children's early traumatic experiences. Research into the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences demotes a link between toxic stress in childhood and developmental and health issues in later life. ACES have a cumulative response effect on a range of negative health outcomes in later childhood and through to adulthood. Although the ACEs from the initial study (Felitti et al., 1998) excluded bereavement, there is more recognition in emerging research that children who suffer the loss of a sibling may experience long term effects on their health into adulthood. Too much stress in childhood at this crucial time of brain development can result in a child's brain becoming hard wired to a trauma response where long-term damaging effects are noticed in the physical, social, and mental health of children who endure stress without the protection of a secure attachment. (Tranter, Brooks, and Khan, 2020). The maintenance of a secure and healthy relationship between parents and children can limit the negative effects

of trauma and stress in bereaved children as a secure attachment can support children to regulate their emotional arousal (Erozkan, 2016). Childhood bereavement can be thought of as an adverse childhood experience with Woodward et al (2023) noting that childhood bereavement can interfere with the development of important social resources from the bereaved child and subsequently impact their ongoing development across their life course.

Sibling death has the potential to increase a child's vulnerabilities in the home.

However, whilst adverse childhood experiences which result from early childhood bereavement can cause negative health and wellbeing outcomes, not all children who are affected by ACEs continue to develop poor health and wellbeing in adulthood. Woodward et al (2023) argue that positive childhood experiences can mitigate the impacts of childhood bereavement and offer a buffer against the damaging effects of sibling death. These positive experiences include a strong and secure attachment to parents, a sense of belonging, support, and safety and are connected to positive post traumatic growth and can be seen in "adult flourishing." (Woodward et al, 2023, p3). Further exploration of flourishing and resilience in adulthood and how it can mitigate the long-term negative effects of childhood bereavement could offer further insight into the support offered to young children in managing their grief.

Young children who do not receive an adequate response to their grief may show visible signs of dissociation; children are not always aware that they dissociate and so their behaviour can be misunderstood by parents and educators. As traumatised children often display under-developed cognitive skills, their behaviour and inability to organise and problem solve in the classroom environment, can lead to misjudgements and continued difficulties in educational attainment and the development of prosocial development, empathy, and altruism. Empathy and altruism tend to arise from the idea of 'good enough' parenting (Winnicott,1953). When young children are placed under stress, they turn to their attachment figure, often seeking physical proximity. Through sensitive and attuned attention, the young child learns to trust, to be interested in others' feelings and want to participate in cooperative group-life; however, these traits are often turned off in a child experiencing trauma.

A considerable number of children across the United Kingdom are exposed to extreme stressors and a sudden death is an example; children can suffer distress in the immediate aftermath of the death, but their trauma can be long lasting. When children are faced with adversity, some can recover whilst others face challenge in overcoming this childhood traumatic experience. Childhood represents a key period of development where future health determinants can be determined and so parents and professionals can consider how to respond to issues related to social skills. Antony (2022) argues that resilience can be taught during childhood through the complex, social interactions children have with their parents. However, she argues that resilience may be dependent on the context meaning children can adapt well in school following adversity but may not be as successful in their social skills and personal friendships.

The importance that bereavement and trauma are recognised as coexisting is argued by Layne et al (2017) who posits that childhood bereavement is one of the most frequently reported trauma types. The death of a close loved one such as a sibling is recognised as one of the most distressing types of traumas. Despite this Layne et al (2017) further argue that there are insufficient screening tools to measure bereavement and grief reactions in children and that children's bereavement is often simply placed within generic categories of loss which also include parental divorce. Too much stress in childhood at this crucial time of brain development can result in the child's brain becoming hard wired to a trauma response; this means that a child's base line state could be one where they interpret their world to be unsafe. Tranter, Brooks, and Khan, (2020, p3) suggest that "prolonged, severe stress in early childhood, without the buffer of a secure attached relationship, can have long-term, damaging effects".

2.7 Sibling Grief

Bereavement literature most commonly focuses on the child's loss of a parent, but the death of a young child's sibling receives far less attention in contemporary thinking. Jonas-Simpson (2012, p242) state that there "there are no studies with young children (aged 4-12) born before or after their infant sibling's death, nor with adolescent participants born prior to the loss of an infant sibling". This is cause for concern as contemporary thinking indicates sibling loss is linked to poor physical and mental health outcomes in children and that the future for the surviving sibling is dependent on a successful approach to their grief

(Machajewski, & Kronk, 2013; Torbic, 2011). Previous research tends to focus on teenage or adult sibling survivors, but there is need to understand the grief process of child siblings' survivors and to assist the child's grief process alongside their family rather than viewing it in the same way. Parents who are emotionally shattered and physically exhausted may not be able to provide the stability and support the sibling survivor needs and so a child's behaviour may deteriorate as they seek to make sense of their loss. Understanding the child's concept of death is a vital aspect of their bereavement process. Machajewski & Kronk (2013) suggest that the child needs to move through 3 steps in accordance with their developmental stage with the third being a return to normal. The final stage cannot be possible as the sibling has died and so a true sense of normality cannot be found. This is borne out by a narrative analysis of sibling grief undertaken by Funk et al (2018) noting the emotional suffering felt by surviving siblings and a sense of isolation from younger aged children who showed an awareness of difference and that they were being avoided by friendship groups and experiencing a return to school following this agonising loss. Narratives in Funk et al's study offered a unique perspective of sibling grief including feelings of guilt and remorse despite their actions being unwarranted. (Funk et al 2018).

Although grief is a normal aspect of mourning, teenage siblings describe numerous emotions following their loss including loneliness, shock and guilt and atypical symptoms such as helplessness and despair (Sharp et al, 2018) however, the younger child has a range of unique perspectives to manage as their grief is dependent on their ability to manage their immature emotions and the support received from their parents.

Chan et al (2022) explore an aspect of research which situates itself particularly well in this thesis. Whilst acknowledging the death of a child as particularly painful, there is also recognition that child bereavement is usually focused on parental grief and as such siblings are marginalised; therefore, perspectives from parents regarding their surviving children can offer an insight into how young children manage their grief following the death of their sibling. Literature pertaining to sibling bereavement positions itself with a focus on the individual, however contemporary thinking views grief to be centred around the family. Literature widely concurs that family dynamics are deeply affected by the loss of a child (Chan et al., 2022; Crehan, 2011; Harris & Edmonds, 2022). Parental influence is particularly relevant in understanding sibling's bereavement and how death is understood with Chan et

al (2022, p2) stating “bereaved siblings’ bereavement outcomes were associated directly with mother’s symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and prolonged grief disorder”.

Sibling loss potentially means a break in a close companion, someone who has shared a life, breaking attachment patterns and dynamics. This broken bond also has the potential to create a sense of loss and disconnect with parents who are suffering from the grief and mourning associated with the death of one of their children.

Describing the unique features of grief associated with the loss of a sibling can support parents and others to be more aware of grief behaviours and in turn to ensure that children are offered the reassurance and support that they need. A study by McCown and Davies (1995) identified that pre-school aged bereaved children showed the highest incidences of emotionally challenging behaviour although none displayed deviant behaviour. Fulmer (1983) described young children’s emotionally charged behaviour as “collusive mischief” which was designed and deliberately enacted to seek a response to their mother’s apathy. In further seeking to appreciate and understand the behaviour demonstrated by surviving siblings, Machajewski & Kronk (2013, p446) suggest that young children are required to accept the death and then to transfer “the emotional and physical bond from the *life* with the sibling to the *memory* of the sibling” the child then assumes a different role in their family as a sibling survivor which necessitates the realignment of the family group. The death of a child can rip the very fabric of a family apart, weaving it back together again in a completely new way. Families are transformed by the death of a child with the immediate family feeling the force of a loss which can destroy. Young siblings must navigate the ripples of their closest companion's death whilst managing their own yearning and transformation within their family. Whilst society may expect adults to move quite quickly through stages of grief, a child is unable to complete a hastened series of mourning tasks; a bereaved child surviving the death of a sibling faces a lifelong journey of adjustment with the potential for complicated or unresolved grief. Fanos, et al (2009, p852) poignantly write “siblings inherit the responsibility of grieving as well as honoring the death of a child by not forgetting”.

Mallon (2018) cites Julie Stokes, founder of children’s bereavement charity Winston’s Wish who says “memories do not sit there like a stone. They must be worked like the best bread, kneaded, and gently warmed so they can slowly rise to the surface.” This statement exposes the complexities of supporting a child to create and retain memories of a sibling and the

underlying importance of the vital role of the adult, but more so for a child who is being helped to develop and continue a bond with a sibling who was never known to them in their living world.

2.8 The Unknown Sibling

The relationship between siblings is one of the longest and strongest throughout one's life (Kempson & Murdock, 2010; Devita-Raeburn, 2014). Surviving siblings grieve differently from their bereaved parents and yet little attention is offered in contemporary literature to explore the loss of a loved companion in their earliest years. In a candid story of love following the death of his three-year-old son Henry, actor Rob Delaney (2022) speaks of his fear for his dying son's siblings as they face the loss of their "cuddle-buddy". Such terminology is rarely used in bereavement literature which explores sibling loss; Delaney's words conjure a true picture of sibling relationships and the shattering loss when they abruptly end, but there is scarce acknowledgement of subsequent siblings who are born into a complex world where relationships never known must be developed and created through narratives from their parents.

Although attention is given through research and literature to siblings who survive the loss of their brother or sister, less evidence is attributed to the experience of subsequent siblings. As such their experiences are scarce in contemporary reading. Clinical literature reveals that subsequent siblings are adversely affected by this role with their birth order impacting their ability to construct their own identity and social reality (Vollmann, 2014). Cain and Cain's 1974 study defined subsequent children as those who are intended to replace the dead child or to fill the void of having a child consciously or unconsciously. Their study's notion that subsequent children exist to fill a void or to replace their dead predecessor is drawn from the theory that parents must complete their mourning and be in a place where their grief over the loss of their child has taken place and is complete. However, this transgenerational loss can exist when grieving is still in process and where the balance between providing a unique identity to the new baby alongside assimilating the memory and life of the deceased child is full of complexity and tension (Vollmann, 2014; Cain & Cain, 1974; Ainsfield & Richards, 2000). Recognising the tangled emotions experienced by parents bereaved of a child who are then in a subsequent pregnancy,

O'Leary (2003) suggests that unresolved grief can occur when parents risk attachment to another child when their attachment to the child who died is denied and argue that when parents take time to manage their grief and to develop new attachments to the subsequent child whilst also maintaining an attachment to their deceased child, is normal and healthy and should not be viewed as pathological. Parents can revel in the joy of having a new baby and continue to hold a space in their lives for the child who died. If this is not recognised and supported there is a higher chance for poor mental health to occur in subsequent siblings.

Neimeyer (2001) posits that using memories to create meaning is a central process when the bereaved begin the process of adapting to their loss. Families come together to share stories and memories of their child who has died and in doing so continue their existence onwards into the lives of their subsequent children through social and symbolic interactions. The ability to reconstruct meaning is therefore intricately linked with how a child interacts with its caregivers (Procaccia, et al., 2018). A child's understanding of their world is derived from communication with others; such social interactions allow a child to create and shape the world around them and in turn such social interactions influence children through their family's cultural and societal beliefs. Interactions with parents and others within the family inform how children perceive their unknown dead sibling. The question arises that if the sibling is no longer present can their life influence their subsequent siblings' lives. The deceased child becomes alive symbolically; through rituals, stories and personal and cultural symbolic images for example angels and cherubs (Meyer, 2015; Kempson & Murdock, 2010).

Grief then can be viewed less as a personal and interior process and more of one where the bereaved seek meaning not only from within their immediate family but also from the wider social and cultural communities in which they live. (Neimeyer, Klass and Dennis, 2014).

Lieberman first considered the question of how families enter a system where their cultures, rituals and traditions are passed from one generation to the next in 1979 coining the phrase transgenerational grief. This theory suggests that all forms of learning within a family affect the developing child and that parenting behaviour "beliefs and control are simultaneously and directly handed down to the next generation" (Lieberman, 1979). Once this theory is placed into the context of siblings and family patterns, the position of the

deceased child and their subsequent sibling can be better explored. Critically, Kempson et al (2008) argue that siblings born as subsequent, or replacement children may feel the need for a dual identity; that of their own and that of the dead child which may result in complex feelings of guilt, trauma, and a loss of their own individuality. Intergenerational grief theory supports and acknowledges the notion of survivor guilt and yet limited consideration is given to the child living with the 'ghost' of a sibling unknown who is endeavouring to fulfil the wishes of their parent for a sibling bond. Replacement children have a unique position in their family and may carry an unconscious emotional burden which is overlooked or not acknowledged by their parents.

The notion of the subsequent child as a "family ghost" in relation to transgenerational grief, is explored by Kempson, Conley and Murdock (2008) who argue that this phenomenon is relatively new partly due to changes in societal values and a change to the value of a smaller family where children's lives are carefully planned "therefore, while the phenomenon of "ghosts" may possibly have occurred for generations, only recently is it becoming 'unearthed'" (p3). The death of a child as previously explored in literature has a whole family impact, but siblings are less likely to be considered and have their grief managed by adults. Families remain emotionally invested in their deceased child which may include reference to the phantom's characteristics and personality which can inadvertently cause emotional damage or distress to the surviving child.

The suggestion that the loss of a family member is associated with higher mortality rates amongst family members leads to an uncomfortable association with the health consequences for siblings. Rostila et al (2012) suggest that family health is interconnected, and that the loss of a child is associated with both health status and mortality in bereaved parents. The impact of sibling loss in relation to behavioural symptoms for example emotional disturbances or sleep issues is widely referenced in theoretical literature, but Rostila et al (2012) argue that health consequences in adult siblings is neglected.

2.9 Continuing Bonds, signs, and a sense of presence

Following the catastrophic death of his son from meningitis in 1999, author Michael Rosen realised he was being told that he mourned too much and that he should be able to move on from Eddie's death. Having been unable to initially write about his son's death, he read poetry from Raymond Carver which opened the door to him being able to express his

feelings at being told by others how to grieve and for how long to grieve. He also authored a book for children called *The Sad Book* (Rosen, 2004)

What makes me most sad is when I think about my son Eddie. He died. I loved him very, very much but he died anyway. Sometimes this makes me really angry. I say to myself, "How dare he go and die like that? How dare he make me sad?"

And then I remember things: Eddie walking along the street laughing, and laughing, and laughing. (p2 & p5)

Continuing bonds is a term used in the field of grief and bereavement to describe the ongoing relationship that individuals maintain with their loved ones who have died. Previous theories proposed that parents who undertook prolonged or lifelong engagement with their dead child had pathological grief and were unable to adjust to their bereavement which could lead to distress and dysfunction in their lives. As a vehicle to explore the intricate relationship between the living and the dead and to challenge the dominant model in Western culture of disengaging from the dead, continuing bonds was proposed as a theory by Klass et al in 1996.

The term itself acknowledges that even though a child may not maintain a physical presence, their memory continues to shape the lives of their surviving parents and siblings. Continuing bonds offer an alternative model for grief in recognising the ongoing presence in the lives of those left behind and acknowledges that although the relationship has changed it is still possible to maintain or even to create a relationship with the deceased. This can be done through numerous ways including graveside rituals and visits, talking to the deceased and holding on to treasured possessions. Parents may encourage their surviving children to maintain a connection to their dead sibling by keeping photographs around the home, sharing memories of their sibling friendship, and using possessions to provoke conversations which include the deceased and to feel their touch physically. In the event of children who are subsequent siblings, parents may create scenarios or express hopes for a relationship to develop as soon as the subsequent child is born; visits to the graveside on route home from the hospital to introduce the siblings or the use of the dead child's favourite clothes or blankets are examples.

Devita-Raeburn (2004) writes that prior to World War 1 there was a universally accepted notion that death caused lifelong consequences for those who survived. Continuing bonds challenges the contemporary mourning process and suggests that maintaining a bond with the deceased child can offer a potentially healthy way to manage grief and support young children in their understanding of the death of their sibling. During the 20th century, the dominant model proposes that those who are mourning can only move forwards if the bonds that tie them are cut and in doing so the grieving family member can develop new relationships and new lives. Klass (1996) observed that modern society viewed continuing bonds as pathological but argued that this model of grief is a 20th century phenomenon in that continuing bonds as a normal part of the grieving process have only been denied in the last one hundred years. In 1979, Klass undertook ethnographic research listening to the ways in which bereaved parents continued a bond with their dead children and realised that dead children remained an active and visible part of their parents' lives and furthermore, the parents made determined efforts to take their inner reality in to the lives of their friends and families (Klass and Steffen, 2017). This marks a significant element of bereavement where a new identity of the dead child is constructed and enables a continued presence in the lives of their siblings and parents. However, Bartel (2019) suggests that research into how continuing bonds exist within the larger family dynamic are under researched and therefore there is limited capacity to explore this aspect further.

Silverman and Worden's seminal research in 1992 examined children's bereavement in the context of parental loss and suggested that a process of 'constructing the deceased' through the establishment of memories, feelings and actions was an intrinsic aspect of the grieving process for children. Silverman proposed there are five stages that demonstrate the child's ability to maintain a bond to their deceased parent. The first stage was for the child to locate their dead parent and the second involved a sense of presence. The third and fourth stages see the children using memories in their inner thoughts and then in spoken memory and finally staying connected through treasured objects. Silverman's conclusion posited that expressions of continuing bonds are situated within a child's social and cultural context involving those who remember and memorialise the deceased as children's concrete understanding of death does not begin until they are able to acknowledge permanency and causality. Young children become sensitive to the grief experienced by their parents as they

begin to develop a sense of self and what bereavement in their family means to them (Mallon,2018).

As young children find challenges in understanding death, parents have a key role if a continuing bond and a healthy relationship with grief is to be found between their living and dead children; nonetheless, as with relationships with the living, continuing bonds are complex and may not always be healthy (Steffen, 2023). Bartel (2021) argues that grief research is focused on the individual but scholarly attention is emerging with a focus on cultural, societal, and interpersonal relationships within families with researchers advocating for a change in basic assumptions to family grief. Using a guiding question of How do bereaved families grieve together? Bartlet's study explored the joint grieving activities of families following the death of a child. The study findings "offered a glimpse into the complex, multifaceted, nature of the interpersonal dimensions of relational grieving" (Bartlet, 2021, p502). Furthermore, Bartlet (2021) discovered that the mourning rituals following the death of a child were significant to the family dynamic. Breen et al (2019) suggest that the family is one of the most important situated contexts where grief is experienced, but argue that defining a family is dependent on cultural and societal variations and so draw on Klass, Silverman and Nickman (1996) to classify a family as "a web of relationships that is individually experienced; may have legal, biological, and/or relational bases; and exists within social, temporal, and cultural contexts" (p173) and that the family is not a static entity; rather it is fluid and not defined by legalities, genes or relational bonds. An important distinction in grieving is stated by Breen et al (2019, p174) who discuss "that families do not grieve; instead, individuals within families grieve, and they do so in the context of family" and argue that current grief research contextualises family grief as a monolithic entity and as such disallows the theory that grief is an interactive, developmental aspect within the family unit.

Parental responsibilities in continuing bonds with their child alongside parenting surviving or subsequent children is fraught with tension and the unique grief associated with child loss. Ensuring that surviving children continue to be parented can present difficulties when a parent is bereaved particularly when the parent is also maintaining a bond with their dead child; navigating this landscape is emotionally charged, extraordinarily complex and poses potential implications for the emotional resilience and well-being of the sibling. Crehan

(2004) poses the possibility that surviving siblings may feel that they are not the focus of their parent particularly if they are positioned as a replacement child or that the child observes their parent excessively remembering their sibling.

“consider the experience of a child who seeks the comfort of her mother’s arms having lost a sibling, to find those arms unavailable, or indeed broken, by the heavy weight of the dead child” (Crehan, 2004, p215).

An extension of continuing bonds and attachment after a child’s death can be characterised by the transitional nature of objects. Whilst Winnicott (1964) theorised the transitional object to be the first “not me” possession as the infant develops an awareness of a separation from the mother, the use of possessions belonging to the dead child may be a way to facilitate healthy continuing bonds for both parents and siblings. Attaching to an object which provides comfort during times of vulnerability may offer support during the grieving process or indeed years later. Whilst attachment theory has traditionally focused on the infant-mother relationship and transitional objects as an item that young children can draw succour and security from in times of separation from their mother, in terms of grief theory, the transitional object could be thought of as a positive way to support young children in managing their grief. Cathexis is a useful concept to understand how transitional objects are situated in bereavement. First defined by Freud (1911) cathexis is “a term for psychic charge or emotional stimulus attached to love objects and figures of identification” (Gibson, 2004, p287).

Approximately 60% of young children in the United States show an attachment to a non-social object for example a blanket, soft toy or cloth with attachments being tied to a certain and unique item. Research demonstrates that by around two years of age, children show preference for their object and show preference towards it over other toys or related items. By four years of age, children can explore their object’s history and are aware they hold a special place in both their own past and in the present. Nonetheless, Gelman and Davidson (2016) note that in a comparable way to how children and families grieve following the death of a child, the transitional object and its associated attachment behaviours are also culturally situated. When conducting interviews at home with parents whose child had died, Goldstein et al (2020) noted that some form of shrine to the child was always evident which included photographs and that mothers remained attached to special items of their child’s

and “reported visiting these objects frequently, to hold and smell them, typically in private. They described comfort and distress when they accessed them” (p2). Naming these items as “transitional objects of grief” Goldstein et al (2020) posit that the role of continuing bonds both concrete and symbolic are crucial in parents post loss adjustment and that protecting the worth of the deceased child is viewed as their responsibility. Transitional objects of grief therefore

serve a similar adaptive function in bereaved mothers as Winnicott’s transitional object provide the individuating infant: a way to hold onto an absent and essential attachment object to assist them in their new and challenging state (Goldstein et al, 2020, p4).

Whilst being interviewed for a televised documentary on March 30th, 2023 (Tune, 2023), actors Jason Watkins and his wife Clara Francis spoke of the loss of their two-year-old daughter Maudie who died on January 1st, 2011. “Child loss is so grim and unspeakable; I want to talk about her and let people know she was here. She existed and was alive. Love is still alive – she is emotionally present inside us.”

Following the death of a child, many parents find comfort seek comfort in possessions which keep them connected to their child; for example, having kept their child’s belongings at the home of a friend, the Watkins chose to keep Maudie’s shoes and a few small doll’s house items to take with them when they moved home and displayed them prominently in their new living space. Maintaining an attachment to objects which offer comfort is essential when developing and keeping connections to the deceased. The preservation of an internal relationship to the deceased can be seen as a key factor to a successful mourning process as detachment from the deceased is avoided (Klass, 1996).

Bennett and Bennett (2000) suggest that one post-bereavement experience which encapsulate closeness and continuing bonds can be referred to as ‘illusion’ or a sense of presence “At its weakest it is a feeling that one is somehow being watched; at its strongest it is a full-blown sensory experience – olfactory, auditory, visual, and occasionally tactile” (p140). In a study of nineteen mothers, Tan and Ketola (2013) acknowledge the role of continuing bonds is an integral aspect of successful adaptation to the death of a child, with benefits including the provision of hope and peace amongst their grief and shattering loss. Sense of presence experiences can be defined as “the non-material Quasi sensory subjective but (experienced as) veridical feeling of presence of the deceased” (Steffen and Coyle, 2011,

p580) and can be perceived as comforting and pleasant. However, literature on the role a sense of presence has as viewed through the eyes of a child is scarce with most research regarding what may be helpful for bereaved siblings being drawn from parental narratives (Thompson et al, 2010) or research which focuses on the death of a parent rather than a sibling of a young child. This is evident in a study undertaken by Steffen and Coyle (2017) where a division was found between the surviving parent (in this case the mother) and the children who could not relate to sense of presence experiences in making sense of their father's death; the mother could view sense of presence events as "veridical" whereas the children required a more concrete, scientific explanation. This study exposes the differences in adult and child grieving processes particularly in one response where a mother wished the whole family could experience a sense of presence event as significant but acknowledged that it was relevant only to her.

Mallon (2018) suggests that the adult role when supporting grieving children is to enable them to continue bonds through recalling positive memories that keep their sibling alive. The telling of memories and the use of possessions, objects and photographs offer opportunities for grieving children to conjure their sibling to either maintain or create an attachment. This is of particular importance when considering the unknown sibling as it is only through such memories and possessions that a relationship can be constructed. Packham et al (2006, p820) state that "Among the long-term effects of sibling bereavement in childhood, bereaved siblings maintain connections with their deceased brother or sister by engaging in specific actions that serve to keep them in touch".

The phenomenon of continuing bonds in children is referred to as "carrying" by DeVita-Raeburn (2004). Based on interviews with bereaved siblings, her data demonstrated that living siblings continue to include their deceased sibling into their day-to-day life and noted that "the deceased siblings remain part of their identity as parallel travellers in life" (Packman et al, p822). Naturally, this continuation of a bond is strengthened by the relationship between the children in the living world. Sibling relationships have a unique component, but as with all relationships, conflict can arise and so the nature of continuing bonds has an aspect of reliance on the sibling relationship. For siblings who are subsequent children following child death, this relationship must be constructed through the stories and memories of their parents and the sibling becomes in many ways that of an imaginary friend

in their lives. Whilst imaginary friends can be assumed to be creations of the mind, Adams, Stanford, and Singh (2022) explore the phenomenon through a different lens arguing that using the terminology of *companion* rather than *friend* allows the creation of a space where a more specific focus – that of the human form – can exist. Within bereavement studies, the imaginary companion is deceased and was previously known to the recipient which is associated with the term sense of presence (Steffen and Coyle, 2011) where the child is present in different forms, including through auditory and visual manifestations. In the case of unknown siblings, the child is required to create a mental representation of their sibling and therefore it is impossible to fully know how their sibling looks at any given time to them. Adams et al (2022, p37) note that “the concept of being able to interact with a deceased person who is normally invisible to others challenges developmental psychology’s explanations of deliberately creating a person for the purposes of play”. This could suggest that deceased siblings – those both known and unknown – can become invisible companions understood and seen only by the living child and offer some form of emotional wellbeing, warmth, and friendship although undoubtedly this remains an under researched area.

2.10 Social Media

Social media can serve as a means of reaching out for support and connection for those who choose to share their grief on social media platforms. Posting about their loss allows individuals to express emotions, share their cherished memories, and honour the life of the person they have lost. Social media platforms provide an opportunity for friends, family, and even strangers to offer words of comfort, express condolences, and to provide support in a world where speaking openly about loss, particularly the death of a child is still considered a taboo. Social media interactions are increasingly a way for people to celebrate life events and to share important or even random thoughts and ideas. Social networking sites are the place that many people reach out to share birthdays, weddings, to make birth announcements and any other life experiences which are deemed significant. This now includes announcements of the death of a loved one, where following death, supporters express their devastation and shock either on the deceased’s own page or on posts made by family and friends. The death of a child in western societies is almost secretive and is often avoided during external social interactions. Segerstad and Kasperowski (2015) suggest that

there are few contexts where bereaved parents can continue bonds and learn to cope with their grief by speaking about their dead child, but social media has changed this.

Grief has always been a shared experience used to bind communities in times of adversity. In modern times, grief has become more private, tucked away into the shadows of those who are bereaved and away from the public gaze. In contemporary society, grief is uncomfortable and child death goes against the grain. At the same time, Harris, and Edmonds (2022) suggest that a huge shift has taken place in how the world connects through grief “what was once printed by hand is now infinitely reproduceable and consumed almost immediately” (p90). As a result, the bereaved can discover new ways to share grief and to be fed by a community who share the pain of child loss. Social media and the internet have created new ways to converse about death and to remember the deceased using poems, words, remembrance, and an instant, immediate way to console, to share others’ grief in a public arena. Harris and Edmonds (2022) further reflect that whilst social media is now a natural vehicle to share our day to day lives, it may appear a juxtaposition between the mundane aspects of life and the enormity and permanence of death. However illusory continuing a bond on social media may be, it allows an attachment to continue, but more importantly “grief is now more social, more open and possibly more radical, rebellious even, and that is a good thing” (Harris et al, 2022, p92).

Despite this, there are potential challenges for the bereaved in using social media platforms to share their grief. Whilst online communities can be beneficial, Rossetto et al (2014) argue that posting content, photographs, and messages may also expose people who are bereaved to risk and harm. Social media technology has only existed since the mid-1990s and only in its current form since Facebook spread into the public beyond its initial purpose of connecting university peers. Morris (2021) explores the notion that despite social media being a recent phenomenon, Baudrillard’s theory of simulation and simulacrum should be viewed as similar in that Baudrillard’s argument was that “these technologies of communication endangered a media world that exists in parallel to reality” (p321). The bereaved parents are creating a world for their living children that runs parallel to reality; they create relationships with ghosts and memories, and they risk blurring the difference between the real and the imaginary.

The ability to remain attached to the dead and to continue communications and bonds is a clear positive aspect of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, memorials on social media can help the bereaved maintain relationships between the living and the dead, to sustain rituals and to create a community where bereaved people can connect and find commonalities in their lives despite differences. Carroll and Landry (2010) suggest that new rituals are being enabled due to social media platforms and that whilst public displays of mourning are still regarded as taboo in western culture, young people are changing the norms through their use of social media. Despite these positives, Rossetto et al (2014) posit that the potential negative impacts of memorialising the deceased on social media platforms require attention. These negatives centre around the fact that these continued relationships can only be adaptive if that the parent recognises that their relationship with their dead child is different; failure to distinguish the living from the dead can be seen as maladaptive. Arguably, posting on social media can blur these lines for the bereaved and where children are encouraged to situate themselves between these spaces, their grief and understanding of the permanence of death can become confused.

Of particular importance is the opportunity for bereaved parents to find ways to cope and adapt to their loss as there are limited contexts where continuing bonds with their dead child can take place. Talking with other others about their bereavement can support parents in their grief; talking frequently about their child allows parents to authenticate their loss. Despite this, it can be challenging for some family members and friends to fully appreciate the devastation caused by the death of a child and as such their support may be lacking, with some withdrawing from the parents' company to avoid the embarrassment of inadvertently causing harm through words and actions (Toller, 2011). Parents can therefore use social media to articulate their grief and to show the joy and sorrow of their child's death and receive sympathy and shared experiences from strangers.

Segerstad and Kasperowski (2015) further explore how parents use the social media platform Facebook to cope with the loss of their child using Stroebe and Schut's theoretical dual process model (2005) where coping strategies, oscillation and the maintaining of continuing bonds is encouraged in contrast to theories where stages of grief are proposed which have an end stage of resolution and acceptance. If the purpose of grief is to integrate the dead into the ongoing life of the living, photographs can offer new possibilities for parents to express their grief, maintain a bond with their dead child and to encourage others who are grieving to share with others. Photographs are an effortless way to remember a loved one who has died and have been used historically to support grieving mothers to memorialise their dead child (Mander and Marshall, 2003). Photographs can offer parents a way to preserve the love and emotional bond they have for their child. Drawing on the practice of postmortem photography, Blood and Cacciatore (2014) note that photographs can create a social identity for the child and are used to create a narrative which can be shared with others. In a study undertaken by Keskinen et al (2019) bereaved parents talked about their emotional states experienced during grieving such as hope, pride, and longing which could be expressed through photographs shared in a discussion group for bereaved parents. Intimate photographs of dying or dead children, funeral imagery, and photographs of the children both before and after their death were depicted in the photographs shared.

Photographs on social media are also used to present a connection between the siblings and as a way for parents to display openly their desire for continued bonds between their children. The children's relationship which was once kept as an internalised, private space, can now be displayed in a more open public social media space although research and literature into this aspect of grieving is limited. Keskinen et al (2019) reflect on the distinct types of photographs posted by those bereaved of a child and interpret their meanings, for example images of gravestones, grave goods, the deceased child, or images which depict their final journey for example seagulls, butterflies, or angels. Graves may also depict the signs that the family chooses to believe are from the dead child; these may be butterflies, ladybirds, or feathers for example and show how the living siblings are encouraged to acknowledge these both in their day-to-day life and within imagery at the graveside posted

on to social media platforms. These poignant posts evidence the way in which bereaved parents rely on social media to express their thoughts and grief and to engage their young children in relationships with their dead sibling. Unable to have a living relationship between the sisters, their mother continues their bond on social media and invites strangers from around the world to comment and to contribute their own thoughts and experiences. In this way, the mother's behaviour is validated and rewarded offering a sense of peace. The language used replicates the language used amongst the children and despite being on public display still appears to be deeply personal. Cann (2014, p60) posits that the different photographs and comments posted by bereaved parents on to social media demonstrate "that a very central part of their grief work is constituted by sharing and exchanging strategies, practices, and thoughts with peers concerning how to keep the child present; of how to live on while keeping the dead child in one's life". Despite this, Christenson et al (2017) argues that research in bereavement studies is still purporting that parenting practices concerned with living with their dead child are situated with rhetoric around prolonged and maladaptive grief, drawing on Freud's concept of melancholia and the concept of resolved grief as theorised by Kubler-Ross (1969).

Summary

This chapter has provided an outline of relevant and appropriate literature pertaining to bereavement, highlighting the importance of recognising that young children's grief differs from that of their parents. The literature demonstrates that young children can be susceptible to lifelong negative behaviours and poor health because of the death of their sibling and that their emotional wellbeing is directly impacted by the behaviours and attitudes of their parents during the initial grieving process. It is therefore crucial that the theory of continued bonds is brought out of the shadow of research. Acknowledging the death of a child in society and removing its taboo can support parents to be better equipped to support the mental health and wellbeing of their children. There is limited research into the unknown sibling and the impact on young children who are encouraged to maintain a continued bond with a child they have had no relationship in the living world; and such gaps in current published research evidence the importance and validity of this study.

Chapter 3 Methodology

The literature review for this thesis highlights several key considerations relating to how young children manage their grief following the death of a sibling and has been the platform in developing the following research questions.

1. How do mothers engage in tender conversations about the death of a sibling with their children to offer solace during their grieving process?
2. What strategies do mothers use within continuing bonds practices to forge and maintain a relationship between their deceased child and their living siblings, and how might these approaches be subject to scrutiny?
3. How do subsequent siblings establish and sustain a connection with a sibling they did not know in the living world?

This chapter seeks to identify and discuss the methodological approach of this research in addition to an examination of the methods used to select participants and to collect and analyse data. The chapter will begin with an overview of my own positionality and continuing to discuss the study's approach. The chapter will move on to introduce the participants of the research and discuss how they were recruited. The specific method of using interviews to collect data will be justified, followed by a discussion relating to the ethical considerations and issues around validity and reliability. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the analytical processes used in data interpretation.

3.1 Introduction

A tentative understanding of the impact of maternal loss came into my personal life when I met my husband in 1996. Richard's mother died in 1974, at forty years of age, leaving him the eldest of three siblings and with a responsibility or an expectation at ten years old to emotionally support his two younger siblings aged seven and four. His mother's presence was absent in his home following her death; there were no photographs on display, no visible reminders of her existence, there were no rituals or memorials associated with her life and death. Some months after our marriage, I asked if he knew where his mother was laid to rest and if he would like to visit. To my astonishment, he replied that he had no idea; his mother had died whilst the children had been sent to stay with family friends and on their return her funeral had been held and life returned to some form of normality – at least for the adults. Three years later, his father remarried, and his mother's presence was further

diminished as his father and stepmother had felt this was the right way to 'be,' to allow a new blended family the very best chance to function. This tender conversation between us did prompt him to ask his father about his mother and we subsequently made an emotional visit to the unmarked and unrecognised place where his mother's ashes had been placed over forty years ago. His father recently told me that he had never collected his late wife's ashes as he had been unsure of what to do and had not discussed her death with his children from that point. Whilst feeling a deep grief for his mother, my overwhelming sense of loss came for Richard and his siblings and how this cataclysmic shift in their lives impacted their sibling relationship and influenced their behaviours and wellbeing as they became young people and on into adulthood as husbands, wives, and parents themselves. As Richard was the eldest sibling, there was an assumption that he would take emotional care for his younger brother and sister; his mother had left him a letter, written to be given to him after her death. She spoke to him of their eternal bond and that she would always be with him and expressed her wish for him to look after his younger siblings and how much they would need him after her death.

I asked him recently if this was the case, but he said he had not felt any additional burden beyond the usual role of being a big brother. In a conversation about this thesis, his sister recently commented that there had been no after bereavement care for the three siblings. She recalls attending school several days after her mother's death and the teacher announcing to the class what happened and then continuing with the day. A second memory she recalled centred around Mother's Day and card making. The teacher suddenly realised Rachel's predicament and told the class that everyone can make a card for their mummy and Rachel could make one for her granny. This satisfied the teacher that all would be well, but for Rachel, it was a traumatic memory which surfaced readily over forty years later and one which demonstrates the ongoing need for bereavement compassion and understanding amongst educators working with children in all age groups from the Foundation stage through to Key Stage 2.

3.2 Research Approach

Methodology refers to the systemic and structured approach used in conducting research or inquiry. It serves as a journey that follows the specific steps and procedures which are gathered and analysed to process received data (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). A well-considered methodology ensures that the research process is conducted with rigour and in a systematic manner which allows for reliable results. It provides a framework for researchers to address their research questions and offers a structure to the whole research pathway. There are distinct types of methodologies that can be employed in research that pertain to education; positivism and interpretivism are influenced by the ontological and epistemological perspective of the individual researcher. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and existence; it seeks to understand the fundamental nature of reality and the underlying structures that govern it, and so ontological assumptions shape our perception of the world and influence our understanding of phenomena (Hathcoat et al, 2019, p99). The diametrically opposed approach, epistemology, focuses on the nature of knowledge and the processes by which knowledge is acquired, justified, and disseminated. Epistemology explores different theories of knowledge, examining the sources, methods, and criteria by which reliable and valid knowledge can be gained.

Slevitch (2011, p76) posits that “the ontological position of the quantitative paradigm holds that objective reality exists independent of human perception”. An epistemological stance is adopted that emphasises the importance of empirical evidence and the use of quantitative methods. In interpretivist research, which often aligns with a constructivist ontology, researchers seek to understand the subjective meanings and interpretations individuals align to their lived experiences. They adopt an epistemological stance that values qualitative methods, for example, interviews and observations as these allow the capture of the richness and complexity of human experiences. In an endeavour to create a deeper understanding of bereavement realities epistemological positions within this thesis have been considered. Constructivist epistemology allows for researcher communication created from the reality of death but situates itself within the subjective truth about the reality of

individuals. Constructivism does not offer an absolute truth; rather it is concerned with a moment in time, with those participants offering only a truth of that moment.

Park & Konge (2020, p692) suggest that “a key goal in positivist experimentation is to isolate and control the influence of all factors so that only the key variables of interest are studied”. However, positivism tends to reduce complex social phenomena to simple cause and effect relationships, often overlooking the intricate interplay of numerous factors. Therefore, a positivist stance was rejected as it is incompatible with a study which seeks the rich thick detail of people’s lives.

Interpretivism challenges the positivist perspective by emphasising subjectivity, meaning, and the importance of understanding the social world from the perspective of individuals. Interpretivists argue that social reality is complex and cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect relationships. The purpose of this study is to generate knowledge based on the experience of mothers, seeking their unique and personal stories of child loss over a period of time. Knowledge here is individually constructed, but the study of human beings must always incorporate the external world and an element of control over the participant (Pandey & Pandey, 2021).

Donovan et al (2019) acknowledge the challenges that researchers have faced when involving bereaved parents as participants, stating that “in the past, researchers expressed reluctance to involve bereaved parents in research due to concerns about causing an escalation of grief” (p2). However, they argue that there are positive effects for parents to be participants in research including being able to remember their child, to be able to offer support for other bereaved parents both now and in the future. To allow for deep, sensitive, and purposeful data to be collected, a qualitative methodology suits this thesis best; in consideration of the sensitive nature of the subject area and the need to explore the meaning-making processes of the participants, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is deemed to be the most appropriate method.

The relationship between researcher knowledge, bereavement experience and assumptions about bereavement in siblings has been carefully considered. Seeking a greater knowledge of how young children grieve and their bereavement reality can be done through observation and what is experienced through my own interpretation of the phenomenon. The age group of the children in this study has created new knowledge which complements and contributes to research which is already known in the field with older siblings and adults (Bowlby, 1973; DeVita-Raeburn 2004; Steffen and Coyle, 2017).

3.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) delves in to the subjective and personal meanings people attach to their experiences, aiming to uncover the intricate layers of human existence. Developed by John Smith in the field of psychology, IPA can reveal rich and nuanced insights into individuals' thoughts, emotions, and perceptions. At its core, IPA is underpinned by three key principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. Phenomenology emphasises the exploration of subjective experiences, seeking to understand how individuals make sense of the world around them (Nizza, Farr & Smith, 2021). Hermeneutics emphasises the interpretation of these experiences, acknowledging the role of the researcher's own perspective and biases. Ideography highlights the significance of individual experiences and their unique characteristics. (Nizza et al., 2021). IPA enables the researcher to understand the specific experiences of individuals in certain circumstances. Campbell-Jackson et al (2014) observes that ideography is:

concerned with an individual's subjective report, rather than formulating an objective account and is therefore considered phenomenological. Furthermore, it is recognised as a dynamic process, within which the researcher plays an active role by taking an 'insider's perspective' to explore the essence of the participant's experience and to explore new areas of knowledge. (p2).

The approach for this study is phenomenological in that it involves the detailed experiences of the participants world. It does not seek to produce any objective statement of the event. IPA involves a rigorous and iterative process that includes several stages. Firstly, researchers engage in in-depth interviews with participants, encouraging open and authentic discussions. These interviews are audio or video recorded to capture both the verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication. Transcription of the recording is followed by a

thorough and repeated reading, which enables researchers to immerse themselves in the participants experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the data (Shinebourne, 2011). Next, researchers engage in a process of coding, where they identify emergent themes within the data. These themes represent the essence of the participants' experiences and serve as the building blocks for analysis. Through constant comparison, researchers compare these emergent themes, seeking patterns across the data set. This iterative process allows for the refinement of themes, resulting in a comprehensive and nuanced analysis. (Noon, 2018).

The final stage of this process is to interpret the themes within a broader context of existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and the researcher's own subjectivity. This interpretative step involves reflection on the emergent themes, considering their implications, and generating a coherent and rich narrative that captures the experiences of the participants. The interpretative process respects the unique perspectives of both the participants and the researchers, acknowledging the interaction between the two.

Smith & Osborne (2007) state that "a two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, is involved" in that the those who participate are endeavouring to make sense of their world and the researcher in turn is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. Furthermore, Smith & Osborne suggest that IPA is an attempt to take the side of the participants. This was a crucial point for me as I had no intention of forming or creating critical judgements. I felt very much 'on the side' of the mothers and wanted to explore their reality of being bereaved of their child and how they continue to parent their living and dead children.

Whilst IPA would appear to be a suitable method for this study, Engward & Goldspink (2020) caution that experiencing reflexivity as an IPA researcher can be complex, time-consuming and that the researcher must live with the data. The function of the researcher is integral to the data and so remains a close companion to the data or as Engward & Goldspink (2020,

p42) state “the researcher and participant are separate but share a space of enquiry”. This thesis then lends itself well to this idiographic approach as grief is not linear, and one family’s grief is unlike any other family and so it was important that both likenesses and differences were captured. As the purpose of this thesis is to explore how parents support their young children to manage their grief following the death of their sibling, this paradigm is the only way to allow the researcher to explore how these individual mothers make sense of this life changing experience.

3.4 Participants

Figure 2: Table of Participants (Pseudonyms & deceased child in bold)

NAME	CHILDREN
Jean	Louis , Jenny, Billy
Jess	Mollie , Lennie, Albie
Ella	Lizzie , Gabriel, Harry
Sarah	Zander , Zia, Alfie

Studies which seek to examine the lived experiences and perspectives of bereaved parents can offer valuable information to improve societal understanding of grief, however, Cleveland et al., (2021, p213) acknowledge that they “carry a significant risk of selection bias that threaten their feasibility and generalisability”. Butler, Copnell & Hall (2019) argue that conducting research in areas considered as sensitive, can be challenging in that the processes involved have the potential to expose both participants and researcher to an array of risks “which may cause damage in their personal, professional, social and cultural worlds” (p224). Therefore, recruiting participants requires careful consideration and ethical practices to ensure the wellbeing and privacy of individuals involved.

There was naivety on my part when considering how I would recruit participants for this study. This piece of research had a very narrow criteria and in speaking to others who undertaken similar research, I felt confident that recruiting participants would be straightforward. I had determined from the outset that I would not engage children in this research; whilst their narratives would undoubtedly be valuable, it was not ethical to speak to children about their grief; there were significant challenges in persuading the Ethics Committee that speaking to parents would be of value and so I knew that engaging children in this study would be considered unacceptable. The research had a narrow criterion requiring parents to have been bereaved of their child at least twelve months before participating and had living children under seven years of age at the time of their child’s death. The siblings could have known the dead child in the living world or may have been born as subsequent children. Initially, the research proposal also sought the views of a small group of students who were studying on the Early Years Teacher Status Postgraduate Certificate at the university where I am employed. I felt that the views of educators would

offer insight into the understanding and knowledge of how young children manage their grief. Four of the students responded positively and all were individually interviewed having been provided with the necessary information regarding ethics, consent, and research information. At the point of analysing the data, I began to sense that the data collected was obfuscating the voices of the parents. Their stories held such love, strength, and hope for their children that I felt strongly this should be the only data used in the research. It had been disappointing to hear from the educators that they had no experience of working with bereaved children and could only hold views drawn from personal considerations rather than professional experiences and therefore lacked any true connection to the study. I am aware that bereavement conversations in education institutions including those in the early years are of importance and the exclusion of this aspect was very carefully considered. I spoke with my supervisor about how I felt, and we agreed to only use the data drawn from the parents in this thesis. Deciding not to use these participants in research is a complex ethical decision; this decision was taken as the data collected did not align with the study's requirements and excluding their responses maintained the integrity of the research. It is important to note that the group of educators were not excluded on any other basis relating to protected characteristics. On reflection, the exclusion of the educators' data had no impact on the study's validity, nor did it compromise the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

Once ethical considerations had been agreed between my supervisors and the university ethics committee, I contacted the Child Bereavement UK (United Kingdom) charity to enquire if my research could be posted on their website. The charity has a place on their website where researchers request that their research proposal is posted and invites participants to engage should they wish to. Contact of the charity was initially made via social media and then a series of responses ensued over several weeks, eventually elevating the request to the correct person. The research proposal and the information given to the university ethics committee was provided and my request was accepted. I had assumed that participants would be forthcoming, and I was surprised and dismayed to find this was not the case. Cleveland et al (2021) suggest that further evidence is required to ascertain the needs of bereaved parents during research recruitment and that researchers should engage

with bereaved parent support groups and social media sites “to develop novel ways to recruit parents” (Cleveland et al., 2021, p216). Despite this disappointment, I felt that the posting of my research proposal onto the Child Bereavement UK website offered gravitas and validity.

I had spoken with a colleague who had undertaken research into parental bereavement, and I was guided by her towards a small independent charity supporting bereaved parents in my locality. I made tentative contact with Jean who operates the charity via WhatsApp and followed this with a telephone call. Jean invited me to visit her at the charity which I did, and we spoke at length about my research. Jean herself is a bereaved parent and created the charity to support other parents. She spoke to me about her family and her children which resulted in me asking if she would consider taking part in the research to which she readily agreed. Jean’s family dynamic is unusual to the study as her daughter Jenny is now in her late teens whilst still meeting the criteria as her three-year-old son Louis died from cancer in 2010. Jenny experienced the illness and death of her sibling and has a subsequent brother Billy now aged ten years. Nonetheless, Jean’s story was so powerful it deserved to be part of this thesis.

She agreed to place my Participant Information Sheet on to a private Facebook site for bereaved preschool children and their parents. This drew two positive responses one from a mother and one from a father both of whom had had a young child die and had both existing and subsequent siblings. I contacted each parent by email and introduced myself and attached the Participant Information Sheet and the consent form and suggested that a telephone call was arranged to make initial contact prior to the interview taking place. This was important as their interviews would take place over Teams for convenience and flexibility and so a pre interview telephone call offered an introduction. Unfortunately, only Sarah responded and despite several emails from Andrew insisting that he remained willing to be involved, I felt it would be intrusive to continue to contact him and sent him an email thanking him for his initial communication with me. Sarah’ son Zander died aged eleven months in January 2018. Sarah had a child Zia who was aged three years old when her brother died and had a subsequent child Alfie, born eleven months later. When Sarah returned the necessary consent forms, we agreed a mutually convenient time to undertake

the Teams call. Whilst the use of Teams or Zoom for interviews is new to me, there is no doubt that advances in communication technologies provide new opportunities in interviewing potential research participants (Archibald et al., 2019). Conducting the interviews in this way offered benefit to myself and to Sarah.

I spoke with Jean about my frustration and concern at the lack of response to my research and she suggested that I contact Ella. Ella had authored a book aimed at preschool children bereaved of a sibling to support her child Gabriel aged three years old living at home at the time of Lizzie's stillbirth and their subsequent child Harry born eighteen months later. I spoke with my supervisory team regarding approaching a potential participant in this way. We discussed the ethical considerations of this and agreed that as Ella was known to Jean and her support charity and could seek further support conversations with Jean should she wish to, this would be acceptable. I contacted Ella via email and asked if she would be interested in being a potential participant. Having read all the information which I provided, she agreed and as before, an initial telephone was made prior to establishing a time to speak via Teams.

The fourth and final participant was Jess. Jess was the only mother to be bereaved of her first child Mollie at aged ten months and the only mother whose child had died suddenly through an accident; she has two subsequent children, Lennie, and Albie. I had had academic contact with Jess previously and was aware that she was a vocal advocate for continuing bonds, frequently recording her thoughts on social media about her daughter and the ways in which she continued to maintain a relationship with her in the living world. She supported me in undertaking a small piece of research as part of my doctoral programme and I was very keen to see if she would be willing to take part with this larger study. To remain within the requirements of the university ethics committee, I spoke with my supervisor to assess whether it would be appropriate to initiate first contact with Jess, and it was agreed that this would be acceptable.

It would be prudent here to recognise that all four participants are mothers. I had pondered whether there was importance to this and carefully considered the lack of a father's voice, highlighting Fivush's (2008) recognition of the differences in parental reminiscing. Fivush's work is referred to later in the study, but it was worth noting at this point her observation that most research is focused on white, middle-class women in Western culture and how

any findings must be interpreted within these constraints. Whilst there was no intent to exclude fathers from the research – one initial participant was a father, but personal issues meant he could no longer continue. Whilst it is important to highlight the lack of a father's voice and to acknowledge this was not the intention of the study, the power of the bereaved mothers voice can also be validated. Bennet (2010, p47) suggests that "bereaved motherhood is the quintessential example of enduring relationships and lifelong relationships with the deceased". Listening to the mothers in this study, it became clear that bereaved motherhood has unique qualities; long last and enduring relationships continue to manifest over time. Descriptions of their children's grief fit with literature which identifies meaning making as a central component; meaning making continues but does not stand still. It is fluid and changes and develops.

Despite this being the case in this study, I would argue that the data is filled with rich, candid, and heartfelt stories with a focus on the emotional aspects of their child's death and their living children's lives. The conversations with the four participants also revealed that three of the mothers were confident in their reminiscing. Jean, Jess and Ella speak frequently about their children as their charity work involves elaborate reminiscing; their stories were still filled with love, hope and fragility, and there was a sense of confidence and ease when relating their family narratives.

During this process, I had also left a message on social media to the Douglas Macmillan Hospice enquiring about the possibility of recruiting participants. The Douglas Macmillan Hospice also incorporates The Donna Louise Hospice for children. Some months later, I received an invite to talk further with the Head of Research and a Teams meeting was arranged between us and one of the child counsellors. It was a positive and productive meeting and I felt excited at the prospect of working with the hospice team. It was proposed that the counselling team would approach potential participants and that the interviews would take place at the hospice with counsellors also available.

However, a request for indemnity from the hospice and a request to return to the Ethics committee from the university curtailed this opportunity. Once again feelings of disappointed and frustration arose, but I also acknowledged there were further opportunities to be had in the future, felt proud that the hospice had expressed an interest

to work with me and decided to move forwards with the current participants and fully commit to the data I had.

3.5 Data Collection Method

As previously outlined, this research takes a qualitative approach to data collection. My intention in this research was to hear stories from parents who were bereaved of their child and to attempt to understand how young children manage their grief following the death of their sibling. I was particularly interested in the subsequent child's relationship with their unknown sibling and how parents facilitated and maintained their relationship in the living world and so chose to undertake individual semi structured interviews, but to situate these within a case study framework. In the realm of research and data collection, interviews have long been recognised as a powerful tool for gathering information, insights, and perspectives from individuals with firsthand experience or expertise in a particular field. Interviews serve to delve deeper into a subject, uncover unique viewpoints, and capture nuanced data that could be missed through other research methods (Jain, 2021). Despite the sensitivity of the focus for the research, I knew I wanted to engage in conversations which would allow me to immerse myself into the first-hand experiences, perspectives, and emotions of the participants to obtain a more holistic understanding of the topic being investigated.

3.5.1 Case Study

Academic research serves as a cornerstone for advancing knowledge and understanding in various fields. Within the realm of research methodologies, case studies have emerged as a powerful tool to explore complex phenomena and gain comprehensive insights. Case studies allow researchers to investigate real-life situations, delve into intricate details, and generate in-depth analysis. A case study can be determined to be an empirical investigation that examines a particular phenomenon within its real-life context. It entails an in-depth analysis of a specific individual or group, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject under investigation (Yin, 1981). Furthermore, Yin (1981, p98) posits that the need for a case study arises whenever "an empirical inquiry must examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". Yin (2011) offers three types of case studies regarding their outcomes, these being exploratory which acts a pilot to other

studies, descriptive which offers a narrative account and explanatory which involves testing a theory. I took a descriptive approach to this thesis as I was interested in the narrative accounts offered by the mothers and used Yin (2009) identification of solitary case design where a unique case can be researched.

Thomas (2017) suggests that case studies are a cover –all research method which can cover an entire range of inquiry activity and that each case can be studied on its own merit. I found this to be helpful as my intention was to hear the different rituals and traditions that each family carried out to continue a bond with their dead child and how in turn this supported the siblings to manage their grief. Critically, Thomas (2017) argues that the case study is not to be studied for the sake of study; rather it is not simply a story but has to illuminate a particular phenomenon or theoretical point of view. I wanted this thesis to focus on the siblings; I wanted their voice to shine through in the narratives told by their mothers, rather than to be controlled by the rigour of testing a hypothesis for example. Case studies are reported as stories with tools to collect data including observations and interviews using qualitative data as with this study. Whitmarsh's (2008) discussion of narratives in her research, led me to seek further research on narratives to support the case study aspect of this thesis. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) argue that case studies strive to portray the lived experiences of participants and to delve deeper into their thoughts and feelings about their situation. Cohen et al (2018) assert that case study events should be allowed to speak for themselves rather than being subject to interpretation or judgement by the researcher.

Bruner (1987) uses the term 'autobiographical narrative' to describe the way in which stories are told about lives; stories are a way to retrieve memories and use those memories to electively reshape their narrative. Kearney (2002, p13) posits that a narrative is a "creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplained meanings can unfold". I was further interest in the categories of narratives as this research fell between both canonical and autobiographical approaches. Naturally, the aim was to present a more autobiographical approach as this suggests a dialogue between myself and those being interviewed, but I acknowledge that discussions with bereaved mothers can lead to judging of their actions, which whilst not desirable, could be attributed to human behaviour.

3.4.2 Interviews

Doody & Noonan (2013) indicate that an interview is “a method of collecting data in which quantitative or qualitative questions can be asked” (p1). Furthermore, the questions asked at interview are indicative of the research paradigm in that quantitative questions are closed, whereas those asked in a qualitative methodology are more open ended to allow participants to use their own words. Semi-structured interviews offer a balance between structure and flexibility, where researchers can hold a set of predetermined questions, but have the freedom to ask to follow up questions, probe further, and to explore emergent themes. Knott et al., (2022) state that in-depth interviews are:

a qualitative research method that follows a deceptively familiar logic of human interaction: they are conversations where people talk with each other, interact, and pose and answer questions. An interview is a specific type of interaction in which – usually and predominantly – a researcher asks questions about someone’s life experience, opinions, dreams, fears and hopes and the interview participant answers the questions(p1).

This quotation perfectly fits my aim as the mother’s narratives were filled with love, hope, strength, and fragility as they spoke of their devastating loss and the hope of continuing bonds. I did not seek to judge the actions of bereaved mothers but to listen and to develop an understanding of the continuing bonds phenomena and to explore the traditions, rituals, and practices which mothers use to support their young children in managing their grief.

McGrath, Palmgren & Liljedahl (2019) offer several pertinent points regarding qualitative research interviews. As qualitative interviewing seeks to understand the subjective perspectives of a phenomenon, they hold the potential to give a voice to those who are marginalised and who may not be heard in society. I held some concern regarding the small number of participants in this study, but McGrath et al (2019) argue that there are ethical decisions to be made and consideration should be given to the number of interviewees and to include only those who have experiences of the phenomena being researched. Noon (2018 p2) concurs and states that “the specificity of the sample is dependent upon the phenomena under investigation; whilst in some instances the research topic will only hold relevance to a limited number of people, thus defining the boundaries of the sample”.

Engaging with research topics which are particularly sensitive may evoke feelings of distress in the interviewee which may be unexpected and so the interviewer has the responsibility to act to ensure the interviewee is protected. Stuckey (2013) suggests that three types of interviews are appropriate and commonly used in the types of research where stories can be told in a narrative way. These are structured, semi-structured and a narrative interview which are arranged in formats allowing for specific sets of questions through to the telling of stories in an organic way.

A structured interview is a standardised and systemic approach used in research interviews. It is designed to gather consistent and reliable information from interviewees by using a set of predetermined questions and evaluating their responses in a uniform manner. In a structured interview, the questions are carefully crafted in advance and typically follow a specific format. These questions are developed on the research objectives, and they aim to assess qualifications, skills, experiences, and suitability. The questions which are asked in a structured interview aim to control the responses of the interviewee quite tightly. A predetermined set of questions also asked in a predetermined order have a limited number of responses. Stuckey (2013) posits that this would be an appropriate method of interviewing candidates for a job position as the same set of questions are asked for consistency as it is like a scripted play. This would have been an unsuitable approach for this study as although I had prepared questions in advance, I also needed to be able to be more flexible and allow the mothers to talk openly without restriction or assumptions. Equally an unstructured interview would not have fitted this study despite its purpose being to elicit people's social realities. Unstructured interviews are a more spontaneous way of gathering data and rely on natural interactions between the interviewer and interviewee. Zhang & Wildemuth (2009) state that unstructured interviews have no hypothesis or questions and allow the narration to generate further questions. Whilst this may have been a technique with potential merit for this thesis, the sensitivity of the subject required a more fluid, flexible approach, but one where there could also be direction for both me and the participant.

The technique which would fit best sits in the middle and draws on the IPA methodology. Whilst focus groups can be part of IPA, I chose to use semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are flexible and versatile in their approach and combine elements of structured and unstructured interview techniques. In a semi-structured interview, the

interviewer follows a general framework while allowing for open-ended discussion and exploration of the interviewee's responses. Unlike structured interviews, that rely on a fixed set of predetermined questions, semi-structured interviews provide more freedom and adaptability. Whilst there are specific topics or areas of interest to cover, the interviewer has the flexibility to ask to follow up questions, probe deeper into certain areas, and allow for a more organic conversation to unfold (Ahlin, 2019). A critical point raised by Ahlin (2019) is that semi-structured interviews are deemed appropriate as research team members were academically familiar with the subject and held as such could develop an appropriate series of questions to ask. I had not spoken with the chosen participants aside from a welcome telephone call to establish a connection, and so I was entirely reliant on my academic familiarity with the subject through reading journals and other similar studies and so this point resonated with my experience. I recognised the anxiety and unease felt by my original supervisory team that speaking with parents about the death of their child could cause further distress. To mitigate this and to become better educated on this subject, I attended two online training sessions held by the Child Bereavement UK charity. The first titled *When a child dies: supporting parents and families* and the second titled *Supporting young children in an early year's setting* which indicated clearly that grief is unique to each person, including individual members of each family and that young children and babies can become distressed by grief and need educators to care rather than a bereavement expert. The training also offered me an insight into how speaking to parents about their dead children cannot make their grief worse and that parents need space to say how their life is following the death of their child; not to be fixed, but to be listened to as there is power in a shared conversation. These courses gave me confidence to undertake the interviews as although I did not identify as a bereavement expert, I was empowered by knowledge.

Whilst face to face interviews have long been the norm for undertaking qualitative research interviews, the Covid-19 pandemic led to a need to explore the alternative method of online software. Therefore, video and telephone interviews have become increasingly used.

Conducting interviews online offers several advantages, such as convenience, cost-effectiveness, and the ability to reach candidates from various locations. Despite my own apprehension about undertaking online interviews, Saarijarvi & Bratt (2021) suggest that this is the next closest method to face-face-interviews and argue that face to face

interviewing is only marginally superior to online video interviews. Nonetheless, interviewing online does have some drawbacks including the exclusion of some participants due to technology issues and the issue surrounding confidentiality; Saarijarvi (2021) for example suggest that there is potential for there to be others who are not invited in the room who could influence the discussion, and this needs careful consideration particularly when sensitive topics are to be discussed. This was discussed at the initial telephone call with each participant to ensure that each interview would satisfy confidentiality and that each participant felt comfortable and at ease in the place of interview.

I had limited experience designing an interview schedule and so drew on academic literature to create several open-ended questions with the aim of the interview lasting around an hour; in fact, three out of the four lasted within that period with one interview stretching to two hours. There were interesting differences in how the participants reacted to the questions in the interviews. Three out of the four mothers had experience in speaking about their dead children and showed some confidence in their replies. This did not hinder the love for their child from shining through, but their conversations felt easier and more fluent.

Noon (2013) suggests that interviews should take place in a setting where only the researcher and participant are present as this can ensure confidentiality, reduce the possibility of being interrupted and to enhance the comfort of the participant. All the participants were offered times and days to choose when would suit their work and home lives and due to several factors including distance and convenience, all but one interview was held over Teams software to allow for convenience. I had some anxiety about interviewing on Teams. Having used this software extensively to teach at the university where I work through the Covid-19 pandemic, I was aware that it can create a barrier between interviewer and interviewee and that communication can feel restricted. I felt apprehensive that if one of the participants showed distress, that I would be unable to offer any comfort or that offering reassurance and support through a screen would appear insensitive and distant. I was surprised to find therefore that the most discomfort I felt was during the face-to-face interview. I felt overwhelmed and disengaged. I could not articulate why this happened as Jean could not have been more welcoming; she had shown me such warmth and generosity in supporting my research and yet when sat opposite her, talking

about her son and her family, I felt unprepared. Schmeid et al (2011) state that interviewing participants about sensitive topics requires skill and I most certainly felt that I did not have any skill. I did feel that Jean and I had developed a rapport; she was not originally approached to be a participant, but we had developed a connection through our conversations and discussions, and she was open and candid in answering my questions. Langley and Meziani (2020) explores this further when determining the benefits of undertaking interviews, arguing that “interviews should be considered as local interactional accomplishments where what takes place is highly dependent on how the interviewer situates the task, and how interviewees position themselves with the audience they believe they are addressing” (p370). However, undertaking research, which is sensitive, has challenges. Phenomenological or interpretative interviews are designed to enable the researcher to access their participant's' lived experiences. Concerns raised by Langley et al (202) mirror my own experience when interviewing Jean in that tensions can be developed between sustaining neutrality and developing a rapport.

All interviews were recorded with the participant's consent, using the record function on Teams software and the same option during the face-to-face interview on my own iPad. Following the interviews, transcripts were generated with each participant able to view the transcript on request. I did not take any notes during the interviews, I felt fully focused on their responses and ensured that the stories they were telling about the death of their child were given my full concentration, to the best of my ability.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Human subjects research uses people as the subject of studies and as such it is important that participants are not exploited for the sake of research. To be ethical then demands that human research must have social value, meaning that a study can support people to improve their wellbeing (Emanuel et al., 2016). Sque et al (2014, p3) state that research is deemed sensitive if “it poses an intrusive threat, explores an intensely personal experience. Has the potential to arouse an emotional response and has risk implications for both the researcher and the researched.” This definition aptly allocates bereavement research as a sensitive research topic. This study has social value as supporting children to manage their grief is beneficial to their emotional health both in their childhood and adulthood. Whilst acknowledging the protective mechanisms in place to safeguard participant recruitment

from the bereavement field, Sque et al (2014) argue that over cautious practices are based on the possibility that participants may be asked to recall distressing events. However, there is also evidence to suggest that contributing to research, may be of benefit to the bereaved. There are undoubtedly tensions when balancing the need for data in a research project and the sensitivity required when speaking to parents about the death of their children. Akard et al (2014) acknowledge the “unique ethical and methodological challenges, with bereaved children representing a doubly vulnerable population” (p75,) including low participation rates and small sample sizes; they argue that grief studies do not often report how many attempts were made to contact bereaved parents or any factors associated with the study participation, suggesting that this would be helpful to future studies.

Ethical principles applied by the university were adhered to alongside the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2012). Planning the recruitment procedure for this thesis proved challenging and required multiple conversations with the ethics committee to justify the worthiness of speaking with parents. Gaining ethical approval from the University of Chester’s ethics committee proved challenging. To avoid the possibility of causing further distress to potential participants, the first proposal for this study explored how mothers memorialise their children on social media. This would avoid any contact with bereaved parents and so whilst ethical considerations were needed, ethical approval was not. This felt morally wrong; bereaved mothers do not tell their stories on social media to be used in research without their consent and I felt acute discomfort in undertaking this path. Ethical approval was initially refused which I found very distressing and yet on reflection the university were acting in both my interest and the potential participants. Butler, Copnell and Hall (2017) suggest that ethics committees are sensitive to bereavement research and the possibility that families may experience secondary distress but argue that such overly cautious protocols can limit or exclude potential participants and in doing so inhibit their autonomy. Sque et al (2014) acknowledge that those wishing to undertake bereavement research can face gatekeeping. The process left me feeling diminished and powerless. This was rectified when I took a proactive, reflective, and confident approach to the next application to the committee and produced an application which was worthy of consideration. Once approval was awarded, the study could commence.

3.6.1 Consent

Having competency to provide informed consent is an integral and important aspect of ethical research; adults in this situation are presumed to have the capacity to make an informed choice regarding their decision to participate in research. It could be argued that bereavement research has unique risks surrounding the recruitment including that of consent. The shattering grief felt by parents on the death of their child can impact their ability to have agency with Butler et al (2017) suggesting that parents may agree to take part in research which they would not usually agree to. Dyregov (2004) recognises the ethical concerns faced by those wishing to speak with bereaved parents and state that “informed consent must be freely and rationally given, and the subject must not suffer from human indignity, be deceived or otherwise used as an object” (p2). Nonetheless, Buckle et al (2010) argue that true informed consent cannot be given as participants do not know the path the interview will take, and further argue that when bereaved parents are the experts the researcher must assume the role of the learner and therefore communication that the research is voluntary, and that any data collected can be removed is essential.

This was considered when designing my recruitment process and time was spent thinking about how grief may impact the participant's ability to offer informed consent. I drew on the training that I had undertaken and read widely around the subject to ensure that any risks were acknowledged, and steps taken to mitigate harm. To ensure all potential participants received full information about the proposal, a Participant Information Sheet was created which offered clear information regarding both the study and what would be expected of those who chose to take part. This was emailed to the charities who I had asked to assist and once their approval was given, it was emailed to participants who had expressed an interest in offering their story. This was followed up with an email offering to answer any further questions that may have arisen and with a reminder that their consent to participate was entirely voluntary and they had the right to withdraw their consent at any point up until writing had commenced. Once initial agreement had been given, I emailed consent forms which offered a further reminder of the right to withdraw and once these were returned, a day and time was arranged to make a telephone call ahead of the interview taking place.

Part of the process of consent included the offer to each participant of confidentiality and anonymity, with Dyregov (2004) asserting that both must be assured and that appropriate information about the results and conclusions of the research given. To ensure ethical treatment of any participant, these two key principles are paramount. Both serve as essential safeguards to maintain trust, protect privacy, and to encourage honesty in research planning. Anonymity in research guarantees that the identities of participants are protected through concealment, ensuring that no personal data is linked to their responses. This can encourage individuals to express their thoughts and feelings without fear of consequence or judgement. Although this was offered and accepted by the four participants, I felt some unease at providing a pseudonym to their deceased child. Scarth (2016) however reveals that in a study undertaken to explore the experience of bereaved individuals taking part in research, some participants asserted that they would prefer their real name to be used and that immortalising their deceased loved one in a piece of academic research was important to them. Anonymity has an additional role in protecting personal data and research-related information, including how data is stored and so preserving anonymity allows the building of trust and upholds the privacy rights afforded to those individuals who agree to contribute to research. Scarth (2016) argues that the protection of anonymity differs from confidentiality in that one protects data, and one protects names and identification, but for bereaved participants the opportunity to see their loved one's name on paper, to read about their life and to remain connected to them in this way is desired. Furthermore, the participants in this thesis cannot truly have their identity concealed as three out of the four hold prominent positions as charity founders and a book author and so there is a risk that aspects of their narratives can reveal their identity. In recognising this and in an endeavour to offer a process where parents could identify their child if not by name, I asked each mother to think of a favourite poem or song or the title of a favourite book which would go above their own case study. Each mother expressed happiness at this option, and all offered their own unique connection of love to their child; whilst not explicitly asking for anonymity, the mother's recognised that there was no shame or judgement in the identification of their child in this research, but accepted it was part of the process. I wonder on reflection whether I could have pursued this further and spoke with each mother regarding removing their anonymity, however, as it had not been questioned and no individual had requested their child's real name was used, I did not take

this further. Adding the small lines from each poem, song or words of love was an unexpectedly emotional moment for me. On reflection, I considered whether I had put up a barrier against the emotional nature of this topic to allow me to continue to read and write, but at this point I felt an overwhelming connection to each family and to each child as their mother's love connected them to the thesis. Lester et al (2020, p94) define qualitative research as one which:

Is generally employed to support a researcher in generating a deep and nuanced understanding of a given phenomenon. The outcomes of such research range from generating findings that can inform practice to providing detailed descriptions of a given problem to offering insights about professional practices within a given context and tackling issues related to the subjective nature of qualitative research.

Data was drawn from the four interviews which then required analysing. The process of qualitative data analysis involves several key steps although it is important to note that qualitative data analysis is an iterative process; this means that there is a constant back and forth between the data and my own interpretations, refinement, and an expansion of my understanding.

This allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the data and ensured that the findings are grounded in the raw data offered. The first key step in analysing the data was to transcribe to ensure the recordings became manageable and organised and ensured that the rich, complex, and nuanced narratives given by the participants were fully explored. Transcribing data can be time consuming and although a mildly tedious task, it is one of importance. However, it is not a straightforward and mechanical process. McMullin (2023) argues that transcribing requires a subjective approach about what to include and whether to correct grammar and repetitions which is described as a spectrum "intelligent verbatim" is used where the transcript is adapted to maintain usual grammar and norms of written English or to offer "denaturalised" transcribing where everything is left in just as it was originally said during the interview. McMullin (2023) argues that transcribing data is a subjective act as the researcher decides what to include and what to omit; each of these choices shapes the how everyone is presented, and which aspects of the knowledge given is of relevance and value. Due to the sensitivity of the interview topic, I initially decided that a summary approach would be inadequate, but a verbatim approach would be too detailed. Bailey (2008) raises the

issue of how much detail to include noting that in selecting which data is considered worthy of inclusion into the study can reflect a researcher's underlying assumptions about what they consider to be data. Therefore, I approached the transcripts with a view to a partial transcription rather than in a naturalistic fashion which include all verbal cues and utterances. Mclellan et al (2003) argue that if researchers do not need such a detailed analysis, general themes and patterns can be coded with less text. I was also conscious that as three of the participants were easily identifiable due to their charity ownership and book publication, verbatim transcription may compromise their anonymity.

When considering how to transcribe the data, I was aware that I could undertake the task myself but was cognisant of time and chose to use the transcribe function available on the Teams software and was able to download the text into a Word document to analyse. The software offered a reasonable transcription, but this was carefully reviewed to check for grammatical or articulation errors. Initially, I chose not to offer transcripts to the participants to read; I had not given this any thought and whilst offering transcripts may be of value, McMullin (2023) argues that some individuals may feel embarrassment at how they are portrayed in text. However, on further reflection and in discussion with my supervisor, I emailed each mother and offered her the opportunity to receive a copy of the transcript of our interview. Two out of the four participants responded, and the transcripts were emailed to them with a time limit given for any response or desire to discuss. Neither of the two parents requested any change.

Once the transcriptions were complete, I sought a way to organise the data. A colleague made me aware of the NVivo software and its ability to support the organisation of data. However, as I had a short amount of data, and am not proficient in using technology software, I felt I would be able to understand the data better if I were to analyse and code it myself. Braun and Clarke (2020) highlight this as a key aspect of IPA methodology in that as it is a human process exploring what humans do it requires “close and detailed engagement with the unique features of each participant's account” (p5).

3.6.2 Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2020) discuss the notion of the 'hallowed method' where researchers believe that there is a perfect analytic approach to be found and that their role is to use that approach and to justify why others were not used. Whilst acknowledging that interpretative phenomenological analysis for example can be thought of as an 'off the shelf' methodology and may be considered superior to methods such as thematic analysis, Braun, and Clarke (2020) argue that there can be potential for similar outputs from methodologies like IPA and TA (Thematic Analysis) and so deciding on which approach to take is more "like deciding between which type of fruit you will choose to eat (apple, orange or banana?), than deciding whether to have fruits, a slice of cake or a burger" (p2). I am choosing to use TA as an appropriate phenomenological approach to analyse the data; IPA is concerned with how humans experience and make sense of their world and uses small, homogenous samples to collect data from personal accounts and so is the philosophical framework for the methodology. Despite this, Braun, and Clarke (2020) argue that IPA as a philosophical method can complement TA by seeking emerging themes and connections which are repeated for each individual interview. I treated each interview as a case study to allow me to treat each mother's narrative with depth and focus and to seek master themes and then more detailed emergent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2020). The master themes appeared closely aligned to the research questions; theme one spoke to research question one and theme two aligned to research question two, however, several subsidiary or emerging themes were also present.

Braun and Clarke (2020) offer a recent articulation in identifying a six-phase process to support data engagement, coding, and theme development using thematic analysis which I will follow. I am new to being a researcher and found their writing to be accessible, enjoyable, and felt that the notion of themes as not "essential truths but as constructions of the reader to be quite attractive" (Lainson, Braun, and Clarke, 2019, p4). Thematic analysis is appropriate for this thesis as it can analyse both large and small sets of data including case study research with a small number of participants and can be used to capture both inductive and deductive analyses; this thesis takes an inductive approach. Importantly,

Braun and Clarke (2017) state that the inductive approach works well for studies which are under researched and exploring new terrain which the focus of this study is.

The first step is to become familiar with the data and so I began this process by reading the transcripts and making initial annotations, following this by listening again to the audio and making further notes and annotations, listening for inflections and nuances which I felt were important inclusions. Braun and Clarke (2012, p58) propose that the inductive approach to data “is a bottom-up approach and is driven by what is in the data” where the researcher discovers the codes and themes as they are derived from the data content itself, therefore there is a close match between the two. In a comparable way to active listening, Braun, and Clarke (2012) propose that reading data must be an active process and involves thinking deeply about what aspects of their lives are being revealed. There was also the emotional aspect of reading the transcripts which revealed sorrowful and emotive content; however, there was also joy and pride about how the parents spoke about their children – both living and dead and their endeavours to raise emotionally healthy siblings and so this offered some counterbalance to any distressing aspects of the data. All the four mothers were keen to speak of their children and showered me with stories imbued with memory, humour, and remembrance. As three of the mothers participated in external bereavement work: two heading self-made charities and one the author of a book they spoke more confidently in an interview environment. This involvement raised a question as to whether the narratives from these three mothers were shaped by their professional experiences. The creation of philanthropic foundations to deal with grief is explored by Rossetto (2014). The death of a child precipitates life reorganisation for parents and as grief threatens to overwhelm, the tasks of grieving can help the bereaved to regain their sense of equilibrium. Whilst this study is not specifically aimed at the grieving tasks engaged by the mothers, their stories spoke not only of love and meaning, but also compassion and community for others. The mothers in this study all looked beyond their personal grief and sought ways to help others. In Rossetto’s (2014) study, participants offered the belief that their charities could keep the spirit of their children alive; each of the three mothers involved in some form of tangible and external bond with their children referred to the ongoing connection their charitable helped them to make meaning, despite their pain.

There is little literature which is concerned with how qualitative researchers encounter disturbing narratives when researching sensitive or marginalised groups and whilst the ethics committee who considered my proposal were committed in ensuring that participants met no harm, there was less consideration for my own lack of experiences when encountering parents talking about the death of their child. Fenge et al (2019) concur and highlight the lack of preparedness felt by researchers when dealing with sensitive subjects and argue “Although ethics review considers mechanisms to support research participants who may become upset as a result of a research interview, it rarely considers similar mechanisms of support for researchers” (p4). I had not entered this research with the purpose of criticising or judging these mothers' actions in continuing bonds with their children and whilst I acknowledged their sorrow and devastation and the loss of their beloved children, I also sought the joy and happiness in each case study. Having read each transcript, I then also read again whilst simultaneously listening to the audio and watching the videos. This helped to appreciate and to consider the tone, inflection, and nuances of what was being said; the written word can appear bleak when reading about the loss of a child and so the combination of listening and watching the recordings again allowed me to note points of gentle humour and wistfulness of mothers speaking about their beloved children.

Such scrutiny was time consuming but rewarding as it brought the data – and the siblings- into the present which ensured that meaningful findings and interpretations could be found amongst the raw data. Treating each interview as a case study was beneficial as I could concentrate on each family and their story without being influenced by comparisons to the remaining data; the similarities or themes between each case was still apparent however and I made notes highlighting these on the relevant transcripts to explore at a later stage of the research. Once this process was complete, the next stage was to organise the codes and here I followed Braun and Clarke's 2006 iterative process which suggest that codes are generated and then the researcher can seek themes from within. Familiarity with the data leads to generating themes which can then be reviewed. This process created eight initial themes.

Figure 3: Initial themes

Traditions	Rituals – continuing bonds
Conversations about the death of the sibling	Travelling through grief
Sibling’s grief / the unknown sibling	Subsequent sibling grief / transgenerational grief / imagined bonds
Euphemism / language	Funerals & cemetery practices

Summary

This chapter has provided the research approach and the study design. The chapter has outlined a case study approach to enable a clear, structured system to answer the research questions. The chapter has also explored IPA as a philosophy where lived experiences of those who are parenting children who are both living, and dead can be captured. Recruitment of participants was examined and an explanation as to how the data offered meaningful interpretations despite the small sample size. Ethical concerns have been addressed and reflected upon explaining the ethical approaches taken to ensure no harm was felt by the participants.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter address the research question “How do young children manage their grief following the death of a sibling and how do their mothers use continuing bonds to maintain the children’s relationships in the living world?” The study has three research questions:

1. How do mothers engage in tender conversations about the death of a sibling with their children to offer solace during their grieving process?
2. What strategies do mothers use within continuing bonds practices to uphold a relationship between their deceased child and their living siblings, and how might these approaches be subject to scrutiny?
3. How do subsequent siblings establish and sustain a connection with a sibling they did not know in the living world?

This chapter aims to address these three questions using thematic analysis to interpret the data and to offer an account of the narratives within the data. The table below outlines the themes drawn from the data; these are then grouped into three key themes and two subsidiary themes which intricately connect to the research questions for this study. This chapter then seeks to explore these themes to address the research questions.

4.2 Participant Case Studies

4.2.1 - Jean, Louis, Jenny & Billy

I will lend you for a little time, A child of mine, He said. For you to love the while he lives, and mourn for when he is dead (Guest, 1930).

Jean’s second child Louis was diagnosed with cancer when he was eight months old and died aged two years in 2010 following a relapse. Jean and her husband already had a child, Jenny aged five who had just started her first year at school. Jenny was fully involved with Louis’ care and routine during the periods of time when he was in hospital; she sat beside him and read to him the day before he died. Jean remembered that the baby had a way of pointing his finger into the air and that he did this to his sister whilst she was reading to him. Jean reflected that Jenny did not have any recollection of that time, but she felt it was an

incredibly special moment between the siblings. Following his death, the family told Jenny on the following morning which was a Sunday and she returned to school the next day. Jenny attended Louis' funeral; Jean reflected that as a child she had always been to the funerals of relatives and so it was a natural event for the whole family to attend.

Jean went on to have a subsequent son Billy who always had an awareness of his older brother and began to show signs of transgenerational grief when he was four. The family celebrate Louis' birthday and have photographs around the house. Jean is open and honest with her children about death and answers any questions that Billy asks about his brother particularly when he expresses distress that they did not know each other in the living world. Following Louis' death, Jean set up a charity to offer support and care to other bereaved parents.

4.2.2 - Jess, Mollie, Lennie & Albie

"If you'll be my bodyguard, I can be your long-lost pal, I can call you Betty and Betty when you call me, you can call me Al" (Simon, 1986).

Jess's first child Mollie died in an incident at nursery in 2012 aged nine months old. Jess had a subsequent child Lennie in 2015 and then a second child Albie in 2017. Mollie has always been a part of her sibling's lives; her graveside is the first place the family visited with each subsequent child when leaving hospital on their way home. Jess is keen that her sons develop and maintain a bond with their sister despite not having a relationship with her in the living world. Mollie's resting place is an important space for the family; the children have been taught how to behave in this sacred space from a noticeably early age and Jess is proud of their manner and understanding.

Both children now attend school, and this year sees a shift in the traditions and rituals that the family undertake to celebrate Mollie's birthday; whilst they would usually cancel all nursery, work commitments, and visit the cemetery, this year Jess changed their tradition and kept to their school and work routine and visited Mollie later in the day. The school are aware of the continuing bonds practices the family have and that their sister remains a significant part of her sibling's lives. Jess and her husband created a charity in Mollie's name in 2013.

4.2.3 - Ella, Lizzie, Gabriel & Harry

"Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby"

(Harburg, 1939)

Ella's second child Lizzie died on April 1st and was stillborn on April 4th, 2010. Her surviving child Gabriel aged three years old at the time of his sister's death found difficulty in comprehending where his much-anticipated baby sister had gone. Twenty-one months later, Lizzie gave birth to her third child Harry; a brother for Lizzie and Gabriel and so the bond with a sister known to one sibling and unknown to another continued. In seeking to offer support to her two young sons, Ella wrote a picture book depicting her family and exploring in age-appropriate terms their thoughts about where their sister could be. Gabriel channelled his grief through drawing and talking about his sister and keeping small treasures in a memory box. Gabriel attended nursery at the time of Lizzie's birth and death but there were limited resources to support him and so Ella drew on the support of SANDS who introduced the family to ideas about children's cognitive understanding and to use concrete language rather than euphemisms despite Gabriel's early age. Gabriel introduced Lizzie to Henry and together they have grown a bond with her. They speak about her because they want her to be acknowledged as part of their family,

4.2.4 - Sarah, Zander, Zia & Alfie

If love could have fixed your broken heart you would have lived forever. Always loved, never forgotten, my forever baby boy.

Sarah's second child Zander was diagnosed with a heart condition at aged four months and died aged eleven months. Zander had been unwell from birth and had spent periods of his life in hospital. Sarah and her husband already a child, a daughter Zia who was two and a half years old who spent considerable time in the hospital intensive care units with her brother and parents including spending her third birthday lying next to her brother's bed. Eleven months later, Sarah had another child, a son Alfie.

The family celebrate Zander's birthday with fun experiences including a trip to Disney World and at Christmas they go as a family to decorate his grave with balloons and banners. Both the siblings are fully involved in these traditions and rituals to maintain their sibling bond. Zia talks with Alfie about Zander and maintains his presence in her life by including him in cards and drawings and keeps a memory box to store treasures which remind her of Zander.

She had some counselling sessions with a local hospice but appeared to be managing the death of her sibling well. Sarah reflected that Zia is instrumental in continuing a bond between all three siblings rather than it being driven by her as their mother.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

Understanding how young children respond to the death of a sibling underpins the first key theme of this study and links closely to the first research question. Whilst the key theme focuses on the children as a group and the conversations about continuing bonds following the death of their sibling, a brief discussion of transgenerational grief was included.

Kempson et al (2008) highlight the construct of transgenerational grief as it pertains to children who have experienced the death of a sibling who was unknown to them but “whose ghost has been important in the family” (p271). I had been surprised by how the mothers had noticed that their children had kept their dead sibling alive to their younger brother or sister and that conversations and memories were driven in some cases by the children. Children’s responses to the death of their sibling varied across the case studies, but the transgenerational grief exposed through the conversations between older children and their younger siblings was evident. Whilst their mothers felt a responsibility to ensure that their children remained in a sibling relationship, it was surprising to note that this desire to continue bonds was often driven by the children themselves. Nonetheless, the mothers answered questions with honesty and their responses were underpinned by their family values and where traditions and beliefs were upheld. This section will explore the relationship between siblings and the construct of transgenerational grief in supporting young children in their grief.

Drawing on the themes, I begin by outlining the findings for each family and then support this with quotes from each mother to evidence and explain the findings. All the siblings are given a voice through the narratives of their mothers. After some reflection and consideration, the theme regarding rituals and traditions has a subsidiary theme labelled Funeral and Cemetery Practices. The cemetery or a place of reflection are important sacred spaces for the mothers, but they hold expectations from society about behaviour particularly for children. As a result, this was a key area to explore within the context of continuing bonds.

Figure 4.1.a: Themes

THEMES		
Page 90 5.2	Tender Conversations with siblings about death (Unknown sibling)	
Page 103 5.3	Subsequent Siblings & Continuing Bonds	
Page 110 5.4	Rituals & Traditions	
Page 111	Funeral & Cemetery Practices	
Page 117	Building Memories through Continuing Bonds	
CONTINUING BONDS / IMAGINED BONDS		
Case Study 1 Jean, Jenny, Louis & Billy	Time in hospital as a family- challenging time Tender conversations Issues at school Oscillating Subsequent siblings miss and grief	Attendance at funeral Traditions – Christmas tree decoration Charity
Case Study 2 Jess, Mollie, Lennie & Albie	Living children both subsequent siblings Development of relationship with unknown sibling	Traditions & rituals Graveside as a sacred space Religion (lack of) Nurturing of relations between siblings Charity
Case Study 3 Ella, Gabriel, Lizzie & Harry	Death of an expected sibling Lack of cognitive understanding Visualised sister in his mind Expression through drawings and talking Continuing bonds – stories from older sibling Subsequent sibling very vocal	Photographs at home Memory boxes Memorial ornaments for birthday and Christmas Drawing Picture book
Case Study 4 Sarah, Zia, Zander & Alfie	Time in hospital as a family Tender conversations Stories from surviving sibling	Funeral Treasure boxes Photographs at home Memorial jewellery Celebration of birthday

5.2 Tender Conversations with young children about the death of their sibling

5.2.1 Jenny (1)

Jenny had been fully involved in her younger brother's care from when he was diagnosed with cancer when she was five until his death two years later. Jean (CS1) reflected on how accustomed her young daughter had become to the notion of dying and the challenges of keeping their family unit together:

And you know, she saw him, she saw him in treatment, and we would pick her up from school of an evening and go straight to the hospital. We're trying to keep the family unit together, but it was very difficult at times.

As Louis relapsed and became very unwell, the family continued to include Jenny and talked to her about the fact that her brother would die. Jean remembers:

He ended up in hospital about ten days before he died, Jenny was involved. She saw him the day before he died. She came and read a book to him which was actually very emotional. He kept pointing his finger in the air when she was reading to him... she doesn't have any recollection of that, but it was very special.

When Louis died, Jean spoke of how she [and the children's father], told Jenny the next day and expressed her astonishment at Jenny's reaction.

She wasn't with him when he died, but we went to pick her up... and we sat down and we said, I think she was on my lap and I said, you know, really sorry, but Louis died last night. No emotion, nothing at all. It was almost like she knew... she just seemed to know, and there was no emotion when we told her, there was nothing. Just very, very, very bizarre. It sort of took me back really that she didn't show any emotion.

Of course, it would not be reasonable to assume why Jenny did not react as expected when she was told that her brother had died, but research is clear that young children are easily overwhelmed by emotion and so oscillate in and out of their grief; they puddle jump to protect their immature emotional capacity. Funk et al (2018) also acknowledge that when death is expected or anticipated, a "diffuse and gradual grief can be noted" (p6).

Seyderhelm (2019) posits that children's ability to grieve is dependent on their attachment style but acknowledges that children's grief reactions may not be immediately clear to parents. Jean's assumptions that Jenny had not expressed any emotion is countered by the understanding that the ease in which children can refer to death may lead adults to believe there is an absence of grief when in fact Jenny may have been too young to be able to articulate this significant loss.

Jenny's parents managed their daughter's grief in the manner they felt was appropriate for their child, but Jean reflected on what happened next. Jenny acknowledged that the family had post death matters to address and there was also the need to inform the school. Jenny's calm reaction to her brother's death may have contributed to Jean's decision to send her in to school. However, children faced with the loss of a sibling can experience numbness and shock along with a sense of confusion and disorientation (Pettle et al, 1995; Dryegrov, 1994). Jean observed:

So, this was a Sunday and rightly or wrongly we actually sent her to school on the Monday morning. We wanted to try and keep life as normal as possible for her. We had things to organise, and we wanted to tell the school, so it was a very emotional morning as you can imagine... I don't know if it was the right or the wrong thing to do.

Mallon (2018) discusses resilience in children noting that "a resilient child is not only a child in a certain set of circumstances, but ultimately a child with a certain set of attitudes" (p18). Extensive research has been carried out by bereavement charities who found that bereaved children have better outcomes if they have strong attachments and positive relationships to at least one adult and are able to maintain a healthy connection to the deceased. Jenny's family had maintained a strong bond throughout their child's illness and subsequent death and in the immediacy, Jenny had benefitted from this support. However, Jenny's grief became more visible and was evidenced in outbursts of anger and aggression over small issues. The literature review of this study acknowledges that young children have unique challenges managing their grief due to a combination of factors including underdeveloped cognitive skills and an immature ability to express overwhelming emotions (Ferow, 2019).

Despite the school being small and the staff knowing about Jenny's loss, the transition into Key Stage 3, brought to the fore Jenny's delayed grief. A lack of understanding from a class teacher created circumstances where Jenny's outburst of emotion and anger were identified as deviance and disruption. Siblings are often neglected in their grief; Paris et al (2009) argue that far more is known and acknowledged about parental grief and there is a false assumption that children's grief reactions are different both in their manifestation and duration from an adult's grief. This can lead young children being labelled inappropriately by educators and their behaviour misunderstood which may negatively impact their educational success. It could also be argued that Jenny's grief is disenfranchised; Doka (1989, p4) noted that disenfranchised grievers experience grief that is not socially accepted. In addition, he noted that grief can become disenfranchised if the relationship, the loss, and the griever are not recognised. For Jenny, there may have been assumptions that she was no longer experiencing grief or a lack of knowledge regarding how children grieve. She reflects.

It was like, she (Jenny's teacher) was telling us that she's got low self-esteem on one hand and then the next minute she was throwing her out of the classroom saying she was acting like a two-year-old. Well, how did you expect her to be? You know, so we had a lot of back and forth with Jenny's behaviour. This is her grief, absolutely.

As Jenny developed, Jean acknowledged that her cognitive thinking changed as did her desire to speak about her sibling.

I noticed when she went to middle school when she was in Year 5, I was worried because of her behaviour, but we never had a problem. But what was interesting is that she never told anybody that she's lost her brother. She didn't want to be seen as different... She has friends now who know, she just doesn't make a big thing of it. I think that is a way of protecting herself possibly... She doesn't talk a lot about him.

Children's grief is intricately linked with their development and therefore it is not unusual to see a delay in how they grieve. Jenny adjusted her grief as she aged although this does not mean that her grief had ended; rather she was entering a different phase. Jean still reflects on her daughter's grief and whether as a young child this significant part of her life was fully understood. These reflections from Jean illustrates that grief is not linear and that it may

appear at any stage of a child's life. Jenny's emotional behaviour did not appear to elicit any intervention response from the school and whilst it is difficult to ascertain why the classroom teacher responded to Jenny in this less than supportive way, it is evident that Jenny's emotional distress was a way of communicating with her teacher about her ongoing grief. This speaks to the kind of conversations which are seen to be permitted and normal in educational settings and that a child's changing comprehension of death needs further consideration across education to account for changes in behaviour which are linked to emotional difficulties associated with their bereavement.

5.2.2 Lennie (2)

Lennie and his younger brother Albie are unique to this study as they are the only two siblings born years after their sister's death and so they had no knowledge of or expectations of a sibling. Mollie died in an incident at her nursery in 2012 aged nine months; Lennie was born three years later in 2015 and Albie was born in 2017. Their mother Jess passionately believes in maintaining the sibling relationship between all three of her children and it was clear that this relationship was created right at the start of Lennie's life.

Whilst Lennie has never known his sister in the living world, now aged seven, he is able to consider what his sister may look like if she were alive. In his work with children who were parentally bereaved, Worden (1996) noted how children could construct an inner representation of their deceased parent which allowed for the continuation of a relationship. Jess had observed how Lennie had a mental representation of his sister and could compare her to other children of that age:

A meeting with a friend a few weeks ago, quite a good friend of mine but Lennie hasn't met her before, she has a daughter who is two days older than Mollie and when we were there, Lennie said Mummy, is that what Mollie will be like? Is that what my sister would be like? So, he knows consciously, like he knows that ten-year-old girls are what his sister would be like and it's nice that he sees that and doesn't get upset.

It was clear that Jess had always intended to ensure that Mollie's position in their family is continued, her presence felt and that her actions to facilitate this create an environment where her young son felt at ease in speaking about his sister and that his emotional

wellbeing and attachment to his mother was securely presented. Jess spoke about how the children managed their sibling relationship with their friends at nursery and school:

They talk about Mollie and Lennie came home one day and told me, oh, we have been talking about my sister and everybody knows that she lives on a cloud... You know he has been brought up knowing all about her and he talks about her and probably a year into school, his friends realised he had a sister who isn't here any more.

Meyer et al (2017) argue that whilst continuing a bond after the death of a loved one is viewed as a healthy way to grieve, that bond can only happen symbolically if it existed in the first place. Instead of categorising the relationship that Lennie and Albie have with Mollie as continuing, Meyer et al (2017) refer to it as an imagined bond. This study has acknowledged the ways in which siblings stay connected to their deceased brother or sister and note that families are able to construct ongoing bonds through traditions and rituals (Fanos et al, 2009), but few researchers have explored the sibling experiences for those who did not know their brother or sister in the living world.

Although one of the mothers in the study (CS3) had referred to having a sense of spirituality, Jess was the only mother who spoke about religion in more concrete terms and the way it had influenced how Lennie speaks about his sister.

Following Mollie passing away, I completely turned away against religion; I was very much in the mind that this shouldn't happen to parents... if there was something out there then this wouldn't happen and so we very much turned away from religion. Following that, that's the easiest way we explain it to the boys, that Mollie lives on a cloud.

Conversations about grief and loss, life and death, hope and heaven are a few of the lifelong conversations that parents have with their children when death comes into their lives; Jess is showing Lennie that these are safe conversations to have. They can be intimidating stories to tell, but they are normal and natural following the death of a sibling, even if that sibling was not known in the living world. Lennie has confidence and belief in his mother's story about his sister and is willing and able to assert himself when his beliefs are challenged.

I had this conversation with Lennie last week because his school were talking about Heaven, and he said to me I told my teacher we don't believe in heaven and that my sister's on a cloud. So, he's very active and he's quite confident in saying we have different beliefs, which I think is really good at his age. He can change his beliefs as he gets older, but as a family now, that is how we bring our children up to think that she's there and she's always watching us.

Lennie's school journey had been positive in that the nursery he attended had been willing to embrace and understand how the family continued a bond with Mollie and Jess was keen that when Lennie went to school that this was continued, but again the concept of religion confused Lennie and Jess spoke to the school about her concerns in protecting Lennie's emotional wellbeing.

I just wanted then to understand how we bring him up and our beliefs. They did a lesson about drawing, and they made them draw Jesus and talk about Heaven. So, Lennie came home very confused as that is not what we had spoken to him about. I spoke with the school about families who are agnostic and the school talk to the children now in R.E. at the end of the lesson, they say that some people don't have any beliefs and that is fine.

Whilst the school is accommodating in their conversations about religion with young children, it is interesting to note that there is no wider discussion around bereavement nor staff training to support children like Lennie. There are currently no recorded numbers of bereaved children in school settings in the United Kingdom despite a 2004 survey which recorded around 3.5% of children aged 5-16 were bereaved of a sibling or parent (Fauth et al, 2009). United Kingdom Child Bereavement charities are currently lobbying the government to record the number of bereaved children in educational settings to ensure service development is planned for and to give support to more research on how bereavement impacts children's lives. To encourage more open conversations about death and to reduce concerns from adults about how to speak to young children more effort is required to make death an accepted part of life and one which is worthy of conversation both at home and within school. Jess spoke of how Lennie had managed to circumnavigate his confusion, with a poignant and light-hearted anecdote demonstrating the resilience of children when navigating their understanding of family grief when their emotional and

attachment needs are met, but also the need for schools to be more bereavement aware to be able to engage with children like Lennie and to protect their religious, spiritual, or family beliefs.

*Lennie came home and he was like, how do you draw Jesus when he doesn't exist?
He's like I didn't know what to do – so I just drew daddy.*

5.2.3 Gabriel (3)

The participants included a family whose baby was stillborn. This was unique to the study in that both Gabriel who was the eldest child and his sibling Harry who is a subsequent child had quite different grief experiences despite neither having known their sister in the living world. Erlandsson et al (2010) note that siblings who are grieving following a perinatal loss experience sadness and disappointment which can last over a period of time. The impact of perinatal loss is under researched however, despite this “perinatal sibling death is considered an event with impact determined by the interaction of the child’s emotional and cognitive responses with the reactions, distortions, and communications of the parents” (Leon, 2009, p1).

Gabriel was three at the time his mother was expecting a baby sister. The stillbirth of Lizzie created a situation of confusion and distress for Gabriel and highlights the challenges of how to support a young child who is experiencing grief when the mother is grieving herself:

I was pregnant with Lizzie in 2009 slash 2010. Gabriel was three at the time when Lizzie passed away and yeah, he was really looking forward to having a sibling

So, Gabriel didn't see Lizzie in reality because at that point there wasn't an encouragement... you know for that sort of thing to happen and initially our instinct is to protect our children.

And so, Gabriel's initial sort of reaction, you know, obviously I'd been very heavily pregnant and suddenly the baby, you know, wasn't there. So aside from obviously saying Lizzie had gone to heaven at that point, we said to him, you know, physically, he really wanted to know where had she, where was she, where had she gone

His mother Ella conveyed the challenges in explaining death to a young child and how the language used, despite her best intentions, caused further confusion. The use of euphemism to explain death is a common feature particularly when talking with young children. Euphemisms can be used as alternative words to those connected to death; two families (CS2 & 3) in this study used euphemisms to answer their young children's questions about their sibling. Rawlings et al (2017) state that euphemisms are used to soften words that are considered too harsh and, in her need to protect Gabriel, Ella tried to explain the unexplainable to Gabriel:

I do believe we go on somewhere else, whatever that may be. And in some respects, and through me wanting to talk, to tell Gabriel about that, he got confused. I didn't understand at the time that was due to his cognitive development.

Talking openly about death to a young child can be distressing; However, it can also support children to build their resilience and emotional strength. It validates Gabriel's feelings and shows him that there is no shame in celebrating a baby who died before birth. Ella sought guidance from bereavement charity SANDS and deepened her understanding and knowledge of how young children grieve and the importance of using clear, age-appropriate language when explaining death. Pettle and Britten (1995) note that as children do not understand concepts of death, and their questions may centre around the reversibility of death and act as though the dead person's whereabouts and wellbeing is of concern. There was additional confusion for Gabriel as there had been no forewarning of Lizzie's death and therefore his questions become more constant and persistent:

Initially, yes, he wanted to see her. He said, well why can't I go and see her? You know where she is so how do we get there? Can we take a rocket... can we? And he was worried that she was cold or if she was hungry or if she was lonely. Who was looking after her... if she was in this place called heaven, who was there with her?

Ella reflected on how difficult she had found it to protect Gabriel's emotional wellbeing whilst in the depths of her own grief. O'Leary (2011) posits that surviving siblings may experience a range of difficulties following a perinatal loss including the grief of their parents, substantial changes to their family equilibrium and feelings of disappointment and sadness which may never go away. Therefore, it is critical that health, education, and other

adults within the child's environment are prepared to speak confidently and with clarity to bereaved young children who are managing their grief following the death of their sibling.

There were unique challenges for Gabriel; his age and cognitive immaturity meant that he understood death, but not permanency. Erlandsson et al (2010) note that perinatal grief has a uniqueness to it; it is part of a mother's identity and is entwined with anticipation and despair, but siblings are supported when their mother engages them in their mourning. Cain et al (1964) noted that children often felt puzzled and confused about what had happened to their expected sibling and would seek answers, but these would only make sense if they were at the right level of development. Furthermore, Willer et al (2018) identify communication challenges for children who have experienced their mother's pregnancy loss and highlight studies which evidence allowing a child to express themselves through drawing can promote expression of thought and support children to navigate complex emotions.

Ella had to support Gabriel to understand the loss of a child that had not existed to him:

It was having lots of conversations with him about his feelings and his emotions. And he did lots and lots of drawings that he wanted to send to Lizzie or that he just wanted them up all over the place...even though he hadn't seen her, he imagined her with red hair because he's got red hair and just his whole way of thinking was he wanted to talk about her you know and if people came to the house, he's like my sister's died

Ella reflected on how difficult she found Gabriel's openness outside of their immediate family and home and how she made a determined shift in the language that she used to better enable him to grapple with the concept of permanency and to support him to talk about his feelings. This demonstrates the inability of children aged 3 to understand abstract concepts and that talking to children in simple, factual language support children in their ability to think about death (Brooten and Youngblut, 2017)

I changed my way of you know I brought in words dead, dying, explained what that means the heart has stopped. It means I went into the real mechanics of of what that means because I think they just, well why can't, why can't you come back to life? Why can't you come back?

Gabriel suffered from anxiety about his mother's health asking whether she would die too; Ella discussed again how her language had confused Gabriel's immature thinking.

When I was saying earlier about language and euphemisms, when I was saying initially, she's gone to sleep, I thought that would protect him. Then he didn't want to go to sleep because he thought he might die. He kept waking up and checking if we were alive. Then I said she was really sick so whenever he was unwell, he's like am I going to die now?

Ella emphasised the importance of allowing Gabriel to talk and to be led by him rather than by his parents. She explained the challenges of finding appropriate ways to talk to a young child about death particularly when Gabriel could not visualise his sister. Children of Gabriel's age are dependent on their parents to support them through their grief and to ensure they remain emotionally healthy. The literature review (Crehan, 2004) highlighted that when a child lacks verbal capacity to express such complex emotions, they may express their grief and confusion through play. Whilst Ella did not speak of any adverse behavioural issues for Gabriel, she remarked on his need to constantly draw:

He could voice whatever he wanted when he wanted. And we were you know very much led by him. We were not sort of saying let's talk about Lizzy. He would literally be doing it through everything that he was doing at that time. Painting, drawing, acting, little things. I would say Gabriel was kind of working through it and we just sort of managed it. We tried to get a book but couldn't and anything I did find, he was like, well that's not my sister. It wasn't relatable for him as he had Lizzy in his head.

We just kind of took each day as it came... and I think from my perspective I became much more protective of Gabriel. I know this is about him and the siblings, but he needed routine, he needed to know that life still carried on and that he still went to nursery and still went to bed. We kept those things in place to help at that age to make him feel as grounded as possible.

Ella's relationship with Gabriel and her nurturing of his wellbeing clearly supported him to work through his feelings and loss over the death of his sister. Mallon (2018) reminds us

that young children can pick up and put down their grief, but the love around them is the protective measure which sustains them.

This family found it challenging to access appropriate resources on how to explain death to a young child and support their young son, exposing the realities of supporting young children in their grief. Nevertheless, Ella was determined to protect Gabriel and to seek expertise to better understand his grief and gain knowledge of language suitable to support everyone to work through their grief together. Nonetheless, the discomfort of others in speaking about a child's death, threatened to undermine Ella's protection and interrupt Gabriel's grief. Ella spoke candidly about how uncomfortable it can be for parents to talk about death with their children and how this can lessen opportunities to talk about Lizzie and risks making Gabriel feel uncertain of speaking about his sister. Naturally, Ella was not alone in the grief over Lizzie's stillbirth; her immediate family and friends would also have been included in addition to those acquaintances at Gabriel's school. This discussion exposes the fear experienced by parents surrounding young children and death, but communication and shared conversations about death can contribute to easing anxieties surrounding how death is spoken about.

There's this whole thing of, you know what you say and it's better to say I don't know what to say...and I think there's this perception again of children, you know, kind of no,no,no. Like we don't. They don't want to have that conversation with their child about where Gabriel or Harry's sister has gone.

some parents said they wouldn't want to tell their child that the school tortoise had died, or you know they would buy another fish, absolutely adamant that they did not want to go there or have the conversation as it was not suitable. I can understand that point, but it is time for a change

In an endeavour to help her young sons manage their grief, feel confident in talking about their sister and answer their questions, Ella used her career background in creativity to create and illustrate a picture book. We spoke about how the children were involved in its production; it is evident that Ella's love for her daughter and her determination to ensure that her young sons benefitted from a healthy grief environment contributed to their emotional wellbeing. Ella reflected:

the drawings were right on the table, cut out you know. The illustrations and they were really involved with what to go in the pictures and yeah absolutely throughout the whole experience. I talked to them obviously about if they were happy to be part of the book, for their names to be used and they said yes because they wanted other boys and girls to know. There are special things in the book that me and the boys know what they are and the minute it was printed Harry wanted to take it into school

Children's picture books are a useful way to support young children as they experience grief and begin to understand and manage their emotions. Furthermore, a picture book can help adults to have honest and concrete conversations through the stories and can be important for a child's grief reaction. Wiseman (2012) argues that it is important for adults to understand that children's grief reactions can be long lasting, contain misconceptions and are reflective of their family values, beliefs, and culture. Therefore, picture books can provide images and texts which relate to death.

5.2.4 Zia (4)

Zia's family also spent time in hospital with an unwell child. Zander had been unwell since birth but was diagnosed with a heart condition when he was four months old and had heart surgery at eleven months old. During this time, Zia had her third birthday, and this was spent in hospital with her brother. Indeed, her mother Sarah acknowledged that Zia was always very much involved with her baby brother's care:

during the month that Zander was in hospital. We'd had Zia's birthday as well. She's even spent her third birthday lying next to her brother's intensive care bed. So, I think we have always been very open with that... and his open-heart surgery we were always very open and honest with that.

Sarah explained how she had told Zia that Zander had died and the clear and honest language that she used. Sarah also reflected on Zia's age and how her grief was more obvious at times and less at others. Grief can quickly overwhelm young children; it is important that adults in a child's inner circle are aware of how children experience grief and are able to separate their own behaviours from that of their child. Sarah remembered:

We very much were open and honest with her about how he died and that he had a poorly heart and he'd gone to heaven, and she wouldn't see him again and that takes a bit of time for children to get in their head, especially at a young age

You would notice that she would go into this grief and then come out of it... I still see it. I wouldn't say she shuts down; she doesn't shut down at all, but she might suddenly ask a question about Zander and that's fine.

Sarah conveyed that whilst Zia was comfortable to express her grief to her parents and to ask questions about Zander, two experiences with family and friends had caused confusion and distress. In speaking of how open the family are about Zander and how Zia's friends are aware of her sibling, a family friend spoke to Zia about the new baby Archie. Insensitive conversations threaten the ability to be open about a child death and can in turn hinder the sibling's ability to speak about Zander. If siblings' grief is to be more commonly spoken about in society, it is imperative that parents continue to support and converse with their children. This is a noticeable feature across the study; parents have constructed and facilitated ways in which their children can speak confidently about their dead sibling but a lack of knowledge about child grief can create barriers:

A family friend's child said to her: Zia, you've got to make mummy and daddy feed this baby because she didn't feed the last one and he died. I saw her face drop, so I explained the real reason to her friend. No, no he didn't die because he wasn't fed... I think it was because of the tubes. They are just misconceptions, but Zia's face, and I really felt for her because she is always so open, and she doesn't mind. She shut down at that point, as though we had done something wrong and so I explained to her friend that that wasn't right. I am always a little wary when her friends come round, are they going to say oh who's that?

Sarah's anxiety surrounding how others speak to her young daughter about Zander could be addressed at home and Zia could be comforted straight away by her mother. However, the next experience took place at school, where Zia was separated from her mother and unable to convey her ongoing relationship with Zander:

So last year her school they were doing a family tree, and it wasn't until a couple of days later, she just said Mummy I am upset and it's because my teacher said I

couldn't draw Zander in my picture on my family tree. She obviously didn't tell me at the time, but it was something that had obviously played on her mind, so I was very much straight away when was this? Who was it? And would you like me to ring the school?

I raised it with the teacher, and it was a teaching assistant in a PSHE lesson. I raised it with the teacher, and she was quite shocked. It wasn't even about that ... there's children in the class who have lost siblings and because Zia had been told to draw her current family. When she asked if she could draw people who had died, she was told no. It is because the assumption is that people in families who die are old.

Assumptions and ignorance about children and their lives can lead to confusion and distress in young children. Sarah's determination to protect her daughter and to educate the teaching staff was evident when she spoke and the actions that she took with her youngest child. In a similar experience to that of the children in CS2, whilst the school were receptive to Sarah's discussions around her children and the sibling group, she did not refer to any interventions by the school or any request for staff training:

I do tend to make the school aware now and Alfie's nursery, aware that they've had another brother that died because the name will come up, you know in situations.

Shared communications between families, children and educators can anticipate and alleviate any misunderstandings and anxieties and how families speak about death. A shift in thinking throughout health, education and society is needed so that adults can feel more at ease when speaking about death and become role models for children experiencing bereavement. Children need to hear conversations about death and have access to resources which also explore the death of a child in addition to the predicted deaths of elderly grandparents. This will help to alleviate any dilemmas faced by adults when children speak to them about death.

5.3 Subsequent siblings & continuing bonds

'Plenty of memories, said Nightingale. Ghosts, I was thinking, memories – I wasn't sure there was a difference' (Abramovitch, 2011, p1407)

The subsequent siblings have a significant space in this study; it was their stories which initially attracted me to this area of research and the question of whether subsequent children grieve a sibling who they did not know. Kempson et al (2008) reminds us that transgenerational grief can be related to grief responses to an unknown sibling where the child's 'ghost' is an important part of family life. For the children in this study, their secure attachment and narratives from their parents supported their grief process, but it was interesting to note that for some of the children it was the older sibling who kept the dead child alive and maintained their relationship as a sibling group. Continued bonds for the subsequent siblings were facilitated through photographs, possessions, and shared memories. Two of the case study families explained the use of treasure or memory boxes where precious items were stored and shared as lasting memories to be passed down to the next sibling.

5.3.1 Billy (1)

Jean's third child Billy was born two years after Louis died and whilst his older sister had been fully immersed in the life and death of their brother, Billy has been fully immersed in his brother's memory. Jean recounted how Billy grieves the loss of a brother he did not know. Meyer and Ford (2017) acknowledged this in their own study noting that subsequent siblings were able to interact with their dead sibling and that their bond comes from the narratives told to them. This was evident in Billy's case story as his mother described the distress Billy felt that he had not known Louis; Billy had constructed an identity for himself as a brother and constructed an imaginary bond with Louis created through the stories and visual reminders of his brother passed down from his parents and older sister. Louis then became real to Billy and in turn his grief for this unknown sibling also became real to him. Meyer et al (2017) argue that although these bonds are imaginary, they are no less real to the child:

He gets upset sometimes. Yeah, he does get really upset. Oh, must have been last year and they were doing something at school, and he came in the car, and he just started crying and he said mummy I miss Louis and yeah, he does get upset

He's quite a sensitive soul, but he talks about him a lot, a lot more than Jenny does really. So, you know I suppose he's like intrigued because he never met him and it's like what was he like and I wish I had met him.

Jean acknowledged the challenges for subsequent children and reflected on the difficulties found in people outside of their family understanding a subsequent sibling's grief:

You know if a child loses a sibling there should be a plan in place at their school and everybody's aware. Billy having not known Louis but going into an educational setting and talking about a brother who he didn't know but has a relationship with. And I think for the subsequent child, is it harder for the subsequent child because they didn't know? They didn't know them and so it is harder to articulate or to express their grief.

5.3.2 Lennie & Albie (2)

As subsequent siblings, Jess has had to create a relationship between her children; both those in the living world and their sister Mollie. Lennie is now seven and Albie is four and both children have been raised with the awareness that they have a sister and that she is very much part of their lives. Their mother Jess spoke with a determination that her living children should have a relationship with their older sister and that this has been nurtured right from the start of their lives. Secure attachments and continuing bonds contribute to emotional security for children when they are faced with situations beyond their cognitive understanding. Unlike Billy (CS1) and Harry (CS3) who felt frustration and anger at not knowing their older brother, Lennie and Albie appear to be securely attached to their sister through their imagined bond. They exhibit no distress at a lack of direct memory and are content to be part of the narratives told by their mother and feel pride and excitement in their sister and the conversations about her; Lennie and Albie are not experiencing the traditional separation anxiety referred to by Ainsworth et al (2015), but there are minimal studies available which could explore this further and seek how subsequent children with imagined bonds and no secure attachment to the deceased manage their sibling death experience.

Fivush (2008, p49) notes that the stories that we construct about our lives "define who we are as individuals, within particular families, culture and historical periods". Fivush's thinking

resonates clearly with how Lennie and Albie create an imaginary bond with their unknown sibling. Children are surrounded by stories, of their parents, their grandparents, family, and friends. Fivush (2008) argues that such autobiographical narratives shape a child's understanding of their world and the world in which they live. Lennie and Albie are dependent on these narratives to be able to tell stories of themselves and to construct the building blocks of themselves as younger brothers to an older sister.

So, it's always been part of them. The first place I took them after we came out of the hospital was to Mollie's grave and so we started literally within days of them being born. And so, it became quite normal for the, you know, at a very, very young age to be taken down there and which is through the years led to an amazing place where they want to go as well.

Jess spoke with conviction that her three children had and would continue to have a bond and was aware of their change in understanding as they became older. She conveyed her happiness that Lennie & Albie were aware of their relationship with their sister and were able to talk about her and to include her in their day to day lives, highlighting that in their living world, the construct of an older sister was alive in their psychological reality. This fluidity between the living and the dead enables the transmission of the mother's fantasies and expectations of her children's relationship and has been noted by several theorists (Meyer et al,2017; Crehan, 2004)

They have got a very strong relationship considering they've never met their sister and they talk about her as though she was here and like they have met her. They've definitely got a feeling that they have got a normal sibling relationship even though they haven't met which I love because that's what I only wanted

Yeah, I don't think people should be forgotten by children. And I think it's really important you know even if my kids haven't met their sister. It was always really important to me that they knew they had a sister and how much she was loved and everything about her. I think it's really important they grow up knowing that you don't forget people like that.

For Jess, there have been challenges about how Lennie and Albie speak openly about their sister and some confusion from other parents and school friends. Jess reflected on how both her family, friends and school support the children in their imagined bonds with Mollie.

I know some of the parents at Lennie's school have struggled with the way that we talk about Mollie and how open Lennie is. You know the child's come home and said he's been talking about his sister, and they are confused. And I've just explained very clearly that he's not going to be ashamed for having a sister that's not here

Jess mused that the parents are not preventing Lennie from talking about his sister, it is more that it is difficult for people to understand the theory of continuing bonds, but Jess is willing to openly talk as a way both to keep her daughter a part of their lives and to ensure her young sons are supported and understood by those who are in their lives. Holland (2008) suggests that the taboo nature of death creates challenges for schools, for whilst public outpourings of grief may be tolerable in society for example those seen following Princess Diana's death, the personal grief of children and their parents is more uncomfortable and more so when the deceased is a child. Jackson and Colwell (2001) argue that adults including educators can be fearful of speaking about death considering it to be too morbid and may cause children anxiety about their own loved ones.

It's not that they don't want him talking about it, it's more like can you kind of help me explain it to my child. So, the teacher has done a bit of a chat with the children in Lennie's class. In particular about you know Lennie's sister isn't here but he still thinks about her and talks about her a lot and she is a big part of his family, so that's massively helped the children in his class having understanding about it as well.

5.3.3 Harry (3)

Ella found out she was pregnant with Harry on the first anniversary of Lizzie's death which caused a mixture of emotions. Ella reflected that she had become used to Gabriel being more private regarding his grief in the later years, but her subsequent child had also needed to speak out:

Harry was born after Lizzie, but he is very very vocal about Lizzie even though he was born after. He and his brother both have different grief experiences but they both very much think of her as their sister and talk about her regularly.

Ella spoke about her children's grief and how Gabriel had been the memory keeper for their sister despite his early age:

Harry had no understanding of Lizzie in his living world, but I would say he started to ask questions about Lizzie at about the same age that Gabriel was. Gabriel would be having conversations with Harry from when he was born about you know my sister Lizzie and he would be talking and holding Harry on the sofa and be talking about her. Obviously, Harry didn't know anything at that point but right from when he was born, she was there.

In a comparable way to the other participants, Ella acknowledged how Harry became uncertain about where the sister he was being told so much about was. Whilst Gabriel had passed down stories of Lizzie for all of Harry's life, as his cognitive abilities developed his questions became more focused on his own position within the sibling group. Illustrated case studies (Cain et al, 1964) highlight that parents who have not fully grieved for their dead child can risk putting expectations on to a subsequent baby and as such that child may have feelings of being a replacement and expected to fill a void. Harry's immature thinking and his distress and confusion coincide with his developmental stage and would require careful conversations from his family:

And so, Harry got really upset about where Lizzie was, and you know whether we would have had him if Lizzy had lived. All sorts of different questions but all the real tears, real about crying for her and her not being here for him to be able to cuddle. He didn't want to take her things to Heaven like Gabriel did, he would ask Gabriel things like can Lizzie come back? Do you think she can see us? And the little conversations they would have together.

There is a scarcity of literature which pertains to how siblings share the memories of a sibling known to one and not to the other and even less so for the younger age group. The idea of transgenerational grief proposed by Doka (1999) is the closest theory in understanding how siblings share not only their stories of the dead sibling, but also their grief. Critically, the surviving sibling's wellbeing is dependent on a successful journey

through grief with this work in progress being dependent on their developmental stage as young children do not have the coping strategies available to adults. Ella recounted the conversations between Gabriel and Harry as they navigated their grief:

I observed one conversation where Gabriel said I think Lizzie is an angel and angels can come back to earth if they want to. But Harry really struggled at school because he wanted every year when they did the About Me and Harry would say I have a sister but other children in the group would say what do you mean? I know there are more resources now but for him it was about people acknowledging that he did have a sister.

This appeared as a common feature in the stories of the subsequent sibling; all the mothers in the study indicated that their children experienced the loss of their sibling in some way and experienced barriers to their ongoing relationship due to discomfort from people in their immediate environment. Ella emphasised this point and illuminated the notion that subsequent siblings do grieve and that this should be better acknowledged in society:

The overwhelming thing I would say is just because Harry was born after doesn't mean that he still hasn't gone through or and is going through a grieving process.

5.3.4 Alfie (4)

Alfie was born eleven months after the death of his brother Zander and is now three years and six months old. His mother Sarah spoke of their family unit and their continued bond with Zander. Funk et al (2018) reveals how participants in their study continued a relationship with their dead sibling despite not knowing them in the living world. This relationship included having photographs of their older brother or sister in their bedroom. Sarah spoke of how Alfie's presence has not been diminished:

So, we still very much include Zander in Alfie's life. Alfie has Zander's room; we changed it a bit though as we didn't want it to be a shrine, a sad place. But we kept a lot of his stuff, and he has pictures of Zander in his room and some of his toys and clothes.

Sarah reflected on how Alfie began to question his relationship to Zander and his own position within the sibling group:

When Alfie started to think and understand Zander, it was first of all he could see pictures and say "well have I got a tube in my nose" so he was seeing himself and I'd be like that isn't you that is Zander. Then he'd ask where am I in that picture? He would see Zia and me and his dad and wonder where he was and why he wasn't there?

Sarah spoke of how Zia continues a bond with Zander and talks to Alfie about their brother and how she believes their bond will be continue through these conversations and the memories that Zia shares with Alfie:

If she is playing with Alfie, if he's looking at pictures or something, she says that's your big brother and she very much speaks to Archie a lot about him.

Zia includes him... we was on holiday last week and they collected shells off the beach so they could put them on his grave and I did a postcard; I always do wherever we go, and Zias wanted to write one as well, then Alfie also wanted to. So, he's obviously copying and it's not me that says let's go pick shells. They do it you know off their own back and like I said, if they didn't mention that I wouldn't force it

5.4 Rituals & Traditions

"Ritual is a practice that seeks to make the repressed visible... in ritual space, something inside of us shimmers, quickens and aligns itself with a larger, more vital element"

(Weller,2015, p412)

The journey following the death of a child is marked by a myriad of emotions from sorrow to bittersweet remembrance. Amid this emotional turbulence, the familiarity of traditions can serve as a lifeline, offering a sense of continuity when everything else seems to be shattered. It may be an annual holiday gathering or a ceremony to honour the child's memory, these customs take on renewed significance when families use continuing bonds to stay connected with their child. The impact of loss on family traditions is complex and multi-faceted as some memories carry comfort and others cause pain. As families make decisions to maintain, create or let go of traditions and rituals, they embark on a delicate process of redefining their sense of togetherness. This interplay between grief and tradition can lead to new ways of connecting, as families find creative ways to celebrate the life of their dead child whilst nurturing the bonds that endure. The rituals and traditions that

follow a death are universal and culturally situated; one of the most familiar and obvious display of a ritual event which crosses cultures is the funeral and despite the involvement of a child, funerals can still be seen as celebratory; they connect communities and reflect love and togetherness. (Romanoff, 1997). Furthermore, whilst the funeral can be viewed as a ritual, it is separate from post bereavement rituals which support grieving families over time. The study found that there were differing rituals surrounding the child's funeral, but that all the families continued with bereavement rituals and spoke of how these acted as an anchor to their child and continued despite some changes over time.

Whilst the previous theme focused on talking to siblings about death, this theme explores the rituals and traditions that the families have, which facilitate a continued bond with their dead child. These include funeral and cemetery practices and the continued bonds through use of mementoes and memorials. Harris and Edmonds (2023) note that rituals have been performed by grieving humans to remember, commemorate and to connect to their dead loved ones. This section explores the ritualistic practices and grief traditions that the families use from the funeral through to lasting memorials and commemorations used to facilitate continued bonds and to maintain relationships between the children.

5.4.1 Funeral & Cemetery Practice

In acknowledging the importance of funerals as a key step in supporting the grieving process, Fristad et al (2000) argue that little is known about how children manage such important rituals and where research is available, it is contradictory in evidencing whether children benefit from attending funerals and being included in post funeral traditions. The four families in this study had differing experiences regarding how they continue a bond with their dead child through traditions and rituals. All four of the mothers shared their reflections and thoughts about the funeral and cemetery practices and discussed their living children's involvement. Visiting a cemetery offers physical proximity to the dead; Klass (2006, p7) questions "if the goal of attachment behaviour is to maintain physical proximity, how should we understand the living maintaining continuing physical proximity for years even decades after death?" There are differing views regarding whether young children should attend funerals with Holland (2010) drawing on the findings of the 'Iceberg' study (Holland, 1999) undertaken into parental bereavement at York University. Whilst Holland's

(1999) study reported that children who attended their sibling's funeral experienced no negative experiences, those who did not attend expressed later regret.

5.4.1a Louis, Jenny & Billy (1)

Jenny had been fully involved with her brother's illness and subsequent death. Her mother spoke about how she had always been included in family funerals as a child and it was normal for her to include her young daughter in the days before Louis' death and the subsequent funeral ritual. Jean acknowledged the sadness of a child's funeral, but also the sense of community and that Jenny could be supported by her friends:

We had a bereavement in our family when I was a child, and we were never protected from it. We always went to funerals, we would stand by the graveside, we were exposed to it. Did Jenny go to Louis's funeral? Yes, yeah absolutely. She had the choice, she had the choice, but she wanted to go... I think children's funerals are very different. Yes, they are incredibly sad, but they are a little more colourful and a celebration and there was a lot of people and some of her friends were allowed to come as well, so it was as nice as it could be, but we didn't try to hide it.

Jean reflected that for some families, a child's attendance at a funeral was not appropriate as parents endeavour to protect their children, but she had clear views about how important she felt it was for Jenny to be there:

people would say they want to protect, but we thought very much that she needs to, this is her brother, let's say goodbye. She had been very involved in his death as well. She had been to see him after he died and was there in the run up to his death. We did activities with him and memory making. I think her lack of emotion when we told her he had died was because it was a set of stages for her... she had seen him in intensive care so that guided her rather than it being thrown upon her.

Holland (2004) argues that a child's grief can be evident at a funeral, but that this can be easily overlooked amidst parental grief. Other studies noted by Holland (2004) for example Jewett (1994) and Duffy (1995) all advocate for a child's attendance at the funeral and for their full involvement in the family rituals following a family death. Anderson (2020) concurs arguing that attendance at funerals offer children opportunities to demonstrate their own grief but also to observe the strong emotions displayed by adults. The way in which adults express their

grief at a funeral teaches young children about the mourning behaviour aligned with their own culture and that heightened emotions are appropriate and normal.

Jean then revealed how she had answered Billy's questions about where his brother had gone, acknowledging that as children's cognitive abilities change, their understanding of death can become more confusing. Oltenbruns (2001, p169) note that children who experience significant bereavement will often "regrieve" their loss as they age "from a different and more mature vantage point". This phenomenon can lead to contradictory findings about how children grieve in relation to their developmental context as Jean explained:

It's why I showed Billy the ashes actually. At that time when he was so inquisitive, and he couldn't get it. I think as they get older their understanding changes obviously, so then the questions change, and he you know started asking lots of questions. I thought well, the ashes are in a pot, and I showed it and I said that's that's Louis. I tried to say it in a way that he would understand, and you know I explained that some people are buried, but we had Louis cremated which means bodies burn and this is what is left. We talked about it a lot in great depth

It was interesting how he perceived it and that is the fascination of young children, yes, we don't always understand, but we've done the best we think we could have done, and we have never shied away at hiding things from him.

Anderson (2020) acknowledges that these after death rituals and rites support children to begin their understanding of the permanency of death and that they offer a way for children to work through their emotions. Jean is confident in her ability to show in practical terms what happens after a person dies and that she is emotionally available to talk this through with Billy.

5.4.1b Lennie & Albie (2)

As subsequent siblings, Lennie and Albie had not been involved in their sister's funeral, but the cemetery is a sacred space for the family imbued with Jess's hopes and dreams of a relationship between all her children. Jess had spoken previously about how the cemetery is the first place the family visited with each child within days of them being born and described it now as an 'amazing place' where Lennie and Albie like to go. Woodthorpe

(2020) argues that the cemetery is “much more than a static landscape of headstones, benches and rose gardens, the contemporary cemetery is a dynamic space filled with assumptions, activities and perspectives, some of which are contradictory” (p134). The data suggests that the graveside acts as a bridge between Mollie and her living siblings:

So, they come down regularly with me; I still go down two to three times a week and they come along for at least one of those visits and that's whether that's me, I planned on going down and now they at the stage where they ask to go down, which is really nice. Both of them do that now in the last six months, so they actively ask, can we go down to this place? Can we take a balloon? It's quite a normal place for them to go.

Klass (2006) notes that observing how people behave in a cemetery can offer a way to observe the social and cultural dynamics of grief in an equivalent way to how people behave at a funeral. In addition, Klass (2006, p6) suggests that visiting a cemetery immediately after a death is “an important element in the construction of the continuing bond both as an inner reality and as part of the family system”. Jess spoke of how she views the cemetery as a space where all three of her children can bond and maintain their sibling relationship and how she has modelled how to behave:

I always wanted it to be a place where they could go, when they are older. Like if they were to think or just be on their own and even now, I can see that it's going to be a thing they do when they're older. I have always taught them to behave well in cemeteries; I don't like it when children are running around, I don't think it's a place for that. So, they very quickly learn that when we see their sister they come, and they can play around her headstone... Mollie is buried under the headstone and so they can play on the grass. We have sat there and had picnics on there. We sit down there, and we read stories to her, but they also know that they can't walk anywhere else on the grass because they understand that people are buried there. So, they are very well behaved down there.

Bachelor (2020, p1) observes that visiting the grave of a loved one is a “high-participatory, value-laden, expressive activity, and a most significant observable behaviour of the recently bereaved” but argues that children rarely visit cemeteries for both cultural and social

reasons and that mother's rather than fathers were more likely to visit their child's grave. Mollie's grave holds an important space in Jess's life and is central in her continued bonds both for herself and the imagined bonds that have been constructed for her sons.

5.4.1c Lizzie, Gabriel & Harry (3)

Ella spoke poignantly about her and her husband's decisions regarding whether to cremate or bury Lizzie and their values and beliefs. Having previously mentioned her sense of spirituality, Ella's conversation about where she chose Lizzie's place had the same feel:

When we were initially deciding whether to bury Lizzie, we went to look at cemeteries and I think I was so overwhelmed with sadness going to the child place, I just found it really hard. And for me, I don't want to be buried, I like the idea of being sort of nature and going back to nature and so I wanted that for her as well. I had initially made the decision that I didn't want her to be buried and so we chose a special place. The boys have been going there since they were small, and we go every year for her birthday.

The family have now moved further away from Lizzie's place, but despite not visiting a specific marker, they remember Lizzy in different ways and look for signs that they can stay connected to her:

There are lots of little sort of bits and bobs which are around that are sort of nods to her, even if you wouldn't know it. And I think about rainbows being Lizzie, so whenever there's a rainbow, they go oh that's Lizzie. They do seem to pick up those moments. And camellias they are sort of her flower; we had a camellia that didn't have a single flower and then it bloomed and if we have been for a walk before her anniversary and it comes out again, the boys notice stuff like that.

5.4.1d Zander, Zia & Alfie (4)

Zia was three when her brother Zander died, and despite being involved in her brother's illness and death she did not attend his funeral:

The one thing we didn't do, which I do reflect back on it and think maybe, you know, you are always going to toy with yourself about what you should and shouldn't do. She didn't come to his funeral, and it was because I didn't feel strong enough. I didn't

know how I was going to react to his funeral and if I can't look after myself, how am I meant to look after a three-year-old

Despite this, Sarah did not exclude her young daughter from the rituals undertaken post funeral and when Zander's ashes were taken to the cemetery Zia accompanied her parents:

We took her to that and we was very open and honest with her about, what ashes are and why. We had always said he'd die, and we didn't use phrases like he was sleeping, but I do reflect that thinking I was strong enough to take her, I could have took her because I do feel like in later life, she's going to be like, why didn't you let me go? But I know at the time I just couldn't handle it and that was right for me at the time. Obviously, you think back, and I feel like I should have.

This conversation explores the conflict which exists in society about children attending funerals and highlighted that tensions and opposing views still exist within research. Anderson (2020) notes this question is rarely debated and yet suggests there are significant benefits to children attending the funeral of a loved one including helping the child to understand the permanency of death and the opportunity for children to witness strong grief reactions. Despite this, Anderson (2020) also acknowledges children as disadvantaged grievers arguing that young children have a disadvantage due to their immature cognitive abilities, their inability to express emotion and to describe how they feel to the important people in their lives. Anderson (2020, p25) states that young children "are great observers but poor interpreters, often making inaccurate, generalisations"

Sarah also spoke about visiting Zander's grave with both Zia and her subsequent child Alfie to mark seasonal celebrations and his birthday:

Because I always want to do something fun on his birthday. It's not a day to be sad, it's a day to be celebrated and the kids very much want to go to his grave, decorate it with balloons and banners and put cards down and the same at Christmas we do the exact same thing. It's not a sad time, we don't stand there crying and when we are there is very dependent on the kids.

In similar observations to Jess, Sarah also commented on the children's behaviour in the cemetery and how the time she spent there was dependant on whether the children

wanted to be there or could behave in the manner perceived by society as appropriate for this space. The data highlights the tensions of private and personal grief and the public mourning space of the cemetery particularly when children are visiting:

Sometimes I am only there a few minutes because it depends on what the children are dictating. If they're running around, I'm very conscious of, I don't want them treading on other graves. And if they'll help to water it, but if they're getting fed up, I'm not going to make them.

5.5. Building memories through continuing bonds

The mothers in this study discussed the ways in which they continued bonds with their child using new traditions which embrace and include all the siblings. Memories live inside us and contain our unique experiences, thoughts and connect us to our deceased loved ones.

Lowson (2004, p51) notes that memories “come through the moment to moment sharing, touching, showing, playing, making and noticing in the tender talk within the living moment”. For the families in this study, continued bonds were enacted through new and shared rituals both during everyday lives, (keeping the child alive through conversations, shared personal items) and for three of the families in the form of long-lasting tributes in the form of charities and a book. Continued bonds were observed in the rituals created for birthday and Christmas times and on the anniversary of the child’s death. Whilst funerals can be viewed as culturally specific, rituals which become part of family traditions are unique and distinct to each family. They are not particular rites of passage, but they do follow a pattern of regularity (Barnhill, 2011).

5.5.1a Jean, Louis, Jenny & Billy (1)

Jean reflected on what continuing bonds mean for her family:

It is continuing just to keep their memory alive, and I think for bereaved parents, the biggest fear is that people will forget their child. People at the time will remember, the anniversary, they will always remember birthdays and stuff like that. Now time has gone on you know, we might get a couple of people who remember.

Jean discussed the setting up of a charity to support other bereaved parents and whilst she did not use his name in the title, she liked how he could be acknowledged:

I set the charity up after he died. That wasn't really to keep his memory alive, but it's nice that he does get acknowledged with it. We did it on the day he died you know so it's probably a bad idea in hindsight.

Jean then spoke about their family traditions and the involvement of Louis's siblings:

We've got the thing with the charity now on his anniversary, but his birthday, we always have a cake for him, and Billy always blows the candles out. It's always a caterpillar cake because that was the two birthday cakes that he had when he was here. So, we always have a Colin the Caterpillar cake and Billy always blows the candles out. We used to do a lot more, specific things on his anniversary, but we don't do that so much anymore, but he's never forgotten.

Jean explored further the resilience of family traditions in the aftermath of a loss of a child. These interplays between grief and traditions lead to new ways of connecting as a family and offer creative ways for young children to nurture the bonds that endure.

people do still remember and talk fondly of him, which is lovely, and we do what we can and there are pictures are everywhere and that's right. There are pictures everywhere you he's around the house, but his picture never changes, he's still two and that's quite sad. I have a little place in the house, and we have a little tree with little memory things.

In addition to photographs, Jean revealed that she buys small ornaments for Louis. Jenny's desire to create a ritual to include Louis in the family Christmas celebrations is evident. Rituals after a child's death can provoke a sense of renewal within the family and these new rituals can contribute to healing. Barnhill (2011) observed that the creation of new traditions could be a way to support grieving, but other families found acknowledging deaths challenging in traditional holiday focused celebrations. Jean however felt that these small contributions to include Louis were of benefit to the children even though they had changed over time; he was not forgotten and was present in the fun times.

At Christmas, we always buy something from Swarovski like our little Christmas Angel or the Christmas stars. I used to do that every birthday anniversary and Christmas, but it did become expensive, so we did slow down. But we also buy something at

Christmas to acknowledge him and he sits on top of the Christmas tree with a grumpy face, and he's got angel wings and a little fallen halo, and he sits on top of the tree which is quite funny. But Jenny has been part of that and now Billy is obviously part of that now and he sees that we do the things that we do for him.

5.5.2b Jess, Mollie, Lennie & Albie (2)

For Jess, there is more emphasis on creating bonds and emotional connections as both Lennie and Albie are subsequent siblings. As previously discussed, the cemetery is a sacred space for this family and traditions and rituals are made there for Lennie and Archie and birthdays, anniversaries and Christmas are all celebrated together as a sibling group and a united family despite Jess's separation from her husband. This year however had seen a change in their tradition:

On special days, like, Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, and we all make sure we are down there together. Myself and the kids dad aren't together anymore, but that is something we strongly believe that we should all do together. On her birthdays, in fact, this year was a bit strange because up until this year, I've always like closed down on her birthday and this year I wanted it to be different, that we can get through this in a different way.

Jess explained that this year, the children's routines continued as usual so both Lennie and Archie attended nursery and school, and Jess herself attended college. This marked quite a shift from the usual traditions where Jess would take the children to the graveside during the day or even in the early evening. Time may have supported the family to change their routine, but Mollie remains at the front of their love and life. Wollin and Bennett (1984) note that there is an underlying process to family ritual practice which include a commitment and adaptability throughout family life cycles:

Then we all met up at 3 o'clock and we went down with balloons and a cake. We always take the cake down as well and let balloons off and the kids love watching it and wonder which one, she will catch. It is still a birthday party that my boys attend. Christmas is the same, we do the same at Christmas and on her anniversary.

5.5.2c Ella, Lizzie, Gabriel & Harry (3)

Ella's situation with her young sons is unusual as although Gabriel had been expecting a new baby sister and, in some way, had created a sibling relationship through the usual excitement which precedes the arrival of a new baby. Lizzie's still birth meant that he was not able to meet her and to develop a sibling relationship in the living world and so all his expectations and anticipation were denied. Despite this, the siblings which now include Harry have maintained a bond through family traditions and Ella spoke of the difference in how Gabriel and Harry choose to remember their sister:

Harry tends to collect things, you know actual objects as opposed to doing a picture and he always asks Father Christmas to give Lizzie a stocking in heaven which is really sweet, and he does a little list which is so lovely

But this is like, this is one of the things that he collects for her on a beach, a little stone shaped like a heart. It's really really pretty and has beautiful colours and so it is his way of saying this is for Lizzie and can we take it home. And we have her birthday and Christmas and things where she has a little decoration on the tree.

Ella reflected on how her children create their family traditions through their imagined bond and memories of their sister. Unlike two of the families in this study, Gabriel and Harry had not spent time creating shared memories with their sibling before her death and so needed to fill in the gaps. Ella's recounting of Gabriel's drawing had an almost furious sense to it; an image conjured of a three-year-old child frantically drawing endless pictures for his imagined sister showing the love that he had for her and the grief that he felt in her loss:

So, you know the pictures that Gabriel was doing and putting them up on, he wanted them on the wall so that with her name on it and that he's drawn it for her, and you know pictures of the family and we've got quite a few of them. We would go to a pottery place near to where we lived, and he would always include Lizzie... he would have previously just drawn stick figures but now he includes Lizzie as a star, so there's definitely sort of him wanting to continue her name being mentioned and people knowing about her. So, then it naturally comes in to play that on family holidays or special times that child is included.

5.5.2d Sarah, Zander, Zia & Alfie (4)

Sarah keeps traditions for Zia and Alfie to keep the memory of their brother alive within the family. These are especially poignant for Alfie as a subsequent child, but also for Zia who had a close relationship to Zander in life and remains close after his death. Sarah spoke of how she shared Zander with his sibling and their wider family:

We gave Alfie some of Zander's clothes because I didn't want them to be ruined, so I had memory bears made for me and my mum, I had an 'ashes in to glass ring' and we gave like items to pretty much most of the family members of clothes and everything like that.

Sarah is the only mother who spoke about creating traditions and memories out of her child's possessions. Sarah explored this ritual further by explaining how she uses mourning jewellery to continue a bond with Zander. Mourning jewellery was historically part of bereavement tradition and is noted as a symbol for bereaved parents or grieving siblings, but the incorporation of cremation ashes into jewellery is a more contemporary practice. These objects serve as a memory cue for commemoration and memories of the deceased. More importantly for Sarah, is the acknowledgment that Zia is Alfie's greatest gift when he needs to understand about his elder brother:

Alfie has some of Zander's belongings as I said, and he's got Zia. I mean he's got the most wonderful bond with a sibling who knew a sibling. And he has some little ornaments of Zander's in his room. I have Zander's ashes in a ring, and I have enough that if he wanted some cufflinks for example later in life. Zia looks at my ring and goes I want one of them. I think not yet but maybe when they're older.

Sarah also discussed that Zander's birthday is a particularly special time for the family to make memories:

We've booked a holiday to Disney World, Florida for Zander's birthday for next year. We want to keep the memories alive, and we want to have fun. On one of his birthdays, she was at school; my husband and I are key workers so she could still attend school. It was lockdown and my husband, and I had the day off so we said there will be no learning at home today. We are having a day of fun as it is her little brother's birthday.

A further reflection raised an interesting point for Sarah. She discussed how Alfie would always be included in his brother's life because Zia very much involves him in her everyday

life. She recognised that without Zia, Alfie would still be aware of Zander due to the photographs of him around the house, but it is Zia who maintains the traditions and the rituals of continuing bonds with Zander including holding treasures in a memory box:

Zia includes him and she has a memory box that the hospital did for her. So, anything Zia does she puts into her memory box.

Mallon (2018) recognises that caring for memories is an important part of child grief to allow for the dead sibling to continue to live amongst them. Such treasured mementoes support young children to recall positive memories to allow continued bonds to continue. They can be returned to at any time and can be shared with others whenever the need to think about or talk about the deceased sibling arises. Memory work is an important way to support young children in continuing bonds. Memory boxes which hold treasured objects which either belong to or are connected to the deceased child can be a foundation for adults towards discussion and processing with the living sibling. Goldman (2012) argues that memory boxes hold an important function in allowing children to express their feelings in ways they may have been unable to do at the time of their sibling's death. Furthermore, memory boxes serve as linking objects (Volkan, 1972) in that they hold items which the children consider they would like to share with their sibling. Volkan (1972) observed ambivalence in his patients attitudes towards linking objects and identified them as part of pathological grief, Wheeler (1999) argues that in the case of linking objects used by those bereaved of a child there was no ambivalence, rather the objects had meaning and maintained a connection to the dead child. The data recognised that for children, the creation of a memory box is a sacred and treasured act where their bond – real or imagined – can be continued. It is imperative that those involved in the care and education of young children facilitate this creative act to support and encourage healthy grief in the young sibling.

5.6 Summary

This chapter has presented the raw data and discussed the findings in relation to literature with further analysis and reflection of what the findings offer. It has a central theme of continuing bonds and considers how children understand death through the conversations they have with their mothers. It explores the ways in which young children manage their

grief through the attachments they have with their mother and how post death rituals and traditions support children to remain linked to their dead sibling. The life of the unknown sibling is discussed and shows how siblings stay connected to each other through the stories and memories they share with each other. The chapter demonstrates that children can experience grief for a sibling who died before they were born and that their emotional health and wellbeing can be negatively impacted if clear explanations and memories are not sustained within their family. Moreover, if other adults are not grief aware, these children can have a poor experience at school. The closing chapter concludes the thesis and discusses the implications and recommendations for practice and further research. It also considers the study's limitations and reflects on the learning that has taken place.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

The notion of continuing bonds is central to these families; their way of living changed when their child died and as mothers they have had to continue to live and raise their children whilst holding a space for their dead child. Tradition and rituals hold a prominent place in their lives and learning how to talk to young children following the death of their sibling is a new skill. Mothers are influenced by their own family traditions, values, and beliefs and how their experiences of bereavement were managed when they were children. Communicating with children revealed itself to be an important aspect of how parents help their children manage their grief and is inextricably linked with continuing bonds as are the rituals centred around the funeral and cemetery.

This study proposed to address the following research questions:

1. How do mothers talk to their children about the death of their sibling to support their grief?
2. What continuing bonds practices do parents use to maintain a relationship between their dead child and their living siblings?
3. How do subsequent siblings establish and sustain a connection with a sibling they did not know in the living world?

In this concluding chapter, I will offer brief reflections from the key findings from the study and will continue to discuss the implications for sibling bereaved young children. The chapter will conclude with reflections on the limitations of the study in addition to suggestions for areas of further research.

6.1 Summary of Findings

The research sought to explore the narratives of four mothers in relation to how their young children manage grief when they are bereaved of their sibling. This was framed within one research question which asked: 'How do young children manage their grief following the death of a sibling and how do their mothers use continuing bonds to maintain their children's relationship in the living world.' Subsidiary questions were designed to highlight different elements present in the literature review, to explore in depth the experiences of bereaved siblings and how young children understand death. The following sections highlight how these sub questions were addressed to achieve a more substantive answer to the main research question.

6.1.1 How do young children understand death when bereaved of their sibling?

The findings observe that young children can comprehend death and, despite their immature age, are able to feel a sense of loss and respond to the emotional turbulence happening around them. The children in this study showed a remarkable comprehension of the death of their sibling through their conversations and questions which evolved as they became older and were able to hold memories of the sibling through shared photographs, personal possessions, and tender conversations with their mother. These aspects helped the children to begin to understand death. These aspects raise the importance of attachment theories which endure over time through the facilitation of continuing bonds which never end but strengthen and evolve through the child's life phases.

Talking to their young children about death presented challenges for the mothers; often not in the initial telling but as the child endeavoured to process the loss. The circumstances of the loss dictated how the mothers were able to talk about death and so inevitably their narratives are shaped by their own personal relationship with grief and their unique perspective of integrating the death of their child into a new life narrative. For example, the two children who were able to be fully involved in the death of their sibling were able to hold tender conversations with their mothers during the period before the child died whereas other mothers relied on the support of charities or directed explanations based on their own values and beliefs. The use of euphemism to protect young children from the harsh nature of death words caused further challenges and feelings of anxiety and confusion exposing the unpreparedness parents face when talking about death to children particularly when amid their own grief. The mothers explored how they were dealing with their own grief and found it difficult to find appropriate words when children needed immediate answers. For one child whose sibling was known to them through anticipation but not known in the living world, his grief prompted a flurry of questions, a furious attempt to relieve his thoughts through drawing, and a need to make his grief visible.

Childhood behaviour in relation to their mourning was discussed.

An interesting aspect to note is that the birth of the subsequent child created the cycle of death conversations once more. Mothers once again found themselves explaining death to their young child but this time to a child with no knowledge or awareness of their sibling. In these instances, continued bonds became much more prominent and took on more significance. It is apparent that for those outside the child's immediate family, there were

challenges in talking openly about death but also in recognising grief behaviour. None of the mothers recalled that their children's school had undertaken any training or conversations about how to hold death conversations and in some cases, this led to further distress. Prominent child bereavement charities hold training sessions for professional staff, and it is incumbent on educators to avail themselves of this knowledge. Insensitive conversations and an ambivalence towards children who are in mourning can and should be avoided.

6.1.2 How are continuing bonds used to support emotional wellbeing in both mother and child after a bereavement?

Continuing bonds, first proposed by Klass et al (1996) are facilitated by those who knew the child; often they use linking objects as a starting point for conversations. Adults outside of the child's home such as educators and health professionals, hold a critical role in supporting bereaved children who bring their memories, rituals, and traditions beyond their home environment. The children in this study showed pride in being a sibling and wanted to share this pride in school. One child took a copy of his mother's book into school whilst another confidently spoke about his sister even when school friends were perplexed, and other parents faced uncertainty in how to respond. Two of the families discussed their child's memory box. One memory box had been created by hospital staff who cared for the dying child, and another created by the family. The children could gather treasures for their siblings and store them to look at and remember whenever they felt a need to connect. This notion that the deceased are here and not here at the same time is a key question when theorising about how children accommodate loss. Accommodation is an ongoing, continual activity; it is continual in that new meanings are sought amidst the interchanges and children's use of memory boxes and the items contained within form part of the ability to grieve and to also be able to look forwards. Stroebe and Schut's (1999) seminal Dual Process Model became a starting point for the blend of loss-orientated and restoration orientated grief work and the dynamic, regulatory coping mechanism of oscillation between the two.

The model promoted recognition that bereaved adults can hold a space in both grief related worlds. Despite this, there are limitations in the DPM which do not fully acknowledge the immature understanding of death that very young children have. Children have a

remarkable ability to oscillate, but not in the way that the DMP presents. Young children have the ability to jump in and out of their grief to protect their immature emotional capabilities, rather than a deliberate effort to move between loss and restoration behaviours. Stroebe and Schut (2010) acknowledge that their model builds on existing theories related to grief work and integrates theoretical perspectives such as attachment theories and so an adaptive model to incorporate the grief behaviour of young children could add to their formulation. A taxonomy which could include ways in which young children come to terms with the loss of their sibling and the coping mechanisms they use would contribute to and complement existing bereavement theories and models.

The data revealed the importance of continuing bonds in the children's lives and how both the mothers and the older siblings maintained these themselves. It showed how children functioned as memory keepers for their siblings and engaged in a series of rituals and traditions to continue their connection with their sibling. The study demonstrated the wide range of emotions expressed by the children and how their mother reacted to these emotional outbursts. There is a lack of clarity over the long-term impact for these children, but the data is indicative that secure attachments to their mother could mitigate any negative implications to their emotional health. The two children who are now in their teenage years experienced differing reactions as they became older. For one child (CS1) the death of a sibling remains private and hidden from her peers whereas for another (CS3) the sibling remains part of his life and is shared within his important relationships. There is no determined data which would explain this, and literature remains scarce about continued bonds between siblings over the years which is of detriment to the bereaved sibling.

What is evident is that a lack of understanding about continuing bonds can lead to unnecessary emotional distress both within the child's inner circle and in educational settings. Continuing bonds practice remains a contemporary theory, although many earlier theories fit into the model. CB was shown to be similar within all four families; the children engaged in conversations, rituals, traditions, and creative practices to connect with their deceased sibling, the more private aspects of continuing bonds were managed better whereas issues arose for the children when they took their continued bonds practices beyond their home life. A wider understanding of the role of CB in children's grief and outward mourning within health, education and society would provide more stability and support for children bereaved of their sibling.

Making sense of continued bonds for bereaved mothers also has a role in this part of the study. Klass' concept of continuing bonds is pertinent to the ongoing construction of continued bonds for bereaved mothers. The integration of the dead into the ongoing life of mothers should be encouraged to facilitate healing and resolution (Klass and Steffen, 2018). There is a scarcity of research which explores mothers' grieving styles in relation to continuing bonds following child death. In relation to stillbirth, Hunt (2020) notes that some literature focusses on whether connections should be made at all and posits "the concept that bonds may come unbidden to the mother – as a natural process of painful separation – has mainly fallen outside the focus of the researcher" (p26). The cultured and gendered norms on how to express grief are entwined with societal understandings and approvals of grief. Grief is regulated to a series of rules in terms of its duration, how it is expressed, and the associated rituals and traditions surrounding how to remember and memorialise. Granek (2021) posits that women are holders and expressors of grief, noting that if expressions of grief are mediated by a mother's social context, then "Women have an important role in metabolizing, holding, and expressing the collective grief on behalf of their families, their communities, and their states". Whilst both mothers and fathers are expected to grieve following the loss of a child, social norms support and expect mothers to be prominent in their grief whereas men suppress grief to appear stoic and emotionally strong.

6.1.3 What is the experience of the subsequent or unknown sibling?

The birth of a subsequent child following child loss means that the death must be returned to and acknowledged so that the new child can understand their identity and role in the family. The subsequent sibling has unique challenges both in terms of their own grief and that of their parents as they navigate the space left by their sibling's death; the complexities of sharing space with sorrow and joy exposed the difficulties felt by the mothers as they tentatively introduced to their young children the sibling unknown to them in the living world. The children felt a mix of emotions about this sibling relationship, including frustration, anger, and curiosity. The absent sibling also raised questions around their position in the family. This re-emergence of grief within the family was an aspect that I had not anticipated, and it is unclear whether the subsequent child will carry the ghost of their sibling into adult life and what the consequences of this on their mental health might be. An

aspect of the subsequent child which is rarely discussed is the impact of stress whilst in utero. Babies born to bereaved mothers are born into a world of grief where mothers are hypervigilant and sensitively attuned to their previous loss and the impact on this next child. These children may be identified as a replacement child or vulnerable in that their parents are overprotective of their health and wellbeing as their mother experiences unresolved grief. (Davidson, 2018). This could be considered a natural reaction rather than unresolved grief; if a mother's experience is that babies die, she does not have the protective illusion that everything will be okay. A limited understanding of the sequel to child death and assumptions about the grieving process can lead to a lack of support for the sibling which highlights the need for future research focusing on child death, how parents cope and the effect on the subsequent child.

Two of the children in the study were both subsequent children and were born into a family determined to continue the bond between all three of their children. These children are growing up with grief rather than directly experiencing it themselves and this imagined bond is constructed within their mother's beliefs, values and stories of the sister born several years before them both (Meyer, 2017). Secure attachments to their mother ensured that both children are content to be part of a sibling group and are able and willing to assert their bond when they are outside the protection of their home. Raising continuing bonds awareness in schools would be beneficial, allowing educators to converse with children about their relationships with family members who have died.

Rituals and traditions are a key focus of continuing bonds and making memories with children can be both enjoyable and challenging for parents, particularly when the children have no existing knowledge of the dead child. Three of the four case studies had young children when their child died; these children became the memory keepers of their sibling passing down stories of their sibling, and in so doing keeping them alive. Shared photographs, small treasures, and personal possessions become imbued with the personality of the dead sibling and bring solace to the child who is endeavouring to fill the void where their sibling should be. Such objects have significance in keeping the children connected and attached to each other.

6.1.4 How do parents continue to offer ongoing support to their sibling bereaved children?

The study explored two aspects of sibling loss: that of the existing sibling grieving the loss of their sibling and that of the subsequent sibling grieving an imagined bond. The study also explored the challenges associated with both experiences. Parents experience the death and grief of their child a second time round as memories resurface and new questions are asked. When the subsequent child begins to become aware of their dead sibling, new narratives and memories are needed to allow the next child to find their place and their identity. The mothers in the study were sensitive to their subsequent children's questions and curiosities, but there were painful moments as the continued bonds were developed in the next sibling group. These siblings are children of two worlds; they have an innocent and grief-free life ahead of them but remain tethered to their relationship with the unknown sibling and their emotional wellbeing may require particular attention from professionals, educators, and their extended family to ensure that their emotional wellbeing and educational progress is nurtured. When parents enter the decision to have another child, they do not forget or leave their dead child behind; they carry them alongside, making space in their changed lives to celebrate and have joy in parenting their existing or subsequent children. The data in this study showed that parents had a fierce desire to protect their sibling-bereaved children and to educate those around them in continued bonds. When parents facilitate conversations with educators and health professionals, it helps their young children to have their feelings validated and to learn how to communicate about their sibling in a healthy way.

There are challenges for educators who are tasked with knowing how to respond to bereaved children with little or limited training. Raising awareness of this limited training can help training providers include and improve bereavement training within the curriculum. Whilst older children can and do cope with the death of someone important, their experiences have been associated with a range of outcomes that can negatively impact on their emotional wellbeing. School communities are well placed to offer informal support to bereaved children owing to their regular relationships with the children in their care (Holland, 2008). McManus et al (2019, p72) note that "bereavement is thus prevalent and inescapable for school communities and can impact directly on a child's school

experiences". Promoting healthy lifestyles is not a new concept in education; I teach this module myself to second year students who are studying an early childhood degree, but there is a lack of emphasis on bereavement or the teaching of skills and strategies to manage this catastrophic loss in early childhood. It can be difficult for educators and providers if access to the right training is not available.

6.2 Further considerations and contributions to the field of child bereavement

This is a small-scale study with a small number of participants which inevitably creates weaknesses. The participants are all white professional women living in the United Kingdom and therefore the data aligns itself with a small aspect of culture and identity. The lack of a father's voice is acknowledged. Reasons why there is the lack of a father's voice cannot be interpreted in this study; whilst there was no deliberate attempt to deny father's a contribution, only mothers responded to the research request. Research into parental bereavement has previously explored grief reactions and lived experiences of mothers and fathers; the uniqueness of the parent-child relationship makes bereaved parents vulnerable to complicated grief responses. In response to such a shattering loss, parents often incorporate the death of their child into their everyday lives and therefore their identities are forever altered. Compared to fathers, mothers tend towards a stronger bond with their children (Kim et al, 2019) and yet little is known about mothers' bereavement process and that of anticipatory grief. As a result of the composition of mothers only, issues of diversity, faith, religion, and culture as they relate to continuing bonds could not be addressed; this could be an important aspect of further study.

Nonetheless, implications for future research, policy and practice can be highlighted. Research into attitudes towards bereaved siblings has focused on parents' narratives or sought stories told by older siblings who are able to reflect on their childhood experiences. The younger child is often neglected in bereavement theories in the assumption that they lack a sufficient understanding of death to make a meaningful contribution to research. However, this study has in a small representative way evidenced through narratives from their mothers that children do have a voice when they are properly supported and can assert their understanding of death in relation to their own experiences and family belief

system. These beliefs sit at the heart of how young children manage their grief and the way in which their mothers use continued bonds.

In this study, children and their mothers faced a tidal wave of assumptions and misconceptions which threatened their carefully constructed sibling relationships. Seminal works around attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) exploring how young children form attachments to significant people and cope during separation have offered a theoretical framework in which to situate grief work and to create a foundation for further study into the lives of the bereaved sibling. Alongside this, models devised by Stroebe and Schut (1999; 2002) have contributed to a deeper understanding and wider knowledge of how grief in adults is processed in terms of loss and restoration.

Complementing and building upon these theories, continuing bonds is the principal component of this study. Drawing together a rich and complex world of grief, mourning and the theory of letting go and moving on, Klass et al (1996) proposed a new and enlightened understanding of how we grieve. Challenging the notion that bonds must be severed, the alternative model suggests living alongside the dead and accommodating them into everyday life can be a healthier way to live when bereaved of a child. This study shows how the bonds of love and attachment after this most terrible loss enables parents to manage their own grief and support that of their living children.

The omission of children and their everyday lives in theoretical research can limit contemporary research into the experiences of bereaved siblings in their early years. Forward thinking research has a duty to include the child's voice and to explore the long-term impact on a child's emotional wellbeing when bereaved of a sibling. In addition, there is a scarcity of studies which explore the experience of the subsequent sibling; further emphasis on this marginalised group of children would highlight how bereavement in a child's earliest years can affect their emotional wellbeing and life successes. Parents use of continuing bonds and the traditions and rituals which keep their dead child alive within their family are often overlooked in research. In the 21st century, parents and siblings should be able to speak about their dead children in the same way they do about their living children without shame or prejudice. This can only happen if bereavement researchers acknowledge this phenomenon and consider it worthy of further investigation. It is pertinent to recognise

here that this thesis seeks the lived experiences of children, but in truth obtains that through the narratives of their mothers. It must be acknowledged that the lived experiences of the children are told through the lens of the adults and could be thought of as being diminished as a result. However, children's participation in research can be fraught with tension and ambiguity, with Komulainen (2007, p11) arguing "the notion of the child's 'voice' is, despite being a powerful rhetorical device, socially constructed". I recognise that there may be conflict in claiming this thesis seeks the lived experiences of children but denies those children their authentic voice. Nonetheless, I support the view that whilst gaining an understanding of children's lives through listening to their voice is a positive starting point for social study, it nevertheless makes it a challenging task particularly considering the ethical challenges this thesis faced.

Speaking openly about death and including children in such conversations can build confidence and resilience amongst bereaved siblings and those in their environment of family and educational settings. A wider range of resources using appropriate terminology can support parents and children alike to remember their sibling and to develop an awareness and understanding of death and its permanency and remove the taboo and fear which society reacts to when child death is mentioned.

Studies which include the lived experiences of subsequent siblings can offer an insight into this hidden world where children are raised with continued and imagined bonds to their sibling. Investigating how they understand this relationship over time and how their thinking and belief systems change can be of benefit to the bereavement community and wider society. Those working in the field of childhood bereavement research must continue to work towards increasing grief literacy, informed by evidence-based research and break through the culturally situated death and grief avoidant rhetoric. It is incumbent on educators and policy makers that young children are equipped with the understanding and knowledge of grief and death to offer them their own coping skills and to ensure they understand the bereavement of others. In arguing for mandatory training in schools, Dawson et al (2023) posit that proactive grief education can equip children with the ability to manage their feelings and to communicate their emotions. They note that when grief education is proactive, it supports children to learn about death and loss beyond a traumatic event; children are prepared for the eventuality of death rather than having a

reactive response when it is too late. Complex and unresolved grief have a direct correlation with poor outcomes in children's emotional health, resilience and wellbeing leading to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem in later years. Therefore, the promotion and inclusion of bereavement training within educational curricula are vital to support both the bereaved child to manage their loss but also for their peer group to show compassion and understanding.

6.3 Personal and final reflections

A small photograph of a very young child kissing the grave of his sister on a social media blog written by a bereaved mother provoked the nature of this study. This child, no more than a baby really, was entering into a relationship with a cherished sister who had been born and died years before he existed. And yet, the photograph and its accompanying narrative, was imbued with a magical hope from his mother; a hope that he would grow always being proud of his sister and able to speak openly to his friends and teachers about his relationship with her. That her graveside would become a place of safety to him where he could share the joys and sorrows in his life. This under researched relationship is one which is not celebrated in a society where grief and death remain hidden and induce fear, and where parents fear the loss of their child more than anything else, keeping the notion of it away from their own world and that of their children. We live in a society where picture books about death written for children feature images of animals or elderly grandparents so children cannot be represented even in areas which are created for them.

Young children have an awareness of death; they are sensitive to changes in their parent's emotions and can voice their understanding even with limited communication abilities.

Their voices have a valuable contribution to a wider understanding of how young siblings manage their grief and there is no need for them to be neglected or forgotten.

In this study, siblings who knew the dead child were able to share memories and stories and had confidence in their relationship. The subsequent siblings experienced periods of distress and anger and questioned their place in the family, but the protective support and abundance of love from their mother mitigated their distress and supported their ability to live alongside the memory of their dead sibling and enjoy a healthy relationship with their living sibling.

For Lennie and Albie, the two children in CS2 it was of note to me that their emotional wellbeing was secure, and that they remained firmly and securely attached to the sibling who they did not know. The older child – the little boy in the original photograph – was able to advocate for his sibling relationship. Moreover, to him and his younger brother, although in theoretical terms their relationship could be deemed imaginary, their older sister is present in their lives, and they thrive from it. It would be of interest to continuing bonds research to explore if this relationship remains strong as the children become older and that they continue to benefit from it.

In conclusion, the cultural attitudes to death in Western countries such as the United Kingdom hinder and prohibit healthy grief and mourning and disenable children to speak openly about their feelings and emotions. The four mothers in this study engage in continuing bonds practices to keep their dead child close and present within their family but this is not fully accepted or understood by the society and communities in which they live. I had not entered this small study with the intent to criticise or to cast judgement on how these families support their young children in their grief and mourning. I simply wanted to add a contribution to a growing recognition in contemporary research that sibling relationships remain one of the single most important relationships a child will have beyond that of their parents and that relationship does not die when the sibling does. Further research and potential longitudinal studies particularly of the subsequent children and the inclusion of their voice will contribute to a better understanding and protection of their emotional wellbeing, educational success, and healthy grief. I hope now I can feel confident to share my knowledge about child death and to hold conversations both personally and professionally with more ease.

Engaging with the mothers in this study has been of great personal and professional growth. They willingly opened their hearts and selflessly gave their time, encouragement, and support to share their experiences, to speak of their children and to share their pain, grief, and overwhelming love. The love for the children, the children themselves and the experiences that were shared with me are woven through this thesis. They bring it alive with the rich colours of love, heartbreak, and pride. The privilege was all mine. I hope I have done their stories justice.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participation Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet (Parent. Version 2)

Puddle Jumping: How do young children manage their grief following the death of their sibling and how do mothers use continuing bonds to maintain their children's relationship in the living world

Dear

Thank you for indicating that you are interested in taking part in this research. This Information Sheet will hopefully explain what is involved, but if you need further clarification, then please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below.

About me

My name is Deb Ravenscroft; I am currently undertaking a Doctorate in Education at the University of Chester. I am a Senior Lecturer in Education and teach across a range of programmes with a particular focus on young children and families.

What is the purpose of the study?

This research is part of a Doctorate in Education that I am undertaking at the University of Chester. I am endeavouring to understand how young siblings manage their grief following the death of a sibling. There is limited research into how young children navigate the loss of a sibling despite the significant impact it could have on this group of young children. A continuing bonds perspective explores how families develop and continue the relationship between the siblings following the bereavement.

Am I able to take part?

You can take part if you meet the limited criterion for this study. You must be the parent of a child or children in the family who are bereaved of their sibling. Their sibling may have died during their lifetime or before they were born. The child's death will have taken place at least 12 months prior to the interview taking place.

What will happen to me if I take part?

To enable this, if you feel able to take part, I will contact you by email and a telephone call. This will give you the opportunity to ask me any questions about the research and enable me to arrange a time to have a conversation with you either face-to-face or via an online service called Teams. Your written consent will be obtained through the attached consent form. The interview will be recorded and will last no longer than 60 minutes.

You are able to withdraw from the conversation at any point and will also be able to pause from answering questions.

Once the interview is complete, the digital recording will be transcribed. Your transcript will be allocated a pseudonym to protect your anonymity, and any identifying features in the transcript will be deleted. I will email the transcript to you, so that you can check for accuracy. This will also give you an opportunity to amend or change any of the data. Your final written consent will be obtained, which will then allow me to begin the process of analysis of the data.

Your right to withdraw without prejudice

You have every right to withdraw from the research at any time, without prejudice, up until the point that the thesis has commenced in writing. I will let you know when that point is.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The research will be asking you questions which may query your own personal and beliefs and values. There is no judgement being made and you should be assured that your personal discussions are a valued aspect of this research. You may also find participating in this research will cause distress or discomfort; this is treated with the utmost sensitivity; the pace of the interview and your continuation is determined by you.

If you are unhappy

I very much hope that you will be comfortable and confident in this process. My aim is to ensure that your safety and confidentiality are at the forefront of all my work. However, please raise any concerns you may have, and I will endeavour to work these issues through. If you still feel unhappy, you may raise it with the Faculty of Education and Children's Services Executive Dean, David Cumberland, at the University of Chester.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

This is an under researched area and my hope is that it may offer you as a parent an opportunity to talk about your children and their relationship as siblings. As an under researched area of academic study, you would also be contributing to a wider understanding of how young children manage their grief following the death of a sibling and the traditions and rituals that families use to continue their bond.

Will taking part in the study be kept confidential, and how will my data be stored?

Every aspect of this study, including your participation, will remain confidential. Your data will be anonymised and pseudonyms used to protect your identity. The data will be securely kept on a password protected computer. The data will be destroyed in accordance with the data protection act.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The completed research will be stored (bound and electronic) at the University of Chester. The research will be disseminated in future publications and at conferences.

Can I contact anyone for further information?

You are welcome to contact myself as the researcher: Debbie Ravenscroft
My contact details are: d.ravenscroft@chester.ac.uk

Appendix 2

Research Consent Form

This consent form is to make sure that you understand the study, and that you are aware of your rights and that you are happy to take part in the study. Once you have read the Participant Information Sheet, please carefully read this form and then if you are happy to, fill in each part where you are asked to do so.

1. Have you been given information about the research?
2. Do you understand what you are being asked to do?
3. Have you been informed that you may approach the researcher at any time with any questions you might have?
4. Do you understand that you can withdraw your consent from the project at any time, up to the point that writing is due to commence?
5. Do you understand that the information given is for the sole purpose of an academic study?

I understand that the research will be conducted in line with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2004) and the Data protection Act (1998).

I agree that any quotations from any discussions may be used in the project. I understand that this will be done anonymously.

I understand that any reports and photographs taken during the research will be made available to me for inspection, if required.

SIGNED:

PRINT NAME

DATE

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO~OPERATION.

APPENDIX 3

ETHICAL APPROVAL



University of Chester

13th January 2020

Dear Deb,

Many thanks for your application to the Ethics Committee, which the Committee would like to grant approval for; given the especially sensitive nature of the work you propose, we would like you and your supervisory team to address the following points:

- Please revisit any documentation involving any participants to ensure that it is as clear and sensitive as possible
- Please consider the sensitivities around the first contact and engagement with the participants, and how you might be introduced in ways that reassure
- Please go over and discuss the planning of contacts with participants with your supervisors, including where possible dates and times
- Please insure that you discuss any contacts with participants as quickly as possible with your supervisors (we recognise that this may involve going above any normal supervisory schedule), and that you inform your supervisors at the earliest opportunity of any concerns hat you might have regarding any contact
- Please confine contact with participants to an agreed schedule, and inform your supervisors of any contact, for example not initiated by yourself, with any participants
- Please, also, communicate your progress regarding these matters, through your supervisors, to the Ethics Committee at its monthly Committee meetings, and inform the Committee should any concerns arise as they may occur.

Congratulations, and very good luck with your research.

Best regards

Paul

Dr PA Moran (Chair of Faculty Ethics)

