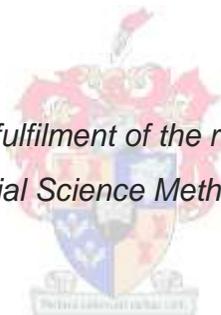


**“Who will I be now?”: The lived experience of adolescent sibling bereavement within the school context.**

by

**Lesley Ann Schroeder**

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Philosophy in Social Science Methods at Stellenbosch University*



Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Supervisor: Mr Jan H. Vorster  
Co-supervisor: Dr Nceba Z. Somhlaba

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the needs of sibling-bereaved adolescents in high schools in the Western Cape, South Africa. A grounded theory approach was used to examine unexpected sibling bereavement with specific focus on participant perceptions and experiences regarding support provided by their high school. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with siblings who were in high school when their brother or sister died suddenly. An argument is developed for why high schools need insight into effective ways of supporting sibling-bereaved adolescents as they attempt to fit in and function at school.

As this study was conducted in a multi-language environment, attention is given to the differing abilities of adolescents to articulate their bereavement experience. The effectiveness of focus groups with this population and the importance of providing psycho-education support during the interviewing process are emphasised. The scarcity of studies on adolescent bereavement in South Africa can be attributed to a combination of the emotional painfulness of the subject for adolescents and gatekeeping by school personnel and parents. Understandably, concerns about disclosure and fresh trauma/grief triggering may be given precedence over research.

Themes grounded in the data uncovered a psychosocial journey involving disruption, transition and changed self. Bereaved siblings felt singled out as different from their peers when they return to school. Hence discreet acknowledgement and disclosure of the death is important to them. A key finding is that accomplishment plays a significant role in boosting the flagging morale of bereaved adolescents. Accomplishment aids their individuation and stimulates them to regain interest in their own life goals. While individual teachers and other school personnel were considered helpful, there was an absence of a structured plan of support for bereaved adolescents in the schools examined. Attachment theory foregrounded an explanation of why the loss of a sibling during adolescence can have a lasting influence on the future of those left behind. Most adolescents in the study evidenced a desire for an on-going connection with their sibling who died while they simultaneously took on new roles to try and fill the void created by their death. Findings from this study are intended to provide richer insight into the complexity of adolescent sibling bereavement and may also serve to inform educational and health care interventions for bereaved learners in South Africa.

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie verken die behoeftes van adolessente in hoërskole in die Wes-Kaap, Suid-Afrika, ná die verlies van 'n broer of suster. 'n Gegronde-teorie-benadering is gebruik om ondersoek in te stel na adolessente wat onverwags 'n broer of suster verloor het, met bepaalde klem op deelnemers se opvattinge oor, en ervarings van, die steun wat hulle van hul onderskeie hoërskole ontvang het. Onderhoude en fokusgroepe is dus gehou met adolessente wat op hoërskool was toe hul broer of suster skielik gesterf het. Die studie beredeneer waarom hoërskole insig moet hê in die doeltreffende ondersteuning van adolessente wat 'n broer of suster aan die dood moes afstaan, namate hulle weer op skool probeer inpas en funksioneer.

Aangesien hierdie studie in 'n meertalige omgewing uitgevoer is, word adolessente se wisselende vermoëns om hul ervaring van verlies te verwoord, in ag geneem. Die doeltreffendheid van fokusgroepe met hierdie populasie, sowel as die belang van psigo-opvoedkundige steun gedurende die onderhoudproses, word beklemtoon. Die seldsaamheid van Suid-Afrikaanse studies oor adolessente wat broers of susters verloor, kan toegeskryf word aan 'n kombinasie van die emosionele pyn wat die onderwerp by adolessente oproep, en skoolpersoneel en ouers wat adolessente teen sodanige navorsing beskerm. Uiteraard is dit te verstane dat kommer oor openbaarmaking en die vars trauma/hartseer wat dit kan ontlok, dikwels voorrang kry bo navorsing.

Die temas wat in die data vasgelê was, bring 'n psigososiale reis van ontwrigting, oorgang en verandering van die self aan die lig. Adolessente wat broers of susters aan die dood moes afstaan, het met hul terugkeer skool toe uitgesonder en anders as hul portuur gevoel. Dus is oordeelkundige erkenning en openbaarmaking van die sterfgeval vir hulle belangrik. Een van die belangrikste bevindinge is dat prestasie 'n beduidende rol speel om die verswakte moreel van sodanige adolessente 'n hupstoot te gee. Prestasie help met hulle individuasie, en stimuleer hulle om opnuut in hul eie lewensdoelwitte belang te stel. Hoewel individuele onderwysers en ander skoolpersoneel as tegemoetkomend beskou is, was daar geen gestruktureerde ondersteuningsplan vir die adolessente in die betrokke skole nie. Die gehegtheidsteorie doen 'n verklaring aan die hand van waarom die verlies van 'n broer of suster gedurende adolessensie 'n blywende invloed kan hê op die toekoms van die kinders wat agterbly. Die meeste adolessente in die studie het 'n begeerte getoon na 'n voortgesette band met hul oorlede broer of suster, terwyl hulle terselfdertyd nuwe rolle aanvaar het om die leemte van die oorledene te probeer vul. Bevindinge uit hierdie studie is bedoel om dieper insig te bied in die kompleksiteit van adolessente wat broers of susters verloor, en kan ook opvoedkundige en gesondheidsorgintervensies vir sodanige leerders in Suid-Afrika rig.

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To Babu, the Boys and the Betties - thank you for showing me the way when I couldn't see it.

This work was inspired by the life and legacy of my son,

Mark Schroeder

13.11.1987 – 07.07.2005

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# CHAPTER 1 WHO AM I NOW?

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a time when young people develop a sense of who they are and what their future can be like. Ideally it is a time of opportunity and optimism. We expect it to be about life, not death. When a teenagers' brother or sister dies unexpectedly, they may be forced to cope with untold disruption, stress and sorrow in their young lives. Many studies have found that bereavement is usually more complicated when a young person dies suddenly and thus the death of a brother or sister has far-reaching implications for the surviving adolescent sibling's physical health, academic performance, family dynamics and psychological well-being (Hindmarch, 1995; Hogan & DeSantis, 1996; Goldblatt, 2011).

This chapter lays the groundwork for the study by considering why sibling death can have a profound and lasting effect on the life of adolescents and why it is *different* from other populations. In this regard, the *rarity* of sibling loss during adolescence comparative to other age groups is highlighted. Secondly, an argument is developed for why high schools need insight into the specific problems *adolescents* wrestle with following the death of a sibling. Thirdly, the aims of the study in terms of the bereaved adolescent in the *school setting* are delineated. In particular these include understanding the influence of the school community on teenagers trying to manage the consequences of sibling death while concomitantly trying to fit in and function at school. Fourth, I take a reflexive look at my own bereavement experience and insider status and how this shaped my methodological decisions.

## 1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND FOCUS

In a career spanning thirty years of bereavement and trauma research George Bonanno (2009: 24) has found that most people who suffer loss exhibit a natural resilience. They may be deeply saddened; they may feel adrift for some time; they may not resolve the loss; and they may not fully put aside the pain but their life eventually finds its way again and they can resume functioning without any kind of professional help. This begs the question: If most people seem to recover without professional help, is there a need to hone in on the experience of high school adolescents bereaved of a sibling?

Firstly, adolescent encounters with death are different because of the distinct qualities of adolescent life (Balk & Corr, 2009) and the phenomenon of adolescent grief must be placed within the context of the cognitive, moral, and psychosocial changes occurring in teenagers' lives (Balk, 1991). Assertions that grieving is particularly difficult during adolescence are frequently foregrounded by Erik Erikson's (1968)

well-known theory of psychosocial development which delineates tasks that must be successfully accomplished at each stage of life in order to advance to the next stage. Erikson proposed that the central tasks of adolescence are to develop independence and a sense of self. Thomas (2011) says that in addition to these tasks, adolescents are also struggling with the pressures of peer acceptance, and adjustment to sexually maturing bodies. She highlights how this grappling with their emerging sense of self is confounded by the death of an important person in their lives because one way we come to know ourselves is in relationship to others. Glass (1990: 155) says that “losses such as death affect the total life of the high school students involved: their work at school, their part-time jobs, their leisure activities, their relationship with friends and family, and their concept about themselves.” Hence any exploration of how they cope with death and bereavement needs to take this into account. Klicker (2000: 21) supports this view, noting that adolescents appear to have the most difficult time dealing with death because unlike younger children, the additional anxieties and confusion of normal puberty compound their grief. Further, death can add to their already conflicted feelings which may include insecurity, not belonging, and not being in control of self and surroundings. White (2006: 15) contends that sibling loss for adolescents is different from bereaved siblings of other ages because the reality of their siblings’ death and the subsequent sense of vulnerability can shake the foundation of the adolescents’ still fragile identity. Furthermore the loss of a sibling during this period intensifies the issues related to the normal tasks of adolescence.

Secondly, the death of a child in a family disrupts the family equilibrium, catapulting the entire family into crisis. Packman, Horsley, Davies and Kramer (2006: 830-831) contend that this disruption spills over into every sphere of the surviving siblings’ lives and any sense of normalcy is lost. Various studies (Packman *et al.*, 2006; White, 2006; Bank & Kahn, 1982) have found that parents are often so deeply absorbed in their own grief experience that they have little emotional energy to assist their surviving children through their loss of their sibling. Most sibling-bereaved high school learners still live at home with their parents. Thus, on a daily basis, they confront their parents’ grief reactions, their own loss, and the accumulated family stresses precipitated by their sibling’s death. In consequence, school may offer a temporary “escape” from the pressures and tensions of a grief-laden home as this study shows

Thirdly, because adolescents spend much of their time at school, it is important to understand the influence of the school setting in the experience of sibling loss. Research by Hellstrom and Nolbris (2005) and Cicirelli (1995) found that bereaved learners often attempt to restore order to the chaos in their lives through sports and school. Studies in the United States of America (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (U.K.) show that anger, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, attention-seeking behaviour, lack of concentration and increased absenteeism are some of the disruptive behaviours evident in this population (Packman *et al.*, 2006; Klicker, 2000; Balk, 1983). Other associated reactions are guilt, peer

isolation post-traumatic stress symptoms and suicidal ideation (Servaty-Seib, 2009; Horsley & Patterson, 2006). The problem, as Klicker (2000: 21) points out, is that while most high schools have bereaved learners, it is relatively unusual for high school learners to lose a *sibling* through death. He found that many schools in the U.S. seldom need to deal with sibling-bereaved learners and therefore tend to overlook the need for a plan of support for them. In a review of research on HIV/AIDS related-bereavement in South Africa, Louw and Louw (2010: 375) emphasised that social support from family members, teachers and peers can decrease scholastic and psychological problems stemming from adolescents' exposure to trauma and death. However bereaved adolescents frequently feel different from their peers and this may contribute to their sense of not belonging when they return to school. Kosminsky and Lewin (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 334) concur that the comparative rarity of sibling death can compound an adolescents' sense of being different from their peers at a time when "fitting in" is of paramount importance to them.

Fourth, while Bonanno's (2009) contention that people tend to be resilient in the face of grief may hold true for the majority of bereaved people, what is important to consider is that adolescents may not yet have accumulated sufficient emotional competence and life experience to adapt easily to a ruptured relationship of this magnitude. Unexpected sibling loss is shocking. It is not the same as your sick granny dying at seventy-eight. A sibling is an integral part of one's past and present and the relationship is naturally expected to continue throughout childhood and into old age (Horsley & Patterson, 2006). Sibling loss is more than a death loss. It is also the loss of the variety of roles siblings play in one another's lives. Amongst others, these can include: playmate, rival, trusted confidante and role model. The identities of siblings are intricately linked because they have a shared history and they use each other as a referent to understand the world around them. Thus when one of them dies, the surviving sibling loses many parts of themselves (Bank & Khan, 1982; Davies, 1995).

Jakoby (2012: 679) maintains that most of what we know about grief originates from medical models which tend to view grief as an "illness" that the bereaved need to recover from. These models, which have their roots in psychiatry, emphasise an individual response to death loss. In contrast, the present study is grounded in the lived experience of teenagers dealing with grief and loss in their social worlds. Charmaz and Milligan (2006) assert that sociological studies contribute to relocating grief to its specific historical, cultural and situational conditions. The argument advanced in this study is that grief occurs within social contexts. For teenagers whose lives have been disrupted by sibling death, their school is a significant and unavoidable social setting where they have to find ways to manage their responses on a daily basis.

### 1.3 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In its embryonic stage, the present study was a swirling of ideas about parents and siblings trying to make sense of something that is unimaginable for most families. We know that young people can die with no warning but we don't expect them to. The death of a child is an unthinkable loss; an inversion of the natural order. The resultant emptiness leaves families dazed and uncertain (Bonanno, 2009: 11). Sibling death severely tests family relationships and shakes central beliefs to the core. For the surviving siblings, the death of their brother or sister is permanent and irrevocable, shattering all expectations and anticipations of a shared future that can no longer be (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996: 250). Within the scope of life's trajectory, it is an unusual event that should not happen. Stevenson (in Balk & Corr 2009: 279) says as much as people would like to cling to the illusion that death does not touch the lives of adolescents, the reality is quite different. In the U.S. one in every 750 young people of high school age dies each year. All around the world teenagers in high school lose friends, parents, grandparents and siblings to death. This means that potentially there are learners trying to cope with grief in every class in every school.

I began this study with the objective of giving voice to how adolescents who are in high school cope when their brother or sister dies unexpectedly. I planned to build on my earlier conversations with bereaved teenagers by gathering data to expand, illuminate and clarify how schools can help adolescents through this harrowing experience. The study title: "Who will I be now?" speaks to the conceptualisation that the death of a brother or a sister presents a major life crisis for adolescent siblings at an already critical transitional time in their identity development. Identity does not evolve in a vacuum but develops within the context of family, social and peer relationships and particularly through the dyadic interaction between siblings. Consequently, after sibling death, surviving siblings' identity questions often change from "who am I?" and "where am I going?" to "who am I now?" and "what is going to happen now?" as they contemplate a future without their sibling while simultaneously grappling with their transition into adulthood (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Balk, 1990; Robinson, 2001; White, 2006).

Bereaved adolescent siblings are often referred to as forgotten or silent grievers (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005; White, 2006; Woodrow, 2007; Marshall, 2009; Goldblatt, 2011). I contend that they have plenty to say but they are hesitant to be heard. They are rendered silent by their isolation, their sense of not being "normal". I think of them as "hidden survivors" because they are so difficult to find and the last thing they want is to draw unwanted attention to themselves. An important finding uncovered by Hogan (as cited in Balk & Corr, 2009: 202) is that bereaved adolescent siblings often "camouflage" their grief because to them, expressing grief seems to add to distress in the family. It is important to underline that losing a sibling during adolescence is less likely to occur than losing a sibling as an adult. Gill White, who as

director of the Sibling Connection (U.S.) has worked extensively with bereaved siblings, notes that if they were in high school at the time of their sibling's death, it is statistically likely that their sibling died in an accident or from suicide (White, 2006: 16). While it is not possible to extrapolate from mortality statistics the number of adolescents who have lost a brother or a sister in South Africa, the data that follow give some background to the problem in the Western Cape where this study was conducted. According to StatsSA (2011) tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS are the major drivers behind South Africa's high child mortality rate, but as children reach adolescence, cause of death patterns shift to external causes. In 2009 road traffic accidents were the leading cause of premature mortality among adolescents aged 13 – 18 and homicide and suicide also featured in the top five causes of death. The Western Cape has the highest rates of inter-personal violence in the country and the Western Cape Mortality Profile for 2009 shows that interpersonal violence and transport injuries were in the top five causes of years of life lost. In the age-category 15-19, there were approximately 800 deaths where over half were due to injury. Death rates rose steeply in the 20–24 age-category, where injury again accounted for over half of the 1800 total deaths. In both age categories the rate of death for males was higher than for females.

To put these statistics into the context of the teenagers who consented to participate in this study, seven attributed their sibling's death to murder or inter-personal violence; three said their sibling died from suicide; eight said their sibling died in a motor vehicle accident; and less than a quarter said their sibling died because of sudden illness. However there are no available data in South Africa to indicate how many adolescents in the country's or Western Cape population have lost a brother or a sister, and consequently many of them remain hidden. High Schools seemed an obvious starting point to gauge the frequency of adolescent sibling bereavement and identify cases in the Western Cape. When I asked secretaries, counsellors and principals at seventy-four Cape Town schools how many learners in their school had lost a sibling in the last three years, they gave estimates that ranged from none to six cases but few were sure of the exact number. Given the lack of numbers or demographics of surviving siblings, we can only deduce that in South Africa there are thousands of teenagers whose brothers or sisters die but it is hard to know where they live, where they go to school and what they think. This study is concerned with the stories behind the statistics; the daily reality for teenagers left behind - how the early death of a brother or sister profoundly changes their lives.

Adolescents spend much of their time in the school setting, yet little research has been done on how surviving siblings experience the role of the school community in facilitating or inhibiting coping as they navigate their bereavement experience. My review of the literature did not uncover any South African study on adolescent grief specifically as it pertains to school support following the sudden death of a brother or sister. Leading international scholars in this field (notably, David Balk, Atle Dyregrov, Nancy Hogan, Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Gill White) emphasise the need for research that will aid schools in

developing interventions that facilitate a nurturing environment for bereaved adolescents, particularly from the perspective of learners. There are a host of reasons why schools should pay attention to learners who are adjusting to bereavement. Its adverse effects on their health, behaviour, schoolwork, family functioning, self-esteem and identity development are well documented. Without support and understanding, bereaved adolescents can lurch down a confused, self-destructive path, cutting short their own dreams for the future (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; White, 2006; Balk & Corr, 2009). Cohen (as cited in Balk & Corr, 2009: 221) found that sibling death resulted in varying negative effects over time with regard to depression, mastery and engagement with life. When adolescent grief is not nurtured in a containing environment like the home or the school, it may result in the use of drugs and alcohol, poor school performance, loneliness, a tendency to withdraw from relationships, low self-esteem, depression and difficulty in making long-term commitments (White, 2006: 16).

The level of support available to adolescents significantly influences their ability to bounce back after bereavement. This includes social support systems within their family and friendship circle; within their school community; and within the broader community they belong to (Worden, 2009). In the Western Cape one educational psychologist might be responsible for providing specialised learner support to as many as 35 schools. During my interaction with school staff and educational psychologists around this topic, the need for better understanding of the complex range of bereavement responses, which can adversely affect adolescent learners, has been repeatedly expressed (Personal files, 2011). Scholarship in this area emphasises the need for research that will aid schools in developing insight and interventions that facilitate a nurturing environment for bereaved adolescents, particularly from the perspective of learners (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Balk & Corr, 2009).

In South Africa we have much to learn about the impact of the school community on teenagers trying to manage the consequences of death within an ethnically diverse society. What we know is derived mainly from studies undertaken in the United States of America and Europe, and sociologist Jane Ribbens McCarthy (as cited in Balk & Corr 2009: 28) notes that the almost total absence of a literature on young people's experience of bereavement outside Western contexts is itself very striking. The few available bereavement studies on South African youth populations have been conducted with young adult siblings (Woodrow, 2007; Halstead-Cleak, 2009); bereavement among adolescents following a sibling's death from AIDS (Demmer & Rothschild, 2011); the experiences of late-adolescent female suicide survivors (Hoffmann, Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2010); and adolescents bereaved of a parent (Garzouzie, 2011).

## **1.4 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The general aim of this study was to answer the research question, “What is the lived experience of an adolescent who returns to school after the sudden death of their sibling?” The objective was to produce age-sensitive research which addresses the unique experiences and concerns of adolescents bereaved of a sibling. Hence the study method was designed to describe from the vantage point of bereaved adolescents whose sibling died suddenly: how they constructed the role of the school community in their coping and whether they in fact want and expect the school community to play a role in the aftermath of their loss. The scope of enquiry included bereaved adolescents’ experiences during formal school hours and during extra-mural activities and their interaction with a variety of actors: principals, educators, counsellors, coaches, classmates and other learners. To probe their experiences and expectations of the role of the school, themes that were explored included: The learner’s return to school following the death of their sibling and the response to their bereavement by the school community; academic coping; counselling provided by the school, if any; and inter-personal relations with teaching staff and other learners. Findings from this study were intended to provide richer insight into the complexity of adolescent sibling bereavement and were aimed to also serve to inform educational and mental-health care interventions regarding the best possible avenues for responding to sibling loss in the school context.

## **1.5 THE RESEARCHER AS INSIDER**

Balk, Jordon, Kennedy, Nadeau, Sandler and Shapiro (2005: 96-99) encourage researchers in the field of bereavement to make explicit their personal loss experiences and the foundations of their research that shape their choice of research questions, methods and conclusions. This study is rooted in my own journey and “insider” knowledge following the death of my son, Mark who was in high school when he died after a plane crash. Walking with my surviving teenage children through their bewilderment and battle to readjust to normal life at school gave me rare insight. Later my understanding was broadened by more formalised interaction with school personnel and psychologists in my roles of workshop facilitator and advisor on the crisis precipitated by sudden death in schools. This also meant that I started out wanting to educate and “fix” things. Consequently it was an on-going challenge to balance insight with reflexivity and I was fortunate to have advisors who kept me aware of the need to confront and scrutinise my underlying biases. They helped me recognise the extent to which my work is informed by a strong sense of advocacy and how I am deeply identified as a member of the study question. I had developed strong opinions about bereavement support in the context of the “school” and what “schools” should and should not do. It is without question that my deeply-felt personal experience of loss motivated and structured my work from the outset. Bracketing these views and being aware of my blind spots was not easy in practice.

As the study unfolded, I learned to listen rather than tell, and it became easier to guard against the incursion of my views into the research process. This mindfulness to guard against ‘imposing’ my preconceived notions of what the experience was like informed my decision to employ grounded-theory methodology for analyses of the qualitative data. As its name suggests, grounded theory allows theory to emerge directly from the data and therefore curbs the natural tendency for a researcher to try and fit data into pre-existing theories or favoured models (Charmaz, 2006: 101). In my case this was not really possible because while grappling with my own sorrow, I “devoured” grief literature and formed strong preferences for certain theorists whose work spoke to my experience. However, grounded theory alerted me to the need to follow a much more open process than the way I had started out.

While trying to determine the most effective methodology for this study, I was influenced by seasoned scholars, in the area of grief and bereavement. In the view of Niemeyer, Prigerson and Davies (2002) bereavement is an experience that both reaches down deeply into our individuality and branches out widely into our social world and it therefore calls for inter-disciplinary study using complementary concepts and methods. Creswell (2002: 24-25) points out that for advocacy orientated researchers there is undoubtedly a strong inner stimulus to pursue topics that are of a personal interest; issues that relate to marginalised people and an interest in creating a better society for them. Thus, when a researcher wants to both generalise the findings to a population and develop a detailed view of a phenomenon, a mixed methods design can capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

As it turned out, the obstacles in reaching a vulnerable, difficult-to-access sample solved the methodological dilemma for me. In the methodology chapter, I discuss candidly how when I ventured into the field, I soon discovered that the map is not the territory. I reflect on the constraints and challenges of accessing hard-to-reach adolescent learners and the emotional toll bound up in interactions with “gatekeepers”. I frequently found myself feeling thwarted and frustrated when recruiting participants through schools and trying to impress upon school principals the importance of this study. It took months before I grasped how the work involved in preparing to enter the field is also data. After that, I stopped trying to force the pace, understanding that grounded theory does not have neat beginnings and endings but weaves through the process as the fit between the initial research question and the evolving data is contrasted and evaluated.

I have been especially privileged to have my still-living sons actively engage with this research. They volunteered insights and perspectives which not only illuminated my understanding of the emerging data but also opened up space for them to be more forthright with me in my role as researcher than they were previously able to be with me as their grieving mother. Seven years ago my eldest son astutely

said: "At first this will be surreal, but in time it will be a remarkable journey." As the instrument for this research, I used our joint experiences with death and grief to define the research problem and to become a sensitive collaborator with a group of courageous South African teenagers who were brave enough to share parts of their journey with me.

## **CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter describes the choice of methodology; the sampling and recruitment strategies; the data collection strategies; measures taken to protect vulnerable participants; and the data analytic process. I provide a continuous view of my academic and personal reflection on the process of bringing vulnerable young people into a research setting. I reflect on the complexity of identifying and accessing participants through their schools and their parents; and I try to convey the emotional impact this had on me in my separate but interlinked roles of current parent and bereaved parent; grief educator and counsellor; researcher and research instrument.

### **2.2 METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES**

Creswell (2002: 3-6) asserts that while philosophical assumptions may not always be visible in social science research design, the epistemological stance or theoretical perspective of the researcher nonetheless informs the strategy that links methods to outcomes. Although the needs of my participants and the sample size ultimately predicated a qualitative methodology, it is by no means the only approach I considered. My bachelor degree was in psychology and initially I leaned towards the more positivist research designs employed in this discipline where analysis, emulating the methods of the natural sciences, seeks to hypothesise and make causal inferences about social phenomena that will be generalisable beyond the specific data analysed (Roth & Mehta, 2002: 133). Taylor (1982) explains that anti-positivists, or interpretivists, argue the opposite. They take the view that scientific methods are inappropriate for the study of society. If we want to understand social action, we have to delve into the reasons and meanings which that action has for people. However, Creswell (2002: 4, 9) asserts that social research today tends to be less an issue of quantitative versus qualitative and more how research practices lie somewhere on a continuum between the two. This is reflected by the growth of mixed methods research where the philosophical underpinning is to first focus attention on the research problem and to then use pluralistic approaches to derive knowledge about the problem.

My orientation to bereavement research has overtones of participative action research (PAR) and feminist ways of approaching interviews. Elements of both can be seen in this study. PAR, is a method described by Liamputtong (2007: 7,129) as researchers aiming to work collaboratively with individuals, groups and

communities who have been 'silenced, othered and marginalised' with a view to improving their circumstances. PAR emphasises the need for research methods which allow researchers to hear their voices and care is taken that vulnerable participants benefit from the research and are not further exploited or oppressed because of their participation. Liamputtong (2007: 130) cites Davidson who undertook PAR studies with mentally ill people and who contends that conventional approaches to research with vulnerable people can be yet another source of the loss of self, unwittingly undermining, rather than promoting recovery by treating the person as a passive object to be investigated and acted upon by others. In feminist research methodology there is also a strong concern that research should benefit those who participate. A commitment to social change translates into research methods that limit isolation between participants and the researcher identifies with the study question by sharing her experiences with women in the study. It also presents a cogent argument for the researcher to incorporate personal and research experience into the data collection and the analysis of the data (Liamputtong, 2007: 10-11). Because the deepest parts of my being have been profoundly stirred by the death of my son and the grief of my still-living children, my work also incorporates a degree of autoethnography. This is a genre of writing and research which is about the researchers' own self while in fieldwork. It often involves personal narratives of the author's life experiences as the autoethnographer looks both through a wider ethnographic lens focusing outwards on social and cultural aspects of the research question and looks inward, exposing a vulnerable self (Liamputtong, 2007: 167).

The dominant theoretical perspectives on bereavement and grief stem from psychology and psychiatry where the focus is on the individual response rather than on the social and structural context in which bereavement occurs (Charmaz, 1999; Komaromy, *et al.*, 2007). Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop (2005: 4) underline that these theories have also generated from the particular cultural contexts of contemporary western society. Furthermore grief literature has been mainly written by medical practitioners or therapists and as they are apt to see only these bereaved people who are struggling to function, there has been a tendency to pathologise grief responses which fall outside of narrow and often prescriptive definitions. Bonanno (2009: 3) contends that this poses a problem when we try to understand grief in broader terms.

This study considers adolescent bereavement from a sociological perspective. Through this lens, grief is viewed less as an individual response to death and more as a social phenomenon. I wanted to know how young people who are not in therapy manage the loss of their sibling in the school setting and in their everyday lives. I set out to explore the cultural and social dynamics that impacted them following their brother or sister's death and to ask them how these influences helped or inhibited their ability to bounce back from bereavement. Relocating grief and bereavement to reflect its specific historical, cultural and social

conditions has only begun in the last two decades. Ribbens-McCarthy (2006) and Jakoby (2012) assert that it is due time to confront the psychological conception of grief and establish grief as a sociological topic using interdisciplinary approaches. My own study has been made richer by having the perspectives of two supervisors from different disciplines: one from sociology and one from psychology.

Balk *et al.* (2005: 96-99) found that there is a need for the use of multi-systemic approaches to generating and disseminating research and evidence-based practice innovations. Creswell (2002: 25) says that quantitative studies are the traditional mode of research and consequently some researchers may find it uncomfortable to challenge accepted approaches by using qualitative approaches to inquiry. Indeed, leading contemporary theorists in the field of bereavement typically report on studies with large samples. Many of these studies use quantitative instruments to predict outcomes, while complementary qualitative techniques add colour and depth to the findings. Scholars like Balk, Bonanno, Dyregrov and Hogan have used a range of quantitative techniques to measure variables and test theory. A case in point is the Göteborg discotheque fire study (Broberg, Dyregrov & Lilled, 2005) which investigated posttraumatic stress and school adjustment as reported by 275 adolescents who survived the fire. The methods employed in this study included the Impact of Events Scale (IES), Clinician Administered Posttraumatic Stress Scale (CAPS) and an interview concerning background factors and issues of public and personal support. The breadth and depth of inquiry in bereavement studies is often impressive. Bonanno (2009: 3) combines diagnostic and qualitative methods in testing ideas about grief, applying standard methods from other areas of psychology to the topic of bereavement. In experimental paradigms bereaved people were asked to discuss death loss and other important events in their lives. While they talked, Bonanno and his colleagues recorded subjects' facial expressions and their automatic nervous system activity as the way of measuring their emotional responses (Bonanno, 2009: 27). In a South African study (Somhlaba & Wait, 2008) which sought to investigate the role of social networks and coping following spousal bereavement, 198 Xhosa-speaking recently widowed spouses were administered the Social Support Appraisals Scale, the Beck Depression Inventory-Second Edition and the Coping Strategy Indicator. Qualitative data were derived from semi-structured interviews with selected participants.

As illustrated above mainstream psychology offers myriad possible tests which can be used to measure and verify ideas about adolescent grief and my original proposal set out an ambitious plan for a three-phased data collection process using a mixed methods approach. My aim was to combine survey data with data derived from focus groups and interviews. I planned to analyse qualitative data using the grounded theory method where the constant interplay between data collection and data analysis allows theory to emerge directly from the data which can then be tested against the 'real world' (Bryman, 2009: 541). As knowledge

about the influence of the school on adolescent bereavement in South Africa is scant I wanted the rich data that qualitative methods can generate and a degree of generalisability to my sample which quantitative methods offer. Balk and Jordan *et al.* (2005: 96-99) note that while qualitative methods offer distinct advantages in understanding perceptions and motives in depth, they are typically limited to understanding a few cases and cannot produce generalisable results. However Charmaz (2006: 101) contends that the quest for generalisability is at odds with the process of constructing theory through theoretical sampling. She observes that qualitative researchers often ill-advisedly strive to make their samples represent distributions of larger populations. While this strategy may be useful for initial sampling, it can result in the researcher collecting unnecessary and conceptually thin data.

## 2.3 CHOICE OF GROUNDED THEORY FOR ANALYTIC METHOD

It intrigues me how this study has slowly come together in a serendipitous way. At the outset I knew little about the grounded theory method (GTM) other than that it emerged through Glaser and Strauss's seminal study, *Time for Dying* (1968) which dealt with the dying and death of seriously ill patients in a variety of hospital settings. Death as a social process is one of the great turning points in human existence, but prior to their work, it had been subjected to little scientific study. While GTM can be used for a variety of research questions it is particularly advocated for exploring research questions in uncharted territory. Over the years it has proven effective in studies dealing with grief and death for example: *Adolescent Bereavement after the Sudden Death of a Sibling* (Forward & Garlie, 2003); and *The Long Term Outcomes of Adolescent Sibling Bereavement* (Davies, 1991).

As I was using GTM for the first time and there are different variations of the method, I was mainly guided by the work of Kathy Charmaz, a leading theorist and exponent of grounded theory who studied under both Glaser and Strauss. Glaser was grounded in the quantitative tradition of Columbia University while Strauss's epistemological stance derived from the pragmatist, symbolic interactionist and ethnographic traditions of the Chicago school (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 32-43). In the five decades since Glaser and Strauss wrote as a team, their subsequent methodological development of grounded theory diverged quite markedly. Strauss and Corbin went on to develop a more interpretative approach to theory generation (Bryman, 2008: 541) with the view that data can't always speak for themselves. Charmaz (2006: xi) concurs, saying that while grounded theory can provide a methodological map, or suggestions for possible routes, it is the researcher's involvement and interpretation that leads them to the next step. *The Construction of Grounded Theory* by Charmaz (2006) lay at my bedside for months and as I was weighing up mixed methods approaches to this study I also had a stack of papers by John Creswell. It was only later that I discovered

that Creswell, apart from being a leading authority on mixed methods is also a professor of educational psychology and writer on the topic of grief; and that Charmaz has produced outstanding scholarship on living with chronic illness which, when I thought about it, is a condition not dissimilar to living with grief. Both have a dramatic effect on a person's self-concept; their view of their future and their relationships. Furthermore what is noteworthy in the work of Glaser and Straus and in Charmaz's work is their emphasis on the temporality of death, bereavement and illness processes and how all these processes involve adaptation to an altered state over time.

## **2.4 PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT**

The research objectives led me to seek interviews with teenagers who were in high school at the time of their sibling's death. I consulted closely with psychologists responsible for school circuits in the Western Cape and we anticipated that using a purposive sampling strategy, we would be able to recruit at least 50 suitable participants within a couple of months. This did not happen. Four months and more than four hundred phone calls later, I had identified 42 suitable participants yet only 25 young people actually took part in this study. They were recruited through a combination of purposive sampling strategies: Responding to newspaper articles about my work and contacting me directly (two participants); introductions by their mothers who belong to a bereaved parents network (twelve participants); and introductions by school principals (two participants) or school counsellors (nine participants). The main hurdle for me was that bereaved siblings are a hidden population and therefore the most effective way of accessing them (unless I knew them or their parents personally) was to find them through schools. The principals and counsellors at the 74 high schools I contacted were generally not opposed to the research or intentionally obstructive. However, assisting me required principals to contact parents and ask if they would be willing for me to phone them and discuss the research. This presented a problem because many principals did not have contact details for parents. Secondly, few principals knew exactly how many bereaved sibling cases they had in their schools and had to ask teachers or school counsellors to assist in identifying them. The main obstacle to reaching adolescents was getting by the gate-keepers involved. Three school psychologists declined to help me due to their concerns that participation would be too traumatic for the bereaved learners in their care. Liamputtong (2007: 51) discusses how families and guardians can be an entry point to accessing vulnerable participants, but they may also be vigilant protectors because they often believe that vulnerable people have suffered many times over and do not deserve another disruption in their lives. Although few principals actually gave me parents' names the responses below reflect both their overall willingness to assist and the problems associated with identifying bereaved adolescents in their schools:

“Just this weekend there was a shootout ... I mean this happens nearly every week. I think I can find some for you, definitely we should have some.” ( Life Orientation Teacher)

“Well it’s not like I can just announce this in assembly and say could you please put your hands up if your brother or sister died! This is a highly sensitive area you’re venturing into now. We have not had a death in our school in the last few years and I highly doubt that we have more than one or two siblings suitable for your study.” ( School Principal)

“It’s strange you phone today because just this week a learner’s mother died and last year we had a learner who burnt to death. And we had a stabbing but that boy did not have siblings in the school ... but *Ja*, we can definitely help you.” ( School Principal)

“We have two boys ... I think in grade 8 and 11 whose brother was killed last year, there is another boy in grade 8 whose brother died in a car accident and we could have another one in Matric. I will find out and phone you back.” ( School Secretary)

Approaching parents and their children was also complicated. I visited some parents in their homes. We found common ground and trust in sharing our bereavement experiences and they signed consent for their children to participate, but some of the teenagers later felt too anxious to come to focus groups or their parent had a bad day and did not feel up to driving them there. This caused some of the parents’ considerable distress and because I’ve been there myself, the last thing I wanted was to make an already-suffering parent feel worse. Hence considerable time and energy went into checking back with parents and providing reassurance.

## 2.5 THE STUDY SAMPLE

Data were collected from 25 siblings in 21 families in the Western Cape, South Africa. Their mean age was 18 years (range 14–22 years; female/male ratio 14/11). While all the participants were high school learners at the time of their sibling’s death, five of the participants had subsequently left school and were at university and one had a full-time job at the time of data collection. Research participation took place from two months to seven years post-loss. The mean number of years since the death of their sibling was three years. The home languages of participants were: Afrikaans (six), English (ten) and isiXhosa (nine). Five participants

were bereaved of a sister and 20 participants were bereaved of a brother. Most siblings were from the same set of parents but six participants reported the death of a step sibling or half-brother/sister. The causes of death reported by either siblings or one of their parents were: car crash (five); climbing accident (one); died in sleep (one); drowning (two); drug-related (one); motorbike crash (one); poisoning (one); shooting (two); stabbing (four); sudden illness, where the sibling died within days of its onset (four); and suicide (three). Ethical clearance was granted by the Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities) of Stellenbosch University. An information leaflet that outlined the study's aim, duration, potential benefits and potential emotional discomfort was provided to each potential research participant.

## 2.6 DATA COLLECTION

I promised candid reflection on the difficulty of conducting bereavement studies and I begin by discussing the challenges of collecting data that yields robust empirical data. I set out to produce research that would be reliable, valid and representative. I planned to start with three focus groups (one each in Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa) to set the agenda for a survey, followed by semi-structured interviews. However when I tested survey questionnaires with potential participants, I found that the closed questions were confusing. For example, not all teenagers knew the exact date of their sibling's death and sometimes the details around the death had not been fully explained to them nor did they necessarily want to disclose the nature of the death. Hence I revised the pilot questionnaire and included some open-ended questions but the replies remained stilted and did not elicit thick data. Nonetheless I clung to my conviction that I needed empirical evidence from a quantitative survey to give my work legitimacy and authority. Then I conducted the first focus group and was totally taken aback at the complex and colourful data it generated. The focus group concept grew out of the group therapy method used by psychologists and psychiatrists and was based on the assumption that people with similar problems or beliefs would be more comfortable talking about these issues within the safety of a group of people who shared that problem or belief (Helitzer-Allen, Makhambera & Wangel, 1994).

My use of the focus group in a sensitive social research setting showed me that it is far more than an agenda-setting exercise and I grasped the power, not only of its data-generating potential, but also of its cathartic value. Nolbis *et al.* (2010: 298) used focus groups as a therapeutic support method for siblings of children with cancer. They found that the siblings felt a sense of belonging and comfort by being able to share their experiences with others in a similar situation; and that participation in such sibling groups has been shown to decrease anxiety and depression. In the present study the participants engaged each other, argued with each other, cried together. They enjoyed practical stress-reducing activities introduced by the supporting psychologists, for example blowing into a paper bag to curb anxiety and learning muscle-

relaxation exercises. It was evident that the participants found that sharing with other bereaved siblings helped them to normalise their own experience and that the discussions had both cathartic and therapeutic elements.

I'm not used to talking and I used to keep this to myself just thinking about it but not talking. I feel better now, after doing this, more free you know, happy because of actually telling what happened. It's like feeling relieved knowing that all of us shared here and no one is going to go outside and tell people that I lost a brother and make fun of it or gossip about it. (Themba, aged 18)

Before I came here I was freaking out to be quite honest. But *Ja*, it was interesting because everyone has a different story but there're some things we all feel the same way about ... I mean death, it's the same thing ... and I mean the bit about how we deal with our parents was very interesting for me because it's like different ways of doing the same thing. (Bridget, aged 16)

Bryman (2008: 475-476) discusses many advantages of the focus group which I also found in my fieldwork. In the context of focus groups participants will often challenge each other's views or as they listen to each other they may want to qualify or modify a view. This can unearth a lot more than what is often achieved in the question-followed-by-answer-approach of normal interviews and I found that the participants tended to speak their minds strongly once they got a sense that they were not alone in their view. Thus the focus group offered me a privileged insider's glimpse at how teenagers experience and make sense of sibling loss. Some were outwardly nervous when they arrived but soon they were laughing, arguing and leaning forward in their seats, totally absorbed as each new thought led them down a path of mutual discovery. When the first focus group turned out to be so rewarding I reflected on the way the teenagers bonded and how they sparked and added to each other's disclosures. I realised that asking a bereaved teenager to fill out a questionnaire in isolation, without validation from peers working through a similar experience, was unlikely to produce the same rich results. This combined with time constraints; with the logistical hurdles in reaching a larger sample; and the complexities of working in a multi-language environment where young people have differing levels of literacy, led me to down-scale my study and follow a more emergent design.

The development of grounded theory by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss demonstrated that qualitative inquiry could produce outcomes of equal significance to those produced by the predominant statistical-quantitative, primarily mass survey methods of the 1960's. What they also achieved was a re-direction of positivist-orientated concern among qualitative researchers seeking reliability and validity in response to criticisms from quantitative methodologies. They advocated grounded theory as a method for systematic qualitative research where data could generate more than numerical data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 33) and this was true in my own experience of using the method.

## 2.7 FORMAT OF FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Data emerged formally through focus groups and semi-structured interviews. It also emerged informally through emails, conversations with bereaved parents and teenagers, phone calls to high schools and the way each of these groups responded to the research topic. The discussions and interviews were recorded with the full knowledge of the participants and were preceded by a recapping of their rights and what they could expect to happen. Participants were assured that they would be assigned fictitious names when their statements were used in the report. None of the participants received payment for their participation but they were offered assistance with transport costs. During the discussion, snacks and drinks were served.

Psychologists accredited by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) were present to provide psycho-educational support at all the group discussions which were conducted in university or school meeting rooms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participant's homes or at a coffee shop of their choosing and one interview was conducted via Skype with a participant who knew me and was comfortable with this medium. Ever cautious about the potential for this research to cause harm or exacerbate preexisting psychological problems related to their bereavement, I carefully checked with parents that the siblings participating in individual interviews with me had access to counseling should they require it, or I provided the contact details of one of the educational psychologists who supported me during the focus groups. Each interviewee was also given a list of organisations where they could get advice and support for suicide, depression and anxiety at no cost or for a negligible fee and I gave them a list of psychologists in private practice. This same resource list was given to all focus group participants. At the end of each discussion the supporting psychologist also explained how the bereaved siblings in high school could access the government educational psychologist providing specialised learner support to their school. This information was very well received by the participants.

Consistent with the tenets of the Grounded Theory Method, I let the participants direct the conversation and had on hand a discussion guide containing only a brief topical outline to alert me to questions I hoped to ask. Most times this proved unnecessary as the young people spontaneously raised these topics. The questions in the discussion guide were:

Could you take me back to what it was like for you going back to school after your sister (brother) died?

What did you expect the school to do?

What could have been done differently?

Did you feel like you were acknowledged as a sibling who was grieving?

Where did you get the most helpful support from?

If your brother (sister) was in the same school as you, was it important for you that the school arranged memorial activities for them or mentioned it in assembly?

How did people at school behave towards you after your brother (sister) died?

Did you find you were able to draw on your own inner resources to cope?

Has time made a difference? Do you cope better now than before?

## 2.8 PROTECTING VULNERABLE PARTICIPANTS

Pranee Liamputtong's book *Researching the vulnerable* (2007) gave me insightful direction as I entered the field. As scholars we have an almost routine understanding that children are a vulnerable population but her work made me think about what vulnerability really means. Various definitions of the "vulnerable" include people who lack autonomy; people who are "different"; people who are subject to subordination and stigma; children who experience unequal power relations with adults in their lives; and people who find themselves socially isolated or marginalised. The term "vulnerable" is often used interchangeably with the terms "hard-to-reach" or a "hidden" population referring to a group of people like my participants whose membership is not readily distinguished or enumerated based on existing knowledge and sampling capabilities (Liamputtong, 2007: 2-3). In this study participants shared deeply private accounts of emotionally disturbing events and processes. In the retelling of their stories; in the re-experiencing of sensory memories and emotions around their siblings' sudden and/or horrifying death, they ran the risk of psychological and even physical harm resulting from their participation. Therefore special safeguards were required to ensure that their well-being was protected and this extended beyond their rights. An adolescent can be assured that they are free to walk out of the research room at any point but will they do so? Will a child who has been raised to habitually respect and obey adults find it in themselves to say, "I do not feel comfortable, I am leaving now." Then, if they do leave, who will be there to make it okay for them? What are the implications for the researcher who goes into "private space" where only "insiders" participate?

The support of experienced professionals was important in managing these concerns during the data gathering process. I worked with four educational psychologists who quickly established rapport with the participants. They played a gentle guiding role, picking up on and clarifying with the participants important emotional aspects that I may have overlooked in my quest for data. Mainly they were unobtrusive and often participants became so absorbed in the discussion that they barely seemed aware of either the psychologist or my presence. What was very important is that the psychologists were on call after the discussions to deal with any reactions and provide counsel to both the participants and their parents.

Sensitive researchers venture into intimate spheres of family lives and this provides openings to discuss their personal troubles. Thus when these families have difficulties they may expect opinions or advice from the researcher as part of the research exchange and it is prudent for researchers to anticipate these requests (Daly 1992, as cited in Liamputtong 2007: 62). Because I was aware that the research might be traumatic for participants, I further prepared for this possibility by being able to offer referrals to counseling services and support groups.

In this study one of the participants in a focus group experienced a panic attack later the same evening while out socialising. The participant's parents asked for advice and the supporting psychologist was on hand to provide wise and appropriate counsel which they acted upon. Months later the mother contacted me to say that they had acted on other aspects of his advice which had helped the family. The supporting psychologists also imparted knowledge and help to me by pointing out certain things they felt I should be aware of and giving me feedback on the way I had facilitated the discussion.

## **2.9 IMPARTING COPING SKILLS AND PRACTICAL INFORMATION**

Having a professional to provide psycho-education support freed me up to focus on the discussion without worrying about the potential trauma and grief reactions it could trigger. In this way I was kept from mixing my roles of researcher and counsellor. The fact remains however that I have developed very specific knowledge about adolescents and grief both from an academic and a personal perspective and for some years now psychologists have been consulting me on the topic as it is not an area where they necessarily have extensive practice experience. Secondly, as a trained grief counsellor, I have interacted with many grieving teenagers in this role. This background was advantageous in establishing rapport and facilitating the discussions but it did mean that to an extent I was straddling the roles of researcher and counsellor and it was not always easy to determine when and if I should overstep the bounds of focus group facilitator to actually provide advice or information.

Liamputtong (2007: 59-62) drawing on her own work with vulnerable participants and the experiences of researchers like Romero-Daza, and Pauw and Brener, contends that when you as a researcher have resources or knowledge that can help participants it is morally wrong not to do so because the research should also benefit them; and by inviting individuals to participate in research, the researcher and the participants build a relationship based on a fair exchange. For example researchers working with drug

users, prostitutes and abused women have done this by providing educational material and referrals to health and social services or arranging treatment if there was a need to do so.

In conducting this study I wanted the participants to also be able to take away useful coping strategies or insights into the things that troubled them. Thus the psychologists and I shared practical exercises for reducing anxiety and I always concluded individual interviews by saying “You have given me so much valuable information, is there anything that you would like to ask me?”

For example when I realised how disturbing nightmares are for bereaved siblings, I began to provide information that gave them better insight into trauma dreaming. My concern was to put to rest their fears that when they dreamt about others or themselves dying, it meant that death was imminent. Continuing to think this day-after-day could be very detrimental to their emotional well-being and it was apparent that this was something they were unlikely to easily disclose to others. Below I give an example of how I took on the role of counsellor when these dreams were disclosed and I show how the participants were relieved and comforted, which to me justified my intervention.

Tarryn: Well, I wanted to ask you about this because lately I've been having this dream where my ex-boyfriend rammed me with his car and I went into a lamp pole and died but I don't know if it means I'm going to die.

Lesley (researcher): When did this dream start?

Tarryn: Well after we broke up and well he blamed me for making him angry so I broke off all contact after that so in the dream he was trying to kill me because he was angry.

Lesley (researcher): Well these dreams generally don't seem to mean that you are going to die. What I have found is that it often indicates some type of transition in your life or the ending of something. When you dream about dying it's often linked to a major life change.

Tarryn: *Ja*, like university. That's a big thing for me at the moment.

Lesley (researcher): Mmm ... yes, often it's when you're at a turning point ... something is going to end.... the way you've been up to that point. Dreams about dying often relate to new beginnings, new chapters that we have uncertainty about.

Tarryn: Well that's good! (Laughs) At least I'm not going to get killed when I finish matric! It would have really helped if I had known about these things earlier. (Tarryn, aged 18)

Liamputtong (2007: 61) says that reciprocity can also take the form of researchers providing feedback on the study to the participants and gatekeepers who facilitated its production. In my own research I have undertaken to return to schools and communities and share the findings of the study at gatherings with parents and bereaved siblings and to also share findings at workshops with high school educators,

educational psychologists, grief counsellors and non-governmental organisations like the Western Cape chapter of Compassionate Friends, FAMSA, and Khuleka Bereavement support for Children and Youth.

## 2.10 POWER RELATIONSHIPS WITH VULNERABLE ADOLESCENTS

One of my concerns going into the interviewing process was the power dynamics that would be in play. Here I was, a fifty year old woman seeking to engage young people, most of them still teenagers, who had been introduced to me through their mothers, counsellors or teachers. Would it be possible to establish an equal enough footing where they felt free enough to not censor what they shared? Researchers who work with vulnerable people stress the need for flexibility, to make sure the research takes place in a non-threatening, comfortable setting. Aside from tangible benefits, research can make participants feel valued when they are treated respectfully and as experts because they have certain knowledge and skills that the researcher does not have. Respect and reciprocity are important and by giving something in return for information, researchers can reduce the power inequality between themselves and the researched. All the participants in the study knew that my family, like theirs, had lost a child. None of them ever referred to this but they related to me as an insider. This was not only evident by the ease they displayed in the research setting but also by expressing this implicitly in comments like, “well, you know what I mean.” While the English participants all addressed me by my first name, a couple of the Afrikaans boys initially addressed me as “*Tannie*” (Auntie) and the isiXhosa participants addressed me as “Miss” in the same way they address their teachers but this seemed to merely indicate the respect protocol they were comfortable with, not a barrier. The participants quickly became deeply engaged in the discussions and examining the transcripts later, I found there were 72 outbursts of laughter during the eleven hours of sharing that took place. As they got caught up in the telling of their stories participants also began to use swear words and slang unthinkingly. My fears of an unequal power dynamic were quickly put to rest when I re-listened to their comments at the end of each group discussion, for example:

Tiaan: Whoever the adult is that gets the discussion group going they must be someone who respects you even though you’re not an adult yet like how we did it today.

Lesley (researcher): You spoke about the power thing with adults, like how often you want to speak out but you hold yourself in and it’s important for me also in these discussions.

Pierre: You are very good. You don’t have to worry. (Focus group 4)

It was clear that they wanted to be heard and that they trusted me to hear them. Even when I was working through an interpreter and participants knew that I could understand only parts of what they said, they would turn and speak to me directly.

Lwazi: Miss, when will we talk again?

Lesley (researcher): Unfortunately I can't come back here for a while because I must go and talk to teenagers at other schools but maybe in the meantime you can get together as a group again. (Nods towards the school psychologist) I am sure you can ask your counsellor here to assist you with this. (Psychologist agrees)

Lesley (researcher): But what I can do, when I am finished doing all the discussions, I can come back and share the report with you. Would you like that?

Lwazi: Yes we would be very glad for that. (Others all nod) Focus group 3)

Pierre: *Ja* and we can also help you. I mean like with other guys that don't want to come, we could tell them that we already came and maybe we can find you some other people

Lesley (researcher): That would be a big help!

Tiaan: Maybe we could also get together like with the bigger group of everyone, I mean so that we can meet them and you can tell us about the study when you're finished. (Focus group 4)

This desire to get together again and continue sharing came through in all the discussions. Their reluctance to end the discussion presented a huge ethical dilemma for me: On one hand this whole research undertaking was spurred by my conviction that I'm doing something really important but it's hard to say "Well, I'm sorry but this is kind of the end. You've spilled your deepest emotions, opened yourself up for intense scrutiny and it's been great, we've learned so much from you. So thank you for giving up your Saturday afternoon, I'll be back in six months to share the findings with you and bye for now."

It took immense courage for young people to come to discussion groups and they gave so much of themselves that it was important to me that they also benefitted from their participation. When you're dealing with such deep and disturbing issues you can't just raid your participants for data and walk away. Hence, I made a point of checking back in with my participants via email and phone and I promised that I would come and share the findings with them when the study was complete.

## 2.11 DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

My main data were transcripts of focus group discussions and interviews with bereaved adolescent learners. In addition I have drawn not only on data that emerged directly from the present study but also on excerpted or adapted material developed along my journey with bereaved adolescents since 2005. I transcribed the focus group and interview recordings into standard text to allow for analysis and I translated the Afrikaans discussions into English. An isiXhosa-speaking colleague assisted me with the translation of the isiXhosa focus group. He was also very helpful in explaining deeper nuance and indigenous or shorthand terms, for instance the term 'dabs' which is short for of *oodade bobawo*. The literal meaning is 'the sisters of my father' but the colloquial use refers to older aunts in the family who are pillars of support.

I pause here to reflect on how translating the discussions affected my colleague. I carried the stories of devastated siblings around in my head for months and for my own well-being, I steeled myself against the emotional pain of it. However the colleague who assisted me with the isiXhosa-English translation found himself overcome by sadness. As the participants described violent deaths, he began weeping at the emotional intensity of what he was listening to. Liamputtong (2007: 82) says that sensitive researchers often neglect to report on the emotional toll of working with vulnerable people because they fear being accused of bias. Yet listening over and over again to anguished accounts can invoke extreme subjective distress as the researcher endures and shares the pain of the participants.

I began analysis by reading the transcripts and coded each line using open coding and in-vivo coding. Coding guidelines developed by Taylor and Gibbs (2010) were helpful. They discuss how codes can be based on behaviours, events, activities, strategies, states, meanings, adaptations, relationships, conditions or constraints, consequences, settings and the researcher's role in the process of data generation. Initial coding generated over 300 codes indicating anxiety, fear and trauma. These were developed into more focused codes like "panic attacks", "scared of lifts", "scared of showering", and "worried about being blamed for the death" and then grouped into a category I provisionally called "anxiety". A snapshot of how the analysis process is grounded in the data is shown in Figure 1 where the successive refining of codes built up a tentative analytic category of "Anxiety".

**Figure 1: Development of the category “Anxiety”**

<i>Tentative Category : ANXIETY</i>					
Controlling Behaviour/ Phobias			Fear of Self and others dying		
<i>Focused code</i>			<i>Focused code</i>		
Baths instead of showering <i>now</i>	Can only bath in lukewarm water <i>since</i>	Won't go in a lift <i>now</i>	I wonder who's going to be <i>next</i>	<i>People</i> just get snatched out my life	I never thought about death <i>before</i>
Plans routes in advance	Terrified of tunnels <i>now</i>	Wont drive at month end <i>anymore</i>	My parents couldn't handle this <i>again</i>	I'm scared to turn 18 coz that's how old he was	you really think about dying for the 1 <sup>st</sup> time
Can't go to shopping centre alone <i>now</i>	Keeps three emergency numbers on phone <i>now</i>	Plans carefully so nothing bad can happen	Logically I know it won't happen to me but ...	I could die tomorrow that's reality for me <i>now</i>	Well at least I'm not going to die then!
<b><i>Selected examples of raw codes</i></b>					

The emphasis on words like *now*, and *before* indicates that anxiety and fear developed as a direct consequence of their sibling's death. Data in the emergent category “Anxiety” also provided clues for possible sub-categories such as “Fear of self and others dying”. I looked at literature on anxiety and wrote memos to clarify my thoughts on what had emerged. To gauge how important categories were to my participants, I combed my data again and picked up on absolute statements containing words like “very”, “really” and “most of all”. I looked at the use of intense verbs: words like “hate” and “destroy” and I noted extreme adjectives like: “hysterical” and “petrified”.

Line-by-line coding forced me to stay close to the data and helped me to compare data with data. Charmaz (2006: 52) notes that coding every line it is an enormously useful tool because it helps identify implicit concerns as well as explicit statements and ideas will occur to you that may escape your attention if you read for a general thematic analysis of qualitative data. Figure 2 provides a snapshot of the line-by-line coding process which sparked the idea that becoming older than the sibling who died could be a troubling experience for surviving brothers and sisters. Thus I paid more attention to the event of a sibling reaching a birthday which made them the same age or older than their sibling was at death. Then I compared incident to incident. Charmaz (2006: 53) explains that this helps your ideas to take hold and gives you clues to follow.

**Figure 2: Coding: Line-by-line**

<p>Simultaneous collapse of family and loss of sibling</p> <p>Connected to sibling</p> <p>Sibling who died was the most dependable of all his siblings</p> <p>Strong connection to sibling</p> <p>Looked up to sibling</p> <p>Life is different since the death</p> <p>Hierarchy changed</p> <p>Forced into new role</p> <p>First experience of death</p> <p>Weird being older than brother</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 1</b> <i>Rob, 22 who was in high school when his older brother died</i></p> <p>The collapse of our family was bad and for me I mean ... at that stage with Anthony, well he was the only brother I felt I could actually depend on, you know. I was very connected to him and I looked up to him a lot. I mean I could rely on him more than I could on anybody else. It's definitely different because of him dying. Particularly me kind of being placed in the older brother sort of role. <i>Ja</i>, so the first person I actually personally knew who died was Anthony. And what's weird is being older than him because no matter how old I am I always, when I think of him, I think of him as a person older than me...even though I think of him as the same age as what he was but I still kind of picture him as older than me.</p>
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Figure 3 shows an excerpt from an incident-to-incident comparison of how teenagers feel about becoming older than the sibling who died. This coding exercise uncovered more concepts for examination like the impact of multiple losses and fears of dying.

**Figure 3: Coding: Incident-to-Incident**

<p>Both died at same age</p> <p>Scared of who will die next</p> <p>Afraid to turn same age as sibling who died</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 1</b></p> <p>And my boyfriend had turned seventeen so that freaked me out and both of them died when they were seventeen, well close to eighteen. And next year I'll be seventeen (Laughs ruefully) I'll wait and see how that goes.</p>
<p>Weird being the same age as sibling who died</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 2</b></p> <p>And now I'm actually seventeen, the same age as my brother was when he died and that's kind of weird because I am the youngest of all of my brothers.</p>
<p>Fears overtaking brother's age</p> <p>Regrets he did not get to experience being older</p>	<p><b>Excerpt 3</b></p> <p>I was afraid to turn eighteen because then I would be the same age as him. It's very difficult for me and it's always in the back of my mind that he never got to this point.</p>

## 2.12 REFLECTION ON USING THE GROUNDED THEORY METHOD

The aim of using grounded theory (GTM) is to arrive at theoretical concepts from which a substantive theory may be developed. However when you read grounded theory research, you often get the impression that it was a tidy, systematic process from beginning to end; moving from open coding to more abstract analysis and having the concepts emerge quite naturally. My experience was not like that. Once I had gathered a whole lot of codes I immediately noticed patterns and trends and the problem was that I then found myself jumping ahead of the process into thematic analysis. Also while I sincerely wanted to follow a grounded theory process, focusing first on data surfacing from my study and only then comparing it to relevant extant literature, I found that I did not trust myself fully to work exclusively with my participants' responses. I tended to delve back into my pile of books and papers written by prominent adolescent bereavement researchers like Hogan, Balk and Dyregrov checking if they had reported on similar data. Some weeks into my field work I realised this was slowing me down and fragmenting my thinking so I resolved to work purely with my own memos as I made links and interpretations from my own data. Nonetheless I found myself returning over and over to grounded theory texts to verify that I was correctly interpreting how to systematically work through the data, raising codes to categories and explicating the categories in memos so that theoretical concepts could emerge without me forcing the process.

I elected to compare the study data concurrently with relevant scholarship because presentation of the content in this way is consistent with the premise that grounded theory (GTM) flows out of an ongoing iteration between data collection and data analysis that is then tested with inquiry into the "real world" and contrasted with extant literature. Bryman (2008: 541) and exponents of the method describe this process as the hallmark of grounded theory. The question, says Dey, (2007: 185) is when do you stop? The answer is theoretical saturation. In GTM theoretical sampling is considered the vehicle by which the researcher arrives at saturation. Bryman (2008: 416) clarifies that theoretical sampling in GTM is not just about sampling people but means that the researcher seeks out and samples new settings, events or additional people to shed more light on the questions under consideration. For example, in this study, if I want to verify what learners say about Life orientation (L.O.) classes being a waste of time and that they don't equip adolescents to cope with traumatic and tragic events, I would seek out a knowledgeable person at the education department to gain better understanding of the L.O. curriculum content and maybe ask additional learners from different schools if they feel the same. When there is no further confirming information or variation, you can assume that the properties of your categories are exhausted and stop. Such an approach fits with Charmaz's emphasis on the potential of grounded theory to generate contextually relevant, plausible accounts that produce substantive theory (Dey, 2007: 186). My quandary has been "How do I

know if I have enough?" But Dey says that "despite their flirtation with verification", Glaser and Strauss were themselves quite explicit about the limited nature of theoretical saturation. They wrote (1967: 30): "The researcher's job is not to provide a perfect description of an area, but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behavior." Theory generation doesn't require lots of cases. One case could be used to generate conceptual categories and a few more cases used to confirm the indication. Glaser emphasised that theoretical sampling allows concepts to earn their way into the grounded theory (Holton, 2007: 279).

This inductive process was frustrating and intimidating to apply in practice. It was difficult to discern which categories merited being raised to core categories and how these in turn uncovered theoretical concepts; I also grappled with how to name categories precisely and in a way that represents what participants really voiced (bearing in mind that more than half the transcript material was translated from either Afrikaans or isiXhosa). Seasoned GTM scholars admonish the researcher to stay grounded in the data while warning them to resist the trap of staying so close to data that they fail to lift the analysis above a thematic description. Holton (2007: 266) notes that these are common challenges in a grounded theory study and that the researcher has to trust one's intuitive sense of the conceptualisation process when raising the focus of analysis from the descriptive to the conceptual level.

## **CHAPTER 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3.1. INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter the timing of the literature review is discussed in the light of the grounded theory method employed in this study. In the theoretical framework section John Bowlby's (1961) attachment theory provides a springboard for a discussion on how grief theorizing has evolved and changed over the last century since psychiatrist Sigmund Freud first distinguished between "normal" mourning and melancholia (1917/1957). Stage and task-based models which were spawned by attachment theory are briefly outlined with due attention to how these models construct grief as something that needs to be worked through and recovered from. Newer models which consider stress and coping and integrated approaches are outlined. In the final section, the distinct developmental stage of adolescence is discussed in relation to findings in the last two decades that continued attachment is adaptive for adolescent grievers. Lastly literature relating to the sibling-bereaved adolescent in the school setting is discussed. In chapter five the discussion of findings relates back to themes presented here, namely: identity and the individuating self; reordering versus relinquishing roles; resilience in the face of sibling-loss; and the bereaved adolescent in the school setting.

### **3.2 THE LITERATURE REVIEW IN A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

The question of whether or not to delay the literature review is a contentious issue amongst grounded theorists. Glaser and Strauss advised novice grounded theory researchers to delay the literature review to avoid seeing the world through the lens of extant ideas (Charmaz, 2006: 6). For graduate students, choice in this matter is limited given the requirements of Research Ethics Committees who want to see the academic framework and the methodology for the study clearly spelled out before giving the nod for the researcher to venture into the field.

Prominent grounded theory (GTM) theorist, Kelle (2005: 2) urges researchers to approach their study questions with an open mind, suspending their existing theoretical knowledge so that they do not force emerging theory into a preconceived understanding of theory. However, Charmaz points out that an open mind is not an empty mind. I spent years reading bereavement literature and observing first-hand the daily reality of my sons living without their sibling and because my approach is partly autoethnographic, it would be implausible for me to suggest that I approached the present study with an empty mind. Charmaz (2006: 17) notes that many graduate students already have a sound footing in their disciplines before they begin a research project and often have an intimate familiarity with the research topic and the literature about it. Yet each study produces the unexpected, and Dick (in Bryant

& Charmaz, 2007: 405) contends that a more compelling reason to postpone a literature review is that as a study proceeds, assumptions are developed and tested; and as understanding grows the relevant literature becomes easier to identify. This view resonated with me. There are some things that the researcher can take for granted or overlook and it is only when confronted with bereaved siblings in a research setting that you actually hear them properly and can check out what they're saying against what bereavement researchers in other parts of the world have found. For example, I never conceived that my still-living children might want to escape their sorrowful home by rushing off to school each morning. This is where an open mind and a self-imposed resolve to faithfully record what surfaces in the data is crucial when one is the chief instrument in the research process.

While Lempert (in Bryant & Charmaz, 2007: 254) concedes some of the concerns about the timing of the literature review, she counters that the literature review provides the current parameters of the conversation she hopes to enter and that in order to participate in the current theoretical conversation, she first needs to understand it. Failure to do this may mean that what seems like an innovative breakthrough in research may simply be a reflection of the researchers' ignorance of the present conversation.

### **3.3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

In this section concepts are operationally defined in the context of the present study:

The *school* is conceptualised as a social organisation where responses from a myriad of actors within the school and the organisational practices of the school, may help or hinder coping in bereaved adolescents. Qualitative work allows for the construction of the school by participants, not reifying it from an adult's perspective.

The terms *teen(s)*, *teenager(s)* and *adolescent(s)* are used interchangeably. Adolescence is generally viewed as a transition between childhood and adulthood; however its demarcation varies depending on whether biological, socio-cultural, or chronological age criteria are used. According to Louw and Louw (2007: 279) the onset of adolescence varies from 11 to 13 years and ends at between 17 and 21 years depending on individual physical maturation and attainment of societal norms and expectations of being an adult. Discussion of the needs of adolescents who have suffered loss is made in the context of their distinct developmental stage. The study considers the adolescent's transition from childhood to adulthood, the central task of identity formation and how sibling loss impacts and possibly disrupts this process (Kosminsky & Lewin in Balk & Corr, 2009: 333).

The terms *bereavement*, *mourning* and *grief* are often used interchangeably by mental health care professionals and by lay people. Hence the following definitions by Kastenbaum (2003) are helpful: *Bereavement* refers to the state of loss. If one experiences a death loss, one is bereaved. *Grief* is a personal and subjective response to loss. The intensity of grief depends on the meaning of that loss to the individual and bereavement does not inevitably create grief. *Mourning* has two interrelated meanings in the scholarly literature on the subject. On one hand, it describes the intrapsychic process whereby a grieving individual gradually adapts to the loss, but it can also denote a social process: the norms, behaviour patterns, and rituals through which an individual is recognised as bereaved.

Herman Feifel conceptualised grief recovery as 'redefining and reintegrating oneself into life' after bereavement (Balk, 2004). Parkes and Weiss (1983) defined grief recovery as "the ability to re-plan one's life and to achieve an independent level of functioning". Inherent in both is the concept of being able to reinvest in life following bereavement. Recent scholarship by Bonanno (2009) challenges the need for grief to be 'recovered from' or fully resolved in a lifetime. Instead Bonanno advances the role of resilience in facilitating functioning while the bereaved person simultaneously deals with the effects of grief and bereavement.

## **3.4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **3.4.1 Attachment Theory**

Contemporary theories about bereavement and grief have been widely influenced by John Bowlby's theory of attachment (1969). Bowlby studied the distress of infants separated from their mothers and concluded that early experiences in childhood influence development and behaviour later in life. He believed that the propensity to develop reciprocal affectional bonds with other humans is driven by a biological imperative for survival and when these bonds are severed by death, grief is an instinctive and universal response. Bowlby shared Freud's view that "insatiable and persistent yearning for the lost object" signals pathology. He divided the grief process into four phases, namely: numbing; yearning and searching; disorganisation and despair; and a final stage of reorganisation marked by successful emotional detachment from the deceased and adaptation to a new life (Talbot 2002: 61). Anderson (2001: 15) whose scholarship has centered on abandonment and loss concurs that human beings are genetically heir to a powerful need for attachment. However she argues that a severed relationship does not end the need to bond; in fact, losing the relationship tends to intensify this need. However, Freud's idea that recovery from grief is achieved by severing 'unhealthy emotional ties' with the deceased and reinvesting in something new" (Worden, 2009: 50) took hold and various stage-based theories of grief recovery evolved out of this school of thought.

Psychiatrist, Elisabeth Kübler Ross rose to prominence with the publication of her work *On Death and Dying* (1969) and her five-step model, originally developed in the context of terminally ill patients anticipating their death, became known as the “five stages of grieving”. This model proposed a pattern of adjustment that entailed working through denial, anger, bargaining and depression before reaching a final step of acceptance. Talbot (2002: 58) notes that the misinterpretation and over-simplification of Kübler Ross’s contributions inadvertently percolated a prescriptive approach to grieving. The end goal of stage and phased models is that at some point grief comes to an end; survivors “work” through stages of grief; and ultimately they are able to relinquish roles and resolve their grief. Emotional health from this perspective is only possible when the bereaved individual is detached from the deceased (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992: 171). This line of thought can be seen in the earlier editions of Worden’s *Grief counseling and grief therapy*, (1983 & 1988) where his final task of mourning is to help the survivor complete any unfinished business with the deceased and be able to say a final goodbye. In later editions of his handbook, which is widely used by clinical practitioners, Worden (2009: 50) discussed how he has since revised this view; finding instead that the final task of mourning is for the survivor to find ways to stay connected to the person who died but in a way that will not preclude him or her from going on with life. In her integrated model of bereavement Catherine Sanders (1999) distinguished between biological, emotional and social factors. While her model entails recovery from the biological effects of grief (for example trauma and stress), on an emotional level, her emphasis is on functioning rather than recovery. The culminative phase in her model is renewal which involves replacing the identity and roles based on life with the loved person who died with a restructured identity. Terms like “tasks” and “phases” underscore the idea that grief entails work in order to resume normal functioning. While mental health practitioners long endorsed the grief work perspective, Wortman and Silver (1989) found a lack of empirical support for this view. At the same time, the concept of grief work also suggests that the absence of grief is as much cause for concern as excessive grief that renders the mourner dysfunctional. Bowlby (1980: 138) described the absence of conscious grieving and expressions of positivity during the early stages of bereavement as a type of defensive denial. It’s as if you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t.

A newer model which included the possibility of a continued connection was developed by Stroebe and Schut (1999). Their dual process model of coping with bereavement advanced the idea that coping with loss involves more than confronting and processing grief. They suggested that coping with loss requires active effort to structure memories and thoughts and to regain mastery over one’s life. In their view, restoration-orientated coping is an attempt to ameliorate the pain of grief and distance oneself from one’s grief sufficiently in order to cope with the demands of daily life. By dealing with grief in limited ‘dosages,’ the survivor frees up energy to concentrate on restructuring their life. A model advanced by Fleming and Robinson (1991) formulated the grief journey as navigating the transition

from 'losing what you have to having what you have lost'. As the bereaved searches for meaning in the face of death loss the legacy of the person they loved facilitates this transition. This legacy is seen as the result of dwelling on what one has learned and incorporated from the loved one who died and their legacy is reflected in the survivor's transformed sense of self.

Balk, Jordan *et al.* (2005: 96-99) note that emerging scholarship has challenged many of the preeminent conceptual bereavement theories that tended to pathologise a grief experience when a mourner is unable to sever ties with the loved one who died or conversely, fails to demonstrate grief. In view of the argument for continuing attachment which follows, it bears noting that Freud in part, revised his earlier theory following the death of his daughter Sophie in 1920. Nine years later he wrote a letter to his friend Ludwig Binswanger (as cited in Grubrich-Simitis, 1993). The sentiment expressed in the letter contrasts sharply with his earlier advocacy of emotional detachment from the loved one who dies.

"We know that the acute sorrow we feel after such a loss will run its course, but also that we will remain inconsolable, and will never find a substitute. No matter what may come to take its place, even should it fill that place completely, it remains something else. And that is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating a love that we do not want to abandon. This is an enduring loss for which there is no solace."

### 3.4.2 Continued Attachment

As various researchers have pointed out, neither Freud, who was mainly interested in depression, or Bowlby, who studied the mother-infant relationship, was directly studying death (Talbot, 2002: 54). However their early work sparked research which examined the role of continued attachment between the bereaved and their loved ones who die. A growing body of research over the last two decades has found that survivor well-being is better accomplished by integrating the grief experience and perceiving that they have a different but on-going relationship with the loved one who died (Balk & Jordan, 2005). This approach was highlighted in the ground-breaking book *Continuing bonds – new understandings of grief* (1996) by Klass, Silverman and Nickman. Subsequent to their work, the concept of continued bonds (or ongoing attachment) has received wide prominence and validation by researchers (for example, Hogan & DeSantis, 1992, 1994, 1996; Talbot, 2022; Bonanno, 2009; Worden, 2009)

In a counter to medical models that pathologise a grief experience that continues after a certain amount of time, the role of resilience and the ability to simultaneously grieve and function is emphasised in current grief research. Klass *et al.* (1996) who presented data from 22 authors, among

the most respected in their fields, do not see bereavement or grief as ever being fully resolved. They propose that rather than emphasising letting go the emphasis should be on negotiating and renegotiating the meaning of the loss over time. They state that: “as professionals, we need to understand the reality of how people experience and live their lives, rather than finding ways of verifying preconceived theories of how people should live.” Boerner and Heckhausen (2010: 200) note that although current bereavement research appears to have moved away from the breaking bonds orientation, this paradigm continues to be influential among clinicians. Their model conceives the bereavement process as one of transformation that involves both elements of disengagement and connection. Boerner and Heckhausen (2010) and Bonanno (2009) point to many non-Westernised cultures where the concept of ongoing connection with the dead is commonplace. Indeed in South Africa, ancestors are referred to as the “living dead” (Somhlaba & Wait 2008: 343). Bonanno (2009) developed a cogent argument for resilience, showing that most people are able to continue functioning and can even embrace life while continuing to grapple with the effects of bereavement many years after the death. In *Man’s search for meaning* (1946), one of the most influential works of psychiatric literature since Freud, Frankl contended that the human spirit can triumph over even the most miserable circumstances and that the worst losses can be the very catalysts to invigorate the search for meaning.

### **3.4.3 Sibling bereavement during adolescence**

This section examines issues related to adolescents encountering the death and bereavement of a sibling. Current thanatological scholarship supports the view that sibling loss presents a major life crisis; and that from a developmental perspective, adolescence is the most difficult time to lose a sibling. Hogan and Balk (as cited in Hogan & DeSantis, 1992: 175) contend that the conceptualisation of adolescent sibling bereavement is complicated by the fact that adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the double jeopardy factor. They are simultaneously coping with the situational crises of sibling death and the typical developmental crises or tasks of adolescence (Hogan & Balk, 1991) In particular researchers have emphasised the developmental challenges that are critical to establishing a distinct and stable identity (Balk in Balk & Corr, 2009: 4). Erikson (1964) explained that adolescence is a time of change, a time of upheaval and a time of attempting to define and redefine a theory of one’s self. There is a natural expectation that one’s sibling will be there throughout most of one’s lifespan (Horsley & Patterson, 2006: 119) and when this anticipation is dashed by death, the adolescent’s evolving self-concept can be significantly impacted. Brothers and sisters, early in life, can become locked into a complementarity in which a vital part of one sibling’s identity becomes fitted to deep parts of the others’ core identity (Bank & Khan, 1982). Sibling relationships make up a child’s first social network and as this is generally the longest relationship one will have throughout a lifetime, it has a

profound influence on individual development, how people feel about themselves and the relationships they go on to develop outside of the family. The interaction between siblings teaches them to negotiate, to cooperate and recognise that others have needs and rights. Older siblings provide role modeling for younger siblings and frequently teach them skills and as siblings mature they take on new roles with each other, such as teacher, friend, companion, follower, protector, rival, and confidante (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Shaffer & Kipp, 2008).

Goldblatt (2009: 23) discussed how siblings develop different characteristics and strengths in an attempt to distinguish themselves from their siblings. Thus when a brother or sister dies, the most conflicted part of the emotional reaction of surviving siblings' stems from the intense yearning for closeness to the very person they were at pains to distinguish themselves from. At the same time there is often a gaping void as these complementary roles and strengths are irrevocably lost from the lives of those left behind. However, despite the potential for negative outcomes following death encounters during adolescence, Balk (in Balk & Corr 2009: 200) says that researchers tend to overlook more positive outcomes: how the crisis of sibling loss can also stimulate resilience, positive growth and maturity in adolescents. Hogan and DeSantis (1992: 171) contended that the prevailing medical science descriptions of bereavement are problematic when applied to adolescent sibling bereavement. This is because they posit a beginning, middle and end to grieving. They argued that these ontological viewpoints presume that grief occurs in discrete and invariant stages and that grief is time bound with an end point. By contrast, findings from the Hogan and DeSantis (1992) study demonstrated that adolescent sibling bereavement is not time bound and that bereaved adolescents experience a persistent ongoing attachment to their sibling who died. Hogan and DeSantis (1994: 173) found that adolescent siblings anticipate a heavenly reunion with the sibling and they said this precludes and is conceptually incompatible with the severing of the bonds of attachment to the dead sibling.

Balk (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 206) contends that sibling relations provide a fruitful area for deploying attachment theory. In his paper "Models for understanding adolescent coping with bereavement," Balk (1996: 367-387) said that those concerned with adolescent bereavement need models to assist in rethinking what "recovery from bereavement" denotes and to afford criteria for assessing recovery from bereavement. This sparked research interest in adolescent bereavement but Hogan and DeSantis (1992: 159) found that the vast majority of adolescent bereavement scholarship focused on grief resulting from the death of a parent and little was known with regard to grief adaptation in surviving adolescent siblings. In an attempt to address this lacuna, they studied this population in large community-based samples. Hogan and DeSantis (1992) set out three foundational constructs: grief, personal growth and ongoing attachment from which an initial conceptualisation of a substantive theory of adolescent sibling bereavement was hypothesised. The six categories which constitute the

construct of grief are: permanently changed reality of self and family; physical effects; increased vulnerability; cognitive interference; desire for reunion with sibling; and coping behaviour to distract from the pain of grief. The five categories which constitute the construct of personal growth are: permanently changed reality; increased sense of others; increased resiliency; increased faith in their own inner strength; and ability to receive and give help. Hogan and DeSantis (1992): conceptualised ongoing attachment as a type of motivational energy that assists in transforming bereaved adolescent siblings into resilient survivors. Ongoing attachment can encompass memorialisation activities; taking over tasks and roles previously performed by the sibling who died; perceiving an ongoing sense of presence of their sibling who died; and taking on the role of their ambassador.

#### **3.4.4 The bereaved adolescent sibling in the school setting**

The literature reviewed above focused on the role of the self, and the family environment in the adolescent reaction to the death of a sibling. However, since adolescents spend much of their day time at school, the school is another setting that determines how sibling death is reacted upon, experienced and expressed. The extent to which different role players in the school setting respond to adolescent death and how this response shapes the adolescent's reaction to sibling death emerges as an important factor in the literature. In his book, "*A student dies, a school mourns*," Klicker (2000) notes that while there is an abundance of information available on death and dying, there is a limited amount of material that addresses the needs of a school community in coping with bereaved learners. Klicker goes on to say that the school must be prepared to provide an environment which encourages healthy grieving, where the bereaved feel free to express their emotions and an environment that is sensitive to their needs (Klicker, 2000: xv - xx). However, his focus is on the management of collective grief rather than a single bereaved learner.

A Norwegian study (Dyregrov, 2009: 147) which considered the role of the school in the lives of adolescents affected by the suicide of a sibling or close friend, found that little knowledge has been documented on how young survivors cope and what kind of support they think they need. A study by Hogan and DeSantis (1994: 136) showed that within the category of social system support, there was almost total absence of school personnel being cited as supportive by bereaved adolescent siblings. According to Klicker (2000), staff members do not always have knowledge to respond to a school death and counsellors are given limited training, if any, in the dynamics of grief and the school community.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the results from both the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews. Throughout the discussion, the journey of adolescent sibling bereavement is described through the personal narratives that are captured by the subjective experiences of the siblings who participated. Some of them were no longer at high school when data for the present study was collected hence they were retrospectively recalling what took place after their sibling died. The topics that posed the most disruption and concern in their daily lives are covered. I take participants' stories and trace their bereavement journey beginning with the disruptive effect of their sibling's death and the shock and disbelief it evoked. Interwoven in this discussion are issues and events that were not the primary focus of the research but that were nonetheless essential to understanding the multiple factors that impacted adolescent sibling bereavement. In presentation of the material, the grounded theory analytic process is made visible by demonstrating how raw data were abstracted into core categories and theoretical concepts. Lastly, I locate my work within the body of adolescent bereavement scholarship as I contrast and compare the emergent substantive theory with extant theory.

The three key concepts that emerged are grounded in the study data and map adolescent sibling bereavement as a psychosocial journey of **disruption**, through **transition** to a sense of **changed self**. In the early weeks and months after the death of their sibling, the lives of these adolescents were severely disrupted. This set in motion a transition where they struggled with bewilderment and fear, trying to make sense of their present and their future in relation to the death. During this transitional time, how they perceived their interaction with their families, teachers and peers was pivotal to how they adapted to the multiple changes wrought by the bereavement. Gradually they recognised that the person they are becoming is in many ways different to the person they were before their brother or sister died. Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop provide an insightful explanation of the disruption and transition inherent in adolescent bereavement:

The status of youth and the status of bereavement may both be experienced as periods of marginality with all the attendant possibilities for uncertainty and disruption. Beyond this, these statuses are also transitional; with youth constituting a time of transition between childhood and adulthood, and bereavement a time of psychosocial transition between one set of significant relationships and another. While the theme of transition does not inevitably connote loss, it does necessarily imply change, and whether or not it is experienced as a loss, change itself may arouse fears of the unknown and the potentially chaotic. The juxtaposition of bereavement and young people may thus suggest a double jeopardy, invoking deep anxiety (Ribbens McCarthy & Jessop, 2005: 3).

## 4.2 DISRUPTION

Disruption is a central theoretical concept that emerged from the present study. Webster's online dictionary (2006) offers the following definitions of 'disruption': 1) An act of delaying or interrupting the continuity 2) An event that results in a displacement or discontinuity 3) The state of being rent asunder or broken in pieces

In the study, the disruption of their sibling's death resulted in: a sense of not knowing who they are anymore; not being sure what they believe or how the world works; not fitting in with their peers; not feeling normal; fears about their family life and their future; fears about death; and a range of other troubling physical and emotional responses. Ringler and Hayden (2000: 210) discuss the shock, numbness, sadness, anger, insomnia, loneliness, fright, survivor guilt, nightmares, suicide ideation, fears of own death, drug abuse, and school problems that can follow sibling bereavement.

Worden (2009: 59-63) lists seven mediating factors related to the circumstances of death which can severely complicate the mourning process for survivors. They include: unexpected death; death that happens geographically far away from the survivor; violent or traumatic death; death perceived as preventable; stigmatised death, ambiguous death where those left behind do not know all the details; and multiple losses which occurring together or soon after each other. As will be shown these factors emerged and often overlapped in the present study data. Five core categories are discussed under the theme of disruption: trauma responses; perceived preventability; fear of self or others dying; anxiety and controlling behaviour; and disruption in the family

### 4.2.1 Trauma responses

Research by Balk and Walker (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 256) found that 30% of all college students in the United States of America are within 12 months of having experienced the death of a family member or a friend and many of these deaths are traumatic. In a nationwide Norwegian study (Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2005) adolescents whose siblings died from suicide, suffered from posttraumatic reactions, depression, and anxiety. In a study by Sethi and Bhargava (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 258) of Indian children aged from six to 16, participants who discovered the body of a person who died were all diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder. Hogan and DeSantis (1994) noted that some of the things that hinder bereaved adolescents are beyond their self-control for example: being imploded with intrusive thoughts and images, experiencing intense loneliness or guilt and confronting the injustice and unfairness of their sibling's death.

In the present study all the deaths were sudden and many were violent. Overwhelmingly participants showed distress when discussing the deaths. Six of the participants in the study had the opportunity to see their sibling in hospital and say goodbye to them before the machines that were keeping them alive were switched off. The others had no warning of the deaths. Some were not present at the death scene, some rushed there when they received news of the death and others did not. What weaves through their accounts is that whether or not they were present at the scene, they found their siblings' death highly disturbing and traumatic. Some of their descriptions of nightmares, depression, re-experiencing episodes, panic attacks, avoidance, injury to self, fear, horror and helplessness, and physiological difficulties can be classified as posttraumatic stress reactions (Beckner & Arden, 2008).

Afterwards I couldn't concentrate in school because my brother was stabbed and then stoned to death and I kept thinking about what happened. I was with my brother then he left the house to walk a friend out and then the *skollies* (gangsters) tried to rob them and they stabbed him ... he fought back very hard (admiring tone) ... but I was not there where it happened and afterwards I didn't want to look at him. People told me to go and see him but I couldn't bring myself to do that. (Zama, aged 14)

I never went to the accident scene and I don't know anything about his injuries. It was almost as though I was protecting myself, you know, from thinking obsessively about it. I don't think I would cope as well if I knew what his actual injuries were but in the beginning I did have a lot of bad dreams. (Louise, aged 20)

Actually he was stabbed on Christmas day and then he died the next day on 26 December. When I got there to the scene, it was on Christmas Day and he had gone out later and by the time we arrived there the blood was cold .... my brother was already cold. The blood was so cold. I could smell the blood. (Nompilo, aged 17)

So then the ambulance drove up all casual and they got out and slowly walked in...no equipment, all casual, like I haven't called a hundred times and they walked over to my brother and I'm like is he alive? (Shakes head) I was still like shocked (sighs) and they're asking me questions and I'm like HELLO! I mean I just found my brother dead and now you've got crime scene tape here and there's this guy with his little walkie-talkie and I'm like PULEEZ can you just turn that thing off! Then, they started taking photographs you know because it's a crime scene and they turned his body around and they left mud on his face.... I didn't want them to touch him ... I just kept saying you're not touching his body! He's dead, just leave it! (Amy, aged 19)

Um she died in the bath and I wasn't there but *Ja* (laughs ruefully) taking a bath is very difficult now. But the thing is it's not all the time and I don't understand like what brings those thoughts up! Because sometimes I don't even think about it but then other times I like get petrified you know ... sometimes its

fine and sometimes, sometimes it's weird because I picture her and I think well what if it's me? But I don't know what brings it up, like sometimes I don't want to even look at a bath and I don't know what to do about it. (Bridget, aged 16)

Participants revealed that nightmares and flashbacks caused profound distress and were in some cases still triggered years after their sibling's death. These reactions were not limited to participants whose siblings died in a violent way or those who saw their siblings shortly after death. Those who were far away from the death scene or whose sibling died from illness also reported trauma dreams and reimaginings about the death as these accounts illustrate:

Even later, I think it was actually just before matric started so it was a year and a half after. I'd been at a party and I had way too much to drink! And by then it wasn't always on my mind anymore but there were just times when it would be far more intense and um and I can't remember everything but I just suddenly started getting flashbacks ... um seeing my brother dying from his perspective and it was really hectic, I mean to go through ... um, but so I called my parents and asked them to pick me up. I was just, I couldn't deal with it. I can still picture the exact thing. I still remember what it looked like in my head. Obviously I wasn't there so it's not what happened, it's how I saw it happening. And it was very hectic. (Rob, aged 22)

And I had another dream, you know we go down the rivers with tubes and when it floods you get these big rapids and you can just Drop! And suddenly I was in my brother's body. It was really weird. Everyone else was laughing and splashing in the water but I couldn't get out and when I woke up I was like (makes panting noises) *Jis!* It was frightening! (Hendri, aged 20)

Andiswa: (tears running down face) and when I dream of her there's blood coming out of her eyes ... its tears of blood. (Zama starts to cry)

Supporting Psychologist: Zama, are you okay? Zama: Yes Miss. It's okay.

Zama: I wasn't eating and I was struggling to sleep. When I saw my brother in my dreams he was in pain, the same as he was when he passed ... his face was full of blood and wounds.

Nompilo: I also dream about my brother. In my dreams it's like he's chasing me and I'm running and I can't get anywhere, I'm just running and he's coming after me... (Focus Group 3)

There were also numerous accounts of surviving siblings dreaming about themselves dying and this was very scary for them. None of the participants used the word "traumatic" when describing their (often recurring) bereavement nightmares, but their horror was tangible and their eyes glistened with tears in the telling. While some participants did not speak out about their dream experiences, they showed strong agreement with others who did - their affirming remarks or nods indicating that bereavement dreaming was also part of their experience. Accounts of dying dreams gained momentum

and drama in the telling. In the following edited excerpt the participant, got up off his chair and animatedly acted out the dream. The group reacted with amusement and nodding of heads, indicating that it was an experience familiar to them.

And what we were talking about suicide, well teachers should be more aware because then I started getting really bad dreams where I would kill myself or someone else would kill me. I remember this specific dream where someone killed me with a screwdriver (voice rises as he continues to recount the dream where he was killed by an intruder) ... *Jis!* It was hectic! ... And then I went back to sleep again and then I died in a car accident and then I committed suicide in another dream, like all in the same night! (Hendri, aged 20)

Bereavement dreaming surfaced in the very first focus group so in subsequent discussions I began to probe gently to get participants to elaborate a little more when the topic came up:

I only had one dream. It was quick. I could see him but he didn't speak to me. And I remember once I cried in my sleep but I couldn't remember afterwards why. (Tiaan, aged 17)

Louise: I had a lot of dreams of my brother coming back. One of the dreams I remember was with a group of people and somebody said 'where's Pete?' and he suddenly appeared and he said 'here I am.' But he was very different in the dreams you know, he was almost disconnected with me. I still have that now sometimes.

Lesley (researcher): You felt you couldn't reach him in the dreams?

Louise: *Ja* I couldn't quite get to him. He was there but I couldn't speak to him and the next day it would always be continuously on my mind. But they've got further apart now and I don't dwell on them so much. I think closer to the accident I latched onto them. (Louise, aged 20)

A clear distinction emerged between dreams that bring happiness and dreams that terrify or trouble participants. After more group discussions, and based on earlier discussions with other bereaved siblings, I discerned four focused codes: traumatic nightmares; happy dreams; message/symbolic dreams; and visitation dreams where the participants explained that their sibling who died was actually present with them in the dream. Dreams were recounted in the middle and late stages of the interviews when participants were more at ease about disclosing emotionally-charged responses to the death. The distinction between uplifting dreams and troubling dreams suggested a need to delve deeper and ask: if happy dreams are helpful, are nightmares harmful? Does the bereaved adolescent oscillate between both kinds? Do dream visits strengthen a sense of continued connection? And importantly, do nightmares belong in the same category as other dream types or is there a closer fit with post-bereavement trauma responses. This leads back to the point made in chapter three about whether or

not to delay the literature review and it also ties into the process of theoretical sampling. I identified four different kinds of dreams in the data, and searched for literature specifically on this topic. Wray and Price (2005:2) had done extensive research on the subject and had identified four broad types of bereavement dreams very similar to what emerged in my study: (1) the reassurance dream; (2) the visitation dream; (3) the message dream; and (4) the trauma dream.

In the present study trauma dreams created considerable anxiety and fear. Therefore I separated them from other types of dreams which are discussed in section 4.3.7.5. The participants' reports corresponded with the findings of Wray and Price (2005: 119) that disturbing dreams often appear shortly after a sibling's death but it is not unusual for mourners to experience trauma dreams many years after the loss. What is perhaps surprising is their assertion that despite the terror associated with them, trauma dreams can ultimately be adaptive in grief recovery, particularly because they aid accepting the reality of the death. This links to Worden's (2009: 39) tasks of mourning where acceptance of the reality of the loss is viewed as a crucial step in the painful adjustment process to living without the loved one. Wray and Price (2005: 119 – 121) found that the more one dreams about the horror of the death, the more the reality sinks in. Trauma dreams help sort out unvoiced feelings and aid adjustment to the loss of the loved one. In modern psychology, the study of dreams has become an important aspect of therapeutic practice. Biblical dreams were understood as messages from God. The piecing together of unresolved questions in trauma dreams is indicated in a dream that Tarryn, one of the participants, had a year after the death of her brother. She concludes that perhaps the dreams were a way of figuring out what really happened:

I still dream about Mike lying at the accident scene. I used to dream about the accident almost every single night ... but it was like, well it was sometimes a bit different from what really happened. I think it was my way of trying to figure out what exactly happened. Like we don't know if his brakes failed or what so it was like my way of trying to find out. (Tarryn, aged 18)

#### **4.2.2 Perceived preventability**

In the early parts of discussions the participants talked about the shock of sudden death, the disbelief. How it did not seem real. It came so out of the blue. They had no time to get used to the idea of it. They never thought about the possibility of it happening. The underlying sentiment was that their siblings' deaths could have been prevented. Much of the sharing was around the cause of death and how someone could have or should have stopped it from happening as illustrated by these excerpts from different discussions:

When I received the news that my sister had passed away I was at school. Then I saw my mother and she was crying. It was a big shock because my sister was sick only a short time. I never knew she would die even though we shared the same room and actually I could see she was getting worse. .... but it was such a shock. I didn't go to school the next day. I couldn't believe it happened. I don't know what caused her sickness. It was sudden and now I am in that same room still. (Xolela, aged 20)

They said they were just going to do a routine operation, just a normal operation...it would be fine...and um but they didn't do a test before to see if there were any viruses but um when the autopsy came back then they saw it was a virus that gives you flu, it was in his brain but they didn't test for it they just went and gave him anesthetic...but then he never woke up and they couldn't put it as their slip up... (Hendri, aged 20)

And okay he didn't kill himself because of them but it added because there's only so much you can take when you're like so young. (Amy, aged 19)

In the discussions about the cause of death I was alerted to something different in discussions with isiXhosa-speaking participants. Afrikaans and English participants tended to lay blame on people they felt could have prevented the death, however their reporting of the cause of death was consistent with the findings of autopsies or what they had been told by those who were at the death scene. With isiXhosa-speaking participants something quite different emerged. While the deaths may have resulted from sudden sickness or violence, they were unsure what had really caused the death. This is illustrated with an excerpt from a focus group discussion:

Luleka: She never woke up that day. They found the plastic inside her because someone poisoned her. People were making sarcastic jokes. There was a belief that my sister had a curse on her so we went to *igqirha* to inquire who had poisoned her.

Andiswa: Yes and also with us people were gossiping in fact what they were saying is that my mother is the one that brought the death curse on my sister because she ... (tears running down face) she practices *uthakatha* (witchcraft) ... one day my mother was going to work and our neighbour called her and people were saying that my sister was a witch and my mother was also a witch but I don't believe that she was a witch ... it's because she was successful and people were jealous.

Lesley (researcher): Was it worrying for you when they were trying to find out what caused the death?

Andiswa: Yes! Because maybe they think you had something to do with it! (Others nod in agreement)

Lwazi: My brother just never woke up. It was a Saturday and I found him sleeping but he didn't wake up. I was hysterical and I rushed to go and call the neighbours. My brother was well-known and so they were all talking about it and they would make jokes. The neighbours believed that someone had put a curse ... you know ...that it was foul play ... that this woman who was our neighbour had something to do with his death. So we had to consult the *igqirha* to find out who caused the death. (Focus Group 3)

At this point I could see that I needed to verify whether consulting spiritualists / traditional healers to establish the primary cause of death is localised to the particular isiXhosa-speaking siblings who participated in the focus group or whether this is a more generalised trend. This is where the value of theoretical sampling comes into play in the grounded theory analytic process. Theoretical sampling means that you collect additional data to explain what is coming through the data you already have. Charmaz (2006: 103) says that theoretical sampling prompts the researcher to predict where and how you can find needed data to fill gaps until categories are saturated.

It was clear that the practice of consulting a traditional spiritual healer (*igqirha*) was common to all nine isiXhosa-speaking siblings who participated in a focus group. While the topic is not central to the main research inquiry about the impact of the school community, it nonetheless provides an important perspective for teachers and others who come into contact with bereaved adolescent siblings. Thus I had conversations with isiXhosa-speaking colleagues to establish the prevalence of seeking a cause of death beyond the medical reason. My first conversation was with the psychologist who facilitated and interpreted during the focus group with isiXhosa-speaking siblings. Second I asked three more colleagues whether this is consistent with the experiences they themselves had when someone close to them died. To this end I shared the key points of a draft memo I wrote on the topic (figure 4) and asked them to comment. Charmaz (2006: 93) emphasises the importance of writing memos throughout the analysis process. They assist in drawing linkages between categories and concepts as I did in the rough memo about trauma and blame. My colleagues gave me insightful feedback which confirmed focus group data. Their responses are summarised below:

Within the Xhosa-speaking community, the role of God is seldom questioned. It is understood that God is the one who determines when a person will die. This socialisation begins at an early age where the teaching begins with the fact that God is in control. Thus reverence for God is combined with rituals to appease the ancestors who are also referred to as the "living dead". Practices such as *imbeleko* (the introduction and announcement of the arrival of the child to the living dead) make the connection with their ancestors strong and the child grows up being "protected". So, when death comes suddenly there can be two schools of thought: some parents will consult *inyanga* or *igqirha* to understand why. Others will accept this as the will of the ancestors and the will of God. This is a long-standing debate which hinges also on the influence of westernised Christian influences in the religious belief system.

All agreed that blame is prevalent and that there is credence to the view that surviving siblings often live in fear of being blamed by others and they may blame themselves in relation to the death of others. One of the colleagues I consulted mentioned a complicated case of a young girl whose brother suffers from mental illness. The girl believes that if something bad should happen to her brother, she will be

responsible. She has been having dreams and believes that the ancestors are communicating with her and giving her the signals she needs to be proactive in ensuring that nothing happens to her brother. Now she is undertaking a number of rituals with the sole belief that she will unlock her brother's mental illness and even prevent death. (Personal communication between 22 June and 6 July 2012)

**Figure 4: Draft memo relating to blaming someone for the death**

**Memo 5 June 2012: TRAUMA AND "WHO IS TO BLAME"**

Consistent with bereavement literature, participants experienced sudden death as being very traumatic. None of the group expected their siblings to die. Seven of them lost a sibling in a violent way through shooting or stabbing. Some saw the body and some did not see the body. Irrespective of whether they saw the body or not, they all reported trauma symptoms: reimaginings, nightmares and flashbacks which made it very difficult for them to concentrate at school. This converges with what emerged from the first two focus groups and with discussion notes re the experience of my sons and other friends bereaved as teenagers. Afrikaans and English-speaking participants discussed possible reasons for their sibling taking their life; getting caught up in drug abuse or, in the case of accidental death or illness, they explained the medical cause of death, often in a detailed way.

**Differences found in the Xhosa group:**

The sudden death of a young person is not natural therefore it seems *someone* has to be held accountable. Medical or psychological explanations seemed less important. Death causes were reported as someone who poisoned their sister; someone who caused their brother's shooting to happen because they lusted after him secretly; a sister who was stabbed because she was a 'witch' (although the surviving sibling thinks it is more a case of others being jealous of her for being too beautiful). When five participants said their parents consulted an *igqirha* to find out who caused the death the others listened intently and nodded in agreement with what was being discussed. Even when it was a clear cut case of assault by known perpetrators, families still sought opinion from an *igqirha*. The identification of the guilty person is cloaked in secrecy and fuelled by gossip, thus it arouses enormous anxiety in surviving siblings and fears that *they* may have caused the death.

This was my first attempt at applying theoretical sampling in practice. Charmaz (2006: 103) explains that saturation is achieved when no new patterns or variances emerge in category data. Predictions are not off-hand conjectures but informed hunches that arise from your immediate analytic work. They lead you to go and collect data to verify and explain what is emerging. Ways of doing this include: returning to the data to see if important clues have been missed; going back to participants and asking further questions; consulting literature on the specific topic; consulting people who have a particular knowledge about the subject; or seeking out specific new cases to clarify emergent data. When I was reading extensively about grounded theory to demystify its application, I remember being especially intrigued when researchers remarked how they almost found themselves getting bored when in successive interviews each participant said very similar things about a topic. Then halfway through my fieldwork I too found myself often being able to anticipate what participants were going to say next.

Clearly this is when continuing to add new cases becomes a pointless pursuit of numbers simply to give legitimacy to findings.

### 4.2.3 Fear of self and others dying

Data from the present study indicated that a key reason why sudden deaths may rock a teenager's world to the core is because it destroys their illusion of continuity. If it can happen to someone close to them, it could happen to them or someone else. Faced with the death of a brother or sister, adolescents are often confronted with their own mortality for the first time and the resultant sense of vulnerability and inability to control their world can profoundly undermine the very foundation of their still fragile identity and evolving belief system (Balk, 2009; White, 2006). Kosminsky and Lewin (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 327) describe adolescence as "a process of finding one's way across a great divide, leaving behind the world of childhood, with little assurance of what awaits them on the other side. It is at this very point when the world feels frighteningly unknowable and unpredictable that a sibling can provide a reassuring sense of connection. Thus it is not surprising that at a time of life when one's emotional muscle is still developing, the weight of grief can be too much to bear." In the present study a pervasive pattern through participant's accounts was that they lacked experience to deal with the shock of their sibling dying.

I mean the first person I actually knew who died was my brother and, well I was sixteen then and I think it removes your innocent perspective on life. I suppose it's more about the reality of life's short span because I never had a reason to think about it before and I know I started rethinking my priorities, re-evaluating a lot of stuff (Rob, aged 22)

I found him and then ... just, adrenalin shock! Like I've never experienced anything like this in my life before! And I was trying to call people on the phone and I'm like can you just come! Just come!  
(Amy, aged 19)

Participants said that losing a sibling who is young like you presents a completely new set of questions about your own mortality. One young man likened it to the Biblical Adam and Eve moment, when they had eaten the apple and realised they were naked because, he said, you become conscious of facts about life which you were never conscious of before and that prompts you to rethink a lot of the things you'd previously assumed because things no longer fit. Others echoed these ideas. Their siblings' death sparked complex questioning about their perspective on life and religion. Up to this point in their lives they had never before been forced to confront or examine their framework on how they viewed reality. The impact of their siblings' sudden death caused an immediate crisis in their world view. In different discussions they described how this overwhelmed their emotional and spiritual coping ability.

I had a lot of questions, to deal with you know. I was raised in a very religious home and I don't have a problem with Christianity although now I'm not such a big believer as I was. (Hendri, aged 20)

In contrast, the responses by a girl who lost her cousin and her best friend after her brother died were enlightening because by the time the subsequent deaths occurred a year and two years later, she had developed some understanding about death and grief. As a result she felt better equipped to recognise and almost "plot" her grief journey.

I think after you've been through this once you know better what to expect the next time. With my friend I was almost more angry than grieving. But with my cousin it was like I was going through the whole thing again from the beginning although I never let myself spiral quite as low as with my brother. I think now I can almost plot the grief journey (smiles ruefully) ... It's like I know where I am. I go okay I recognise this ... I'm at that stage now. It's like I know I'm going to cope. I've done it before. It's not so bad but I do feel that everyone who gets close to me deserts me ... I mean whether consciously or not. (Louise, aged 20)

While cumulative losses can aid insight, Klicker (2000: 8) discusses the dangers of grief overload. After multiple losses a person does not always gain strength from each loss experienced. It's true that someone can gain knowledge about the effect of loss each time he experiences a new loss but this doesn't mean that successive losses makes the adjustment easier. In fact, just the opposite usually occurs: the negative effects build up and are brought to the surface during subsequent losses. When participants talked about the successive death(s) in a matter-of-fact way, at times the sorrow, the sense of disbelief was so strong that it was palpable.

My sister was in a different place so I didn't see. I keep thinking about what happened but I wasn't there. Anyway, what happened is they killed her for her cel phone ... and actually the worst thing was it happened on the same day we were burying our cousin. We were still there at the funeral for my cousin when they came to tell us. (Andiswa, aged 16)

People just get snatched from my life. It's like WTF! But now I'm kind of used to it happening. I think I know what this is like now so I don't really grieve, I more just incorporate them both into my life. (Dylan, aged 16)

*Ja*, there were like five freak accidents and the other one was a matric guy, well that was my standard six year and my standard seven year was one of the top athletes, he got stomach pains and two months later he died of cancer and then when I was in grade 10 it my roommate's brother, two of them in the car both died...(draws a deep breath) then there was a guy who rolled his car, well he was already out of school, like five years older than us. So there was like ... a lot of death in the school. (Hendri, aged 20)

It's mainly young people (sighs) lots of deaths actually if I think about ten where I've like known the people, not via-via but people that I know. I sometimes get scared that something's going to happen to me or when I get to the age Mikey was that like I'll also die in a car accident or something.

(Tarryn, aged 18)

We had these plans and then Kiki died and it kind of, well it's like you don't have control over who you get to love and it happened before ... my cousin was also seventeen and he died and I really wanted him in my life and then this happened with her and it's like who's going to be next! I just kind of felt why connect to somebody who's going to die as well? And another thing my boyfriend just turned seventeen and both of them died when they were seventeen ... And next year I'll be seventeen. (Laughs bitterly) Well, we'll see how that goes! (Bridget, aged 16)

Participants' fears of dying when they reach the same age as the sibling who died match the findings of Hogan and DeSantis (1994) in U.S. populations and this also surfaced in White's (2006) research with bereaved siblings in the U.S.

#### **4.2.4 Anxiety and controlling behaviour**

In a study by Brent and colleagues (as cited in Dyregrov, 2005: 715) 25 adolescents experienced significantly higher levels of anxiety than a matched control group. Their anxiety symptoms included: a lack of energy, sleep problems, appetite and weight change, social withdrawal and concentration problems. These responses surfaced numerous times in the present study and what was also noticeable is how many of the participants began controlling their environment to lessen anxiety and defend against further loss. This included carefully plotting out routes before driving somewhere by car; making sure they have the numbers for their security company, the ambulance and their doctor on their cel phones; not driving at the end of the month when more drunk drivers are likely to be out on the roads; and not being able to enter a shopping centre or other crowded public place unless they first stand outside and visualize what it will be like going inside. Kosminsky and Lewin (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 332) note that an adolescents' emerging feeling of personal empowerment can be shattered by loss. For this reason, restoring a sense of control or restoring at least the confidence that some measure of control is possible is very important.

Amy: That's one of the reasons I like living here. Like it's a place where he was never at so it's nice to ... I don't pretend like it didn't happen I just ... um he was never here.

Lesley (researcher): So you don't have the constant reminders?

Amy: Well *Ja*, he was never there. Like when I go back to our house, you know where it happened I won't use the shower because it's right there by his bedroom. And when I get shampoo in my eyes and they're stuck closed like then I freak out because I see the image. And I couldn't sleep by myself. My sister had to sleep with me in the same bed afterwards. Also I can't go in lifts and even on the plane when I was coming here I was uh .... like this! (shows herself sitting stiff and scared) because it's like I'm stuck there and then ... we were coming back after the weekend and going through the tunnel and it was like traffic and I was sitting there like sweating and light headed like and shaking.

Lesley (researcher): And this is all since your brother's death? Did this happen before?

Amy: No, only after he died. (Focus Group 1)

I started getting anxiety and panic attacks. I can't handle big crowds of people now like I don't like clubbing, the space is too small and like I had a complete freak out the other day in a market, I started shaking because I don't like strangers I don't know, lots of them ...and I found that from the funeral, after that I can't handle strangers. (Lauren, aged 15)

In initial discussions with potential participants, parents and counsellors, remarks were made about how some bereaved adolescents hurt themselves by cutting, picking at sores hidden by their hair or deliberately inflicting pain on themselves in other ways. In a study with college students in the United States of America, Trepal and Wester (2010) found that grief and loss are amongst the factors related to nonsuicidal self-injury; and self-injurers can be distinguished, in part, by their reliance on avoidant coping behaviors and their need to suppress intruding thoughts. In the present study one of the boys raised self-injury without any prompting. He described how he would box the punching bag in the gym until his hands were dripping with blood.

The pain with the boxing actually helped, I didn't know why but when I spoke to the counsellor she explained that when you inflict pain on yourself it's like a healing, like you get emotional pain out of you. Then it got so bad that I got like blackouts and I couldn't remember what I did. Like one day my friend and I had an argument and I stormed off. I remember walking towards the river and then I don't remember anything but afterwards when I came back to myself I saw I had blood on me... I had taken a stick and broken it and I like made a point at the end of it and my arteries ... they're very near the surface so you can see them very clearly and I almost cut five of them straight off. (Hendri, aged 20)

The participants talked about a range of anxieties that surfaced after their siblings' death: panic attacks, claustrophobia, fear of the dark, inability to concentrate, fear of taking a shower or a bath, self-injury and depression. They remarked on having no energy, getting tired quickly, how their limbs felt heavy and how they battled to sleep. Where their sibling had lived in the same house or shared a bedroom with them, there were various triggers that unsettled and frightened the still-living siblings.

I would not go down stairs in the dark. My mom had to go with me. Even turning on the lights I was very afraid you know that I would see something coz I didn't have anyone who could sleep with me. Well I had my dog and in the beginning we had my brother's ashes, we haven't scattered them yet and I made my parents bring his ashes into the lounge the first few months and that was my sort of being able to sleep because his ashes were in the lounge. And my parents were fine about it until about eight months then they said not anymore. (Louise, aged 20)

In every discussion, changes in weight were mentioned by participants. They variously described themselves as looking like a skeleton, or looking really fat. They also talked about their parents gaining or losing weight and linked it directly to the stress and anxiety that followed their sibling's death. Weight changes were significant and were consistently reported as gains of more than ten kilograms or losses of at least ten kilograms. They particularly disliked people discussing their weight.

#### **4.2.5 Disruption in the family**

Horsley and Patterson (2006: 119-121) describe sudden death of a sibling as a horrific experience for a family, highlighting the sense of powerlessness that follows the death and how surviving children are forced, immediately to come to terms with their parents' inability to protect them. An examination of the longer-term effects of sibling loss and consequent changes in the family structure highlighted the impact of secondary losses experienced by the siblings left behind. These include loss of security, loss of normality, loss of confidence, and loss of attention by parents (Hindmarch, 1995: 425). Parents may be so debilitated by their child's death that they may neglect their surviving children. While the grief of parents is not a focus of the present study, its impact on surviving children is important to understand. Various other studies found that parents often become so engaged in and absorbed by their own grief that their ability to respond adequately to their surviving children's grief and provide them with guidance and support is severely compromised, at least in the early months following the death (Hogan & DeSantis, 1992; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; Goldblatt, 2011).

We frequently read that the death of a child is the 'worst kind' of loss. In fact some of the academic and popular literature talks about loss in an almost competitive way, as if some losses are worse than others (Dougy Centre for grieving children, 2003). What matters here, is not whether parental grief is worse but that educators and others involved with bereaved adolescents gain insight into how the unrelenting sorrow of bereaved parents can shatter family dynamics. The following selection of statements by adolescents gives a glimpse into the struggle of newly bereaved parents struggling to be emotionally and physically available for surviving siblings. They highlight how the death of a child

creates enormous stress within a family. More than one adolescent has described this to me as a cloud of sorrow that descends over their house and stays there.

I'm scared of my father because he hasn't dealt with this and I would like for him to get help and I understand how he must feel and my mother too but I'm scared to talk to him about it. When he's angry he shouts and he makes us feel afraid but I don't want to think back because you have to accept ... you know the reality of the death. (Andiswa, aged 16)

I keep everything inside and I always try to control myself but um watching my mom and especially my dad grieve differently was difficult. I know their grief is worse but sometimes it almost irritates me because my father is very verbal about it. (Louise, aged 20)

I was sixteen when my brother died. He was the oldest and there was like a hierarchy. He organised things and so, I mean, when he died our whole structure collapsed. I think we all felt very isolated in our own home. Obviously people focused on my mother but *Ja*, we were more on the side lines. (Rob, aged 22)

When I asked South African parents in a bereavement support group for their thoughts on this, I received a flood of replies best described by a mother whose fourteen year old son died.

I know my two daughters felt we had abandoned them... after a while they just fled from the house. For almost a year my kids were without parents.....it was only later in a therapy session that I found out how I was "neglecting" them - how alone they felt on this whole journey and how worried they were for us as their parents. It took hard work from us to start mending the family again. My daughters are still angry. They don't talk about how they feel. The other day an 18 year old girl died in a car accident and one of my daughters said: "Another family destroyed again." I feel I should be able to fix it for them...but I just don't know how. (Personal correspondence, July 2012)

According to Goldblatt (2011: 18) the literature indicates that siblings appear to suffer in silence while the adults in their lives grieve openly and often with more support. Nonetheless, their sibling's death is disruptive because it shifts everything in their lives. One morning while I was clustering codes, I drew a big circle and wrote the word "grief" in it but when I ran my eye again over the raw codes I had been studying, I realised that I was anticipating a category that was not strongly present in the data. It could be that I was influenced by the literature where authors often use the terms bereavement and grief interchangeably, thereby creating an assumption that all siblings grieve. Undoubtedly I was further sensitized by the very visible grief I had witnessed first-hand amongst adolescent friends over a period of years. In adolescent siblings, by contrast, grief appears more ambivalent and the bereaved siblings

in my sample tended not to name their experience “grief”. A count of the words “grief” or “grieving” uncovered only twelve unprompted mentions in eleven hours’ worth of transcripts and in most cases the siblings were talking about the grief of other people or the supporting psychologist or I had used the words in the questions we posed and it is likely that participants were mirroring our words.

When they discussed the first months after the death, participants talked mainly about the disruptive aftermath, how it changed their lives dramatically and how they tended to use avoidant emotional coping strategies. They said it helped when they distracted themselves from thoughts about their sibling and hid their sadness from others. This statement is typical of what many of them expressed:

I kind of deal with it... quietly... close my door and literally cry for fifteen minutes, then say ‘okay!’ put on the face, smile and then I really don’t think about her coz like it’s always hanging over everything that you do. So I just cry it all out or phone my boyfriend and then I just go do whatever else I have to do and just be functional and people wouldn’t even know. It helps me really to just deal with it and then do something else. I don’t mix it together. (Bridget, aged 16)

Five brothers spontaneously indicated that their grief or sense of loss was not as overwhelming as the grief of other members of their family. They said they missed their sibling, were often reminded of them and were shocked by their deaths but they tried to be positive and carry on. However, the over-riding sense of disruption in their lives was evident in words like “torn apart”, “shattered” and “obsessive”.

We were friends but he was six years older than me which made a big difference. To be honest I wasn’t really grieving very much I mean it was two, maybe three weeks and I was pretty much okay but my parents were grieving hectically...um, you could say even obsessively. I never had any actual grieving. I just don’t really think I wanted the emotional pain. It does make me a bit sad but it’s not terribly unbearable and it’s very annoying when they start telling you to talk about it, get it out, things like that. (Luke, aged 18)

I just went on as normal. I tried to cry but I couldn’t not even when the machines were switched off ... before that I cried a little bit. After the funeral, I went and did stuff that I had already planned to do. I mainly wanted to just get away from everything a bit. I make a conscious effort to try and hide it. (Pierre, aged 17)

It didn’t really shatter my world like everyone else. I remember feeling like I was stuck because everyone else was falling apart but for me it was like he had just gone away. I couldn’t understand why everyone was so upset. I mean, I was bleak, but I got over it. (Dylan, aged 16)

The boys who said they grieved less than others around them gave as reasons for this: not getting on well together; having very different personalities and interests; not being close emotionally, geographically or in age; being step-siblings who lived with different parents and interacted only for short periods; or they focused on finding ways to incorporate their sibling into their lives so that confrontation with their physical absence was not as difficult. They said they tried to be positive rather than dwell on the negativity of the death. Worden (2009: 58) explains that a more difficult grief reaction is portended if there was a high degree of ambivalence in a relationship or a history of conflict; if the survivor needed the lost person to bolster his or her self-esteem or feel safe; or if the survivor depended on them for activities of daily living as the following statement expresses:

People were talking and they were wondering after my sister passed away ... who is going to do things for us ... buy us airtime and take care of us? (Luleka, aged 16)

Also, surviving siblings from the same family did not necessarily share their feelings about their loss or draw closer as a result of the death. Often they felt frustrated when their still-living brother or sister, or their parents processed the loss differently to them:

I mean even with my brother, well we didn't talk about it much. We spoke about it on the day we found out and then afterwards not much. (Bridget, aged 16)

My brother got really depressed. He was completely different to me. I couldn't understand why he couldn't see the positive side to it. I mean it's not the end of the world and you really have to make the best out of it. You can't let it bring you down. (Pierre, aged 17)

And well the thing is my older brother got on with him the best because I mean the age gap was only two years and they did stuff together and um my younger brother well he was the little one so Greg used to teach him things and look after him a lot, do his homework with him and so um I was kind of in the middle there, you know. (Chris, aged 19.)

Consequently I became more alert to drawing a distinction between bereavement and grief noting that the intensity and complexity of grief appears to hinge on the nature of the sibling relationship (Kastenbaum, 2003). Therefore when we seek to examine and understand adolescent sibling bereavement against the background of the family ecosystem, it is important to be aware of differences in bereavement responses and adaptation. The statements below represent some of the differences that surfaced in the present study.

I never really knew him as well as I would have like to and when he died ... well I still felt, obviously I felt sad but it wasn't really the same as everyone else um, I mean so what I mostly felt was sort of how it

changed the family because I mean everyone was just ... isolated, completely torn apart and I mean we've been trying to work through that you know. But I mean it still had a huge impact on my life.

(Chris, aged 19)

They forget they still have a child that needs them. They make me feel almost inadequate because I can never really match up to the "angel" child. I think to myself, "Yes you lost a child, but I lost my brother and my best friend." But it's like their lives stopped when he died and their grief is the main focus of our lives now. (Email from a potential participant, August 2011)

White (2006: 20) notes that the rivalry siblings experienced when their brother or sister was alive does not necessarily end at their death. Parents tend to idealise the child who died and it can be very difficult for surviving siblings to live up to this ideal. The degree of grief notwithstanding, all the participants in the present study experienced their sibling's death as a major disruption in their lives, particularly when dealing with the changed dynamics in their family. Unlike parents whose grief seems continuous, participating siblings reported intermittent grief. Hellstrom and Nolbris (2005: 233) also found that siblings did not mourn continuously. They need "time-out" periods from their grief. The participants expressed explicitly and implicitly that their parent's grief is the worst and so they try to hide their own sadness and not cause any additional trouble. They are acutely aware of the change in their parents and worry about them as expressed in these statements from two different group discussions:

My mother always keeps a candle burning. Now when I see my brother's photos and the candle I find it comforting. In the beginning I wouldn't say it was disturbing it was just not like it normally was. But that wasn't the big thing. The big thing was the silence at the table, what are we going to talk about. It was just awkward between us and the thing is I used to always be very talkative, you know loud ... and they weren't used to me being the quiet one, doing nothing. My mom let me do what I needed to do but I think for my dad, well it was quite disturbing for him like what the heck happened to my son! The one that played rugby did so much stuff and now he sits there like a ghost listening to music. (Hendri, aged 20)

Bridget: How do you guys deal with your parents? Coz 'specially now when we had Mother's Day, I had no idea what to do coz she's my stepmom and she's just lost her only daughter (sighs) so I ended up sending her an sms saying, "happy mother's day, I'm thinking about you", It sort of felt like, okay she's lost her daughter, so I felt like I had to step in and sort of talk to her more and sms her and call her more so that she still had sort of some, well, child. I don't know.

Luke: I think it's important for parents to know they've still got something left behind. It's not like if one child dies that they've got nothing which I think they often feel.

(Others murmur agreement) I think that by just being there, showing that there are still other children who care about them makes a big difference. So you almost feel inclined to do that so *Ja*, most of the time I try to be there for them. I help them out a lot more.

Clayton: Our family just grew like closer to each other, it was like more sensitive.

Lesley (researcher): With words or doing things?

Clayton: Well like my mom like sometimes just giving her a hug or she would like it if I make tea or anything, mainly tea and a hug. (Focus Group 2)

In a different discussion, the supporting psychologist commented that boys seemed to try and be strong for their families. Nine participants in different discussions said that their parents' grief was so intense that they avoided mentioning their sibling who died so as not to upset them further. Horsley and Patterson (2006: 140) and Balmer (in Balk & Corr 2009: 203) found similar results in their research with adolescents who had lost a sibling. Balmer found that adolescents were concerned about their parents' health following the death and attempted to protect them from further pain by not adding their own concerns and worries.

Psychologist: It sounds to me like for both of you it was important to be strong for your family.

Tiaan: *Ja*. I don't like it when my mother cries. When she cries I walk away. Like when she tells me about something and she gets emotional then I just say to her I don't want to hear about it because it's not comfortable for me.

Pierre: I couldn't understand why my mother was so heart sore all the time. Well, she didn't cry all the time but it wasn't nice for me. That's why I don't talk about it too much because I'm just scared. I don't want them to get like that again. I don't want to make it worse for her. (Focus Group 4)

White (2006: 15) notes that an important difference between grieving adults and adolescents is the amount of power or autonomy they hold. Adolescents often need their parents' permission or help in order to seek support. Parents may recognise their childrens' pain or confusion, but can be reluctant for outsiders to get close to their family for fear they will be criticised. As a researcher who has been through this experience, I can confirm this fear. In the first six months after my own son died I was also sensitive about my still-living sons confiding in people outside our family. Children instinctively get this and it adds to their silence, their melting away into the background.

Participants in the present study seemed able to distract themselves from dwelling on thoughts about their sibling's absence and the circumstances of the death. In the early months, this distraction was sometimes aided by escaping the misery at home. However, as I will discuss in the section on transition, many also said that their family lives slowly regained structure and coherence. In time they drew closer to their parents and their parents often played a crucial role in helping them plan their

futures after school as well as facilitating a sense of ongoing connection with their sibling. White (2006: 17) notes that when the family is secure and surviving siblings feel their home offers a place to retreat to when they are hurt, they are likely to fare better after their brother or sister's death.

### 4.3 TRANSITION

A question I asked all participants is: "Has time made a difference – do you feel you cope better than before?" I began to see that temporality was pivotal in the gradual change from disruption to a sense of "new normal". The death of a sibling divides time into the past and the now. This was revealed in comments like: "but that was before" and "that was the first term after". When bereaved siblings talk amongst themselves there is an implicit understanding of what time indicators mean.

Lesley (researcher): So what would you say has helped you cope the most? Just feeling like you can kind of breath again? What's helped you to get there?

Amy: Distractions... I used to ...*before* my brother... (Her voice tails off, she sighs deeply). It's funny how everything's *before*. (Amy, aged 19)

Lesley (researcher): And how is it now? Has time made a difference?

Themba: I still think about him now and then but not all the time like before. I think about him but I know he's not going to be back.

Andiswa: For me it's not even a year ... you could say I'm running the year backwards all the time in my head. I was not there when it happened ... and I try not to think about it but sometimes I can't stop thinking about her. (Focus group 3)

Does time heal? We cannot assume that. In the present study, participants said their ability to cope after bereavement did improve over time but it is what occurred during that time that created the bridge between disruption and construction of a changed self. Charmaz (1991: 274), discussing chronic illness, notes that time and self are illusive topics to talk about. There are many parallels between illness and bereavement. With both, a person's life is altered by something external to them; with both there are distinct markers and a chronological sequence of events. She points out that we only have a limited language with which to talk about time and self so discussions about illness (or in this instance, sibling bereavement) can provide a vehicle for talking about time and self. Both chronically ill people and bereaved people find themselves relating to time in new ways. Charmaz linked their interpretations to their experiences of time and showed how experiencing time provides latent lessons that foreshadow a new concept of self

Data from the present study suggest that time in and of itself does not necessarily bring resolution. Consistent with the findings of Klass *et al.* (1996) none of the surviving siblings voiced an expectation of recovering from, or in their words, “getting over” the loss of their brother or sister, but most expressed a sense of being able to cope better over time. Their ability to adapt related directly to: their ability to manage anxiety; and make sense of their sibling’s death; the level of support they received; the relationship they had with their sibling prior to their death; and the extent to which their parents or others facilitated their piecing together of what was left of that relationship. Over time they viewed themselves as changed in negative and positive ways. This change into a different self can best be described as a transition.

Webster’s on-line dictionary (2006) offers the following definitions of a ‘transition’: 1) The act of passing from one state or stage or place to the next 2) An event that results in a transformation 3) A passage that connects a topic to one that follows

The challenges and confusion bound up in the transition to a different self are discussed in six categories: being different and disclosure of the death; school as an escape; coping in the classroom; counseling at school; connecting with peers; connecting with the sibling who died.

#### **4.3.1 School: being different and disclosure of the death**

The negotiation of the public space following a sibling’s funeral involves a number of conflicting issues. An immediate dilemma is disclosure of the death when the surviving sibling returns to school. It is a dilemma for the school leadership because they are not always certain if and how the death should be communicated to the school body. It is a dilemma for the bereaved adolescent sibling because they want to be acknowledged but they don’t want undue attention drawn to themselves. The question of disclosing the death at school has been raised with me many times in discussions with principals, teachers, educational psychologists and parents. It is a complex issue. Having observed many bereaved adolescents, it seems that it is easier for schools to respond to the shock and grief of a group of learners when a schoolmate dies than it is to respond to a single sibling.

It’s like they don’t know how to deal with you because well I think I was the only one. (Tarryn, aged 18)

I don’t want them to think, “oh here comes that guy who lost his brother, shame lets be sympathetic towards him” ... I want to be a normal person like there’s nothing wrong with me, I’m the same as the guys next to me you know. (Pierre, aged 17)

When more than one learner is grieving or experiencing trauma following a death, it is a shared experience that can be handled collectively in the classroom or in a support group without any particular learner being singled out as different. But for a sibling, the last time they walked out the school gate they belonged, they fitted in. When they return after their siblings' death, they talk about labels like 'the emo girl whose brother died'. They want to be normal but they feel they are instantly viewed differently and they feel vulnerable.

I wasn't really that amped to go back because everyone's going to be looking at me ...and teachers acting different towards me. I suppose it's nice for people to say like I'm sorry for what happened to your brother and I want to be treated like normal but also with compassion but not to make me feel like an outsider. (Dylan, aged 16)

Jenna: Because I mean, you're so vulnerable

Amy: You want to belong

Liezel: You want to fit in (Focus Group 1)

Even years later, many bereaved siblings expressed deep hurt or anger about the way disclosure and discussion of the death was handled at a time when they were at their most vulnerable. Hence it is discussed here at some length. As a point of departure: all deaths cannot be treated the same because deaths are not all the same. Thus there is confusion about what form of disclosure is appropriate for and sensitive to the needs of surviving siblings. Three main scenarios emerged from the study and I discuss each one separately.

In the first scenario the sibling who died attended the same school as the surviving sibling(s) or had only recently left the school and was still known by many in the school body. In these cases, most schools announce the death in a learner assembly and they often arrange for learners and teachers to attend the funeral. They may also organise additional memorial events at the school, usually predicated by the status and perceived good standing of the learner who died. For example a prefect or a sport captain's death usually results in formalised memorial activity whereas the death of a learner who underachieved academically, and died in a fight at a night club may be glossed over. Ten of the siblings in the study returned to a school where their brother or sister was a current learner at the time of their death or had left one or two years earlier. While they, like the rest of the participants, said they wanted to be acknowledged as a learner who was going through a tough time, they had differing views on the death being announced in a school assembly. Some appreciated being mentioned by name in the expression of condolences. Others said they had preferred not to attend the assembly when the death was announced because it would have been uncomfortable and they were concerned about being able to control their emotions.

I didn't really want to be there coz you don't know what the headmaster will say (changes tone of voice) "your brother was a great student, a role model" and what the headmaster thinks doesn't make a difference to me because I have my own experience of how we were, you know as brothers and I don't know coz what if I got all emotional and stuff cause you don't really want to seem weak ... maybe one or two chops might laugh at you. Some people are chops. (Dylan, aged 16)

Announcing the death, paying tribute and offering condolences in a school assembly generated a great deal of debate in focus group discussions. Participants spoke about priests and pastors talking at assemblies who offended them because they did not share their religious views about death. Five spoke about how much they appreciated the school principal or a teacher visiting them at their home before they returned to school.

My first day back we had the memorial assembly, but our principal came to us before, and it was nice that they came and asked us and read what they going to say and we could say 'no that's not nice we don't want you to say that and we could say what we wanted her to say and also we could make sure that his friends were also acknowledged because that was important and then I asked a friend to sing. (Liesel, aged 20)

It didn't feel right that to sit in that assembly. It's so much more intense than they could ever describe so you don't want to sit there and listen to it as though it's a newspaper clipping. I didn't need to be told that my brother died! It wasn't news to me. And our head didn't even speak to me about it. Maybe I wouldn't have had anything to suggest but I think I would have felt almost more...acknowledged. I mean you obviously don't want them to say, "Look out for Rob de Klerk, his brother died so treat him well. That would single you out way too much." But at least speak to you beforehand like he actually cared a bit, not like it's a duty. You'd feel more comfortable if he just came to you to acknowledge what happened. Well that's what I would do if I was a school head. And definitely the teachers need to be aware. (Rob, aged 22)

Actually our school head was very good. He called me in and talked to me when I came back to school. And he always checks on how I'm doing. (Pierre, aged 17)

The second scenario is where the sibling who died did not attend the same school and is not known to teachers and learners. Sometimes principals and teachers will know about a death that has been publicised in the media or a death that is talked about in the community. But in this scenario, schools will usually not know about the death unless they are informed by a parent or the learner tells a teacher. Some parents said they told the school counsellor or principal in order to make sure their surviving child gets special support only to discover later that their child's teachers were not informed

because the disclosure was considered confidential. The participants in the study felt it was important for their teachers to be aware of what they were going through.

Luke: It most probably would be helpful if parents told the school coz then teachers would be aware of it and that would make a difference.

Bridget: Well with me, nobody knew and if went and told them, "oh by the way, my stepsister died yesterday" then I'm sort of like trying to draw attention to myself. It would have been easier if somebody else could have just told them so they could have just come to my rescue without me sort of asking for it you know, like imposing on them. (Focus group 2)

I changed schools and they didn't know my brother so I didn't have to deal with the assembly but my principal and my English teacher actually came to the funeral. So a lot of the teachers did know but my whole issue was of not being pitied, you know. (Louise, aged 20)

I got behind with my work because I couldn't concentrate and then my teacher called me and asked me what was wrong ... she didn't know about it because it happened in the holidays so I told her that my brother passed away and she also helped me to talk with my friends and with others even if they didn't have someone passing away and don't know what I went through. Actually my teachers helped me a lot. They even said if the schools had not been closed then they would have been able to give some money towards the costs of the funeral. (Khanyi, aged 18)

In the third scenario the circumstances of the death are considered shameful and therefore either the parents or the bereaved learner (or both) prefer not to disclose details to the school. Or the parents don't consider the kinship important enough to bring it to the attention of the school, for example when the sibling who dies is a step-sibling. Both are examples of what Doka termed disenfranchised grief where social support for the bereaved is less than sufficient (Doka 1989, as cited in Worden, 2009: 63). Principals have also told me that it is difficult to know how to announce a stigmatized death, for instance when the death is drug related and they seldom know all the facts. Their concern is that a formal announcement and expression of condolences can fan the rumours already circulating and single out the surviving siblings and close friends further. Two siblings in the study felt strongly that their brother's death should be announced in a school assembly, firstly because it would quell rumours about how he died and secondly, they hoped it would lead to teachers becoming more aware of suicide and how to prevent the bullying they felt exacerbated it. In a startling case told to me by the parent of a prospective participant whose sibling died from suicide, the school principal suggested that it might be easier if the surviving sibling did not return to the school because it would be awkward for everyone. For the bereaved adolescent, disenfranchised grief is a double edged sword because not only do they have to deal with the disruption and trauma of the death, but additionally they are made to feel that

their loss has less weight than other kinds of bereavements or that it is something they should be ashamed of. Participants expressed disenfranchised grief in statements like:

Even though he killed himself and it's not the same as how your brother died (Liezal, aged 20)

I know he was only my stepbrother but (Chris, aged 19)

And like people say it's the parents' fault but my mother really did everything she could and my brother was in and out of rehab and like she was a good mother, she is very good to all of us, she tried everything she knew how and people don't understand. (Leana, aged 18)

### **4.3.2 School as an escape**

In the first focus group when participants were talking about disruption in the first few weeks after the death, I was alerted to the possibility that they viewed school as an escape from home. When this surfaced in subsequent discussions I asked: "So what was easier in the beginning, being at home or being at school?" These responses from different discussions represent the majority view that initially it is easier to be at school because it takes them away from an emotionally turbulent home, they have friends to hang out with, and it helps to distract them from their thoughts about the death, and/or their yearning for their sibling.

I went to school every day. I didn't miss a day because that's where I can be in my own world. I felt more at ease at school because at home it was very emotional. (Xolela, aged 20)

At school I could just detach whereas at home it was still very real and there was a lot of tension. I almost escaped from it. I spent a lot of time at my friends' houses. (Rob, aged 22)

I could pretend I was like everyone else. It was easier to put my mask on there than at home. (Louise 20)

At home I would think my brother, you know, how it was when he was around the house. At school I was distracted by other things so that was better. (Nompilo, aged 17)

I often used to feel there was a dark cloud hanging over our house so school was my going out place where I could go and like just try and live a normal life. (Tarryn, aged 18)

It was better to be at school because at home everyone was avoiding talking about my sister but at school I can talk with my friends and they listen and they don't judge me. I feel alone at home and nobody understands me. (Andiswa, aged 16)

### 4.3.3 Coping in the classroom

In the present study individual teachers were deemed supportive but there was no evidence of school leaders approaching bereaved learners with offers of support based on a phased support plan already in place. This was confirmed in conversations with principals when I enquired about the presence of bereaved learners in their school, as these telephone conversation excerpts illustrate:

I must say our attention has not been in this area ... we have not checked. But put everything down in the message and we will look.

There ought to be a few cases ... You touch on a nerve now ... There are deaths but we're often distant from the grieving process. We see the child acting normal and we assume things are okay because we are not aware of the hurt. We would like to offer, you know, more pastoral care but we don't have the personnel.

Participants hold strong views about how they were treated when they returned to class after the death of their sibling and they emphasised how little control they have over how teachers deal with them. One of the girls reflected, "I mean school is an external thing but it plays a big factor." In this part of the discussion I contrast their negative experiences against their positive experiences in order to build up a picture of what works for them and what doesn't. Resentment and anger towards teachers evolved from a combination of feeling they were unacknowledged or misunderstood; that they were not receiving special consideration and help; or that they were being singled out in front of others.

As soon as they hear about a pupil who has gone through a tragedy like this they should know what kind of things they need to do, not just ignore you and pretend it didn't happen. And they should offer help, I mean whether you say you want it or not coz you don't even know what you need! But THEY should know. Like about how you can't concentrate and the tiredness ... and you forget everything and not feeling safe and like teachers should know you need extra consideration, you REALLY do. I mean you shouldn't have to go and tell them! (Leana, aged 18)

Well, I don't think my teachers realised that I was his brother because I was in grade eight so I hadn't been at the school long. I mean, if I think back, um they could have made more effort to identify me as his brother but the thing is you also don't want them to be all over you like "are you okay?" I think it would have helped if they had just asked me how I was coping with my work and stuff, like because of like not being able to focus you know, and then maybe when I felt comfortable I might have spoken more. But no one ever asked. (Chris, aged 19)

Well my register teacher she said: “and if you need any help”, you know like the usual thing they say but you kind of feel like she had to do it. But the thing is she did it in front of the whole class and I was standing at my desk and she just asked me if I need help in front of everyone. And well I burst out crying and she was like acting like she cared in front of the class but if she really wanted to help like you dont do it in front of the whole class! (Tarryn, aged 18)

Hogan (1987) also found that adolescent siblings worry that peers are watching them to see whether they will cry or seem strange in class. Participants in the present study stated that teachers should know how to approach bereaved teens and what kind of help they need because the teens do not know what they themselves need.

They could call you privately after class you know and have a talk not to say “Oh I’m so sorry” but just that they acknowledge that, okay this must be difficult for her and so this is how we will help you and like if you aren’t up to coming to school, here’s my cel number, just sms me and when you come back to school I will help you catch up with your work ... you know, stuff like that. But I never had that. I mean like you would expect them to know how it must be *but they behaved as if it never happened!* None of the teachers asked me about my brother or me or anything. (Leana, aged 18)

I had an assignment due the day after and my teacher just said: “Don’t worry about it.” But after that I didn’t really get any offers for extended time. I think teachers were considerate of it in the beginning but then they expected me to be okay. (Lauren, aged 15)

It got worse later on because like I always used to get distinctions and then you can’t but they expect you to, you know, *get back to the person you were.* (Tarryn, aged 18)

Participants became very agitated when discussing confrontations with teachers. They frequently swore and got up off their chairs to act out what happened. The underlying sentiment is that bereaved learners want their teachers and school authorities to give them extra consideration but they want to be approached discreetly and matter-of-factly, with limited display of sympathy. The statements below give a good overview of what was expressed in different discussions:

Well ... if I didn’t feel like going to school I wouldn’t go and the teachers gave me demerits and I’d just go “Whatever, give me demerits, I’m not going to the detention I’m not going to do what you tell me, I’m mean I’m one of your top students!” ...then they said “No, you have to attend...you can’t miss more than 20% of school or something in a year, and then you will be deregistered”. Coz a girl had broken her leg and she didn’t go to school for one whole term. So I thought “Why are my wounds...they’re inside...why are they less important?” (Liezal, aged 20)

I only had a problem with one teacher. She arrived in the term afterwards and she immediately split me and my best friend up and we hadn't even talked. And then I got a nose ring and then she made my life hell about that. She just hated everything about me ... and even after she found out about my brother she still continued to make my life hell. (Lauren, aged 15)

There was a very, very bad situation. I mean really bad thing that happened on the first day back at school. The one teacher came late so she wasn't at the staff meeting where they told all the teachers. And I had a project due that was supposed to be done in the holidays and so I said to her 'I'm sorry ma'am I haven't done the project' and she was like: "Well you're going to get zero." And I was almost speechless! I'm like "my brother died." and she was like: "At the beginning or at the end of the holidays?" I almost hit her. (Amy, aged 19)

Well like our teacher was preparing us for exams and she said, "I know you guys find Afrikaans difficult so if you want to do well in your exam, just write a eulogy because it's the easiest thing to do." And I'm sitting there thinking there's NOTHING easy about writing a eulogy. So she says, "Pick someone you know but don't write about the normal stuff they say at funerals" ... and she went on like all MOCKING ... and her whole body she said like: "Don't say that they're special to you and how they influenced you in this way, how they were so wonderful" and bladibladiblah. And it made me SO mad, I wanted to hit her! I was so upset coz for anybody to stand up and talk about someone who has died is incredibly difficult. You can't just call it the normal thing about somebody being dead. There's nothing NORMAL about it because I mean at that stage Kiki had just died. It wasn't even seven days and she's saying how easy it is to write a eulogy. And I went to her afterwards and I said: "look that hurt me a lot," and she said, "I didn't realise you were so SENSITIVE. You should have told me. (Bridget, aged 16)

Bereaved siblings in the study most appreciated teachers who did not talk much about the loss of their brother or sister but who were kind and sensitive to their need for space or extra time to complete tasks. They said intrusive thoughts and lack of energy made concentration difficult and they battled to motivate themselves. Some who were top students before their sibling's death said they became very anxious about not getting the matric results they had felt confident of achieving before the death. In their study with 275 survivors of the Göteborg discotheque fire, Broberg and his colleagues (2005) found that their schoolwork was strongly affected by the fire in many different ways. Close to a quarter said they had either dropped out of school because of the fire or that they had to repeat a class. A minority (13%) reported that schoolwork had become more important to them. Consistent with the experience that schoolwork had become more difficult, 59% said that their grades had gone down as a result of the fire. In the present study three siblings considered dropping out of school and four of the siblings changed schools after their siblings' death.

Amongst the 17 potential participants who did not take part in this study, three mentioned that they had changed schools after their sibling died. Also when I phoned high schools a number of principals said they couldn't help me because the bereaved learners had left the school and parents also told me that they had taken their children out of school after the death because they were so unhappy there. Balk (2011: 7) noted that bereaved adolescents may find keeping to a routine more difficult. What was interesting is that across all the discussions, participants in the present study mentioned that they liked strict teachers who were fair and kind but not overly sympathetic. This made them feel more secure and more confident of being able to do well.

All my marks dropped and a month before my final exams it got even worse and I'm thinking 'how am I supposed to go and write and get an A?' I was used to doing well but now, well I wasn't concentrating. I would try but I couldn't and then I started panicking heavily coz I needed the marks to get into University and I couldn't concentrate. But then my mother came to me and she said "I don't care what marks you get, I'm just proud of you for doing this." and that was ...well, it was a relief. (Hendri, aged 20)

I remember the first day of grade 11. I was so stoked to get placed in Mrs Cannon's English class because in my mind she was the strict English teacher and I knew that that would give me an incentive to actually stay and work hard. Now I don't need that, I can motivate myself but at that time I needed strict teachers. (Rob, aged 22)

It was a really disciplined school. We had a lot of routine and that definitely helped me because I found I procrastinated terribly. I battled a lot with making decisions. The whole reason I moved to that school was to get good marks for Matric and I think if somebody could maybe have taken more time to get my marks back up I could have done better. I think the teachers were very cautious around me and they didn't want to say anything to upset me. (Louise, aged 20)

They should be strict, but not overboard strict and especially don't belittle us. Teachers don't always understand that just one thing they do can affect a child's whole life. Like one teacher, he knew about my brother, well in the beginning he was more aware but now ... well it's just how he is like when my friend did badly in maths he said: "you're never going to make it." And I mean how are you supposed to bounce back then? And okay it he didn't say it to me but I sat there and I thought to myself and it made me really mad. I hate injustice from older people against young people because you can't really respond. And he takes advantage of his power. It makes me angry. (Tiaan, aged 18)

Themba: They should know it is difficult to focus on work because you ... you seeing him and thinking about what happened. I was getting behind at school with my work. I wasn't right at all because I was the first one at the scene and when I was at school I kept seeing his face and having thoughts about it.

Lwazi: I got angry even at school and I couldn't play soccer after that. Even now I can't play ... I used to play but now I can't play I just watch and I sit alone and I will just suddenly start to cry. My brother was a well know soccer star he played for a big club

Zama: (Makes agreeing noises, nods her head) people should talk with their *dabs* (wise aunts) and the teachers because if you keep quiet the teachers won't know about it.

Khanyi: My school work also dropped a lot. Then my teacher said maybe it would be better if I go to this school because we get special help here. She understood me. I would advise people to share and talk but not everyone understands. (Focus group 3)

Participants talked about how the topic of death came up in class, particularly in language subjects in literature or when they were set creative writing assignments. The excerpt used about the Afrikaans eulogy shows how this can be upsetting but it can also be an opportunity for them to pour out their feelings about their siblings.

We were given topics to write an essay on. They were printed on bright yellow paper and yellow is the colour I symbolise with my brother. On the back was a topic, "How terrible it is to love something death can touch" so obviously I chose that essay and I think it was good coz in a way then a teacher can understand how you really feel. (Tarryn, aged 18)

Liezel: Some assignments I couldn't do coz it was too emotional like we were doing Othello, and like, there's three suicides in there and my teacher's like "So sorry you have to do this but you can do the assignment whenever you feel ready and don't worry about it." *Ja* but all my art, my finals they were all about my brother.

Hendri: *Ja*, every essay in the exams, I would search for a topic that goes with someone special, something that hurt you and I wrote all these deep things about my brother.

Jenna: *Ja*, me too. (Focus group 1)

Despite negative encounters with teachers, there were accounts of teachers who did not draw unwanted attention to bereaved siblings and who seemed to know when they needed a listening ear. Often teachers considered most helpful had themselves been bereaved of a sibling or a spouse and hence the participants felt they understood what they were going through.

I had one teacher ... she really helped me because I did really well in her class ... well actually I did well in all my classes and then all my marks dropped obviously but she was nice ... she said to me that one of the things that comes with depression is memory loss and that really helped me, like I felt less weird. (Hendri, aged 20)

There's one teacher who doesn't teach me but well she also lost a child and nobody could notice it in me except her on the days when I was down. And she would just call me after class and check how I'm doing and sometimes she would take me to her house and I could just sit there for the afternoon where there're no other children because you know sometimes it gets a bit much you know. (Pierre, aged 17)

But I also had teachers that were like amazing. The one lost her husband so she knows like about death and how you come down to reality and she was very supportive. And then my history teacher she also lost a brother so she knows what it's like. And she had also smelled him and when she said that she had experienced the same thing like it helped me a lot because then at least I didn't feel like I was insane. (Tarryn, aged 18)

#### **4.3.4 Counselling at school**

Participants recognised the value of some type of counseling where they could be listened to but this was bound up with anxiety and suspicion. They spoke about teachers and counsellors who were not genuinely interested in them or teachers who adopted a fake mournful manner when speaking with them. Some participants said they did not like teachers to 'pounce on them' in the school corridor. They preferred to set the time for the counseling themselves so they could prepare for the encounter.

It's better when you know, okay we're going to talk about this, I mean better than when someone just walks up to you and wants to know how you're getting on just because they have the urge to ask you at that moment. Like today, I knew what I was coming here for and the things we would be discussing and so I was prepared for it. (Pierre, aged 17)

I want to be heard but I don't want them to listen ... I mean, if you understand that? (Dylan, aged 16)

Schools could help because a lot of children feel down or can't talk or they don't want to talk to their parents because, um they just want to hide it away. (Clayton, aged 13)

She was also the L.O. teacher but she didn't push me into anything. She just asked me to come and see her and that was about a week after I got back and she was personal but matter-of-fact. She said I knew where her office was if I needed anything and then I went to her every now and then but I could decide when. (Louise, aged 20)

Not all siblings had access to a school counsellor. Some siblings who attended schools in more affluent areas had access to a psychologist employed by their school. During a focus group, when one of the supporting psychologists explained how to get their names onto the counseling list for the Education Department psychologist responsible for their school, the participants said they were unaware of the

procedure and the service had not been offered to them. They would have liked a list of websites they could have visited for more information but only two were given these resources.

I never got anything like where to get help. They should give you hotline numbers like you know for trauma and suicide. (Leana, aged 18)

Bridget: I think there's a lot of NGOS (non-governmental organisations) and people that are out there actively helping people going through this but I don't think the schools know about them! I mean at least if they just said: "there are these options for you, here you go ... here are people who actually understand."

Luke: More like just information, who you can contact, resources. (Focus Group 2)

Liezel: Yes and you need channels like when someone dies in your life like, who do you speak to?

Amy: And even like hotline numbers.

Dirk: And like about depression

Liezel: Like who to call ...where to find a psychologist. (Focus Group 1)

In the Western Cape, conversations with school staff indicate that the standard response following the unexpected and traumatic death of learners in the school is for a professional debriefing to be conducted with affected learners. It is unclear how these learners are supported over the longer term and I did not find a standard response in the schools I interacted with during this study.

Worden (2009: 7) says that more research is needed on the effectiveness of grief counseling and crisis intervention in school communities.

#### **4.3.5 Connecting with peers**

Hogan and DeSantis (1994) found that bereaved adolescents feel most comfortable around their friends and derive helpful support from them. Siblings in this study also expressed the view that friends are helpful, particularly if they had experienced the death of a loved one.

My friends helped a lot. They treat me like normal and take my mind off it. And my one friend's uncle died when he was young so her dad told her what it's like and my other friend's mom died so they knew. In the beginning even afterwards some people said such insensitive things, really hurtful. It was only my friends that I wanted to talk to, and my mom. She's helped me the most of anything. (Lauren, aged 15)

My friend Nonyela is the main person I share my stuff with and she doesn't judge what I'm saying – she just listens. (Andiswa, aged 16)

And then a friend of ours committed suicide um ...and I was never really good friends with his older brother but then we just became friends because you know if you have someone else who's experienced the same death you don't have to say anything you just know what they're feeling and it was nice to be with friends who knew what we were feeling. Not parents or psychologists ... we just knew without anything being said. We could talk about any random thing and it just felt ... comforting. (Liesel, aged 19)

However they also spoke about how their friends battled to relate to them; how they lost friendships after the death; how people expected them to bounce back after a few weeks; how their 'otherness' set them apart from their peers; how they feel more mature than their peers; and how they resented being gossiped about by peers at school. Balk and Corr (2009: 228) also refer to studies by Dyregrov and by Saffer where bereaved learners struggled with hurtful comments and felt they were "outcasts" from the rest of the student body.

I think it's because people don't grasp what grieving is like, that grieving doesn't just happen and go away. I suppose people are a bit clueless. (Tarryn, aged 18)

One of my friends didn't know what to do. She was lost as to what to say to me, um deal with me. She felt very helpless and I don't think since then our friendship's ever been the way it was. She kept on about how I needed to move on. She didn't understand. (Louise, aged 20)

The way people look at you! They are very weird the way they react and I've learnt through this who are my friends and who aren't, who's worth keeping, who's worth giving my energy to because I have no time to waste. (Amy, aged 19)

If people hurt me with what they say, I distance myself. I'll just space myself out and focus on something else. I mean I used to like being around them but after the whole business with my brother I just didn't feel that stoked for it anymore. I feel different from them. The whole "yap yap" thing, the childishness - it's irritating. (Tiaan, aged 18)

Connecting with peers who have also experienced bereavement can be helpful for adolescents. However, none of the participants had previously been invited to share with other bereaved siblings prior to taking part in the group discussions for this study. They all said the discussions were cathartic for them and it was helpful to hear how others had handled similar dilemmas. However, most had initially had reservations about coming to a focus group discussion.

Zodwa: When we started it re-ignited the pain but as now that we're finished and we talked I am more at ease and feel better.

Nompilo: I feel actually great now because I had I was keeping all of this inside. This is the first time I have ever talked about it.

Lesley (researcher): You were very brave to do this.

Nompilo: And now that I've talked about it and its out I feel better Miss.

Lwazi: I also did not tell people about this before ... I didn't share the information before. I feel much better ... stronger... I know I'm not the only one and I would encourage people to talk.

Xolela: It took me back. I was hesitant to talk but I feel much better now. (Focus Group 3)

Overwhelmingly focus groups participants expressed a need to meet again or to connect with other bereaved siblings in their schools. They said that through the sharing in the focus groups, they picked up ways of handling situations better and had the opportunity to try out a variety of new coping strategies. They said it would be difficult to arrange this type of sharing themselves and they would need an adult to help set up a group and perhaps facilitate it. They stressed that the facilitator should be someone who "knows about grief".

Pierre: And like here talking with other people who have gone through the same thing. I think, our head could have found all the pupils who lost their brothers and got us together and we could have talked.

Tiaan: But most schools would not have a big group

Pierre: But just those who have gone through it. Like here today, you feel better afterwards.

Pierre: *Ja*, like one person says they found this thing helps or they do that and then you can also go and try it and see if it works for you.

Lesley (researcher): Is the school head not perhaps too much of a power figure to run the group?

Pierre: No. Not to run it but just because he will know who the children are.

Tiaan: *Ja*, you don't necessarily have to have an adult although I don't know if it would be the same as today if there wasn't an adult to guide it in a way.

Pierre: *Ja*, but like a psychologist or someone who knows these things

Tiaan: *Ja* but whoever the adult is, they must realise that they don't know everything about what you're going through. (Focus Group 4)

Bridget: That's the other thing, if you're going to use an L.O. teacher. I mean they have to deal with stuff that's heavy and I don't know, but I feel there should be a lot more screening. (The others laugh).

Psychologist: Someone who's experienced?

Clayton: I don't think, well ...not at all schools would have teachers that are like open to children.

Bridget: *Ja*, a person who actually understands what you're going through. I mean they don't have to do a degree in it but maybe if they've been through something and have an idea what they're talking about.

Clayton: *Ja* coz like coming here this morning was... scary! I didn't want to come here but now I feel better like I've got some things off my chest, like calmer. (Focus Group 2)

In a recently-published study, Tony Walter (2012) cites studies (Klass; Riches & Dawson; and Rock) on bereavement mutual-help groups which concur that the communion experienced among those who have been through the same experience of loss can be powerful. In the excerpt below he gives a succinct description of the benefits:

“Self-help bereavement groups are better termed mutual-help groups (MHGs), in that they teach not self-reliance but the value of sharing stories and feelings with others who have suffered the same category of loss. MHGs typically reject popular culture with its norms of emotional control, getting over grief in a matter of weeks, and ‘letting go’ of the deceased. Stories abound of uncomprehending friends, relatives and professionals who have not ‘been there’, that is, who have not themselves lost or a sibling, or whatever category of loss permits entry to the group.” (Walter, 2012: 108)

#### **4.3.6 Death and other life crises: sharing and practical information**

The participants in the present study had a number of ideas on how their schools can develop more openness about death issues and provide practical information and guidance for learners, especially those who were grappling with suicide and depression. In different focus groups, participants debated whether life orientation (L.O.) classes could provide a forum for talking about coping with death, suicide, depression and anxiety. Here they were referring to the prevalence of these problems in the general school population. Participants had a clear idea of what they considered to be the key issues and articulated them well.

Hendri: I would at least, well it be helpful for the other pupils in the school if the principal got someone in just to talk about death and suicide and, I don’t know how but you had two cases in what, three months?... so maybe there were other kids that also felt emotionally destroyed and they could know oh okay there is actually help.

Liezel: *Ja*, I didn’t really care how the teachers handled it, we wanted something to happen to spark like a revolution where kids could get something that would help them through high school.

Jenna: I think it’s better that there’s a group of professionals rather than teachers.

Hendri: *Ja*, but they can be informed to at least know how to handle situations. (Focus group 1)

Pierre: L.O.’s a lot of nonsense actually. They talk about stupid stuff.

Tiaan: *Ja*, HIV and drugs

Pierre: Actually we do mostly healthy eating and relationships, that kind of stuff. It’s not really very useful.

Tiaan: Well L.O. is a waste of time we just have to copy stuff off the board. But we have a teacher who will draw something out of that and start with a story about something that happened to him and then we all just chat about it and it’s very positive, I mean you learn from the discussion. That’s more what L.O. should be like instead of having to learn a lot of nonsense. (Focus group 4)

Luke: L.O. is literally just a waste of time to be honest.

Clayton The only thing they do is drugs and hygiene and public holidays (Laughter)

Bridget: You don't learn squat! (Laughter)

Luke: It's just random information that you really don't need to know

Bridget: Ja, but maybe in L.O. because death and HIV and stuff, I mean it's very hard to learn okay don't do this, don't do that, these are symptoms and stuff but you don't actually have any emotional connection to this thing. I think you'd be able to learn a lot more from someone who's actually going through it like in a video.

Luke: *Ja* but like short clips just for discussion openers.

Clayton: *Ja* just to open up ideas

Luke: I think a class discussion type thing like how we're talking now. The teacher could bring information on stats or whatever and that would trigger it.

Bridget: My English teacher leaves one lesson a week open for class discussion and he'll say "what about this" and he gets us to turn our desks and face each other. And very interesting stuff has actually come out. We did suicide two weeks ago and obviously you have to be sensitive so he says, "If you don't want to participate in the conversation you're free to do whatever you want to do." But I think you could do that.

Luke: Definitely! But the organisation of it is important

Bridget: *Ja*, well he just like facilitates so people don't all shout at once. (Focus group 2)

Although participants overwhelmingly said they found little value in the life orientation curriculum, they agreed that L.O. lessons could be a potential forum for discussing troubling life issues like how to cope with death, trauma, anxiety, suicide and depression. In their view discussion about these issues would best be facilitated by a teacher who is able to stimulate conversation, has counseling skills and has insight into the issues adolescents struggle with. In their view the facilitating teacher should also be careful not to draw attention to any learner who is perhaps dealing with one of these issues. This alludes to their concern that if death is being discussed, the bereaved learners do not want to be flagged in a discussion.

#### **4.3.7 Connecting with the sibling who died**

Bereavement literature, particularly the book *Continuing bonds* (1996) by Klass, Silverman and Nickman, has highlighted how many survivors feel a sense of ongoing connection with a loved one who dies. It was clear from the data in the present study that the majority (over 80%) of the siblings deliberately maintained a link with their sibling who died.

I used to go everywhere with him. I was his adoring little sister (laughs) and I miss his guidance. *Ja* that's what I miss the most, being able to talk to him. Well now I kind of believe in the afterlife. It's what I hold

onto most - seeing him again. I imagine being able to talk to him and also I can often just smell him. (Lauren, aged 15)

Continuing to miss and long for their late siblings, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of attachment, becomes a lifelong process for many bereaved siblings. Data in this study strongly confirms that still-living siblings often pursue and perceive an ongoing connection with their sibling who died. Below is a representative selection where the participants themselves use the word connection without any prompting:

I asked my auntie to give me her photos so I could use them to stay *connected* to her because I really loved her. (Andiswa, aged 16)

Well, I still feel *connected* to him, I feel his presence but I don't know how to explain that. And I often smell him, you know the cologne he wore (Leana, aged 18)

That sense of *connection* is less now but I still retain that impression of who he was and I still draw from it. I mean ... the full extent of losing him is something I have to keep figuring out. (Rob, aged 22)

#### **4.3.7.1 Physical connection with sibling**

Physical ways of maintaining a connection with their late sibling include: wearing jewelry that belonged to their sibling; keeping photographs of their sibling on their cell phones or on their bedroom walls; wearing their sibling's clothes; getting a tattoo that symbolises their relationship with their sibling, cooking their siblings' favourite food; playing their sibling's favourite songs; finishing projects they started; and experiencing closeness and also feeling that they honour and uphold their sibling's legacy through physical activities like playing soccer or rugby and hiking or camping in nature.

That's why I keep on with cricket. My brother used to play cricket and I ... after he passed away I also started playing cricket. I still play cricket now. I play for a team and that's how I sort of *connect* to him or help myself to feel better. (Themba, aged 18)

I find it a lot with sport. It helps. You do it for yourself but you feel a *connection* with your brother because he can't do it anymore. (Pierre, aged 17)

And I remember last year when we had inter-school rugby and another guy whose brother also died was in my team. And when we won *it was like we also did it for them*. He dropped to his knees in tears of joy and I went and sat there by him and we looked at each other and we didn't need words. Then he said to me: "You're my brother, I love you." (Tiaan, aged 18)

Over half the participants in the study spoke about holding on to a selection of their sibling's possessions that are very meaningful to them.

Like sometimes I wear my brother's soccer t-shirts to comfort myself. (Lwazi, aged 19)

Well I wear his rugby Jacket even though it doesn't keep the rain out (laughs) and I still have his billabong shirt. (Rob, aged 22)

Worden (2009: 162-165) makes a distinction between healthy keepsakes and linking objects. He explains that while many people keep mementos after a death, the latter are symbolic objects or representations that the survivor keeps and invests with intense meaning, thus if the object is misplaced it will evoke considerable distress. The concept of linking objects was developed by psychiatrist Vamik Volkan (as cited in Worden, 2009) who has written widely on the issue of pathological grief. He maintains that when a mourner invests an inanimate object with symbolism that establishes it as an external link between him or her and the person who died, it can hinder satisfactory completion of the grieving process.

However in the present study participants expressed that holding onto inanimate objects and representations like tattoos and photographs associated with their sibling brings them considerable comfort. At the end of a focus group the supporting psychologist shared with the group that her own brother had died. She reached down under her collar and showed the group a chain that had belonged to her brother. She said she had worn it since the day he died and never took it off. The smiles and nods from the participants in that group indicated that this is well within the realms of their own experience. This topic is discussed further in section 4.3.7.3 below.

#### **4.3.7.2 Paranormal connection with sibling**

Participants also cited paranormal occurrences of their siblings interacting with them and affirming their ongoing presence through signs, consultations with mediums or traditional spiritual healers, and through auditory and sensory experiences. Four sisters, independently of each other, described smelling their sibling in similar ways as expressed in this interview excerpt:

Tarryn: I could smell Mike and the teachers wouldn't understand. They started saying that smelling my brother was all in my head like I was imagining it but I wasn't! I knew it was him...

Lesley (researcher): Can you describe the smell?

Tarryn: Mike used a specific deodorant it was one of those Axe ones and in one specific class it was like the strongest but it followed me from class to class ...always around me and then I felt like an idiot and I

even started sniffing the other boys to see if it was their deodorant but it wasn't ... that smell of them was nothing like the smell of my brother

Lesley (researcher): That must have been kind of strange for you in the beginning?

Tarryn: *Ja* and because people thought I was imagining it I stopped sharing the experiences. I almost shut myself off from even believing

Lesley (researcher): Did that help?

Tarryn: No, because then it was almost like I started like losing the *connection* and I really wanted it.

The participants shared experiences where objects like feathers and numbers associated with their sibling appeared in unusual places. They described dragonflies, ladybirds, butterflies and birds that they associated with their sibling behaving in unusual ways. A sister recounted how her home was filled with praying mantis on the weekend of the first anniversary of her brother's death. In four different discussions they talked about associating eagles with their siblings and how eagles would appear in unusual ways at significant times. This excerpt from a focus group discussion echoes what other siblings shared.

Hendri: It helps to find a place where I can be quiet ... actually to think about him, not how he was lying there lifeless but how he was (smiles) he was so energetic, he was ten times what I was really and you know we used to practice together, oh and his name means eagle you know and so I was out in the field hoping for a sign or just something you know, and it's so weird because suddenly there was an eagle.

Liesel: You're kidding!

Amy: It's also a sign for us!

Hendri: And it swooped around me and just chilled there with me for a long time.

Liesel: The same thing happens to us even in the middle of the city.

Jenna: Really!

Liesel: Eagles featured a lot in my brother's life. He made a little bag and he sewed his buckle eagle onto the bag.

Amy: And that afternoon when it happened, my dad and I were still just sitting there, I mean in the middle of the city and there was this eagle – huge! Like circling our garden and we just watched like wow! and then it flew off into the sun And it was like it waited because me and my dad we had to deal with that together you know with finding him and cutting him down and then it was like it waited and I just sat down and I was like 'oh my word!' (Others nod, smile)

Lesley (researcher): And you Jenna?

Jenna: Like signs and stuff?

Lesley (researcher): *Ja*, well you lit up at the eagle.

Jenna: Oh well we have this thing with feathers (speaks very animatedly) like every two weeks there would be a feather, on the kitchen table next week there's another feather where one wouldn't normally

be and my mom and I just think it's like a sign, there's no explanation for it being there (Others murmur agreement) *Ja* and I just see it as a sign like 'everything's alright, I'm watching over you', like, so it makes me happy.

Hendri: Like when my father and I were just riding out on our own and it was like emotional healing because there are no fish eagles near where we live, really just ordinary eagles but then my dad and I were out there and we heard a clear, clear loud fish eagle (whistles the sound of a fish eagle) calling, calling, calling.

Jenna: Wow! (others smile)

Hendri: And my mother is like very against tattoos and I don't know how to break it to her but I want to get an eagle right on my shoulder there. Just a small eagle with black outlines and then on the left wing his birthday and then like the date he passed away. It's just something I want to carry with me, under my shirt, I don't want other people seeing...it's something for me it's not for them that I must explain the tattoo.

Jenna: My brother and my mom got one.

Liezel: I want to get one for my brother.

Hendri: Also, our res caps have an eagle on them so every day I see them on the caps.

Liezel: What happened with us on the day my brother died we suddenly noticed lots of praying mantises, praying mantis? I don't know what the plural is (Everyone laughs) and I found out that the praying mantis is a bushman god, so a spiritual thing and then on the day of the 1 year (anniversary) my house again was full of them. And they're the only animal that if they're teased enough, they pull their own heads off so its suicide.

Jenna: Hectic!

Hendri: *Ja*, it's funny how in nature you get the bigger picture of everything. (Others murmur agreement) All these things you only realise the significance of afterwards, how it comes together. Like something mysterious, bigger you know. (Focus Group 1)

The participants described the juxtaposition of events and symbols or objects that seem more than coincidental and which they took as signs from their sibling. They also spoke about the paranormal transference of an article from one place to another. How the object gets to them is inexplicable but it has specific meaning for the people who receive it and they have no doubt that is linked to the person they love, now in spirit form.

My mom and I still get dragon flies in the strangest places where you wouldn't expect it like in the pub where Jeff used to play pool, there was a dragonfly hovering over the pool table and it was nine o'clock at night! There are always dragonflies around us and apparently it's symbolic of metamorphosis and we like that. Also since my brother died I've had a connection with eagles. Often when we're traveling there'll be an eagle flying in the direction we're going. So when I got there to have the tattoo done it was going to be either a feather or an eagle and when I walked in a certain song of my brother's was playing so that's how

I knew to do the angel wings. For me they symbolise a leap of faith, you know, moving forward in my life, flying. (Louise, aged 20)

#### 4.3.7.3 Parental facilitation of connection with sibling

There are many ways in which parents help facilitate the sense of ongoing connection with the sibling who died. English and Afrikaans speaking siblings in this study said their mothers had created special areas in their homes to honour the sibling and display their art, mementos and photographs. They spoke about events held at their homes on the first anniversary of the death and special places where they and their parents had scattered their sibling's ashes. They also spoke about creating memorial gardens and places where they could go to spend time in quiet reflection. Many of these were new rituals and traditions created from within the family, whereas the families of the isiXhosa-speaking teens tended to follow conventional societal rituals practiced after a death. For all of the participants these rituals and events were very meaningful. They liked the symbolism and the collective remembrance of their sibling.

When he was buried I couldn't go to the funeral because it was in the Eastern Cape but then I managed to go there in the December. I had to do this personal thing ... it's like a tradition. You take a stone from your house and then you put it there at the grave. It's called *ukubeka ilitye* which means to place the stone. You know, so my brother could feel my presence so that he knew at last I had come. It shows that your heart was there although you were not there physically ... like paying your own last respects because you weren't there when the family was doing it. So what happens is I wore a nice Jacket as if I was going to the funeral then I walked to the grave to put the stone. When I got back there was a bucket of water waiting for me outside the home with a cloth and then I washed my hands there before I went inside. (Lwazi, aged 19)

Liezel: I think the shrine idea is nice. We packed up his room and kept only his precious things, his favourite books and his hunting knives. All that is there and that's all we need.

Jenna: Talking about shrines and stuff we've got all Alison's art and stuff and that's nice. It's all over the house and also we didn't have a church funeral we had it like at the house, we had an exhibition of my sister's art. She was studying art and design and photography and so we exhibited all her stuff and her close friends came and I really enjoyed that. We called it the celebration of her life which was really nice.

Liezel: We buried my brother in the mountains where we have a cottage and well for me, it's comforting, I like visiting his grave. We just buried his ashes and we had a Buddhist ceremony and built a cairn and there's a little urn, and the cairn and every time we go there, whoever visits puts a stone or something.

Jenna: That's nice. *Ja*, like we also, we threw her ashes, you know Betty's Bay?

Hendri: Yes.

Jenna: Well there's a nature reserve there right on the sea and that was really nice.

Hendri: We're going to do it too. My brother, I told you what a good rugby player he was, and he wanted to play for the sharks

Lesley (researcher): Good taste! (Laughter)

Hendri: So our family is going to go up to Durban to Kings Park and scatter his ashes there.

Liesel: That will be beautiful.

Hendri: And the other thing my uncle built a huge white cross on one of the high hills near our house. If you stand there you can see across the whole valley and I drew a lot of healing from that. I would sit there with music in my ears, just chilling and every time I went I took a khaki pen and then I would write him a message or tell him what I did since I was last there. It helped because I actually felt like I was talking to him: This is his cross, I'm here, I'm talking to him, writing him a message and I put dates there.

(Focus Group 1)

Reference was made to linking objects in section 4.3.7.1 above. These are inanimate objects or representations invested with symbolism associated with the loved one who died. Balk (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 207) says that recent research shows that it is helpful for parents to model continuing bonds to their surviving children and that keeping linking objects is one of the ways that this can be achieved: for example by keeping photographs in their wallets and by admitting to having internal conversations with their dead child. Many of the participants in the present study discussed examples of how their parents modeled continuing bonds. For example: lighting a candle next to their sibling's photograph every day; sharing bereavement visitation dream experiences with their still-living children; discussing together what their sibling would do in a certain situation they are facing; allowing them to get tattoos related to their sibling; and sharing in the delight of getting what they believe are signs from the sibling who died when they are out in nature together or doing everyday things like shopping in the mall.

#### **4.3.7.4 Connection through someone like their sibling**

Another way of staying connected is by developing a deeper relationship with friends of their late brother or sister. Reflecting on Freud's theory (discussed in chapter three), that grief recovery is achieved by transferring energy to new relationships, I was inclined to delineate a category called substitution but that may be too strong a term for what I describe here. Essentially what the data uncovered is that at least half the participants in this study mentioned that they had become very close to someone who is 'like their sibling' in many ways. The following statements reflect what came through the data:

Clayton: One of my brother's best friends like he was always there before and every day he would come around and we'd just sit in the room, play games, like just be there. He still comes around a lot now... just to check how I am.

Lesley (researcher): And that helps?

Clayton: *Ja*, because well they were friends from young already. They were both twenty-one so it's like I always knew him when I was growing up. He is like another brother to me ... *he's like my own brother*, like he gives me the same kind of advice. (Focus Group 2)

Another thing that helped me a lot is my friend, Gary. He's older than my brother but *he's so similar to my brother* and he gives me the same advice. *Ja*, he's helped me a lot. (Lauren, aged 15)

*Ja*, so with my new boyfriend it's like he is very similar to my brother in his ways but he didn't know him so it's better. He doesn't really look like my brother, *he's just a lot like him* and that makes me feel safe. (Leana, aged 18)

Interestingly, this also surfaced in the only other South African study I uncovered on sibling-bereaved adolescents in high school. In their study on Zulu adolescents whose siblings died from AIDS, Demmer and Rothschild (2011: 19) noted that finding someone to fill the void left by their sibling was very difficult for them and that they deeply missed being able to confide in their sibling and receive advice and encouragement.

#### **4.3.7.5 Connecting through dreams**

In the section on trauma after the death (4.2.2.2) I discussed how memo writing led to the delineation of four different kinds of bereavement dreams and I described the properties of trauma dreams. *Uplifting dreams* are also common and the different kinds coded in this study converge with Wray and Price's (2005: 2) categories: The visitation dream; the message dream; and the reassurance dream, with some dreams including elements of more than one dream type. Wray and Price believe dreams can be powerful tools that help mourners reclaim some measure of power at a time when they're feeling quite powerless; and because grief dreams transcend the limits of time and space they allow the bereaved to travel to a time unchanged by death where they can reconnect with the one they miss. According to Wray and Price (2005: 3) in a visitation dream, the dreamer merely spends time with the one who died. These dreams may recall a forgotten memory of the dreamer, sometimes from childhood. Such visits may be pensive or they might come in the form of joyous reunion. In a message dream, the dreamer receives some sort of important information, instruction or warning. In the present study there were various examples of message dreams.

Dom's computer broke and in the dream like he said no you have to get it fixed. So then I phoned my friend Brian who's a computer technician and he said he would fix it for me and in the dream my brother was like *Ja* did you know he and his girlfriend are engaged now? Then the next day I saw on Facebook

that Brian had proposed to her ... and it was like after my brother already told me. So that was quite amazing. (Lauren, aged 15)

Also I had this weird dream about things Mike had left behind, specifically his phone. My friends said that it meant my brother was trying to *connect* with me so then I opened myself up to that. (Tarryn, aged 18)

My grandfather came to me in dreams and he told me to go the Eastern Cape because my brother was getting cold. He didn't have his clothes and he needed a blanket. (Zama, aged 14)

In the dream account above an ancestor gave the dreamer an instruction. Interestingly this links to a very similar reference in a study where Lee (2011) considered the changing management of death with the problems and possibilities presented by the growing mobility of the isiXhosa-speaking population in South Africa. In discussions with funeral directors in Cape Town she noted that a growing proportion of their business is taken up by exhumations, particularly the retrieval of the dead from a municipal cemetery and its reburial in the Eastern Cape. Often the exhumation process is initiated by a visitation where the dead person appears to a family member in a dream or series of dreams. Lee says that one of the participants in her study recounted that his father visited him in a dream and said that he was not sleeping well in the graveyard where he had been buried because he was getting cold. After the dream the participant exhumed his father's body, wrapped the bones in a blanket and reburied them (Lee, 2011: 240).

Wray and Price (2005) discussed how ancient civilisations looked to dreams as a way to predict the future and to contact ancestors. These excerpts indicate how seriously the bereaved can view dreams and the power that bereavement dreams may have over the living. Many participants also spoke about deriving comfort from reassurance dreams. In these types of dreams their sibling is no longer in pain and appears healthy and happy. This makes them feel more hopeful that their sibling continues to exist and interact with them. Those whose sibling died violently also drew comfort from reassurance dreams. Wray and Price (2005: 95) note that reassurance dreams are distinctive in that they are always dreams of consolation and comfort.

Xolela: In my dreams I know it is really, really is my sister. She is happy.

Khanyi: I feel happy when I wake up. He looks healthy in my dreams.

Sive: In dreams I know it is really, it is my sister. And when she comes she is happy.

Sinazo: I feel better after I see him. He looks very well in my dreams. (Focus Group 3)

I've only had three dreams of him. I could see him it was really nice but it also makes me sad. He smiled at me and he looked the same as when he was here. (Leana, aged 18)

The study data showed 14 accounts of trauma dreams and 19 accounts of reassurance, visitation and message dreams. I also went back and read dream accounts I had collected with other bereaved adolescents over the years to verify the emerging data and found a close fit with all four types of dreams. Wray and Price's (2005) assertion that dreams can help the bereaved grapple with weighty questions about religious faith is illustrated by this statement from a girl whose friend died when she was in high school.

He talks to me in dreams. People might think I'm strange but I know it's him. Death is frightening and I'm scared of who I'm going to lose next. I don't know for sure but there can't just be nothing when you get to the other side. I believe our spirits carry on but we will never get all the answers. (Personal files, 2011)

#### **4.4. CHANGED SELF**

As highlighted in the first chapter and in the theoretical framework, various researchers have emphasised the impact of sibling death on an adolescent's evolving identity. The present study generated a wealth of data that indicated that siblings take on new roles after their sibling dies. They described themselves as changed in many ways and they said that they incorporated aspects of their sibling into themselves after the death. Many of them wrestled with being a different person to the person they were before the death.

In this section five categories that characterise the changes in self are discussed: time markers; trying new things; self-insight; moving toward acceptance; and rethinking identity and the future.

##### **4.4.1 Time markers**

In chapter three various task or stage orientated frameworks for working through bereavement were discussed. Worden's (2009: 39-51) four tasks of mourning are: recognising the reality of the death; expressing the pain of grief; adjusting to a world without the loved one; and finding an enduring connection with the loved one while embarking on a new life. While the participants expressed all of these steps in their journey, they did not regard themselves as working through set stages of grief at set times. It was rather as if they spiraled through different reactions, and they showed self-insight when they discussed this.

You know they talk about those different stages but I think they move forward simultaneously. I don't think you go through one and then the other. I think they all interrelated and that you actually move through them together. (Rob, aged 22)

And um I felt I had spiraled back into the slump I was in after the accident ...like I was replaying the hopelessness and the grief. (Louise, aged 20)

One of the sisters in the present study talked about how her brother took up a small little corner when he was alive but how now that he's gone it's a very big space. Participants mentioned various times when they felt their siblings' absence more acutely and grief was triggered anew. This often coincided with milestone events like matric dances, getting their driver's licenses, getting their final exam results and events around Christmas time. The first anniversary of their siblings' death is another important time marker and an opportunity for the family to share in a collective honouring and remembrance of their life through traditional rituals or new customs conceived and carried out by the family. The importance of parents facilitating these remembrance activities is highlighted in section 4.3.7.3. Silverman (2000) found that loss may be continued to be felt throughout the teenager's lifespan, as he or she finishes high school, finds a job, gets married and grows older than the sibling who has died. Becoming older than their sibling was at death emerged as a critical time marker for participants in the present study. They felt anger and regret that their sibling did not reach and enjoy the life stage they are experiencing and it made them feel lonely and sad, particularly around milestone birthdays like an 18th or a 21st birthday.

Well something I think about a lot is that I'm nearly as old as he was and I don't like that because he was my older brother. (Leana, aged 18)

Before I was always someone who knew what I wanted in my life and now I'm like oh my goodness I don't know if I can actually face going to varsity and I think it's because I'm nearly his age and it's like every year must count now and if I make the wrong choice then I'm not going to be able to do that. (Tarryn, aged 18)

And now I'm nearly 21 and it's always playing in the back of my mind that he never got to this point. He never, you know, turned twenty. He'll never get married. All those things he never got the chance to do. (Louise, aged 20)

#### **4.4.2 Trying new things**

The participants said that they found themselves trying new things after their sibling's death. In some cases this involved a level of recklessness and daring they had not engaged in before. Various studies have drawn attention to the problem of bereaved adolescents engaging in impulsive and risky

behaviours and these are normally undertaken with their peers. Ringler and Hayden (2000) who investigated the role of social support of adolescents grieving the loss of a peer assert that knowledge of how to support an adolescent who is grieving is important as epidemiological evidence points to a greater incidence of problems for adolescents who have experienced a significant loss. According to Horsley and Patterson (2006: 120) a sudden death leaves the survivor feeling out of control and this anger is often expressed through high-risk behaviors such as drug use and sexual activity in order to block out thoughts and feelings associated with the sibling death. In a South African study Garzouzie (2011: 3) identified high-risk behaviours like drug and alcohol abuse, unprotected sex, dangerous behaviours, and suicide in parent-bereaved adolescents who have not dealt with loss effectively, stressing the need to protect them by offering support.

While suicide ideation was not expressed in the present study, the participants did express concern about life events that could lead to a sense of hopelessness and suicidal feelings. I did not specifically probe for disclosures about high risk behaviour and what emerged spontaneously is that many of the participants adopted a fatalistic “I don’t care” attitude towards their personal safety in the early months. In the isiXhosa-speaking focus group this emerged less strongly but this should be qualified by the recognition that there was also less time to explore peripheral issues because discussion centered on the trauma of their siblings deaths and the time used to translate or clarify certain points ate into the allotted time. Hogan and DeSantis (1994) found that adolescents may undertake risky behaviors such as binge drinking to numb themselves from feelings of grief and loss. In the present study some participants spoke about taking more physical risks and some discussed using alcohol excessively after their sibling died.

Like I’ve gone out and got completely smashed, coz like I felt like I needed to do that (laughs) never again! The thing is I used to be so aware of what people think, like including my parents. Like before, I would never have gone out and got pissed without out, I mean without their permission. I don’t think, well I mean I didn’t think of the risks of things, you know what the consequences are, that’s probably a problem. (Lauren, aged 15)

Well um I partied and drank a lot more after my brother. A lot more than what I did before the accident, about double. I was fearless to the point of recklessness, especially the first year after. (Louise, aged 20)

I started drinking a lot. No one was really paying attention and a lot of things started shifting in my life. (Rob, aged 22)

None of the participants mentioned drug-taking or sexual activity but it is reasonable to assume that it would take repeated interactions to build a level of trust where participants would be comfortable raising these issues within a group discussion.

In the main, the new things the participants started doing since their sibling's death involved activities led to them extending themselves rather than behaving recklessly. They talked about how they had learned to surf, or started other new sports or how they found release in creative pastimes.

I started surfing and I like practice tricks on bikes and skateboard and like bikes and, like well I do a lot more things now. Just to keep myself busy. (Clayton, aged 16)

After my brother passed away I started playing cricket and I play for a team now. (Themba, aged 16)

Doing art helps me. I love art and watching movies and reading ... usually reading. And I really want to get into motor cross but I'm not allowed coz of my brother dying like, but it just looks so fun and I love quad bikes just I wouldn't be as reckless as I was before. (Lauren, aged 15)

Consistent with Demmer and Rothschild's (2011: 21) study with a South African sample of sibling-bereaved adolescents, I found high levels of perseverance amongst the participants in the present study. This was expressed in their determination to do well at school or in sport. Achievement in these spheres was frequently linked to their sibling's legacy and viewed as a way of honoring them / doing something they were no longer able to do.

So I pushed through and it was like *I was doing it for me and for him* you know. And what's really cool the tournament was started in memory of another guy who died, like also a school kid and he a number one tennis player. I didn't really think that I could win so when I got the trophy, well I'm the first guy in my school to win it and everyone was there like supporting me and it's what I needed. (Hendri, aged 20)

I worked hard I was really determined. It was like *'I'm going to do this for you.'* So I put a lot of effort into my work and into my sport. And then when I finished matric I took a year off and I travelled and saw the world and like that was amazing. I learnt a lot, by myself and *Ja*, it was like my release. (Jenna, aged 19)

#### **4.4.3 Self-insight**

In the early months following their sibling's death, participants indicated that they mainly used distraction as a coping strategy. Over time they seemed to gain clarity and looked at others and themselves differently. They developed better problem-solving skills and they discovered how they could make themselves feel better by engaging in activities that reduced stress resulting from sadness and additional disappointments after the death.

Like I did badly in maths and I was worried about my marks you know and then my girlfriend broke up with me and that was only two months after the accident but then I just go to gym because that helps me. (Dylan, aged 16)

I've learned to be careful about who I talk to. You can't just talk to anyone because that's when you'll get hurt. They'll often go and tell someone else what you said and that's how stories get around. So choose someone who's not going to talk, someone you can trust. (Pierre, aged 17)

Many participants expressed how being outdoors and in nature helped them to feel more positive. They mentioned a range of activities like surfing, riding quad bikes, walking in the mountains, camping and hiking which increased their self-insight and helped them to gain perspective. White (2006: 13) notes that one of the best gifts parents can give their surviving children is to help them cultivate a love for nature and to teach them the value of exercise because these activities reduce stress and anxiety.

"That's why I associate with eagles. An eagle has a better view of things. It can go anywhere but it is also very solitary and I feel like that. Like I have a bigger perspective than most people my age but it makes you alone you know. (Louise, aged 20)

Lesley (researcher): So if you had to give advice to other teenagers who experience this loss what would you tell them?

Pierre: They must set goals. They mustn't say well okay, this is now a bit difficult, they must rather see it as a challenge. And don't settle for the limits other people put on you. Just because someone else says you can't do something doesn't mean you must believe them. You can do better than you think you can.

Tiaan: *Ja* and I would say find something to keep themselves busy with. Do things that make them happy. Hiking works for me and music. When I'm emotional I listen to music.

Pierre: Before if I didn't feel like doing something or if it was too hard, I would just leave it. But now I set myself a goal to do something then I go all out to do it. I don't give up any more. I do my absolute best. Now if I don't get it right straight away, I just try harder. Like last year I didn't even make the second team. So this year I played trials and I was immediately moved up to the first team because I worked really hard to be ready.

Tiaan: And you mustn't feel sorry for yourself. That's a big mistake. If you keep feeling sorry for yourself it irritates other people and they won't want to be around you. (Focus Group 4)

Throughout all the discussions, siblings also said how they felt more mature than their peers and while they saw this as positive, it also increased their sense of being different from others.

Also a huge problem with me is that I've become more mature and I find that like at the moment they find the smallest thing funny and it's just like so immature ... there are bigger issues that people are facing. (Tarryn, aged 18)

Hellstrom and Nolbris (2005: 233) found that surviving siblings believed that they were more mature than others because of their experience of sibling loss. Balk (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 200) examined whether sibling-bereaved adolescents in the United States of America showed self-concept problems when compared to national samples of healthy and clinically disturbed adolescents by administering the Offer Self Image Questionnaire for Adolescents (OSIQ). The OSIQ subscales measure moral values, vocational aspirations, family relationships, peer relationships and psychopathology. On ten of the eleven subscales bereaved adolescents scores showed no difference to the scores of same-age, same-sex healthy adolescents. However on moral values, the bereaved adolescent's scores were one standard deviation higher which, according to Balk, indicates that coping with sibling death can propel adolescents into maturity beyond that of unaffected peers their age.

#### **4.4.4 Toward acceptance**

Klicker (2000: 12) says one of the reasons why the death of young people is considered so tragic is because they have not lived to fulfill their dreams, experience the wonder of life and feel a sense of accomplishment. In the present study the sense of their sibling being cheated of the opportunity to live a full life came through strongly when participants talked regretfully about all the things their sibling never got to do.

Much of what was expressed in the present study is consistent with the findings of the Hogan and DeSantis (1992) study with 157 bereaved adolescent siblings. The pair derived six categories of perceived ongoing emotional and social connection with their dead sibling, namely: *Regretting* in two forms: not being able to share activities in their lives and confide in their sibling; and regretting that they did not have a better relationship with their sibling; *Endeavouring to understand*: wanting to understand how the death happened and wanting to understand the events that led up to the death and who is to blame; *Catching up*: where the still-living sibling wishes they could share what's happening in their lives and they want to know how their dead sibling is doing, where they are and what they do there; *Reaffirming* -- where the emotional bond is experienced as continuous in the present and not severed by physical absence; *Influencing*: their sibling continues to influence their lives and they long for their guidance; *Reuniting*, where siblings anticipate reunion with their sibling after death.

As their self-insight increased over time, participants in the present study seemed to reach an emotionally manageable level of understanding about why the death happened and this enabled them to move towards accepting the reality of the death and its implications for their lives.

Jenna: I think I've faced it ... like I've realised it was her time to go, like she was ...she reached her peak and I was like happy with that because at that time she was doing really well and she would have been amazing and like a book illustrator but you know, I felt like, you know, her cup was overflowing at that time... so it was okay

Liesel: That's how we also felt about my brother ... like it was his time.

Jenna: Yes. I'm glad like she wasn't say in a bad relationship, or struggling ... she was actually like the best I've ever seen her so like Ja ... she was who she wanted to be

Hendri: Well Ja, after I came back to school I just did sport all the time ... like to distract myself. And then I came back to earth a little bit, and then for me the big thing was not to be sad about the death but rather you know celebrate the life. That was the turning point. When I got there it really helped. Before that I was mad because he was fourteen and I was eighteen and why couldn't I have died and he could have lived and also with matric I went all out, like I did it in his name because he'll never get his matric now.

Jenna: Yes. Like I try to do everything a hundred percent now because my sister can't

Liesel: Well for me it's like well, I'm not going to live HIS fullest in MY life. He was his own kind of person. It's like my brother is fine. He's happy now. ...and because of the type of person he was well he's not in that place he was and maybe if he'd lived to be older he would have had the depression with him his whole life. And I'd rather he didn't have to live like that because he did live quite a full life. He was a nature person. He wanted to work in nature conservation and he used to build tepee houses out of palm fronds and he set the garden on fire a couple of times (Laughter) but he lived his life as full as he wanted to ...not to the fullest because obviously then he'd still be alive but he lived his life. (Focus group 1)

#### 4.4.5 Rethinking identity and the future

The working title I chose for this study before starting field work was 'Who am I now?' and it was interesting to see how often bereaved siblings in the study expressed those feelings.

Well people criticise a lot because they want the same Tarryn as before Mike. They don't know how to deal with *who I am now*. (Tarryn, aged 18)

I don't think you can live your life for somebody else. You can't say that your own life is only valuable in terms of how well you represent them. But you can always be inspired by them, like for me, the way Ant treated people I mean, that was a great example of the way you should conduct your life. But I don't live for him. You can only live as yourself but I do think I'm very conscious about *who he was I try and incorporate that into the way I am now*. (Rob, aged 22)

White (2005:24) found that it takes time for still living adolescent siblings to create a new identity. She says “When our sibling dies, the part of us that related to our sibling seems to die too, creating a rift in the unbroken wholeness that we called our self”. Thomas (2011) likened a teenager losing a sibling to losing a mirror – a person who reflects back to them part of the answer to who they are. Goldblatt (2009: 3) discussed how siblings distinguish themselves from each other and recognise each other’s strengths and weaknesses. A surviving adolescent brother expressed this succinctly:

We worked on different levels; He was outgoing and magnetic; while I am quieter and more analytic. He was the friendly, practical one; I was the planner, the visionary. He was the artist, I was the writer. We complemented each other. What the one of us lacked, the other had. (Personal files, 2007)

In the literature various authors (e.g. Hogan & DeSantis, 1994; Bonanno, 2009; Balk & Corr, 2009) suggest that grief can be a catalyst for transformation and that death loss potentiates self-growth. I hesitate to use either term here because while all the participants in this study recognised indelible changes in themselves after their sibling died, they did not view all aspects of their changed self in a positive way. Certainly they talked about gaining maturity, gaining perspective and gaining new determination to live their lives fully. However these factors in turn intensified their sense of being different to their peers and many were troubled by lingering anger and anxiety.

I’m still *not a normal person*. I don’t mean it in a negative way, I’m just different. It’s almost like *I’ve had to recreate myself*. Um, I don’t think I would ever have had the chance to figure it out, I mean who I want to be if I didn’t go through this. I’ve almost tried to become myself and my brother in one. (Louise, aged 20)

It’s six years and *even now* I get angry. *Even now*, at school I don’t join in when others play soccer. I used to play but now I can’t play I just watch and I sit alone and still sometimes, I will just suddenly start to cry. (Lwazi, aged 19)

In a South African study with late-adolescent female survivors of suicide (aged 17 – 22) Hoffmann, Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2010) found that part of the survivor dies with the victim. They found that physical and symbolic losses associated with the death of a significant other can pose a substantial existential threat and may explain why many of the suicide aftermath crises for survivors originate in the loss of so much of the ‘self’. White (2006: 6) found that many siblings are troubled by the ambivalent nature of the sibling relationship. Upon the death of a brother or sister they may see themselves in memory as the “bad one” while the dead sibling is the “good one”. This split in self-concept can result in the feeling that they are not good enough. Thus they need encouragement to

pursue activities that advance their own life-goals and enhance their self-concept as is poignantly illustrated in the statement below.

You could almost feel like it's unfair that he was the one that died and I was left behind because he was doing so much ... the whole school knew him and everyone liked him, so I feel almost like a little inferior, I mean I could just be the kid who was Dan's little brother not like my own person. (Dylan, aged 16)

Study data suggested that the intensity of grief appears to be linked to the degree of closeness in the sibling relationship prior to the death. However, those participants who said they were less close to the sibling who died continued to grapple with the ambivalent and/or conflicted nature of that sibling relationship and tried to work it out in their present lives.

When he was here I was a douche really. And I can't fix that ...um so I can only try to live up to things that he was you know. I think he would have liked me a lot more the way I am now. (Laughs) hell I like myself more now! So *Ja*, I think we would have been a lot closer. (Chris, aged 19)

Many siblings in the present study remarked how after their sibling's death they noticed changes within themselves. These included changes in extroversion or introversion; becoming kinder and becoming more responsible. Often they saw this as an attempt to incorporate aspects of their sibling's personality or characteristics into themselves.

I'm naturally quite introvert and my brother was like a complete extrovert. But like *now I've become* more outgoing. It's strange because I'm also more confident now. (Lauren, aged 15)

Like I saw things he did really well and what he could have been, um and also what he wasn't and you take that and bring it into your life, into *who you are, who you become*. (Rob, aged 22)

I think mostly because before the accident I was more of a loner, not social and I think now I'm finding a nice balance between the two. I mean if I look at the year before and the year after I've almost been completely opposite ... polar opposites. I don't think I would ever have had the chance to figure it out, I mean *who I want to be* if I didn't go through this. (Louise, aged 20)

Four of the siblings talked about how they had become "only children" after the death of their sibling. Others talked about how the family had to reprogram itself from being a family of five to a family of four. They discussed specific roles their sibling fulfilled in the family: organising events, being the family joker or resolving conflict; and practical roles like driving their mothers to go shopping or providing pocket money to younger siblings. Thus the subsequent absence of their sibling left a gaping void that

they often feel they need to somehow fill. Surviving siblings described how they held onto certain aspects of their sibling who died and they incorporated these as a living legacy in their present lives. However at the same time they wanted to be their own person and build their own lives separate from their sibling. Most of the participants were also able to recognise that having dreams for the future and reaching goals improved their emotional well-being and that certain activities made them feel better about themselves.

I needed to start building a new life. I don't want to forget my brother but *I can't stay so linked to him* either. I don't know if that makes sense? (Leana, aged 18)

You must keep doing things, you know, try to keep on with things you want to do. (Themba, aged 16)

It's important to have something to look forward to, like having a plan to go camping or knowing I'm going to see my girlfriend on the weekend and her father is great, he takes us camping a lot or we go hiking in the mountains. (Tiaan, aged 18)

Four participants mentioned career choices that had been shaped by the experience of losing their sibling. They spoke of becoming a lawyer who would fight for justice for young people; or how they wanted to be a teacher and help grieving children or children who battle to fit into mainstream education. This converges with findings in Demmer and Rothschild's (2011: 19) study where adolescents in KwaZulu-Natal expressed a desire to become a nurse, a doctor or a social worker so that they could help people affected by HIV.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Based on the theory and findings covered thus far, this chapter discusses key findings related to the psychosocial experience of adolescent sibling bereavement and the implications for intervention by school personnel and others with vested interest in promoting the well-being of specifically sibling-bereaved, and generally bereaved adolescents. In conclusion the limitations of the study are described and recommendations for further research are made.

### 5.2 THE PSYCHOSOCIAL JOURNEY OF SIBLING-BEREAVED ADOLESCENTS

Figure 5 provides a three-phased schematic representation of the themes that emerged in focus groups and interviews. Holton (2007: 226) says that grounded theory researchers need to be comfortable with delineating data collection, allowing core concepts to emerge and then abstracting only those concepts that relate to the core. The bereavement journey of the participants was multifaceted and there was a constant temptation to cover peripheral issues that did not relate to the core categories and the research question. However, as theoretical saturation was approached, it became easier to define the core categories and domains which described the psycho-social journey of bereaved siblings in the present study.

**Figure 5: The psycho-social journey of bereaved adolescent siblings in high school**

<i>Phase</i>	<b>Disruption</b>	⇒	<b>Transition</b>	⇒	<b>Changed Self</b>
<i>Core categories in this phase</i>	Unexpected death		Death disclosure means being different		Time markers
	Anxiety, fear and trauma		Coping in the classroom		Trying new things
	Disruption in the home		Caution around counseling Connecting with peers Connecting with sibling who died		Self-insight Toward acceptance Rethinking identity and the future
<i>Dominant coping strategies in phase</i>	Avoidance Distraction		School as an escape Distraction Social and family support Exploring ways to stay connected to sibling		Accomplishment Stress-reducing activity Problem solving Incorporating sibling into self-schema

Findings from the present study revealed that the core categories characterising the initial phase of *disruption* are: shock at the unexpected death; the resultant anxiety, fear and/or trauma evoked by the death; and disruption of normality within the family. During this time adolescents felt bewildered and scared. The dominant coping strategies used to deal with disruption were avoidance and distraction.

The present finding regarding coping strategies is consistent the findings of a South African study of parent-bereaved adolescents, where Garzouzie (2011: 39) reported that participants overwhelmingly used avoidant coping strategies. Only 13% made a predominant use of social support-seeking coping strategies, and less than 2% made a predominant use of problem-solving coping strategies. Over many years of counselling practice and research with young people, Worden (2009: 64) has found that long-term, avoidant emotional coping is the least effective coping strategy for the bereaved. However it does have short-term benefits because it acts as a buffer against reality. Gray's (1989) found that problem solving and distraction are common helpful behaviours amongst bereaved adolescents. Worden (2009) asserts that cognitive behavioural interventions are helpful in aiding the bereaved with problem solving. The implication for those who work with bereaved adolescents is that it is beneficial to assist them to develop effective problem-solving coping strategies.

The transitional phase emerged as a bridge that takes adolescents from disruption to a changed self. In the transition phase the participants struggled to fit in with their peers and regain a sense of normality. During this time the bereaved adolescents continued to feel isolated and they felt increasingly different from others. The core categories that characterise *transition* are: acknowledgement and disclosure; coping in the classroom; caution about counseling; connecting with bereaved and non-bereaved peers in ways that are both helpful and hurtful; and sensing an ongoing connection with their siblings who died.

Participants in the present study continued to use avoidant coping strategies through the transitional phase for example, distraction and using school as an escape from the disruption and sadness at home. However as they developed greater insight about their loss, they began to use more active emotional coping where they were receptive of social and family support and explored ways of staying connected to their sibling.

The core categories that characterise a sense of *changed self* are linked to pivotal turning points in the journey. These included trying on new activities and roles; gaining new levels of self-insight; reaching understanding about why the death happened; moving towards accepting the reality of the death and its implications for their lives; rethinking their identity and beginning to look forward to and plan for the future.

When reflecting on their changed self, the siblings demonstrated development of cognitive problem-solving skills and self-insight. For example they learned to be more selective about whom they confided in to avoid being gossiped about; and they realised that self-pity exacerbated their isolation from their peers. They also used redefinition - the ability to find something positive in a bad situation. Worden (2009: 65) asserts that redefinition is the most effective active emotional coping strategy. Participants narratives also revealed that their coping was significantly aided by accomplishment and achieving goals they had worked towards - like making a team, winning an award, or doing well in their exams. Other coping strategies they used to feel good about themselves included: spending time in nature; activities to reduce stress like exercise or painting. Participants also reported that finding ways to maintain an ongoing connection to their sibling who died helped them cope better with their present (bereaved) lives.

## **5.3 KEY FINDINGS ON THE CHANGED SELF**

### **5.3.1 Continuing attachment versus breaking bonds**

Attachment theory was introduced as the guiding theoretical perspective for the present study. The findings revealed that the majority of participants actively sought to maintain a connection with their sibling who died. They did this by becoming “more like” their sibling in certain ways and behaving in ways that they believed their sibling would have approved. They found they were able to honour their sibling through some of their accomplishments and they drew on the memory of their sibling for inspiration. These findings are consistent with findings on sibling-bereaved adolescent populations in other parts of the world (notably, Hogan & DeSantis 1996). However, a caveat is also necessary: a minority of participants in the present study did not express a need to actively nurture a continued relationship with the sibling who died. Nonetheless they reported that they valued collective family commemoration of their sibling in the form of shared rituals following the death and anniversary events.

In the theoretical framework the breaking bonds versus continuing bonds orientation was discussed as represent two conflicting paradigms: one that insists on the necessity of psychological disengagement from the loved one who died and one that emphasises the value of a continuing connection with them Boerner and Heckhausen (2003: 200). Worden (2009: 67) explained that when the relationship to an attachment figure is severed through death, the grieving survivor often attempts to maintain or re-establish proximity to that figure. In the light of new research about the adaptive benefit of bereaved people maintaining a bond with their loved one who died, Worden amended his view that the survivor needs to complete any unfinished business with the deceased and be able to say a final goodbye. In

his more recent scholarship, Worden proposed that a healthy adaptation to the new reality of life is for survivors to internalise the loved one into themselves and their schema of life so that psychological proximity substitutes for the physical presence of the loved one which is no longer available.

Boerner and Heckhausen (2003: 201) proposed a model that moves beyond the dichotomy of disengagement versus continuing connection, and instead, conceived this process as one of transformation that involves both elements of disengagement and connection. This provides an accurate representation of the process that emerged in the present study. The implication for those concerned with assisting bereaved adolescents is that rather than encouraging a 'speedy resolution' of grief, support should be geared towards the emotional and symbolic expressions of what the lost relationship meant for the bereaved. This would help the latter to emotionally process the loss without being pressured to follow set time frames regarding the extent and duration of grieving.

### **5.3.2 Identity and individuation**

The participants' accounts of their grief experience evoked a sense that their individuation was tested and tempered by the disruption and chaos that followed their siblings' death. They spoke about "recreating" themselves and figuring out "who they are now." While they initially struggled to fill the void their siblings' absence created in their lives, they described how they gradually began to reinvest in life. Participants in the study evidenced this by showing excitement in their plans for the future: setting goals, finishing school, applying to university, making a team, or choosing a career.

In the introductory chapter, the distinct dilemmas of adolescence and the drive for personal identity were advanced as the reason why sibling loss during this stage of life is perhaps more difficult than at any other age. The core argument was that adolescent encounters with death are different from those of other age groups because a central quest of the adolescent life development phase is to establish a stable sense of self. White (2006:24) defines the term "identity" as one's sense of self that remains the same over time. Often a considerable part of the adolescents' identity is bound up in the sibling who died. Hence the struggle to come to terms with the irrevocable loss of the sibling relationship can complicate tasks relating to identity development. In adolescents, a stable sense of self is still under construction. White (2006) maintains that because siblings makeup part of "who we are", brothers and sisters left behind after death often experience a profound sense of identity confusion.

The implication for those assisting adolescents through the bereavement of their sibling is that surviving siblings should not be made to feel guilty about going on with their lives. While their identity is influenced by their relationship with the sibling who died, their individuation needs to be supported (Packman et al., 2006: 835).

### 5.3.3 Reordering versus relinquishing roles

Sanders' (1999) integrated model of bereavement describes a "healing" phase that includes restructuring identity and relinquishing roles. In the present study, data suggest that the sibling-bereaved participants felt they did not relinquish the role of being the brother or sister of the sibling who died. Rather old roles were re-ordered and new roles were added to fill the void left by their sibling. This is an ongoing process where revision of their identity accommodates integration of their sibling into their present life, albeit in a different way than when they were alive.

Worden (2009: 46-49) discusses how adjusting to a world without the person who died occurs on three dimensions: external adjustment - daily life without them; internal adjustment - rethinking one's identity and spiritual adjustment - reframing fundamental assumptions about how the world works and one's purpose in it. These adjustments have emerged through much of the data already presented. Hence in this section data related to points made above about bereaved adolescents rekindling a sense of purpose in the future and rethinking identity is highlighted.

In the present study it was not only the re-evaluation of their own identity and future that concerned bereaved siblings but also the identity of their family and the revision of roles and ordering of surviving siblings. Participant's subjective recollections of early months following their sibling's is consistent with literature covered earlier (Hogan & DeSantis; 1992 Hindmarch, 1995; Ribbens McCarthy, 2006; White, 2006) which maintains that the death of a child often catapults the entire family into crisis and thus surviving children may receive little attention from their parents in the short term. This makes them inclined to take on the role of "hidden grievers". Talbot (2002: 49) observed how the family structure is reordered and how the roles fulfilled by the child who died fall to those who are left or go unfilled. In her work with bereaved parents, Talbot found that the death of a child irrevocably alters virtually every aspect of a bereaved parent's life and that their relationships with their surviving children are also changed forever.

Findings in the present study about parents being supportive concurred with the Hogan and DeSantis (1994:144) study where almost half the adolescents said that their parents were supportive although they were at times too preoccupied with their own grief to be available to the teens when they needed them. In the present study Afrikaans and English-speaking participants said that over time their families became more coherent and functional and their parents were supportive and understanding. None of the isiXhosa-speaking participants cited their parents as being supportive but they mentioned siblings and other relatives who were understanding and helpful.

The findings of the present study supported the view that school is often a temporary escape from the uncertainty and sorrow at home. Thus the implication for school personnel is that as adolescents spend much of their time at school, teachers and other school personnel may be well placed to provide structured support. They may also be able to help them work through troubling and bewildering aspects of their bereavement experience.

#### **5.3.4 Resilience in the face of sibling loss**

In an article entitled *Growing resilient children* Frankel (2001) defines resilience as the ability to bounce back and the ability to turn life stresses into opportunities. While the bereaved siblings in the present study did not describe themselves as resilient, a pervasive pattern through their narratives was how they constantly strived to be resilient. This was underscored by numerous accounts of persevering to be the best they can be. Participants also used redefinition, looking for redemptive aspects in an otherwise difficult situation Worden (2009: 65). Humour was another effective coping strategy for many of them. Bonanno (2004: 26) asserts that positive emotion and laughter are indicators of resilience. In this view, the participants in the present study could be said to be resilient as the sharing was punctuated by frequent bursts of laughter and the majority of participants made statements about how they tried to stay positive and strive for happiness.

Bonanno (2004:20) ties resilience to functioning. He draws a distinction between recovery from grief and resilience in the face of grief. In his view, recovery denotes a trajectory in which normal functioning temporarily gives way to threshold or subthreshold psychopathology, for example symptoms of depression or posttraumatic stress disorder for months or years, and then returns to pre-event levels. In contrast, among people who are exposed to loss and trauma, resilience means that despite adversity, they show only transient disruptions in their ability to function and they continue to have positive emotional experiences.

Participants in the present study reported that the initial shock of their siblings' death overwhelmed their coping ability, mainly because they had little or no prior experience of an event of this magnitude. Yet, reflecting back on the time following the death they discussed many positive emotional experiences and they reported being able to function reasonably well on a day-to-day basis despite the disruption of their sibling's death. However there was an underlying sense that this took conscious and deliberate effort on their part.

In a South African study of sibling-bereaved adolescents Demmer and Rothschild (2011: 22) found that despite extreme poverty and a dearth of resources, the adolescents in their study demonstrated resilience in that they were able to avoid peer pressure and retained hope for a better future for

themselves. They remark that it is not completely clear how these young people were able to surmount numerous obstacles and continue to function relatively well. They suggest that this emotional resourcefulness and relative hardiness could be in part a product of their youth.

Based on the findings of the present study, the implication for those who deal with bereaved adolescents is that while they may well display resilience in the face of adversity, they may not have accumulated sufficient emotional competence and life experience to cope with some of the dramatic changes wrought by their sibling's sudden death.

## **5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOLS**

Stokes, Reid and Cook (in Balk & Corr 2009: 187) speak to the heart of the issue, saying that for most young people school plays a major role in their everyday life and for a bereaved adolescent it may represent the only place where he or she can begin to process the loss without fear of upsetting a family member. Overwhelmingly participants in the present study viewed school as an escape from the sorrow in their home in the first weeks and months following their siblings' death. However, going to school presented a dilemma: they did not want to be singled out from their peers, yet they wanted recognition of their situation and the difficulties it created for them. In this section these issues are distilled into a description of the concrete help participants considered important for bereaved learners; and the general level of awareness around major life issues like death, trauma, anxiety and suicide, which they view as lacking in their schools.

Seven key factors emerged in relation to how schools can support sibling-bereaved learners in their school community. These factors are summarised in Table 1. In the discussion that follows, the type of support participants said they want is contrasted with relevant studies in South Africa and other parts of the world; the implications of these findings are briefly outlined; and possible appropriate interventions in the high school setting are discussed.

### **5.4.1 Discreet acknowledgement and death disclosure**

The main concern bereaved siblings in the present study had about death disclosure at school is that it labeled them as different from their peers. Participants all said they wanted teachers to know about the death. They wanted to be acknowledged as going through a tough time, but they wanted to be approached privately and in a non-emotional way. All participants said it was better if their parents or someone else had alerted their school to what they were going through. However it was sometimes only when a sensitive teacher detected a change in the learner and asked them directly what was

wrong that the death was disclosed. As was noted in Section 4.3.1 above, schools are not always aware of a single bereaved learner or a set of bereaved siblings within their school body. Klicker (2000:65) notes that it is particularly hard for teachers to choose a course of action when the bereavement involves only one child. Most teachers report that bereaved children feel a need to be within the group. Separating them, even for the purpose of excusing them from work responsibilities, generally causes anxiety.

The findings of the present study are in line with a Canadian study by Forward and Garlie (2003: 43) which discussed the ambivalence teens felt surrounding the knowledge that they are different from their peers because of the devastating loss they had experienced and they did not want to be different or treated differently. On the other hand they did want their loss acknowledged, which in itself required a recognition that they had changed.

Thus the implication is that all educators who teach a bereaved learner are notified of the death before the learner returns to school. Moreover educators could be given practical information about coping with bereaved learners and alerted to key problems stemming from bereavement that may impact the learners' scholastic performance and psychosocial adjustment.

**Table 1: Type of support bereaved adolescent siblings want from their school**

Type of support	Implementation
1) Discreet acknowledgement and death disclosure	On their return to school, the principal, registration teacher or counsellor meets with the bereaved learner privately, acknowledges the difficult time they are going through and offers structured support. If the sibling who died was in the same school, any plans to commemorate or announce their death are discussed with the surviving sibling(s) in the school.
2) Structured support	Structured support with school work is provided from the day the bereaved sibling returns to school until 14 months after the death (noting that the 1 year mark is often difficult)
3) Access to counselling	The learner is alerted to the services available from their school counsellor or school circuit education psychologist, Western Cape Education Department.
4) Aid accomplishment	School staff encourage opportunities for the bereaved learner to shine and succeed in sport, scholastic work and other areas.
5) Bereavement information	When the bereaved learner returns to school he or she is given a resource sheet containing facts about bereavement and its effects and hotlines and websites where help can be sought.
6) Bereavement support groups	School facilitates establishment of a bereavement support group within the school or facilitates opportunities for bereaved learners to join support groups already in operation.
7) Awareness: death and other life crises	School leadership, counsellors and life orientation teachers consider innovative ways to increase understanding about death, suicide, anxiety, depression and trauma.

### 5.4.2 Structured support

Outside the home, those most likely to find themselves in thrust into the role of counsellor or advisor about bereavement-related problems are the teachers who come into daily contact with bereaved siblings. The challenge for schools, as Stevenson (in Balk & Corr 2009: 282) notes, is that most education curricula do not prepare educators to cope with death in the classroom and school counsellors may also not have formal training in death education or grief counselling.

In the present study participants discussed the challenges of coping in the classroom which included perceived insensitivity and unkindness from teachers and hurtful behaviour from fellow learners. Most participants said that their close friends were supportive, particularly if they had some experience of loss. However, they became alienated from friends who did not understand what they were going through and they felt misunderstood by many of their peers at school. One of their biggest concerns was being labeled as the person whose brother or sister died, and they disliked being gossiped about. Most of the bereaved siblings in the study reported that they were only shown concern for a few days or weeks. After that teachers tended to assume that they were “back to normal”.

Klicker (2000:66-67) points out that grief is a process not an event. In the weeks and months after the death, teachers need to provide ongoing opportunities for students to express their grief. He emphasises that grief can be long-lasting, in some cases two years or more. Grief can also be cumulative. Learners experiencing multiple losses can suffer grief overload which further affects their normal behaviour and functioning. Grief that seems to be under control can resurface around special days, such as birthdays, holidays or the anniversary of the death.

The points Klicker makes above reflect the multifaceted nature of a bereaved sibling's struggle which was supported by findings in the present study. Participants wanted their struggle to be acknowledged but they most of all want concrete help in the form of tools and resources that make them feel more confident about making it through. Gray (1989) also found that bereaved adolescent learners want structured support. The type of structured support participants responded to best was being invited to talk privately to a teacher who checked to see how they were coping with their school work and being offered extra tuition or an implicit promise of support in an unemotional show of care. They also said they preferred teachers who are ‘strict but fair’. Looking back at the first months of their bereavement they mostly said they lacked practical help with managing their anxiety and inability to concentrate on school work.

Klicker (2000: 59) contends that teachers are uniquely positioned to guide grieving students and their classmates. However, teachers often feel uncomfortable discussing death and this reluctance can

adversely affect the children in their charge who look to their teachers for truth, knowledge and support. In a study Hogan and DeSantis (1994) conducted with 140 bereaved adolescent siblings, the almost total absence of school support was flagged. In contrast some of the participants in the present study **did** find school personnel supportive. For example, it was a relief when disturbing bereavement responses were explained to them by counsellors and teachers. Nonetheless, the overall lack of structured support, and school personnel's lack of skills in approaching and helping help bereaved learners, was strongly voiced.

The implication of these findings is that teachers should take every opportunity available to learn about the grieving process in adolescents and that schools should have a plan of structured support for them. Hogan and DeSantis underlined the importance of a school support network that conveys a sense of belonging and being cared for:

In order to potentiate resiliency and to attenuate the vulnerability of bereaved adolescent siblings, it is essential that health care providers and others concerned with sibling bereavement should become actively involved in identifying what characteristics of their social and systems bereaved adolescents perceive as helpful or hindering. By so doing they can provide a framework to promote healthy grieving and enhance the adolescents' sense of well-being and resiliency, despite the stress of coping with the death of their brother or sister. (Hogan & DeSantis, 1994: 144)

### **5.4.3 Access to counselling**

A pervasive pattern in the present study was that adolescent learners do not want to be approached as if they are emotionally inadequate. Being treated "like a normal person" at school was of cardinal importance to them. Nonetheless they did not feel normal. Not all the schools had a counsellor or psychologist and only a few of the siblings in the study reported that they were advised of counseling support available through psychologists at the Department of Education. While the participants recognised possible value in counselling, they were wary of it and were often doubtful about the ability of a counsellor to understand their situation. They especially clammed up when others implied that they should be "normal by now". They indicated that they would be more likely to open up to counsellors and teachers who "knew about grief". For example, it helped when teachers suggested they tell their parents about their nightmares. They wished that in the early weeks they had been given information about strange and troubling things that were happening in the bodies and their minds: why their systems were in a state of hyper-arousal and how to cope with a panic attack; or why they were constantly tired and forgetful. Above all, bereaved siblings appreciated simple kindness.

Worden (2009: 77) says that one of the basic things that education through grief counseling can do is to alert people to the fact that mourning is a long-term process and that the culmination will not be a pre-grief state. The implication for counselling interventions with bereaved learners is that they should chiefly be orientated towards helping bereaved adolescents to cope with anxiety, lack of concentration, intrusive thoughts, fatigue and stress. Factual information about bereavement and what they can anticipate during the process is also very helpful to them.

#### **5.4.4 Aiding accomplishment**

A finding that emerged through every discussion in the present study, and an aspect which should not be underestimated when bereaved adolescent siblings return to school, is that accomplishment makes them feel significantly better about themselves. Participants indicated that being recognised for performance and achievement significantly bolstered their confidence and gave them more hope for the future. Scholastic accomplishment was particularly important for learners who wanted to do well in their final high school exams. Some of the older participants reflected on how they were disappointed with their final results and how this created serious concern about their options for university study or careers. Participants also reported that sport and academic achievement were frequently vehicles through which they shared their successes with their sibling who died.

Stokes, Reid and Cook (in Balk & Corr 2009: 177) cite preliminary findings by Brewer and Sparkes suggesting that involvement in music, and physical activity provides a useful means of coping with parental bereavement for some adolescents. Success in sport can be an important and concrete way for a young person to succeed and feel a sense of pride which can be inwardly shared with the loved one who died. In the Harvard Child Bereavement Study, self-esteem and self-efficacy were important strengths in children who made the best adjustments to the death of a parent (Worden, 2009: 72). Louw and Louw (2010: 383) concur that an overriding aim for those who work with bereaved and traumatised South African learners should be to facilitate a supportive environment. They contend it is critical to help foster a sense of accomplishment in children. In so doing, the self-esteem and self-efficacy of these troubled learners is enhanced and this spills over into other spheres of their lives.

The implication for school personnel is to find ways to help reintegrate bereaved adolescents with their peers and help them find reasons to feel optimistic and successful. They are often unable to do this on their own. Hence both parents and school personnel can be alert to playing a role here. Parents can encourage their children to socialise with friends and enjoy outdoor activities. School personnel can boost a bereaved learner's morale by giving them extra help with school work so that they can do well and feel good about that; they can involve them in duties at school events and encourage them to participate in sport, concerts and other extra-mural activities.

### **5.4.5 Bereavement information**

Participants in the present study said that they had lacked information about sibling bereavement and about the effects of grief and shock on their bodies and their emotions. They had not known how to set about finding information relevant to their needs. One of the simplest ways to support a bereaved adolescent sibling is to provide them with a resource sheet containing facts about the effects of bereavement and hotlines and websites where information and help can be sought. Especially when it is their first experience of youthful death and not something they would have anticipated it is unlikely that they would know where to start gathering the information they need.

An implication for schools is that the school librarian could play a role in supplying suitable information for bereaved learners. Klicker (2000: 48) notes that the role of the school library personnel is often overlooked. They are in a position to offer supportive information to the school community and can put appropriate reading and audiovisual material on reserve for individual or class use.

### **5.4.6. Bereavement support groups**

The participants in the present study reported that they found sharing with other bereaved siblings helpful and cathartic, particularly because they felt more normal being around others who understood and had similar experience of what they were going through. In different discussions they indicated that adolescents need help in setting up these sharing opportunities.

The present finding is in line with findings by Stokes, Reid and Cook (in Balk & Corr 2009: 194) who also noted that bereaved young people need someone to facilitate their coming together. Also, the present finding is consistent with findings from Demmer and Rothschild's (2012) study in KwaZulu-Natal where bereaved siblings expressed little interest in counseling but displayed enthusiasm for a support group for young people who had lost a sibling to AIDS.

According to Kosminsky and Lewin (in Balk & Corr, 2009: 338-340) one of the major advantages of bereavement groups is the normalisation of grief. Being with others who are dealing with a similar loss helps adolescents to recognise that their reactions to death are not strange or unhealthy. Furthermore, Walter (2012) says that "group approaches make intuitive sense for adolescents, given their growing reliance on peers during this period of their lives". White (2006: 32) found that for bereaved siblings the benefits of connecting with others in similar circumstances are that comparison and contrasting of their stories creates a process of turning the experience over in their minds. It also reduces the emotional charge; because when they describe their story by comparison to someone else's, it allows them to look at their experiences through a new set of eyes as if they are seeing it from the outside.

In South Africa there are two noteworthy resources for those concerned with supporting bereaved adolescents: A training manual and age-appropriate books on death have been compiled by Khululeka Bereavement Support for Children and Youth (Ferris: 2007). This is a non-governmental organisation that trains teachers and child care workers to run grief and loss support groups for bereaved school-going children. The second intervention, a practical programme called “When death impacts your school”, has been developed by the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) (2005) in response to what the organisation describes as the rocketing incidents of suicide and HIV/AIDS-related deaths affecting South African schools. This practical programme aims at helping learners, teachers, parents and communities deal with the impact of death on schools and communities.

#### **5.4.7. Awareness: Death and other life crises**

Klicker (2000: 58) points out that the school is a centre for sharing ideas, testing new concepts, and learning social phenomena. Thus it should be a safe place to confront death-related issues and provide appropriate learning and curricular experiences. He asserts that by effectively addressing the concepts of dying and death within the school setting, teachers are able to both assist learners confronted with death as well as promote a better understanding of death as an essential element of the life cycle.

As discussed in the results section (4.3.6) participants found little value in the life orientation curriculum. However, with less top-down presentation and some adaptation of the content and formats, they felt life orientation classes could help learners to better understand and manage major life issues. An implication for schools is that the school leadership, counsellors and life orientation teachers consider innovative ways to increase understanding about death, suicide, anxiety, depression and trauma. In the view of the participants, discussion about these issues would best be facilitated by a teacher who is able to stimulate and guide open conversation. They felt it was important that the facilitating teacher should have counseling expertise and practical knowledge of the life issues they are dealing with.

This is in line with a recent South African study by Pillay (2012). She argues that the many social issues in the country warrant the need for highly trained and specialised L.O. teachers, especially when they are expected to contribute to the holistic development of learners. She discusses a number of social issues that affect learning and development including: violence, teenage suicide, substance abuse, family breakdown and lack of access to services. Pillay asserts that it is not just the L.O. learning area that is needed to make a difference within schools, but is also the skills and characteristics of LO teachers that are crucial. The problem says Pillay, is that most L.O. teachers have not been trained in basic counselling skills.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

This study attempted to contribute a more in-depth understanding of the dilemmas and challenges particular to sibling-bereaved adolescents in the high school setting in the Western Cape province of South Africa. The bereaved siblings who participated in the research reported that they did not view their bereavement or grief journey as time bound. Rather, there was an expectation that they would continue to work out the effects of their siblings' death throughout their lives. A large body of research suggests that many siblings actively attempt to maintain an ongoing connection with their brother or sister who died. While this was confirmed in the present study, a minority of the participants did not seek this connection. Nonetheless all the participants experienced their siblings' death as a profound disruption of the continuity in their lives and the functioning of their family.

While each bereavement journey is unique, there were common findings which have practical implications for intervention by school personnel and counsellors. None of the participants wanted to be singled out as different from their peers at school and they expressed a need for structured support and consideration from school personnel for at least a year after their siblings' death. In the light of how badly bereaved adolescents want to fit in with their peers, one of the most important findings in this study is that accomplishments (like scholastic success, winning trophies, being selected for a team or chosen as a leader at school) considerably boosted bereaved siblings self-esteem and significantly contributed to their overall sense of being "normal". While counselling was viewed with caution, the participants were positive about opportunities to share with other bereaved young people in semi-structured group discussions facilitated by an adult who has insight into the issues they are dealing with. As pointed out by numerous authors in the preceding discussion, being with other adolescents dealing with similar experiences of loss helps to normalise their own experience. The other advantage is that they learn from each other how to cope better with things that perplex and frustrate them.

## 5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A limitation of the study may be the time interval that elapsed from the events surrounding the death of the sibling to the time the study was conducted. However, despite the risk that memories change over time, all participants were able to vividly recall emotions and experiences from that time.

Although these findings have significant implications for improving understanding of sibling-bereaved adolescents in the high school setting, the sample is not a representative sample of schools, so the findings cannot be generalised to all schools.

Findings are further limited because of potential biases in the purposively-selected sample. The bereaved siblings were encouraged to participate by school personnel or their parents. Thus those who participated may be more active in trying to understand and come to terms with their bereavement than is typical in the population of adolescent-bereaved siblings.

Recruitment for this study was an exceptionally challenging undertaking. Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy and Rutter (1996: 104) found that one of the reasons for the scarcity of empirical studies on adolescent bereavement is the emotional painfulness of the subject for the adolescent, raising problems of researcher sensitivity and ethics. Ethical concerns surrounding the well-being of participants (and commitment not to harm them) are very much central to research. In this vein, I found gatekeeping by psychologists and counsellors to be a hurdle as clinical concerns were understandably sometimes given precedence over research. Furthermore, some parents indicated explicitly and implicitly that they did not want their children to participate because they felt it would be traumatic for them and/or because they had concerns about what would be revealed about the family and the child who died. I found it was more difficult to recruit siblings whose brother or sister died from suicide or drug abuse than it was to involve those whose siblings died from accidents, homicide or sudden illness. For example seven participants whose siblings died as a result of drug abuse or from suicide had signed consent and then failed to arrive at focus group venues.

Haggerty *et al.* (1996: 104) also cite the relatively low base rate as an obstacle to adolescent bereavement research. Most siblings do not lose a brother or sister to death during adolescence. Hence, as I experienced, it takes time and persistent networking to accumulate a large sample of participants. In the first South African study to provide preliminary data on adolescents whose siblings died from AIDS, Demmer and Rothschild's (2011: 17) sample involved only 11 adolescents. However, they found that use of the grounded theory method enabled them to reach theoretical saturation.

## **5.7 FURTHER RESEARCH AND COLLABORATION**

Longitudinal studies would aid insight into the longer term psychosocial journey of sibling-bereaved adolescents in South Africa. Due the multi-language environment in South Africa and the differing abilities of adolescents to express themselves verbally and in writing, researchers could give thought to conducting research within adolescent bereavement support groups where mutual trust has been already been fostered as this may allow for greater disclosure.

Our newspapers regularly report on multiple and single deaths of young people which have profound effects on school communities and adolescents in the Western Cape. There are many more that do not

make the headlines. This suggests that it could be beneficial to establish a multi-disciplinary research team to specifically address the issues around supporting bereaved adolescents in schools. *Balk et al.* (2007) emphasise that new information needs to flow back and forth between researchers and practitioners in order to improve research and practice and solve practical problems of society. This requires identifying multiple stakeholders who have an impact on the synthesis of information and/or those who make decisions on the implementation of research findings.

Lastly however modest, this work represents the first South African research that specifically addresses the needs of sibling-bereaved adolescents in high schools. As such it is my hope to effectively disseminate the findings with policymakers and counselors, and with educators who come into daily contact with bereaved teenagers.

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