

# Exploring the experiences of children bereaved by parental death: Practitioner Research

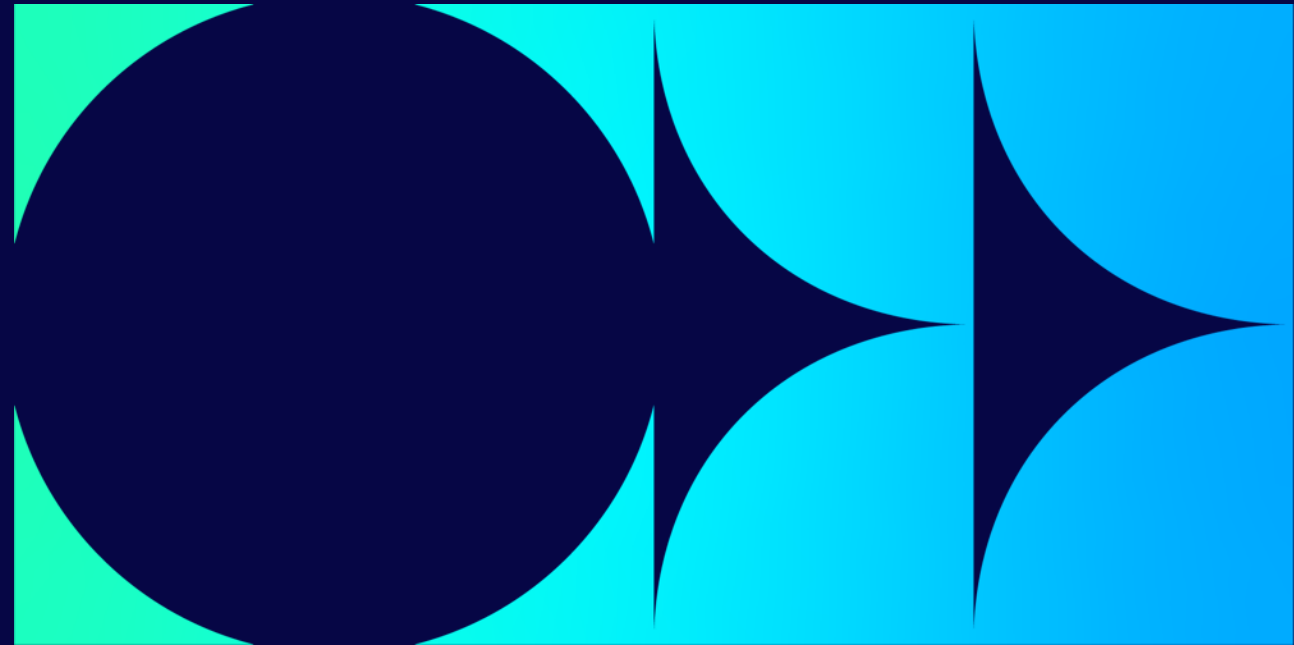
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# Remi Martin- Practitioner Research

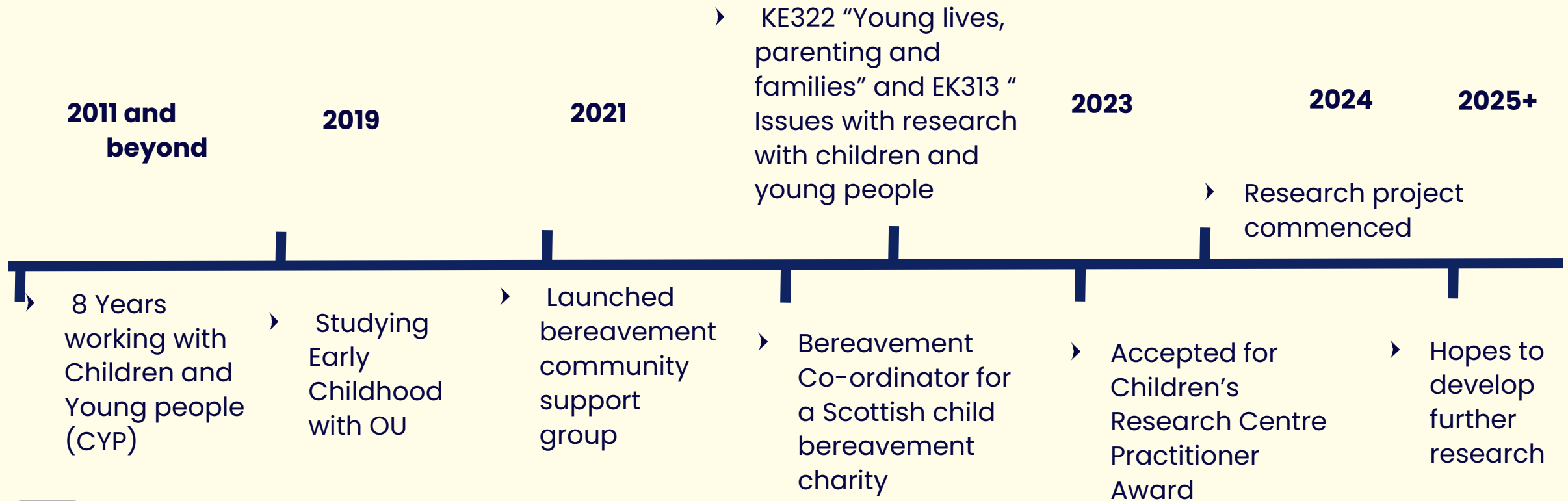
## Contents of presentation

- ▶ Journey to becoming an emergent researcher
- ▶ Research question and ideas that informed this
- ▶ Methodology
- ▶ Data collection and Co-analysis with children
- ▶ Emerging Themes
- ▶ Drawing Parallels
- ▶ Challenges
- ▶ Recommendations

# About me

Timeline so far...

## The Journey to Researcher



# Research Question

Its origins...

## Overarching themes from the Literature Review:

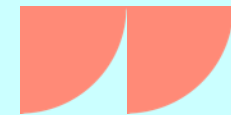
- Teachers and school staff do not feel well equipped to support bereaved pupils
- Parents who are bereaved of a spouse or partner are not always emotionally available for their bereaved children
- Where there is research with children and young people, they are generally between 13–18 years old
- Quantitative methods showed correlations between experiencing a bereavement and lower educational attainment
- Surviving parents are the best people placed to support their grieving child
- Most research is on or with children, young people and families with a nuclear family (initial idea was based on children who were estranged from surviving parent)
- Most research is with children, young people and families from Euro-centric backgrounds

# Methodology

## Listening to children



How can we know if we don't listen? How can we listen if we haven't asked?



# Methodology

## Multimodal Methods



'100 Languages of children' (Malaguzzi, 1994) should mean that we as researchers and practitioner have '100 ways of listening' (Clark, 2007)

# Themes

School experiences after their parent died

## Listening to children

- I asked open ended questions to the participants; to describe and explain what school was like.
- ▶ One child found a good connection with a female teacher and made comment on how kind and caring she was, even until recently
  - ▶ Friendships were a key topic within this theme, exploring parallels and examples of other children who had experienced loss and accessing their treatment in comparison to themselves.



“ I don't mind the teachers knowing; but its private news... I'm going to draw a rainbow because I made a song called "joy makes rainbows""  
Daisy (aged 7)

# Themes

Important people after the death of their parent

## Listening to children

Participants were asked to share any significant people in their lives after the death.

- ▶ The surviving parent was mentioned to be the most important
- ▶ Teachers were mentioned but with mixed feelings about their support
- ▶ One mentioned their sibling and there was a mutual understanding and feeling of loss between them- they would comfort each other “with hugs”
- ▶ Another mentioned that Grandad provided a safe space and was supportive when she had to flee from the violent parent



Maddie (aged 9)

“My Dad and Mrs Mackenzie were important to me”



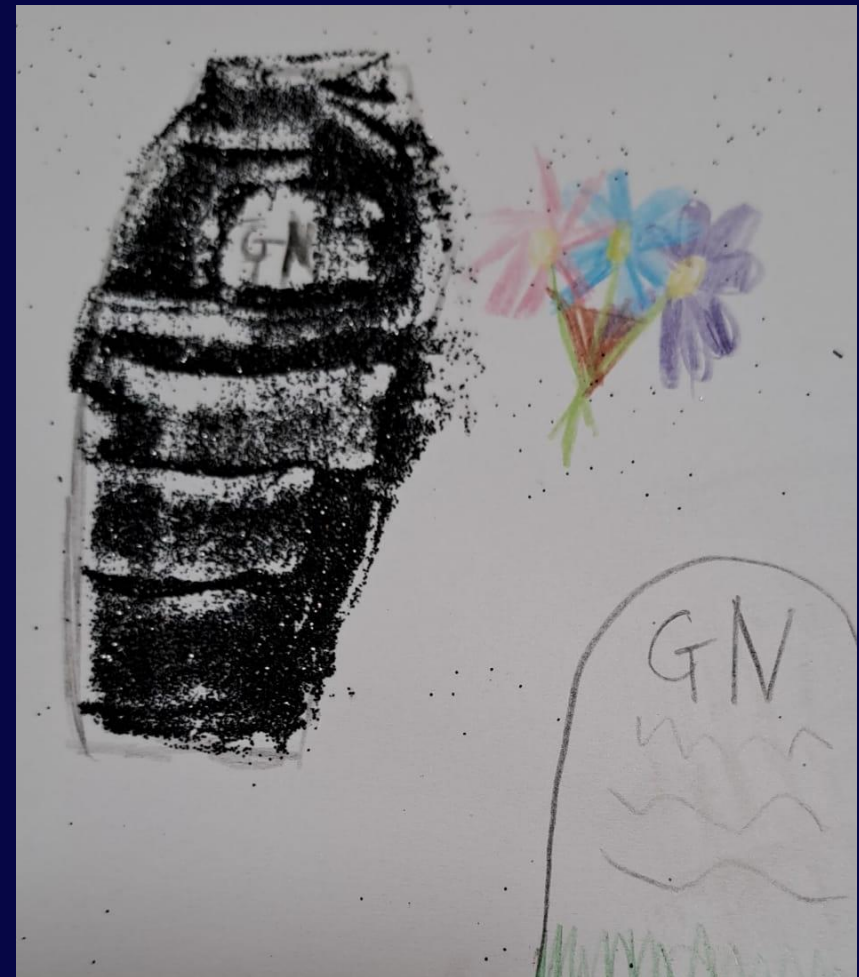
# Themes

## Other significant deaths

### Listening to children

Both children were asked whether they had experienced any other deaths before

- ▶ One participant had experienced another family death a few years after the death of her parent and this was important to her
- ▶ They had both shared that they have experienced the death of a pet(s)



Daisy (aged 7)

“Grandpa Neil died too, but I got to sad goodbye to him and go to his funeral- it was good ”

# Other emergent themes

Listening to other commonalities and differences

## Pets are significant

- ▶ Pets provided source of comfort and companionship to both participants after their parent died.
- ▶ The death of their pet added to their grief-similar sad feelings, yet different to the death of their parent
- ▶ Pets have been part of their emotional journey of grief as well as pets having shared feelings (particularly when experiencing being frightened or scared)

## Opportunity to say goodbye

- ▶ Both participants shared that they wanted to be able to say goodbye to their deceased parent
- ▶ One of them wanted to be there at their parents last breath
- ▶ The other participant wanted to say a formal goodbye before never having the chance to see their parent again

# Emergent Themes continued...

## Being informed as soon as possible

- › Both children expressed a lack of urgency when they were told about the death of their parent; though one said that parents should choose when to tell the child
- › They both were not fully satisfied with being told later than expected
- › When one participant experienced another death in the family, she was told much sooner and she was appreciative of that- she would like this to happen again
- › One of them expressed that if there is an opportunity to be there is their loved ones last breath, they would want to be there

## The importance of friendships vs needing to relate to others

- › Both children describe friendships that were positive after their parent died
- › Both children shared that they find it difficult to navigate friendships as having a dead parent is “lonely” or “people won’t understand” so have to hide that part of them
- › One participant felt strongly that friends and the school community had forgotten about her grief entirely

# Drawing Parallels

My own experiences and how they impact and influence data interpretation

## As a Practitioner

- There is an element of wanting to 'fix' the grief, when in fact its okay to feel grief and mixed emotions
- I can underestimate how difficult it is for others to talk about grief, death and dying
- As a trainee Play Therapist difficult to refrain from making meanings/ interpretations of their play
- My cultural lens is different
- Learning that pets can be really significant to children particularly around death and loss

## As a bereaved child

- School made me feel odd
- I was more accepting of people dying
- My father and female figures were significant
- I was given multiple opportunities to say goodbye; viewing the body, the funeral, seeing her very ill in hospital
- I was offered play and art based therapeutic group support immediately
- It has been life long, dipping in and out
- Whilst I feel quite connected to them, their experiences are their own; similarities, not the *same*

# The Challenges

## Evaluation

### Limitations

- ▶ As a practitioner, working in this field and hearing stories like this everyday; *can* be desensitising
- ▶ Making the research participation accessible to all (travel issues etc)
- ▶ Limited time spent with them ( 2 x 1hr each)
- ▶ Possibly too 'close to home' as one participants parent died in the Hospice
- ▶ Small participant number

### Strengths

- ▶ Use of creative / playful methods (use of puppets was utilised to convey a 'message')
- ▶ Play is children's natural language
- ▶ The data is rich and full of depth
- ▶ Participants were part of the analysis stage too so could inform what was going to be shared
- ▶ There is a certain level of empathy and respect I have for them that is not learnt

# Recommendations

## What they said

I feel sad for them  
[Grandparents]... I wish I  
could have given them a  
hug when they watched my  
Mum die

Don't forget that I have my  
grief... talking about it make  
me sad

I wonder if his skeleton goes in  
the ground, I want to know.

I feel awkward [ about having  
one parent]

- **Acknowledging their grief does not necessarily mean mentioning their dead person- ask them how they would like to be supported including their worries for others**
- **Ask bereaved children if they would like to know more about the practicalities around the death; burial, belongings, relationship changes. This includes death of pets too. Be honest**
- **Question and challenge the social environment (namely schools) which contribute to CYP feeling awkward, alone or isolated. Lets advocate for death, dying, loss and its impacts to be normalised in school environments and beyond.**

**“Never give up!” [on bereaved children or yourself] – Maddie**

**“Don’t be too sad [about death] we will always have them in our hearts”**

**Daisy**

**Thank you for listening.**