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University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

An Exploration of Sibling Contact for Children in Foster Care

A Retrospective Study of Adults formerly in Foster Care in Waterford

Amanda Cooper

CARL Research Project

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Date completed:	7th May 2013

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CARL seek to:

- provide civil society with knowledge and skills through research and education;
- provide their services on an affordable basis;
- promote and support public access to and influence on science and technology;
- create equitable and supportive partnerships with civil society organisations;
- enhance understanding among policymakers and education and research institutions of the research and education needs of civil society, and
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"Be nice to your siblings. They are the best link to your past and the people most likely to stick with you in the future".[1]

[1] Quote from Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen), Baz Luhrmann, 1999. Original Essay by Mary Schmich, 'Advice, like youth, probably just wasted on the young', *1st June 1997, Chicago Tribune.*

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Abstract

This research study contributes to research in the area of sibling contact for children in foster care. Undertaken in collaboration with the Irish Foster Care Association in Waterford, this study aims to explore sibling contact based on the retrospective experiences of adults formerly in foster care in Waterford. At present, much of the research on this important topic is based in the United States and the United Kingdom and so does not necessarily relate to the Irish context.

This study provides valuable insight into children's experiences of continued contact with their siblings, from whom they were separated during foster care; looking at the role of legislation and policy, the nature and frequency of contact and the facilitators and barriers to contact in terms of maintaining sibling relationships. As a social work student, this study has important implications for practice and offers recommendations for improving the quality of children's experiences of contact while in foster care, which has proven to have a significant influence on the development and maintenance of these important relationships.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Introduction 9
1.2 Title 9
1.3 Background 9
1.4 Rationale 10
1.5 Aim of Research 11
1.6 Research Questions 11
1.7 Definitions 12
1.8 My Reflexive Positioning as the Researcher 12
1.9 Conclusion 13
1.10 Overview of Chapters 13

Chapter Two: Research Design

2.1 Introduction 15
2.2 Philosophical & Theoretical Underpinnings 15
2.2.1 Ontology 15
2.2.2 Epistemology 16
2.2.3 Methodology 16
2.3 Research Methods 18
2.4 Sampling 19
2.5 Data Analysis 20
2.6 Ethical Considerations 20
2.7 Challenges & Limitations 20
2.8 Conclusion 21

Chapter Three: Review of Policy & Literature

3.1 Introduction 22
3.2 Legislation & Policy 22
3.2.1 The Child Care Act (1991) 22
3.2.2 The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations (1995) 23

3.2.3 The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations (1995) 23
3.2.4 The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) 24
3.3 Attachment & Loss 24
3.3.1 The Sibling Bond 24
3.3.2 The Impact of Separation/Loss 25
3.4 The Voice of the Child....26
3.4.1 Children's Rights 26
3.4.2 Giving Children a Voice through Research 27
3.4.3 Children's Rights & the Constitution 28
3.5 The Key Players in the Child's Life and the Facilitation of Sibling Contact 28
3.5.1 Social Workers 29
3.5.2 Foster Carers 30
3.5.3 Birth Parents 30
3.6 The Social Network of a Child in Foster Care....31
3.6.1 Aftercare 31
3.7 Conclusion 32

Chapter Four: Findings & Analysis

4.1 Introduction 34
4.2 Theme One: Forms of Contact....34
4.2.1 Direct Contact 34
4.2.2 Indirect Contact 34
4.3 Theme Two: The Sibling Bond....35
4.4 Theme Three: The Impact of Separation/Loss....35
4.5 Theme Four: The Voice of the Child....37
4.5.1 Contact Arrangements 37
4.6 Theme Five: The Key Players in the Child's Life 39
4.6.1 Social Workers 39
4.6.2 Foster Carers 40
4.6.3 Birth Parents 40
4.7 Theme Six: The Social Network of a Child in Foster Care 41
4.7.1 Foster Care – Relationships in Childhood 41
4.7.2 Aftercare – Relationships in Adulthood 42
4.8 Limitation of the Research 42

4.9 Conclusion 43

Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction 44
5.2 Research Question One 44
5.3 Research Question Two 45
5.4 Research Question Three 46
5.5 Conclusion 47

Chapter Six: Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Introduction 49
6.2 Research Recommendations 49
6.3 Implications for Social Work Practice 51
6.4 Reflective Piece 52
6.5 Conclusion 52

Bibliography 54
Appendices 62

Appendix A – CARL Research Agreement
Appendix B – Confirmation Letter of Ethical Approval
Appendix C – Letter to Participants (1)
Appendix D – Letter to Participants (2)
Appendix E – Information Guide
Appendix F – Consent Form
Appendix G – Interview Guide

Chapter One
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the research study by presenting the title, the background to the study and the rationale behind the research as part of the Community Academic Research Links (CARL). The overall aim and research questions of this study will also be presented, with a brief section defining important terms used. This chapter will conclude with a statement vis-à-vis my reflexive positioning within the research and a brief outline of following chapters.

1.2 Title

An Exploration of Sibling Contact for Children in Foster Care: A Retrospective Study of Adults formerly in Foster Care in Waterford.

1.3 Background to the Research

At the end of December 2011, there were 6,160 children in statutory care in Ireland (Health Service Executive, 2012c). Children are admitted into care for a variety of reasons ranging from abuse and neglect, to family problems such as parents unable to cope, substance abuse and domestic violence (HSE, 2012a, p. 48). The placement of children in statutory care is governed by the Child Care Act, 1991 and more recently, the National Standards for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Health Information and Quality Authority, 2012).

Of the 6,160 children in statutory care in December 2011, 3,776 resided in general foster care and a further 1,788 resided in relative foster care (HSE, 2012c, p. 35). The placement of children in foster care is governed by the Child Care Regulations (1995) and National Standards for Foster Care (2003), and is monitored against these standards by Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA). Fostering can be defined simply as 'caring for someone else's child in one's own home' and can be on a short or long-term basis, depending the individual circumstances of the child (Irish Foster Care Association, 2012).

The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) recommend that sibling groups remain together in foster care, and that this is prioritised unless deemed inappropriate for the best interests of the child (Department of Health & Children, 2003, p. 9). There is a lack of statistical data available on the placement of siblings groups in Ireland, but resource constraints suggest that separation from siblings is a reality for many children in foster care (Kosonen, 1996; Shlonsky, Needell, & Webster, 2003; Sinclair *et al,* 2005b, Leathers, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005 cited in Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 304; HIQA, 2007 cited in Clarke, A. & Eustace A, Eustace Patterson Limited, 2010, p. 74; HSE, 2012a). Where separation is inevitable, it is recommended that care arrangements facilitate continued contact between siblings, 'provided this is in their best interests' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 11; HIQA, 2010).

1.4 Rationale

This research study was undertaken as part of the CARL initiative, which provides 'independent, participatory research support in response to concerns experienced by civil society' (CARL, 2012, *online).* The civil society organisation (CSO) within this process is the Irish Foster Care Association (Waterford), which is 'a rights-based, child-centred organisation which promotes family-based solutions for children and young people in out of home care' (IFCA, 2013, *online*). This research study is centred on the principles of community-based participatory research, which is 'a partnership of students, faculty and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change' (Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo & Donohue, 2003, p. 3 cited in Bates & Burns, 2012, p. 68). The rationale behind this study is based on the working partnership between UCC and IFCA, in response to the organisation's request for research in the area of sibling contact. My own interest in the area of attachment encouraged to me to apply for this opportunity, and I was selected to undertake this study on behalf of IFCA as part of my final year dissertation. From the outset, I felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to be involved in research which would support this organisation in their practice.

IFCA's request for research in the area of sibling contact corresponds with the absence of research in this specific area in Ireland. The findings from a number of recent Irish studies on children and young people in care have made a valuable contribution to knowledge about children's experiences of sibling contact *(See Gilligan, 2000a; Buckey, 2002; Deady, 2002;*

Daly & Gilligan, 2005, McMahon, 2010 and McEvoy & Smith, 2011). However, as sibling contact was not the focused area of enquiry of these studies, the information available remains limited. A huge proportion of research on sibling contact is international, with studies carried out primarily in the United States and the United Kingdom. For a significant number of these studies, much of the focus tends to be on the reasons for separation or whether siblings fare better when placed together or separately (Kosonen, 1996; Ryan, 2003; Shlonsky *et al*., 2003; Whelan, 2003; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazel, 2005; Wulczyn & Zimmerman, 2005; Shlonsky *et al.,* 2005). This study aims to provide important knowledge and understanding about life after separation from siblings, and fill the void which currently exists in the literature on sibling contact for children in foster care in Ireland.

It is also an appropriate time to carry out research which gives a voice to those with lived-experience of foster care. At the time of writing, the landscape on children's rights in Ireland is beginning to undergo important change with the passing of the Children's referendum in November last year. This is an important step towards giving children in Ireland a greater voice and greater recognition in matters which affect their lives. The outcome and current status of the recent developments in children's rights in Ireland will be discussed further in chapter three.

1.5 Aim of the Research

The aim of this research study is to explore children's experiences of sibling contact, and the role of contact in maintaining the relationships between siblings separated through foster care.

1.6 Research Questions

1. To what extent does Irish legislation and policy promote the continued contact between siblings separated through foster care?

2. Based on the retrospective accounts of adults formerly in foster care, what was their experience in terms of the nature and frequency of contact with their siblings?

3. What are the facilitators and barriers to contact, in terms of maintaining sibling relationships between children separated in foster care?

1.7 Definitions

For the purposes of clarity, a number of key terms are defined as follows;

Access can be defined as 'the meeting of children in care with their families and others who are significant figures in their lives' and can be supervised or unsupervised. Supervised access is the 'supervision of access or contact to ensure a child's safety and welfare' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 69 & 72).

Aftercare can be defined as 'the support service provided by health boards, or other agencies, to young people who have remained in care until the age of 18 and are no longer in the care of the health board or who have left care before reaching 18 years of age' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 69).

Contact can be defined as 'the arrangements made in order for children to keep in touch with their family and significant others from whom they are separated' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 70). Contact can be direct through face to face meetings, or indirect through telephone calls, letters and more recently, via the internet through email and social networking sites (O'Neill, 1997 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 234; Ofsted, 2009).

Siblings may include biological siblings, step-siblings and half-siblings (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 304).

1.8 My Reflexive Positioning as the Researcher

As the researcher of this study, I feel it is important to make clear my reflexive positioning and any influence I may have on the collection, interpretation and analysis of data throughout this process. As a social work student, I have been fortunate to gain valuable experience in the area of child protection and welfare and palliative care, and some of my personal and professional values have been transformed since my training began. One value that I have always held which has been strengthened by my experience is the value I place upon family and relationships. My personal life experience and the professional knowledge I have gained has helped me to appreciate the subjective meaning we place upon the term 'family' and the sense of belonging and acceptance that can come from relationships with those close to us. I believe that we are all entitled to have the relationships that are important to us valued and

appreciated, particularly by those in a greater position of power. I feel this shapes the lens through which I view the world. My reflexive positioning stems from my belief that children who must be separated from their siblings are entitled to these important relationships, and it is critical that we, as professionals, recognise our responsibility to nurture and support these important relationships as much as possible.

1.9 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the reader to the research study by outlining the background to the study in the context of Irish policy on sibling contact, and the rationale behind this research as part of the CARL initiative. The overall research aim and the three research questions which form the basis of this study were also outlined, as was my reflexive positioning to ensure any influence I may have on this study is transparent.

1.10 Overview of Chapters

The study is comprised of six chapters which are outlined as follows;

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter one has introduced the reader to the research study.

Chapter Two: Research Design

Chapter two presents the overall design of the research study, outlining the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the research, the sampling process, the analysis of data, the challenges that were faced and limitations of the research.

Chapter Three: Review of Policy & Literature

Chapter three reviews the relevant Irish legislation and policy on sibling contact in Ireland, and the prominent themes presented within Irish and International literature on this topic, in line with the aims and research questions of this study as outlined above.

Chapter Four: Findings & Analysis

Chapter four presents the key themes which emerged from the data generated through a series of interviews with participants of the study. These themes are analysed using the relevant

literature on the topic and discussed through an exploration of the meanings behind the participants' experiences of sibling contact.

Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings

Chapter five provides an in-depth discussion of the key findings of this study in relation to the three research questions outlined above.

Chapter Six: Conclusion & Recommendations

Chapter six concludes the study by presenting the six recommendations for practice based on the research findings, the implications of the study for IFCA and social work practice and a reflective piece on my experience of this research process.

Chapter Two
Research Design

2.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this study is to explore the role of contact in maintaining the relationships between siblings separated through foster care, based on the lived experience of adults formerly in foster care. This chapter will provide the reader with a detailed account of the research process to meet this objective, discussing the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of this study, which formulated the methods of data collections and analysis. Ethical considerations and the challenges and limitations of the study will also be explored.

2.2 Philosophical & Theoretical Underpinnings

At the centre of any qualitative research study lies the philosophical and theoretical positioning of the researcher, which consists of four main dimensions; ontology, epistemology, methodology and research methods. Each dimension influences and interconnects with the other like a staircase, with each step representing a dimension (as demonstrated in the diagram[2]). One step/dimension cannot be reached without the other creating a sequential research process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In relation to this study, they are discussed as follows;



2.2.1 *Ontology*

My understanding of ontology is based on a continuum of research approaches ranging from realist/positivist traditions to anti-realist/relativist traditions. My position within this continuum is derived from my world-view in relation to this particular topic of study (Ballinger, 2004, p. 541). As this study aims to explore sibling contact through people's lived experience, the ontology is located on the relativist side of the continuum. A relativist position emphasises that the nature of the world is comprised of realities which are socially

[2] 'The Schroeder Stairs' (Bool *et al.*, 1982) Available online at: http://mathworld.wolfram.com/SchroederStairs.html (Accessed: 15/3/2013).

constructed, diverse and unique to each person (Ballinger, 2004). On the opposite end of the continuum, the realist position claims there is one objective reality that can be studied and measured using quantitative methods of data collection (Finlay, 2006). As the researcher, I believe that realities exist within the participant's own experiences and interpretations. These interpretations cannot be scientifically measured but are valued as authentic representations of sibling contact for the purposes of this study.

2.2.2 *Epistemology*

Leading on from my ontological position, the way in which I value knowledge and the construction of knowledge is also influenced by my world-view (Ballinger & Finlay, 2006). This study uses an interpretivist construction of knowledge which values the interpretation and meaning that participants attribute to their experience of sibling contact (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Interpretivist epistemology emphasises knowledge as obtained through subjective experience and the social, cultural and historical factors that shape and influence our perceptions (Finlay, 2006, p. 19).

2.2.3 *Methodology*

Methodology acts as the 'bridge' between the philosophical position of the researcher in relation to the topic of study, and the most appropriate means of investigation, i.e. research methods (Carey, 2009, Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 6). In simple terms, the methodology is the theory behind the method of data collection. The methodological approach of this study is qualitative, influenced by interpretivism and a participatory research approach. This illustrates how I intend to capture the knowledge of participants and why I chose this particular research method.

2.2.3.1 Qualitative

This study has adopted a qualitative methodological approach as its primary aim is to explore the meaning behind participants' personal experiences of sibling contact. It allows for detailed investigation into specific themes relating to experience, attitudes and histories (Carey, 2009, p. 38). Quantitative research focuses on the aspects of experience which can be measured and generalised, whereas this study seeks and values the intricacies of personal experience (Snape & Spencer, 2003).

2.2.3.2 Interpretivism

Interpretivism is a qualitative research approach which draws on subjective meaning and perspectives to represent and explore a particular topic of study (Ballinger & Finlay, 2006, p. 260). The study aims to explore sibling contact through the personal accounts of participants which are shaped by their own personal meaning and interpretation. As the researcher, my own interpretation will inevitably shape how I perceive the information gathered, but it is the authenticity of the participant's account of their own experience which informs the understanding and knowledge of this topic (Carey, 2009).

2.2.3.3 Participatory Research Approach

Participatory research (PR) or community-based participatory research (CBR) is another qualitative approach which is central to this study as part of the CARL initiative. CBR forms the basis of the partnership between UCC and IFCA in Waterford, which aims to enhance participation and empower members of the community to identify and address issues through the collaborative research process (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). As part of my final year dissertation, I undertook this study in collaboration with IFCA, who identified the need for research in the area of sibling contact with the aim of enhancing its service for community members. Unlike conventional research, CBR is centred on 'who defines the research problem and who generates, analyses, represents, owns and acts on the information which is sought' (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995, p. 1668). Through this process, IFCA and I were able to combine our knowledge and skills to address an important issue IFCA faces in practice, based on local knowledge and expertise.

A valuable feature of CBR is that research is carried out *with* people rather than *on* people, involving all partners in the research process (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 144; Minkler and Wallerstein, 2008). IFCA and I engaged in a combination of collaborative and consultative forms of participation (Biggs, 1989, p. 3) which took place at various stages throughout the research process. The initial design stage of this study is characterised by collaborative participation, which involves the CSO and the researcher working in partnership on a research project managed by the researcher (Biggs, 1989 cited in Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1669). The representative of IFCA and I co-constructed the research aim and questions, the sampling criteria and decided on the most appropriate form of data collection method that would meet the aim of the study and the identified needs of the IFCA *(see below)*. This highlights the 'bottom-up' approach which is unique to CBR (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p.

1667). The IFCA's central role in the design of the study is based on their own expertise of the nature of the issue they wish to address, and the best way in which to address it. The recruitment stage of the process is also characterised by collaborative participation based on the working relationship between IFCA and the HSE aftercare team in Waterford. The aftercare team became a key player in the research process and played a critical role in the recruitment of participants for the study. The collection of data and analysis stage of the process was characterised by consultative participation, which involves the researcher consulting with the CSO and seeking their opinions on the topic of research and overall design (Biggs, 1989 cited in Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1669). Consulting with IFCA and keeping them informed about the process of interviews and the analysis of data was an important part of my commitment to the organisation and my role as the researcher within this process. The CBR approach employed by partners as part of the CARL initiative 'emphasises reciprocity, shared power and decision-making', making the research process a very unique, worthwhile and informative learning experience for all involved (Bates & Burns, 2012, p. 70).

2.3 Research Methods

Research methods are practical techniques that are used in the gathering of data to investigate the topic of study, and are selected in accordance with the research question one seeks to answer (Carey, 2009; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The chosen research method in this study is semi-structured interviews based on the exploratory nature of the research questions, which value the participants as experts of their own lived experience of sibling contact. In the early stages of the research design, it was proposed that a focus group could be used as the appropriate research method. After much deliberation, it was decided by all parties that due to the sensitive and emotive nature of the topic of study, interviews would provide a private and safe environment for participants to share the details of their experience. Semi-structured interviews also allow for flexibility. They combine a planned and unplanned approach to questioning, and enable participants to describe their experience in their own words, allowing us to gain insight into the world of sibling contact that is real and unique to them (Carey, 2009, p. 113. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allow for 'depth of investigation' and provide the opportunity to delve into issues unexpectedly raised by participants, as well as important themes relating to the research aims or relevant literature (Silverman, 1993 cited in Carey, 2009, p. 112).

Interview questions were designed in consultation with IFCA and according to the themes present within the relevant literature. Squashy Couch, a local adolescent health and information project was used as the venue for the interviews. This venue was selected based on its central location, but most importantly because of the direct access to counsellors which was arranged as a support option for participants and its neutral and non-threatening environment. This was an important aspect of decision-making in relation to the venue due to the sensitive and emotive topic of study.

2.4 Sampling

As this study is based on a qualitative research approach, a purposive sample was designed and recruited based on the relevant selection criteria. Purposive sampling involves the selection of participants who possess particular characteristics to allow for in-depth investigation of relevant themes within the topic of study (Richie *et al.,* 2003). The purposive sample of this study consists of adults with former experience of foster care, who had some form of direct or indirect contact with their siblings from whom they were separated. As this study is in collaboration with IFCA based in Waterford, it was agreed that participants must have lived in Waterford at some stage during their time in foster care. Permission for the research area to be identified was granted by IFCA as per the terms of the CARL research agreement *(see appendix A)*. Due to the small-scale nature of this research study and the limited time frame, a sample of six participants were recruited for this study in line with the ethical standards which are outlined in the upcoming section on ethical considerations.

The representative from IFCA in Waterford and the Aftercare team in Waterford acted as the 'gatekeepers' in the recruitment process, playing in crucial role in this stage of the research (Campbell-Breen & Poland, 2006, p. 160). The Aftercare team selected participants who were clients of their service, who they believed would be interested in participating and would make an important contribution to the research study. Although it could be argued that this is a biased sample, voluntary participation is a fundamental part of the ethical standards that shaped the design of this sample. I believe that approaching clients of the aftercare service who were likely to have an interest reflects the voluntary nature of participation within this study.

2.5 Data Analysis

The method used for the analysis of collected data was thematic analysis, which identifies and determines the relevant themes that emerge from the data collected, using the transcriptions of participant interviews (Carey, 2009). The interpretation and examination of relevant themes that emerge is based on a theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006) comprised of a children's rights perspective, with reference to attachment and ecological theory. This theoretical framework encompasses the prominent themes in relation to sibling contact derived from research literature. They provide an important base from which to understand and explore participants' experiences of sibling contact in line with the aim and research questions of this study.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

As this study is based on participatory research, the collaborative partners sought to explore sibling contact from the perspectives of those with lived knowledge and experience. Consequently, it was imperative that ethical approval was obtained to protect the well-being of participants involved. Participants were required to be aged eighteen and over in order to give full and informed written consent to participate in the study. Detailed information about the study and the potential for emotional distress was explained to all participants in writing before the primary research began, for them to make an informed decision about their involvement. The potential for emotional distress lay in the retrospective nature of this study, as participants were asked to talk about their family relationships and share their experiences which may have brought back memories of difficult times in their lives. Various forms of support were made available to participants during and after the research process. Ethical approval was sought from the Social Research Ethics Committee in UCC to ensure the study was designed and undertaken in line with ethical standards. The application was successful and the study was approved, but unfortunately a great deal of time was lost in the time the application took to be processed. The difficulties that arose from this will be discussed in the section below.

2.7 Challenges and Limitations of the Study

The most challenging aspect of the research process was the recruitment of participants within the timeframe allocated, which was dictated by the process of applying for ethical approval from SREC in UCC. The delay in receiving ethical approval was a result of

administrative issues which caused the processing of the application to extend to approximately twelve weeks. This caused a substantial delay in a critical part of the research process and could have potentially jeopardised the entire study. The short time frame we had to recruit participants was not ideal, but thankfully it was managed in collaboration with the aftercare team and IFCA. On reflection, it seems clear that awaiting ethical approval before beginning the recruitment process would bring with it a number of risks, relating to the timeframe and the lack of opportunity to manage crisis or unforeseen circumstances. As a novice researcher, I have come to learn of ways to avoid such challenges by beginning the recruitment process pending ethical approval, and making practical arrangements with participants once approval has been confirmed. Despite the challenges this arose, I have learned some important lessons about team work, preparation and the unpredictable nature of research and gained some important experience in this field.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the overall design of the research study, outlining the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings which guide and create the sequential research process. The study's qualitative research approach which values participants' lived experience was also outlined, along with the decision-making process regarding the research method, the analysis of data, the ethical considerations and the challenges and limitations in order to provide an important insight into the study's design and the process that was undertaken.

Chapter Three
Review of Policy & Literature

3.1 Introduction

Contact between a child in foster care and their birth family continues to be an issue of debate, and is often with reference to contact between parent and child (Kelly, 2000b; Shlonsky, *et al.,* 2003; Shlonsky *et al.,* 2005; McMahon & Curtin, 2012). Children who enter the care system are frequently separated not only from their parents, but can also suffer the loss of important relationships with their siblings (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; James *et al,* 2008). The significance of the sibling relationship for children in foster care has been given greater recognition in the literature over the last number of years (Kosonen, 1996), but it still appears to be an elusive part of legislation, policy and practice in Ireland.

For siblings separated in care, contact is an important means of maintaining their relationship and carries a number of benefits for the child which will be outlined throughout this chapter (Gilligan, 2000a). As discussed in chapter one, the overall aim of this study is to explore the role of contact as a means of maintaining the relationship between siblings separated through foster care. This chapter will examine the relevant Irish legislation and policy, and the central themes presented in Irish and International literature to explore the concept of sibling contact, its significance for children and young people in foster care, and the barriers that exist in relation to this important concept.

3.2 Legislation and Policy

The Irish legislation and policy which regulates the continued contact between children in foster care and their birth families comprises of the Child Care Act (1991), the Child Care Regulations (1995) and the National Standards for Foster Care (2003). The details of these instruments and the extent to which they promote the continued contact between siblings will be discussed as follows;

3.2.1 *The Child Care Act* (1991)

The Child Care Act, 1991 governs the placement of children into care in Ireland. Section 37 (1) of the act provides for the maintenance of relationships with a child's birth family through

'access' stating, 'the board shall, subject to the provisions of this Act, facilitate reasonable access to the child by his parents...or any other person who, in the opinion of the board, has a bona fide interest in the child' (Government of Ireland, 1991). As there is no specific reference to siblings within the act, it may be taken for granted that siblings would have 'a bona fide interest in the child' and are therefore recognised indirectly. This places a requirement on the HSE to facilitate access with other family members who are important to the child, but allows for the refusal of contact between siblings without permission from the court (Miles & Lindley, 2003). This means the facilitation of contact between siblings becomes a matter of discretion for professionals responsible for the care and welfare of the child.

3.2.2 *The Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations* (1995)

This policy governs the placement of children in foster care, requiring that each individual child has a specified care plan identifying the supports required for the child and foster parents, and the arrangements for access with the child's birth family. Again, although there is no specific reference to 'siblings', the continuity of important family relationships is maintained under section 11 (1) (c) which states, '...the arrangements for access to the child by a parent, relative or other named person, subject to any order as to access made by a court...' (Department of Health, 1995a).

3.2.3 *The Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations* (1995)

This policy is largely similar to provisions set out in the above policy in terms of arrangements for family contact, but is with respect to the placement of the children with his or her family relatives (Department of Health, 1995b). Relative care is becoming more and more recognised as a suitable option for children entering the care system, with 1,788 of the 6,160 children residing in relative foster care at the end of December 2011 (HSE, 2012c, p. 35). One of the advantages presented in the literature in relation to relative foster care is the likelihood that children and young people will remain in touch with and have regular contact with members of their extended family and siblings. However, a significant drawback to relative care is in the setting of boundaries and the potential family conflict over the upbringing of the child (McMahon & Curtin, 2012).

3.2.4 *The National Standards for Foster Care* (2003)

The National Standards for Foster Care (Department of Health and Children, 2003) has an important role in ensuring the adequate care of children in foster care in Ireland. The standards place direct emphasis on the importance of sibling contact under the section on 'Family and Friends'. Section 2 (2.2) states;

> Siblings are placed together where possible, taking account of their wishes. If they are not accommodated together, arrangements are made for them to have high levels of contact, including holidays together, provided this in their best interests (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 11)

Each standard is designed to guide and influence decision-making and recommendations made by professionals responsible for the child's care. The standards are an important factor in the promotion of sibling contact, but as they are not enforced by law, arrangements for contact between siblings may not be guaranteed. The standards are used to inspect and monitor the quality of foster care services by HIQA, established in 2007 (HIQA, 2013) and may help to support the promotion of sibling contact in professional practice.

It appears that the relevant legislation and policy play a limited role in the promotion of sibling contact for children in foster care in Ireland, with only direct reference made to the continued contact between siblings in one section of the National Standards for Foster Care (2003). The central themes within the Irish and International literature on sibling contact for children in foster care will be discussed as follows;

3.3 Attachment and Loss

The literature that emphasises the importance of the sibling relationship and the detrimental impact of separation is mostly based on theories of attachment and loss (Shlonsky *et al,* 2005; Bowlby, 1951; Grigsby, 1994; Whelan, 2003; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 300).

3.3.1 *The Sibling Bond*

Bowlby's earlier work stressed the importance of the attachment relationship between the child and the primary care-giver but over time, theories of attachment have developed to include other important persons in the child's environment (Whelan, 2003). These relationships have been referred to as 'beyond attachment' and include significant relationships with siblings (Dunn, 1993; Rutter & Rutter, 1993 cited in Howe, 1995, p. 25).

Sibling relationships are a fundamental part of childhood and are said to play an important role in development (Gilligan, 1999; Hindle, 2000). They can influence the formation of one's identity and sense of self, and are often the people with whom children can explore and learn about the world around them (Tucker *et al*, 2001; Ryan, 2002; Shlonsky *et al*, 2003; Wong *et al*, 2010). For children from abusive homes, siblings may adopt roles to ensure each other's safety and protection and provide fulfilling relationships that model 'loyalty, intimacy and enduring love' (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 12 cited in Gilligan, 1999, p. 75). Attachments between siblings are also said to strengthen when parents are emotionally unavailable or neglectful (Smith, 1996).

Gogarty (1995) highlights the tendency for professionals to assume that it is the abuse a child suffers that causes them most distress, however is often the intense pain of loss children feel when separated from their families that we fail to recognize. It is recommended that sibling groups remain together in foster care under standard 1 (1.3) of the National Standards, which states; 'priority is given to the placement of siblings together, unless this is inappropriate given the assessed needs of the children' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 9). However, eparation from siblings is often a reality for most children in foster care and can be inevitable and even necessary for some (Shlonsky *et al.,* 2003; Fox & Berrick, 2007). Reasons for not placing siblings together include; a lack of available placements to accommodate sibling groups, entering care at different times, significant age gaps, and abuse and/or conflict within the sibling group (Maclean, 1991; Whelan, 2003).

3.3.2 *The Impact of Separation/Loss*

Herrick & Piccus (2005, p. 849) offer a unique perspective on the impact of separation for siblings in foster care based on their own personal experience. For a child separated from their siblings, the experience of foster care can be associated with feelings of 'grief, worry, guilt and lost identity'. Lundstrom and Sallnas' study (2012) of Swedish children separated from their siblings found that children often feel they have abandoned their siblings and left them to face the abuse alone. Studies have also shown that children and young people experience 'a strong sense of sadness' when separated from their siblings and describe their loss as 'highly traumatic' (Folman, 1998 cited in Tarren-Sweeney & Hazel, 2005, p. 882).

In the cases where separation of siblings is unavoidable '...it is critical that careful consideration is paid to the promotion of sibling contact' (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 304). The 'continued presence' of siblings can ensure a sense of 'safety and emotional security' for

children and can alleviate the sense of loss they feel when separated from their parents (Smith, 1998; Shlonsky *et al*, 2003, p. 29; Shlonsky *et al,* 2005, p. 698). It is also important to note that not all siblings should be placed together, and the optimal amount of contact may vary depending on the circumstances of each case. Some sibling relationships are unhealthy and abusive. Siblings with emotional or behavioural problems can also negatively influence other siblings in the group, creating unnecessary conflict (Ryan, 2002; Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

It is clear from the literature that attachment relationships between siblings are extremely diverse and carry both positives and negatives for each child. Therefore, it is vital that the attachment relationship between siblings is a factor in all decision-making regarding the best interests and well-being of children in foster care (Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

3.4 The Voice of the Child

The 'voice of the child' is a prominent feature of children's rights literature both in Ireland and internationally. Much of the literature recognises the need for greater reform in this area as it is reported that children's views are mostly unheard and unappreciated in matters affecting their lives (Kilkelly, 2004; Fox & Berrick, 2007). Research has shown that children feel frequently unheard and disempowered in relation to contact with their siblings (Kosonen, 1996; Deady, 2002; Festinger, 1983 cited in Leathers, 2005, p. 817; Hegar, 2005; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Ofsted, 2009).

3.4.1 *Children's Rights*

Gilligan (2000a, p. 40) advocates for the voice of the child making specific reference to Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Ireland in September 1992 (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010, p. 1). Under article 12, all children have a right to express their views freely regarding issues that affect their lives, with their views being given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (Article 12 (1) UNCRC, Children's Rights Alliance, 2010, p. 15). Gilligan (2000a, p. 41) reinforces the message of article 12 by highlighting the importance of listening to the child 'whether listening as a parent, foster carer, social worker, court or public body'.

The voice of the child is also a feature of Irish domestic law under the Child Care Act, 1991. Section 24 (b) of the act requires that in any child care proceedings, the court is required to consider the child's wishes, with regard to the child's 'age and understanding' (Government of Ireland, 1991). It is extremely positive that the voice of the child is recognised within Irish and International law, but the extent to which a child's views are considered is currently subject to the conditions and discretion of the court. This seems to suggest that 'Children may have rights, but adults still know best' (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998, p. 138).

3.4.2 *Giving Children a Voice through Research*

Despite the methodological issues that are often present, studies that directly involve children are extremely valuable in providing children with a voice to express their views and share their experiences of foster care. Studies have shown that children's relationship with their siblings is a theme that often emerges during consultation with children for the purposes of research (Gilligan, 2000a).

'Listen to Our Voices!' (2011) is a report on the findings of an Irish study carried out by the Office of the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). One of the key objectives of this study was 'to seek the views of children and young people in the care of the State on the issues that really mattered to them and on which they would like to be heard'(McEvoy & Smith, 2011 p. 4). Fifty eight of the participants were children living in foster care. The study found that contact with siblings was of fundamental importance for children and young people in foster care. During consultation, children spoke of the 'tremendous bond' they had with their siblings and the 'particular anguish and sadness' they felt when separated from them. Some young people reported having siblings they 'did not know, did not get to visit or did not know anything about'. Children also 'dreamed of seeing their siblings more than they did' (McEvoy & Smith, 2011, p. 16).

Some studies have shown that children enjoy frequent contact with their siblings (O'Neill, 1997 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 234; Dyas, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 232, Moyers *et al,* 2006). However, a large number of old and more recent studies report that children would prefer more contact with their siblings than any other family member (Zimmerman, 1982 cited in Fox & Berrick, 2007, p. 41; Festinger, 1983 cited in Fox & Berrick, 2007, p. 41; O'Regan, 1994 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 232; Gogarty, 1995; Kosonen, 1996; Daly & Gilligan, 2005; Ofsted, 2009; McEvoy & Smith, 2011). The reasons why contact with

siblings may be infrequent or completely absent will be discussed in the following sections but as noted by Horgan; 'the needs of the child for access to parents and siblings also tend to be tempered by agency exigencies rather than what is the optimum level of access from the perspective of the child' (2002, p. 29).

It is clear from the relevant literature that contact is not just an issue concerning parents and as set out in the CRC, local authorities have a responsibility to empower children to be involved in the decision-making about important aspects of their lives, such as the relationships they wish to maintain through contact (Gilligan, 2000a; Kelly, 2000, p. 18). However, as highlighted by Kilkelly (2007, p. 62), 'it is unlikely that this will happen by default, and so procedures and mechanisms must be established to ensure that the voices of children are heard on all matters affecting them'.

3.4.3 *Children's Rights and the Constitution*

The landscape of children's rights in Ireland is currently in the process of important reform since the passing of the children's referendum in November last year. This proposes to strengthen the Constitutional rights of children in Ireland through the Thirty-First Amendment to the Constitution (Children) Bill, 2012 (Department of Children & Youth Affairs, 2012). At the time of writing, the signing of the Bill into Irish law is currently delayed due to a legal challenge brought to the High Court. Prior to the children's referendum, the invisibility of children within Irish policy and law was largely due to the absence of individual rights for children in the Constitution. This had a direct impact on the position of children's rights in domestic law, policy and practice (Kilkelly, 2004). Whether the Bill will be enacted into Irish law is dependent on the decision of the High Court. However, the Thirty-First Amendment to the Constitution (Children) Bill, 2012 is a very positive and historical step for children's rights in Ireland, towards empowering children to have a greater say in matters that are important to them, such as relationships with their siblings (Kilkelly, 2004; DCYA, 2012)

3.5 Key Players in the Child's Life and the Facilitation of Sibling Contact

For siblings who are separated in care, contact is an important means of sustaining their relationship (Gilligan, 2000a). James *et al,* (2008, p. 92) emphasize the challenges that exist in this regard, stating that 'very little is known about the mechanisms in place to support and facilitate the maintenance of sibling relationships'. Research emphasises that the facilitation

of contact between siblings requires the efforts of the key adults in the child's life; the social worker, the foster carer and the birth parent (Kosonen, 1996).

3.5.1 *Social Workers*

Research has shown that a number of social workers tend to view sibling contact in a positive light, deeming it valuable and necessary for children separated through foster care (Smith, 1998; Dyas, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 236). In spite of this, James *et al* (2008) found that social workers often only focus on the relationship between siblings in relation to initial placement decisions and permanency planning, with little or no role in the maintenance of sibling relationships.

It is well documented that there are high pressure demands on social workers working with vulnerable children and families, and time and resources are often stretched to manage growing caseloads (Cleaver, 1999; Buckley, 2002; Kilkelly, 2004). In relation to contact with birth families and siblings, social workers in both Ireland and the United States have expressed concern and reservation about the demands that contact can place upon on social work time (Gallagher, 1995; O'Regan, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 232; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Clarke & Eustace, Eustace Patterson Limited, 2010). In Dyas' Irish study (1998 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 236) social workers spoke of how practical arrangements of contact often took precedence over the nature and quality of contact between children and their families. Despite these barriers, it is important for children that social workers value and play a greater role in facilitating contact between siblings in foster care. Gogarty argues (1995, p. 116);

> It is the responsibility of the social worker to build a relationship with the child to the point where he or she is sensitively aware of the child's needs for and response to access, and how this can be met'

A greater understanding of the child's perception of their relationship with their siblings can be helpful in making decisions regarding sibling contact, as the meaning of the relationship to the child may also change and be influenced by a child's stage of development (Hindle, 2000; Tarren-Sweeney & Hazel, 2005; Leathers, 2005).

3.5.2 *Foster Carers*

Within the literature, foster carers are often regarded as the 'gatekeepers' of sibling contact (James *et al,* 2008, p. 99) and play a major part in the maintenance of these relationships. The foster carer's role in facilitating contact may involve providing transport, making practical arrangements, encouraging contact with the child's birth family and 'assisting children to make sense of their family backgrounds, problems and structures' (Farmer *et al,* 2001; Sinclair *et al,* 2005b cited in Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 303). Research has shown that despite the vital role that foster carers play, they can often have mixed attitudes in relation to contact with siblings.

Studies show that some foster carers do not regard the sibling relationship as significant and may limit contact with siblings to avoid the 'negative influences' of the birth family (Smith, 1996; James *et al,* 2008, p. 99). Other studies report a strong commitment on the part of foster carers to facilitating contact and appreciating its value for the child (O'Regan, 1994 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 233). In a recent Irish study (McMahon, 2010), foster carers were reported as encouraging young people to maintain contact with their birth family and siblings.

In response to the varying attitudes of foster carers in relation to sibling relationships and contact, authors stress the need for and importance of further training and support for foster carers regarding sibling contact and the positives it may bring to a child's development and sense of identity (O'Regan, 1994 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 233; Fox & Berrick, 2007; James *et al,* 2008).

3.5.3 Birth Parents

Research and practice literature emphasises the importance of working in partnership with birth parents and involving them as much as possible in decision-making around contact and other aspects of the child's life (Lucey, Sturge, Fellow-Smith & Reader, 2003; Scott, O'Neill & Minge, 2005). However in relation to sibling contact, the extent to which the birth parents' role is recognised in the literature is extremely limited; with social workers and foster carers regarded as the main facilitators of contact between siblings (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; James *et al*., 2008). Kosonen (1996, p. 819) emphasises the need for cooperation between social workers, foster carers and birth parents to facilitate and maintain contact between siblings. Children must often rely on the key adults in their lives to maintain these important relationships, and a commitment on behalf of all parties, including birth parents, may help to

overcome any difficulties or potential barriers to facilitate and maintain sibling contact (Kosonen, 1996, p. 819).

3.6 The Social Network of a Child in Foster Care

A characteristic that we all share as human beings is the value we place on the relationships with the people in our lives and those who construct our social network.

> 'Social networks evolve from interactions between individuals and groups in society. They refer to the primary networks of family and friendships, and include the secondary or institutional networks involving such formal organisations as school and work (Matos & Sousa, 2004 cited in McMahon & Curtin, 2012, p. 1).

The social network of a child in foster care or previously in care is likely to differ from a child with no experience of care, and may include social workers and foster carers as people of importance. Despite this, research identifies siblings as being important elements of a child's social network, regardless of care experience (Kosonen, 1996; Gilligan, 1999; Gilligan, 2000c; McMahon, 2010, p. 55).

A strengthened social network made up of important family and friends may act as a protective factor in the life of a young person and may help to counteract the risk factors that have accumulated over time (Gilligan, 2000b). McMahon's study (2010) examined the social network experience of children with experience of long-term foster care in Ireland in a specific region of the HSE-West. Participants included 21 young people in foster care and 17 young people who had left the care system. When asked to identify a family member who was part of their social network, but with whom they did not reside, both groups regarded siblings as significant members of their social network. It is important to note from these findings that siblings who reside separately due to separate foster placements or other factors can still be regarded as an important part of each other's social network. This also indicates the importance of regular and meaningful contact between siblings separated through care (McMahon, 2010, p. 147).

3.6.1 *Aftercare*

Sen & Broadhurst (2011, p. 302) emphasize the importance of contact as it can 'keep alive a child's sense of his or her origins and may offer future networks of support for care leavers...' Young people in long-term care are often most vulnerable to the breakdown or a lack of supportive networks, and therefore may be at risk of isolation and marginalisation (Gilligan,

1999; McMahon, 2010). Research shows that structural factors, such as the length of time a young person spends in care, can impact negatively on the frequency of contact with their birth family (Rowe *et al,* 1984 cited in Kelly, 2000, p. 22; O'Neill, 1997 cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 235; Millham & Colleagues, 1986 cited in Sinclair *et al,* 2005, p. 170; Moyers *et al,* 2006; Ofsted, 2009; McMahon, 2010). This is also consistent with the findings of the Irish study by Daly & Gilligan (2005) which examined the educational and social experiences of young people aged 13 to 14 years in long term foster care. It is at these times that young people are likely to need their siblings and as illustrated by Gilligan (1999, p. 76) 'with few other reliable adults to turn to, siblings may be become important sources of support'.

The on-going needs of young people who have left the care system are only beginning to be recognised in Ireland (McMahon, 2010). An informal network made up of important family members and friends may be more meaningful and of particular importance for young people in care, due to the instability and adversity that often makes up their past. Professionals must appreciate the value of a young person's social network when carrying out assessments and in the development of important interventions. It is important they recognise the significance of such networks to their future well-being and development (Gilligan, 1999; McMahon, 2010). Professionals who consider the significance of the relationship between siblings in care may help to strengthen the sibling relationship 'in the here and now and preserve its potential role right into middle and later adulthood' (Gilligan, 2000c, p. 45).

3.7 Conclusion

An analysis of the relevant literature has shown that research relating to siblings in foster care in Ireland is extremely limited, and although the studies based in the United States and the United Kingdom are beneficial, they do not always relate to the Irish context. This chapter has identified and examined four dominant themes in detail, which reflect the current standpoint on sibling contact both in Ireland and internationally. Theories of attachment and loss underline the importance of sibling relationships for children in foster care, and the detrimental impact of being separated from them. This emphasises the need for increased knowledge and understanding of sibling attachments for professionals whose responsibility it is to make important informed decisions that will impact the child's well-being, development and future dramatically. The voice of the child still remains largely unheard despite the recent developments in children's rights in Ireland. The absence of children's views in decision-making may cause important relationships with their siblings to deteriorate against the child's

wishes *and* best interests. The role of key adults in the child's life illustrates the vulnerability of children in foster care and their reliance on foster carers and social workers to maintain important networks in their lives. The mixed attitudes of foster carers and the demands placed on social workers can directly impact on both the nature and frequency of contact and may potentially deprive children of important sources of love and support. Lastly, the literature on social networks identifies siblings as important elements of the social network of a child in foster care in terms of resilience and future support into adulthood. It is clear from the literature that the relationships between siblings in foster care cannot be ignored and that contact is fundamental in maintaining and sustaining these important relationships. The barriers that exist are great and it seems a greater focus, understanding and appreciation for sibling contact is necessary for the well-being of children in foster care, both now and in their future.

Chapter Four
Findings & Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the main findings of this research study, which will be presented as six key themes. Each theme will be explored in detail with reference to the relevant literature on the topic. For the purposes of confidentiality and to preserve participants' anonymity, all names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

4.2 Theme One: Forms of Contact

As discussed in chapter one, contact can be defined as 'the arrangements made in order for children to keep in touch with their family and significant others from whom they are separated' (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 70). It can consist of face to face meetings, telephone calls, letters and more recently, via the internet through email and social networking sites (O'Neill, 1997 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 234; Ofsted, 2009).

4.2.1 *Direct Contact*

For all participants in this study, the main form of contact was direct, face to face meetings. For two participants, contact with their siblings was formal and took place during supervised access with a birth parent. Access was held in the local social work department and supervised by social workers or a family support worker. Participants described a small room where they would meet their siblings for one hour and would have with some books and toys to play with. For the majority of participants, contact with their siblings was informal and was held in the family home or the foster home. Contact could last from a few hours to overnight stays. During contact, participants described watching TV/DVDs, chatting, playing games, seeing their friends and spending time in the garden.

4.2.2 *Indirect Contact*

The only form of indirect contact utilised by participants was phone contact. Three participants reported having weekly phone contact with their siblings. For the other participants, phone contact was occasional and mostly to arrange face to face visits. Other forms of indirect contact such as letter writing, email or social networking sites were either

not preferred forms of contact or were unavailable during the time participants were in foster care.

4.3 Theme Two: The Sibling Bond

Participants were asked about their sibling relationships prior to entering foster care, to gain an insight into participants' perceptions of their sibling relationships at different points in their lives. Two of the six participants entered foster care under the age of six, so had few memories of their sibling relationships prior to entering foster care. The remaining four participants grew up with their siblings for a number of years before they entered foster care, and spoke of having a 'close' relationship with some or all of their siblings during this time. Some participants spoke openly about the adverse experiences they had lived through with their brothers and sisters, and how these shared experiences had brought them closer together:

> *"...we were close, and we'd be there to look out for one another. Even when we were homeless like, my brother was the oldest and he was always looking out for us. So we're very close in that way and we had experienced things, the four of us together"* (Anne).

These findings are reflected in the literature on sibling bonds, which illustrates how a 'shared history' can enable siblings to establish a close and meaningful relationship, even in the most difficult and adverse circumstances (Cicirelli, 1995; Elgar & Head, 1999 cited in Herrick & Piccus, 2005, p. 852). It is not uncommon for sibling relationships to become a child's most important relationship, and for the attachment relationship to strengthen in the context of maltreatment or abuse. Siblings can become accustomed to 'looking out' for each other and adopting certain roles to ensure each other's safety and protection (Smith, 1996; Werner & Smith, 1992 cited in Gilligan, 1999, p. 75; Elgar & Head, 1999 cited in Herrick & Piccus, 2005 p. 852; Shlonsky *et al,* 2005, p. 699).

4.4 Theme Three: The Impact of Separation/Loss

Due to the retrospective nature of this study, many participants found it difficult to recall the reasons for being separated from some or all their siblings while in foster care. For those that could recall, the most common reason cited was the lack of available placements, a factor which is well-documented in the literature on the separation of sibling groups in foster care (Maclean, 1991; Kosonen, 1996; Smith, 1996; Hindle, 2000; Lord & Borthwick, 2001; Shlonksy *et al,* 2003; Leathers, 2005; Sinclair *et al,* 2005; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 304;

HIQA, 2007 cited in Clarke, A. & Eustace A, Eustace Patterson Limited, 2010, p. 74; Jeyes, 2012).

For the participants who had grown up in the presence of their siblings, separation was a distressing experience and a difficult transition in their lives. Participants' memories of entering foster care and being separated from their parents and siblings were described in great detail. No longer living with their brothers and sisters and 'seeing them everyday' were significant losses for these participants. John, who entered foster care at the age of fifteen, recalls how much life had changed and the loss he experienced when separated from his three siblings;

> *"I suppose the first year of it was very difficult for me. Because growing up, my brother and sisters for fifteen years, like having a good strong relationship with them as a family would, going from that to having none of them around was very difficult at first"* (John).

This finding corresponds with the literature on the impact of separation, which describes how entry into care for children who have a 'good strong relationship' with their siblings can be accompanied by intense feelings of 'grief, worry, guilt and lost identity' (Harrison, 1999a, 1999b; Triseliotis & Russell, 1984; Wedge & Mantle, 1991 cited in Herrick & Piccus, 2005, p. 849, McEvoy & Smith, 2011). Separation from siblings is a significant loss for many children in foster care (Lundstrom & Sallnas, 2012).

> *"I missed him. When we were separated I did miss him and everything because we were never separated...we were always together all our life"* (Louise).

Two participants who entered foster care at an early age spoke of having very few 'memories of being a family' with their siblings. For these participants, the experience of separation was very different compared to their older brothers and sisters, and other participants in this study. When asked how she felt about being separated from her sister and two brothers, Sarah stated;

> *I dunno if it felt normal but...I think I was just used to it...I don't really know any different* (Sarah).

Leathers (2005) highlights a child's developmental stage as an important factor in the meaning a child attributes to separation. Siblings of the same group may consequently

experience and be affected by separation in very different ways (Shlonsky *et al,* 2005, p. 707).

4.5 Theme Four: The Voice of the Child

The right for children to express their views and be heard in relation to matters which affect their lives is enshrined within Article 12 of the UNCRC (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010, p. 1). However, it is well documented within the literature that views of children in care are mostly unheard and underrepresented in matters which affect their lives (Kilkelly, 2004; Fox & Berrick, 2007). All participants were able to describe a number of instances where they felt their views in relation to contact with their siblings were unheard and undervalued by the key adults in their lives. This is consistent with the findings of a number of research studies based on the experiences of children in care (Kosonen, 1996; Deady, 2002; Festinger, 1983 cited in Leathers, 2005, p. 817; Daly & Gilligan, 2005; Hegar, 2005; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Ofsted, 2009; McEvoy & Smith, 2011).

4.5.1 *Contact Arrangements*

Two of the six participants had regular supervised access with their siblings and a birth parent every week/month for a number of years when they first entered foster care. Both participants had very similar experiences of access, and reported having no choice or preference in relation to the venue or activities undertaken during contact with their siblings. Ray's frustration is evident when he describes how his views and the views of his siblings were completely disregarded by the professionals making the decisions about how they would spend their time together;

> *"I think if they actually asked you...what you want to do? Where do you want to go today? Do you want to go to the park and have a run around...things like that. There was no choice for us, and that was definitely a problem. That was something I didn't like at all, even at that age"* (Ray).

The lack of choice or involvement in decision-making around contact meant that the participants had 'no choice' but to spend time with their siblings in this restrictive environment. The characteristics of formal contact which negatively impacted on the quality of their time with their brothers and sisters included the application of 'rules' such as supervision, the restrictive nature of the venue, the lack of 'fun' activities and the lack of opportunity for siblings to spend time alone. Anne describes how the consistent presence of social workers was an uncomfortable intrusion on her time with her brothers and sisters;

> *"We wouldn't talk about the things that we would've liked to talk about because of the fact that they were there. So it was awkward…because they were there….I hated it"* (Anne).

Research emphasises the importance of taking children's views and preferences into consideration when planning contact, to ensure that the time children spend with their families is meaningful and purposeful (O'Doherty, 1999, 1994, O'Neill, 1997, Dyas, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 230-237; Horgan, 2002; Mackaskill, 2002 cited in Sen & Boradhurst, 2011, p. 302). However, supervision is necessary in cases where access with parents or other family members may present a risk to the child. It is often the lack of resources which confines access to social work departments, instead of venues that are more child-friendly, activity-based or age-appropriate (Cleaver, 1999). Studies show due to limited time and resources, the 'primary aim' for many professionals when arranging contact between children and families is that they see each other regularly, sometimes at the expense of the quality of contact (Cleaver, 1999, p. 261; O'Doherty, 1991 cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 230).

The remaining four participants had informal contact with their siblings throughout their time in care which took place in the family home or the foster home. Informal contact was arranged by birth parents, foster parents or between the siblings themselves and involved spending free, quality time together, ranging from a few hours to overnight stays. All four participants spoke of the importance of having 'normal', free time to spend with their siblings and how much they enjoyed this time together;

> *"We'd just sit around and watch DVDs, spend time together. It was great. It used to be good quality time ya know?"* (John).

The majority of participants reported having irregular, informal contact with their siblings every 2-3 months. Despite enjoying the overall experience of contact, participants reported being unsatisfied with the frequency of contact with their siblings while in care. These findings mirror a number of older and more recent studies which report that children in care often wish for more frequent contact with their siblings than any other family member (Zimmerman, 1982, Festinger, 1983 cited in Fox & Berrick, 2007, p. 41; Gogarty, 1995; Kosonen, 1996, Deady, 2002, Hegar, 2005, McEvoy & Smith, 2011). Participants felt their wishes for 'more regular' contact with their siblings were unheard by foster carers and professionals, relating to factors such as time, the transport costs and the distance between

foster placements. This again illustrates how limited resources can cause children's voices to be unheard in decision-making, negatively impacting on the frequency of contact with their siblings (Kilkelly, 2004).

4.6 Theme Five: Key Players in the Child's life and the Facilitation of Sibling Contact

Research emphasises the central role that social workers, foster carers and sometimes birth parents play in the facilitation of contact between siblings separated through foster care (Cleaver, 1999; Waterhouse, 1999; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Daly & Gilligan, 2005; James *et al,* 2008; McMahon, 2010; McEvoy & Smith, 2011; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). Participants' accounts revealed how much they had to rely on the key adults in their lives to maintain their relationships with their siblings.

4.6.1 *Social Workers*

Participants illustrated that the social worker's role in facilitating contact with their siblings was based primarily around the management of risk. For participants Ray and Anne, as formal contact with their siblings involved the presence of a birth parent, social workers were directly involved in the organisation and facilitation of contact based on an assessed need for supervision. However, Ray expresses his strong belief that the presence of social workers and the nature of supervised access itself was an unnecessary formality that did not meet the needs or best interests of his family;

> *"...because our family wasn't a major issue, it was more of a case of, once a week access, that's it, go on, move onto the next family, more than kind of focusing on what our family really needed"* (Ray).

One participant had informal contact with his siblings and birth parent in the family home. Social workers did not arrange or supervise contact but monitored it closely through communication with the children and foster carers. When an incident occurred during contact which placed the participant and his siblings at risk, social workers would postpone contact for a number of months. Although contact was stopped due to issues relating to the birth parent, social workers did not seek to arrange or offer to facilitate alternative arrangements for continued contact between the participant and his siblings. This subjected them to long, difficult periods of time without seeing each other;

"...because every time something went wrong with access, there was a six month period when I couldn't see them...there was no other place I could see them" (John).

These findings correlate with the literature which states that contact arrangements take up a significant amount of social work time (Gallagher, 1995; O'Regan, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2002, p. 232; Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Clarke & Eustace, Eustace Patterson Limited, 2010). Caseload demand and restricted resources can require social workers to prioritise cases where contact or access may involve some element of risk (Cleaver, 1999). This can make it difficult for social workers to be consistently 'client-focused' in practice, and take into account the individual needs and wishes of children and their families (Fox & Berrick, 2007, p. 47). Social workers often encourage foster carers to take responsibility for contact that does not possess any element of risk (Cleaver, 1999). Therefore, social workers' role in the maintenance of sibling relationships can be very limited (James *et al*., 2008).

4.6.2 *Foster Carers*

For the majority of participants, the arrangement and facilitation of informal contact was the responsibility of foster carers. Foster carers are regarded as the 'gate keepers' of sibling contact within the literature (James *et al,* 2008, p. 99) and this is clearly reflected in the experience of participants. Foster carers played an important role in making arrangements between children, parents and other foster carers, providing transport and hosting contact in the foster home (Farmer *et al,* 2001; Sinclair *et al,* 2005; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 303). The majority of participants reported that foster carers encouraged contact. However they were ultimately dissatisfied with the frequency of informal contact with their siblings. Research highlights that the distance between foster placements is often a factor which can limit the frequency of contact, and the burden this can place on foster carers in terms of time and resources when providing transport (Kilkelly, 2004; Sinclair *et al*., 2005; *James et al.,* 2008; *Sen* & Broadhurst, 2011, p. 303).

4.6.3 *Birth Parents*

For two participants, John and Claire, contact between siblings was arranged by birth parents and took place in the family home. This carried both positives and negatives for participants, but ultimately impacted negatively on both the nature and frequency of contact between siblings. Relationship difficulties or the birth parent's inappropriate behaviour during contact subjected participants to long periods of no contact with their siblings. The presence of a birth

parent as a negative influence on the quality of contact was emphasised by participant Ray, who highlighted the need for siblings to have time alone, without the presence of adults.

"...it was almost a happy thing not to have dad there ya know? Where it'd be more relaxed and we'd actually get to talk and play..." (Ray).

Although the role of the birth parent in the facilitation of sibling contact is not well documented within the literature, Gilligan (2000b, p. 114) illustrates the value of contact with siblings and other family members which does not bring with it the potential 'downside of parental contact'. This also emphasises the need to listen to children's views and wishes in relation to contact arrangements (O'Doherty, 1999, 1994, O'Neill, 1997, Dyas, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 230-237; Horgan, 2002; Mackaskill, 2002 cited in Sen & Boradhurst, 2011, p. 302).

4.7 Theme Six: The Social Network of a Child in Foster Care

Research highlights the importance of a strengthened social network for vulnerable children in foster care, which can also act as a protective factor in their lives (Gilligan, 2000b). Family relationships, such as close relationships with siblings can form a significant part of a child's social network (Kosonen, 1996; Gilligan, 1999; Gilligan, 2000c; McMahon, 2010).

4.7.1 Foster Care – Relationships in Childhood

The majority of participants spoke of having a close relationship with some or all their siblings throughout their time in foster care, and how contact enabled them to remain close, despite their separation;

> *"...every time I saw Emma, or Paul or Linda, it felt like...we were never really apart, do you know that kind of way? We were still very close...we were still able to speak about things and be like brother and sister"* (John).

Research highlights how the important role of contact in providing a sense of continuity and long-term relationships for children in foster care (Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). For participant Ray, separation from all but one of his siblings at an early age, combined with poor quality supervised contact had a significant effect on the development of his relationships with his brothers and sisters, despite seeing them every week for a number of years. Ray describes how this resulted in a significant lack of supportive relationships with his siblings as he

became older. He refers to his unmet need for the support of his siblings during difficult times he faced, particularly when he moved to residential care;

> *"...there was a lot of problems up in (residential home)...and I kind of needed someone else there. It was something where I would've wanted a brother basically to be there and that was something that just wasn't there at all"* (Ray).

Ray's experience reflects the literature which states that sibling relationships which are lost during childhood are unlikely to be re-established, leading to a lack of close supportive relationships in adulthood (Lundstrom and Sallnas, 2012). Ray described how his experience towards the end of his time in care has motivated him to try and re-build his relationships with his siblings.

4.7.2 *Aftercare – Relationships in Adulthood*

The majority of participants affirmed that the opportunity to see and stay in touch with their siblings through contact during foster care has laid the foundations for strong supportive networks in adulthood (Gilligan, 1999; Sen & Broadhurst, 2011). Without contact, many participants believed that they would not know their brothers and sisters, or have a relationship with them as adults. Based on her experience of significant loss during childhood, Anne describes how her brother and sisters have become a cherished source of family and support for her in adulthood;

> *"...if we didn't have those relationships as I said I'd be so lonely now, because I have no mother and I have no father...so I'm glad to have my brothers and sisters to this day, because otherwise I'd just be on my own"* (Anne).

Young people can be particularly vulnerable to the breakdown or lack of supportive relationships when they leave care (Gilligan, 1999; McMahon, 2010). Fortunately, this was not the case for the majority of participants. All participants reported that contact with their siblings is much more regular and on their own terms since they have left care. This has enabled participants to re-build their relationships with their siblings, 'get to know each other again' and make up for the years they have lost.

4.8 Limitations of the Research

The limitations of this study will be discussed in order to ensure validity and transparency of the research process. As this is a small-scale qualitative study, the findings of this study reflect the experiences of a small sample of participants and may exclude other important

aspects of sibling contact that were not the experience of participants. A larger sample may provide a greater and more diverse insight into the issues related to children's experiences of sibling contact.

The huge amount of rich and interesting data was obtained during the interview process with participants. As the researcher, I felt a strong sense of responsibility to do justice to the participants' individual experiences, but this proved extremely challenging when writing up the final version of this chapter. The final representation of the findings of this study was unable to include the intricate details of participants' experiences due to the restricted word limit of this small-scale dissertation, but reflects the main themes that emerged from participants' personal accounts of their experiences of sibling contact.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the main findings of this study, representing them as six key themes which emerged from the data collected. These findings have been explored and analysed with reference to the relevant literature, using a children's rights perspective to interpret and reveal the meaning behind participants' unique experiences of contact with their siblings throughout their time in foster care and into adulthood. These findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Five
Discussion of Findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will present a discussion of the key findings of this research in relation to the three research questions on which this study is based. Links will be made to the relevant Irish legislation and literature discussed in chapter three.

5.2 Research Question One: To what extent does Irish legislation and policy facilitate the continued contact between siblings separated through foster care?

The review of Irish legislation and policy outlined in chapter three illustrates that the Child Care Act, 1991, the Child Care (Placement of Children in Foster Care) Regulations (1995) and the Child Care (Placement of Children with Relatives) Regulations (1995) govern the facilitation of continued contact between siblings in foster care in Ireland. It is important to note that in all three of these instruments, there is no specific reference made to 'siblings', but each advise that arrangements are made to facilitate 'access' between a child and their parents, relatives and other people who may be important to the child. This is except in cases where contact is against the best interests of the child (Government of Ireland, 1991; Department of Health, 1995a; Department of Health, 1995b).

The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) places more direct emphasis on the facilitation of contact between separated siblings, recommending that arrangements are made for 'high levels of contact' between siblings, where placements for sibling groups are unavailable. This again is except in cases where it is against the best interests of the child (Department of Health and Children, 2003, p. 11). As these standards are intended to guide the practice and decision-making of professionals in relation to contact between children and their families, there remains no legal obligation for professionals to facilitate contact between siblings.

It may be argued that the relevant Irish legislation, policy and the National Standards for Foster Care (2003) adopt an advisory role in relation to the facilitation of contact between siblings separated through foster care. The absence of any direct reference made to siblings in

the legislation and policy may present a legal barrier, which can have a direct influence on the degree to which professionals can prioritise the facilitation of contact between siblings in their practice. The National Standards for Foster Care (2003) is a positive step towards recognising and maintaining children's relationships with their siblings. However, as these standards are not enforced by Irish law, the arrangements for contact between siblings may be dependent on the discretion and good nature of social workers and foster carers responsible for the care of the child. Therefore, it appears that the extent to which Irish legislation and policy promote the continued contact between siblings is limited in Ireland.

5.3 Research Question Two: Based on the retrospective accounts of adults formerly in foster care, what was their experience in terms of the nature and frequency of contact with their siblings?

Participants' experiences in terms of the nature and frequency of contact with their siblings varied according to their age and circumstances during their time in foster care. Two participants experienced formal contact with their siblings in the form of supervised access, which involved the presence of birth parents and professionals such as social workers or family support workers. Formal contact took place in the local social work department in a small room with some books and toys for children to play with. Participants' were very clear about how the structured nature of supervised access and the absence of any choice for them in terms of the venue or activities undertaken impacted hugely on the quality of their time with their siblings. Although formal contact was regular and arranged by professionals, the quality of contact was poor, and in one case, directly impacted on the development of the relationships between siblings.

The majority of participants experienced informal contact which took place primarily in the family home or the foster home. Informal contact gave participants the freedom to spend quality time with their siblings, without the restrictions of supervision or limits on time. The downside of informal contact for participants was that it was irregular and limited to every 2-3 months. This was due to factors such as the distance between foster placements and the burden this placed on foster carers in terms of making arrangements and travel. Some participants also experienced long periods of no contact with their siblings relating to issues concerning birth parents.

The only other form of contact that participants availed of during their time in foster care was through phone calls. The majority of participants spoke to their siblings weekly or monthly, but this was mostly to discuss contact arrangements. Social media and networking sites were not as readily available or popular during the time that participants were in foster care, but became a popular form of contact with siblings once participants had left care.

5.4 Research Question Three: What are the main facilitators and barriers to contact in terms of maintaining the relationships between siblings separated through foster care?

The findings of this study revealed that in terms of maintaining sibling relationships, contact was an important source of emotional and continuity for participants (Shlonsky *et al.,* 2003, p. 29). The majority of participants had a close relationship with some or all of their siblings before they entered foster care. Contact played an important role in maintaining this connection between participants and their siblings, enabling them to stay 'familiar' with each other and remain 'close' despite no longer living together or 'seeing each other every day'. Contact also provided continuity for the two participants who entered foster care at an early age, enabling them to get to know their siblings and remain connected to their birth family, although these relationships were not particularly close. This sense of continuity which was established through contact has helped to maintain participants' sibling relationships into adulthood. For the majority of participants, these relationships remain close and make up a significant part of their support network as adults. All participants stated that without contact, they believed these relationships would be non-existent. For participants whose relationships were not as close during foster care, this sense of continuity enabled participants to establish a connection with their siblings and re-build these relationships since leaving care.

Based on the findings of this study, the role of the foster carer was the main facilitator to contact. The foster carer's role in terms of making practical arrangements and facilitating informal contact in their home was critical to contact in terms of the maintenance of sibling relationships for the majority of participants in this study. Informal contact provided a number of benefits to participants in terms of choice, quality time and a natural home environment for participants to enjoy the company of their siblings. Although participants reported being unsatisfied with the infrequency of informal contact arranged by the foster

carer, the quality of contact appeared to be a definitive factor in maintaining participants' close relationships with their siblings into adulthood.

Although this sense of continuity and connectedness was maintained between participants and their siblings, there were a number of barriers to contact. These barriers had a direct influence on the nature and frequency of contact between participants and their siblings and for some, negatively impacted on the development of these important relationships. Findings revealed that there were a number of financial barriers to contact. The lack of available financial resources often caused participants' preferences and wishes in relation to contact arrangements to be unmet or disregarded by professionals. Children's wishes for family outings or fun activities during supervised access incur a financial cost that is rarely, if at all available to social workers due to constraints on financial resources provided by the State (Cleaver, 1999; Buckley, 2003). Long-distance journeys between foster placements can also incur a financial cost, and the lack of available financial resources to regularly cover this cost caused participants to see their siblings much less that they would have liked.

Findings also revealed a number of administrative barriers to contact in terms of social work time, case load demand and access to financial resources. The demands that contact arrangements can place on social work time are well-documented within the literature (Cleaver, 1999; Horgan, 2002; O'Doherty, 1999, 1994, O'Neill, 1997, Dyas, 1998 cited in Buckley, 2003, p. 230-237). When social workers did facilitate contact, it was mostly centred on the management of risk and limited to contact involving birth parents. Contact in these cases was regular, but was often of poor quality and confined to social work departments. Social workers had little or no time to dedicate to the facilitation of contact between siblings groups, and so often delegated this responsibility to foster carers.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an in-depth discussion of the key findings of this study in relation to the research questions on which this study is based. The findings of this study have revealed that the extent to which Irish legislation and policy promotes the facilitation of sibling contact between children in foster care is very limited, with the only direct reference made to contact between siblings in the National Standards for Foster Care (2003). The nature and frequency of contact between participants and their siblings while in foster care was either formal in the form of supervised access, taking place every week/month; or

informal in the family home or the foster home taking place every few months. Participants' experiences of formal and informal contact were worlds apart in terms of quality, which seemed to be the most important aspect of contact for all participants of this study. Findings also revealed that the role of the foster carer in arranging and facilitating informal contact was the main facilitator to contact in terms of maintaining sibling relationships. Barriers to contact ranged from lack of financial resources to fund activities to administrative demands on social work time.

It is clear that the lack of available resources to support and maintain contact created significant barriers to the quality and frequency of contact between siblings. The experiences of participants illustrate that contact was either regular and of poor quality, or irregular and of high quality which is an unfortunate imbalance of needs and resources. This may suggest why contact between participants and their siblings in this study was highly variable and subject to 'political, legal, financial, administrative barriers' which unfortunately can dictate practice and neglect the views of children in care (Fox & Berrick, 2007, p. 47; Kilkelly, 2007). Fortunately, contact has played an important part in the maintenance of relationships between participants and some or all of their siblings into adulthood. However, it appears that a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance and benefits of continued contact between siblings is necessary for the well-being of children in foster care, both now and in the future.

Chapter Six
Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The final chapter of this study will present the recommendations of the research and the implications of this research study for the Irish Foster Care Association in Waterford, as part of the CARL initiative. As the topic of study has strong links to social work, the implications for social work practice will also be discussed. This study will conclude with a reflective piece on my experience of undertaking this study and what I have learned from this important process.

6.2 Research Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the research recommendations are as follows;

1. In the words of one participant; "*I think there needs to be a lot more communication with foster children in the HSE. I think there's too much kind of...people thinking they know what's best for the child and just going off and doing it rather than talking things through"* (Ray).

The importance of ascertaining and respecting children's views in relation to contact with their siblings and all other matters which affect their lives is a valuable finding and an important recommendation of this research study. Children have a right to have their views heard, 'whether listening as a parent, foster carer, social worker, court or public body' (Gilligan, 2000a, p. 41).

2. A strengthened social network is an important source of support and a valuable protective factor for children in care (Gilligan, 2000a). Children's relationships with their siblings and other significant people in their life, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, neighbours need to be recognised and appreciated in practice. The need for further education and training in this area for professionals, foster carers and students is an important recommendation of this study.

3. This study recommends that enhancing the quality of contact is a key consideration when making contact arrangements between siblings in foster care. The purpose of contact and children's experiences of contact should be regularly reviewed to ensure that this time is meaningful, purposeful and age-appropriate for children and their families.

4. Based on the demands placed upon foster carers to facilitate contact between siblings, this study recommends that foster carers have access to further training and support from social workers and other professionals.

5. This study also emphasises the need for extra resources to support social workers and foster carers to support the maintenance of sibling relationships through regular, high–quality contact. Extra resources would allow for flexibility and creativity in terms of contact arrangements which would empower children to decide how they would like to spend their time with their brothers and sisters.

6. This study has demonstrated the importance of contact between siblings separated through foster care. A future study on the value of continued contact between children in foster care and other important family members such as grandparents could be beneficial in terms of highlighting the benefits of maintaining and supporting relationships with other people who are important to the child. The parent-child relationship continues to be prioritised in legislation and practice in Ireland (Kilkelly, 2004) but research shows that children can enjoy a number of benefits from continued contact with other family members (Gilligan, 1999).

A service providing Child Contact Centres has been recently developed to meet children's needs for safe supported contact with their parents. This new service is provided by Barnardos and the organisation, One Family and was launched in North and South Dublin in April 2012 by Francis Fitzgerald, Minister for Children (Barnardos, 2013 *online*). The Child Contact Centre service enables children to maintain contact with both parents in the case of relationship difficulties or conflict, and for children in the care of the HSE. A Child Contact Centre is defined as 'a safe, friendly and neutral place where children can spend time with the parent/s they do not live with. It is a child centred environment which allows the child to form or develop a relationship with the parent at their own pace and in their own way, usually through play and child centred activities' (Barnardo, 2013 *online*). Although the service is

primarily designed to support contact between parents and children, supported contact between children and their siblings and other important family members can also be provided (Murphy & Caffrey, 2010). An interesting and worthwhile research study could be carried out about the role of contact centres in supporting relationships between siblings and other people who are important to the child.

"IFCA works in partnership with the HSE to promote foster care as the best alternative for children who cannot live with their own families" (IFCA, 2013 *online*). Members of IFCA can range from foster carers and social workers to any person who is working with or involved with children in foster care. IFCA provides a range of services to its members including information, education, mediation, advocacy and emotional support, and a range of training programmes to promote best practice (IFCA, 2013 *online*). This research study was undertaken in collaboration with IFCA in Waterford for the purpose of education and training for its members in relation to sibling contact. Contact with a child's birth family is a very real and important issue faced by foster carers, and the implications of this study will hopefully promote knowledge and awareness about the importance of maintaining and nurturing children's relationships with their siblings while in foster care.

6.3 Implications for social work practice

The overall premise of this study highlights the importance of listening to the views of children in foster care and has direct implications for social work practice. Professionals working with children in foster care have an important part to play in empowering children to express their views and contribute to important decisions that affect their lives (Kilkelly, 2004). This study has emphasised the value that children place upon their relationships with their siblings and the importance of continued contact to maintain and nurture these relationships. The sibling bond has been recognised as a valuable source of emotional support and stability throughout the lifespan and it is clear from the relevant literature and the findings of this study that contact is not just an issue concerning parents (Gilligan, 2000b; Leathers, 2005, p. 79). Recognising the importance of maintaining contact between siblings in foster care can help to ensure that children are not deprived of these lifelong sources of love and support (Kosonen, 1996, p. 820; Shlonsky *et al.,* 2005). .

6.4 Reflective Piece

The experience of undertaking this study has been a very interesting and worthwhile journey for me both personally and professionally. Firstly, this study has helped me to recognise not only the importance and value of the sibling relationships in my future practice as a social worker, but has helped me to appreciate the relationship I have with my two older brothers and what I have gained from my relationship with them in terms of love, support and wisdom throughout my life so far. I feel this has helped me to appreciate and learn from the experiences of participants even further and helped me to establish an important connection to this study from the outset.

The process of undertaking this study has introduced me to a number of new experiences and learning opportunities and has opened me up to a whole new world of research. On reflection, I feel I completely took for granted the process that goes into designing a study, especially when referring to the research literature to construct my argument within one of the many essays I have completed as part of the MSW. Initially, this study represented something I wrote about, talked about and went to meetings about. In some ways, it didn't really exist. It was contacting my first participant that truly brought this study to life for me, and I began to realise that the topic I am reading about and writing about is real-life for the people in this study, and for many others out there. I immediately began to look at research and this process in a very different light, and immediately felt a sense of protectiveness over the participants and a sense of responsibility in my role. I did not for one minute 'forget' that the books I have been reading were about real people's experience, but I think talking and learning from these people has opened my eyes and given me a whole new appreciation and respect for this process. My new perspective has motivated me in a way I did not foresee and I feel privileged to have been a part of this experience.

6.5 Conclusion

This process of this research study has taught me so much and I feel I have truly gained so much in terms of knowledge and skills that I can bring to my future social work practice. This study has provided an in-depth exploration of sibling contact for children in foster care, based on the relevant legislation, policy and literature, and the lived experience of adults formerly in foster care.

The accounts of participants' lived experiences of foster care have provided us with a valuable snapshot into what it means to be separated from their siblings and have to rely on others to maintain these important relationships. It is through lived experience that we can develop important knowledge and understanding about what is important to children in foster care, their view of the world and what they can teach us as professionals. The participants of this study provided open and honest accounts of what life was like after separation from their siblings as children, offering their opinions and valuable insight into how foster care and family contact can be improved and managed in a way that is child centred and responsive to their needs. The significance of sibling relationships for many children in foster care cannot be ignored and we have an important responsibility to recognise and promote sibling contact as part of our duty of care to children who cannot be brought up within their own families. For children in foster care, having their voices heard and their views respected is not only a legitimate right, but can be an important means of improving future foster care services in Ireland. I believe this study has played a small but important role in demonstrating this.

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Appendices

Dear Participant,

My name is Amanda Cooper and I am a Master of Social Work student in UCC. I am undertaking a research project as part of my studies in the area of sibling contact in collaboration with the Irish Foster Care Association in Waterford. The title of the study is 'An Exploration of Sibling Contact for Children in Foster Care in Waterford: A Retrospective Study' and I would like to formally invite you to participate in an interview. The study aims to explore sibling contact based on the experiences of adults who were formally in foster care, and separated from their siblings at some point during their time in foster care. I am interested in looking at the role of sibling contact and the barriers that may have existed in relation to maintaining important sibling relationships.

You have been identified as a suitable participant by the After Care team in Waterford, who are sending this letter to you on my behalf. I am an independent researcher and have no association with the After Care Team or the Irish Foster Care Association. I would be very interested to learn about your own unique experience of sibling contact during your time in foster care and your thoughts and feelings on this important topic. The interview would last for approximately 45 minutes to an hour and I would ask you a series of questions about your experience. Your participation would be very much appreciated and a valuable contribution to this research project, as research in the area of sibling contact is extremely limited in Ireland. Further information on this study is provided in the information sheet accompanying this letter.

If you would like to participate in this study, I would be very grateful if you could complete the consent form attached and return it to me in the stamped addressed envelope provided before Wednesday 20th March 2013. I will then contact you to arrange a time, date and inform you of the location of our interview. If you have any questions about the study or your involvement, please do not hesitate to contact me on 086 3076505 or by email at 111221170@umail.ucc.ie. Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards,

Information Sheet

Purpose of the study

As part of my Masters of Social Work, I have been given the opportunity to carry out a research study in collaboration with the Irish Foster Care Association in Waterford. This study will focus on contact between siblings who have been separated through foster care. I am interested in exploring the role of contact and the barriers that exist in maintaining sibling relationships through contact.

What will the study involve?

This is a participatory research study, which means your involvement and views are very important. I would like to invite you to take part an interview to share your own experiences of sibling contact while in foster care. The interview should take no longer than 45 minutes to 1 hour and I will ask you some questions which you can answer in as much detail as you feel comfortable with. There is very limited research on this topic in Ireland and your participation would help me to gain a greater insight into the past experiences of individuals who were separated from their siblings while in foster care.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You have been asked to take part as you meet the criteria for the study. You are 18 years old or over, have former experience of foster care and were separated from one or more of your siblings at some point during your time in foster care. Your views and experience will be a valuable contribution to this research and would enable me to highlight the issues that were an important part of your experience of sibling contact.

Do you have to take part?

No, participation is completely voluntary. Once you have read the information provided and feel you would like to participate, you will be asked to sign the consent form attached. If you later decide you do not want to be involved, you can withdraw consent at any stage before, during or after the interview takes place. You can also withdraw consent for your interview data to be used in the study within three weeks of the research project being submitted to the University. In such cases, the data will be deleted.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. I will ensure that no identifying information about you will appear in any part of written project, and your name will not be revealed to the Irish Foster Care Association or any other third party. In the unlikely event of any problems arising, I may be required to share some identifying information about you as a participant of this study with my supervisor, Dr Kenneth Burns or the University's external examiner. In the very unlikely event that this does occur, I will inform you as soon as possible.

The aftercare team who identified you as a suitable participant will have no knowledge of your participation unless you choose to tell them. The letter, information sheet and consent form will be sent to you by the aftercare team on my behalf, but completed consent forms will be addressed to me and sent to the office of my supervisor where I will collect them unopened. Any information/contact details you provide will remain confidential. During the research, any identifying information such as names, addresses, etc will be removed from the typed version of our interview and changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. No identifying information will appear in any part of the final written project that will be presented to the organisation, my supervisor and the external examiner of the University.

What will happen to the information which you give?

All data will remain confidential throughout the duration of this study. All typed versions of the interviews will be stored securely on a UCC student server which is password protected. All audio recordings of the interviews will be secured in a locked cabinet in my house which only I will be able to access. I will have access to the recorded data for 6 months after the research project is submitted to the University and at the end of this period, all audio files and all written transcripts will be destroyed.

What will happen to the results?

The results of the study will be presented within my final written project which will be provided to the Irish Foster Care Association. My supervisor, a second marker and the external examiner will also have a copy of my completed dissertation, as will all participants who helped me to complete this study. The project will be available on the CARL website (http://carl.ucc.ie) and may be used in presentations or publications in the future if it reaches the appropriate academic standard. I will also present my findings to my colleagues at a

research conference which will be held in UCC in May 2013 that you will be invited to attend. You will not be identified in any aspect of the written project, report or presentation.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

As the study is focused on participants' former experiences of foster care and being separated from their siblings, it is possible that talking about your experience may be upsetting. I will try my very best to ensure that you feel safe and supported throughout the interview and research process, and all questions will be asked with the upmost respect and sensitivity.

What if there is a problem?

At the end of the interview, I will discuss with you how you found the experience and your feelings around what was discussed during the research. Jacqui Kennedy, a member of the after-care team will be available to contact if you would like some additional support. If you would prefer another person to contact, please make this known on your consent form and this information will remain confidential. The voluntary organisation Squashy Couch in Waterford City have also offered to provide private and confidential counselling to any participants who feel they require further support after the research process. Details are available as follows;

Jacqui Kennedy After Care Team HSE Community Care Centre, Cork Road, Waterford. Tel no. 051 842800 Mob no. 087 4109053	Maire Morrissey Squashy Couch Adolescent Health and Information Project, Parnell Street, Waterford. Tel no. 051 859061

If participants require support after office hours, the following 24 hour helplines are available;

- The Samaritans 1800 60 90 90
- Aware 1890 303 302
- 1Life 1800 24 71 00
- Caredoc, Waterford 1850 33 49 99

Who has reviewed the study?

All primary research projects such as this must have approval from the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee before taking place. A detailed description of this study was reviewed by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee and approved in February 2013.

Any further questions?

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you feel you would like to take part in this research study, please sign the attached consent form and return it in the stamped addressed envelope provided. If you have any other questions or queries, please do not hesitate to contact me on 086 3076505 or 111221170@umail.ucc.ie. My supervisor, Dr Kenneth Burns can also be contacted on 021 4903151 or k.burns@ucc.ie.

Consent Form

I……agree to participate in Amanda Cooper's research study.

1. The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

2. I am participating voluntarily.

3. I give permission for my participation in the interview with _____to be tape-recorded.

4. I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

5. I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within three weeks of the project being submitted, in which case the material will be deleted.

6. I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

7. I understand and give permission for _____ to use disguised extracts from my interview in the thesis, presentations and any subsequent publications.

(Please tick one box. *This information will remain confidential*)

I am happy to contact Jacqui Kennedy for further support if I need to

I would prefer another person to contact for further support if I need to

Signed……. Date…….

(Please see page overleaf)

If you would like to participate in this study, please provide the following details so I can contact you to arrange the date, time and location of our interview. These details will remain confidential and will only be shared with a third part in the event that any issues arise.

(Please complete in BLOCK CAPITALS)

Name _____

DOB _____

Address _____

_____

_____

_____

Contact Number _____

Email *(Optional)* _____

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Interview Guide

Introduction

Thank participant for agreeing to take part, go through consent form if not already received by post. Explain the concept of 'contact' and aim of the study, explain the interview process, i.e, recording of the interview, transcription, confidentiality, supports available, invite participants to ask questions or take break if they feel they need to.

Warm up Questions

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

Prompts: Age? Where are you from? School/college?

2. Can you tell me about your siblings?

Prompts: Brothers/sisters? How many? Older/younger?

Interview Questions

Foster Care

3. Were you were placed in a different foster placement to your brother/sister? Can you tell me a bit about that?

Prompts: How old were you? Were you were separated from them more than once during your time in foster care?

4. What was it like being in a separated from to them?

Prompts: How did you feel about it? Did you understand why you were separated from them? Did your brother/sister understand? Was is explained to you? By whom?

5. What was your relationship like before you were placed in foster care, when you were living together?

Prompts: How did you get on?

6. What impact do you think being placed in separate placements had on your relationship?

Prompts: In what way?

Contact

7. Can you tell me about the contact you had with your brother/sister when you were while you were in different placements.

Prompts: What did it involve? What kind of contact? (face to face- access, meetings, phonecalls, texts, letters, emails, social network sites). What did you do during contact? Who else was there during contact? Did that person affect your time with your brother sister in a positive or negative way?

8. How often did you have contact?

Prompts: Did you feel it was enough? Often would you have liked to have contact?

9. How did you feel about contact?

Prompts: Was it something you wanted? Would you have preferred another form of contact?

10. Do you think contact helped you to maintain a relationship with your brother/sister?

Prompts: Why/why not? In what way?

11. Can you tell me about who organised contact with your brother/sister?

Prompts: You? SW? FC? Birth Parent? How do you think felt about contact with your brother/sister?

12. Did you make any decisions about contact?

Prompts: If no, why do you think that was? Did you feel like you were listened to in relation to your wishes around contact?

Relationships as Adults

13. How would you describe your relationship with your brother/sister today, as an adult?

14. In what way do you think the contact you had while in foster care has impacted your relationship today?

Prompts: Would you consider them to be an important part of your life as an adult? How do you see them?

15. Looking back, is there anything you would change about your experience of contact with your brother/sister?

16. Are there any other parts of your experience that you would like to share or expand on in relation to sibling contact or your siblings in general?

End of Interview: Thank participant for their time, check in to see how they are feeling, remind them of support available.