MORE THAN JUST LETTERS: EXPANDING COMMUNITY THROUGH LITERACY IN AN ELEMENTARY CHRISTIAN SCHOOL CLASSROOM

By

Rebecca L. Witte

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographically-oriented, multi-year study examined an epistolary writing relationship between third grade students and the teacher's uncle, known to them as Uncle Billy, who, at the time of the study, was corresponding from prison. Taking place within a Reformed Christian school, this study encapsulates the pedagogy of Ms. Thompson, the focal teacher; how she invited students into a relationship with Uncle Billy, threaded multiple literacies together, and taught with racial justice in mind—all through a letter writing intervention.

Situated within a framework based on certain elements of community (reciprocity, proximity, hospitality, justice-mindedness, and collective emotion and vulnerability), I threaded three individual yet intersecting research strands: Christianity, race-related theories, and sociocultural literacy. In doing so, I ask, *how can letter writing widen perspectives of diverse community?*

Analyzing letters, classroom observations, interviews, and field notes collected over a two-year time frame, this study explored what students learned about racial (in)justice and anti-Black mass incarceration both from Ms. Thompson, a Black teacher, and Uncle Billy, a Black incarcerated Christian man. Findings suggested three distinct and interconnected themes: The power of a teacher, the power of letter writing, and the power of connections. *The Power of a Teacher* describes how Ms. Thompson served as a guide for literacy learning and the classroom connector between the two unlikely participants. In doing so, she addressed the complexities and intersections of Uncle Billy's race, gender, and incarceration status. *The Power of Letter Writing* highlights how students communicated, what students learned through the letter writing process, and how letter writing provided a way for Uncle Billy to become a co-educator. Finally, *The*

Power of Connection explored how relational reciprocity and the sharing between participants impacted perspectives regarding incarceration.

This study's significance is its teaching of racial (in)justice within the context of a relationship. Because of the connection to Uncle Billy, students learned about the dehumanizing realities of anti-Black policing and mass incarceration encompassed within a setting of familial love and joy. As Ms. Thompson added contextualization and complexity to Uncle Billy's story, students began to see Uncle Billy as a fellow human being. In doing so, Uncle Billy moved beyond societal labels like "prisoner" (Alexander, 2010) to become "uncle," "friend," and "fellow Christian." Further, this study, mediated through literacy, dialogue, and centered within Biblical scriptures, students experienced community as a collective and communal act. This study offers a model to see how a widened view of community can help students to connect across boundaries, to question binaries, and to create more expansive communities.

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This work is dedicated to Alanna and all educators teaching toward racial justice. Continue to bring your passion, creativity, and joy into the classroom.

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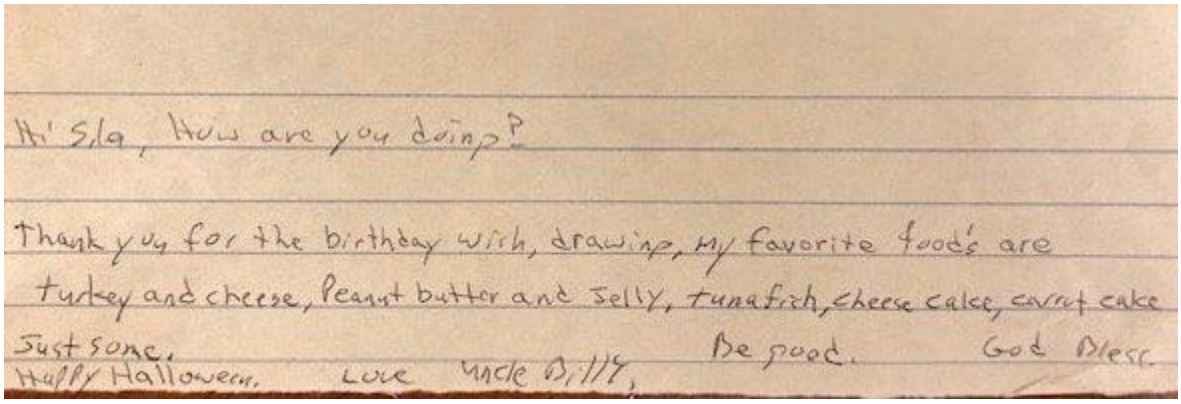
PROLOGUE

"Silas,[1] what is this?" I asked my youngest son as I pulled a note from his backpack. After looking at it more closely, I noticed the torn-off edges of a yellow legal pad.

Figure 1

Note from Uncle Billy to Silas (October 2020)



Note: This letter was written in the fall of 2020

"Who is Uncle Billy?" I said aloud.

"He is Ms. Thompson's uncle. He's in jail," Silas responded.

"What?!" Whether I said it aloud or not, I was initially taken aback. My first instinct was to question whether this man, who had written a letter and addressed it by name to my third grader, was "safe.[2]" I prodded Silas for more information. "Tell me more about Uncle Billy." He responded nonchalantly. "He is the brother of Ms. Thompson's dad, who died. Because he is Black he got in prison for a longer time. He made some mistakes, and he loves Jesus." Silas then ran off leaving me with much to process. While I knew of Ms. Thompson's late father and the

[1] All names (first and last), besides the first names of Billy, Rebecca, and Silas are pseudonyms. I obtained permission from Billy to use his first name. Any references to places are also pseudonyms.
[2] I use the word "safe", but it is a term fraught with racial violence for feeling of "safety" has been used by white people, and specifically white women, to justify violence and anti-Blackness.

unequal imprisonment of Black men in America, what I didn't realize is that my eight year-old also knew it and could articulate it.

Before Silas was placed in her third grade class in the fall of 2020, I had already connected with Ms Thompson. Ms. Thompson was a relatively new teacher at Great Lakes Christian School having taught in another Christian school district several towns away. She was already developing a reputation for being a dynamic teacher, but what also set her apart was that she was the only biracial Black teacher in a predominately white school. By the time Silas entered her classroom, Ms. Thompson and I had been on a few walks together, cultivating a friendship over shared Starbucks cravings and talking about our experiences as Christian school educators. At that point, she was close to completing her Master's degree at a local Christian University and I had just left a teaching job after 15 years to go to grad school. Both of us shared a desire of Christian schools to be more justice-oriented. We talked about how we were engaging with topics of race in our own contexts. The murder of George Floyd happened earlier (May 2020) that year and we were both reading Bettina Love's (2019) book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*. Through our walks, she shared openly about the burdens of being the only Black teacher in this predominantly White context and yet also fully aware of her positive influence as a Black teacher to the students[3] of color in her classroom.

It was not a surprise to me that Silas would talk openly about race, since Ms. Thompson modeled that in the classroom. My initial uncertainties that originally surfaced about safety–which were echoed by some parents[4] in the study—quickly subsided and I began to look at this letter and conversation with new angles.

[3] I use the term "student" throughout the dissertation.
[4] I use the term "parent" throughout the dissertation. While I recognize the term "caregiver" to be more inclusive, especially considering if a researcher is not familiar with individual familial situations. In this case, "parent" is an appropriate term as I am familiar with the familial relationships highlighted in the study.

In that short conversation, Silas, in his own matter-of-fact way, was able to articulate a racial injustice in the unequal and longer sentencing for Black men in America. While I had known this statistic before, I didn't expect this systemic knowledge from him. This felt uncommon for this setting–or any Christian school setting–certainly something I had not heard of or experienced in my 18-year tenure as an elementary teacher. I thought back to my own teaching in an upper-middle class, predominantly White Christian school in the suburbs. I thought back to the lessons I taught on global hunger and the few times I addressed the racial complexities of the reconstruction era during *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* (Taylor, 2006), but I recognize my attempts were probably more akin to multiculturalism than centering experiences and providing counternarratives of people of color. This letter and subsequent conversation with Ms. Thompson felt different than my previous teaching setting for it was in the context of a shared relationship—one that would end up in a sustained partnership lasting the whole school year.

As I reread the letter, it was apparent that Uncle Billy had answered some questions which meant that Silas had written to him first. Not only that, as I contemplated it further, Uncle Billy had written to every child in the class. Now, this realization made me humbled and curious. Uncle Billy used his own resources and time to write to a classroom of elementary students for seemingly nothing in return.

The short conversation I had with Silas percolated through me that night and in the days that followed. This letter writing exchange was not only uncommon, but felt Biblically-aligned to my personal Christian convictions and closer to what Reformed Christian school should promote and cultivate—to be in relationship with people who have been marginalized. This

literary intervention was something that I wanted to explore and understand, both from my own former teaching standpoint, but also as a scholar, and as a mom.

I set up a time to meet with Ms. Thompson and she explained the situation. After the passing of her father, she reached out to his brother, who was in prison. The two reconnected. At some point, she determined that both her students and her uncle would benefit from this correspondence relationship. While she initially thought he would write a whole class letter, he ended up writing to every student individually.

After that conversation with Ms. Thompson, I was eager to come alongside and be part of this blossoming project. Seeking advice from professors and fellow classmates, I was challenged to confront my own biases about individuals in incarceration. Growing up in the 1980s and 90s, most of my knowledge of incarceration came from the media. The "War on Drugs" created a fear in many elementary school kids. During this time, crack cocaine was targeted as Enemy #1, disproportionately sending Black men to prison (Alexander, 2010). Because of my lack of knowledge and misunderstandings, I read books and listened to talks about the prison industrial complex. Notably, I read Alexander's (2010) book, *The New Jim Crow*, and it became a powerful springboard to other learning. Through it I became more aware of how politics and capitalism are grossly intertwined with policing and the prison industrial complex. I read autobiographies of returned citizens[5] and their experiences (Andrisse, 2021; Hill, 2013) and also critiques of prison-based ministries (Erzen, 2017). I sought out lectures about educational research in carceral spaces (Milner, 2022). Layered on this was my in-class graduate school learning about the school to prison nexus disproportionately affecting Black and Brown students. Admittedly, all of this was outside of my personal and professional experiences and while reading provided

[5] I use the term "returned citizens" to refer to people who have been formerly incarcerated (Yates, 2015).

needed head knowledge, I still had little personal interaction until I started writing to Uncle Billy in the fall of 2020.

I knew I needed to connect with Billy. I will admit that I didn't know what to expect. Ms. Thompson had prepped me that because of my identity as a White woman, that he may not trust me. This concern seemed to me historically valid. For that reason, I am grateful that she wrote to him about me before I sent my initial letter. I did reach out eventually, and, as a result, Billy and I corresponded for 18 months until his release from prison in the summer of 2022. During this time, I became personally involved in Billy and his story. By then I was reading letters and having regular conversations with Ms. Thompson, for one of my roles with respect to the project was mailing the letters.

Then and now I am still cognizant of the fact that Billy and I appear to have little in common. Not only that, even with the letters, I know little about what life is like as a Black man, much less someone who has experienced police brutality, unjust sentencing, and mass incarceration.[6] It is this fact that gives me pause. How can I even begin to understand his life, much less research and write about it? How can I write about this literacy intervention while keeping in mind that he, at the time, was sitting in a prison cell?

To be honest, I don't have a perfect (or even a good) answer. I can say that as a mom, friend, teacher, and Christian, I have felt compelled to research and share how Uncle Billy and Ms. Thompson impacted the lives of the third graders. I can also testify that I've devoted myself to continued learning, to nurturing my critical relationships (both within and outside of this study), to interrogating my social location and privilege as a Christian White woman (Tisby, 2024), to listening to critique, and to being honest (foremost with myself, but also with others in

[6] I follow Alexander's (2010) definition of mass incarceration to mean "not only the criminal justice system but also the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (p. 15).

the field) about the complexities this study holds. Still, putting this written dissertation out terrifies me. I know my knowledge is limited – "as only a reflection " (NIV, 2010) or "through a glass darkly" (KJV, 1987) (1 Corinthians 13:2) as the apostle Paul put it, highly particular and partial, not really generalizable. I worry this study may be offensive to some (or many) Black readers. I worry about further reifying "pain stories" about Black people (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Green, 2020). I worry about negative assumptions readers may make when I testify to my Christian faith as part of my degree fulfillment at a public state university.

Yet I feel drawn to write and share this work, because of my own spiritual and intellectual desires. My response to that initial reading of Uncle Billy's note to my son, Silas, launched a journey to appreciating Ms. Thompson's invitation to Silas (and his classmates and me) to be part of her family circle. Through this invitation, my understanding of community changed. For now it included a new name, a new face, a new identity to consider. As a result of my investment in Billy and he in me, our community became entwined together, and from my standpoint, offering a new vision of community for me, for the students, and I hope also for scholarship and practice in elementary (Christian) education.

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

In a recent speech to the National Republican Committee, as reported by Jones (2024), "Trump calls his political opponents 'very sick people.' priming his audience to see their fellow citizens with suspicion and fear." Jones (2024) goes on to highlight another snippet of the speech where the former president situates the upcoming election in terms of good vs. evil based on political stances, and further, called on his followers to "save" the country. Taken together, these rhetorical moves create fear and suspicion, reemphasize binaries, twist Christianity and politics in detrimental and damaging ways, and seem to be part of the growing influence of White Christian Nationalism in American politics and society.

Meanwhile, in Mississippi, the recent convictions of six former white police officers police who abused and torture two Black men (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024) remind us that anti-Black racism is alive and well within the ranks of law enforcement. While those that adhere to White Christian Nationalism (WCN) may suggest that racism is purely a result of personal decisions, the murders of George Floyd, Patrick Lyoya, Breonna Taylor, Daute Wright, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Philando Castile (to a name a few) point to systemic anti-Black racism that is rampant in the U.S..

While this dissertation is not about the former president or politics or even focused on police brutality, it is about this movement of our country toward fear of the "other," the narrowing of community—some of it stemming from the ideology of WCN creating a vision of community that is exclusionary, hierarchical, and inhospitable to those outside its ranks. It is dangerous not only to our democracy (DuMez, 2022, 2024; Tisby, 2022) but also to Christianity and Christian spaces (churches and schools) which are ripe for its transmittance (Christians Against Christian Nationalism, n.d.). The current project assumes that this narrowed version of

community works against Biblical principles of community presented both in the Old Testament prophetic scriptures and in the New Testament teachings of Jesus. But an understanding of Jesus' life is not necessary for those who hold to WCN, for their ideologies may not be situated with the Bible at all. Gorski and Perry (2022) find that many who adhere to WCN may not be religious in terms of church attendance or other traditional senses of religious affiliation. The "Christian" in WCN is merely an appropriation of the myth of a Christian nation rather than to gospel narratives of justice or love.

Reformed Christian schools (RCS), the educational setting of this study, are not immune to the effects of WCN. Historically, Reformed Christian scholars have distanced themselves from Christian nationalist rhetoric, albeit not termed WCN at the time (written in 2002). Vryhof (2002) states, for example, that "There is no sense among Reformed Christian schoolpeople [sic] of trying to "take over" society or 'returning America to Christian heritage' " (pg. 118). That being said, some have strayed away from this long-standing conviction. WCN is affecting Christian education in more subtle ways as parents question the teaching of "justice," push back against teaching critical thinking, resist engaging with culture, lose their ability to hold "gray areas," and refuse to see or hold multiple perspectives. Each of these examples conflict with what I hold as the foundations of Reformed Christian education.

All this to say that one way to challenge the effects of WCN, and other movements restricting community, in education is through faith communities (churches and schools). Burke, Juzwik, and Prins (2023) suggest that one possibility is to "create a meaningful sense of belonging within their own Christian tradition" (p. 8). They also suggest a deeper engagement with the Bible that includes learning about multiple interpretations. Being rooted in Jesus' teachings and expanding notions of community could potentially offer a resistance to WCN and

challenge the status quo. With an expansive view of community mediated through literacy and centered in Biblical scriptures (with attention paid toward justice for the marginalized), this study explores a pedagogy and specific literacy intervention in a Christian school classroom that challenges community-narrowing ideologies like WCN.

Concurrently, politicians and political groups are making education, and specifically literacy, a battleground. The current book bans, attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and suspicions around socio-emotional learning, together with WCN, leads to a hostile and authoritarian educational atmosphere where a diminishing trust in teachers is a result and restricting curriculum becomes a means of control. In contrast, this study recognizes the background, connections, and expertise of teachers. The study presents an example of an integrated literacy environment that tackles issues of racial justice with care and complexity. In doing so, the study offers an example of how a teacher and school can respond to challenges posed by this current cultural milieu.

With the current societal backdrop in mind, the purpose of this study is to highlight the multiple learning possibilities of an innovative epistolary writing intervention within a larger literacy pedagogy in a third grade classroom. My research asked: *How can letter writing widen perspectives of diverse community?*

In the chapters to come I lay out an argument for understanding how epistolary writing, as part of a multi-layered literacy environment, reached across physical and figurative borders to expand students' understanding of diverse community. Letters helped to build a relationship with Uncle Billy, an incarcerated Black Christian man, to open up new pathways to learning about racial (in)justice, Christianity, and literacy. This experience involved new and expansive

knowledge, emotional investment, and subsequent action. In order to show this, I first lay out a road map to situate the study.

In Chapter 1, I laid out the societal backdrop in which this study takes place. Taking place within a current time and space that seeks to limit community with Christian circles, this study offers pedagogical possibilities to challenge and potentially counteract these forces. In Chapter 2, I establish the theoretical and conceptual foundation of this study. Situated within an understanding of diverse community, I draw together three separate, but also entangled strands: Christianity, race-related theories, and sociocultural literacy. In Chapter 3, I explicate the research design and methods of the study. In order to explore the multiple interconnected webs of complexity and relationships, I have turned to ethnographic-oriented research design methods. Within this chapter, I detail the methods as well as the context, participants, and conclude with data analysis. Chapters 4-6 explore the findings from my ethnographically-oriented research study. Using classroom observations, interviews, letters and field notes, I sought to address the research question, *How can letter writing widen experiences of diverse communities for 3rd grade students?* Through interpreting the data, three themes emerge: The Power of a Teacher, the Power of Letter Writing, the Power of Connections. Specifically, Chapter 4 describes the Power of a Teacher as a teacher, specifically Ms. Thompson in this study, is the classroom connector between the students and Uncle Billy. She served as a guide for literacy learning, a facilitator of discussion of racial (in)justice in the classroom. Chapter 5 highlights the Power of Letter writing. It addresses what students learned through the letter writing process and how letter writing became the platform for Uncle Billy to become a co-educator alongside Ms. Thompson. The last findings chapter, Chapter 6, the Power of Connection, explores how relational reciprocity and the sharing between participants impacted perspectives. Although the findings point to these three

distinct themes, in many ways the data connects across all three findings inviting new possibilities for pedagogical considerations and definitions of community. Finally, Chapter 7 brings together the data situated within a quote from Freire (1984) about experiencing community as a result of the head, heart, and hands. From there I discuss the implications of this study.

CHAPTER 2 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

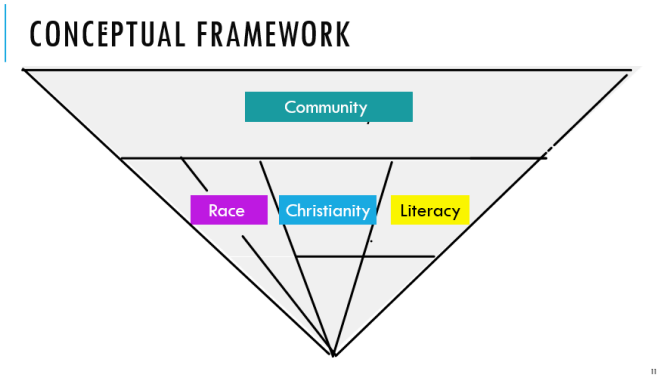
As the title of this dissertation suggests, *More than Just Letters: Expanding Community Through Literacy in an Elementary Christian School*, is about letters, community, and a Christian elementary school. But as the word "just" implies, it is not simply about letter writing. For this study encapsulates a multi-layered literacy environment of which letter writing is a part. Not only that, "just" also alludes to "justice" for threads of justice are woven through, particularly in response to racial (in)justice and incarceration. All these facets work together to expand notions of community for elementary students within a Christian school. In order to capture the complexity this study holds, many theoretical threads need to be understood separately while also in conjunction with one another.

Here, I go back to the research question, *How can letter writing widen experiences of diverse community for third grade students?* First, in this chapter, I provide an overarching view of community in relation to this study's context. In particular, I focus on three factors, or "strands," regarding community: race-related theories, Christianity, and sociocultural literacy. Because each strand is quite broad, I will also focus on selected facets of each but also show how they are interconnected.

Rather than focusing on one scholar or on an individual theory, the study considers multiple overarching themes and their intersections with theory. Therefore, the theoretical framework does not compartmentalize into neat "buckets," but intersects with one another across themes. Because current research could benefit from more examples of these particular entanglements of these factors and Christianity is broad, I hope to provide examples as well as in-depth reasoning and biblical justification to the stated themes. (See figure 2 for the visual of Conceptual Framework.)

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework



Community

The theoretical framework of this study is rooted in an expanded vision of community that brings together various scholars working within theology (Cone, 2010; Evans, 2018; Jennings, 2010, 2020; Reilly, 2022; Rohr, 2010; Sales, 2020; NIV, 2011), theories of language (Bakhtin, 1986; Freire, 1985, 1993), and (literacy) education (Dyson, 2021; Freire, 1984, 1985, 1993; hooks, 2003; Palmer, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). This envisioned community attends to themes of belonging, justice-mindedness, proximity, vulnerability, and collective sharing.

I start with conceptualizations of community for it encompasses the possibilities this study holds. Before I delve into and theorize the community in more detail, I acknowledge two important things. First, community is a well-worn word. Despite its overuse, theorizing community holds value in this particular context. Second, definitions of community are fluid, meaning they change depending on the make-up and rules of each community. Because of this, community can spur feelings of warmth and belonging, but community can also be stagnant and insular, used to exclude and "other" (Fendler, 2006).

For this study, I concentrate on the meanings/imaginings of community in terms of a particular notion of Christianity and Christian schooling. Since community is conceptualized in various ways within Christianity and Christian schooling, dependent on progressive vs. traditionalist theology, conceptions of the Bible, etc, I want to situate community within a variety of diverse scholars and ecumenical understandings.

Expansively-minded Community

While some communities seek to set parameters on membership, I look to an ideal of Christian community that is open to widening (vs. policing or reifying) its borders. The New Testament gospels give a model for expansive communities. Specifically looking at the life and ministry of Jesus, he intentionally included people from various socio-economic levels, religious leanings, and community status-levels—calling tax collectors, fishermen, the wealthy (e.g., a doctor), and women into ministry with him. Further, In Matthew 25, Jesus calls his followers to look after the needy, the stranger and those in prison, for whatever you "did not for the least of these you did not do for me" (NIV, 2011, Matthew 25:40). In the story of the Samaritan woman at the well (John, chapter 4), Jesus made a choice to go through Samaria rather than around which was the custom in that day, in order to visit marginalized places and people. Further, the Parable of the Great Banquet (NIV, 2011, Luke 14:1-24) reminds us that all are invited to the banquet, while some will make excuses, the feast is for all. Clearly, Jesus' example of community included a wide variety of people, going out of this way to intentionally invite all people who might willingly come.

Specifically attending to the underrepresented, this classroom community intentionally seeks to include and learn about people who have been marginalized. In Ms. Thompson's Christian school classroom, which for many reasons remains predominantly White, a widening

sphere includes racial diversity of persons, but also diversity in contexts (e.g., prison, schools), thoughts, and ideas. This is easy to say, but more difficult to put into practice, especially as so often White educators and schools have often gotten this wrong and leaned into tokenism, White saviorism, and glossing over injustices.

For this reason, my understanding of community attends to broadening and inclusion of voices. It includes contexts that are often excluded from traditional learning sites. Jennings (2020) notes, "Theological education is supposed to open up sites where we enter the struggle to rethink our people" (Jennings, 2020, p. 10). In a society containing Christian circles that seeks to set parameters for inclusion, widening spheres of community is essential to understanding the expansive kingdom of God.

Belonging

Talking about belonging within Christian circles is complicated for many, with good reason. Christian communities throughout history often have seemed more concerned with controlling who's in and who's out than with welcoming and promoting belonging. With that in mind, this study uplifts belonging, thus favoring inclusion over exclusion and welcome over "discipline."

Belonging takes on added depth when undergirded with Biblical narratives. In many cases, belonging starts with invitation. In the New Testament, Jesus calls to each of the disciples–a motley assortment of men (and women, undermentioned (Moltmann-Wendel, 1982)) coming from a range of backgrounds and invites them into his community and names them as belonging to each other and to him. Another prominent example of belonging is Jesus' invitation to the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well. Defying societal norms, Jesus asks the woman for a drink. Not only did men not directly address women, but Jewish people did not typically deal

with Samaritans as they were seen as unclean, and religious and culturally inferior (Sales, 2020). This question to the woman at the well, whose past likely involved abuse and abandonment (Harper, 2016), proved that Jesus not only sees her, but also reveals his Messiahship to her, giving her an equal position in the Kingdom of God (Sales, 2020). These Biblical stories of belonging suggest that belonging is more than just familial, but includes those of differing cultural backgrounds, genders, and those who have been marginalized by society.

Belonging is invitational, but also cultivated. Jennings (2020) calls "cultivating belonging" the central work of theological education. In fact, he calls cultivating belonging "an art" reminding that it is a process that takes time, skill, and practice. "Belonging must become the hermeneutic starting point from which we think the social, the political, the individual, the ecclesial, and most crucial for this work, the educational" (Jennings, p. 10). As a Black theologian, Jennings envisions belonging that contrasts with the distortions of belonging that Western education and Whiteness has constructed with regards to possession and commodification. Instead, we look toward a spiritual pedagogy where belonging seeks communion free of human hierarchies.

For the educator, fostering a sense of belonging in our classrooms is not a "buzz word," for belonging, as Jennings (2020) notes, is essential to learning. Belonging is a place to begin, not from a place of power, like Whiteness or colonialism, but from a shared understanding as *imago dei*, or being made in the image of God. Belonging is community-minded; it sees all people created in the image of God and because of that, it recognizes and addresses injustice. Belonging invites learning and perspectives from people whom society has marginalized.

Hospitality

One element within the Christian classroom community that plays a role in this study is hospitality. The Oxford English dictionary (n.d) defines hospitality as "the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality and goodwill." This particular definition of hospitality resonates with me because of its inclusion of strangers. Although hospitality can include those whom we are comfortable with, it is "the visitor" or "the stranger" that means hospitality does not come without some measure of uncertainty and discomfort. Hospitality to the stranger directly connects to Biblical themes of justice and begs to be considered within Christian classroom spaces. Other scholarship, namely the Civic Hospitality Project[7] (2024), also think about hospitality and what this means for the Christian education. Salient for this project is the understanding that Biblically-based roots of hospitality as more than just tolerance, but an embodiment of Christian theology.

For this study, I am particularly interested in hospitality to "strangers" as discussed in the New Testament. Jesus' clear message about welcoming the stranger is noted throughout the gospels. After Jesus tells the parable of The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:35), he says, "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in." Jesus extended generous hospitality to both friends and strangers throughout his ministry. Not only did Jesus eat with his disciples (friends), he ate with tax collectors (enemies despised by the Jewish people), and Pharisees (Jewish religious party who were skeptical of Jesus). In the story of the "Feeding of the 5,000", Jesus literally fed thousands of people he had never met, miraculously providing them food from meager supplies. Further, hospitality became a hallmark of the early church, preached and

[7] The Civic Hospitality Project (civichospitality.com) considers the intersections of the Christian faith and civic engagement.

written about by John, Peter, Paul, and Timothy and seen in the actions of Lydia, Mary and Martha, to name a few.

Even with myriad examples of hospitality practiced in the Bible, I wonder how this could translate into contemporary (Christian) school classrooms. I wonder how the net of hospitality extends beyond those in the classroom to a broader community to include the stranger. Because of this, I want to consider how the classroom can be a hospitable space for "the stranger" as a person, but also for unknown ideas and thoughts as well. Palmer (1993) states, "God is always using the stranger to introduce us to the strangeness of truth. To be inhospitable to strangers or strange ideas, however unsettling they may be, is to be hostile to the possibility of truth; hospitality is not only an ethical virtue but an epistemological one as well" (p. 74). The search for truth, as Palmer (1993) alludes, includes those inside a classroom, but people outside our circles as well. It requires contact with people and things not known to us which includes unknown ideas or perspectives.

Following this conception, the Christian school classroom community needs not only to be hospitable to those within the classroom, but beyond it as well. Pedagogy needs to push the boundaries of the known, to make a welcoming place to bring new ideas into learning. This kind of pedagogy calls for gracious hospitality of strangers and potentially unconsidered ideas. In this uncertain learning space, we learn and grow and understand God better. In a current time and place where new ideas are sources of fear and judgment and met with active resistance, this view of hospitality moves beyond fear to reach toward welcome, but to discernment and an acknowledgement that our knowledge of God increases when we seek to be hospitable.

Proximity

Besides hospitality, another element of community to consider is proximity. In this section I first develop the Biblical implication of proximity. Then, I consider the role proximity plays in the classroom and in letter writing.

Proximity has Biblical implications. Jesus was not afraid of close proximity—he touched and healed the leper, he healed the blind man using his own spit and dirt gathered from the ground (NIV, 2011, John 9), he ate with tax collectors. For those that believed in Jesus, close proximity to Jesus brought life, wholeness, and restoration. The bleeding woman knew that touching Jesus' robe would heal her (NIV, 2011, Matthew 9:20-22). The friends of the paralyzed man understood that getting him close to Jesus, by any means necessary–like cutting a hole in a ceiling– would heal him (NIV, 2011, Mark 2:1-12). In each of these cases, the people that Jesus healed were all marginalized by society. Jesus' proximity to those that were ostracized should matter for it speaks to who mattered and who was included. Bryan Stevenson (Tippet, 2021, November 4), reiterates this sensibility, "We cannot make progress in creating a more just society, healthier communities, if we allow ourselves to be disconnected from the people who are most vulnerable — from the poor, the neglected, the incarcerated, the condemned." Here, close proximity becomes a necessary component to building healthier communities.

Bringing this proximity to the classroom, I wonder how, educationally, can we create closer proximity to those that have been marginalized? How can a classroom tangibly reach across its walls to encompass those whom Jesus loved? For some to choose Christian education, distancing from the "world" is considered a good thing; parents describe it as "sheltering." While the concept of shelter can have positive connotations, in this case it is used to signify separation from those who are not like them—who may disrupt the safety of the status quo. In this type of

community, engagement with the world is seen as a necessity. While physical closeness may not always be an option, bringing in people, stories, thoughts and ideas from those who have been marginalized in order to learn from one another exposes us to a fuller understanding of justice and the gospel. Developing community across physical distance, such as a prison and a classroom in this study, requires a willingness from participants to engage, but also an effective tool in which to communicate. In this case, letter writing, as a literacy intervention, created greater proximity to bring together participants.

Justice-mindedness

Justice, for some in Christian communities, takes on the role of discipline and authority in insisting adherence to divinely ordained laws. In these cases, some would point to the Old Testament laws from Deuteronomy and Leviticus to form the basis for their beliefs on justice. For others, justice is rooted in the latter Old Testament prophets (Amos, Isaiah, for example) and centers action and advocacy.[8] This study focuses on the latter. This kind of justice stems from love from God and neighbor, is community-minded, and liberatory. Further, this type of justice understands Martin Luther King Jr's call for a "beloved community" not as a watered-down utopia, but a call to action that requires the understanding of power, an expansive view of neighbor, and a love as "an energizing force of justice." (Tisby, 2021, p. 143). As Tisby (2021) writes, "If Christians claim to be concerned with their neighbors, then they must also be concerned about the structures and systems that enable or inhibit their neighbor's flourishing" (p. 142). I contend this stance is deeply important for predominantly White Christian classroom spaces because in their homogeneity they miss gospel truths and realities of those that are directly impacted by the imbalance of power.

[8] While sometimes called "minor" prophets, Gorski (2017) calls them the latter prophets.

Having a focus on justice beckons us to look at Jesus in a different way than the way Northern European Christianity has traditionally viewed Jesus, which is mainly through a White lens. But, as DuBois (in Cone, 2010) reminds us, "The white Christ is not the Biblical Christ" (p. 103). In contrast, embracing justice and liberation reminds us that Jesus was not White and, further, if we neglect to connect Jesus to the oppressed, we fail to see his message. Further, Cone (2010) notes, "What is invisible to white Christians and their theologians is inescapable to black people." In other words, we need a diverse (theological) community to see Jesus more clearly.

Justice, built on love, is also community-minded for it seeks liberation of all, not just some. It requires reading the Bible and looking at Jesus through the eyes of a larger community. Evans (2018) expands, "it's especially important for those of us who come to the Bible from positions of relative social, economic, and racial privilege to read its stories alongside people from marginalized communities, past and present, who are often more practiced at tracing that crimson thread of justice through its pages" (p. 41). By reading the Bible in community alongside those who have been historically marginalized, gives us opportunities to learn truths in the Bible that those who come from majoritarian culture are not accustomed to seeing. But, when we do, the Bible and our community becomes wider and more complex, more fully reflecting the story of God.

A justice-focused Christian classroom celebrates the joy of diversity balanced with an understanding of power (Reilly, 2022; Tisby, 2021), diverse thinking about Jesus (Cone, 2020; Jennings, 2020), and is future-minded (Freire, 1997). In this way, justice becomes an important foundation for Christian community-mindedness.

Collective Emotion and Vulnerability

Another component of a diverse community is that of emotion and vulnerability. In a society focused on individual achievement, focusing on collective community seems antithetical to dominant mainstream culture. For this study, I look at the collective community in two different areas: emotionality (sharing of emotion) and vulnerability.

Education that makes space for sharing personal stories, asking questions, and showing emotions can hold a powerful connective role. Palmer (1993) talks about the classroom space being open and vulnerable. "The teacher must make the first move in opening the space for feelings simply because the teacher has the power to do so. In whatever way seems natural, the teacher needs to convey something like this to the students, "...I have feelings too and I will make myself vulnerable by telling you some of them." (p. 84). Here, Palmer (1993) suggests that making room for feelings needs to be modeled first by the teacher in order to create an atmosphere of openness in order to be carried out by students.

Building off vulnerability, Brown (2010), an academic scholar on shame and vulnerability, notes the impact vulnerability can have on relationships, "Staying vulnerable is a risk we have to take if we can to experience connection" (p. 53) For students, classrooms are a potential place where vulnerability is modeled and connections are made.

Besides vulnerability, classrooms need to reflect joy and hope. "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers, which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference." This quote from Audre Lorde (1978), notes how joy becomes a bridge for people, lessening differences and creating connections. Further, joy has Biblical connotations (The Fruits of the Spirit). Joy is an element that brings people together–in a classroom and

beyond. In speaking of hope, Freire (1997) calls hope an "ontological requirement for every human being" (p. 44). In other words, hope becomes part of our existence and reality. This echoes in Christian theology as Christians hope for renewal, for "things unseen," for heaven. In a classroom built on community and connection, collective vulnerability, joy, and hope become necessary components.

To summarize this section on community, I offered a few key elements of community that encompass this study. Attuned to belonging, justice-mindedness, hospitality, proximity, and collective emotion and vulnerability, each of these elements plays a significant role in the conceptualization of an expansively-minded and diverse community for this classroom.

In the next 3 sections of the paper, I highlight theory and concepts for three entangled strands: Christianity, race, and literacy.

Christianity

While I am theologically grounded in Reformed thought, I am not a theologian nor are my convictions of Christianity solely based on Reformed tradition. For many reasons, I find value in being ecumenically-minded Christian. Personally and professionally, I have been inspired by many people who enter the pages or inform this dissertation. I value the work of Palmer (1993,1998), a Quaker who writes about Christian spirituality within education; Smith (2018) and Wolterstorff (2006), who works within Reformed Christian pedagogy; the late Evans (2018), whose writing as a former evangelical turned Episcopalian inspires me to grapple with my own dynamic relationship to the Bible, and Rohr (2010), a Francican priest–who all help me think more broadly about the Bible and its message. My gratitude further goes to Brown (2018), Cone (2010), Harper (2016), Jennings (2010, 2020), Reilly (2022), Tisby (2018, 2021, 2022),

and others who push me to grapple with the complexities of Christianity and race in the United States.

For instance, Cone's (2010) *The Cross and the Lynching Tree,* a book about Black liberation theology, provided me a poignant connection between the crucifixion of Jesus to the lynching of Black Americans. What's more, Black liberation theology is about empowering Black people to fight for justice, and affirming Blackness as part of God's creation and community (Kirylo & Cone, 2011). For me, growing up in a predominantly White Christian Reformed church, this connection was eye-opening, giving me a perspective on how to see Jesus from the lens of the Black experience.

There is a significant connection between Cone and Freire, both in their mutual respect and friendship, but also in their foundation of liberation theology (Kirylo & Cone, 2011), or the liberation for people who are oppressed. While Cone focuses on Black experience in the US and Freire, for his part, on Latin America, both forms of liberation theology care deeply for justice.

To be clear, liberation theology is far outside my own faith tradition, so I write this with an understanding that these paragraphs only skim the surface. While some inside Reformed theology would balk at the beliefs within liberation theology (specifically because of its Marxist roots), but, I think there is much Reformed Christians could stand to learn from liberation theology. Its sharp focus on justice for historically marginalized people (e.g. socio-economically, racially, culturally, etc), I believe, needs to be infused into how we understand and care for people.

Admittedly, Reformed thinking and theology shape my life–directly affecting my vocation, my past and current religious experience, and how I interact with others. With that, I hold with the foundational beliefs that the redemptive story of God calls humanity to not only

recognize sin, but how the gift of salvation propels us to action. I believe in God's sovereignty over all things and that he calls us to "make all things new." In saying this, while I am rooted in Reformed thinking, I also feel there is much to gain from looking ecumenically at other denominational and traditions to recognize a fuller vision of God's kingdom.

Personally, I believe Christians should be collectively and community-minded, loving our neighbor(s), not only because the Bible calls us, but because when we do, we see the fullness of God in more vibrant ways. I believe that God's intention for his people is to live in diverse communities which is reflected throughout the Biblical scriptures. For example, often positioned as a cautionary tale of the consequences of pride, the Old Testament narrative of the Tower of Babel may better be reflected as a loving example of a gift given to his people in the form of diverse language (Barros, 2019) and care for his people (Harper, 2016). Harper (2016) in her book, *The Very Good Gospel*, talks about the scattering of language in terms of "a blessing" for the people, not only because of the hazard to physical safety is was to work with the materials at hand, but also the scattering of language meant the people groups were able to develop their own language, cultures, and perspectives. Looking at the Tower of Babel through this lens offers a compelling interpretation of God's intention for culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The gift of diversity in languages was also carried through to the New Testament as well. God, through the Holy Spirit, descending on the disciples caused them to speak in languages they had not known, empowering them to preach the gospel to multiple people groups (New International Version (NIV), 2011, Acts 2:1-12). In a lesser talked about example, the signpost over the cross, written to mock Jesus at his death, was scripted in multiple languages, allowing the news of Jesus' death to reach multiple people groups (Harper, 2016). There is

Biblical grounding, then, for the idea that diverse languages, cultures, communities should be seen as both a gift and a goal in educational settings.

For me, this recognition of diversity comes in two parts; first, a celebration in the way that we are created differently to reflect the diversity of the Creator God (Evans, 2021), and two, recognizing the individual and collective sin in the form of pride and power that created inequitable systems and structures based on race, economics, gender, sexuality, and status. Understanding that these structures are out of alignment with God's intention and shalom (Harper, 2016) means actively working toward justice for the marginalized.

Along with this, I believe in God's intentional inclusion of marginalized individuals and communities. Throughout the Biblical scripture, the writers of the Bible call for special attention to be paid to those who have been marginalized, specifically the widow, fatherless, the foreigner, and the poor.[9] Biblical calls for justice, including the Old Testament concept of the Year of Jubilee, provide economic and communal reset, forgiving debts and setting oppressed peoples free. The Old Testament prophets also spoke boldly of justice for the oppressed. In the New Testament, Jesus' interaction with the unnamed woman at the well showcases the welcoming nature of Jesus, but more than that, it is also a beautiful example of the transformational power of the gospel to those who are marginalized (Harper, 2016; Sales, 2020).

Through the study and dissertation, Biblical referencing and sharing of scriptural passages become a connection point between participants. From a personal standpoint as a researcher, I recognize that humans interpret scripture through their own perspectives and lenses. Because of this, I approach matters of faith by leaning into humility, by approaching the Bible with an acknowledgement that human thinking is fallible compared to the mind of God. While

[9] I use this terminology (once) as referenced in the NIV (2011), recognizing that some terms may now be considered outdated.

individual Christians and denominations all have convictions of what the Bible teaches, none can claim absolute authority. This humility extends to questions and curiosity about faith, not a sign of unbelief, but rather seeking to understand the mysteriousness of God.

(Christian) Education and Community

The role of community, theoretically and practically, undergirds this study. Because of the deep implications surrounding the meaning and role of community within this study, I take into consideration several theoretical perspectives/theoretical thinkers and their intersections with education and Christian spirituality.

This study draws on the works of Freire (1984, 1985, 1993), whose Latin American Catholicism deeply affected his life and scholarship, (Barros, 2020; McLaren & Jandrić, 2018), both in his theorizing of dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge, to be discussed later, but also in how faith is tied to community and social action. In a short, but poignant paper, *To Know, Practice and Preach the Gospels*, Freire (1984), writes about the connection between faith, social action, and community. "I understand the Gospels, well or badly, to the degree that, well or badly, I live them. I experience them and in them experience myself through my own social practice, in history, with other human beings" (p. 548). Freire essentially says that to know the gospels is to practice them with others. In a study that delves into pedagogy attuned to community and connectedness, tandem knowing and practicing go "hand in hand." In doing so, the Biblical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John), their message and subsequent understandings, are known and tangibly lived out, creating a ripple effect from the classroom to communities.

Similarly, Palmer (1993, 1998), influenced by Freire (1993) asserts that education should be about co-creation, dialogue, and communal learning. In his book, *To Know as we are Known; Education as a Spiritual Journey*, Palmer (1993), explores how Christian spirituality shapes

teaching and learning. While there is much to take up, for the sake of this dissertation, I start with his theorizing of "knowing is loving" (p. 1). Using an often-quoted passage in 1 Corinthians 13 (NIV, 2011), Palmer posits this passage not as romantic love (as many popular mainstream Christian interpretations have done, especially in their weddings!), but how love could be interpreted as a driving force in education. Specifically, Palmer writes about "Knowing Face to Face" (p. 14) echoing language from verse 12. ("For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see *face to face.* Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" NIV, emphasis added). From this, the implications of knowing is that it is communal–knowing fully is about being fully known–about seeing one another face to face. It is about accountability to one another and the world. Extending from this, Palmer (1993) writes, "This is a personal knowledge toward which Christian spirituality calls us, a knowledge that does not distance us from the world but brings us into community *face to face*" (p. 16). Two essential things can be drawn from these quotes: One, knowing happens with others in community and, two, learning happens in proximity with the world. Each of these facets, knowledge as community and learning as proximity, hold implications for this larger study.

There is much more to be said about spiritual education in terms of what it offers in terms of connection, but also in reconnection. Palmer (1993) adds that love is not shaped in the intellectual, but in the spiritual: "our knowing becomes a way of reweaving that community's bonds" (p. 8) This concept has important implications for how the spiritual shapes community and has the propensity for not only weaving bonds, but also *re*weaving bonds–repairing broken bonds. I believe the verbiage of "repairing" and "reweaving" bonds directly connect to Biblical justice-mindedness (NIV, 2011, Isaiah 58) and an effort to create, in Dr. Martin Luther King's terms, a more "Beloved Community."

While Palmer addresses community within a spiritual sense, Smith (2018), writes about Christian pedagogy, specifically. Writing from a Reformed Christian tradition, he wants those interested in Christian education to "work toward ways of designing teaching and learning that resonate more consistently with Christian convictions about what it is to be human, to interact with other humans, to serve the world, and to imagine the future" (p. 133). Through this study, I hope to make connections of how faith shapes pedagogy, and further, how faith can shape Christian community. Smith (2018) asserts, and I agree, that Christians are not the only teachers who value community, but Christian teachers are called to value community because of foundational Christian beliefs. It is true that communities (and even/especially Christian communities) can be exclusive, competitive, narrow-minded, and harmful: however, a classroom community, like the one in this study, can expand communities through inviting belonging, and fostering hospitality, and justice-mindedness.

Race-Informed Theory and Literature

Race is an integral facet, both because of the racial identification of the participants, some of whom are Black, but also in the role that anti-racist understanding and racial justice more broadly, plays for this study. Because of this, race frameworks, like aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and ideas about Black joy, inform this dissertation. Specifically, I draw from counternarratives as a facet of CRT. Further, in this predominantly White space, elements of Whiteness Studies are included, specifically in regard to Whiteness as normative (Gilborn, 2016) and color-evasive ideologies and white saviorism. Due to Uncle Billy's story as a Black incarcerated man, the section concludes with literature on carceral spaces.

Counternarratives

Critical Race Theory (CRT) centers race as a central aspect to understanding society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Starting with a foundation in law, CRT moved into an educational realm through the work of Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995). CRT includes a variety of tenets depending on the individual or group marginalization. Certain tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) inform this project; namely that of counternarratives (or counter-storytelling or counter-storying) as it intersects with understanding the lived experiences of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2016). This tenet recognizes the lived experience of people of color as a strength to both teaching and research and valuable to understanding racial oppression and includes their stories as critical to understanding how race affects them and society. Specifically, Milner (2013) explains, "CRT explicitly solicits, analyzes, and listens to the lived experiences of people of color through counter storytelling methods such as family histories, parables, testimonials, and chronicles" (Milner, p. 539). For young students, as the ones in this project, family histories, testimonials, and stories told of people of color are a natural and effective method to convey perspectives, lived realities, and build empathy which is why counterstories play a critical role in this classroom study. As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) state, "It is the hope that well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers to bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others" (p. 49).

Giving a specific example, counterstories in this study push back against the dominant narratives that "prisons are normal and effective," "the criminal justice system operates without bias," and "all people in prison are bad and/or unsafe." Counterstories, as told through the lens of Uncle Billy and Ms. Thompson in the pages ahead, complicate these common dominant narratives revealing a system set up to work against people like Uncle Billy. And, just as

importantly, counterstories reveal a man, despite his mistakes, to be kind, loving, and someone who cares deeply for the students.

According to Solórzano & Yosso (2016), counterstories take three different forms, two of which are applicable for this study. One, they can include p*ersonal stories or narratives* that reveal an individual's experience with race and racism. Primarily, this plays out when Ms. Thompson tells her own stories of race and racism. Second, they can include *other people's stories or narratives* as told in third person. In this case, Ms. Thompson also is the narrator for other people's stories, like her father's stories or Uncle Billy's story. The third form of story encompasses *composite stories* and is not applicable to this project (p. 134, emphasis added). The first two forms, however, are infused into pedagogy of Ms. Thompson, both in formal ways like part of a lesson plan, but also in implicit ways which will be discussed further in the dissertation.

Additionally, counterstories function in four different ways (Solozano & Yosso, 2016) to positively impact the classroom and larger community. Each of these functions, in varying ways, can be seen throughout the study.

> "(a) [counterstories] *build community* among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice, (b) they can *challenge* the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform believe systems, (c) they *open new windows* into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position, (d) they can *teach others* that by combining elements from both story and the current reality, on can construct another world that is richer than either the story or reality alone" (p. 136, emphasis added)

In all, looking at the participants and data from the lens of counterstories allows for a fuller comprehension of community, a disruption of whiteness, a widening of alternative realities and perspectives, and a mode to teach others.

For this study, understanding Ms. Thompson's pedagogy in terms of counternarratives proved generative for understanding the power of her approach. As you will see throughout the dissertation, Ms. Thompson demonstrates counternarrating as part of her pedagogical moves. This counterstorying pushes back against traditional understandings of hospitality, highlights the notion of proximity, and supports justice-mindedness.

Further, in this study, counterstorying benefits all the students in the classroom. For the Black students, their culture and racial understandings are centered. Their racial identities are affirmed and celebrated. For the White students, hearing stories and experiences that counter the perceived narratives in society, challenge previously-held assumptions. They are provided context and nuance that disrupt good vs. bad and Black vs. White binaries.

Moreover, Ms. Thompson provides a first-hand model of counterstorying that is entangled with religious sense-making—an area of research that is relatively scarce, particularly within literacy educational scholarship that takes up counternarrative strands of CRT. This space, then, becomes a place of possibility that is much needed for research and teaching.

Black Joy

In conjunction with race-related theories, I bring in the idea of Black joy. Not only does Black joy fall under race-related theory, but also works toward the community element of collective emotion, discussed earlier in this chapter. I first situate Black joy within education and literacy, and then how Black joy is seen in this study.

Black joy has recently been theorized in the education realm. Love (2019) spends a considerable amount of time in *We Want to More than Survive* discussing joy–how joy is needed for social action and teaching, how joy fuels justice, how it makes us whole and gives the opportunity to dream. Focusing on Black creativity, healing, resistance, and love, Black joy culminates in classroom spaces where Black students are free to create, heal, resist, love and be (Dunn & Love, 2020). Further, Dunn and Love (2020) assert that antiracist pedagogy is incomplete without the inclusion of Black joy. In all, Black joy needs to be considered alongside other critical theories attuned to race.

Specifically in the merging of literacy to joy, Muhammad (2023) writes about including joy in literacy teaching, and much of it focused on joy present when people who have been oppressed come together to fight oppression with creativity and love. For these reasons, I want to be attuned to the ways that Ms. Thompson exhibits and encourages (Black) joy with and among her students. For example, this framework directed me to observe how Kavon, a Black student in this study, seemed to be enacting a kind of Black joy when he revoiced an earlier (unrecorded) phrase (and an identity) to Uncle Billy, "I am a Black male leader," (student letter) that had previously been given to him by Ms. Thompson (A. Thompson, personal communication). Additionally, Ms. Thomspon creates space to honor the lives of Black ancestors, from her own father to public figures like Chadwick Bozeman (teacher interview, September 2020). Black Joy was spread through celebrating Blackness collectively in this classroom community.

If I am honest as a White woman, I feel apprehensive about including frameworks like Black joy into the scholarly conversation of this dissertation, not because they are needed and necessary, but because Black joy is outside of my own lived experience. I worry I will not bring to light all the beauty and nuance that it deserves, or that I will miss opportunities to share them

within my research because I am not accustomed to notice or feel it in the same way. That being said, I do not want to center what Tuck & Yang (2014) call "pain stories" about Black people. Moreover, because I am inspired by ethnographic approaches, I follow the participants' lead. Ms. Thompson is a friend and gifted educator, whose intersectional identities as a Black woman educator have a lot to teach the field. For that reason, I look to Love's (2019, 2021)/Dunn & Love's (2020) notions of Black joy, because from my vantage point, Ms. Thompson exhibits and teaches Black joy and in this context, this stance is something that her Black students and her White students stand to experience and learn with and from.

Whiteness Studies

For interpreting the White students and families in this context, understanding the nuances of Whiteness is important, particularly regarding normative Whiteness and White saviorism. In our society, Whiteness is normative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In Harris's (1993) often-cited work on Whiteness as property, she asserts that one principle of Whiteness is the power to exclude. While she intersects that within the legal system, this also is seen in the ways that White people make decisions about communities based on race. Who is included and excluded in a community has ramifications for this study.

Wekker (2016) further connects Whiteness with "Dutchness", a cultural tie to this particular community. Wekker (2016) forwards the notion of White Innocence as a "dominant Dutch way of being in the world" (p. 17). This understanding of White innocence claims both a simultaneous not-knowing of and also a not wanting to know about their own racism. While the Netherlands has its own unique history with race and colonization, the school and church community where this school was located has ties to Dutch ancestry, and thus understanding how

racial “innocence” presents itself may give insight to how this community conceptualized their own racism.

Often Whiteness is seen in color-evasive teaching practices (see Witte (2019) for one example in a RCS) or the absence of anti-racist understandings. As Gilborn (2016) asserts, White students need to develop counter discourses as many white students are not taught antiracist understandings (Gilborn, 2016). This is complicated when layered with Christianity as many Christians use their Christian belief to defend color-evasive ideologies (Tisby, 2021). Developing counternarratives become an important part of the White students racial development and resistance to normative Whiteness.

Besides color-evasive teaching practices, tendencies toward White saviorism can occur in predominantly White, Christian spaces. White Saviorism forwards the notion of a well-intentioned white person “rescuing” a person of color. Seeing themselves as “helpers,” White saviors, whether intentionally or unintentionally, control situations and advance their own agenda. Not only is this trope prevalent in media today (think movies like *The Blind Side* [Hancock, 2009] and *The Help* [Taylor, 2011]), but also has ramifications in politics and society (Cole, 2012). Not only that, there is much critique of White saviorism within Christian missional organization and evangelical circles.

Intersecting religious saviorism with carceral spaces, Andrisse (2021) gives an autobiographical account of his experiences with prison. While his success story of getting out of prison to pursue a PhD is outside the norm of those living in incarceration, it provided a narrative glimpse of the injustices experienced by those in prison, the support needed from outside, and the challenges faced with returning to society. Andrisse (2021) describes reentry being full of “Jesus Christ saviors” (p. 308). People who are “big-hearted and well intentioned,” backed with

degrees, research, and awards, but fail to give up leadership and power to those with lived experiences–for such White Saviors, "evidenced-based practices" and data are used to create more power and resources for themselves.

These "savioric" notions, based in Whiteness and Christianity and sometimes both, have harmful consequences like paternalism, charity over justice, and promoting deficit-based views (to name a few). Kuja (2019) elaborates other consequences beyond the scope of my project here. What's more, these notions are potentially perpetuated within churches, schools, and homes. This study primarily locates itself within school context, but there is also a home component for families as well. Understanding how Whiteness operates, intersects, and how it presents itself within common narratives allows for a framework of challenge and disruption in this research. As Leonardo (2016) suggests, "Insofar as it (white supremacy) is pedagogical, there is the possibility of critically reflecting on its flows to disrupt them" (p. 270, parenthetical added). With a knowledgeable teacher who is aware of the tendencies of Whiteness, as Ms. Thompson was, comes an opening of hope that Whiteness as normative might be dismantled, even within a predominantly White Christian school with ties to a historical-Dutch heritage.

Sociocultural Literacy

The third strand brings together research and theory associated with sociocultural literacy. While the research question specifically addresses letter writing, this study encapsulates more than just letter writing. A sociocultural framework pushes me to situate letter writing in the context of a broadly rich classroom literacy environment. So, before moving into letter writing, I first note some foundational scholarship within sociocultural theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Freire, 1985, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978) that informs this study, specifically in regard to dialogue. Then, I address

the role of stories as a tool for learning. Finally, I will close out with one specific literacy practice, letter writing.

Dialogue

Dialogue is an essential component in how learning gets communicated and how relationships are formed. Dialogue is embedded in our language (Bakhtin, 1986), and is the base for our learning (Freire, 1993; hooks, 2003). As Bakhtin (1986) theorizes, dialogue is complicated and complex; it is more than just a conversation or a series of utterances, but how and what we speak is shaped by our proximity and relationship with another. Dialogue with another requires the act of listening, understanding, and then responding to another speaker. Further, dialogue is a back and forth communication based on utterances, perceptions, reactions with anticipated responses (Bakhtin, 1986).

Freire (1993), for his part, further provides a *pedagogical* view that centers dialogue as essential to developing, or in his terms, co-creating knowledge. Dialogue, according to Freire (1993), is an encounter with another to name the world. In that way, dialogue is a "act of creation" (p. 62) that requires profound love. Dialogue occurs between people who are not seeking to dominate or deposit information, but to work together to name the world. "Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is a logical consequence" (p. 64). With a goal of connection, dialogue can connect teacher and students, as they work together to understand the word and the world. For both Bahktin (1986) and Freire (1993) dialogue is communal and reciprocal.

Reciprocity within this study takes place within the context of relationships. It is active and invitational–a back and forth sharing of letters between Mr. Thompson, aka Uncle Billy, and the students across the span of a school year. Each letter becomes part of a chain of written

communication directly to another person developing a relationship between the two. This, in addition to the stories that Ms. Thompson shares, helps to co-create new knowledge and understanding of people who are marginalized.

Together, these reciprocal activities help to create a dialogic space, defined as "an openness and multiplicity of voices…a shared space of possibilities where dialogue becomes more important than identities" (Wegerif, 2016). The correspondence, as situated within the classroom context, became a dialogic space in which love could emerge (Witte & Juzwik, 2024: Watson & Marciano, 2023). Indeed, I hope to show that what once began as a bond of familial love (between Ms. Thompson and Uncle Billy) expanded into a space of possibility where, through dialogue, Ms. Thompson, her students and Uncle Billy co-created new understandings that resulted in an expansive love for neighbor and community.

Letter Writing

Letter writing itself is a form of dialogue. When looked at through a sociocultural lens, letter writing in this study considers the written text, but also context and participants. To borrow a often-quoted phrase from Freire (1985), letter writing became a place of possibility to "read the world and the world." Because of the significant role letter writing plays in this study, I provide research on letter writing that supports the relational nature of letter writing as well as highlights a variety of writing partnerships.

Letter provides an authentic audience and can be used to build relationships are reasons alone to (re)consider letter writing. Indeed, one of the most salient benefits of letter writing is that it provides a natural and authentic audience and builds a relationship with another person (Grove & Calo, 2019). There is power in the reciprocal connection that letter writing provides. As Manley (1994) states, ‘‘receiving a letter says that you are a person worthy of someone else's

time, attention and concern'' (p. 790). Letter writing promoted a relationship (Barksdale, et al, 2007; Cote, Mosher-Ashley, & Kiernon, 2002; Grove & Calo, 2019), and allowed for learning through an authentic audience (Austin, 2002; McMillon, 2008; Newman, et al, 2011).

Elementary-aged Letter Writing Partnerships

Although scarce, a few studies across the decades have taken up letter writing. There are several peer reviewed articles as well as practitioner-focused articles that demonstrate writing partnerships outside the classroom elementary classroom. Elementary students have written to college-age partners in order to build literacy skills (Austin, 2000; Grove & Calo, 2019; Jenkins & Earle, 1999; McMillon, 2009). In particular, McMillon (2009) conducted a letter writing study between a group of predominantly White preservice teachers and racially diverse 4th grade students in an urban contest. McMillon's study, designed to prompt a risk-free cultural exchange between two different social worlds, opened up pathways of both learning and sharing.

Showcasing other partnerships, in a study by Barksdale, Watson, and Park (2007) elementary students in the United States wrote to students of similar age in Malawi taking first steps in growing their cultural understanding. In another example, although not cross-cultural, but intergenerational partnership, Cote, Mosher-Ashley, & Kiernan (2002) displays a partnership between elementary students writing to residents in long-term care facilities. This study reveals an increased interest and investment in writing that the partnerships continued even after the study concluded. In each of these cases, the recipient's identity, as an authentic audience, plays a significant role in learning.

Carceral Spaces

Because of Uncle Billy's lived experience as a Black man in prison, carceral spaces need consideration. Research on carceral spaces cuts across the three strands (Christianity, Race, and

Literacy) and adds to the wide foundation of this study. Specifically in relation to race, the entanglements between race and carceral spaces is not new (Alexander, 2010). For as Alexander (2010) argues, "Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that once was legal to discriminate against African Americans" (p. 2). Mass incarceration is now a redesigned Jim Crow—a way of perpetuating the racial caste system in America. The intersections of race and mass incarceration cannot be ignored and appear throughout this study. Quoting Alexander (2010) again:

> "If the movement [reforms] that emerges to challenge mass incarceration fails to confront squarely the *critical role of race in the basic structure of society*, and if it fails to *cultivate an ethic of genuine care, compassion, and concern for every human being*—of every class, race, and nationality—within our country's borders…No task is more urgent for racial advocates that ensuring that America's current racial caste system is its last (p. 23, emphasis added).

This quote brings up several parallels for this study. In this study, pay attention to how race is positioned as a systemic structure in society. Notice how Ms. Thompson positions Uncle Billy within an ethic of care and compassion. Be cognizant of the way that Uncle Billy is regarded as a complex human being. Further, if a person considers themselves a racial advocate, addressing mass incarceration is the primary task.

Until his release in June 2022, Uncle Billy spent the last 24 ½ years within mass carceral spaces. The unequal and alarming rate of incarceration of Black individuals in prison, high rates of recidivism, and coded language within laws that disproportionately affect people of color reveal a biased and broken system (Alexander, 2010). This, along with ongoing issues of police

brutality reveal structural and systemic racism embedded within the criminal justice system. This study touches on these issues in connection with Uncle Billy's past and present reality.

Specifically within the domain of literacy, Winn's (2011) *Girl Time* explores the literate lives of incarcerated women. Through the book she showcases agency, freedom, and creativity of talented young women. Winn (2011) urges readers to push back a single story (Adichie, 2021) of incarcerated youth including deficit narratives of incarcerating youth and their literate lives and desires. In a similar manner, I hope the present project pushes back against a single story of the literate lives of Black men in prison.

Admittedly, there is much more to be said here about research in carceral spaces and in its intersections to the cradle to prison nexus. Though outside the scope of this study, please refer to Coles & Powell (2020), Edelman (2008), Love (2024), Monroe (2005), and Winn (2011) for more comprehensive understanding.

Carceral Letter Writing

In conjunction with carceral spaces, I provide research on letter writing within carceral space. With letter writing being the primary tool for communication with people in prison, research on letter writing in carceral spaces adds to this study.

In a recent *Newsweek* article, Greenwood (2023) writes about the power of letter writing to people who are incarcerated. "Letter writing is simple, cheap, and deeply effective. It lets the recipient know they have not been forgotten, and gives the writer a line into what is going on in the opaque and purposefully impenetrable world of prisons." Letters are indeed a way for those who are incarcerated to communicate and connect with non-incarcerated individuals. Because of that, numerous organizations facilitate and encourage letter writing to incarcerated adults (e.g. Innocence Project, Wire of Hope, Friends for Prisoners, Crossroads Prison Ministry). While this

study does not focus on these organizations nor adult correspondence, the presence of these organizations undergird the importance of letter writing as a tool for communication and connection. While I focus on letter writing with elementary students, the power of letters remains the same—connection and communication. For that reason, I highlight studies that look at letter writing within carceral spaces.

There are a limited number of studies that involve letter writing between children and parents living within carceral spaces. For those studies that were reviewed, the letter writing took place in the context of familial relationships. While not school-based, these studies have the potential to shed light on the importance of communication and relationship building between those inside and outside carceral spaces. Schlafer, Davis, Hidnt, Weymouth, Cuthrell, Burson, & Poehlmann-Tynan (2020) looked at frequency of contact between fathers living in incarceration and their children (of which letter writing was a part of that communication), and how the frequency of communication affected the frequency of visits. Tuerk and Loper (2006) found that letter writing, in particular, increased maternal attachment for mothers who are incarcerated, reducing parenting stress, and improved sense of competence as parents. Fang, Liu, Kuan, & Lee (2021) recent study, out of Singapore, explored how relationships are navigated through carceral spaces, often in nuanced ways. For the purpose of this study, Fang, et al, (2021) discusses how families communicated through letter writing: to express feelings, give information, and provide encouragement. In each case, these studies show how letter writing became an integral piece of relationship-building between participants.

Broadly, looking at carceral spaces has implications for conceptualizing community as carceral spaces are often forgotten spaces that, I argue, should be included as part of a larger Christian community. Looking at research that reveals anti-Black educational injustice has

ramifications for this context, but also the larger educational community. Further, research in letter writing that shows how communication and connection happens, allows communities to respond to needs of all its individuals, including those who are incarcerated.

Summary

In sum, the goal of this chapter was situate research within three thematic strands (Christianity, race, and literacy) all of which impact community in this setting. Through this chapter, I provided research for each strand but also addressed the entanglements between strands.

The diverse body of research that I have assembled is significant when conceptualizing community in an expansively-minded way, particularly for this Christian context. Additionally, theories attuned to race clarify a more justice-centered approach to teaching. Further, research on sociocultural literacy and, specifically, dialogue serve to understand how learning can occur both within the classroom but also facilitate learning across geographical, social-economic, and racial difference.

Presently, there are no studies that address the impact of letter writing between elementary students and someone in a carceral space. This study serves to fill this gap. What's more, this study has the potential to shed light on how racial (in) justice and anti-Blackness is addressed within an elementary space in various contexts. In order to do this, this study collects not only written dialogue between students and Uncle Billy, but also captures students' and parent perceptions–all of which informs how community can be built across uncommon contexts to create a richer understanding of who is included in a classroom community.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODS

This qualitative study takes an ethnographically-oriented approach. Concerned with the question, “How can letter writing widen experiences of diverse community?”, this study seeks to explore the sociocultural setting of a classroom, a teacher, and the impacts of a literacy practice on the students, and to a lesser extent, their parents. This follows other literacy-based qualitative studies in elementary schooling contexts that consider race as a pedagogical factor (Dyson, 2003, 2021; Heath, 1983; Rogers & Mosely, 2006). Additionally, following ethnographic importance of time in the field (Heath & Street, 2008), this study took place over the course of two years, involving a variety of participants, and multiple data points. More importantly, qualitative studies, like ethnographies, allow for complexities of individuals' understandings and perceptions. While not perfectly aligned, this study is also informed by other ethnographies in Christian school settings (Blosser, 2019; Peshkin, 1986).

This study is rooted in ethnography in the sense that ethnographic methods are situated in natural and cultural contexts and concerned with understanding participants within particular settings, like classrooms. As Geertz (1993), quoted by Dyson (2021) suggests, an ethnography aims to understand the “webs of significance” (Dyson, 2021, p. 19) of meaning present within a specific time and space. “Webs of significance” suggest an interconnected complexity of relationships and contexts. Indeed, woven through the study are webs of many interpersonal relationships between participants as they connect across multiple contexts. In addition, the influence and entanglements of literate practices – specifically letter writing – with religion, race, and societal (in)justice shape the data creating an atmosphere rich with layered possibilities and opportunities.

Dyson (2021), in her book, *Writing the Schoolhouse Blues*, blends several methodologies to create a cohesive ethnographically-oriented narrative. Like Dyson (2021), this study also makes use of several combined theories. Likewise, as an ethnographically-oriented project, several methodologies are used. First, ethnography, as an umbrella methodology, allows focus on details and aspects tracing throughlines all in dialogue with the larger social, political, and cultural milieu. Two, dialogic discourse analysis (Juzwik & Ives, 2010; Juzwik, 2013; Juzwik, et al., 2023; Nystrand, 1986) allows me to hone in on specific dialogic interactions both in the classroom interactions and in the letters. Dialogic analysis of writing, talk, and curricular materials allows a focus on how reciprocity and shared understanding may unfold at the level of utterances (such as turns of talk or letters) and responses to utterances (such as spoken responses or responses to a letter), through chains of utterances which themselves may respond to curriculum materials and pedagogical utterances (Bakhtin, 1986; VanDerHeide & Newell, 2013). Third, due to the nature of this study looking at one teacher's pedagogy, I also incorporate elements of case-study (Dyson & Genishi, 2008).

Context

Reformed Christian Schools (RCS)

The topic of Christian schooling, in general, is contentious for many and could be a separate dissertation altogether. To be sure, Christian schools, Reformed Christian schools notwithstanding, have a history of separatism, elitism, and racism, presenting in different and complex ways. There is much to be said about this particular tradition of Christian schooling having its own history, cultural background, and foundational Christian beliefs (Smith, 2019; Stronks & Blomberg, 1993; Vryhof, 2002; Woltersdorff 1999, 2006). Although these facets inform the study, the study encapsulates much more than a reformed perspective. Due to the

more ecumenical nature of the student body at Great Lakes Christian School, I hesitate to make Reformed Christianity the only defining feature of this school. Although I am familiar and interested in RCS, I am not an expert and I am no theologian – as already noted. For that reason, please see Appendix A for a brief discussion of Reformed Christian school background and some defining values.

With this in mind, I turn toward the focal district and school. Admittedly, this district is not perfect – a perspective I address throughout the study; however, it is a place that is important to my family (all three of my children have attended the district) and where ethnographic studies, like this one, are permitted. Thus, I hope to contextualize this district, and more importantly, the classroom and its teacher, Ms. Thompson, to illuminate possibilities for elementary Christian school literacy instruction

Great Lakes Christian School (GLCS)

Great Lakes Christian Schools serves 2,200 students PK-12. While it would technically qualify as an urban district (with the exception of one small elementary school in the far northern suburbs), as it is within the city limits of a medium-sized metropolitan Midwest city. In saying this, the schools' physical locations are all located within middle class to upper middle class neighborhoods. The school system is predominantly White, with approximately 25% students of color attending. The school heralds "Cultural Competence" and "Justice-seeker" as one of their collective ideas that enfold the school's "Portrait of Graduate." While this district has publicized and made steps to address issues of (racial) justice, how this is acted upon seems largely up to individual teachers, like Ms Thompson. While seemingly more willing to grapple with racial complexities than other RCS schools within the greater area, GLCS is still learning how to support teachers and students of color, issues which appear in the dissertation.

GLCS is historically-rooted in the Reformed Christian tradition. In reality, however, this district is home to several evangelical denominations and nondenominational churches with only about half the students attending a traditionally reformed-leaning church (such as the Reformed Church of America or the Christian Reformed Church in North America). The rest of the students and families align with other denominations or hold no church affiliation. While some RCSs require letters from pastors, confirming church attendance and involvement, GLCS does not. This makes the district more ecumenical than other RCSs in the area. To many familiar with this RCS, GLCS would be considered more progressive and more racially diverse than other RCS in the surrounding area and beyond.

Central City (Christian) Elementary School (CCCS) is the biggest and one of three elementary schools in the district. CCSS is located in an older historic neighborhood and, because of its central location, playground, and track, it is a hub for neighborhood activities. CCCS houses both a Spanish Immersion and a traditional elementary school experience in which Ms. Thompson taught. Ms. Thompson was one of three third grade teachers at CCCS (not counting Spanish Immersion). When walking into Ms. Thomspon's classroom, you first notice a colorful display of bulletin boards and artifacts around the room. Student work hung around the room and Christmas lights outlined the white board in the front of the room. The reading section was delineated with a colorful rug. Bean bags sat in the corner for student use while Ms. Thompson used a chair in the middle for read alouds. My preferred spot was at a circular table in the corner of the room in order to observe the lesson from the side or front. Sometimes another support person was sitting with me, observing an inclusion student.

Participants

Ms. Thompson (Alana)

This study would not be possible without Ms. Thompson. As the connecting point between the students and her uncle, she created and sustained the dialogic space between her students and Uncle Billy in order to share and learn from one another (Witte & Juzwik, 2023). Ms. Thompson's pedagogy, including the letter writing partnership, was not only academically integrated, but also attuned to race and justice. As a biracial Black woman, she was able to weave her personal lived experience throughout her teaching. In an interview in the fall of 2020, she described herself as "unapologetically Black," but, with that, also felt that label limited the connection she felt to her mother's side of the family, who are White. This connection was especially felt as she came from a long line of teachers as her mother, sister, aunt, and grandmother were or are in the education field. At the time of the study, she was an established teacher in her 7th and 8th year of teaching. Important to note, that she was the only Black teacher in this particular building and one of only three Black teachers in the district. This led to extra burdens placed on her to be the expert in Blackness in this predominantly White environment (Milner, 2020). Beyond these identities, at the time of the study she described herself as a "Christ-follower."

Uncle Billy

In 2022, the year Uncle Billy was released from prison, he was one of the 1,230,100 incarcerated individuals in state or federal prisons in the United States. 32% percent of the prison population were Black, even though they, as a racial demographic group, only represent 13.6% of the US population (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2023). I share these statistics in order to keep in mind not only the staggering number of people in prison, but also the disproportionate number

of Black people incarcerated in the US. For the students, though, many unaware of these statistics and realities, Uncle Billy was more than a "prisoner" he was an "Uncle" and part of their classroom community.

Uncle Billy is Ms. Thompson's uncle with whom she reconnected after her beloved father's death. She reached out with letters and eventually had her students write to him. During the study, he lived in a prison in the Northeast. As of June 2022, he was released after 24 ½ years in prison. He identifies as Black and is in his mid sixties. Ms. Thompson described him as "loving Jesus" and hot dogs (a topic that will resurface later) and throughout the letter writing he encouraged students to pray and read the Bible. He also provided them with Bible references.

Students

The study includes students from two academic years. The first year (2020-2021), Ms. Thompson had 18 students in her class: Nine girls and nine boys (one of whom was my son). In this class, six students identified as Black (all girls) and twelve as white. Due to the timing of IRB in securing parental permissions, COVID restrictions in schools, and a missing exchange from that year's data, much of this data set is not used in the dissertation.

In Year two, there were 19 students that started the second year (2021-2022), with two students leaving midway through the year leaving 17 students remaining. Within the class of 17, four students identified as students of color (three Black, one Asian). Out of the 17, one student was an inclusion student. Data from this second year are the primary data for this dissertation.

While I don't have specific statistics on adoption status of students because it is a topic beyond the scope of the study, it is worth noting that some of the students are (transracially) adopted and in initially analyzing the data, the topic of adoption surfaces as a potentially interesting facet both in terms of race and incarceration status.

Parents

As part of the study, I interviewed three parents from Year 1. All the parents in this year were self-selected. One parent I consider a friend and the other two are acquaintances. All the interviewees were female, White, and parents of girls. I am also a parent in this year's class.

In Year 2, I opened the interviews to all parents, and I interviewed parents of eight students. All the parents were White and female (except for one couple). Three of the parents interviewed are currently employed by the school district. While one family attends my church, four families I am acquainted with due to our children's overlapping interests. Three parent interviewees I met for the first time at the time of the interview. This familiarity may have allowed some parents to speak more openly about this study.

Rebecca

I consider myself a participant-researcher (Wagner, 1993). I am actively entwined with the participants and setting in this study. As noted before, I am a mom of Silas, a student in Year 1 and I have a personal and professional connection with Ms. Thompson. Through this study I became a letter writing partner with Uncle Billy—all of which make me inextricably linked to the context and participants.

Using insider-outsider terminology (Blosser, 2019; Schweber, 2017), I am an insider to this school community. All of my children attended Central City Elementary School. I am familiar with many of the teachers, students, and parents in the study because I see them at school events or see them at church. My home is located across the street from the elementary school making access convenient.

I am an insider in that I identify as a Reformed Christian and presently attend a church affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church in North America. My background and life is but

one way to look at being "reformed;" therefore, I claim no sense of religious superiority nor typicality in my experiences. Like most religious labels, this comes with a diversity of thought and conviction. I am no different. Although I hold to what I consider reformed-learnings, I have a growing disagreement with the way the majority of my denomination is moving toward exclusivity and desire to define "sin," especially how it pertains to the LGBTQ+ community. Along with this, my personal faith convictions lead me toward a more the latter (Gorski, 2017) prophetic justice-oriented view of community and education (Wolterstorff, 2006). This means interpreting racism as a systemic structure, rather than a solely personal sin. While I know that many in my community would join me in these convictions, there are others who would take great issue with this creating a (contentious) complexity of thought and convictions.

As a former elementary educator for 18 years, I value creative and integrative pedagogy that cuts across disciplines. Professionally, I take notice of teachers who can develop positive rapport with students. What's more, as a former RCS teacher, I value the skillful way that a teacher, like Ms. Thompson, can integrate faith into pedagogy. In many ways, Ms. Thompson was able to weave in topics of race and justice that I wished I could have done in my own prior teaching career. For me, as a Christian who holds a reformed worldview, her teaching pedagogy reflects the possibilities that Reformed Christian education can offer. Personally, she was more than just my child's teacher or a teacher I respected, but a friend who I found common ground not only in our shared love for Starbucks, but also in that both of us had a parent who died much too young, and in our then-vision for Christian education.

Through this study, I also correspond with Uncle Billy through letters. Although initially anxious due to my limited experience and unknown expectations, I am grateful that Ms. Thompson opened up a pathway for me to begin this letter writing relationship. Over 18 months,

we corresponded over letters and cards. Beyond this, at Ms. Thompson's request, in October 2021, I called the IRS, as well as wrote a parole board letter on his behalf. I say this not to elevate my involvement, but to note that I became invested in his life and well-being.

As a White researcher I am still grappling with how to navigate research spaces with participants of color. hooks (2003) reminds me of the trauma done to Black people by well-meaning white people in academia who write about race but fail to connect it to their own behaviors. I sit with caution of the dangers, seen and unseen, when navigating issues of race in research (Milner, 2007), moving forward with hope that research surrounding race is not about perfection, but honesty and accountability (Tisby, 2021).

Data Collection/Generation

The data were collected over two academic years and include not only letters, but field notes and interviews with students, parents, and administrators. The first year (2020-2021) of data collection included multiple exchanges of letters to and from Uncle Billy, and interviews with three parents. While the writing relationship between Uncle Billy and the third graders began in the early fall of 2020, I learned about and gained access to letters in November. With COVID affecting access to students and school buildings, my interactions were limited to letters and conversations with Ms. Thompson. During that school year, I began writing to Uncle Billy eventually asking him to be a part of the study.

During the spring and summer of 2021 I worked to secure IRB, parent permissions, and set up observations. Finally, at the end of October of 2021, I observed the classroom twice as Ms. Thompson introduced the writing relationship and while the students wrote their initial letters. I also observed the classroom in early December when the first letters from Uncle Billy arrived at the school. Throughout that academic year I scanned multiple sets of letters going back and forth

including sympathy notes and Valentines. I observed again in the spring of 2022 when Uncle Billy sent a box of treats for the students and told them of his upcoming release.

Letters

In 2020-2021, four exchanges of letters were sent from students to Uncle Billy and three exchanges came from Uncle Billy to the students. In 2021-2022, six exchanges of letters went to Uncle Billy, including an exchange of sympathy notes (when his sister died) and an exchange of Valentines. Uncle Billy wrote back to students five times over the course of that academic year. Each student exchange of letters was scanned, transcribed, and placed on a chart (by month) to help with organizing and coding.

In addition to student letters, I copied the letters in my own personal exchanges with Billy. I also had access to some (not all) of the letters that Uncle Billy sent to Ms. Thompson. These letters were scanned and included as data for the study..

Classroom Observations

I observed the classroom four times over the course of the school year; once in late October, once in early November, once in early December, and once in March. Each of these observations corresponded with a significant event in the letter-writing partnership (introduction, writing initials letters, receiving first letters from Uncle Billy, getting news of Uncle Billy's release). I also was in the classroom from time to time during lunch and after school meetings with Ms. Thompson. For each observation I audio recorded the classroom with the Voice Memo feature on my phone and took handwritten field notes in my notebook. In addition to the audio recording, my notebook contains drawings, and dialogue to enhance the audio data. To further supplement this, I took photographs of diagrams, parts of the classroom, mailing labels, and some student interactions.

Interviews

Student Interviews

Student interviews were conducted using the voice recording feature on my personal phone. I recorded fifteen student interviews (one parent opted out) in person over the course of two days in late May 2022. I followed the student interview protocol (Appendix B). To note, at the classroom support aide's suggestion, one student was asked yes/no questions. During the interviews, I manually took notes on my own document. After the first interview and hearing the student's response, I added a question to the interview protocol, "*What do you know about Uncle Billy?*" Upon completion of the interviews, I listened to the recording of each student and personally transcribed the interview, making a separate document for each student. After transcribing all the interviews, I put all the responses in a table, sorted by question, for easier analysis. While analyzing the data, I utilized both the table of student responses and my original notes.

Parent interviews

Over the course of two years, I conducted a total of 11 parent interviews. In saying this, I only used data from parents in Year 2. Three interviews were conducted in the fall of 2021, whose students were in class during the 2020-2021 school year. One interview was video recorded in-person and two interviews took place over the phone. During the interviews I took notes on a separate document. In advance of the interview, one parent requested that they view and approve my notes in which I obliged. These interviews happened before IRB approval and did not follow the questions on the Draft Parent Interview Protocol. Because of these reasons, individual parent responses from Year 1 were not included in this study.

During the summer of 2022, I reached out through email to all the parents multiple times. Seven parents initially volunteered to have an interview. I conducted seven parent interviews over recorded Zoom sessions following interview protocol (See appendix C). The remaining interview was conducted in-person at their home during the summer of 2023 and recorded using the VoiceMemo feature on my phone. During all the interviews, I took notes on a separate document. All the parent interviews in Year 2 were transcribed using a transcription service (TranscribeMe). Both the transcriptions and researcher notes were utilized in analyzing data.

While I tried to secure an interview with Uncle Billy, I was only able to record a brief visual over Facetime (with Ms. Thompson) shortly after he was released. I reached out several times after, but we were unable to connect.

In addition to parent and student interviews and in conjunction with another project, I initially interviewed Ms. Thompson in the fall of 2020 to learn more about how Ms. Thompson celebrates and incorporates Blackness in her classroom. This interview happened over a recorded Zoom session. I transcribed some snippets of the interview and the rest were transcribed using a transcription service (TranscribeMe). Portions of that interview appear in the study. Additionally, the data set includes several unrecorded conversations with Ms. Thompson (as remembered).

Coding and Data Analysis

Considering all the data collected (letters, interviews, classroom observations, and notes), Data were first transcribed (either by me or through TranscribeMe) as stated above. While I generally used open coding (Saldaña, 2011), each data set was coded slightly differently. For the following sections, I differentiate the coding and data analysis for each specific set of data. Finally, I offer an example of how I developed a theme across data.

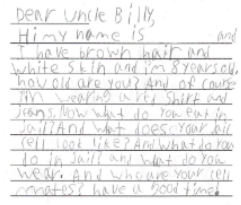
Coding and Analyzing Letters

In order to organize the letters, I divided them by separate exchanges according to months. Then, for each exchange, I pasted a picture of each letter in the first column, each student letter claiming one row. In the next column, I transcribed each letter. Following, I created a column for questions asked and information shared. (See Figure 3)

Because I was immersed in the letters. I began to notice the different ways the students were communicating and began to categorize them (asking questions, sharing information, giving (Biblical) encouragement and, to a lesser extent, giving "quizzes" and offering jokes), each getting their own column. These process codes (Saldaña, 2011) were eventually divided into smaller categories focusing on *what* (content) was being shared. For instance, student sharing largely centered on either personal, classroom, and/or familial information.

Figure 3

Example of Letter Organization

Photo of Letter	Transcription	Asking Questions	Sharing Information-	Giving encouragement
	Dear Uncle Billy, Hi my name is [student name] and I have brown hair and white skin and I'm 8 years old. How old are you? And of course I'm wearing a red shirt and jeans. Now what do you eat in jail? And what does your jail cell look like? And what do you do in jai? And what do you wear and who are your cellmates. Have a good time! Love,	How old are you? What do you eat in jail? What does your jail cell look like? What do you do in jai? What do you wear? Who are your cellmates?	• Hi my name is [student name] and • I have brown hair • and white skin • I'm 8 years old. • And of course I'm wearing a red shirt and jeans.	
	Dear Uncle Billy, I am eight years old. How old are you? I like to read. Do you like to read? I have blondish brownish hair and tan skin. What do you look like? I love hotdogs, do you like hotdogs? I like to ride my bike and bake. My favorite color is magenta. What's your favorite color? My favorite drink is orange juice. What's yours? I love snowflakes. My favorite bible verse is Matthew 43-45. What (is) you(r) favorite verses? I also like daisy and roses. Love,	Do you like to read? What do you look like? Do you like hotdogs? What's your favorite color? What's your favorite drink? What is your favorite (Bible verses)?	• I am eight years old. • I have blondish brownish hair • and tan skin. • I love hotdogs, • I like to ride my bike • and bake. • My favorite color is magenta. • My favorite drink is orange juice. • I love snowflakes. • My favorite bible verse is Matthew 43-45. • I also like daisy and roses.	My favorite Bible verse is Matthew 43-45.

In some cases, other data like classroom observations, informed the analyzing of letters. For example, in the first classroom observation, Ms. Thompson mentioned Uncle Billy "giving them Bible verses." Because of this, I made note of Biblical references going across contexts from each participant. Similarly, Ms. Thompson directed the students to describe their racial identity. Therefore, I highlighted the parts of the letters where students write about their racial identity.

Coding and Analyzing Classroom Observations

Because much of the classroom observation focuses on Ms. Thompson (a single subject), the analysis takes on an ethnographic case-study approach (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Borrowing from Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), the analysis asks "What are people (Ms. Thompson) trying to do and through what means and strategies [parenthetical added]?' In order to think about that question, I primarily used open coding (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Saldaña, 2011). During this phase, I marked up the printed copies of the classroom observation with exclamation marks, circled words, and questions. These initial markings eventually became codes to further analyze the data.

For instance, early on, I marked all the connection points (using a symbol of interlocking ovals) in the margins where Ms. Thompson connected Uncle Billy's situation to other familiar texts, stories, or events. After reading through all the connection points I marked, I noticed how Ms. Thompson referenced personal stories, texts from the classroom, and larger societal issues. These connection points eventually became codes ("self," "text," and "world") based on a popular reading comprehension strategy (Facing our History, 2020; Simon, n.d.). In some cases, I broke down these initial connection categories to identify the kinds of text (chapter book,

picture book, song, Bible story) and frequency used. What's more, through this process, I also discovered how Ms. Thompson was using known book characters to help the students understand Uncle Billy's story.

In another round of coding of classroom observation, I highlighted all of the references to biblical material (stories, books of the Bible, theme verse, popular Christian song) to explore how they were used to make connections. Further, I highlighted all the times that Ms. Thompson referenced race and racism. This led to differentiating these codes between racial identity, racism as "sin," racism as structural. Together, these rounds of iterative coding helped to reveal themes.

Coding and Analyzing Interviews

While the interviews, both student and parent, were helpful in themselves, many times I treated the interviews as a way to "test" a pattern coming from other data sets. In this way, interview transcripts were used to confirm thinking over time. For example, in the student interviews, students articulated what they knew about Billy, these answers served to confirm the asset-based descriptions that Ms. Thompson used at the beginning of the study. In this way, interviews would confirm a hunch that was carried through other data sets.

Interview transcripts were helpful on their own as well. Particularly, the parent interviews were able to capture the depth of student learning that students, due to their age and maturity, were not. These parent perspectives proved valuable when talking about the nature and goal of Christian schooling.

Putting it together

To put it all together, I give one example of how a "hunch" developed into a theme spanning across time and data. While writing a conceptual paper tangential to this study, I was immersed in thinking about elements of community–one of which was reciprocity. In reading

Bakhtin (1986), Freire (1993), and Palmer (1993), I was struck by the power of dialogic and relational reciprocity in learning. I wondered how reciprocity may present itself in the data. While none of the discourse contained the word "reciprocity," I looked for and found several references (eight) to the word "relationship" as well as a thorough explanation of Ms. Thompson's vision of the writing relationship between Uncle Billy and the students. Then, I looked for examples of how letters showed reciprocity. Finally, I coded the student interview transcripts for reciprocity, paying close attention to responses like, "He answered all my questions," and "He always wrote back." This hunch, coupled with the data analysis from classroom observations, letters and interviews, explicates the recursive process and co-occurrences used in ethnographic studies (Heath & Street, 2008).

Limitations

Before closing this chapter, I address this study's limitations. The main limitations fall under the broad category of missing data. First, Billy was unavailable for an interview after his release in June 2022. Although his written voice is captured within the letters written to the students, Ms. Thompson and me, his metacognitive voice is not included. An interview with Billy would have given account for his decision-making process during the letters as well as provided a more full expression of his feelings toward the study in general. For instance, I would have liked to know about why he chose the Bible passages he did. I want to know how he felt about receiving the students' letters–Did the letters help him experience community in a new way? I want to know if he would recommend this practice to other people living in carceral spaces. These answers would have added to the findings and inform potential future actions—like could this study be replicated in a different form?

Second, due to the length of the IRB process and events happening in real-time, the permission for the first year of study was mailed over the summer after the school year ended. Only half the parents responded, giving permission for me to use their students' letters. On top of this, I missed a letter exchange which made for incomplete data for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Third, I want to acknowledge the missing perspectives of parents of color in the parent interviews (2021-2022). While I reached out several times to all parents over email, only parents who are White responded to my request. Gaining perspectives from parents of color would have certainly provided a fuller picture of the data in regard to their opinion and their child's learning.

As a participant-researcher, I am invested in the study. This investment brings the potential of personal bias into data analysis. Along those same lines, I am also aware of the warning (hooks, 2013; Milner, 2007) to White researchers doing research with participants of color. I admit that there could be facets of this study that I have overlooked, drawn too much attention to, or misinterpreted. One way I have attempted to counteract this is to have Ms. Thompson involved in the process. Due to the nature of our relationship, I consulted with her for her feedback. I continue to read and reflect about how my own positionality as well as my racialized and cultural and religious upbringing impacts my research.

Because of the nature of the data examined (e.g. only four classroom observations and no interview with Uncle Billy, as already discussed), this study presents an account that is largely tension free. Even mild parental concerns were allayed as parents cited trust in Ms. Thompson. In two of the parent interviews, the interviewees alluded to disapproving sentiments and discussions happening outside of school, but those feelings did not make their way to me. These reports suggested to me that the parents who volunteered to be interviewed may have been the

ones who supported Ms. Thompson's pedagogy. Also important to note that the school approved the study without hesitation. I talked with the principal twice, once at the beginning and again at the end and in each conversation was supportive. I do wonder if further tensions would exist if all parents would have been interviewed. Further, any internal tensions that Ms. Thompson may have experienced during the time of this project reached beyond the scope of the study.

Summary

In closing, I revisit the metaphor of webs at the beginning. Just like webs take time and expertise to build, ethnographic webs are built within a specific context and anchored to foundational beliefs/practices/behaviors, all amidst larger cultural and social forces. Additionally, ethnographically-informed projects take time and energy–both to collect data and to recursively analyze it. In this project, while the letters were collected over the span of two years, the relationships, like the friendship between Ms. Thompson and I, developed over several years and are still ongoing. As far as timing, creating meaning in dialogue with the data will go far beyond this dissertation and I hope its impact will be ongoing.

CHAPTER 4 - THE POWER OF A TEACHER

"And I think it's really wonderful to have a full range of emotions surrounding, especially something like incarceration displayed in a teacher who you love and trust" (Parent Interview, July 6, 2022)

In the first of three findings chapters, I highlight the power of a teacher, and specifically, Ms. Thompson. As I answer the research question*, How can letter writing widen experiences of diverse communities for 3rd grade students?,* it is important to keep in mind that letter writing, as a literacy practice, is part of a larger pedagogy, one that is dependent on this particular teacher, Ms. Thompson. Due to the sociocultural nature of the classroom environment, the teacher becomes the important connector between the curriculum and the students, impacting literacy practices and learning in their classroom. Therefore, to begin, I focus on Ms. Thompson and her ability to create a multi-layered literacy learning environment, to be vulnerable, and to draw students into discussions of race and incarceration.

Before going deeper into the data, I revisit Ms Thompson, for in this project, she opens the societal gap between the students and her uncle. As an established teacher, she is skilled at making connections across pedagogy. Her (bi)racial identity, her familial connections, and her teaching ability provides an unconventional mix of elements and expertise that is not easily replicated outside of this study.

Facilitate a Layered Literacy Environment

While letter writing can be taught as an isolated skill, its benefits lie in its connection to others (DeVine, 2002, Grove & Calo, 2019; McMillon, 2009). For Ms. Thompson, letter writing provided an opportunity to connect her class with her incarcerated uncle, a rare pairing creating a unique authentic audience for her students. In order to do this, she showcased letter writing as

one element of a larger literacy-rich environment. Through using a variety of strategies (discussion, letter writing, read alouds) and connections to the curriculum, literacy learning is integrated holistically. Specifically, the data shows how creating dialogic space (Wegerif, 2016), making connections, modeling literate activities, and learning beyond the text creates "authentic" learning opportunities.

Creating Dialogic Space

Dialogic space is defined as an openness and multiplicity of voices…a shared space of possibilities where dialogue becomes more important than identities" (Wegerif, 2016). Understanding dialogic space in this particular classroom context meant that there was openness to learn and include a variety of voices. Arguably, the dialogic voices that Ms. Thompson gathered together, which includes herself, her students and her uncle, are unconventional. These participants, though uncommon in their collaboration, were both open to not only resisting stereotypes of one another's identities, but becoming a place to also learn and grow from one another. Beyond the real-life voices, there are other voices that were drawn into this dialogue space—from biblical voices and familiar book characters to create a multi-layered learning opportunity.

Ms. Thompson facilitated dialogic space in two ways: through classroom discussion and through letters. On the whole, Ms. Thompson's approach to teaching was conversational: While there were boundaries for discourse (ie. no blurting), Ms. Thompson was interactive with her students. Her introduction to her uncle and subsequent letter writing relationship was no different. As Ms. Thompson introduced the letter writing, she both asked questions and allowed students to respond freely, most of the time with raised hands. In looking over the transcript, she asked 21 questions in the 36 minute lesson.

Excerpt 1: (Classroom Observation, October 27, 2021)

Ms. Thompson: Remember at the beginning of the year when I told you how much I like to write letters? We were reading a letter from Paul to who?

Students (choral response): Ephesians

Ms. Thompson: Yeah, the Ephesians!

Excerpt 2: (Classroom Observation, November 3, 2021)

Ms. Thompson: We're going to be better writers because if we are going to send a letter to someone then we are going to make sure we have a couple things in there. What are a couple of things? Tell someone next to you what should be in our letters...go!

Students: Chatter together in a turn and talk.

Excerpt 3: (Classroom Observation, October 27, 2021)

Ms. Thompson: And I am wondering is there anyone here that has done something to someone because they did something to them? I am going to use [student 1] and [student 2] again because they handled it so well. You handled it so well, didn't you? [student 1], what did you do?

Student 1: I shoved him

Ms. Thompson: Shoved him. Because [student 2], what did you do?

Student 2: Laughed in his face when he didn't catch the ball

Ms. Thompson: What happens when we lose our tempers? It's... sometimes we respond negatively. But I will tell you, as you get older, and become an adult, those can be very serious. What story did we read today in the Bible?

Student 3: Jacob and (...) I mean, no, no (...) Cain and Abel.

Ms. Thompson: Cain and Abel

In each of the excerpts, students responded with choral responses (Excerpt 1), dyad discussion (Turn and Talk-Excerpt 2) or individual responses (Excerpt 3). Throughout the observation Ms. Thompson asked both formal questions and structured with partners (Excerpt 2). In excerpt 3, she addressed a recent playground incident with two boys—and subsequently called them into the full class conversation. While Ms. Thompson took charge of the conversation and its flow, the students were invited in to participate in a variety of ways.

Besides classroom dialogue, the dialogic space included the exchanging of letters. Letters, by nature, are dialogic for they are a conversation across time and space. In my interpretation of Bakhtin (1986), dialogue happens between two people who are not only learning about themselves but learning in their understanding of others. In this instance, students both learned about themselves, but also had an openness to learn about someone outside of their daily lives. For the students, the letters became a place to ask questions, share about their life, give encouragement, and share Biblical knowledge and references (Witte & Juzwik, 2024).

Due to the relationship that was established by Ms. Thompson, dialogue and learning happened between the students and Uncle Billy. Though outside factors made linear conversations difficult, Uncle Billy faithfully wrote to each student and answered each of their questions. Read more about the number of exchanges and topics discussed in Chapter 6.

Making Literate Connections

In the last section, I detailed how Ms. Thompson created dialogic space within her classroom, both in discussion and in letter writing. In this section, I highlight the types of literate connections Ms. Thompson made across one classroom observation. Because of the nature of this elementary classroom context, focusing on literate connections makes sense from a pedagogical standpoint and, further, gives practitioners a model to use in their own classrooms.

Making connections is a popular reading comprehension strategy (Facing Our History, 2020; Simon, n.d.). In this case, Ms. Thompson used connection-making in order for students to better understand not only the practice of letter writing, but also Uncle Billy's story. Because many of the students were unfamiliar with the criminal justice system, Ms. Thompson layered stories, familiar characters, and references to religious texts.

Based on the transcripts of classroom observations, Ms. Thompson made a variety of connections common with those that align with the popularized reading comprehension strategy (Facing our History, 2020; Simon, n.d.): personal connections, connections to other texts (books, songs, etc), and connections to the world. Because of the similarities, I used the same terms when analyzing the classroom observations. Beyond the stated common connections, Ms. Thompson also referenced classroom situations (Class connections) which I added to Table 1. All of the connections worked together, creating in-depth knowledge and personal connections for the students.

Table 1

Connections Referenced within the Classroom Observation (October 27, 2021)

Type of Connection	Examples
Personal Connections	● Familial connection: "Uncle Billy is my dad's brother" ● Ms. Thompson's letter from a former student
Text Connections	Connections to Letter Writing ● Biblical reference to Ephesians (book of the Bible) ● A letter from a former student ● Ms. Thompson reads Uncle Billy's letter Connections to Uncle Billy's story ● Previous opinion writing task (x2) ● Picture book (read aloud to class), *Made by God* ● Biblical reference to creation story ● School theme verse ● Well-known Christian song

Table 1 (cont'd)	
	• Multiple characters in *Because of Winn-Dixie* • A recent Bible story– Cain & Abel • Looking at Google maps
Real World Connection	• Realities of Black man living with a criminal record • Recent Racial injustice
Class Connections	• References an earlier classroom conflict • Ms. Thompson references *Moana*, a favorite movie of one student • Current class situation—someone needs to have the class beanbag

Focusing on the text connections, Ms. Thompson made 11 different textual connections across the observation. These connections are used for two main purposes: understanding the practice of letter writing and relating to Uncle Billy's life (see Table 1). Three literate connections were in reference to letter writing (a letter Ms. Thompson received from a former student, the book of Ephesians, and a letter she received from Uncle Billy).

Beyond this, Ms. Thompson referenced seven texts related to Uncle Billy's story and incarceration in which two become the most salient: the Bible, and the class chapter book read aloud, *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2000). In particular, *Because of the Winn-Dixie* became a touch point multiple times throughout the lesson. *Because of Winn-Dixie* is a coming-of-age story of Opal Buloni who moves to a new town with her father, who is a preacher. Through the story, she finds and rescues a dog with whom she names Winn-Dixie. Meanwhile, Opal meets a cast of characters, including Gloria Dump, a recovering alcoholic, and Otis, a formerly incarcerated pet shop owner.

Using *Because of Winn-Dixie*, Ms. Thompson included four different characters in her lesson: Gloria Dump, Opal's mom, Otis, and the cop (unnamed, part of Otis's past). Each of these characters served as a way to understand Uncle Billy's story. For instance, Ms. Thompson

connected both Gloria Dump and Opal's mom's struggle with alcohol use to Uncle Billy's struggle with substance abuse and further made the connection to show students how alcohol can affect decision-making in negative ways.

Excerpt 4: (Classroom Observation, October 27, 2022)

> Ms. Thompson: I mentioned [during the reading of Winn Dixie] that someone I love is in jail. He has been in jail most of his life and I can explain to you what happened. But, I want you to remember before I say anything. Was Otis a bad man?
>
> Student: No! No! You talked about your uncle…
>
> Ms. Thompson: Did he make a bad choice?
>
> Students: Yes
>
> Ms. Thompson: Are there consequences when we make bad choices? Yes. And I can tell you that sin entered the world and Uncle Billy fell into temptation for sin. He was doing what Gloria Dump was doing. What was Gloria dump doing?
>
> Student: Drinking too much alcohol
>
> Student: And Opal's mom
>
> Ms. Thompson: Yes, that's exactly right. It caused problems in their family, didn't it? Uncle Billy, a long time ago, years ago, he was drinking too much alcohol. And he made a poor choice. He was hanging out in places that were not good…and he got into a fight.

Otis, the formerly incarcerated pet shop owner, becomes a prominent mirror character for Uncle Billy (except for the fact that Otis is White and Uncle Billy is Black). Ms. Thompson referenced Otis three different times in the transcript. Because of his former incarceration status, Otis was looked down upon and misunderstood by the townspeople. Serving as a mirror to Uncle

Billy, Otis was also treated unfairly by the cop. The cop became a point of reference for the unfair treatment of Otis and also Uncle Billy.

The second category of text connections was Biblically-related texts. This included reading a portion of the Christian children's book, *Made by God* (Evans, 2021), explicit Biblical references, and general Christian discourse. In total, nine Christian connections were referenced by Ms. Thompson. First, using simple language, *Made by God*, addressed racism in connection with Christianity. Quoting the text, "Sadly, some people think they are better than others because of the color of their skin or how they look, or where they are from. That sin is called racism." Ms. Thompson intentionally used the text to set the stage for Uncle Billy's story.

Ms. Thompson also referenced the Bible or Biblical ideas six times throughout the conversation. The first example happened at the beginning of the conversation, she asked students to recite the first four words of the Bible ("In the beginning, God"). In this way, she wanted students to remember that all people are made in the image of God. In the second example, Ms. Thompson drew attention to the epistolary genre of the book of Ephesians that they learned about earlier in the year. Thirdly, when describing Uncle Billy's bad choices, she connected his temptation to make bad choices to when "sin entered the world." In another example, she had the students remember the story of Cain and Abel when one brother "lost their temper" and killed the other brother. (She followed this up with the fact that Uncle Billy did not kill anyone, but he had an angry response and was not walking with God or "living according to God's word"). In another more future-oriented reference, Ms. Thompson described how Uncle Billy would interact with the students. She said, "Encourage you with the word of God," and he might ask, "Have you read your Bible lately?" and, "He will give you Bible verses to look up." Lastly, beyond these Biblical reminders, Ms. Thomspons connected learning to the school's

theme for the year, “One Another” and a familiar Christian song, *Build Your Kingdom Here* (Rend Collective, 2012)

Pedagogically, making literate connections to a variety of known texts, events, stories, classroom memories added to students’ prior knowledge and further enhanced students’ comprehension of Uncle Billy’s situation. Further, using Biblical connections contributed to students' overall understanding of the Bible and situated Uncle Billy as part of their Christian community. Together, these various connections deepened their eventual relationship to Uncle Billy.

Bringing Together Multiple Literate Activities

Whether it was adding to the opinions topics lists, learning how to participate in read-alouds and discussion, or building connections across disparate texts that were shared in and beyond the classroom, Ms. Thompson brought together multiple literacy-based activities. While some activities were explicit, like reading and modeling letter writing, others happened earlier in the month and were referenced during the observation. I will discuss them in the order Ms. Thompson mentioned/modeled them. The first classroom observation started out as Ms. Thompson read a list of opinions written on chart paper. (The students brainstormed this list previously in order to write an opinion essay.) She read, “No more bullying, we should have fair treatment, all kids should be able to go to school.” Although she would revisit this list later on in the lesson, at this point she used this “opinions list” as an introduction to a read aloud of the picture book, *Made By God* (Evans, 2021).

Ms. Thompson began, “Do you know what every other kid in the world share?...all of you were made by God.” She proceeded in reading a portion of the text, stopping to ask questions and make connections throughout. At one point, the book addressed the sin of racism.

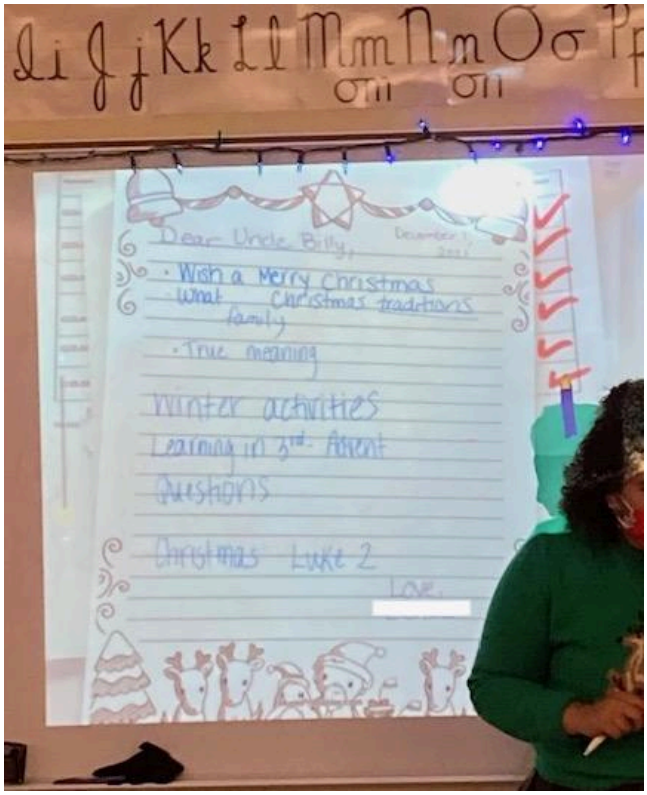
A student interjected and pointed to the opinions list, “No racism.” Ms. Thompson acknowledged this observation and affirmed, “Yeah, you guys came up with that on your own. We talked about that this fall.” This back and forth between present and past activity created a deep learning environment filled with literate connections.

A few days later, the students were ready to write their letter. Before writing, Ms. Thompson described the reciprocal nature of their relationship. Using a diagram with students represented on the left side and Uncle Billy on the right side, she drew arrows from one side to another. Within each arrow she wrote the words, “love, joy, energy,” In the middle she drew a heart (representing love). (This activity and diagram is described in more detail in Chapter 7.) For the purposes of focusing on literate activities, I draw attention to the strategy of modeling and using diagrams. In this case, a diagram reinforced the relationship between the two participants, but also built the context of the situation giving the literate activity an authentic purpose.

Later in the same observation, Ms. Thompson used a document camera to model writing a letter (Figure 4). During the observation, Ms. Thompson spent considerable time discussing and modeling each part of a letter. For instance, she guided the students to describe themselves by their age and skin color. Then, she instructed them to ask a question followed by a sentence of sharing. This concluded with signing their name.

Figure 4

Ms. Thompson Models a Letter to Uncle Billy (December 1, 2021)



In sum, all this data and subsequent analysis in regard to literacy teaching showed a highly competent teacher attuned to literacy pedagogy. Skillfully, Ms. Thompson constructed dialogic space, used connections, and modeled various literate activities to build a multi-layered literacy environment. More than that, Ms. Thompson used her pedagogical knowledge to connect to her Uncle's situation and in doing so, created a real-life authentic purpose for the teaching.

Be Vulnerable/Take Risks

Beyond her literacy teaching, Ms. Thompson's power came through her vulnerability and emotion. A theme of vulnerability is woven through the data–both in the transcripts and letters. Palmer (1993) wrote about "opening a space for feelings" within the classroom and the role of the teacher to model vulnerability. Ms. Thompson's vulnerability showed up in two prominent

ways: in the risk of inviting her uncle into the classroom community and in her willingness to share about her personal experiences. Both of these outpourings allowed students to do the same, therefore creating a depth of vulnerability with Uncle Billy and with the class.

First, Ms. Thompson purposefully included her uncle to be part of the classroom community. Using asset-based words and phrases such as, “Someone I love is in jail” and “He is smart,” and “He loves the Lord,” the transcripts clearly conveyed her affection for him. By inviting him to the letter writing relationship, she also risked pushback by the school community. While many parents eventually embraced this project with openness, some cited initial concerns of safety. His label as “prisoner” and his unknown conviction caused some parents to be uncomfortable with this pen pal relationship. But, Ms. Thompson’s familial ties and her relationship with students allayed many parental concerns (including mine, as discussed in the Prologue).

But this place of risk also held possibility as it formed the ground for an atmosphere of learning as students shared their own connections with incarcerated family members. To demonstrate, when Ms. Thompson first introduced Uncle Billy's situation, other students immediately shared about their family members who have been in jail or prison. In total, four students discussed their experiences with incarceration. While it shouldn’t be surprising since incarceration affects more people than I realized, I was taken aback by the number of students who have been personally impacted by incarceration. For me, incarceration is not traditionally something that is talked about within my community, much less school, so to have four students share their own experiences shed light on the number of people affected by incarceration. The conversation also illuminated, for me, how students talk about incarceration within classroom spaces. This furthers the notion that incarceration should not be taboo, but rather embraced in the

classroom. While the impact of normalization of incarceration will be brought up again in other chapters, I initially highlight a snippet of conversation that took place between Joel and Ms. Thompson.

Excerpt 5:

> Joel: My uncle is also in jail right now.
>
> Ms. Thompson: I am so grateful that you shared that with our class.
>
> Joel: He also drinks alcohol and [that is] how he got in jail
>
> Ms. Thompson: We are starting to see some patterns, and I want you to know that this is something that is common. This is something that happens. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to say, "Ooo, I can't believe it." Joel, I am actually comforted that you and I both have this relationship. We both have this understanding of people that are incarcerated. And we can learn and encourage them. And we can get that type of love back. (Classroom Observation, October 27, 2021)

Before moving on, I pause at this brief exchange between Joel and Ms. Thompson. Joel, being the first student to speak up about his incarcerated family member, took a risk in telling the class about his uncle. Ms. Thompson used Joel's sharing as an opportunity to affirm his risk. She responded, "I am so grateful that you shared that with our class." Joel, then, offered more context about his uncle's incarceration, "He drinks alcohol and [that is] how he got in jail." Here, Ms. Thompson not only reiterated how common an experience incarceration is, but also created a solidarity between them. Essentially she is saying to Joel, "We share this difficult experience." They both understand, because of their shared understandings of familial incarceration, there are still opportunities to learn, encourage, and get reciprocal love back.

After this exchange with Joel, three other students shared about various family members who were incarcerated. I am not going to detail the entire conversation with these three students at this point, but will instead provide an overview. While one of the stories for a student sounded like a distant familial member, the two other students shared about foster/biological fathers in complex situations. (One of these two students, Andrew, will be discussed in Chapter 6). Whether it was Jonah's vulnerability or Ms. Thompson's heartfelt response, or the desire to share in front of class, it was clear to me that students wanted to share their stories with Ms. Thompson. By creating an atmosphere of vulnerability, Ms Thompson opened up space for her students to also be vulnerable.

A second area of vulnerability that Ms. Thompson displayed was in her sharing of personal experiences, struggles, and emotions. Topics that might be considered taboo in other classroom spaces are freely shared by Ms. Thompson. And, because of her willingness to tackle topics like mental health and racial justice, students feel free to do the same. For instance, as part of the introduction she read a letter from Uncle Billy (to her) aloud to the class. She read, "Alana, keep talking to your counselor." Then she told the students, "I talk to a counselor. I share my feelings with a counselor." Immediately after, a student blurted out, "So do I!" Ms. Thompson replied, "You do, too? That's awesome!" This brief dialogic exchange between Ms. Thompson and this student allowed for a shared connection point, but also normalization of talking to a counselor and the importance of taking care of one's mental health.

This opportunity to share about potentially vulnerable topics came out in the student letters as well. For instance, in the first letter exchange one student shared with Uncle Billy about his ADHD diagnosis while another student shared that he was adopted and proceeded to tell Billy the name of a birth mom. Another girl stated in her letter, "I'm new here." In year one, one

girl explained her complex feelings about her mom having a baby. It is quite possible that all these topics are shared with any letter recipient, but there seems to be an openness in confiding in Uncle Billy. Vulnerability, it seemed, to cut across participatns. First modeled and validated by Ms. Thompson in the classroom, vulnerability seemed to transfer to the students in their letters to Uncle Billy.

Vulnerability extended beyond Ms. Thompson. The students felt it from Uncle Billy, too. As one student expressed in an end-of-the year interview, "He was comfortable, like, when we asked him how old he was, he was comfortable answering us." While I don't know whether or not these students talk about their ADHD diagnosis or their complex feelings about a new baby with the class, it feels significant that it becomes part of conversation with Billy. It was as if, because of Ms. Thompson's support and love for him, Uncle Billy became a "safe" person with whom the students shared their feelings. I wonder how Billy felt about receiving these confidences. While he responded to some, others were left unmentioned. What I do know (from his letters) is that Uncle Billy prayed for the students. Not knowing for sure, I would not be surprised if some of these confidences became part of his prayers.

Further, while this level of vulnerability might happen in classrooms in other places, I can only compare it to my own experiences. For me, it feels different than in the (Reformed Christian) school classrooms I have been a part of. From my perspective, the vulnerability and emotions modeled by Ms. Thompson feels all the more significant, and becomes a place in which teachers have much to learn from. This vulnerability and comfortability around topics like counseling, ADHD, and adoption are important to students and they seem willing to discuss when modeled and given the space to do so.

In the classroom space, feelings are shared freely and openly which comes with some vulnerability. For example, in March, Ms. Thompson could barely contain her excitement when she told the class about Uncle Billy's upcoming release from prison. During the announcement, one of the students interjected, "Your dad would be so happy." (Ms. Thompson's dad had died a few years previous.) This comment caused her eyes to well up with tears. Unashamed, she said, "These are happy tears….He would be so happy." This overflow of emotions prompted another student to also start crying. Together, this pair had a moment together. Because of Ms. Thompson's vulnerability, other students in the classroom felt permission to feel and express their own emotions.

Parents also recognized Ms. Thompson's openness to creating a space for feelings. In an interview, one parent explained:

> Yeah. I think one thing I said to Ms. Thompson already is that I really appreciate just how she brings her full human self to the classroom. I love that she's been able to cry in front of the kids and laugh in front of the kids, but especially around you know her uncle's situation and just some of her other family stuff this year. I really love that. And I think it's really wonderful to have a full range of emotions surrounding, especially something like incarceration displayed in a teacher who you love and trust. (Parent Interview, July 6, 2022)

In sum, cutting across data sources—from classroom observations, to letters, to parent interviews—vulnerability is modeled by Ms. Thompson, demonstrated in student letters to Uncle Billy, and recognized by parents. This idea is what Palmer (1993) suggested in that the classroom be a place of openness to emotion and feelings...a space modeled first by the teacher. Because of

Ms.Thompson, students understood vulnerability and emotion as a source of connection between participants broadening their understanding of community.

Scaffold Discussion of Race

Along with making literate connections and modeling vulnerability, Ms. Thompson navigated discussions of race. As shown in the data, she did this in two ways: naming racial identity and teaching about incarceration and unjust policing practices. Understanding how Ms. Thompson used both letter writing and Uncle Billy's story to infuse topics of race provides the education field, and certainly for Reformed Christian education, with more examples of how to include racial identity and topics of race, like anti-Blackness and anti-Black bias within the criminal justice system into the curriculum.

Naming Racial Identity

Ms. Thompson understood the importance of claiming and celebrating identity, especially when it comes to race. During an interview in the fall of 2020, Ms. Thompson described a memory from her own grade-school experience. She talked about trying to find a marker color that represented her unique skin tone, but all that her classroom offered was a Black sharpie which left her with the decision to leave the person on the worksheet white (like the paper) or Sharpie Black, neither which felt accurate for her. Because of that experience (among other reasons), she described various skin tones as "caramel," "macchiato," and "chocolate milk" and subsequently stocked her classroom with various resources to reflect a racially diverse community. This story, as told by Ms. Thompson, reflected her unique lived experience as a biracial child navigating the two different worlds that come together in her identity and thus wanting something different, and more inclusive and affirming, for her own students.

Besides her own personal experiences, Ms. Thompson was also aware of the propensity for White people to be color-evasive. Because of this, Ms. Thompson taught with racial identity in mind. For example, in November 2021, as part of modeling the first letter to Uncle Billy, Ms. Thompson asked the students to describe themselves. She went first, "Hi, my name is Alana, I'm 5'6'' and I have a big smile. I have curly brown hair that goes down to my shoulders. I like to wear it in braids. My skin is chocolatey–milk chocolate–but it can get tan in the summer. I have a big smile and brown eyes…." From what I understand Black joy covers much more than just naming racial identity, but, in that moment, as she spoke confidently of Blackness, she modeled Black joy (Love, 2021).

In the end, eight students took up Ms. Thompson's invitation to include skin color in their letters. The student letters showed that six White students use the words "white," "tan," or "tannish" to describe themselves and two Black students use the term "black" or "brown" to describe their skin color. In the letter that followed, Uncle Billy responded that he has "brown skin." These descriptions, which include skin color, are important in this predominantly White classroom make-up as many White children are raised to either not see or not talk about skin color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006), and equally important for they also speak to the affirmation and joy of Blackness within this classroom.

Naming racial identity was important as Ms. Thompson specifically described Uncle Billy's identity to the class. Race became an integral factor as part of his lived experiences as an incarcerated individual. Throughout the two days of introduction and letter writing she used the term "Black man/male" seven times to reinforce his race and gender together and how these intersectional identities, along with his incarcerated status, affected his life. In the quotes below, I italicized certain words for emphasis.

Ms. Thompson: Uncle Billy was a *Black man*, in this world, *who had committed a crime*. So I am wondering, how do you think people were treating him, after that happened?... He wasn't being treated well. He fell into more temptation and he wasn't able to get on the right path and a lot of it had to do *with the color of his skin*." (Classroom observation, October 27, 2022)

(...) it was very hard for him as *Black man*. Nobody wanted to hire him. Nobody wanted to have him work for them…People need to be treated fairly, and not to just look at the *color of someone's skin* and decide that they are not going to be good. (Classroom observation, October 27, 2021)

So we are recognizing that actions have consequences. We also understand that it can be harder for people (...) members of minority communities, right, if they are not treated fairly by law enforcement. (...) so you saw how Otis was being treated. Can you imagine if Otis, being [sic] a *Black man***,** and the cop didn't like him because of that? (Classroom observation, October 27, 2021)

You guys are also going to get a new friend, a new friend. And this is a friend you maybe don't have (pause) a *Black male*. Maybe you don't have a *Black male* who has made a mistake and decided to turn his life over and *who is in jail* and who is older. Maybe you don't know or have written a letter to a *Black male* who is older and you will be able to have that experience as well. (Classroom observation, November 3, 2021)

In each excerpt, Uncle Billy's race (and gender) coupled with his incarceration status allowed students to make connections about the unjust treatment of people who are (multiply) marginalized. Through the lens of race, naming skin color in conjunction with larger injustices made clear the presence of racism as a system. For instance, in the third quote, Ms. Thompson

referenced that it can be "harder for minority communities." Not only that, Ms. Thompson called out a specific consequence of race and incarceration (like difficulty in job acquisition and retention). Racism as a systemic concept and the consequences of racism need to be explicitly taught, especially for those (White) students who live in a white normative society (Gilborn, 2016). Mentioned multiple times and over several observations, the connection of race and incarceration emphasized the reality for those, like Uncle Billy, who live in carceral spaces.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Ms. Thompson threaded questions through these excerpts effectively drawing students in to think and respond. In the first and third excerpt, she asked two questions, "How do you think people were treating him?" and "Can you imagine, if Otis being [sic] a Black man, and the cop didn't like him because of that? These open-ended questions that asked students to *think* and *imagine* lead toward empathy, compassion, and perspective-taking.

Finally, in looking at the conceptualization of community, the naming of "friend" was significant. In the last excerpt, Ms. Thompson repeated the word "friend" three times. In doing so, she expanded on the identity of Uncle Billy as more than an "uncle," but also positioned him a "friend." More than that, Ms. Thompson deepened the definition of "friend." Using her description in the last excerpt, a "friend" can be people who are Black, who are male, who made mistakes, who are/were in jail, and who can be older. For students whose concept of friendship was potentially narrow (or limited to the same racial identity, age, and gender), this description of friendship opened up new realities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016) for how students understand their community both inside and outside the classroom. In this way, as Jennings (2020) would assert, students actively "rethink their people" with friends being more than just their classmates but to see community in a more diverse and expansive way.

Additionally, the term "friend" dispeled notions of danger, for a "friend" from a third grade perspective (at least in my experience as a former third grade teacher) has positive connotations as someone who you enjoy spending time with. Using the discourse "friend," Ms. Thompson challenged damaging and deficient racialized notions of incarcerated individuals as dangerous, but providing students with a counter discourse and experience (Gilborn, 2016), essentially creating an alternative identity which served as a counternarrative for people in carceral spaces.

Putting the data together, Ms. Thompson encouraged students to notice and name racial identity. Through the quotes, she explicitly tied together Uncle Billy's intersectional identities as a Black incarcerated man and, further, how these identities impacted him. As important, Ms. Thompson used questions and discourse to counter negative assumptions of incarcerated individuals and expanded the notion of friendship.

Teaching about Incarceration, Policing, and Reentry

Certainly, topics of incarceration and unjust policing practices need care when being discussed in an elementary classroom. These are complex topics for adults to grapple with, much less for 8 year-olds. But, because these are topics within Uncle Billy's story, Ms. Thompson approached them with age-appropriate sensitivity using a variety of approaches. The data showed that Ms. Thompson intentionally balanced personal responsibility alongside teaching about overarching systems of inequity, like racism. Besides this, she used familiar book characters (described above) as a connection to Uncle Billy's situation. Later on in the year, Ms. Thompson used the metaphor of an "invisible sticker" to describe the potential hardships facing Uncle Billy after his release from prison. Finally, Ms. Thompson revisited the topics throughout

the year. Together, these varied ways of approaching incarceration foregrounds Uncle Billy's humanity and complicates good/bad binaries.

As a means of displaying the connected nature of Ms. Thompson's approaches, I will highlight a few snippets of classroom observations with explanations in between. Because of the scarcity of examples present in research about how to discuss incarceration with students and the potential take-aways for educators, I use three excerpts to provide possible models.

Excerpt 6: Classroom Observation (October 24, 2022)

> Ms. Thompson: He [Uncle Billy] served what he needed to serve in jail and then you get out free again. And…it is very hard in this world, K, this was maybe 40 years ago or so. Things have changed a little bit, but we talked about how things still need to change. Uncle Billy was a Black man, in this world, who had committed a crime. So I am wondering, how do you think people were treating him, after that happened? Think about how they were treating Otis. Think about how the cop was treating Otis. Was he respectful and kind to him? No. He was calling him names. He was constantly watching him. And so because he wasn't being treated well, K, he fell into more temptation and he wasn't able to get on the right path and a lot of it did have to do with the color of his skin. K, so he ended up having to go back into jail (...) He's not a bad man. He made bad choices. He had to live in a world that didn't love him because of who he was.
>
> …He is not a bad man. He made bad choices. He had to live in a world that didn't love him for who he was.

Although I shared pieces of this conversation earlier in regard to naming racial identity, I revisit the conversation again to specifically address and reiterate Ms. Thompson pedagogical

moves to teach about anti-Black racism/anti-Black police violence. For background, this excerpt explained Uncle Billy's second incarceration.

Through this conversation, Ms. Thompson balanced personal choices with anti-Black systemic racism. Ms. Thompson first acknowledged that Uncle Billy served his time in jail and was released. Then she went on, "It is very hard in this world." While she admitted, "things have changed a bit", she also reminded the students, "We talked about how things still need to change." The phrase "we talked," in the past tense, showed that there was a previous discussion about racism and that this conversation builds off of that. When Ms. Thompson addressed "things need to change" implied that it is more than just personal actions that resulted in his second conviction.

Notably, Ms. Thompson provided examples of police cruelty towards Otis, a mirror character for Uncle Billy. Although Ms. Thompson used different terminology, she noted disrespect, name-calling, constant surveillance, and unfair treatment toward Otis. To build off this, later in the conversation, Ms. Thompson went one step farther and asked, "What if Otis were Black?" In this question, she asked the students to layer what they understood about anti-Black racism on top of police brutality—essentially she implicated anti-Black police violence.

Ms. Thompson continued to explain—as a result of temptation (personal choice) and not being able to get on the right path due to his race (systemic structures), Uncle Billy went back into jail. This balancing of discourse between personal choices alongside systemic injustice has implications for this Christian community. In a society and faith tradition that is seemingly becoming more fragile in their ability to hold differing opinions, this balancing is powerful.

By using statements like, “He is not a bad man. He made bad choices.” Ms. Thompson separated Uncle Billy's identity from his choices. These seemingly small statements challenged students’ assumptions of incarceration. The separation of choices from personhood counteracted the deficit narratives of, “all people in prison are bad.” These sentiments would be echoed by students later in the year during their end-of-the-year interviews. For as one student stated, “We can’t think of him like a very bad man, he makes mistakes just like everyone else,” The dismantling of assumptions of incarceration are detailed in Chapter 6.

At the end of this excerpt, Ms. Thompson reminded the students, “He [Uncle Billy] had to live in a world that didn’t love him for who he was.” At that time “who he was” was a formerly incarcerated Black man. Living in a world that didn’t love him pointed toward the prevalence of anti-Blackness and the dehumanization of incarcerated people within society. Using the word, “world” signaled a larger systemic issue, and more than just personal choices that affected him.

Teasing out Ms. Thompson’s statement, “He had to live in a world that didn’t love him for who he was” sounds Biblical to me. Whether Ms. Thompson meant to or not, it sounds like a description of Jesus—for Jesus also lived in a world that didn’t love him for who he was. This statement echoes, at least in my interpretation, a foundational understanding of liberation theology (Cone, 2010), connecting the suffering of Jesus to the suffering of Black people. In this case, Uncle Billy suffered and because of his race and incarceration status was not understood or loved by the “world” echoing the Black experience in America.

Excerpt #7: Classroom Observation, October 27, 2022

And as I said, it was very hard for him as a Black man…nobody wanted to hire him. Nobody wanted to have him work for them. Yeah, that was really sad because he would

be good at this job and he wasn't being given the chance…often people would look at him and they would see (...) so he decided to make money by doing things that you should not do, that were against the law and that was not the right choice. It's not the right choice and I am not going to make an excuse for him. But I also know that I am also going to work hard to make sure that people…people need to be treated fairly…and not to just look at the color of someone's skin and decide that they are not going to be good. Right?

For me, this excerpt showed how Ms. Thompson centered Uncle Billy's humanity. Ms. Thompson started out by explaining realities for him as a Black man coming out of prison. She stated, "It was hard for him as a Black man," "Nobody wanted to hire him," "He could be good at this job," "He wasn't given a chance." As a result of these obstacles (consequences of anti-Blackness), as Ms.Thompson admitted, Uncle Billy made "not the right choice" by making money in ways and doing things that were against the law. Ms. Thompson clearly stated that these were not excuses, but reasons to work toward action and to make sure "people are treated fairly." Ms. Thompson described, in both positive and negative ways, the complexity in which Uncle Billy lived in the world as a formerly incarcerated Black man.

What's more, without giving Uncle Billy "a pass" for his actions, Ms. Thompson contextualized his situation. This contextualization of someone else's story has potential to blur stark boundaries within communities. Not surprisingly, there remains a tendency in Christian communities (at least in mine, anyway) to clearly delineate good vs. bad and right vs. wrong. This type of binary thinking limits how people understand others within and outside of their community. Drawing stark boundaries is much easier when you don't know someone else's story. For these students, as they became immersed in Uncle Billy's story and background, they gained

a fuller perspective of his choices, both positive and negative, which are intricately tied to his Blackness and incarceration status. While lines between right and wrong are still present (as Ms. Thompson suggested), they become more blurry. This blurriness becomes a place of possibility to widen understanding of community.

In the next excerpt, Ms. Thompson not only shared the news of Uncle Billy's upcoming release, but discussed the complexities of his reentry.

Excerpt #8: Classroom Observation (March 24, 2022)

> Ms. Thompson: So our system is not perfect. It's actually broken. We also know that race plays into it, and there is racism that sometimes affects different people. Uncle Billy, as you know, made a poor choice when he was choosing to be in the wrong place with the wrong people. He knows that he made that wrong choice. He will not say, "I didn't do it." But we do know that the sentence that he got was a lot harsher than we would have thought it would be. He was sentenced to 25 years to life, okay?
>
> (…) I will tell you, getting out of jail is not easy. We live in a world where they don't really set you up for success, okay? It's actually really tricky. They kind of get you, They let you get out, but then right in front of you, there's a mountain you need to climb, okay? You get out and there's a mountain, but you don't have anything you need in order to climb it, okay? So that can be really tricky. He doesn't have a car, so how is he supposed to get home? He doesn't have a job, so how is he supposed to make money, right? You know what I'm saying? And with their special rules, he's not going to be able to leave [State, blinded] for three years.
>
> The hard thing is, is that he's going to have a big sticker on him. It's kind of a figurative language. You know how we say it. It's going to be like he has a big sticker. It's

> going to be an invisible sticker, and it's going to say, "I made a bad choice," or, "I am a criminal," or, "I went to jail." And so you know what people are automatically going to do? So that's what's really hard. Not everybody knows his heart. (Classroom Observation, March 24, 2022)

Admittedly, this lengthy quote needs unpacking. In fact, pages could be written on these three paragraphs alone. While I hope to explore this at a later time, for the purpose of this dissertation, I focus on how Ms. Thompson used analogies to build understandings of reentry. I conclude with a short section on students' understanding of racism outside of the study.

Earlier, I noted Ms. Thompson's references of racism as a systemic structure. Those references were part of a discussion that happened in late October 2021. Here, in this excerpt, I reference Ms. Thompson's conversation that happened five months after the initial discussion in October. I highlight this excerpt from March to not only show frequency over time—that conversations of race/racism need to happen more than once (Kay & Orr, 2023) and across the year—but also how the various connections that Ms.Thompson used in her teaching.

In all, Ms. Thompson used three analogies to describe the difficulties about Uncle Billy's reentry. First, she referenced a mountain. To quote, "There's a mountain to climb, okay, you get out and there's a mountain, but you don't have anything you need in order to climb it, okay?" Then she gave examples of difficulties, "he doesn't have a car…he doesn't have a job…how does he make money." Second, she mentioned "special rules" talking about how Uncle Billy cannot leave the state for three years, making travel and support from family (like Alana) "tricky." Finally, Ms. Thompson referenced, "A big sticker on him." She states, "It's going to be an invisible sticker, and it's going to say, 'I made a bad choice,' or, 'I am a criminal,' or, 'I went to jail.'" Using simple analogies that students understand, like a mountain, special rules, and an

invisible sticker, coupled with specific examples helped students to grasp potentially difficult and complex topics.

I want to pause here for it might be easy to lose sight of the fact that these students are third graders. As eight and nine-year olds, they are already learning about anti-Black racism, incarceration, and the complexities of reentry in age-appropriate ways. Not only that, like my son Silas, students communicated it with others.

I contrast this to my own personal experience with understanding of incarceration and reentry. To be honest, before my involvement with this study, I had not given reentry much thought. My lack of intersections to people in carceral spaces and my relative privilege of not needing to engage left me with inaccurate and simplistic views of reentry. But, because of my relationship with Ms. Thompson and Uncle Billy, and learning from the returning citizens that attend my church, I am now beginning to see the difficulties that returning citizens encounter. Ms. Thompson's description was accurate. Many returned citizens walk out of prison with no job, no car, no money, potentially no place to live, and little to no support. It is no surprise, then, the staggering rate of recidivism (Alexander, 2010).[10] I cannot help but wonder how understanding reentry through the lens of Uncle Billy (through Ms. Thompson) at an early age may impact these students' understandings and actions for the future.

In all, Ms. Thompson used a variety of strategies to teach students about incarceration and policing, and reentry. By weaving together language of personal choices/consequences alongside references of systemic racism and unfair treatment within the larger criminal justice system (which includes "special rules"), students received a more complex view of the situation for people who are marginalized by race and incarceration. Finally, since these topics are revisited throughout the year, this new learning is embedded, built upon, and nuanced.

[10] In 2023, the rate of recidivism in the US was 44% (Recidivism Rates in the US, wisevoter.com)

Student Understandings

Some students came into the discussion knowing the realities of Black people in the US. In a poignant example below, a student expanded on Ms. Thompson's question. While I used this conversation previously, in this case I highlight the snippet of dialogue that happened after Ms. Thompson's initial description.

Excerpt 9: Classroom Observation (October 27, 2022)

> Ms. Thompson: So we are recognizing that actions have consequences. We also understand that it can be harder for people...members of minority communities, right, if they are not treated fairly by law enforcement. …so you saw how Otis was being treated. Can you imagine if Otis, being [sic] a Black man**,** and the cop didn't like him because of that? Would that have been worse for him?
>
> Student: People get killed when they are Black
>
> Ms. Thompson: That is actually a true situation
>
> Student: They get put on their knees, so people…
>
> Ms. Thompson: Those are things that we are going to start to talk about as well, right?

In this brief conversation, connections are being made between a familiar book character and larger societal events all in the context of Uncle Billy. After Ms. Thompson's question, a student responded, "People get killed when they are Black" While George Floyd is not mentioned, this reference is directed toward his murder on Monday, May 25, 2020. For the student again interjected, "They get put on their knees…" This interjection shows that students are making connections to recent events and understanding police brutality in ways outside of a book character but to larger systems of racial injustice and anti-Black police violence.

Conclusion

While this chapter is titled the power of a teacher, it is specifically about the influence of Ms. Thompson. For this study, in particular, she built relationships, made pedagogical decisions, took the lead in being vulnerable, and traversed complex discussions concerning race.

In a recent article (Witte & Juzwik, 2024), my co-author and I use Rohr's (2016) metaphor of a "door opener" to describe Ms. Thompson. Because of her intersectional identities, she was able to open spaces for learning in irreplicable ways, and her capacity to build up her teaching from her singular, once-occurrent ontological positions in the world became a source of power for her teaching (Bakhtin, 1990). First, Ms. Thompson navigated multiple relationships to create connections across physical and societal distance. Because of her familial relationship with her uncle, the respect of students, and the trust of parents is what made this study possible. As a result, Ms. Thompson built a more-expansive, dynamic community. Second, as a teacher, Ms. Thompson facilitated a multi-layered literacy environment. By creating dialogic space, making literate connections, and modeling literate activities, students discovered how literacy can develop relationships. Additionally, in this project, we saw Ms. Thompson being willing to take risks and be vulnerable with students. This hospitality and openness allowed students to embrace Uncle Billy as part of their classroom community and share freely with him. Finally, Ms. Thompson spoke openly about race. She encouraged students to share their own racial identities, but also brought up matters of racial injustice in specific ways (anti-Blackness, police brutality, reentry). As door-opener (Rohr, 2016), Ms. Thompson guided students, through literate activities, to more expansive understandings of community, specifically attuned to race.

CHAPTER 5 - THE POWER OF LETTER WRITING

"I can just learn about this other person who I haven't met…through letters" (Anikah, student interview, May 10, 2022).

Quoting Greenwood (2023), "If you care about the lives of people behind bars, there is a simple, actionable thing you can do: Write a letter." If writing a letter is as powerful as Greenwood (2023) claims, it is critically important that we understand the nuances of letter writing. For instance, how participants in letter writing partnerships communicate, what they share, and how letter writing impacts them would shed light on the power of letter writing. Unlike the article, this chapter focuses not solely on people who are incarcerated, but also on their letter writing partners, elementary students. This study and chapter illuminates the personal and reciprocal nature of letter writing, how participants communicated, and how Uncle Billy became a co-educator—adding nuance to the power of letter writing.

Before moving on, I pause to situate how Ms. Thompson described letter writing to her third graders. Knowing this provides a starting point where the students entered the writing intervention. In late October, as Ms. Thompson introduced letter writing to the students, she explained, "Letters are an opportunity for you to learn about people." A few days later she used a similar phrase, "A learning opportunity." From these statements, students understand that letters not only involve learning about people, but an "opportunity"–-a word with a positive connotation— a privilege to learn about another person. She continued, "A pen pal is someone who you write to and they write back to you." Here, this statement explained the relationship of a pen pal as reciprocal. Taken together, these statements show how Ms. Thompson communicated the nature of letter writing to her third graders.

Personal and Reciprocal

At its core, letter writing is about meaningful communication and connection (LeVine,

2002). Vieira (2019), in her book about writing letters across geographical borders, states that "writing is a site that people make good on a deeply felt human desire; to commune (p. 26). This desire for communion is highlighted specifically in epistolary writing. Its meaningfulness stems from both its personal nature and its reciprocal nature. Writing, specifically letters, can move across contexts and connect participants over space and time, as well shown by Vieira's (2019) transnational study of writing (including letter writing) as remittance. Writing as a literacy act is a way to lessen proximity and develop relationships across time and space. Vieira (2019) uses the word "communion," a word with spiritual connotations, to describe letter writing. I am drawn to how letter writing, like communion, drew participants together with each other and with God within an elementary Christian school classroom setting.

Specifically, pen pal letter writing is personal, it is an expression of individual communication to a particular recipient with the assumption of a reply. For these third graders, both of these facets of letter writing were impactful. The simple fact that each letter was written to a specific student should not be underestimated. Naming is powerful for it denotes a personal and individual relationship. As Ms.Thompson explained, "He [Uncle Billy] will call you by your name, Dear [student name]." From there she explains that the students can use nicknames, but only first names will be used.

As Ms. Thompson passed out the letters in early December 2021, students waited in anticipation for their name to be called. Receiving their individual letter in hand, Ms. Thompson instructed the students to read it twice on their own before sharing with classmates. After a short time, the students rushed around to show their friends. As an observer, I could see and feel the energy and excitement.

While delight from the students, this personalized letter came with both apprehension and

joy from parents. As one parent expressed to me, the fact that Uncle Billy, a person whom they did not know and who was in prison, knew their child's name was a reason for concern. To be honest, that was my initial concern as well. When I first saw the letter from Uncle Billy–not knowing his story–I also thought, "This man knows my child's name." Looking back, these concerns go back to my lack of understanding, maybe more truthfully the privilege of not needing to understand, limited intersections with those in prison, and because of that, negative assumptions about people in carceral spaces. At least for me, as a parent, there was an initial reaction to safeguard my child from potential harm that I feared might come from talking to a convicted "criminal." I was not imagining a complex person beyond his carceral identification. I now consider this reaction as embedded to some degree in White innocence (Wekker, 2016) and White fear (Lensmire, 2010) coupled with a deficit, even dehumanizing, view of incarcerated people. Fear-based dominant social narratives of incarceration are pervasive in society, but also thrive within Christian communities. I bring this up because I think there is power (and power-dynamics in the form of Whiteness and racism) in the notion of being called by name.

For Henry, a student with down syndrome, the simplicity of his name at the top of the letter delighted him. As his mom recalled to me in an interview, he would carry the letters from Uncle Billy around the house simply because his name was written at the top. Indeed, for many students, they kept their letters because the contents of the letter was personal to them. For Kavon, his mom noted the power of seeing his "own name" being at the top of the letter, "We were just amazed at how personal the letters were and the excitement that Kavon felt every time he got his own letter with his name on it." Further, as Andrew's parents recalled in an interview, Yeah, we would talk about it [the letter writing], but there was also this sense that this was a personal thing. This was (sic) his personal letters. Yeah, so he kept that close. Yeah. He didn't

share that with siblings or anything like that…That was a private thing. Uncle Billy wrote to me."

In letters to Uncle Billy, addressing each letter personally was important. If he received a letter without a name, as happened from time to time, he would still write a letter so that each student received a letter back. In the reply he would remind the student to put their name on their letter. The unnamed letter read, "Hi, I don't know your name, you didn't put your name on the letter." Later on he would give a reminder, "Please put your name on all letters. Thanks." In another example of personalization, Uncle Billy would also put individual names within the body of the letter. For instance, he wrote, "I love you, [student name] in the name of Jesus." This small act was another reminder of the personal nature of the recipient for the later.

The act of naming has Biblical connotations. Quoting Isaiah 43:1, "I have summoned you by name, you are mine" (NIV, 2011). Not only does Isaiah use the phrase "by name" denoting the importance of a name, but adds, "you are mine." I cannot help but tie the phrase "you are mine" to the concept of biblical belonging that I described in an earlier chapter—for I don't see this phrase as a means of control, but a way to affirm inclusion and love. In the example in the previous paragraph, Uncle Billy's deliberateness in inclusion of every child as well as personalizing his letters, reinforced the sense of belonging, and in doing so, mirrored an action loving God.

Besides this letter writing process being personal, it was also reciprocal. As Ms. Thompson described in the beginning, one aspect of this relationship was reciprocity in the simple sense that there was a reply back. While I don't know the number of students who had experience with a pen pal before this, the fact that students valued the response should not be underestimated. From the excitement on students' faces as they received their letters from Uncle

Billy, to the comments during the end-of-the-year interviews, students displayed their understanding of and their appreciation of the reply. Here I share five comments students made during interviews about the reciprocal nature of letter writing:

Student comments on end-of-the-year interviews:

> "He is always going to answer back" (Erinn, student interview, May 10, 2022)
>
> "I get to write nice things and he writes nice things back" (Elizabeth, student interview, May 11, 2022)
>
> "That he responded to me, like that was kinda my favorite part" (Kelso, student interview, May 10, 2022)
>
> "It's fun to be able to talk to someone and have them write back" (Andrew, student interview, May 12, 2022)
>
> "My favorite thing was when he gave us letters back." (Dane, student interview, May 12, 2022)

Although the students didn't use the word 'reciprocal,' their comments revealed an understanding of the nature of reciprocity. Reciprocity, here, is about the back and forth correspondence–the giving and receiving of letters. In the quotes above, all the students referenced getting a letter back. For them, there is meaningfulness in the response. For Elizabeth, she added the qualifier of "nice," for letter writing (for her) was about giving and receiving nice sentiments. Andrew noted that it was fun to "talk to someone." For him, the dialogic back and forth was "fun." There is much more to be said in terms of relational reciprocity of which I will address In the next chapter—The Power of Connections.

While I didn't speak to Uncle Billy personally about his feelings toward letter writing, this relationship seemed to mean a great deal to him, for as he told Ms. Thompson, "I love your

students." Over the course of the academic year, Uncle Billy and the students developed a personal and reciprocal relationship through letter writing. This meaningful relationship built on sustained communication, is explicated in the next section.

Developing Meaningful Relationships

Building off the personal and reciprocal nature of letter writing, the sustained communication, depth of conversation and the investment of time and energy developed into a meaningful relationship. In this section, I highlight how these factors contributed to the strength of the letter writing relationship.

First, the students and Uncle Billy sustained communication over an academic year. Table 2 shows the number of exchanges that took place during the 2021-2022. It also includes a brief explanation about the nature of the exchange. In total, the students wrote to Uncle Billy six times and received letters from him five times, equalling 11 total exchanges. This almost monthly exchange allowed for sustained communication across the year. These multiple exchanges seem even more remarkable despite the fact that, due to prison regulations, letters take a longer time to get to and from Uncle Billy, that he was also busy gathering parole materials, and that Uncle Billy was relocated twice during the Spring of 2022.

Table 2

Frequency and Nature of the Letter Writing Exchanges

Month	Letters exchanged	Nature of Letter
November	● Students write letters to Uncle Billy ● Uncle Billy writes to the students	Introductory Letter
December	● Students write to Uncle Billy ● Uncle Billy writes to students	Christmas Letters

Table 2 (cont'd)

January	• Students write (sympathy notes) to Uncle Billy • Uncle Billy writes to students	Sympathy Notes (for Uncle Billy's sister, his last remaining immediate family member, died)
February	• Students write Valentines for Uncle Billy	Valentine Notes*
March	• Students write to Uncle Billy	(early) Easter Letters
	• Uncle Billy writes to students	Uncle Billy tells students about his release
April	• Uncle Billy writes to students	
May	• Students write to Uncle Billy	Final letters to Uncle Billy

Note: *Uncle Billy did not receive these notes

At a glance, the number and depth of topics is wide-ranging. Topics range from introductory questions at the beginning of the year, to sympathy notes in January, to celebration letters on his release in March, to the final letters in May. In these letters students open up about their identity, their fears, and their hopes and prayers for one another. As highlighted in the next section, students share about their personal, familial, and classroom lives. They talk to Uncle Billy about their new pets, their ADHD diagnosis, and their prayers. The breadth of topics by the students seem to increase a shared investment in the relationship.

Besides sustained communication and the breadth of topics discussed, for all participants, writing letters took time and energy. While I don't know the time Uncle Billy spent on answering letters individually, I do know it was over and above his normal routine. Based on information from Ms. Thompson, Uncle Billy had a job in prison and even more, was busy gathering his parole materials. It is therefore easy to understand why some of his letters to the students are formulaic.

For the students, writing letters and drawing required new learning, extra thinking, and writing. As one student put it in an end-of-the-year interview, “It’s hard. Writing and um…thinking about what comes next.” Another student, Dane, mentioned, “Sometimes I don’t want to keep writing because my hands hurt.” While we can smile at the student’s comment, all this time and energy should not be discounted: Writing in a new genre takes thinking and stamina–one that the students were experiencing first hand. In all, the sustained communication, the breadth of topics explored, and the time and energy by all participants created a meaningful relationship that spanned for great distance and allowed for real-life learning opportunities across contexts.

How Participants Communicated

In the next section, I will explore how students communicated with Uncle Billy. This is important to consider as it builds and extends the limited research on letter writing within elementary literacy pedagogy. I will first focus on the various types of communication within the letters and provide examples from students and Uncle Billy. Then, I will provide a more in-depth analysis of the types of communication. From Table 3, you will see that there were four main types of dialogue: sharing information, asking questions, giving encouragement, and exchanging Biblical references. Beyond this, albeit to a lesser extent, some students created interactive activities for Uncle Billy as well as made requests of him.

Table 3

Ways Student Communicated in Letters

Ways of communication	Example quote from students	Example quote from Uncle Billy

Table 3 (cont'd)

Sharing information	• I like math. • I have a dog named Hero. • I am going to my cottage most of the summer.	• I have some good news. I am coming home on or before June 29 • I eat the same foods you eat.
Asking questions	• What is your favorite Bible verse? • What does your jail cell look like? • When is your birthday?	• How are you doing? • How are things? • What have you been doing, [student name]?
Giving encouragement	• I hope you get out of jail soon.	• Be good. • Keep up the good work. • Be all you can be.
Exchanging Biblical references/stories /"blessing"	• Trust in the Lord with all your heart! • Remember God is always with you! • Thank God for answering our prayers, He is so good. • The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. Psalm 23:1-3	• Psalms 23 • Psalms 100 • Jesus is King. I want you to pray and read the Bible
Creating an interactive activity	• 5X5= • U of M or MSU (circle one) • A quiz about 9/11	• none
Requests or suggestions	• Please don't write in cursive • Please tell me more verses • Maybe wish the guards a merry Christmas.	• Please put your name on your letter

Sharing Information

Across the letters, students share freely about their lives. In fact, sharing information became one of the main ways that students communicated with Uncle Billy. Prompted by Ms.

Thompson, she encouraged the students to share about what is happening both inside and outside of class. In order to analyze data, I use the term “telling” as a separate clause with what linguists call “new information” within the letters (Johnstone, 2017). As I analyzed letters, I looked at the number of “tellings” within each letter. For instance, one student shared, 'Hi, my name is John and I have brown hair and white skin and I'm 8 years old.’ For this sentence I tease out four specific “tellings": 1) My name is John, 2) I have brown hair 3) [I have] white skin 4) I am 8 years old. As a general rule the word “and” or a comma would delineate separate “tellings.” In looking across the data, these “tellings” fall into three main categories: sharing personal information, sharing familial information, and sharing classroom information. Personal information includes personal descriptions, as well as “my favorite” statements. Second, students share things about happenings within their family. For instance, many students share their Christmas or Spring Break plans. The third type of telling was classroom information. Students would tell Uncle Billy about what they were studying or school-related activities. In some cases, especially at the end of the year, students share information a fourth way, as a way of teaching Uncle Billy (a situation that often happens between technologically knowledgeable young people and less knowledgeable elders).

Table 4

Type of Sharing by Students

Types of sharing	Example
Personal	● I am a white girl ● I am a Black, male leader ● I have to do reading, coloring, and drawing, that’s my hobby. ● I need glasses because I can’t see far away.
Familial	● My favorite tradition is [that] I get an ornament every year. ● Guess what? We are going to Nashville for Spring Break

Table 4 (cont'd)

Classroom	● We are making and Advent wreath out of paper, our hands, and a glue stick, and every week make a new candle ● Ms. Thompson is the best teacher
For Teaching Purposes	● A (lengthy) description of how a passcode an iphone works

Note: This examples come from student letters across the 2021-2022 academic year

In the first letters to Uncle Billy, Ms. Thompson suggested that the students describe what they look like. Because, as she told the students, "Today your letter is telling Uncle Billy all about (pause) "yourself." Another student interjected, "All about you!" After an example, Ms. Thompson then directed the students to ask him a question and give Uncle Billy a 'blessing."

Focusing on sharing, for the first exchange students included 122 separate "tellings," 117 of which fit under personal information. This changes in the next letter, which was a Christmas letter, Ms. Thompson suggested the students write about their Christmas traditions or winter activities, but stay away from listing presents. Here, students included 50 "tellings."A vast majority (38) updated Uncle Billy with personal information, with four students (6 tellings) sharing about a family event/tradition, and two students (4 tellings) talking about the classroom. Later on in the year, the "tellings" tended to include more familial information as they told Uncle Billy about Spring Break and summer plans. But not all information fits neatly for there is much sharing that goes on surrounding the Bible, especially in the May letters.

A few of the "tellings" were for the purposes of teaching something to Uncle Billy. During one lesson, Ms. Thompson explained about all the new things that Uncle Billy will experience after his release. One student, then, gave a lengthy description of how a passcode on an iphone works.

In general, across the letters, students seem to be the ones who share information, primarily about themselves. In turn, Uncle Billy's sharing comes as a response to answered questions and in sharing Biblically-related information (see below). An exception to this was when he shared the news of his upcoming release from prison. Then, he told each student about the good news and the date of his release. While I don't know how Uncle Billy felt about receiving these tellings from the students, the students felt it was important that they share this with him and I surmise, it was a way for them to feel communion with Uncle Billy. I wonder if reading about these events gave him a connection to life outside of prison through the eyes of a child.

Asking and Answering Questions

Not only did the students share their "tellings' with Uncle Billy, they also engaged in questioning as a way of dialogue and connection. Asking questions was encouraged by Ms. Thompson. In fact, during their first letter she tells the students to "give him something to respond to" and ask him a question. Coming from a dialogic lens, this focus on questions showed reciprocity between participants, but it also served as a building block for a sustained relationship. The students recognized the role of questions in this relationship, for, as one student wrote in a letter to Uncle Billy, "And I know it might be a lot of questions, but I want to know a lot about you so we could get along like good friends." While I will discuss more about how questions allowed for mutual sharing and learning in the next chapter, here I focus on the number and types of questions students asked. Answering questions was a big task for Billy. As he noted in a letter to me, he said, "I will answer all student's [sic] questions, some ask a lot of questions. It is OK and if you have any questions, I will answer them[.] I will answer them all, Rebecca."

At the beginning of November when the letter writing began, Ms. Thompson suggested that the students give Uncle Billy a question. See Table 5 for the number and types of questions. Fifteen out of sixteen students asked him a question with an average of almost three questions per letter, equalling 49 questions total. In December, over the 17 letters, students asked 55 questions totaling slightly over three questions each per letter.

In all, students' questions are divided into two general categories: personal questions and questions regarding incarceration. Personal questions tended to fall into two groups: “favorite” questions and “Do you like…” questions. Students also asked many questions about incarceration including what he wears, eats. his living environment, and how he celebrates holidays.

Table 5

Frequency and Types of Questions from Students to Uncle Billy Across the Year

Month	# of questions	Types and examples of question
November	49	Personal Questions (14) ● What is your favorite color? ● When is your birthday? ● How old are you? Questions about Incarceration (35) ● What do you do in jai? ● What do you wear? ● What does it feel like locked up in jail?
December	55	Personal Questions (24) ● What is your favorite book? ● Did you have pets when you were my age? ● What is your favorite food: Question regarding Incarceration (31) ● How do you celebrate Christmas in jail? ● What are your Christmas traditions? ● Do you have any friends in jail?

Table 5 (cont'd)

January (Sympathy Notes)	1	Personal Question: ● How are you?
February (Valentines)	7	Questions regarding incarceration: (3) ● What do you do for Valentine's day? (2) ● Did you have a good Valentine's Day? Personal: (4) ● Do you like any sports? ● What did you like to do when you were a kid? ● What is your favorite animal? ● How are you?
March	17	Personal questions (8) ● How are you feeling about getting out of jail? (6) ● How are you? (2) Questions regarding incarceration (2) ● Is there a school in jail? ● What are you going to do when you get out of jail? General questions: ● If you could go anywhere for Spring break where would you go?
May	6	Personal questions: ● How are you? (2) ● What do you like to do in the summer? Future-Related questions: ● What are you going to do? (when you get out of jail)

On the whole, the number of questions varies depending on the genre of letter. Students asked more questions in the first two letters than in the sympathy notes and in the Valentines. This would make sense as those two particular exchanges were more genre specific where questioning is not included as part of the genre.

The data shows that students asked questions based on the seasons/academic calendar. This would be age-appropriate as students' personal and familiar lives revolve around holidays and academic breaks (Spring break). It would make sense that they would be curious about how

Uncle Billy celebrated these holidays. One interesting note in the March letters was that six students asked about how Uncle Billy felt about the news of his release. For me, this feels emotionally-in tune for third graders and a way to share their excitement with him.

The data also show that the number of questions decreases as the year progresses. While not knowing for certain this could be that the students felt they knew things about Uncle Billy, or that Ms. Thompson directed them to include other information. It could also be that in May the students knew that they were not going to receive replies from Uncle Billy.

Give Encouragement

Fang, et al, (2021) found that one central way that families communicated with their incarcerated loved ones was to give them encouragement/motivate them. In this study, it seems that both participants gave encouragement, but seemingly in different ways. Uncle's Billy's encouragement came in frequent reminders to "Be good" and "Read the Bible," while the students' written encouragement was more spontaneous and less frequent. Students gave encouragement in a variety of ways from sharing hopes, writing verses and prayers (discussed later). Additionally, the students' acts of writing occasion-specific notes like sympathy cards and congratulation letters might be considered a source of great joy and encouragement by Uncle Billy.

Since Uncle Billy was writing to all the students individually, many times his encouragement came in short phrases that were formulaic across all the letters (Table 6). For instance, "Be good" was his most common phrase written in the letters. I would surmise that part of this was to save some time. Even though the phrases were repeated, it should not be considered trite for Uncle Billy was quite earnest in letter writings. In one of his letters to Alana, he wrote to ask, "Please instill in the student's (sic) education is the key to being successful in

life." This leads me to think that it was important for him to impart this knowledge and encouragement on the students.

In every exchange, a student, and sometimes several, expressed their hopes with Uncle Billy. While sharing hopes could fit under 'Sharing information" discussed earlier, it is less about providing Uncle Billy with information and more about giving encouragement. Some letters include a quick, "I hope you have a nice day," but some sharing of hopes are more substantial. One student wrote, "I hope you are not sick." This was a real concern in the fall of 2021 with Covid being prevalent in communities and especially in prisons. Another student wrote, "I hope you get out of jail soon," and another, "I hope you can go to church." These simple expressions of hopes and dreams became a way of uplifting Uncle Billy.

Biblical Referencing & Sharing

From the beginning of the letter writing practice, Ms. Thompson positions Uncle Billy as not only as someone who loves Jesus, but also as someone who will give them Bible verses. As Ms. Thompson explained,

> And he loves the Lord. He loves kids. He loves hotdogs. He loves me…so much. And he will write to each one of you and encourage you with the Word of God. He will tell you about jail. He will help you to continue to make those right choices….he will give you Bible verses to look up (Classroom observation, October 27, 2021).

Then again, a few days later when they write their first letters, Ms. Thompson reiterates that the students will get Bible verses from Uncle Billy. Ms. Thompson asks, "Anybody else have an idea what you could be getting from this relationship when he writes you a letter? The students respond, "Bible verses." You might be getting Bible verses. (Classroom observation, November 3, 2021)

Uncle Billy's letters came later in November and, in fact, did contain Bible verses. In fact, every letter exchange contained Bible verses (Table 6). Most of his letters also came with Biblical reminders. Besides the common phrase, "be good" Uncle Billy used similar phrases across each exchange. In many cases, Billy would personalize the phrase and write the child's name within the sentence.

Table 6

Uncle Billy's Biblical References and Reminders

Month	Specific Biblical References	Common Biblical Reminders
November	Psalm 23 Psalm 91 Matthew 6:9-13 Psalm 100 James 5:15 * Uncle Billy generally wrote 4 Biblical references in no particular order	Keep your eyes on the Lord Keep praying Ask Ms. Thompson to read the verses to you Be good.
December	Luke 2:16-20 Psalm 136:1 Isaiah 9:6 Matthew 15:4 *the 4 above verses were written on most letters Hebrew 13:15 Psalm 100 Luke 10:37	Merry Christmas Jesus was born on Christmas day. Be nice/Be good. Jesus is love/Jesus is good. Your name is in the book of life. Be the best you can be. The Lord Jesus is the way Jesus is master of the world. [Student name], Read the Bible
March	Matthew 27, 28 Luke 16 John 19, 20 Psalm 32:8	Happy Easter Resurrection of Jesus I want you to read the Bible and pray Be Good I love you, [student name]
April	John 14:6 (Billy writes, "My favorite verse") Psalm 23	Jesus is the only way. Be good. I will never forget you.

Table 6 (cont'd)

Psalm 91	Jesus will not let you down
Proverbs ALL	I love you [student name] in the name of Jesus

As students wrote their introductory letters, Ms. Thompson asked the students to write Uncle Billy "a blessing." As Ms. Thompson explains, a blessing "is something kind." Then she gives examples, "I hope you have a good day. I hope you smile. Jesus loves you. I hope you see the sunshine today." In those early November letters, six students wrote what Ms. Thompson considered a blessing and three others wrote a Bible reference in their letter.

For many students, this exchange of Bible verses and Biblical material was a learning opportunity and connection point. Students reciprocated his example but in different ways. While some students placed Biblical referencing at the bottom of the letter, mimicking Uncle Billy, for many students it was embedded in the body of the letter, and in some cases the verse was written out.

The initial letters came from Uncle Billy in early December. At that point, Ms Thompson suggested that the students write Christmas letters. During the instructions, she gave suggestions about what students could include in their letters back to Uncle Billy. She suggested that they include part of the Christmas story (Luke 2, NIV, 2011). Eight students take up Ms. Thompson's invitation to either write the reference or copy pieces of the Christmas passage. Instead of including the references at the bottom, like Uncle Billy had done, the students referenced in the body of the letter and focused on the Christmas story.

The next month, when some of the students wrote sympathy cards to Uncle Billy, all included a Biblical reference. The same went for the Valentines in February–every student included a Biblical reference or Biblical blessing.

In March, the student letters centered around the news of Uncle Billy's release. Eight students mentioned something Christian-oriented. Interestingly, none of them used Bible verses, but four students referenced prayers, "I have been praying for you." Two students gave a general "thanks" statement, "Thank God for letting you out of jail." Still, two other students gave some encouragement in the form of advice, "I think you should find a good church." The idea of church was mentioned by Ms. Thompson during the classroom observation. She told the students, "We're going to think about what he's going to do [when he gets out of prison] such as get involved with the church." What I love about the student's writing is that they recontextualized Ms. Thompson's statement (from the classroom observation) and offered it in the form of matter-of-fact advice to Uncle Billy.

The May letters were the last letters written to Uncle Billy. It marked the end of the school year and Uncle Billy's release date. While there are some themes running through them, like giving advice and highlighting the year's favorites, most of them include a mixture of Bible verses, written prayers, and/or Biblical encouragement. One student wrote, "I want you to know that I've been praying for you, hears [sic] a prayer. Dear God, be with uncle [sic] Billy as he's about to get out of jail. Help people know that he is a Christian." Another student wrote, "Let God lead you the way, don't get into temptation. Lord bless you and keep you you. Let his face shin(e) [sic] upon you. Psalms 119:9-12. Psalms 100:1-5." This excerpt quoted a blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 (NIV, 2011). It is a verse that is frequently recited by ministers to congregants at the close of a worship service. Depending on the Christian tradition, mine included, the

minister gives the blessing with outstretched hands while the congregants open theirs to receive this blessing from God. Another, more probable, possibility is that the student recontextualized the words from a popular Christian worship song called *The Blessing* (Brown, Carnes, Jobe, & Furtick, 2020) (which used the words from Numbers 6:24-26) that Ms. Thompson often sang with the students (personal communication). Either way, this common blessing, given over Uncle Billy by this student, expressed a child-like faith and evoked a deep loving relationship with Uncle Billy. This exchange forwards the notion that this connection is more akin to communion for it draws participants into a deep relationship to God.

Additional Ways Students' Communicated

In some less frequent examples, the students would create an interactive game or quiz for Uncle Billy to do. In the introductory explanation, Ms. Thompsons offers the suggestion to "give him math problems." In response, a student gave him some multiplication problems to solve. Another student asked Uncle Billy to circle one of two rival college sports teams in their state. In another example, a student asked Uncle Billy if he would like to take a quiz about 9/11. Then, in the next letter the same student follows up with a question, "Was the World Trade Center attacked?" Each of these examples required an interaction from Uncle Billy—a way to communicate and connect. Sometimes Uncle Billy would respond back in the next letter, "Yes, it was attacked," other times the activity would go unmentioned.

In a few cases, the students request things from Uncle Billy. One student asks him, "not to write in cursive." Another student asks Billy to write her some Bible verses. Still, in another example, in the first year of the study, unbeknownst to Ms. Thompson, one student asks Uncle Billy to check in on Ms. Thompson because she "seemed stressed." In the next letter back to Alana, Uncle Billy tells Alana to "be nice…they are only children." Seeing this interaction

unfold behind the scenes showed genuine concern from the student to Ms. Thompson to Uncle Billy.

In sum, like other letter writing relationships with those in prison, students used letters to express feelings, update the incarcerated person on events to help them stay connected, and encourage and motivate the incarcerated person (Fang, et al, 2021). Unlike the Fang, et al (2021) study, the student did not have personal history with Uncle Billy so the feelings expressed were sincere, but not technically familial (although in a way, as discussed previously, Ms. Thompson had invited students into her own familial relationship with her uncle). Sharing information became a way for the students and Uncle Billy to stay in communion.

Co-Educator

Letter writing provided a pathway for Uncle Billy to become a co-educator alongside Ms. Thompson. In a Vygotskian (1978) sense, Uncle Billy was a "more knowledgeable-other" in terms of his personal knowledge of incarceration and of the Bible. Beyond this, Uncle Billy's educative role extended as a reference point for Ms. Thompson teaching students about racial injustice and as a motivator for writing with care.

Biblical Knowledge and Referencing

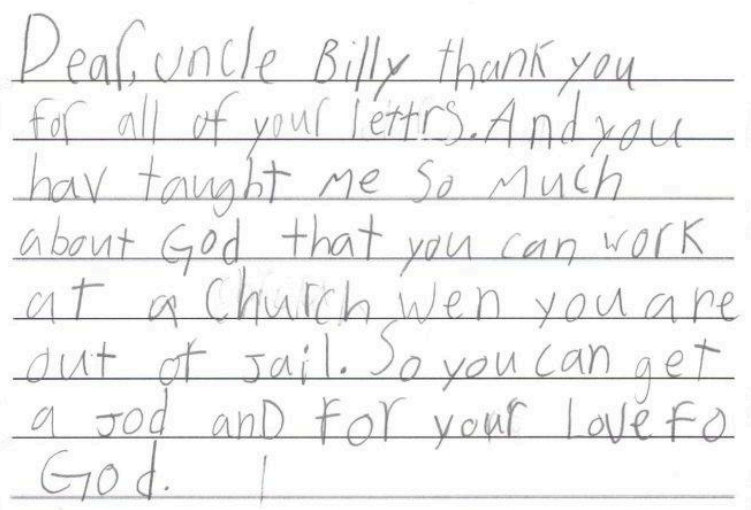
From the very beginning, Uncle Billy was positioned as someone who deeply "loves Jesus" and "who would give them Bible verses" (classroom observation, October 27, 2021). The students immediately claimed this identity for him. In their first letter to Uncle Billy, one student wrote, "I also heard that you know a lot of Bible verses. Maybe you can teach me some?" Not only does the comment show that Uncle Billy knows Bible verses, but it comes with an educative request. Also, in this initial exchange seven students asked about his favorite Bible verse. As anticipated the first set of letters arrived from Uncle Billy. His reply came with Bible

verses attached. Ms. Thompson asked the students to read over their letters two times and then show their friends. After a few moments of stillness, students got up and eagerly found friends and neighbors showing their verses to one another. One student opened his desk, grabbed out his Bible, and quickly flipped to the passage Uncle Billy had written down. Another student showed her friend the Bible verses Uncle Billy had given them and they compared references.

The letters were a powerful connector not only between Uncle Billy and the students, but between students. Students' responses from the end of the year interviews reflect this expert role in Biblical references. For instance, one student said, “He’s taught me a lot of Bible verses. So….I have learned a lot of Bible verses. Five students mentioned Bible verses as something they learned from Uncle Billy. One student expanded, “He helped me learn about God more.” In the students’ eyes, not only was Billy more knowledgeable, but an educator. See figure 5 as an example

Figure 5

Letter from Student to Uncle Billy (March 2022)

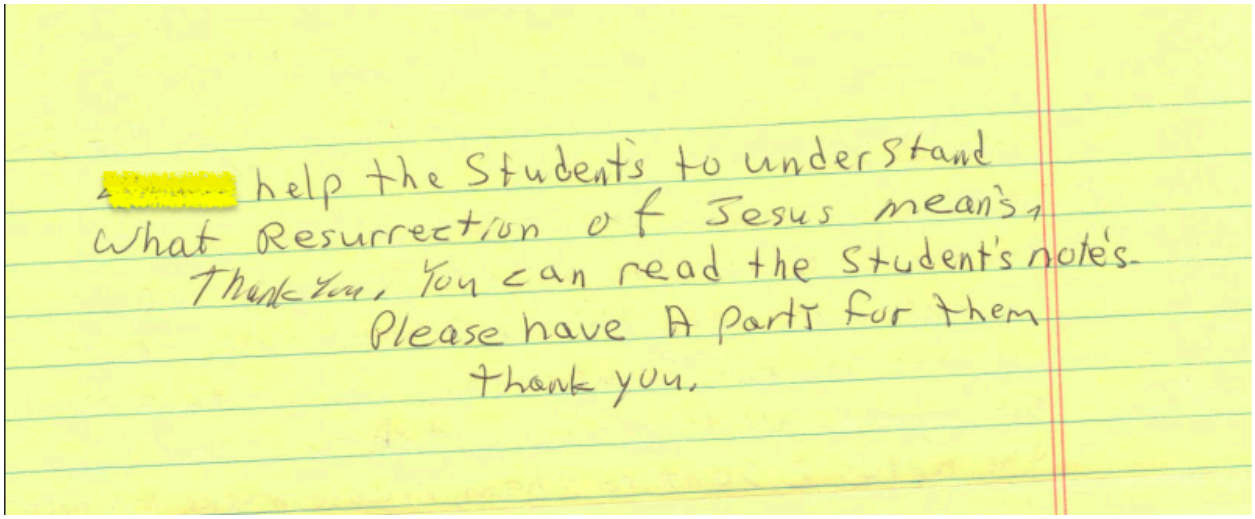

Deaf, uncle Billy thank you
for all of your letters. And you
hav taught me so much
about God that you can work
at a Church wen you are
out of jail. So you can get
a god and for your love fo
God.

In the letter from March 2020, this student (male) first thanked Uncle Billy for the letters. Then he added, “And you hav [sic] taught me so much about God that you can work at a church

wen [sic] you are out of jail." This expression of learning "you have taught me so much" exemplified with a "you can work at church" makes me smile, but also is a sincere expression of the amount the student learned from him. Then the student adds, "so you can get a job" and also "for your love for [sic] God." Taking to heart what Ms. Thompson said about the difficulty for Uncle Billy in finding a job upon his release, makes the expression all the more tender. This letter highlights, for me, the way that this student (and others) have positioned Uncle Billy an expert in Biblical knowledge.

Figure 6

Part of Uncle Billy's Letter to Alana (March 2022)



This role as co-educator in regards to spiritual understandings is exemplified in figure 6. Here, Uncle Billy asks Alana to help the students understand the resurrection of Jesus. Not only in teaching about the resurrection important to him, but also this request shows the dual nature of "co-educator." He sees himself as a part of the educative process and wants Alana to help him.

Important to note that in another letter to Ms. Thompson (not pictured), Uncle Billy referred to himself as a "mentor" to the students. Uncle Billy was earnest in his role as "mentor"

which included helping them by answering their questions and encouraging them in their faith. His self-described use of the word "mentor" speaks to his understanding of an educative role. To add nuance to the situation, he wanted both Alana and me to talk about his mentorship in the parole board letters that we were both writing on his behalf. While wanting his mentorship mentioned may come across as a self-serving act, I nevertheless do think that he loved the students and took his writing to the students seriously.

Racial Injustice

In a less direct role, Uncle Billy became a co-educator as his story was a reference point for racial injustice. As noted in the previous chapter, "The Power of a Teacher," Ms. Thompson used Uncle Billy's life story as a connection point to discuss racial injustice. Throughout the academic year, Ms Thompson talked about injustice through Uncle Billy's story, specifically in regards to policing and sentencing. Table 7 lists the topics discussed.

Table 7

Racial Justice-related Topics Addressed

Month	Topic Addressed
October (late)	● Uncle Billy's personal choices coupled with larger systems of racial injustice ● The complexities of racial bias in policing ● Prison numbers (every person is given a number) ● Prison compound (Ms. Thomspons showed the students an aerial view from Google Maps)
November (early)	● Learning from a Black male (learning through difference) ● Safety measures (Ms. Thompson talks about only using first names)
December	● Realities of prison (Uncle Billy saving money by using yellow legal pad) ● Understanding the timing of the postal system in prison

Table 7 (cont'd)

	● Prison restrictions-Ms. Thompson discusses how Uncle Billy cannot go skiing or snowmobiling or sledding
March	● Injustices of re-entry

Note: Based on Classroom Observation Transcripts

The racial justice topics addressed range from the specific to the systemic. For instance, in October, students learned specifically about Uncle Billy's (correctional) "number" and how each correspondence to him required both his name and number. This, albeit, a small detail alerted students that incarcerated people are "marked" (Ms. Thompson's wording) with a number that goes with them. (I think, then, about the profound significance of naming, as mentioned in *The Power of a Teacher*, when contrasted with this institutional correctional number.) In another specific topic, although it may seem obvious to adults, Ms. Thompson (in December) reminded the students of Uncle Billy's lack of freedoms, "I'll tell you, he is not able to go sledding. He is not able to go snowmobiling. He can't go skiing. When you are in jail, you do not have those freedoms." We see how Ms. Thompson brought complex topics to an age-appropriate level. Besides these specific topics, Ms. Thompson tackled systematic topics like anti-Black police violence and the injustices of re-entry. Each subject was filtered through the life of Uncle Billy.

Student and Parent Understandings

The topics addressed across the academic year were reflected in student and parent letters and interviews. Students' responses show the realities of re-entry and the difficulty of finding a job and being labeled a "criminal."

Student responses:

- And that it is going to be hard for him to find a job (Andrew, interview, May 12, 2022)

- When he (...) gets out of jail, he will have this sign on him that says, “I’ve been to jail” or “I’m a criminal” or something. (Lucas, interview, May 11, 2022)
- I used to think that jail was…you would just be in there for a year or two but now it can be a life sentences or even like 80 or 20 years…30 years (John, interview, May 10, 2022)
- I would say that I’m glad I could see you or I would give him some money because he’s just gotten out of jail and he doesn’t have money or clothes…that he could buy. (Dane, interview, May 12, 2022)

All of the responses echoed the discourse of Ms. Thompson. Andrew talked about Uncle Billy’s difficulty in finding a job. Lucas remembered Ms. Thompson’s analogy of a “sticker” but used the word “sign.” Even with this switch of words, he captured the meaning that the sticker/sign brings a deficit label. John’s comment revealed a change in knowledge about the length of sentences. Finally, Dane responded to the open-ended question, “What would you do if you could see/talk to Uncle Billy?” by “give him some money.” Dane recollected the examples that Ms. Thompson gave the class about the difficulties in reentry, including lack of money and resources. These responses, recorded at the end of the year, showed retention of and changes in knowledge across the year.

Understandings of racial justice were captured in the parent interviews as well:

> He [student’s name] learned a lot about giving grace to people. I think a lot of times people think of people being in jail as being really bad. And even though we don't say that at home, I think just shows and stuff kind of give that impression. And I think he learned that he would come home and say, "You know Uncle Billy, he's in jail, but he was there for too long because of his race.” And so he really got a good understanding of

kind of [sic] why Uncle Billy was there you know and take home from that. (parent interview, September 6, 2022)

Taking a pause to unpack this quote, "giving grace" is more than just courtesy or goodwill in this Christian community— for it is deeply rooted in faith. Grace means undeserved favor: a freely given gift from God. Whether the parent intended to use "grace" in this way, at the least, in my interpretation meant her son learned to "see the best in people." The parent then admitted that many times people in prison are seen as "bad" reflecting a harmful perspective. Interestingly, she pointed to "shows and stuff" thus implicating how media within dominant society bring false characterization of incarceration and anti-Blackness (alluded to later in the excerpt). Then, the parent proceeded with a quote from her son clearly making the connection between Uncle Billy, his carceral status ("in jail"), and his race. Similar to my son, Silas, (referenced in the Prologue), this quote from this parent (quoting her son), "He was there too long because of his race," is another example of a third grader articulating anti-Black systemic racism within the carceral system.

From a counternarrative lens, the topics/teachings/stories about Uncle Billy, as told by Ms. Thompson (in the third person), are one form of counternarrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016). As asserted by Solórzano and Yosso (2016) counternarratives "build community," "challenge perceived wisdom", "open windows," and "teach others" (p.163). In this study the topics discussed (Table 7) become a way to provide information based on the lived experiences of Black people (like Ms. Thompson and Uncle Billy) and also counter anti-Black racism that is prevalent in society.

For this study, the impact of the counterstories lies in two equally important facets: the teaching of realities of anti-Black racism alongside the familial narrative of Uncle Billy. What's

more, while this teaching could focus on "pain stories" (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Green, 2020), of which Uncle Billy's life no doubt contains, his stories are told within an atmosphere of love. The centering of Black stories and people within this classroom created empathy, respect, care, and love. In this way, as Solórzano & Yosso (2016) assert, "counterstories *build community* among those at the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice" (p. 136). For this study, Uncle Billy was the familiar (familial) face—A familiar *Black Christian incarcerated* face in which to contextualize students' understanding of anti-Black racism.

Solorzano & Yosso's (2016) reference to "face" makes me revisit the notion of community. Both 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NIV, 2010) and Palmer (1993) comment on the significance of seeing and knowing "face of face." This knowledge has implications for proximity and community. In this way, counternarratives allowed participants to know each other "face to face" and build community together.

Overall, these co-occurrences between the teacher explanation, four student responses and multiple parental reflections (one referenced directly) over time point to Uncle Billy's role as a touch point for injustice and the important takeaways learning from participants.

Writing for and with Care

Whether he realized it or not, Uncle Billy's role as an authentic audience to student letters was a motivator for high quality writing within the classroom. While academic benefits were not Ms. Thompson's primary reason to include Uncle Billy as a writing partner, he became an impetus for the third graders to use correct punctuation, legible handwriting, and write substantial information.

Ms. Thompson explained:

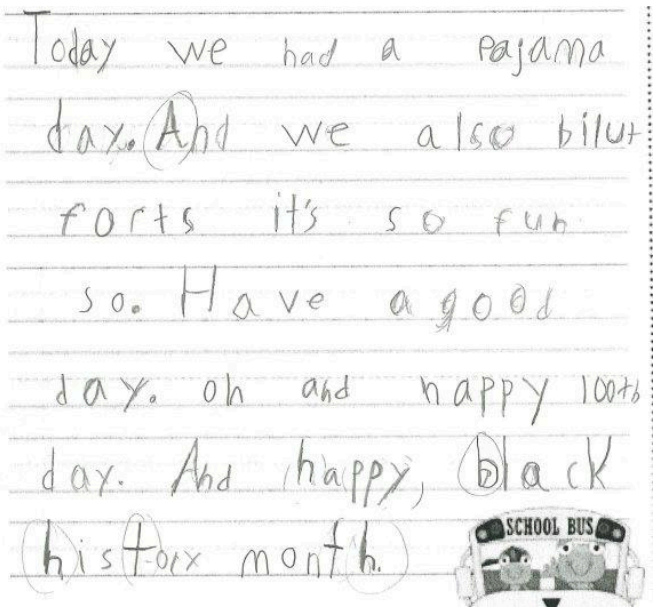
> We are going to write together in class because I want to work with you guys on your writing. This is an opportunity for you guys to use all of your third grade writing. He [Uncle Billy] is a smart man, but he is not a third grade teacher, so if you don't write your letter neatly is he going to understand? If you don't use periods and capital letters, will he know when your sentences are starting? (Students: No) Here's the thing… he is not in this school. So you are going to need to show him, not just tell him…you are going to need to use all of these types of words (pointing to poster)... adjectives, describing things to him. When he sits and reads those letters it is like understanding what life is like for you as a third grader, but only we agree that we are going to be good writers. I do have a little rule…Because I care about Uncle Billy. My rule is this, if it is not written with care, it just doesn't get sent. The reasoning is because it is kind of insulting for him to open a letter and it just doesn't have much to it. It didn't look like a kid took their time writing it. Right, so we'll just try again next time. (classroom observation, November 3, 2021)

This quote from Ms. Thompson, with multiple examples of writing conventions, boils down to one purpose: writing with intentionality and care. Ms.Thompson started off with Uncle Billy being the rationale to write neatly so that Uncle Billy "understands." Then, focusing on mechanics she tells the students to use periods and capital letters so he will. "know when your sentences are starting." She then continues with a common elementary writing phrase, "show, not tell" by using appropriate parts of speech, like "adjectives." Ms. Thompson then ties the rationale back to Uncle Billy, "because I care about Uncle Billy…if it is not written with care, it doesn't get sent." Essentially, she is saying that because I hold Uncle Billy in such high regard that he only gets high quality work. Here, she not only positioned Uncle Billy as having value, but that quality writing reflected Uncle Billy's value.

From a writing pedagogy standpoint, Ms. Thompson is not teaching "writing correctness" for the purpose of higher scores on state tests, or as part of a mandated curriculum, but rather "writing with care" became a form of respect for someone's dignity and humanity. She still expected a high level of writing when it came to conventions (neatness, mechanics, word choice, and care), and also paired it with a real-life purpose—Uncle Billy. With Uncle Billy playing the role of "authentic audience" he became more than just a person who receives a letter, but a person within the community that deserves high quality writing.

Figure 7

Student letter



Note: This letter was part of the data from 2020-2021 (Year 1)

As you can see in figure 7, Ms. Thompson (in the role as writing editor) drew light circles around letters to indicate where capital letters were needed such as the first letter of a sentence and for the proper noun "Black History" These editing reinforced that proper conventions (capital letters) need to be correct before the letter is sent to Uncle Billy. Together,

the snippets of conversation and images reflect Uncle Billy's influence as a real-life audience—and audience that deserved care.

Conclusion

Revisiting the quote at the beginning, I agree with Greenwood (2023) that letter writing is powerful. While Greenwood (2023) talked of the power of letter writing for the incarcerated person, I see the power of letter writing on the non-incarcerated letter writing partner—the students. Through the lens of the students in this classroom, over the course of one academic year, letter writing meant a personal and reciprocal connection with Uncle Billy. It meant meaningful dialogue and communication. Through letters, participants developed and deepened a relationship with Uncle Billy. While each participant communicated in their own ways, they both invested time and energy into one another, shared of themselves, and provided encouragement for one another. Additionally, letters became a platform to learn from Uncle Billy about anti-Black racism and the injustices of mass incarceration. More than that, letters represented care for Uncle Billy for this study shows that letters fostered Uncle Billy's humanity.

CHAPTER 6 - THE POWER OF CONNECTIONS

"One thing I will miss about third grade is you. We are praying for you. WE LOVE YOU!" (student letter, May 2022).

Each of the previous two chapters, The Power of a Teacher and The Power of Letter Writing, build toward the Power of Connection. In order to capture the power of connection, I look at how Ms. Thompson described "relationship," specifically focusing on the relational reciprocity shared between Uncle Billy and the third graders. Then, I will explore how connections allowed the participants to share and learn from one another. Over the course of the academic year, Uncle Billy and the students experienced significant life events, including a death and a major celebration. Therefore, I pay special attention to grief and joy shared between them. Finally, I will explore how the connection humanized Uncle Billy and dismantled assumptions regarding the incarceration of Black men in the U.S.

Relational Reciprocity

More than anything else, the relationship and subsequent community built among participants became the most important contributing factor to this letter writing project. The reciprocity and mutuality that led to shared learning opened pathways for humanizing Uncle Billy, challenged assumptions of incarceration, and disrupted binaries.

While I looked at reciprocity in terms of the reply to a letter in the previous chapter, here I concentrate on the relational aspect of reciprocity and the subsequent connection it could forge. To do this, I will demonstrate how Ms. Thompson laid a foundation of relational reciprocity in the writing partnership.

As Ms. Thompson set up the partnership, she not only used the word "relationship" repeatedly, but she also described and modeled it. In the first two classroom observations, which happened within a week of one another in late October and early November, Ms. Thompson used

the word “relationship” eleven times. In the first classroom observation, Ms. Thompson reiterated the importance of a relationship three times. Quoting Ms. Thompson, “Boys and Girls, this is going to be a *relationship* that we can build. This is going to be a *relationship* we can build” (emphasis added). She used the word “relationship” once more in the first conversation, but that time it is in the context of her and one of the students sharing a connection (both having a family member in prison/jail).

A week later during the second classroom observation, Ms. Thompson goes into more detail to talk about this shared relationship between the students and Uncle Billy. Here, she used the word “relationship” eight times. The transcript started out with the question from Ms. Thompson, “What are we going to do to form a *relationship*?”

> “What are we going to do to form a *relationship*? (student chatter). It’s going to be pen pals. Letters. But what I’m wondering, Boys and Girls, what I am wondering…is what is it? (…) that we, third graders, here in [city, state] can offer and give to Uncle Billy…What can we give to Uncle Billy? (Classroom observation, November 3, 2021)

Students responded to Ms. Thompson questions with ideas–love, joy, encouraging things, energy, Bible verses, Then, Ms. Thompson flipped the question:

> Now, Boys and Girls. It doesn’t stop there. We don’t just put the letters in the mail and say, “Great, that we did a good job. We are helping him. That’s awesome… He’s in jail and we are the helpers. That’s not right at all…What do you think Uncle Billy is going to give to you because it is two ways. How could this *relationship* help you? What could you learn? What could you get? What is this?” (classroom observation, November 3, 2021)

Again, the students offered their ideas. One student suggested that they could, "learn about jail." Another student added, "We could learn about his cellmates." To this comment, Ms. Thompson acknowledged and subtly reinforced, "You could learn more about him. So you could learn about jail. You could learn about Uncle Billy *as a person* (italics added)." Ms. Thompson asked the question again, "Anybody else have an idea what you could be getting from this *relationship* when he writes you a letter? A student answered, "Bible verses." Ms. Thompson agreed that they could learn Bible verses and then added that they also are going to be better writers. But Ms. Thompson doesn't stop there, she reiterated they are going to be getting a friend …a Black male friend. (This part of the conversations was discussed earlier)

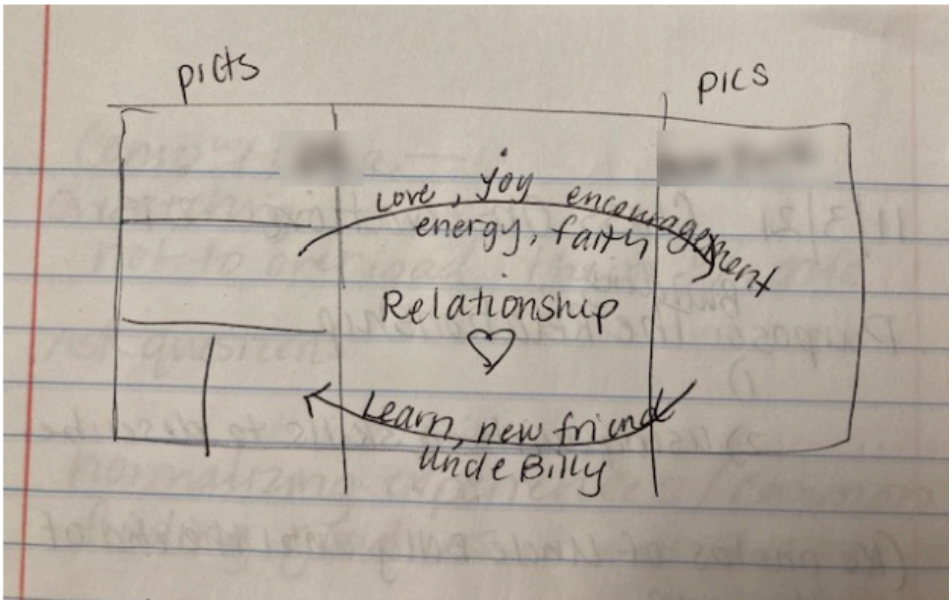
She continued:

> So we are going to be giving love, joy, encouraging things, energy and faith and you are going to be getting a new friend, you are going to be getting Bible verses, you are going to learn about Uncle Billy, you are going to be learn about his story and the whole thing is centered around this (pause).
>
> Students: Love
>
> Ms Thomspon: Love

On the board, Ms. Thompson had placed pictures of the class on the left side and stock images of Black incarcerated men on the right side. As Ms. Thompson talked, she wrote the words the students suggested on the board making arrows from one side of the board to the other. In the center she drew a heart. These images shown on the board and diagram (Figure 8) modeled a reciprocal relationship for students.

Figure 8

An Image From Rebecca's Field Notebook Showing Reciprocal Relationship (November 3, 2022)



This conversation not only exemplified the previously-mentioned dialogic nature of Ms. Thompson's teaching style, but also the awareness and understanding of a mutual, reciprocal relationship. She invited students to think about what they both offer and gain from this relationship. In doing so, she addresses the misconception that the students are only helping Uncle Billy. In this predominantly Christian community, there is a danger in leaning toward hero narratives and (White) saviorism (Cole, 2012; Holmes Curran, 2022; Walsh, 2020) — a concept where (White) people enter a space focused on "helping," imposing their ideals and modes of Christianity without the input or perspectives of the local community. One example of this is short term mission trips where White people travel to Black/Brown communities, whether that be in an urban center of a large city or a socioeconomically disadvantaged community in the US or abroad, and "serve" without developing relationships or connections. While oftentimes this

comes from a place of sincere desire to help others, it does damage to local communities and leaves White Christian people with an unchanged sense of moral superiority.

From our previous unrecorded conversation, Ms. Thompson is well aware of the potential toward White saviorism and hero narratives in this community (parents and students) to approach this relationship with only one-side; to think that we are 'helping' Uncle Billy by writing to him. To push against this possible interpretation and conception of the project, Ms. Thompson wanted the students to think about what Uncle Billy might be offering them. In other words, how might they be learning through and because of him—a person who is different from them in some ways and like them in other ways, as we shall see below.

Students sent their first letters to Uncle Billy shortly after the conversation (explained previously). After a few weeks, in early December, Uncle Billy's letters arrived. Students' anticipation was high as Ms. Thompson called out students' individual names while handing them their section of yellow paper. She directed the students to read them to themselves, first, and a few moments, and after the cue, walk around to read them with another. She walked around the room talking to students, but then stopped to gather the class's attention.

Ms. Thompson:

> "Remember, I told you this is a *relationship*. You get to bless him. He even said in my letter, it was another part. He says, "The letters and cards from the kids make me so happy." And does jail seem like it's a happy place? No. No, so you are bringing him joy. But I watched your faces, and he's bringing you joy, and he's helping you to be able to dive in the Word of God.. (classroom observation, December 1, 2021)

Again, Ms. Thompson again reiterated a reciprocal relationship. Ms. Thompson then asked the students what they are learning through exchanging letters with Uncle Billy. Students

responded with his age (66), how long he has been in prison (24 years), and that he likes crossword puzzles. The fact that he liked crossword puzzles was new to Ms. Thompson and she wondered aloud if crossword puzzles might be a good Christmas gift.

In sum, over the course of five weeks (late October through early December) and through three observations, Ms. Thompson not only repeatedly uses the word, "relationship," but also described it, and modeled it with her students. In doing so, she counteracted potentially harmful hero narratives and White savioristic notions. Instead, she focuses on the beauties and learning of mutual relationship—giving and receiving joy and encouragement from one another. Because of the shared relationship, based in reciprocity, students and Uncle Billy can share and learn from one another.

From the students' perspectives, they not only talked about what they learned, but also that they appreciated learning from him. Although the word mutuality was not mentioned, this mutual sharing and learning was captured in the students' responses. At the end of the school year, in an interview, I posed the question, "What did you learn from Uncle Billy?" While this question to the students was, to be sure, leading them toward articulating their learning, more than half of the responses focused on mutual sharing and learning.

Student responses:

- "Helped me learn about God more" (Erinn, interview, May 10, 2021)
- "He taught me more about living my life for God" (Kavon, interview, May 10, 2022)
- "I can just learn about this other person who I haven't met…through letters" (Anikah, interview, May 11, 2021)

- "I like learning things about other people." "Learning about others. It's important to learn about other people *and their differences?"* (John, interview, May 10, 2021)

The quotes reiterate that sharing and learning happens within the context of another person. These students are beginning to understand the significance of learning in a community with another person. Learning is not just an individual act, but rather, collective (Palmer, 1993).

All responses showed positivity toward learning from another person. Whether they learned about God, Uncle Billy, or "other person," learning was seen with a positive connotation. John specifically noted that he enjoyed learning things about other people. He continued that it is important to learn about others "*and their differences*." "And their differences," stood out to me, not only because "learning about differences" is recontextualized from Ms. Thompson's description of the letter writing project (back in November), but also because many times community ideals revolve around sameness, but in this connotation, differences are positioned as positive.

Through these responses, months after the initial lesson on reciprocity, students vocalized an appreciation for learning and sharing alongside Uncle Billy. Across both time and various data sources, the message of sharing and learning came through.

Sharing in Grief and Joy

Previously, in the last chapter, I highlighted how the students shared information with Uncle Billy as a means of communication and connection. In this section, I concentrate on the connection forged between participants as they share mutual experience, both inside and outside the classroom. To me, these feel like two separate things: the former for providing (a breadth) information and the latter focusing on depth (substantial topics)—topics that wouldn't be

addressed without a prior connection. Specifically, I focus on how the participants shared together in both grief, in the death of Billy's sister, and in joy, in the news of Billy's release.

In January, Uncle Billy's sister (and Ms. Thompson's aunt) died. She was Billy's last remaining sibling after the death of both his brother (Ms. Thompson's dad) and mother a few years earlier. That meant that all his immediate family members died while he was incarcerated and unable to attend any of their funerals. This inability to share in grief with those you love in a collective physical place serves as another reminder of the painful and dehumanizing reality of living in carceral spaces. Ms. Thompson felt that burden for him, explained the situation to the students, and the students wrote sympathy notes. The notes were written on a circle of white lined paper, the middle of a yellow sun (Figure 9).

Figure 9

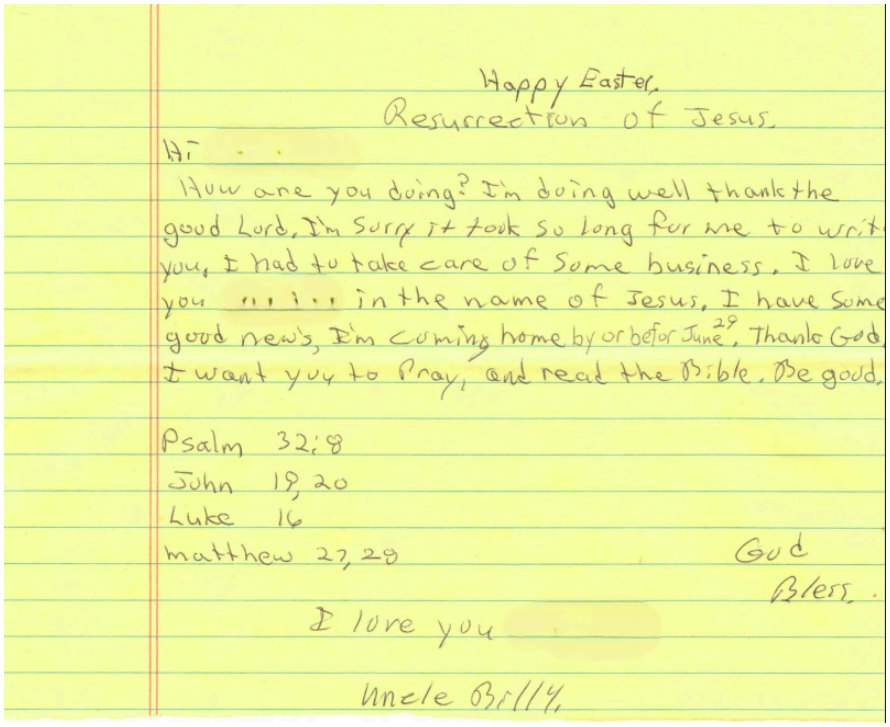
Sympathy Note to Uncle Billy (January 2022)

Each note included an expression of sympathy along with a written or referenced Bible verse. What the notes lack in refinement, they made up for in sincerity, "Your sis is … dead. I'm so sorry," "So sorry that your sister passed. We are very sad." Or this note, "I wish you where [sic] in this classroom so I can tell you how much feelings I have you wright [sic] now." Sharing in real-life circumstances, like the death of a loved one, because of its weightiness in topic, created a depth of connection for the students that was different than "we both like hot dogs."

Besides sharing in grief, the most significant event of the year was Uncle Billy's news that he was going to be released from prison in June 2022. He told each student, "I'm sorry it has taken me so long to write. I had to take care of some business. I love you, [student name]. I have some good news for you. I am coming home by or before June 29." (See figure 10)

Figure 10

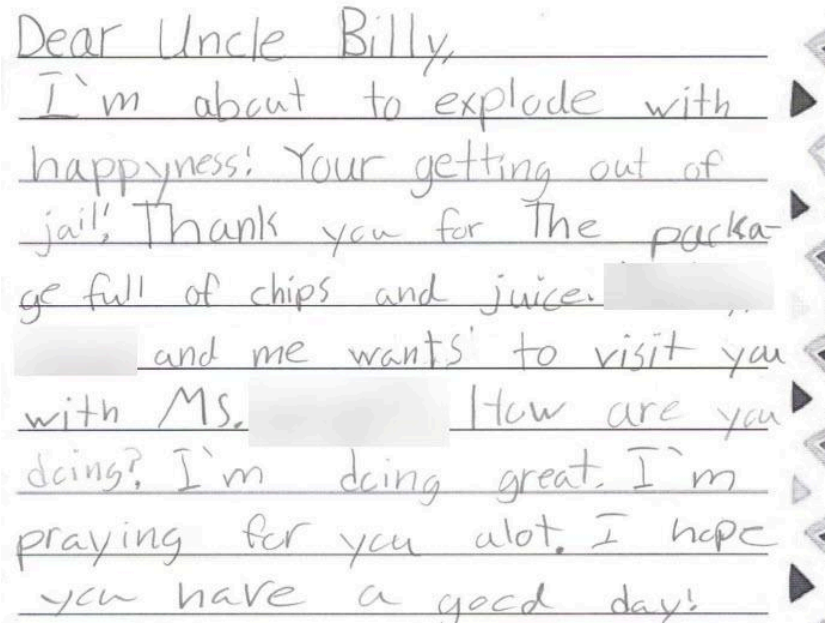
Uncle Billy's Note to Student (March 2022)



As you read in the previous chapter, this was monumental news causing deep emotion in the classroom when Ms. Thompson told them that day in March (Classroom observation, March 24, 2021). Every student shared in this excitement offering their joy and congratulations. See Figure 11 for an example of one response.

Figure 11

Student Note to Uncle Billy- March 2022


Dear Uncle Billy,
I'm about to explode with happyness! Your getting out of jail! Thanks you for the packa-ge full of chips and juice. and me wants' to visit you with Ms. How are you doing? I'm doing great. I'm praying for you alot. I hope you have a good day!

For these students, this was a huge celebration–and answer to prayers. As one student wrote, "Praise God for answering our prayers." For another student, in the end-of-the-year-interview, her favorite thing was that she got to "celebrate things with him." This joyful sentiment was captured in a parent interview as well, "I appreciated that the excitement [student name] had when she found out he was getting out, the encouragement those letters had. I mean, you read them. They're incredible. (parent interview, July 1, 2022)

Across the data, you see the mutual sharing that happens between participants. From grief to joy, they were invested in one another's lives. I can only imagine the joy it gave Uncle Billy to tell people his good news to have others celebrate with him.

While the events in students' lives seem less dramatic, they were important for the students to share and Uncle BIlly to receive. As discussed before, students shared their everyday lives: their ADHD diagnosis, details about their adoptions, and family events. One student shared over multiple letters about her new dog. In each case, although brief, Uncle Billy responded back. In one case, Uncle Billy wrote a lengthy response. In December, Henry, a student with Down syndrome, revealed his diagnosis in a letter to Uncle Billy. With the help of a classroom paraprofessional, Henry wrote, “I was born with an extra chromosome and that is called Down syndrome. My school helper is typing you my letter so I can share ALL my thoughts with you. It snowed a lot! I made snowballs. Do you get to play in the snow?” To this, Uncle Billy responded, “I don’t play in the snow, Henry. Thank you for telling me about your Down syndrome. Henry, I want you to ask your teachers and family to help you pray to Jesus to heal you.” In the next letter, Uncle Billy again writes, “I’m praying to Jesus to heal you (...) Jesus is the best doctor.” Whether or not Billy understood the permanence of Down syndrome, or believed in the possibility of healing, he nonetheless was moved. This is but one example of how he cared for the students and prayed for them**.** Altogether, sharing in significant life events forged a deeper connection between participants.

Humanize People in Carceral Spaces

This study has much to offer in terms of humanizing Uncle Billy and dismantling assumptions about incarceration and about people who are incarcerated. From the data, this is done in a variety of ways—from simply using the familial term “uncle,” to asset based

descriptions, to finding commonalities—all working together to create an identity for Billy beyond his "prisoner" or "criminal" label, which as Alexander (2010) has discussed. These labels have recently been increasingly used in public discourse (across the political spectrum) to demarcate those who are in prison or who have been released from prison as less-than-human. This problem has become so significant that Alexander (2010) has called incarceration "the new Jim Crow."

From the beginning, the students knew and referred to Billy as "Uncle", never Mr. Thompson. For, as Ms. Thompson said, "I call him Uncle Billy and you get to call him Uncle Billy." "Uncle" evokes images of family and a certain closeness. This familial term is a reminder of this intimate space that the students were invited to be a part of—a family not related by blood, but by their shared humanity and their shared love for Jesus..

Additionally, when Ms. Thompson used the word "get to" in reference to calling him Uncle Billy, she positioned this naming of "uncle"' as a privilege: She had invited her students to be a part of her family circle. In order to avoid confusion, as one of the students explained in their interview, "He isn't my uncle, but my teacher's uncle....We call him Uncle Billy, and not any other names."

This intimate familial naming comes alongside personal feeling statements from Ms. Thompson. She stated, "Someone I love is in jail," and "I care about him." These statements are reciprocated by Uncle Billy. She reads a letter from him aloud, "I send you and the family all my love. I wish you the best." Using intimate, familial language humanized Uncle Billy. Essentially, It placed him as part of a family first, rather than his incarcerated status.

Asset-Based Language

Besides the familial naming of "uncle", Ms. Thompson used asset-based descriptions to discuss Uncle Billy. While she is honest about his mistakes, her description of Uncle Billy is also coupled with positive descriptions. As Ms. Thompson told the students, "And he loves the Lord. He loves kids. He loves hotdogs. He loves me…so much." A little later on, she said, "He is a smart man." These asset-based descriptions are internalized by the students. During the end-of-the-year interviews I asked students an open-ended response, "Tell me what you know about Uncle Billy." Between the 17 students interviewed, they used 65 different phrases or 'knowings' to describe him. Out of the 65 "knowings" almost all describe "Who he is". Alternatively, four "knowings" were in regard to his actions (Table 8).

Table 8

End of the year "Knowings" about Uncle Billy

Who he is	What he has done
● He's Black ● He loves God ● He is in jail ● He is kind ● He loves kids ● He sent us chips ● He likes to write to me ● A guy in jail ● Likes hot dogs ● He's a very kind person ● Child of God ● He likes to send people Bible verses ● I know that he loves family	● He drank too much ● It is going to be hard for him to find a job ● He has done some bad stuff ● I think he went to jail two times and if he goes to jail one more time he can't get back out

Table 8 (cont'd)

- He sends us packages with his jail number
- He wears a green jumpsuit
- He loves kids
- I know he wants to go out into the world and change his choices and live for God
- He isn't my uncle, but my teacher's uncle
- He writes on yellow paper and puts it in one big envelope and sends it
- He's in a [state, blinded] jail

Note: These responses were collected from end-of-the-year student interviews (May 10-13, 2022).

Overwhelmingly, the responses from the students focused on who he is–his "humanness"–through physical description, character traits, or his observed actions. "He's Black," "he is kind," "he wears a green jumpsuit." Some students focused on his Christian character, for instance, "He loves God," or "Child of God." Other students honed in on his actions, "He likes to write to me, " "He writes on yellow paper and puts it in one big envelope and sends it." Instead of focusing on description of his past actions, many of the students, like Ms. Thompson, were asset-based. A small number of students told me about what he did (past actions), but I didn't feel this was negative, more a matter-of-fact information about his past. This positive framing of his situation, personality, and identity humanized him beyond his mistakes or incarceration.

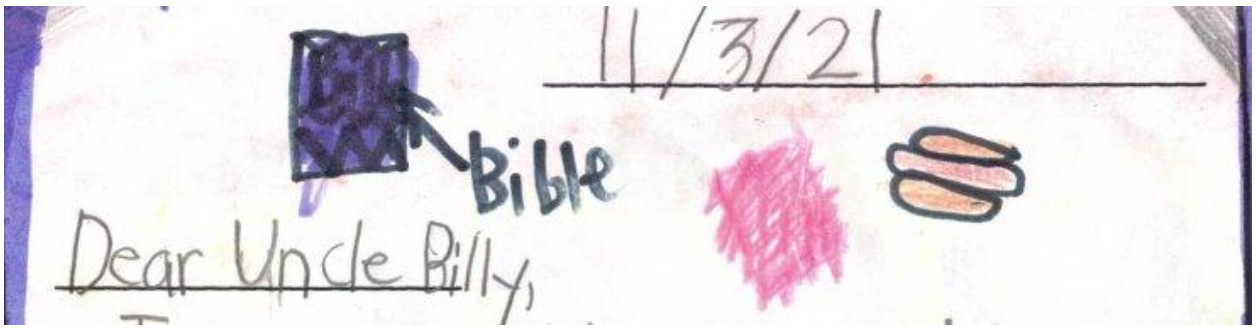
Connections to Humanize

Not only did Ms. Thompson use asset-based descriptions, but also used connections to portray him as a complex individual. In an earlier chapter, I looked at questions as a way to communicate. These questions served as a way to connect to Uncle Billy. From these questions, two connection points emerged. The first connection point is hot dogs, the second is the Bible.

As Ms. Thompson introduced Uncle Billy, one the first things she mentioned about him was that he liked hot dogs. Resharing the quote, Ms. Thompson said, "And he loves the Lord. He loves kids. He loves hotdogs. He loves me…so much." This tidbit of information about loving hotdogs became a source of delight and an initial connection point for the students. A week later, when the students were crafting their individual letters to him, the topic of hotdogs surfaced again as one student blurted out "hotdogs" as something to give to Uncle Billy. Although Ms. Thompson advised him to control the blurting, the comment was a reminder of the excitement felt around this fact of loving hotdogs. In fact, three students asked or wrote about hotdogs in the first exchange of letters. It was addressed by two other students in the second exchange of letters. At the end of the year, the topic of hot dogs was brought up by four students during their interviews.

Figure 12

Student Illustration on top of Letter to Uncle Billy (November 3, 2021)



Note: The illustrations feature a Bible and a hot dog.

One student captured the sentiment in an interview, “We have some things in common. me and Uncle Billy, like, we both like hotdogs. I also wondered if there were hot dogs in jail, and yes. He loves God just like me.’ Sharing a love of hot dogs created a meaningful connection with Uncle Billy in the eyes of the students. This simple commonality, like sharing a love of hotdogs, gave students a way to see Uncle Billy as a complex person–having the same interests–just like them.

The second connection, also mentioned in the student quote above, was the Bible. Like hotdogs, Ms. Thompson mentioned at the start that Uncle Billy would give them Bible verses. Ms. Thompson said, “In the end (of the letter) he will say ‘Love, Uncle Billy’ and he will give you Bible verses to look up.” And he did. In fact in every letter, Uncle Billy sent students Biblical references. Students reciprocated. Seven students either asked his favorite verse or told him their favorite verses. Knowing that they shared a faith together offered a connection and added complexity to prior notions of the intersections of incarceration and Christianity. For some students, being incarcerated and loving Jesus were separate things. But, here, this connection to a shared belief, gave students an opportunity to see him in a new way–beyond his “criminal” label.

Across the data, dialogue and images capture the power of connections. The simple commonalities of liking hot dogs bonded students to Uncle Billy despite physical distance. In the next section, I show how the connection to Uncle Billy worked to challenge previously held assumptions of incarceration.

Dismantling Assumptions of Incarceration

One important finding is how the connection to Uncle Billy both normalized incarceration and facilitated a change in perspective for participants. For many students, interactions with an incarcerated person before this study had been limited, but for the four

students who spoke up about their loved one, this connection proved formative. For a few students, the relationship was deeper than a year long pen pal, but a way of grappling with their own familial stories. For the sake of time and space, I focus on two students, Joel and Andrew. Joel was the first to respond to Ms. Thompson.

> Joel: My uncle is also in jail right now.
>
> Ms. Thompson: Joel, I am so grateful that you shared that with our class.
>
> Joel: He also drinks alcohol and how he got in jail.
>
> Ms. Thompson: We are starting to see some patterns and I want you to know that this is something that is common. This is something that happens. We don't need to be afraid. We don't need to say, 'Ooo, I can't believe it.' Joel, I am actually comforted that you and I both have this relationship. We both have this understanding of people that are incarcerated. And we can learn and encourage them. And we can get that type of love back. (Another student chimes in: My uncle is in jail) Hey Joel, thanks for sharing that with me and the class. (Classroom Observation, October 27, 2021).

You have already met Joel in an earlier chapter. This short interaction between Ms. Thompson and Joel demonstrates vulnerability, connection, all the while challenging assumptions about incarceration. Ms. Thompson affirms Joel's openness in sharing about his uncle. After Joel describes his uncle's reality with substance abuse, Ms. Thompson speaks to both Joel and the class refuting others' judgmental reactions to people in jail. Instead, Ms. Thompson draws them back to the importance of a relationship and how they might respond instead--to learn and encourage and love.

Andrew's familial story also intersects with incarceration. In his case, his birth father is/was incarcerated. During the classroom observation, he told Ms. Thompson, his "foster dad"

was in jail twice for “stealing and selling drugs to kids.” After the shocked reaction by the other students, Ms. Thompson quickly steered the conversation in another direction. But, behind that brief exchange is part of Andrew’s story. At the time, Andrew was figuring out his own feelings about his birth father, who was in jail. His parents, whom I interviewed, shared what the project meant for Andrew.

In the parent’s words:

> I'd say he gained confidence…and just writing to someone. And I think it helped him understand that you can be in prison, but you can still be good because he struggled with that because his birth father was in prison at the same time. And he was asking questions about that. And we were trying to say, "Well, he made a mistake, but it doesn't mean he's bad." And he's like, "But if you're there [prison], you're bad." But writing Uncle Billy and getting that thing [letter] back, he's like, "Well, he's not bad, Mom. He's really nice." So it helped a little bit in that, what do you say? I think it removed that stereotype. Yes.
>
> …He's kept the letters because we found some when we were cleaning his room. And I was like, "What do you want to do with these?" And he's like, "Oh, I'm keeping those." And so that, I think, too, that’s lasting change. He wants that connection. And you know it still means something. (Parent interview, June 13, 2023)

For Andrew, writing to Uncle Billy held a specific personal connection for him. Because of Andrew’s situation, this connection to Uncle Billy meant even more as it helped contextualize feelings toward his birth father. For him, recognizing that Uncle Billy wasn’t a “bad” person also meant his birth father, with whom he has no contact, might also not be “bad.” For a child grappling with complex feelings of his own adoption, this connection is significant. Significant enough, for him, to cherish (and hide) letters (and as his parents recalled–to keep them away

from siblings). His parents attributed this relationship with having "removed a stereotype." Removing a stereotype allowed Andrew to see more clearly and possibly even make sense of his own feelings. While (possibly) unaware of his influence, Uncle Billy's influence impacted Joel and Andrew, students directly impacted by incarceration.

Writing to Uncle Billy became a way to normalize incarceration for students, whether they had previous interaction with incarceration or not. The data show that this connection spurred a change in perspectives regarding incarceration for the students. In the end-of-the-year interviews I asked, "Has anything changed the way you think about people in jail?" That would be followed-up with, "I used to think _____, but now I think _____. Admittedly, the wording of the questions led students toward thinking about changes, but I believe students gave honest answers, nonetheless. While one student admitted nothing changed from his perspective, two other students cited a change in thinking about letter writing, a majority (14) of students responded with a new understanding or a changed perspective in thinking regarding incarceration.

Student responses:

- "I used to think that like, all robbers, people in jail are bad. Now I know that not all of them are as bad, even if they are put in jail." (Michael, interview, May 11, 2022)
- "Yes, what I used to think people get arrested, but no, they have to get, like, to court. He has to, um, he has to…. you just can't get arrested right away. You need to, like, to see if you are actually guilty or not." (Lucas, interview, May 11, 2022)
- "I know that people in jail can still love God and stuff." (Dane, interview, May 12, 2022)
- "You can still love God even if you are in jail." (Erinn, interview, May 10, 2022)

- "I used to think, like, Uncle Billy was a bad guy. He was a criminal. Why would I write to a prisoner? But now I think he is trying to change. I get him know. I understand that he made…not the best choices, but you can always change if you try hard." (Kavon, interview, May 10, 2022)
- "We can't think of him like a very bad man, he makes mistakes just like everyone else" (Amaya, interview, May 11, 2022)

As the quotations show, because of discussion and the personal connection to Uncle Billy, participants both normalized and challenged widely circulating storylines of ideas of incarcerated people being less than human. Even the simple understanding that not all people in prison are bad is an important take-away for these third graders. Along those same lines, students noted that people, like Uncle Billy, can change. Further, that our past choices don't need to define us. This is important because it shows that previously held assumptions are not static (stays the same), but are fluid and can change. It pushes against the notion that "bad" behavior at one time can forever define someone. Further, for the students that wrongly-held stereotypes and dominant narratives are able to be modified with personal knowledge and connection. This metacognitive realization that students displayed in the response holds greater implications for understanding community. In what often feels like stark judgements and labels put on people in Christian communities, these new understandings complicated good/bad binaries.

Another significant take-away from these students' quotes is the explicit references to Christian faith. Because of Uncle Billy's faith, students came away with a new perspective that people in prison can also be people who love God deeply. While Ms. Thompson makes that clear throughout the year, to have students vocalize this fact at the end of the year speaks to its

significance. Parents also recognized this as well. One parent I interviewed expressed how this connection counteracts some of the deeply held assumptions in this Christian school community:

> And so I really ... I've done church ministry in prisons and in jails, and it looks very similar to that Christian school mentality of showing up and assuming that nobody on the inside knows the gospel or as a believer. (Parent interview, July 6, 2022)

This parent, in my eyes, "gets it" (the point)--- in that she identified and called out a false assumption for this Christian school community. I think the phrase "showing up," in this context and in my interpretation, brings with it a level of unpreparedness, or a lack of needing to do anything beforehand, which, for me, includes checking biases. (My interpretation of "showing up," here, stands in sharp contrast to the "showing up" that means unwavering support.) So often well meaning (White) Christian people show up to events, projects, etc. not only with preconceived notions, but also without a willingness to check false assumptions/racial bias. This parent, then, directly named the false narrative, "assuming that nobody on the inside [in prison] knows the gospel or is a believer." As shown in the data, this assumption was held by the students as well. If I am being honest, while I knew incarcerated people were believers, it took until my relationship with Uncle Billy to realize the depth of their Christian faith. This assumption may have also played into the apprehension felt by some parents.

Another parent, who is connected to the school, gave insight on the study. In the quote below she not only referenced the propensity to choose the easy service projects in the school, but also the commitment building a relationship takes.

A parent explained:

> I think that we're really good at short, I don't want to say easy, but sort of short, easy kinds of service projects like collect mittens in winter and bring them to [local community center] or raise money for this thing and bring it there.
>
> And we sort of feel good about it and it's easy because it's like a one-time thing where I think something like this helps you develop a relationship and there's a commitment level to it that I'm not sure.
>
> I think how many people are willing to be a pen pal to anybody if it requires connecting a lot, right? But I think it's a really great way to remind kids that people who are incarcerated are just people.

This parent recognized the value of connections. Instead of the easy short term service projects (in which some have their merit), and this project that required long term connection. I pull two "understandings" from this excerpt. First, this parent understood how this project disrupts the (White) Christian hero/help narrative. While collecting mittens/money is easy and may be beneficial to the organization, it doesn't require a relationship. Service projects like collecting money or mittens, may leave the givers (in this case students from a predominantly White Christian school) with the feeling of detached helping and an unchanged sense of moral superiority.

Second, this parent recognized the "development of a relationship" as a necessary component to this study. It is through the context of a relationship that a redefinition of an incarcerated person happened, or, in her words, "reminding kids that people who are incarcerated are just people." It is through a relationship and disruption that resulted in a humanization of an incarcerated Black Christian man. Together, these two parental comments encapsulates the power of connection: relational reciprocity, confronting bias, and a commitment to another

person. As shown, developing a connection takes intentionality, and a willingness to share and learn from one another.

Conclusion

To close, I revisit the quote I used earlier, but this time, I include the sentence that followed (in italics).

Quoting:

> And so I really ... I've done church ministry in prisons and in jails, and it looks very similar to that Christian school mentality of showing up and assuming that nobody on the inside knows the gospel or as a believer. *And so I think that's the other thing that I really appreciated is just, like, the mutuality and understanding that not only are people human when they're incarcerated, they're also deeply faithful believers who we can stand to learn from."* (Parent Interview, July 6, 2022)

I revisit and close this chapter with this quote for it encapsulates the theme of this chapter. It is through the power of connections (through relationships) that students see the importance, as this parent suggested, "mutuality" (similar to reciprocity), and humanity, "people [are] human when they are incarcerated." Because of a reciprocal relationship, students recognized the power of collective learning. In conjunction with this, this study showed the need for modeling and scaffolding of reciprocity, as Ms. Thompson did with the diagram.

Connections allowed participants to share in significant life events, like grief and joy, and through those experiences, provide encouragement to one another. Through this study, connections were made over favorite foods, like hot dogs, and more significant commonalities, like the Bible. These connections helped to bring humanity to Uncle Billy and dismantle assumptions about incarceration.

Unpacking this quote a bit more, I love how this parent described incarcerated people, like Uncle Billy, as “deeply, faithful believers.”As I learn more, and because I was in a relationship with Uncle Billy, I am keenly aware that their (incarcerated people’s) faith is not shallow, but a meaningful source of comfort and stability. Uncle Billy demonstrated that in his letters, both to Ms. Thompson and to the students. This description, “deeply, faithful believers” feels asset-based and focused on “Who they are vs. What they have done” similar to the way the students described Uncle Billy.

This parent used the pronoun,“we,” in “who *we* can stand to learn from,” meaning that this parent situated herself as part of a larger Christian community. Not only that, there is a certain measure of humility in recognizing that you are still learning, and what’s more, learning from “deeply faithful believers”—people who are incarcerated. Learning happens with another person, a connective tie between two people— reiterating the fact that learning is done in community (Palmer, 1993).

CHAPTER 7 - DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS: EXPERIENCING COMMUNITY THROUGH THE HEAD, THE HEART, AND THE HANDS

In this study, I examined how the third graders' letter writing exchange with Uncle Billy, and the literacy pedagogy in which it was situated, involved more than just the literate act of putting pen or pencil to paper to craft a letter. Because of its ethnographic grounding, this study of an innovative elementary literacy instruction and curriculum was able to consider the larger literary and religious environment and context. Examining a wide range of data (e.g., classroom observations; interviews with students, teacher, and parents; and field notes), I asked, *How can letter writing widen experiences of diverse community for third grade students?* As said before, this study is more than just letters. The findings suggest the importance of *experiencing* diverse community as an integration of knowledge, feelings, and action, or what I refer to as "head, heart, and hands." I situate the findings of this study around a quote from Freire (1984).

In a short article called *Know, Practice, and Teach the Gospels*, Freire (1984) wrote, "I understand the Gospels, well or badly, to the degree that, well or badly, I live them. I experience them and in them experience myself through my own social practice, in history, with other human beings" (p. 574). This merging of knowledge, feeling, and action in a Christian school elementary classroom aligns with Freire's (1984) teaching that understanding the gospel needs to occur alongside practicing and teaching it. As a means of discussion I first concentrate on the parts: The head (knowledge), the heart (feelings), and the hands (action). Then I tie together the implications for understanding community more expansively within Christianity.

The Head

The dissertation documents how students developed knowledge about racial (in)justice, the Bible, and letter writing and other literacy practices/skills, corresponding to the three strands

of theory/research guiding this study: race-related theories, Christianity, and sociocultural literacy perspectives

First, students developed their knowledge about systemic racial justices, anti-Blackness and the disproportionate mass incarceration of Black men (Alexander, 2010). To explicate, students gained knowledge and experience through naming racial identity (Derman-Sparks, 2006) and through discussions of race-related topics (Kay & Orr, 2023) throughout the academic year. Specifically, through a variety of literate connections, students increased their knowledge of police brutality and the systemic inequities and racial injustices associated with the sentencing and incarceration of Black men in the US. Because students learned about Uncle Billy's story, they came to understand Uncle Billy as a complex person, beyond his "criminal" label. Further, some students (like my son, Silas) were able to name and condemn the particular, racialized injustices experienced by Uncle Billy within the US criminal justice system.

From a counternarrative standpoint, the data showed this knowledge building community, challenging perceived wisdom, opening new windows and teaching others (Solorzano & Yosso, 2016, p. 16). Ms. Thompson's counternarrative telling, impacted students' understanding of community, for, as Delgado and Stephancic (2017) assert, "well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers to bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others" (p. 49). While the letters crossed the physical gap, the life of Uncle Billy, bridged the knowledge "gap" between prison and a classroom inviting a more diverse and expansive community–one that was specifically attuned to racial justice, particularly with respect to anti-Black police violence and mass Black male incarceration.

Second, students increased their Biblical knowledge (but also curiosity) in at least two ways: Ms. Thompson's connections made in the classroom observations, and Uncle Billy's

Biblical referencing. First, revisiting previous examples, Ms. Thompson read a Christian children's book, *Made by God* (Evans, 2021) in order to situate Uncle Billy's story within the greater context of understanding racism and how this goes against Gods' intention for society. Ms. Thompson also connected Bible stories to Uncle Billy's life, using them as a springboard to discuss temptation, sin, forgiveness, and love. Finally, by inviting her uncle to be a part of her classroom community, she opened up a space for her students to see more expansively who is included in God's beloved community (Witte & Juzwik, 2024).

Uncle Billy's letters inspired students' curiosity about and joy in Biblical knowledge building. Throughout the study, data show how he used Biblical referencing and reminders to encourage students, and students in turn looked up the references he gave them. Uncle Billy told the students he was praying for them, and they told him they were praying for him. This study documented knowledge building about the "Gospel" message, in a classroom community guided by Ms. Thompson's racial justice-oriented and loving perspectives, within the context of a predominantly White Christian school where these views are not always taught, affirmed, or practiced – despite the school's stated goal that its graduates will be "justice seekers". In the present time as WCN that seeks to narrow community, this type of Biblical understanding that Ms. Thompson taught opens up expansive and inclusive notions of Christian community.

Third, students gained literacy knowledge. Whether it was learning about genre features of letters and how to write physical letters, or learning how to participate interactively by bringing their own perspectives and voices to read-alouds and discussion, or building connections across disparate texts that were shared in and beyond the classroom (e.g., classroom rules, literary texts, songs, biblical excerpts, letters to and from Uncle Billy, prayers), students

experienced a multi-layered literacy learning environment.. Encapsulating this literate knowledge was a relationship—one built on respect, care, love, and inclusiveness.

The Heart

Because in this study gospel knowledge involved knowing with "the heart," feelings became embodied and expressed knowledge. Let's recall the modeling of reciprocal relationship (see figure 8, Chapter 6) that Ms. Thompson used during the class session when students offered their ideas to Ms. Thompson's question, "What can we give to Uncle Billy?" (classroom observation, November 3, 2021). Note how the students' ideas describe the two particular feelings that pervaded this study: love and joy.

The students first called out "Love." Looking back, this answer is perfect, for, in Ms. Thompson's own words, "The whole thing is centered around love." In fact, the word "love" is used 67 times across the four classroom observations." This study showed four types of love: familial, teacher/student, Biblical, and a culmination of the three — community love. As noted before, the impetus for this study was familial love. Throughout the study, the familial love between Ms. Thompson and Uncle Billy was evident–from the naming of "Uncle," to the expectations of care in letter writing required of students, to the emotional reaction when learning of his release. The second type of love was teacher-student love as Ms. Thompson exhibited love for the students and vice versa. This was evidenced by the solidarity she built with Joel over their shared experience of having an incarcerated family member, and the ways she drew students into responsive dialogue with her. For students, this love was reciprocal. In the letters to Uncle Billy, students wrote about their love for her, "And Ms. Thompson is a great teacher and she is funny and awesome!!" Because of the (familial and classroom-based) love that was experienced, students also expressed love to Uncle Billy. The quote at the beginning of The

Power of Connections, students wrote, “We LOVE You!” This triangulation of love became the heart center of learning in this classroom.

Steeped in Biblical love, the study exemplified the love in 1 Corinthians of seeing one another, “face to face” (NIV, 2011). This verse reoccurs through the data for it speaks to the communal aspect of knowledge (Palmer, 1993). The use of the word “face” also connects within a discussion of counternarratives as community is built “by putting a familiar face to education theory and practice” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2017, p. 16). Putting these seemingly disparate references together reinforces the justice-oriented and expansively-minded nature of the particular kind of Christian community created in Ms. Thompson’s classroom.

These three types of love produced a new kind of love: A love for community. A “philia” love (to use a word within Christian rhetoric) means “brotherly love” which I think about as “community love.” I can’t think of a more apt description for the love that developed with Uncle Billy. This kind of love invites people together, it values the humanity of others, it calls people by name—-all things that Jesus did within his ministry—and are all woven through this dissertation. This understanding of Biblical community love attuned to racial justice within a Christian school community, is rare and needed in the field of literacy scholarship (Juzwik, Burke, & Prins, 2023).

The second feeling was joy, so often evident, from the simple delight in learning Uncle Billy liked hotdogs to the face Ms. Thompson made imitating Uncle Billy reading the letters within his cell, to the way Kavon wrote to Uncle Billy, “I am a Black, male leader,” to Ms. Thompson joyfully describing her skin tone as “chocolate milk”. Not only did Ms. Thompson speak frankly about anti-Blackness, and how anti-Blackness affected Uncle Billy’s story, but she also modeled an antidote, Black joy. Ms. Thompson invited students to appreciate the

complexities of Uncle Billy's identity as a Black Christian incarcerated man. While I haven't seen many tangible examples of Black joy in Reformed Christian school classrooms, for me, these examples feel precisely like what Dunn & Love (2020)/Love (2021) suggested when they theorize Black joy/Joy (Muhammad, 2024). Furthermore, honoring Ms. Thompson's and Uncle Billy's testimonies as Christ followers I frame their enacted joy as a Biblical "fruit of the spirit" (NIV, 2011, Galatians 5:22)---alongside love, peace, patience, kindness, and so on—one of the gifts exhibited when people "live by the spirit [of God]." It is joy coupled with justice (Tisby, 2021; 2024) that shapes the ideals of community for these students

The Hands

The "hands"---or actions become the final integral part of experiencing "the Gospels" as Freire (1984) would note, for actions form a tangible outpouring of knowledge, but also of faith. Knowledge itself is not enough without actions. I digress with a story that I hope exemplifies this concept. As a mom of 3 teenage/preteen boys, my kids, from time to time (let's be honest, much more of the time than they prefer) need directives. Take for instance, my parental directive, "Get your shoes off the table." To this terse suggestion, my middle son's common response is, "I understand." First, I was slightly impressed that there was no argument, eye rolling, or other forms of teenage angst. But…the shoes still sit there. After another reminder, and another, "I understand" and no action, I lost my belief that he was actually going to move his shoes off the table. Understanding can only go so far, before it needs to be coupled with action.

Moreover, Freire's (1984) understanding of the Gospel accords with my own sense of actions as a tangible outpouring of a faith. I think of the verse, "Faith without works is dead" from James 2:20. (I did not grow up using the King James translation of the Bible, but I do

remember this verse from that version.) This spiritual understanding has helped me interpret how the students understood the Gospel (and took) action.

In this study, Ms. Thompson recognized action as using a "voice." As she said to the class, "But we have a *voice*, and we are going to use *our voices* here to help us make change…it's our job to make sure we are explaining the truth about love and about forgiveness and about how people matter."

The pronouns "our" and "us" are collective and imply actions that are being accomplished together—another example of a collective act. In the case of "help us make a change," the word "us" focuses inward. The action was not only about helping Uncle Billy, but it also was going to "us" make a change within ourselves. I can't help to connect that back to Freire's (1984) words, "I experience them [the Gospels] and *in them experience myself* " (emphasis added) about this both outward and inward experiential knowledge and action.

Using "our voices" in my interpretation of the data, meant two actionable things: writing letters (a form of literacy as social action) and participating in conversations within and outside of school. First, action took place in the form of writing letters. As already discussed at length in Chapter 5, letters helped to develop a meaningful relationship and allowed Uncle Billy to be a co-educator.

Action also took place within conversation. As Ms. Thompson explained, "It's our job to make sure we are explaining the truth [to others beyond this classroom] about *love* and about *forgiveness* and about *how people matter.*" Actions meant explaining "the truth" of love, forgiveness and how people matter. It meant teaching and modeling for others that actions and labels don't define people, that who we are doesn't equal what we've done. The truth was and is that Uncle Billy is a child of God—just like all of us and deserved to be treated as a human–with

all the complexity (and forgiveness) afforded to all of us. I hope readers agree that this truth needs to be told over and over again. The beauty of what Ms. Thompson was inviting students into throughout this study was that these truths of "people mattering" was being told to and by third graders.

While I don't know the extent to which conversations happened outside the classroom as they are not within the confines of the study, the data do show how Ms. Thompson's pedagogy rippled out into families and the community. Although beyond the scope of this dissertation, data further showed that Uncle Billy became a regular topic in familial conversations and prayers. One family donated meals to a local organization that worked with returned citizens.

Freire (1984) said, "I experience them [the Gospels] and in them experience myself through my own social practice, in history, with other human beings." As Freire suggested, the culmination of knowing through the head, heart, and hands is about the experience, but also how the experience transfers to a more self-reflective knowledge—one that transformed students' spiritual visions. Lastly, Freire's emphasis on knowing "with other human beings" pointed to collective communal experience learning alongside and in relationship with one another. This harkens back to Palmer's (1993) ideas of communal knowledge, discussed in Chapter 2. Together, knowledge, feelings, and actions were experienced as part of a diverse, reciprocal, hospitable, attuned-to-justice, expansive community.

Implications

Partly due to the lack of research on the layered intersections this study explores, the specific context, and the potential importance of the findings in dealing with religious sense-making, conceptualizing community, and understanding race and instructional practice, the contributions of the study are quite broad. Because of this, I highlight contributions in 4

significant areas: academic scholarship (literacy and social studies), teaching, Christian education, and societal implications.

Literacy Teaching & Scholarship

This project is grounded in sociocultural literacy. It considers the importance of dialogue as a tool for reciprocity and learning (Bakhtin, 1986; Freire, 1984, 1995; Palmer, 1993). For this study, there are implications for how a specific literacy intervention, like letter writing can be used, but also for the integration of multiple literacy practices and significance of dialogue, broadly imagined.

First, this study adds and extends the minimal research on epistolary writing in elementary classrooms. It reimagines the possibilities of what the often-ignored practice of letter writing can do for students as a way to mediate inclusion and facilitate proximity between unlikely participants, in this case, students and an incarcerated Black Christian man. Consequently, this study adds to the research on unique letter writing partnerships, how elementary students come to begin to interpret race both within and outside of the context of religion.

Literacy anchors the project, not as an isolated subject, but a conduit for learning and for dialogue. This project is significant in how it explores various facets of literacy within this context. Literacy, as a dialogic tool is seen in letters, but also how dialogue catalyzes new knowledge and to co-create meaning in the classroom (Freire, 1993). The study speaks to the integrated nature of literacy not only in the variety of practices used, but the literate connections made.

Social Studies Teaching & Scholarship

While this study focuses on literacy, it also has many connections to social studies. At a basic level, it touches on questions such as: Who makes societal rules? How are rules enacted? Who is affected? Why? Also, in conjunction with social studies learning, this project addresses topics of family and complex histories. What's more, the study addresses justice (and injustice), tackling hard histories, and addressing dominant vs. counter narratives which are centered in social studies teaching and learning (Rodríquez & Swalwell, 2022). In thinking about justice-oriented standards, I look to the Learning for Justice (Learning for Justice, n.d.) Standards. The Learning for Justice standards are separated into 4 different categories: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. In looking through the Learning for Justice Standards, I found 8 that apply. Through these standards, I noticed how students form understandings and perspectives of others different and distanced from them, how identities are situated across diverse contexts and how these perspectives challenge the status quo

Social Justice Standards (Learning for Justice, n.d.)

3. Students will recognize that people's multiple identities interact and create unique and complex individuals. [Identity Standard]
6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people. [Diversity Standard]
8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way. [Diversity Standard]
9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection. [Diversity Standard]
10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified. [Diversity Standard]
12. Students will recognize unfairness on the individual level (e.g., biased speech) and injustice at the institutional or systemic level (e.g., discrimination). [Justice Standard]
13. Students will analyze the harmful impact of bias and injustice on the world, historically and today. [Justice Standard]
16. Students will express empathy when people are excluded or mistreated because of their identities and concern when they themselves experience bias. [Anchor Action Standard]

While not going into detail, these standards serve as a reminder about how social studies and literacy can work together and enhance the other. While outside the scope of this study, I nonetheless observed Ms. Thompson inviting students into all of these standards in an indirect, relationally-situated, and literacy-activity-organized way that may well have been more powerful and catalytic for learning than didactic or analytic curriculum and instruction about identity, diversity, and justice.

Teachers and Teaching

This study testifies to the power of a teacher. We see how Ms. Thompson leverages her lived experience, familial connections, and knowledge of effective teaching strategies to create a rich learning environment. While Ms. Thompson's then-positionality as a biracial Black and Dutch Christ-follower woman is unique in this context, it serves as a reminder for teachers to bring their whole selves into the classroom. This asset-based view of teachers and teaching has implications for a variety of educational settings, not just in Christian schools. For example, Ms. Thompson's pedagogical decisions and role as teacher coupled with her connections opened and widened students' perspectives and understanding of community. In doing so, she modeled a pedagogy that teachers across various educational settings can learn from.

In conjunction, this study has implications for teachers as they teach about racial identity and injustice, like mass incarceration and police brutality. While topics like CRT and systemic racism are being critiqued in the conservative (Dorman, 2021) and Christian media (Clay & Smith, 2020; Shenvi & Sawyer, 2019), Ms. Thompson provides a model to teach about the lived experiences of affected people using counternarratives—blending joy and justice and balancing personal decisions with systemic injustice. We saw how Ms. Thompson used literate connections, like read-alouds and book characters to build knowledge and empathy. Additionally,

Ms. Thompson used Uncle Billy's story as a narrative to counter previously held assumptions of people in incarceration. For instance, instead of the label "criminal," as many would see him. Uncle Billy became "uncle," "friend," "hot-dog lover" and "fellow Christian." Using contextualization and complexity, Ms.Thompson positioned Uncle Billy as a fellow human.

While not highlighted in this dissertation, during one of the classroom observations, Ms. Thompson balances two potentially opposing viewpoints of law enforcement together. During a conversation about the police in regard to racially-biased policing practices, one of the students volunteered that her uncle serves in law enforcement. In this conversation, Ms. Thompson affirmed, "Awesome! So he is keeping our streets safe and helping us follow the laws?" allowing this student to take pride in her familial connection.[11] This ability to both teach from a systemic perspective of racism and acknowledge a more individualistic viewpoint offers a model for teachers as they work with parents who may have contrasting views both within and beyond Christian school settings.

Further, this study tells a story of one teacher using letter writing to learn about community. It serves as a reminder that teachers can use literacy interventions or even creative outlets to broaden community. For instance, Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik and Martin's (2012) example of Mrs. Rademacher showed how she merged her love for quilting into a quilting project with her class of multilingual language learners to affirm their communities of origin and their own languages. This begs the question, what are the connections, skills, and passions that in-service and pre-service teachers can engage and ignite to live into and teach about community?

In a similar vein this study pushes back on restricted curriculum, a topic especially relevant for public education given how the fraught cultural milieu has created numerous

[11] This conversation is highlighted in Juzwik, Witte, Burke, & Prins, in review.

challenges for public school literacy curriculum, as noted in the introduction. Without the allowance of freedom for Ms. Thompson to venture "off script," this study would not have happened. Freire (2005) has much to say about prepackaged teacher education, "The development of the so-called teacher-proof materials is a continuation of the experts' authoritarianism, of their total lack of faith in the possibility that teachers can know and can also create" (p. 15). This study uplifts Ms. Thompson's knowledge and creativity further demonstrating how providing teachers with freedom to finesse their curriculum creates positive learning experiences for their students.

Christian Education

Not surprisingly, many people hold differing views of Christian education. This study, situated within a particular historically-Reformed Christian school context and faith tradition, holds its own unique history and ties. In this present time, parents choose Christian education for myriad reasons. While some believe Christian education as a space for "sheltering" or replicating traditionally-held viewpoints, other parents may see Christian schools, specifically in some strands of reformed thought, as an opportunity to expand viewpoints, culturally-affirming and critically-engaged with the world, and be open to inquiry (Smith, 2019; Vryoff, 2002; Wolterstorff, 1999, 2006). From the latter standpoint, this study sheds light on what is possible within Reformed Christian education.

In this study, students were invited to dwell in a relationship with Uncle Billy, despite common narratives as "bad," or labeled as "criminal, " instead as *imago dei*. Through the process, students were invited to be curious and gain an understanding that someone else's lived experience should be valued. They tackled important issues of racial identity, racial justice like mass incarceration and unjust policing, all issues that are notably left out of a traditional

curriculum. Additionally, students were exposed to not only the individual responsibility narrative (as common in this setting) but also a systemic understanding of racism. All of this taking place under the umbrella of Christianity and what it means to be a Christian in the world today. All this speaks to the quote I shared earlier about the goal of Christian education, "the goal of RCS is to help students grow into Jesus-following, socially-conscious, critical-thinking young men and women who want to transform the world" (Hiskes, 2022).

In thinking about religious sense-making more broadly, on the whole, I agree with others before me who have advocated for more research addressing religious-sense making in a variety of spaces both in Christian schools and in public school settings (Juzwik, LeBlanc, Dávila, Rackley, & Sarroub, 2022).

White Christian Nationalism

On a societal level, this study offers possibilities in how to challenge harmful ideologies of WCN. These contributions become more salient and timely as the public, and specifically Christians, negotiate their involvement in WCN. Scholars across various fields have recently begun to address WCN (DuMez, 2020; Gorski & Perry, 2022; Stewart, 2022; Tisby, 2022), but this movement has only begun to be explored within educational settings (Burke, Juzwik, Prins, 2023), making this study at the forefront of an emerging inquiry area within educational research. Ms. Thomspon's pedagogy offers a glimpse of hope. Religion often divides, as seen in WCN and other ethno-religious nationalist movements around the world: it can uphold binaries, it can create hierarchies, it can fracture when boundaries are pushed. This study, however, holds forth a model of one educational setting where religion can be a unifying agent, helping people to connect across boundaries, to question hierarchies, and to create more expansive communities.

Conclusion

This study is novel: to date, no studies have been done that look into epistolary writing relationships between elementary students and individuals in carceral spaces. Although innovation is beneficial, it is not its innovation that holds the most scholarly promise. I argue its potential lies in its integration of facets—what it can teach about anti-Black systemic racism and racial inequities within the criminal justice system, the mediation of a multi-layered sociocultural literacy environment, and how the Christian faith can serve not only as a shared commonality between unlikely participants (students and Uncle Billy) but works to strengthen relationship and widen notions of community.

As shown throughout this dissertation, this study is more than just letters, this study centers people and stories. From a (Christian) education standpoint, we not only need more stories from diverse people and contexts, but stories where experiences blend "my story" into "our stories." There is beauty in collective responsibility, in sharing and learning from one another, in seeing *face to face* (Palmer, 1993).

At the onset of the study, I could not anticipate how a simple handwritten note, written on a torn-off section of a yellow legal pad, could influence a broad range of participants. Over the course of two academic years, I bore witness to a multi-layered pedagogy enacted by an established and beloved teacher, an (un)learning process that unfolded among participants. *More Than Just Letters* has explored how this elementary literacy pedagogy, which predominantly included letter writing, was situated within a shared Christian faith and engaged in topics of race to impact students' perceptions of Christian community.

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APPENDIX A: A BRIEF AND INCOMPLETE HISTORY OF REFORMED CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING

When education scholars write about Calvinism they seem to stress aspects of original sin, strict morality, and religious freedom (Rury, 2015). Notably, Calvinist Protestants came to colonial America emphasizing the importance of being literate which became a driving force in shaping schools for European settlers' children (Rury, 2015). The Bible was often the first textbook for new readers. This emphasis on literacy, and specifically religion, was used as a tool to promote social control and instill strict moral and religious values (Graff & Duffy, 2014). This history is important as it portrays schooling as a religious endeavor. But this seems a bit too simple and tidy and it doesn't capture the diversities within various Protestant traditions, which is actually important for understanding many political currents today.

Dutch Calvinists sought separate schooling because of their deep commitment that faith should be integrated into all aspects of life, including school. This came with notions of preservation of beliefs and faith. Reformed Christian schooling became a feature that came out of the Christian Reformed Church and a contested point which divided them from the Reformed Church (holding similar Calvinist beliefs) more than a century ago. These (Reformed) Christian schools are traditionally parent-controlled (not affiliated with a particular church congregation) and geographically located in Dutch-settled pockets of the US. Typically, Reformed Christian schools are parent-controlled and tuition-based which means they are free from church governance. But, because they are parent-controlled (traditionally through elected boards) parents feel they have economic investment and intellectual ownership to influence educational decisions creating power struggles and personal entitlement.

Considering the diverse breadth of the Christian schooling movement in the US in terms of its various locations, beginnings, mission, and purposes, highlighting some important distinctions of Reformed Christian schools from fundamentalist and/or evangelical counterparts may be useful. This is not to draw binaries between them, but to present a fuller understanding of this study's context.

For the purposes of this study, I specifically look at the RCS in regard to views of interpreting the Bible, terminology, regard for culture (and its intersection with society), and the role of inquiry. From there, I situate the realities of RCS in the present day in order to discuss the specific context of the study.

Interpreting the Bible

Christians have different ways of reading the Bible or different concepts around the role of biblicism (Juzwik, 2014) in their religious lives. How the Bible is read and understood holds ramifications for beliefs and actions, and subsequently affects individuals, churches and schools (Juzwik, Witte, Burke & Prins, in review). In a simplistic sense, some Christians see the Bible as "inerrant" or incapable of error. For this group of Christians, the Bible is interpreted through what they and some scholars call "literalism" (Crapanzano, 2000). They tend to hold strict creationist viewpoints, reject cultural interpretations, and tend to be wary of the "outside world." The fundamentalist Christian school that Peshkin (1986) describes falls into this group. For others, like those in Reformed (or Calvinist) traditions, read the Bible as "inspired." They focus their attention on the "grand themes of scripture–trinity, creation, the fall, covenant, redemption, kingdom, Christ's lordship, new heaven and new earth" (Vryhof, 2002, p. 108). For Reformed Christians, understanding that the Bible is God's truth, but also consider the role of language, genre, and culture in interpretation. In other words, the Bible is read with context in mind. This

was paramount in my own RCS experience. One of the first lessons I remember from high school Bible class was my teacher writing on the board, "A text without a context is a pretext for trouble." That being said, not all Reformed Christians agree with how the Bible is interpreted, especially as it comes to certain verses, creating a broad spectrum of viewpoints.

Reformed Terminology

Before moving on, I will briefly highlight some reformed vocabulary that are relevant to this project (italicized in the descriptions). Then I mention some important facets of Reformed Christianity pertaining to this study. Finally, I provide a short synopsis of Reformed Christian schools in 2023.

A significant distinction between fundamentalists and those in RCS is the role of *redemption*. Redemption in the context of a Reformed Christian schooling is not singularly about saving souls from sin as in fundamentalist thought and schooling (see Peshkin, 1986), but redemption is about the holistic redeeming love of God. Because of sin, all creation (the world and its people) is not the way they should be, but Jesus came to redeem and restore all things. Having this mindset means that all of creation, everyone and everywhere, is redeemable.

Similarly, while the *Kingdom of God* may evoke notions of the second coming of Christ to a fundamentalist Christian, the *Kingdom of God* is more than belief in Christ's return, it is a holistic vision for the future–restored with beauty and goodness. Understanding the Kingdom of God is a two-fold vision; working toward the restoration, making "all things new", in the here and now, and as a reflection of the heavenly kingdom. This becomes a place where justice-mindedness becomes part of working toward making things right (*transformation*) in order to create the Kingdom of God here on earth. While not explicit, the verbiage of the

Kingdom echoes Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the Beloved Community–one that fits into this study.

Shalom, an often-used term in RC schooling circles, means peace, wholeness, connectedness, and health. Many scholars write about shalom which I would like to consider for the dissertation. For brevity's sake, I present an initial understanding of shalom. Shalom is about the flourishing of all people and connected to justice and community. It has implications for interconnectedness of relationships with one another and with the world. Further, part of the role of Christians is transforming what's broken and changing it into a state of shalom. Wolterstorff (2006) notes Christian education as "education for shalom." There is no doubt, glimpses of shalom in this study–from enfolding Uncle Billy into a classroom community, and changing perspectives of incarceration–all speak to the process of making things "as they should be."

Culturally-Affirming

Reformed Christians take a decidedly distinct and affirming stance when it comes to its intersection with culture. This comes from a view of the sacred/secular, and "gray areas" (topics, ideas, situations that are not clearly defined through scripture). Where fundamentalist Christians lean toward separate lines between the sacred/secular and non-religious aspects of culture are seen as negative, Reformed Christians view strict differentiation as impossible for they believe all of life is holy and sacred (Vryhof, 2002). Reformed Christianity welcomes discussion/allows more room for "gray areas."

This leads into a distinct view of the role of culture. Vryhoff (2002) contends, "Because God created and redeems the entire world, culture and society are seen by Reformed Christians as good, God-given, and therefore must be affirmed, celebrated, and enhanced. Although rife with problems, culture is still the arena for God's goodness to people" (p. 111). This

culturally-affirming stance stands in direct contrast to the separatist viewpoints present in some fundamentalist Christian schools, like that in Peshkin (1986). What this means practically is addressing (or discerning, to use more reformed terminology) topics of culture and their effect/influence on society. It means promoting critical thinking, discussion (dialogue), and inquiry.

Open to Inquiry

Based on the foundational understandings of critical engagement with culture, one distinctive feature of Christian schooling is the role of *discernment,* the ability to sift apart. This means that all ideas are open to examination and held up to Christian beliefs. In the classroom it means that there is "No fear in inquiry. All ideas are valid for consideration, including "secular' ideas, because, in the most profound sense possible, all subjects and all activities are 'sacred'" (Vryhoff, 2002, p. 112). This contrasts the stark binaries of sacred and secular in fundamentalist Christian schooling (Peshkin, 1986). Practically, this is asking questions, considering secular ideas, and wading into "gray areas" that many evangelical traditions do not value.

Reformed Christian Education Today

In our present day of political polarization, "culture wars", book-banning, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and CRT debates all have significance when viewed through a Reformed lens. Because of the unique view of redemption, culture, and inquiry, these topics should not be feared, but discussed (Vryhof, 2002). In a recent article about the changing landscapes of RCS specifically in regard to addressing parental fear, I reshare a quote from my former high school English teacher reiterates the goal of Reformed Christian education, "is to help students grow into Jesus-following, socially-conscious, critical-thinking young men and women who want to transform the world" (Hiskes, 2022). For me, this is the crux of Reformed Christian education–It

is about following Jesus, being aware of our neighbors (community), critically minded, with a goal with transformation.

There is much more to be said here. I am not nor claim to be a scholar in Reformed Christian schooling. For more information, please see Bratt; 2013; Stronks & Blomberg, 1999; Smith, 2019; Vryhof, 2002; Wolderstorff, 1993, 2006, among many others not included on this list.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Student Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews: For each participant, I will ask the same 3-4 questions. I will also leave some freedom to ask follow-up questions as needed that go beyond the assigned interview questions listed. At the bottom are listed open-ended sentence stems that may be useful for students.

INTERVIEWER: "This interview is designed to help me learn about what you have learned from letter writing to Uncle Billy. Please feel free to answer honestly and openly. I will not judge you or your answers. You can choose to not answer any question and/or ask to stop the interview at any time. Depending on how you feel, I may audio record our session."

Background:
What is your name?

Perceptions of learning:
What have you learned through writing to Uncle Billy?

What was your favorite part of writing to Uncle Billy?

Is there something you didn't like about writing to Uncle Billy?

Writing to Uncle Billy helped/showed me _____

Challenging Stereotypes and Bias:
Has anything changed about the way you think about people living in jail?
OR

I used to think that _____, but now I think _____

APPENDIX C: PARENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Grown-ups (Parent) Interview Protocol- DRAFT

Semi-structured interviews: For each participant/group of participants, I will ask the same 3-4 questions. I will also leave some freedom to ask follow-up questions as needed that go beyond the assigned interview questions listed.

INTERVIEWER: "This interview is designed to help me learn about what you and/or your child has learned from letter writing to Uncle Billy. Please feel free to answer honestly and openly. I will not judge you or your answers. You can choose to not answer any question and/or ask to stop the interview at any time. Depending on your preferences, I may audio record our session."

If you prefer a phone conversation or have a face-to-face interview, I would be happy to accommodate your schedule to discuss this.

Background:
What is your name?

How long have you been a part of Grand Rapids Christian Schools?

Perceptions and Impact:
What has your child learned, if anything, through writing to Uncle Billy?

What, if any, impact has this project had on your child/family? *(For example, have you or your child talked about Uncle Billy? If so, in what regard? Have you or your child prayed for Uncle Billy? Has this project propelled you to take any kind of action?)*

Challenging Stereotypes and Bias:
How do you feel about a project such as this being conducted in a Christian school setting?

What could you imagine may be other parents' concerns?

What do you see are the benefits? Drawbacks?

To those who are interested in learning more about the intersections of race and incarceration, I recommend reading *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander (2010).