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**Disrupting Carceral Logics in Schools:
Restorative Justice, Transformative Justice, and the
Gap Between Intended and Actual Outcomes**

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Abstract

This review of literature examines the extent to which restorative and transformative justice practices in schools disrupt carceral logics and asks what accounts for the gap between intended and actual outcomes. Drawing on seven core sources, the review synthesizes randomized and cluster-randomized trials, a quasi-experimental longitudinal study, critical ethnography, interview-based qualitative research, theoretical scholarship, and a critical archival study. Across the literature, restorative practices show real promise in improving school climate and reducing suspension under some conditions, but those outcomes are uneven and often bypass students most affected by punitive systems. Race and racism emerge as the strongest theme across the sources, with Black students frequently receiving fewer benefits from reform. Disability and educational access reveal parallel patterns of exclusion, especially when students are pushed out through bureaucratic denial or noncompliance. A third theme centers relationships, belonging, and school climate, which are repeatedly treated as indicators of justice but remain fragile when not paired with structural change. Overall, the literature suggests that restorative reform can soften punishment without necessarily dismantling the racialized and ableist ideologies that organize it. The discussion argues that the key divide is not whether schools adopt restorative practices, but whether implementation remains procedural or becomes genuinely transformative.

Keywords: restorative justice, transformative justice, carceral logics, education, school discipline, race, disability, belonging

Disrupting Carceral Logics in Schools: Restorative Justice, Transformative Justice, and the Gap Between Intended and Actual Outcomes

School discipline in the United States is shaped by punitive ideas about order, behavior, and control. Within this context, scholars increasingly use the term *carceral logics*¹ to describe the normalization of surveillance, exclusion, punishment, and forced compliance as ordinary responses to conflict in schools. These logics do not remain in carceral institutions. They circulate across schools and other institutions, where they help structure adult authority, shape which students are perceived as threatening, and legitimize the removal of those who disrupt institutional expectations. The result is not simply harsh discipline, but a far-reaching and deeply entrenched educational culture in which control is prioritized over belonging, support, or repair.

Restorative justice² has become one of the most visible responses to these harms. In school settings, restorative approaches generally emphasize relationship-building, dialogue, accountability, and repair rather than punishment alone. Quantitative and qualitative studies both suggest that restorative practices can improve climate and reduce suspension rates under some conditions. At the same time, the literature increasingly complicates celebratory narratives. Restorative practices are implemented inside institutions that remain shaped by anti-Blackness, ableism, and bureaucratic habits of exclusion. When that happens, restorative justice coexists alongside or inside of carceral logics rather than displacing the harmful ideology.

¹ The term *carceral logics* refers to the ideologies and institutional rationales that produce policies and practices that treat students as subjects of control rather than as learners (Elmesky & Marcucci, 2024). This actively normalizes surveillance, exclusion, punishment, and forced compliance, which mirrors the methods carceral facilities use to control incarcerated people.

² Restorative justice is an approach to responding to harm that is rooted in the traditional practices of indigenous communities of New Zealand and North America, as well as Mennonite peace traditions. In school settings, it involves dialogue, accountability, relationship-building, and practices such as circles, restorative conversations, and conferences designed to repair harm rather than rely on punishment alone. In the United States, restorative justice took more recognizable contemporary form and gained increasing prominence in the decades after the 1980s (Todić et al., 2020).

This tension has sharpened interest in the distinction between restorative justice and transformative justice³. In the literature reviewed here, restorative justice most often refers to repairing harm and rebuilding relationships, while transformative justice moves further by addressing the structural conditions that produce harm in the first place. That difference matters. If schools continue to rely on racialized surveillance, exclusionary discretion, and gatekeeping around educational access, then even well-intentioned restorative practices can become another layer of control. Several of the sources reviewed here make this point directly. Others approach it without using the term transformative justice, but still argue that repairing isolated incidents is insufficient when institutional arrangements themselves remain harmful.

This review asks: To what extent do restorative and transformative justice practices in schools disrupt carceral logics, and what accounts for the gap between intended and actual outcomes? The question matters not only because restorative justice is now common in K-12 schooling, but because its uptake is framed as evidence of progress. The literature suggests a more uneven reality. Across the sources, race and racism emerge as the strongest theme, especially in relation to anti-Black disciplinary patterns. Disability and educational access also reveal how exclusion is reproduced through institutional procedures that claim neutrality. A third theme concerns relationships, belonging, and school climate, since restorative interventions are frequently justified through their relational effects. The review argues that these themes converge around a larger problem: when schools implement restorative practices without deeper structural change, intended outcomes remain partial, uneven, and vulnerable to reversal.

³ Transformative justice is an approach to responding to harm that goes beyond repairing a specific incident and instead seeks to change the social conditions, power relations, and community practices that made harm possible in the first place. In practice, it is often associated with community-based accountability, survivor support, collective responsibility, and efforts to prevent future harm without relying on police, courts, or prisons (generationFIVE, 2007). In relation to restorative justice, transformative justice was articulated later, growing out of abolitionist and anti-violence organizing in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Kim, 2018).

Methods

Sources for this review were identified through searches conducted between January 15 and February 20, 2026, spanning initial in-class guided instruction through independent searching conducted across the intervening weeks. Searches were conducted using the UC Davis Library catalog databases, EBSCO Host Education Source, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Elicit, an AI-assisted research discovery tool introduced as part of the course.

Early search terms employed broad keyword phrases, including “restorative and transformative justice in education,” “incarcerated voices and advocates in education,” and “Carceral logics in schools or the classroom.” As the research question sharpened, search terms were refined to reflect its central concerns. A more developed question: “how carceral logics operate within school discipline systems, particularly in relation to distinctions between restorative justice and transformative justice and how these frameworks are understood,” was used in Elicit and returned several relevant sources. The guiding research question was ultimately refined to the one that organizes this review: “to what extent do restorative and transformative justice practices in schools disrupt carceral logics, and what accounts for the gap between intended and actual outcomes?” This formulation shaped final inclusion decisions. Sources published more than ten years prior to the search period were excluded to ensure relevance to contemporary schooling contexts. In education research, a ten-year window carries different implications that it does in fields like medicine. Policy environments, disciplinary practices, and the scholarly conversation around restorative justice have shifted substantially enough in recent years that older literature risks misrepresenting the current status of the field.

Seven central sources were selected for close analysis: Augustine et al. (2018), Davison et al. (2022), Huang et al. (2023), Lustick (2022), Elmesky and Marcucci (2024), Ivashkevich

(2024), and Svigelj (2025). These sources were selected because they offered a methodologically diverse set of approaches, including a randomized controlled trial and a cluster-randomized controlled trial, a quasi-experimental longitudinal study using administrative data, critical ethnography, interview-based qualitative research, theoretical scholarship, and a critical archival study. Together, they enabled both empirical and conceptual analysis of how justice oriented interventions are understood and enacted in educational and adjacent carceral contexts.

Inclusion criteria were applied as follows: sources were required to address school discipline, restorative or transformative justice, carceral institutional practices, or educational access for youth affected by punitive systems; to contribute conceptually or empirically to the research question; and to be available in full text for close reading. Preference was given to studies with statistically meaningful findings where quantitative methods were employed. Sources were excluded if they functioned only as background references or did not speak directly to implementation, outcomes, or structural critique. No minimum citation threshold was applied, though priority was given to peer-reviewed work published in recognized disciplinary outlets.

Each source was read for its central argument, methodological design, target population, findings, limitations, and relevance to the distinction between reform and transformation. Attention was also given to whether the source centered race, disability, or belonging, and whether justice was treated as a procedural intervention or as a structural and political project. Because the review draws on sources utilizing different methods, no single evaluation method was used. Quantitative sources were assessed for design strength, implementation limits, and subgroup findings, while qualitative and theoretical sources were assessed for conceptual clarity, depth of analysis, and explanatory value in accounting for mechanisms that quantitative studies could not fully capture.

Results

Race, Racism, and the Persistence of Carceral Logics Under Restorative Reform

The strongest pattern across the literature is that restorative reform does not automatically interrupt racialized punishment. In the most optimistic quantitative study in this set, Augustine et al. (2018) found that restorative practices in Pittsburgh Public Schools improved teacher-rated school climate and reduced suspensions more in treatment schools than in control schools. The study also found that racial disparities between Black and White students narrowed modestly. However, even this comparatively hopeful finding stopped short of structural transformation. Arrests did not decline, academic outcomes did not improve overall, and students with individualized education plans (IEPs) did not share equally in suspension reductions. Restorative implementation appeared to improve some outcomes while leaving deeper inequities intact.

Davison et al. (2022) present a sharper warning. Using administrative data from a large urban district over nearly a decade, they found that restorative justice schools experienced substantial declines in suspension rates as programs matured, but those gains largely bypassed Black students. White, Latinx, and Asian students saw more benefit, while Black students' disciplinary outcomes remained largely unchanged. Their explanation is especially important for this review: restorative justice may be adopted as a new procedural layer within schools to operate with race-neutral language inside racially unequal systems. Inside that setting, reform can reduce punishment overall without disrupting the anti-Black structures that shape who is punished most.

Huang et al. (2023) add another important layer. In a cluster randomized controlled trial across 18 schools, they found no overall reduction in out-of-school suspensions after one year of restorative practice implementation and no differential effects by race, gender, or disability

status. Students with prior suspensions were less likely to be suspended again, suggesting that restorative practices may help some already-identified students. Still, the broader picture is cautionary. Even in a rigorous experimental design, restorative reform did not produce across-the-board disciplinary change. This result reinforces the idea that program adoption alone should not be mistaken for institutional transformation.

The qualitative sources help explain why. Lustick (2022) studied a school committed to anti-oppression and schoolwide restorative implementation, yet participants still described tension between restorative ideals and the institutional demand to maintain order. Exclusionary discipline persisted for behaviors associated with zero-tolerance thinking, especially violence and drug use. Lustick's application of critical restorative justice is significant because it recognizes that restorative work must address structural oppression, not just interpersonal conflict. Yet the article also demonstrates that even when participants reach toward this broader vision, what they are describing often approaches transformative justice; an understanding that restorative repair alone is not enough and that meaningful impact requires attention to power, oppression, and institutional restructuring.

Elmesky and Marcucci (2024) make that vulnerability explicit. In their critical ethnography of a predominantly Black high school, restorative justice retained anti-carceral potential only when adults practiced what they called politicized caring: care that explicitly recognized Black students' structural realities, affirmed their emotions, and helped co-construct tools for navigating racialized danger. The study's outlier circle mattered precisely because it refused to treat students as abstract behavior problems. Instead, it located harm within relationships, institutions, and systems of power. The implication is clear; race-conscious

practice is not an optional supplement to restorative justice, but a condition for any serious attempt to disrupt carceral logics in schools.

Ivashkevich (2024) extends the argument by shifting from critique to praxis. Her ant carceral art pedagogy is explicitly transformative rather than merely restorative. Instead of centering individual culpability or behavior correction, the youth poetic media project builds solidarity, belonging, collective healing, and political understanding. The work is especially useful here because it shows what becomes possible when educational responses to harm are organized around agency, voice, and structural critique rather than compliance. Ivashkevich, with Davison, Lustick, and Elmesky and Marcucci, suggest that the racial limits of restorative reform are not simply failures of implementation. They are also signs that schools remain more committed to managing racialized difference than to transforming the conditions under which harm is produced.

Disability, Educational Access, and the Limits of Inclusion Under Reform

Disability appears less often than race across the sources, but when it does appear, it reveals a parallel failure of inclusion. Augustine et al. (2018) found that students with IEPs did not experience suspension reductions comparable to other students, even in a district where restorative implementation improved climate and lowered suspensions overall. Huang et al. (2023) similarly found no significant differential benefit for students with disabilities in their one-year trial. These findings matter because restorative justice is presented as a more inclusive alternative to exclusionary discipline. Yet the quantitative evidence here suggests that disability-based vulnerability is not automatically addressed when schools adopt restorative practices.

Svigelj (2025) makes the structural nature of that exclusion unmistakable. Although centered in a juvenile detention facility, the article is directly relevant because incarcerated youth remain legally entitled to educational access and disability protections under IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA. The study shows how school and detention systems manipulate bureaucratic procedures to delay or deny evaluation, let protections lapse, and effectively redefine disabled youth as outside educational belonging. In this context, control operates through paperwork, delay, noncompliance, and the production of ineligibility. The article extends the review beyond narrowly defined school discipline and shows how exclusion can be institutionalized through the very systems that are supposed to guarantee access.

Svigelj's analysis also clarifies an important connection to school discipline. The article documents how attendance problems, repeated suspension, transfer, and procedural barriers can be used to erase disability recognition itself. Students can be made unwelcome, removed from instruction, and then disqualified for support on the grounds that they have not received the very educational access they were denied. This recursive logic closely resembles the school-to-prison pipeline described elsewhere in the literature: exclusion produces vulnerability, and that vulnerability is used to justify further exclusion. The juvenile carceral setting does not stand apart from schooling in this framework; it reveals the extension and intensification of patterns already active within it.

Ivashkevich's article also helps bridge disability back into the broader educational context by naming the criminalization of youth as racialized, gendered, ableist, and neoliberal. Her transformative framework applies and extends a critique of deficit-centered approaches that isolate trauma or misbehavior within the individual. Instead, it positions collective healing, creative agency, and community support as necessary responses to intersecting structural harms.

This is especially relevant for students with disabilities, who are managed by behaviorist and compliance-based systems in schools. Taking these points into account, the disability theme in the literature does not merely identify a subgroup left behind by restorative reform. It reveals how the very terms of inclusion remain constrained when schools treat access as secondary to order and control.

Together, the disability-focused evidence suggests that restorative reform remains limited when schools fail to challenge ableist ideologies about behavior, participation, and worthiness. Students with disabilities often encounter the same bureaucratic and disciplinary ideas that structure racialized exclusion: heightened surveillance, narrow behavioral expectations, and institutional discretion presented as neutral while producing unequal outcomes. The literature points toward a broader conclusion. If schools are serious about justice, they must understand educational access itself as a central anti-carceral issue rather than a separate compliance matter.

Relationships, Belonging, and School Climate as Measures of Justice Beyond Discipline

A third strong theme across the literature concerns relationships, belonging, and school climate. These concepts are central to how restorative justice is justified in schools, and they appear repeatedly as both intended outcomes and evaluative measures. Augustine et al. (2018) provide the clearest quantitative support for this theme. In their randomized study, teacher-rated school climate improved in restorative schools, and the intervention was grounded in the idea that building stronger relationships and community could reduce the need for suspension. This matters because it shows that restorative practices may reshape everyday conditions of schooling, not only disciplinary events after harm occurs. At the same time, Augustine's findings also expose the limits of climate as a stand-alone measure. Improved climate did not mean

academic gains, arrests did not decrease, and some students remained unevenly served. Climate improvement may be necessary without being sufficient.

Huang et al. (2023) reinforce that caution indirectly. Although their trial focused on out-of-school suspension, the article situates restorative practices within a larger body of research linking them to school climate and connectedness. Yet the study's own null findings on overall suspension reduction after one year show that the relational promise of restorative practices is not guaranteed simply because schools have adopted the model. Belonging cannot be assumed from implementation alone. It depends on exposure, depth, and whether practices are experienced by students as meaningful rather than symbolic.

The qualitative literature provides a richer account of what belonging actually requires. Elmesky and Marcucci (2024) show that relationship-building becomes politically significant only when it is grounded in what they call politicized caring. In their outlier restorative circle, trust was possible because students were not asked to leave race, pain, or vulnerability outside the room. Care was not sentimental; it was relational and political at the same time. This distinction is crucial for the present review because generic appeals to community can easily coexist with carceral schooling if they do not name who has historically been excluded from safety, trust, and recognition.

Lustick (2022) similarly shows that relationship-centered practice can be undermined when institutional order remains the dominant priority. Participants described efforts to build trust and shared responsibility, but they also reported moments when exclusionary responses reemerged under pressure. In other words, schools may endorse relationships rhetorically, while still treating some students as beyond relational repair. This helps explain why restorative justice can improve climate in broad terms while failing to alter deeper patterns of punishment.

Belonging is not just an emotional outcome; it is a political question about who is allowed to remain in the community, under what conditions, and with what degree of dignity.

Ivashkevich (2024) pushes this theme furthest by framing belonging as collective and creative rather than simply interpersonal. The youth poetic media project fostered solidarity, voice, and communal healing among participants who had been criminalized by schools and courts. Here, belonging is not measured as a positive feeling toward school; it is produced through sharing meaning-making and refusal of carceral narratives. This broader view clarifies what is at stake when the literature emphasizes school climate. Improved relationships, belonging, and climate matter, but they should not be mistaken for justice by themselves. These outcomes become anti-carceral only when they are linked to shifts in power, student agency, and meaningful recognition and access for students who have historically been excluded. Without that deeper change, climate language can mask institutional control behind the appearance of care while the same underlying structures of exclusion remain intact.

Discussion

Across the literature, the effects of restorative justice depend heavily on the depth of implementation and the institutional context into which it is introduced; that is the distinction between procedural implementation and genuine transformation that best accounts for the gap between intended and actual outcomes.

The gap between intended and actual outcomes is therefore not accidental. The studies repeatedly point to the same mechanisms: race-neutral implementation in contexts marked by anti-Blackness, reliance on staff discretion, coexistence with exclusionary policies, shallow or uneven exposure to restorative practices, and bureaucratic structures that define some youth as outside the circle of care. In this sense, the problem is not simply fidelity to a program model, it

is the mismatch between restorative rhetoric and punitive institutional design. Schools may add circles, conferences, or relational language while leaving intact structures that sort students through surveillance, removal, and differential access to support.

Using implementation versus structural change as the thread across the literature helps make sense of the apparent contradictions in the findings. Augustine et al. (2018) show that restorative practices can improve climate and reduce suspension under favorable conditions, while Davison et al. (2022) show that overall gains can still coincide with worsening racial disproportionality. Huang et al. (2023) demonstrate that even experimental implementation may not shift outcomes quickly or broadly. The qualitative studies explain why: where schools do not confront power, oppression, and the political conditions of harm, restorative justice can be folded into carceral control. By contrast, the strongest anti-carceral moments in the literature are those that move beyond procedure toward structural consciousness, politicized care, collective agency, and access.

This review also suggests that the literature is moving beyond a narrow restorative frame, even when it does not always use the term transformative justice. The push for anti-oppressive, race-conscious, structurally aware, and community-grounded intervention appears across several sources. Lustick's application of critical restorative justice, Elmesky and Marcucci's politicized caring, and Ivashkevich's antiscarceral pedagogy each point toward forms of educational practice that do more than repair isolated conflict. They seek to reorganize relationships, power, and belonging in ways that are closer to transformative justice in substance, whether or not that exact label is used.

There are also important limitations in the literature. Several studies are context-specific, making broad generalizations difficult. Quantitative evaluations often cannot identify which

students actually received restorative interventions or how consistently practices were implemented. Qualitative studies provide conceptual depth but are usually based on single sites or outlier cases. Even so, their convergence is striking, across methods, the literature supports the conclusion that restorative justice is most vulnerable where it remains procedural and more promising where it becomes structurally and politically transformative.

Several other limitations warrant acknowledgement. Searches were conducted across four databases and one AI-assisted tool, but a more exhaustive review would include additional sources, and it was not always possible to trace which specific terms returned which sources, limiting reproducibility of the search process. The corpus of seven central sources is relatively small, which constrains the generalizability of the synthesis. The review was conducted by a single researcher without a second reviewer to independently verify inclusion decisions or thematic interpretation; a standard safeguard in systematic reviews that was not feasible within the constraints of a single academic quarter.

Finally, the author's positionality is relevant to acknowledge. As a formerly incarcerated person who first encountered the school-to-prison pipeline at age ten by being arrested at school and later navigated mandatory probation supervision during high school, the author brings embodied knowledge of the carceral systems analyzed here. This proximity to the subject matter informed the selection of themes and the interpretive lens applied throughout the review. While the positionality lends experiential grounding to the analysis, it may also have shaped which patterns in the literature felt most salient, and readers should interpret the synthesis with that in mind.

Conclusion

Restorative and transformative justice practices do have potential to disrupt carceral logics in schools, but the extent of that disruption varies sharply by context, implementation, and political clarity. The literature does not support a simple claim that restorative justice fixes school discipline. Instead, it shows that restorative reforms often improve climate or reduce punishment in general while leaving more entrenched patterns of racialized and ableist exclusion intact.

What accounts for the gap between intended and actual outcomes is not a single flaw but a recurring set of institutional conditions: anti-Black disciplinary cultures, colorblind policy language, discretionary enforcement, uneven relational practice, bureaucratic denial of support, and the persistence of order as the dominant value. Where schools name structural harm directly and organize practice around politicized care, collective healing, educational access, and meaningful belonging, more anti-carceral possibilities emerge. Where they do not, restorative justice risks becoming a strategy of management rather than a challenge to carceral logic.

For this reason, the most important implication of the literature is that disruption requires more than practicing restorative justice. It requires transformation of the system. Schools cannot meaningfully challenge carceral logics while continuing to rely on the systems that produced those logics in the first place.

Rhetorical Justification

In the writing of this literature, I made rhetorical choices based on both genre and audience. Because this is a research paper for an academic audience, I used an IMRAD-based structure, a formal tone, and consistent citation to match the expectations of scholarly writing in education and the social sciences. At the same time, I knew my audience might not be familiar with terms like *carceral logics*, *restorative justice*, or *transformative justice*, so I worked to define key terms clearly and explain them in context and by providing footnotes for further clarification rather than assuming shared knowledge.

I also made structural choices to strengthen the argument. Instead of organizing the paper source by source, I organized the Results section by themes. This helped me synthesize the literature and show patterns across the sources, especially around race and racism, disability and educational access, and relationships, belonging, and school climate. That organization also supported my larger claim that the gap between intended and actual outcomes often reflects the difference between surface-level implementation and deeper structural change.

Rhetorically, I rely most heavily on logos through comparison, synthesis, and interpretation of the literature. Ethos is built through careful citation, accurate representation of sources, and close attention to what the evidence does and does not support. Pathos is present more subtly, especially in discussion of exclusion, race, disability, and belonging, because these issues affect real students and not just abstract theory. Kairos also shaped this paper. At a time when restorative language is becoming more common in schools, it felt important to ask whether these reforms are truly disrupting punitive systems or simply making them appear less harsh.

AI Appendix

During the writing of this document, Google Docs' built-in automatic spelling, typo, and grammar check (including grammar suggestions) was used to refine language and correct errors. UWP 101 course instructor, Brenden Johnston, instructed students to use Elicit, an AI search tool, to find relevant reports, and to upload the rough draft to MyEssayFeedback for constructive AI criticism. Out of several critiques, one was implemented: expanding the methods section to be more specific. No generative AI was used to create content, and the author has reviewed all suggestions to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the final work. The author assumes full responsibility for this work.

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