Systematic Literature Review of Restorative Justice

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For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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Dedication

I dedicate my thesis project and the culmination of my graduate degree to my family, all living in Peru. As the oldest sibling, I have always been motivated to set a good example for my sisters, so they strive to go after their dreams no matter any obstacle. Lastly, I dedicate this project to my beloved paternal grandmother, for instilling in me the value of education, for believing in me and for constantly encouraging me to accomplish my goals.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature Page</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review of Restorative Justice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

Systematic Literature Review of Restorative Justice

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Master of Social Work

The purpose of this literature review is to explore restorative justice (RJ) practices as an alternative to punishment for students in the school system. Concurrently, the goal of this research is to explain the concepts related to restorative and retributive justice as well as analyze traditional and newer methods for school misconduct. This analysis highlights the negative effects of punitive methods on school-aged children of urban communities. Thus, emphasizing the importance of adopting newer approaches that aim to surpass punishment by advancing into restoration and healing.

This research systematically evaluates 16 peer-reviewed articles concentrated on restorative justice practices in school settings. The writings confirm great success in RJ’s ability to improve the lives of school-aged children and the communities they inhabit. However, the research also indicates that RJ faces significant barriers upon implementation in schools. Though some of those barriers have been identified, the main obstacle remains society’s favorable perception about discipline; especially when it relates to minorities. Therefore, it is still unknown how to fully transition from a retributive, punishing mentality to a restorative, healing one.
Introduction

Approaches to Discipline

A primary goal of an effective school system is to maintain the safety and integrity of its learning environment (American psychologist, 2008). There are two distinct approaches that have been identified to accomplish this objective. Historically, retributive justice, which implies making the offender suffer while enforcing the rules or values of others (American psychologist, 2008), has been the predominant method utilized. However, evidence shows that implementation of retributive practices, such as zero-tolerance policies, have failed to achieve this goal (American psychologist, 2008). These said policies have not only increased overrepresentation of punishment in minority groups, but also increased juvenile arrests and incarceration, affecting students, families, and communities (American psychologist, 2008).

Conversely, restorative justice is a practice that is rooted in indigenous traditions and aims to restore harmony (Ortega & Lyunbansky, 2016). In the school setting, RJ offers the opportunity for dialogue between those who have been harmed and those who committed the offense, in order to repair the relationship and hold students accountable without separating the offender from the community (Ortega & Lyunbansky, 2016). This recuperative approach has exhibited great strides in sustaining the safety and integrity of schools and their students.
Restorative Justice Challenges

However, due to restorative and punitive systems holding different values, the implementation of restorative justice has been challenging for school staff and for students (Ortega & Lyunbansky, 2016). Longstanding societal thought patterns and penalizing mentalities pose as significant barriers to full acclimation of these rehabilitating practices.

Additionally, matters related to the school administration such allocation of funds, training, and time to implement restorative justice methods are also some of the impediments that restorative justice faces especially at the beginning of its utilization (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to identify and analyze the impairments to implementing restorative justice practices, so that techniques may be curated in the future to guide the full implementation of RJ. Examining the hurdles schools are experiencing and what other studies have identified is most needed in order to adopt restorative justice as the superior approach to punitive methodologies. The following research question was utilized to guide said query: What are the main barriers for schools to implement restorative justice as an alternative to a disciplinary method?

To explore the topic in question, this study will systematically review 16 articles of literature from CSUN’s database. The writings are geared towards the identification of
obstacles to RJ implementation, as well as advancing future research on the execution of
the practice. After gathering each article, they were coded according to their topics,
which facilitated the creation of themes in order to compose the following review.
Methods

Search Strategy

This systematic literature review includes articles on restorative justice that were found on CSUN’s databases. Initial research included no specific time limitations, resulting in the oldest article copywritten in 1961. The article “The Comparative Influence of Punitive and Non-Punitive Teachers upon Children’s Concepts of School Misconduct” was vital for this research because it presented valuable information regarding the history of discipline and punishment in schools.

Next, the search was adjusted to limit articles that were published beginning in 2000 through the present day. Since the goal was specifically to talk about restorative justice in schools, the keyword targeted for the subject line was ‘restorative justice.’ Then the subheadings ‘schools’ and ‘k-12’ were added. When looking only on the ProQuest Social Services abstracts, no articles on restorative justice related to schools were found, prompting research expansion to the One Research CSUN database tool.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria that were used for this research were articles related to restorative justice in schools and peer-reviewed journals dated from 2000 to present. The search resulted in more than 350 articles. The exclusion criteria were any articles related to restorative justice in the juvenile system, book reviews, dissertations, articles written in other languages other than English and unpublished articles.
Themes

After the research, 16 articles were read in order to identify general coding categories. Themes in the literature were identified from the article title and the abstract. Some of the themes identified were the history of discipline in schools, retributive justice practices, the effect of zero tolerance policies, the school-to-prison pipeline, racial biases on discipline, restorative justice as a newer approach, restorative justice practices in schools, recommendations to implementing restorative justice and restorative justice implementation challenges. Some article’s topics overlap, but each article was labeled in one of the aforementioned categories.
Literature Review of Restorative Justice

Negative Effects of Retributive Justice

Fifty-five years ago, research regarding the management of children’s behavior in classroom settings found that “as compared with children who have non-punitive teachers, children who have punitive teachers manifest more aggression in their misconducts, are more concerned, unsettled, conflicted about misconduct in school, and are less concerned with learning and school-unique values” (pg. 49, Kounin & Gump, 1961). This study took place in six 1st grade classrooms. The researchers were able to identify the punitive, retributive, and non-punitive, restorative, teachers solely by the difference in each student’s responses, which proved their hypothesis that punitive teachers are more likely to negatively impact children, leading to more aggression and disobedience (Kunin & Gump, 1961). Although the research was conducted many years ago, when teacher’s disciplinary methods were less regulated, this study still remains of vital importance due to proving the negative effects of traditional disciplinary methods within the education system.

In regard to more recent research in the area of school discipline, a study that took place in 2017 explains the negative effects of suspensions (Chalewa, Hull, Bancock & Smith, 2017). Although the negative consequences of out-of-school suspensions have been previously known as ineffective, this study highlights that in-school suspensions are also detrimental to the performance of students in schools; resulting in lower achievement scores or GPA’s, higher rates of grade repetition, and higher dropout rates (Chalewa,
Hull, Bancock & Smith, 2017). Educators, researchers, and policymakers should consider the findings of this study (Chalewa, Hull, Bancock & Smith, 2017).

*Zero Tolerance Policies*

Zero tolerance policy is a form of retributive justice, which entails giving the offender punitive consequences that are expected to be applied regardless of the gravity of the behavior (American Psychologists, 2018). Furthermore, zero tolerance policies presume that removing students who engage in disruptive behaviors will benefit other students (American Psychologists, 2018). Zero tolerance policy measures include, but are not limited to, in-school suspensions or detentions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions; all of which have proven to have negative effects at both the school and student level (Chalewa, Hull, Bancock & Smith, 2017).

These punitive policies are designed to suspend or expel students from public schools for a single occurrence of misconduct. The offense can range from possession of weapons, drugs in school grounds, to acts of violence (Haft, 2000). In fact, “zero tolerance responses to misconduct run directly counter to a fundamental purpose of public education—the purpose of preparing children to live in a democratic society. It suggests that the decision to exclude or ostracize individuals from an institution specifically designed to prepare them to be productive members of our society is a grave one.” (pg. 2, Haft, 2000). Thus, when students are suspended and are deprived of receiving their education, it is considered a type of systemic violence that is committed against those students (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).
Consequently, the American Psychological Association conducted a task force review on zero tolerance policies to evaluate the efficacy of these policies. The review found that zero-tolerance policies do not improve school climate or school safety. In fact, not only do these policies not guarantee a change in student’s behavior, but they negatively affect children and adolescent’s development as well (American Psychologist, 2008). This review also exposed that zero-tolerance policies have pushed schools to increase their referrals to the juvenile system for misconduct that was once handled by schools, referring to the term of the school-to-prison pipeline (American Psychologist, 2008).

_School-to-Prison Pipeline_

This term is used to describe the systemic transition of youth from the educational system into the juvenile or adult criminal justice system. This phenomenon disproportionally affects low-income, disabled, students of color, who are specifically targeted with the zero-tolerance policies (Miguel & Gargano, 2017). The school-to-prison pipeline “not only robs them from their right to an uninterrupted education but also of the opportunity to forge a life unrestrained by the shackles of a criminal record” (pg. 4, Miguel & Gargano, 2017). These children are disciplined in ways that are disproportioned with their behavior as if the educators are more invested in penalizing them than promoting justice and empathy (Miguel & Gargano, 2017).
Punitive Methods in Minorities Groups

The number of students affected by the juvenile justice system, school-to-prison pipeline and other zero tolerance policies employed by the retributive justice approach has steadily increased over the years. Even more, these policies have disproportionately affected students of color and students with disabilities (American Psychologist, 2008). The over-representation of African American students on suspensions and expulsions continues to increase and what it is more disturbing is to know that evident by research, African American students do not exhibit higher rates of violence or disruptive behavior that could make sense of this over-representation (American Psychologist, 2008).

Moreover, these students are shown to be disciplined more severely for less serious reasons (American Psychologist, 2008).

For example, in statewide research in Texas public school system, it was found that 6 out of 10 students were once suspended or expelled from middle to high school; 83% of these students were African American, 74% Hispanics, and 59% white (Teasly, 2014). Simultaneously, students with emotional disabilities and behavioral disorders are also affected by zero-tolerance policies at disproportionate rates (American psychologist, 2008). Another report from the Public Policy Research Institute at Texas revealed that 3 out of 4 students with registered disabilities were also suspended or expelled at least once during the study period (Teasly, 2014).

Moreover, an analysis on the influence of race on restorative discipline was the first to test the racial threat perspective, which states that a high ratio of a minority group
can influence an increase of public punitiveness due to the potential political, economic, or criminal threat that a large minority group presents to the white minority. The study found that schools with a high population of African American students tend to use restorative justice practices less often when dealing with student behavior (Payne & Welch, 2015). When this injustice occurs, minorities are deeply affected in their abilities to continue their education, looking for employment, finding housing, and simply staying alive (Miguel & Gargano, 2017). Thus, it is implied that the school system is mirroring the criminal justice system on its efforts to oppress and eliminate people of color.

**Restorative Justice as Opposed to Punishment**

Restorative justice is an alternative approach to retributive justice. It is aimed at the restoration of all the members affected by the injustice including the aggressor (Gromet, Okinoto, Wenzel & Darley, 2012). As stated, restorative justice does not focus on punishment, thus “the focus of restorative justice is on restoration of all the actors affected by the injustice: the offender, the victim, and the community, sometimes including supporters of the offender and/or the victim, as well as unaffiliated community members” (pg.375, Gromet, Okinoto, Wenzel & Sarley Darly, 2012).

Restorative justice is a non-punitive, indigenous practice that is based on the value of living in harmony. The term was first familiarized in the United States in the ’70s by way of programs that were focusing on repairing the harm in the criminal justice system (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettle & Espelage, 2016). The grandfather of contemporary restorative justice, Howard Zehr, defined RJ as “a process to involve, to the extent
possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, to heal and put things as right as possible” (pg. 459, Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettle & Espelage, 2016).

Restorative justice more than just a practice is a set of values that seeks the involvement of a whole community in order to maintain harmony. It involves showing respect, build strong relationships and being responsible for your own actions. With this practice, all parties involved are part of the decision to find a solution (Teasley, 2014).

Furthermore, restorative practices seek social engagement whereas retributive practices seek social control (Evans & Lester, 2013). Restorative approaches not only seek to address the misbehavior but also seek to enhance a healthy school climate (Evans & Lester, 2013), Anfara, Evans and Lester add that, “RJ practices are concerned not only with reducing the violence but changing the conditions that lead to violence” (Pg 57, Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013), and that, “while zero tolerance policies promote accountability, they often do so without compassion” (Pg. 59, Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).

Restorative Justice Practices in Schools

One restorative justice approach that is utilized in various schools is the restorative circle technique, which is guided by a facilitator that provides a space for the students affected by conflict to utilize open dialogue to repair the harm done and achieve healing. Restorative justice interventions such as mediation, conferencing and healing
circles each share important steps. These steps allow everyone involved in the offense to talk and share their thoughts, explain how they have been affected, share how they are feeling, and state what they would like to do to repair the harm. The success of this process relies on the participation of everyone involved (Hopkins, 2002). Whereas, conversely, in the punitive approach, the value is placed on revenge or punishing those who caused harm rather than understanding why the harm occurred in the first place (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettle & Espelage, 2016).

The Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue found that there was an 84% decrease in off-campus suspensions and a 30% decrease in the use of in-school suspensions. Thus, this research suggests that restorative justice can greatly influence the reduction of youth referrals to the juvenile system (Teasly, 2014). Another reading on the outcomes of restorative justice circles stated that even though there are few studies on the implementation of restorative justice, research shows that restorative circles decreased major disciplinary issues, expulsions, and suspensions as well as reduced substance use issues (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettle & Espelage, 2016).

Another non-punitive method, peer mediation, which is broadly used in the United States, is a practice where students themselves mediate conflict between their classmates. It utilizes conflict resolution skills and social competencies to reduce the possibility of violence and restore peace in schools. It also aids to resolve conflict and repair and improve relationships (Pavelka, 2013). A similar RJ approach, a peer accountability board, involves the participation of both victims and wrongdoers while
aiming to identify the impact of the offense and come up with a case plan that promotes both accountability and healing for all parties involved. Some items included in the board’s case plan are letters of apology, tutoring, counseling and community service. (Pavelka, 2013)

Additionally, conferencing is a lengthier restorative justice method that involves the participation of parties that are potentially involved with the victim and the transgressor such as, parents, teachers, other students, and community members. These conferences are guided by a trained facilitator who looks to find resolution and reparation of the harm (Pavelka, 2013).

Consequently, in an effort to adopt a “human rights framework” that supports the academic improvement of students and the emotional and behavioral development of young people (Hantzopoulos, 2013), a school in New York implemented the fairness committee. This restorative practice, which closely mirrors conferencing, was designed to advocate for fairness, enhance student-teacher relationships, and diminish schooling inequities (Hantzopoulos, 2013). The fairness committee operates to repair infractions within the school and involves teachers, volunteers, and alumni. These committee sessions purpose is to seek out appropriate consequences that are fair and supportive of those actions.

Teen courts are yet another non-punitive approach that aspire to divert school-age-youth from being sent to juvenile justice or adult justice systems. This court aims to
reintegrate these first-time offenders into the society (Evans, Smokowski, Barbee, Bower & Barefoot, 2016). A key element that diversifies teen courts from the traditional judiciary system is that the jury is composed of past offenders. The jury members have unique insight given their past experiences and use this understanding to collaborate with the court facilitator to devise a plan that instills both accountability and restoration. Teen court programs have proven to prevent recidivism and improve youth’s social relationships and psychological functioning (Evans, et al. 2016). Furthermore, providing disciplinary alternatives through the court improves school climate and help reduce the school-to-prison-pipeline (Smokowski, Evans, Wing, Bower, Bacallao & Barbee, 2017).

Implementing Restorative justice

On the article “Practices and Policies for Implementing Restorative Justice Within Schools,” the author identifies some tools to aid the challenging process of adopting restorative justice practices. First, the author highlights the importance of collaboration between schools’ staff members, student bodies, and people in the community, so that all parties are fully engaged and invested in building a positive school environment, diminishing violence and embracing healing (Pavelka, 2013). The article then speaks on the importance of cultivating a culture that values strong relationships and connections between students, teachers, and other stuff as well as a sense of belonging and care within schools. This creates an environment where students are less likely to engage in bullying, delinquency, and alienation because RJ practices are being highly valued by all parties in the school community (Pavelka, 2013).
Another important aspect of effective implementation of restorative justice is to involve the entire community by recruiting a group of people, such as parents, teachers, community members or alumni, that believe in the values of non-punitive methods. Volunteers that are invested in restoring peace and healing in school settings and that are willing to offer their time to participate as mediators are imperative in RJ’s overall success (Pavelka, 2013).

Finally, it is essential that children are exposed to these values throughout their entire educational experience starting as early as elementary school and expanding through their high school career (Pavelka, 2013). In this way, restorative justice becomes more than just an approach utilized by school systems, but its non-punitive methods become an instinctual mentality that the children adopt and apply even outside of their school experience. Thus, the greater society is positively impacted as the students begin their adult lives with mindsets that naturally work to restore and heal rather than penalize and chastise.
Findings

The literature selected for this research expanded upon the history of discipline in schools in the United States, as well as the policies that have been implemented in the past to deal with behavioral matters. These policies, which were meant to address disciplinary difficulties, have instead created more harm than good for the students and society as a whole.

Conversely, this research also revealed the positive effects restorative justice has had in schools and highlights the enormous difference between retributive and restorative approaches. The articles on restorative justice practices describe that its main goal is to heal, not to punish, and emphasizes the need to put an end on the school-to-prison pipeline, as evidence shows that incarceration does not produce safety nor change.

Challenges on the Implementation of Restorative Justice

As stated previously, differences in values between both disciplinary approaches have made the utilization of the newer rehabilitative practice challenging across the board. Hence, various obstacles have been identified to answer “What are the main barriers for schools to implementing restorative justice as an alternative to a disciplinary method? which constitutes the research question of this project.

One of the hurdles restorative justice has identified is the lack of consistency of repairing and forbearing beliefs that communities and school staff hold, therefore prohibiting the full implementation of healing practices. Thus, some studies have
identified a set of values that a community and a restorative justice facilitator need to embody. The set of values are respect, openness, inclusion, tolerance, integrity, empowerment, and congruence (Hopkins, 2002). These values will promote a shift from rules to relationships, allowing students to be heard and held accountable in a more restorative manner (Hopkins, 2002). Although RJ practices already put in place at schools around the U.S prove to have a positive effect on the youth population, the enormous shift in values amongst discipline practices continues to present obstacles in RJ’s implementation.

Consequently, another challenge of the implementation of RJ is the lack of rehabilitative aptitudes that instructors possess, making it difficult to transmit the core values of RJ. Therefore, studies have recommended a set of skills for a restorative justice facilitator that include “remaining impartial and non-judgmental, respecting the perspective of all parties involved, actively and empathetically listening, developing rapport amongst participants, empowering participants to come up with solutions rather than suggesting and imposing ideas, creative questioning, warmth, compassion, and patience” (pg. 145, Hopkins, 2002). These skills will allow facilitators to humanize wrongdoers and will create space to change the culture of zero tolerance policies.

Furthermore, research suggests that for restorative practices to truly work, school staff need to abandon existing punitive models of restraint (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013). Thus, in order to create real change, schools need to adopt new ways of conceptualizing discipline, from seeing students for their inability to follow a set of rules
to seeing their ability to realize how their behavior affects the school as a whole, to take responsibility and learn from the experience after the harm occurs (Payne & Welch, 2018). Research on outcomes of restorative circle programs in school settings showed that some teachers already had that motivation to change the punitive measures but just needed some structure to put their values into practice (Ortega, Lyubansky, Nettle & Espelage, 2016).

Moreover; an article on restorative justice from the UK indicated that some of the challenges to implementing restorative justice in schools are a shortage of time due to conflicting priorities. For instance, time available dealing with discipline issues in a restorative manner, time dedicated to training, and time for support and review of practice (Hopkins, 2002). These challenges are perceived to be valid due to the evident priority placed on academic matters, but the article suggests that once a school is invested in restorative practices time and even funds for training could be accommodated (Hopkins, 2002).

Another article adds that especially during the initial implementation of RJ in schools, time and energy for training and the funding required to train staff to apply restorative practices is crucial (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013). Although punitive practices might seem faster and efficient, the long-term cost of suspending and expelling students, the higher drop-out rates, and the cost of new prisons make restorative justice a preferable long-term choice (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).
Additionally, research on “The Effects of School Conditions on the Use of Restorative Justice in schools” found that school characteristics such as; school structure, school body or faculty characteristics, and community traits do influence whether restorative practices are used. The study suggests being aware of this differential implementation based on these school characteristics and highlights the need for equal implementation of restorative practices for all students across the board (Payne & Welch, 2018).

It is important to reiterate that the challenges restorative justice faces are due to the fact that restorative justice practices are the opposite of retributive sanctions, which are broadly applied on institutions in response to discipline and violence (Pavelka, 2013). These policies, such as the zero-tolerance policy in schools, punish minor and major incidents with the same degree of severity (Pavelka, 2013). Thus, making no sense of these sanctions, examples of children of pre-school age being suspended due to carrying a knife on their lunchbox, without having any serious intent to harm anybody, speak loud about the inadequate use of these policies.

Another point regarding the challenges of implementation of RJ practices is the importance of adopting not just a particular practice but adopting a set of values that constitute RJ throughout the adaptation process. At the same time, highlighting the importance of consistency of using these restorative approaches in the school setting in order to achieve the desired results (Pavelka, 2013). Thus, a shift from the attempt to manage and condemn student’s behavior to a mentality that embraces social engagement,
collaboration, mutual respect, accountability, and growth is much needed (Anfara, Evans & Lester, 2013).

The Real Challenge

This review speaks on the barriers and challenges that restorative justice has been encountering as a new practice in the school system. The articles identify those difficulties and point out the necessity of a specific set of principles that facilitators, teachers, counselors and volunteers using this practice need to embody. The writings also mention how imperative is that school staff’s perception changes in regard to justice and punishment. Although these articles highlight all these challenges, the literature found does not necessarily identify how to actually alter people’s perception in regard to punitive methods. It does not mention how to challenge those perceptions and adopt new values for people that have been implementing zero-tolerance policies in the past.

How can schools train facilitators to adopt the set of values that are needed to use these rehabilitative approaches? How can schools change staff perceptions on discipline? How can schools train staff to believe in restorative justice? How do we change the mentality of people from a punitive to a forgiving one? And How do we learn to see children as capable and deserving human beings and as wholly redeemable? All these questions still remain unanswered since it constitutes a much broader societal issue to change ingrained perceptions in generations of people.
As mentioned previously, in order to adopt a recuperative approach to discipline mentalities needs to change. As a society, we need to alter our brains and start seeing students as human beings with eyes of compassion. We need to reprogram our mentalities and understand children attending our schools endure unique and challenging experiences at home which constitute the root of their alleged misbehavior. Instead of punishing them we need to provide them with the resources that will alleviate their challenging experiences. It is indeed our responsibility as a society to prevent these children from committing the infraction in the first place.

Mental health workers, educators and liable adults, in general, have a profound commitment to empower our youth and aid them to heal by affording them with a safe environment to communicate their needs and express their feelings. As a society, we need to hold the space for them to grow and instill in them respect, empathy, and forgiveness, but first, we need to start with ourselves.
Conclusion

The responsibility of schools to maintain a safe atmosphere and provide a healthy space for children to learn and develop is unquestionable. However, the way to deliver a structured and safe environment is often debated. Further, when research shows that certain approaches tend to disproportionately impact minorities negatively, the implementation of these measures necessitates further examination. Evidence tells us that more traditional measures have failed students and communities, and as such, innovative, student-centered approaches are necessary.

This research aims to contribute to our understanding of how to better support the implementation of student-centered approaches to discipline within the urban school environment. Furthermore, this literature review answers the research question: What are the main barriers for schools to implement restorative justice as an alternative to a disciplinary method? Identifying challenges and barriers and highlighting what is needed. Recognizing that although other studies have identified that adopting a new set of values such as the importance of community, forgiveness, dialogue, and healing it is vital to embracing restorative justice. It is still unknown how to instill these values and change perceptions within the community and the staff involved. Thus, this research helps us going in the right direction towards the elimination of punitive policies and the full adaption of restorative ones. This study concludes that restorative justice is a better way to deal with discipline in schools, fix social problems, and fight for the dignity and rights of students from unrepresented communities.
References


