A Review of Restorative Justice:
How Anti-Racist Restorative Practices Can Build Community and Support Black Girls in North Carolina Schools

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<u>Introduction</u>: School Discipline in North Carolina

North Carolina's School-to-Prison Pipeline

A strong education is foundational to one's social and economic empowerment. Schools provide a crucial opportunity for children to develop creativity and critical thinking, build social skills and relationships, engage with diverse perspectives, practice civic engagement, and prepare to lead flourishing adult lives. Adults who have completed more years of formal schooling consistently perform better on measures of health, income, and employment; and secondary and post-secondary education are becoming increasingly important requisites for earning a livable wage (Action for Children North Carolina, 2013, p. 1).

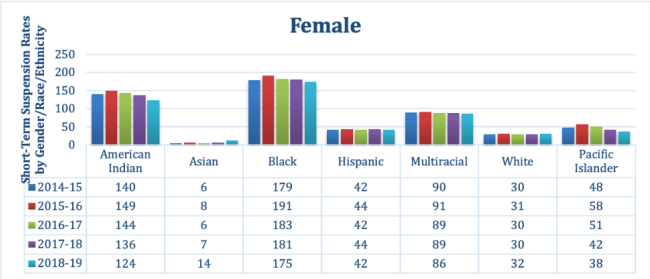
The North Carolina Constitution clearly establishes education as a right, stating that "The people have a right to the privilege of education, and it is the duty of the State to guard and maintain that right" (N.C. Const. Art. 1 § 15). However, North Carolina students—especially Black and Indigenous students—are frequently subjected to punitive discipline policies that exclude them from the classroom. When students experience exclusionary discipline policies like suspension and expulsion, they lose valuable classroom instructional time; they often experience rejection and social isolation; and in North Carolina, where quality alternative education programs are not guaranteed, they also face increased involvement in the juvenile legal system as they spend days outside the classroom, often unsupervised (Action for Children North Carolina, 2013, p. 7). Studies have shown correlations between exclusionary discipline and several negative life outcomes: poor attendance, reduced academic achievement, failure to graduate, increased juvenile justice involvement, and higher rates of adult incarceration (Fronius et al., 2016, p. 16). This funneling of children out of schools and into the criminal legal system is commonly termed the **school-to-prison pipeline**, and it poses a direct threat to the right to education for students across North Carolina.

Recent North Carolina Suspension Data

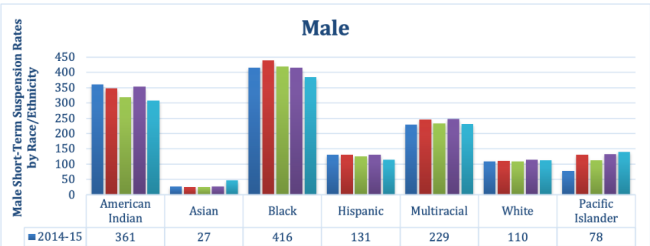
During both the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years, North Carolina students lost over 40,000 days of classroom instruction due to long-term suspensions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020, p. 5). While this number alone is staggering, it tells only a piece of the story. A closer examination of recent North Carolina suspension data makes clear that the burden of classroom exclusion does not fall equally upon all North Carolina students. **Figure 1** shows the annual short-term suspension rates (per 1,000 students enrolled) for North Carolina K-12 students from 2014 until 2019, disaggregated by both gender (using sex assigned at birth) and

race/ethnicity. Among both females and males, Black students received short-term suspensions at the highest rates, followed by American Indians (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020, p. 23).

Although Black male students received suspensions at the highest rates (414 suspensions per 1,000 students), an intersectional look at this data reveals that race may be a more significant factor in disciplinary consequences for females than for males (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 17). While Black males in North Carolina received short-term suspensions at rates three times those of their white counterparts, short-term suspension rates for Black females were nearly *six times* those of their white female peers (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2020, p. 23).



	American Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Multiracial	White	Pacific Islander
2014-15	140	6	179	42	90	30	48
2015-16	149	8	191	44	91	31	58
2016-17	144	6	183	42	89	30	51
2017-18	136	7	181	44	89	30	42
2018-19	124	14	175	42	86	32	38



	American Indian	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Multiracial	White	Pacific Islander
2014-15	361	27	416	131	229	110	78
2015-16	347	26	438	132	246	111	131
2016-17	318	26	418	125	233	109	113
2017-18	353	28	415	131	248	114	134
2018-19	307	48	384	115	231	112	141

Figure 1. North Carolina Short-Term Suspension Rates (per 1,000 Enrolled) by Race/Ethnicity and Gender (Sex Assigned at Birth).
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. (2020, March 15). *Consolidated Data Report, 2018-2019*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/media/7539/download

Black Girls: A Neglected Target of the School-to-Prison Pipeline

The recent North Carolina short-term suspension data in **Figure 1** reflects a much larger pattern in the gendered and racialized experiences of punitive school discipline in the United States. The disproportionate discipline consequences faced by Black girls start alarmingly early, with Black girls making up just 20% of girls enrolled in preschool, but 54% of girls suspended from preschool across the United States (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020, p. 7). Simone Ispa-Landa, Assistant Professor of Sociology and Human Development and Social Policy at Northwestern University, writes that "although being male heightens the risk of

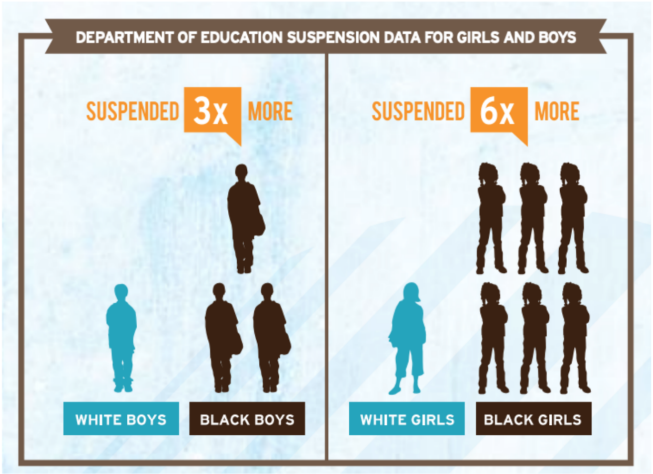


Figure 2. Intra-Gender Comparison of Suspension Rates. U.S. Department of Education, 2011-2012 Academic Year.

Crenshaw, K. W., Ocen, P., & Nanda, J. (2015). Black girls matter: Pushed out, overpoliced and underprotected. African American Policy Forum; Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies. https://www.atlanticphilanthropies.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/BlackGirlsMatter_Report.pdf

receiving a school punishment for all ethnic groups, being Black disadvantages girls more than it does boys" (Ispa-Landa, 2017, p. 2). In fact, national suspension data from the U.S. Department of Education mirrors that of North Carolina, with Black girls being suspended six times more often than their white counterparts at the national level (**Figure 2**, Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 17).

It is abundantly clear that girls of color, Black girls in particular, are subject to stereotypes that contribute to a unique and harmful experience of the school-to-prison pipeline. Studies have shown that Black girls are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system (Ispa-Landa, 2017, p. 2). Despite this alarming trend, however, efforts to address the school-to-prison pipeline almost always center on boys of color, neglecting the intersectional experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other girls of color.

School-Based Restorative Justice

Growing public attention on the school-to-prison pipeline has led educators across the U.S. to develop alternatives to existing punitive disciplinary systems in hopes of alleviating racial and gender-based discipline gaps. Restorative justice is one such alternative, providing a promising framework for building strong school communities and addressing student misconduct. In Durham County, North Carolina—where Black students made up just 44.6% of school enrollment but 69.1% of students receiving in-school suspensions in 2017 (Office for Civil Rights, 2017)—superintendent Pascal Mubenga has led the establishment of "Restorative Practice Centers" in place of prior in-school suspension programs, including the placement of restorative practice coordinators in every middle and high school (Mubenga, 2018).

But what really is **restorative justice**? The use of restorative practices in schools is rooted in a long tradition of restorative justice principles. At its core, restorative justice is a transformative framework that asks us to shift from the individual to the community as we approach conflict and respond to harm. Central to restorative justice is the understanding that people are interconnected in a web of relationships whose ties become strained when harm occurs (Martinez et al., 2022, p. 2). In a restorative justice framework, conflict is viewed not as a violation of institutional rules

Figure 3. Comparison of Questions Asked in Criminal Legal System vs. Restorative Justice Response

or laws, but as harm to those communities and relationships. Many restorative justice practitioners explain this shift by highlighting the vastly different questions asked by the criminal legal system as compared to those raised during a restorative justice response (**Figure 3**). While traditional punitive systems reduce harm to what rule has been broken, who broke it, and how they should be punished; restorative justice centers the harmed party and impacted community, asking who has been harmed, what their needs are, who bears responsibility for meeting those needs, and how the harm can be repaired and prevented from recurring (Restorative Justice Durham, 2017).

Though often simplified as such, restorative justice is more than just a set of processes or practices; it is a way of being that prioritizes relationships, interdependency, fairness, shared decision-making, solidarity, and healing. (Gregory & Evans, 2020, p. 7). This worldview has long been embedded in Indigenous communities across the globe—from Native North American cultures, to Aboriginal communities in Australia, to Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand—and many Western scholars rightly attribute restorative justice principles and practices to these Indigenous origins (Gregory & Evans, 2020, p. 3). In the Western world, restorative justice was first introduced in the criminal legal space as a social movement aimed at transforming the adversarial ways in which behavior is criminalized and punished (Morgan, 2021, p. 6). Spearheaded by Black and Indigenous activists and other groups disenfranchised by the U.S. criminal legal system, restorative justice presented a promising alternative to mass punishment and incarceration (Cama, 2019, p. 2).

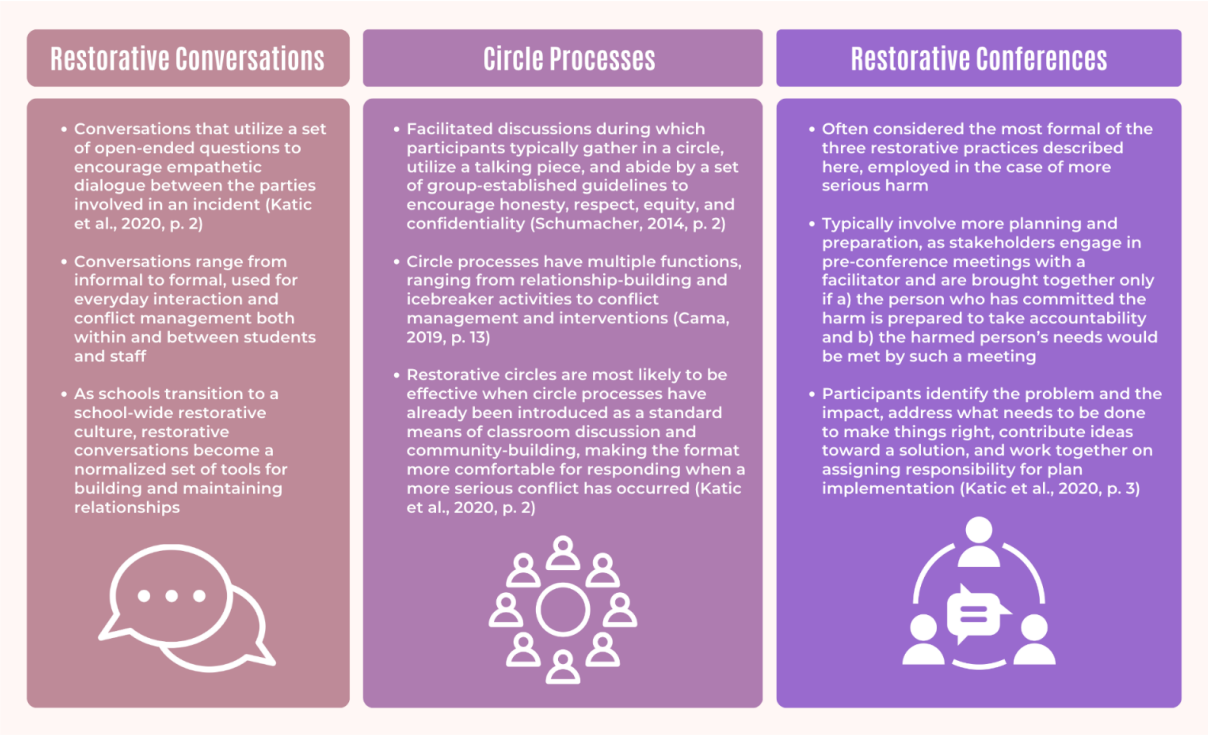


Figure 4. Restorative Conversations, Circle Processes, and Restorative Conferences

Restorative justice began to expand into the educational space in the early 1990s, as the racialized effects of zero-tolerance policies and growing school-to-prison pipeline sparked interest in developing restorative practices as alternatives to exclusionary discipline (Lustick, 2016, p. 42). Today, restorative practices in schools may take many forms and are intentionally adaptable to meet the unique needs of different students and circumstances (Morgan, 2021, p. 6). **Figure 4** describes the core features of three of the most common methods of putting restorative principles into practice in the classroom: restorative conversations, circle processes, and restorative conferences. Together, these practices have the potential to replace exclusionary discipline practices like detention, suspension, and expulsion (Morgan, 2021, p. 6).

The following literature review serves as an evaluation of a variety of school-based restorative justice programs that have been implemented across the United States, taking an intersectional research approach that highlights the too-often neglected school discipline experiences of Black, Indigenous, and other girls of color. By identifying and proposing solutions to address the most common barriers to effective restorative justice implementation, this research can guide educators, policymakers, and activists—both in Durham County and across the state—as they seek to build stronger school communities, keep students in classrooms, and protect their right to education.

Methods: Literature Review of Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools

Research Methods

A preliminary literature search was performed on August 8, 2022, and the final search was run on December 13, 2022. These searches utilized the research platform EBSCOhost to conduct a multi-database search of two education-focused databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Education Full Text (H.W. Wilson). Searches were run in four phases of increasing specificity, adding search terms to ensure inclusion of restorative justice articles that focused on gender, race, and the specific experiences of Black girls in school-based restorative justice programs. Search restrictions limited the results to literature written in English and published since 1990 (restorative justice first expanded into the education space during the early 1990s). The four combined searches returned 1,760 total articles, including 113 duplicated results that were later removed. The search restriction NOT "Dental" was also added to remove 597 articles that were included in the original results but focused on dental schools and restorative dentistry.

Titles and abstracts were then reviewed for the following inclusion criteria: a) article included either a *quantitative, qualitative, or case study* OR *literature review* of school-based restorative justice initiative(s); b) restorative justice initiative(s) took place in United States public middle or high schools; and c) article measured the impact of the restorative justice initiative(s) on any of the following metrics: suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to law enforcement, and school climate. Studies that disaggregated results on the basis of gender and race, as well as restorative justice initiatives that specifically targeted Black girls, were prioritized for inclusion.

PRISMA Search Diagram

PRISMA, or Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, is an evidence-based minimum set of items for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The PRISMA search diagram (**Figure 5**) shows the search terms[1] used in each of the four search phases that were conducted, along with the number of results returned from each database included in the multi-database search. A total of 113 results were removed utilizing EBSCOhost's deduplication tool, and 1,622 results were removed after abstracts were reviewed for relevant inclusion criteria. Ultimately, 25 articles were pulled for inclusion in the final literature review. The 25 results included 20 peer-reviewed articles (13 original studies/experiments and 7 literature reviews), 3 dissertations (containing both literature review and field research components), and 2 reports (published by the National Education Policy Center and National Women's Law Center).

[1] Search terms used in varying combinations: "restorative," "school," "gender," "race," and "black girls."

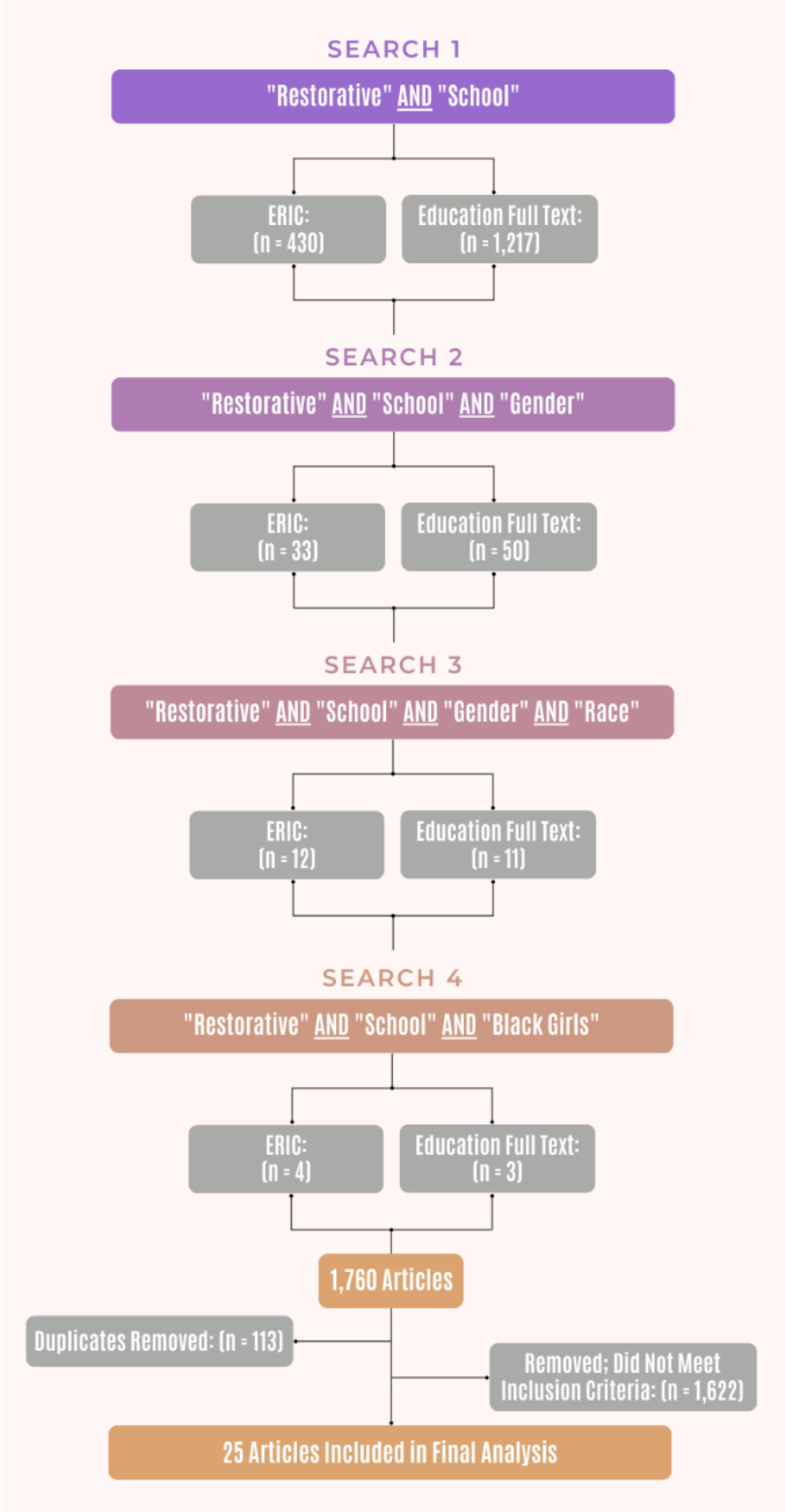


Figure 5. PRISMA Search Diagram

Findings: The Case for Restorative Justice in Schools

Variation in Restorative Justice Programs

The results of this literature review reveal wide variation among the school-based restorative justice programs that are being implemented across the United States. Across the 25 articles reviewed, schools reported wide variety in the types of restorative practices utilized, disparities in resources allocated to restorative justice programming, discrepancies in teacher and administrator buy-in, a range of approaches to addressing racial bias (or not), as well as contextual differences like school size, region, and demographics. Some variety in school-based restorative justice initiatives is to be expected, and not all variation is necessarily problematic (Katic et al., 2020, p. 12). In fact, a core strength of restorative justice is that it is adaptable; restorative practices are built to respond to dynamic circumstances in order to meet unique individual and community needs (Morgan, 2021, p. 6). That said, the findings also reveal how this lack of standardization across United States schools—in both implementation and evaluation of restorative justice programs—can lead to inconsistent outcomes. The remainder of the findings section distinguishes between examples of school-based restorative justice that had positive outcomes, those that had reverse results, and those that demonstrated only partial effectiveness.

Where Restorative Justice Had Positive Outcomes

The overwhelming majority of articles came to the conclusion that despite high degrees of variability in implementation and a shortage of evaluative studies, preliminary evidence suggests that school-based restorative justice programs have positive effects on a range of metrics:

- **Fronius et al., 2016** conducted an extensive literature review of restorative justice in U.S. schools, guided by questions about the empirical impact of school-based restorative justice. Their research suggested that restorative justice "may have positive effects across several outcomes related to discipline, attendance and graduation, climate and culture, and various academic outcomes" (Fronius et al, 2016, p. 18).
- **Katic et al., 2020** conducted a systematic literature review to assess the following questions about the evaluation of school-based restorative justice: (1) What are the specific restorative justice practices used? (2) What were the outcomes of the restorative practice(s) and how were they measured? Again, the majority of studies reported positive outcomes, including improved social relationships with peers and teachers, as well as reductions in office discipline referrals (Katic et al, 2020, p. 13).

In addition, several original studies of individual school-based restorative justice initiatives demonstrated positive outcomes:

- **Schumacher, 2014** studied the implementation of a two-year talking circle program in an urban high school. 60 adolescent girls were recruited to participate in 12 weekly talking circles, during which they met in circles to build friendships, develop emotional literacy skills, and resolve conflict. A combination of observations and semi-structured interviews with the participating students led Schumacher to conclude that the talking circle program provided a safe space for girls to address gender-specific issues, while improving their listening, anger management, and empathetic skills. They emphasized, however, that talking circles should be just one component of a larger whole-school restorative justice program.
- **Mansfield et al., 2018** studied the five-year impact of restorative practices on discipline gaps and recidivism at Algonquin High School (AHS), a large suburban high school in Central Virginia that serves a diverse student body. Guided by trainings from the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) and bolstered by administrative support, AHS was able to gradually scale up its restorative practices to a school-wide program that included both preventative elements (proactive circles, restorative staff community, etc.) and responsive elements (restorative questions, responsive circles, restorative conferences, etc.). Mansfield et al. evaluated discipline data and interviewed school administrators, finding that discipline gaps across race/ethnicity, gender, and special education status all shrunk over those five years of restorative justice implementation.
- **Patrick et al., 2020**, in collaboration with The Education Trust and National Women's Law Center, produced a report aimed at improving learning environments for girls of color. In the report, they cite Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) as a "featured model for change." With support from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, OUSD has implemented several discipline reforms, including banning suspensions for dress code violations and "willful defiance" (a category of subjective offenses for which Black girls are disproportionately suspended); increasing school discipline data collection and distribution; and maintaining a restorative justice program supported by central office staff, school counselors, and dedicated restorative justice facilitators. From 2012 to 2018, out-of-school suspension rates decreased from 12% to 6% for middle school girls and 8% to 5% for high school girls in OUSD, and racial discipline gaps diminished.

Where Restorative Justice Had Negative Results

Despite the abundance of support for restorative justice, however, the literature search also returned several studies of school-based restorative justice programs that had unintended negative outcomes:

- **Wilson, 2018** collected quantitative discipline data and conducted an ethnographic analysis of Rivertown, a school district with urban characteristics in upstate New York. Wilson found that racially disproportionate discipline (including increased discipline of Black students) persisted even when controlling for 'economic disadvantage' and after the implementation of a restorative justice pilot. Parents of color described a culture of colorblindness and white fragility in Rivertown that silenced conversations about the racism embedded in existing zero-tolerance policies, thereby preventing restorative justice initiatives from explicitly addressing racial bias and discrimination.
- **Cama, 2019** collected field notes and conducted interviews in a Colorado high school during the beginning stages of its restorative justice program. In a dissertation titled "Restorative Injustice," Cama describes how the school implemented restorative practices in a procedural and technical manner that retained the punitive foundations of prior discipline policies. Instead of focusing on building a school-wide culture based on the philosophical tenets of restorative justice, the restorative practices were utilized as a disciplinary tool to continue policing bad behavior. This study highlights the risks of isolated and variable implementation of restorative practices, as well as the reality that transforming school culture often requires more time than just one year of restorative practice implementation.

Where Restorative Justice Partially Worked

In many cases, school-based restorative justice programs demonstrated only partial effectiveness: improving outcomes in some categories, while exacerbating disparities in others:

- **Skrzypek et al., 2020** used a mixed-methods approach to explore the restorative circle experiences of urban, low-income, predominantly Black middle school students. The researchers intentionally solicited the voices of students with attention to the diversity of their experiences by grade level, race, and gender. The qualitative findings overall highlighted the benefits of restorative circles in promoting communication, expressing thoughts and feelings, perspective taking, and opportunity for learning. However, Black girls were significantly less likely to endorse the effectiveness of restorative circles to help them solve problems.

- **Davison et al., 2021** examined trends in student discipline as restorative justice programs matured in Meadowview Public Schools. They found that students in "RJ Schools" (schools that employed a restorative justice coordinator, received funding for restorative justice implementation, and made changes to student discipline policies) experienced a profound decline in suspension rates over the first five years of program implementation. However, these RJ Schools frequently implemented restorative justice programs not in replacement of, but in conjunction with, traditional discipline policies—thereby introducing an additional level of discretion as teachers and administrators determined where, when, and *with which students* to either utilize restorative justice or impose more traditional punishments. Thus, despite an overall decline in suspensions, disciplinary outcomes for Black students remained unchanged, meaning that pre-existing racial discipline gaps were only exacerbated following restorative justice implementation.

The examples described above are just a representative sample of the 25 articles selected for this literature review. Together, they paint a picture of the current landscape of school-based restorative justice in the United States. While preliminary evidence supports restorative justice as an effective approach to reducing discipline gaps and building strong school communities, these findings also highlight the need for additional research and bolstered investment to ensure that school-based restorative justice programs meet these goals.

Discussion: Barriers to Effective Implementation

At its core, restorative justice holds great promise for addressing racial and gender-based discipline disparities, disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline, cultivating inclusive learning environments, and transforming schools from sites of punishment to communities of care. However, there were themes across the literature of common obstacles that are preventing schools from achieving a truly anti-racist and school-wide restorative justice culture. Further analysis of these barriers to effective implementation is necessary to ensure that school-based restorative justice stays true to restorative values and works towards—not against—its intended goals of equity and social justice.

Identity-Blind Restorative Justice

One of the most common themes across the literature was the observation that although restorative justice is typically introduced into schools with racial equity as a motivating factor, restorative practices are often integrated into existing discipline systems using language that is race-neutral or "colorblind" (Davison et al., 2021, p. 688). This trend provides a compelling explanation for why racial disproportionality often persists, even in schools that utilize positive school discipline approaches like restorative justice (Lustick, 2016, p. 693). The history of zero-tolerance discipline policies in America is deeply intertwined with anti-Blackness, over-policing, and mass incarceration; thus, the implementation of school-based restorative justice without explicit consideration of these systems of oppression can actually reproduce inequality, even in the most well-intentioned of school districts (Morgan, 2021, p. 7). At the interpersonal level, colorblind (or, more broadly, identity-blind) approaches to restorative justice leave educators and restorative justice facilitators poorly equipped to target the specific needs of the populations that they are intending to serve (Davison et al., 2021, p. 706).

These identity-blind approaches to restorative justice pose an especially great risk to girls of color, especially Black girls—as this group is already systematically excluded from most conversations about the school-to-prison pipeline. Scholars Angela Clark-Louque and Talisa Sullivan (2020, p. 4) have described the institutionalized inequities faced by Black girls in school as a combination of invisibility, intersectionality, and stereotyping. In the context of school discipline, the lack of intentional focus on meeting the unique needs of Black girls leaves educators poorly equipped to address the implicit biases that they hold about this "invisible" group of students. Black girls experience specific stereotypes at the intersection of their identities, independent of both their Black male and white female peers. For example, stereotypes about Black feminine expression as

hypersexual, sassy, conniving, and loud directly translate into disparate disciplinary outcomes; Mendez and Knoff (2003, p. 30) reported that out of the 15 most common infractions for which students are suspended, Black girls are more likely to be referred for subjective offenses such as defiance, disruptive behavior, disrespect, profanity, and fighting. Black girls, even those as young as toddlers, are perceived as less innocent than their white peers of the same age—this phenomenon, termed "adultification," frequently results in harsher consequences for similar classroom behaviors (Clark-Louque & Sullivan, 2020, p. 7).

Identity-blind approaches are antithetical to the core values of restorative justice, which seek to uplift the voices of those involved in a conflict and meet the unique needs of individuals and communities. However, many school-based restorative justice programs in the United States are co-opting those values and implementing "restorative justice" as a set of broadly applicable practices, without regard for participants' race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, class, and other important facets of identity.

Procedural vs. School-Wide Restorative Justice

There is growing evidence that school-based restorative justice is most effective when it is embedded within the school-wide culture (Martinez et al., 2022, p. 2). As such, many school-based restorative justice programs are experiencing pitfalls as they instead apply restorative practices in a manner that is top-down, narrow, and/or reactive. Top-down approaches describe restorative justice initiatives that are mandated by administrators with the hope of producing quick change, without developing them collaboratively with students and staff or providing the necessary funding, training, and support (Morgan, 2021, p. 7). Similarly, narrow approaches to restorative justice prevent school-wide culture change by relying on a single restorative practice that is executed procedurally or technically, retaining the punitive framework of existing discipline systems (Cama, 2019, p. 86). Another common barrier to effective restorative justice implementation occurs when schools limit their restorative practices to reactive, incident-driven approaches (Martinez et al., 2022, p. 2). A school-wide approach to restorative justice, meanwhile, works proactively, incorporating restorative practices into all aspects of the school's culture: student orientation, teacher mentoring, observations, curriculum, and daily interactions both within and between students and staff (Cama, 2019, p. 98). By proactively utilizing restorative practices to build relationships and trust, a school-wide approach establishes a strong community foundation in which restorative justice is already a familiar process for responding when more serious harm does

occur (Katic et al., 2020, p. 2). This trust-building is especially important for Black girls and other girls of color—those for whom oppressive discipline systems have heretofore worked to erode trust.

It is also important to emphasize that achieving this transformative vision for school-based restorative justice—a future in which restorative justice is not just added on top of existing punitive discipline systems, but instead embedded as a school-wide framework for approaching relationships and community care—takes time and active commitment. Experts suggest that transformative change can take up to five years, yet another barrier reported across the literature was that restorative justice initiatives were sometimes cut short if they did not provide immediate returns (Martinez et al., 2022, p. 2). School districts will likely need to dedicate more time, energy, and resources into restorative justice in order to see reductions in discipline gaps and other positive outcomes; reverting back to the punitive systems that are currently excluding so many North Carolina students from the classroom is not the answer.

Teacher and Administrator Buy-In

Another commonly reported determinant of restorative justice effectiveness was teacher and administrator buy-in. Because restorative justice is so philosophically different from traditional systems of exclusionary discipline, effective implementation requires staff buy-in, time, training, and additional resources that may not be necessary under the status quo policies (Fronius et al., 2016, p. 26). Public educators in the United States are already severely underpaid and overburdened. For many, the thought of engaging in additional trainings and shouldering the logistical and emotional burden of coordinating restorative justice efforts discourages buy-in (Sandwick et al., 2019, p. 21). For others, deeply held beliefs about the traditional authority of educators, behavioral standards, and professional identity may dissuade teachers from engaging in the necessarily egalitarian and vulnerable work of restorative justice (Martinez et al., 2022, p. 22).

Even in circumstances where teachers demonstrated commitment to restorative justice principles and practices, a lack of administrator support could still prevent initiatives from reaching their transformative potential. For this reason, strong vision and commitment on the part of the school district and administration was frequently reported as a requisite for effective restorative justice implementation (Cama, 2019, p. 26). Administrator buy-in requires support in both words and deeds; in addition to providing critical emotional support, administrators must make both temporal and physical space for restorative justice. Making space might look like holding weekly staff meetings for restorative justice preparation and processes; providing regular internal and external professional development; building student restorative justice leadership into classes and

clubs; designating physical space for restorative conversations, circles, and conferences; and more (Sandwick et al., 2019, p. 21). Without this institutional support and buy-in across the school community, restorative justice initiatives are likely to achieve only partial effectiveness, if not fizzle out entirely.

Lack of Funding

Finally, another common barrier that was reported to prevent effective restorative justice implementation, even when teachers and administrators demonstrated buy-in, was that schools simply lacked the funding to support teacher training resources, facilitation materials, and the salaries of fully dedicated restorative justice coordinators. Studies have shown a correlation between school funding and the likelihood of implementing restorative practices, with under-resourced initiatives often leading to minimal buy-in, inconsistent practices, and teacher frustration and burnout (Gregory & Evans, 2020, p. 12). In North Carolina, the compounding of racist redlining policies, gentrification, and the property tax model for school funding means that Black students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools; and a 2013 study found that schools with proportionally more Black students are less likely to use restorative justice techniques when responding to student behavior (Payne & Welch, 2013, p. 539). While funding for restorative justice remains low in many districts, North Carolina nearly doubled the number of matching funds available to hire school resource officers (SROs) in its most recent budget, increasing from $18 million to $33 million (Morrison, 2022). SROs typically have limited training in child and adolescent development and mental health, safe restraint techniques, recognizing signs of trauma, working effectively with students with disabilities, and a range of other skills that would prepare them for the situations that they are likely to encounter in schools (Action for Children North Carolina, 2013, p. 8). That North Carolina is currently dedicating so many funds to putting police officers in schools and upholding the punitive nature of school environments is concerning, when instead those funds could be redistributed to support restorative justice coordinators, mental health services, social workers, and other professionals who are better equipped to cultivate safe learning environments.

Study Limitations

This study had a few limitations that are important to note. First, this was not a systematic literature review, as the database searches were conducted by just one person on two separate dates. In addition, this research is not a mixed-methods study, as it lacks its own primary collection of quantitative data. Finally, while the goal of this research was to improve school-based restorative

justice programs in North Carolina, the literature review did not return any studies that took place in North Carolina schools; thus, it is important to account for differences in district demographics, state discipline policies, and other regional variation when evaluating the findings. Despite these limitations, the major themes, outcomes, and barriers of the literature review can still apply in the North Carolina context and provide important direction as policymakers, activists, and educators seek to implement and improve restorative justice in North Carolina schools.

Conclusion: Recommendations

In her 2016 book, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, author-activist Monique Morris writes, "Imperfect implementation should not lead to an abandonment of the idea. We've been doing prisons for over four-hundred-something years, and they clearly don't work. So, let's try restorative justice for about one hundred [years]." It is clear from this literature review that the implementation of restorative justice in U.S. schools has, thus far, been imperfect. The discussion raised several common barriers to effective implementation that have prevented some school-based restorative justice initiatives from having the intended transformative impacts. Nevertheless, many school-based restorative justice initiatives across the country have had positive outcomes—reducing rates of exclusionary punishment, alleviating racial and gender-based discipline gaps, improving academic opportunities, growing empathetic dialogue skills, and transforming schools into relationship-driven communities of care. Thus, with the aforementioned barriers in mind, the following policy recommendations are endorsed:

1. **Anti-Racism and Anti-Bias Trainings:** Schools may more explicitly address racial justice and other intersectional systems of oppression by integrating anti-racism and anti-bias workshops into restorative justice trainings. In addition, restorative practices can be used throughout the school year to both affirm student identities and provide space for students to discuss personal experiences of microaggressions, discrimination, and trauma. These practices might include consultation with faculty/staff and restorative conferences aimed at uplifting marginalized voices. Hiring and retention of culturally representative staff can also help build reliability and trust in the restorative justice process.

2. **Community-Building Circles:** All students, staff, and administrators should participate in community-building circles as a proactive means of cultivating strong relationships and building buy-in for the restorative process. Community-building circles should be utilized throughout the year to continue building restorative relationships and increasing familiarity with the listening, vulnerability, and sharing required to engage fully in restorative processes.

3. **Restorative Justice Grant Funding:** While adequate funding for school-based restorative justice can seem hard to come by, North Carolina does offer several grant programs and funding opportunities that could be utilized to support restorative justice initiatives. In

Durham County, Educator Professional Learning Grants of up to $10,000 for a school can be used for training costs, substitute teacher costs to cover time gone, materials for the new professional learning community, and costs for materials to support a whole-school training. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has also established a School Safety Grant program. Although it has typically been used to fund school resource officers (SROs), local and state-wide activists can advocate for those funds to be redirected towards restorative justice, as well as other mental health, counseling, and social work services. The NEA Foundation is a national nonprofit that provides learning and leadership grants to educators across the country.

4. **Data Collection and Program Evaluation:** Finally, it is recommended that schools update their data collection methods to ensure thorough documentation of restorative practices and their outcomes, at least annually. In addition to recording typical discipline statistics (types of student misconduct and conflict; detention, suspension, and expulsion rates; academic achievement; law enforcement referrals; etc.), evaluations of restorative justice should also include school safety and climate surveys that focus on the trust, relationship-building, and behavioral accountability aspects of restorative justice. It is also essential that data be disaggregated by race, gender, disability status, and other important identifiers to evaluate discipline gaps and intersectional experiences of restorative justice.

By continuing to evaluate and address the most common barriers to effective restorative justice implementation, North Carolina schools can work towards restorative practices that are anti-racist, school-wide, supported by teachers and administrators, and well-funded. North Carolina students deserve to stay in the classroom, in a learning environment that is safe, inclusive, equitable, and just. Restorative justice can help make that future a reality for all North Carolina students.

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