

**The Impact of Restorative Practices on Adolescent Students' Behavior and Learning in
Schools**

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Introduction

The topic of this literature review is the impact of restorative practices in school classrooms. As schools continue to combat the impact of punitive punishments and zero-tolerance policies, many schools are turning towards restorative approaches as alternatives. The purpose of this literature review is to evaluate the successes and challenges of R.P. on students, teachers, and the overall classroom community, while acknowledging the barriers that prevent their full and equitable implementation. In an era where the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately affects students of color and adolescents with emotional needs that are overlooked. It is essential for educators to teach their students emotional control and stability. Ultimately, this literature review will argue that restorative practices are a constructive framework for school discipline, but they must be used with awareness, intention, and systematic support in order to create lasting and meaningful change.

Statement of the Problem

Discipline in schools depends on a variety of factors and stakeholders. For older students especially, punitive no-tolerance policies remain common; across all grade levels, suspension and exclusion are still widely practiced. Such policies are controversial in their effects and have been noted to “threaten the opportunity to learn for too many students” (Archibold, 2014, p. 58). These disciplinary approaches fail to account for the developmental needs of young adolescents, who, according to Caskey (2014), require emotionally safe environments, positive adult relationships, and opportunities for peer interaction.

Such discipline practices also highly impact students of color. “Three years of school records of 6th, 8th, and 10th graders in a mid-Atlantic region, reviewed for discipline gaps, discovered that 26% of Black students vs. 2% of White students received at least one suspension for a minor infraction” (Glover, 2025, p. 53). These disparities reflect systemic inequalities embedded in school culture that extend further than simple disciplinary decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic further affected these challenges, which were not felt equally. Velez (2021) argues that “already marginalized communities experienced greater exposure to the virus alongside steeper financial consequences” (p. 11). The return to in-person schooling has left many students in need of rebuilding relationships, community, and a renewed sense of belonging.

The gap between adolescent developmental needs and current disciplinary practices is wide, as students in this stage need to address their “physical, intellectual, emotional/physiological, moral/ethical, spiritual, and developmental characteristics” (Caskey, 2014, p. 9). As students continue to carry the weight of systemic inequity, developmental needs, and post-pandemic life, this review examines whether restorative practices offer a meaningful alternative to address student behavioral, relational, and academic needs in school settings.

Impact on Students

Multiple studies suggest that restorative practices can create a reduction in suspensions and disciplinary referrals in school settings. Scholars have long connected punitive discipline policies to what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline, arguing that zero-tolerance policies mirror a prison-like atmosphere rather than a supportive learning environment. Rather than addressing the root cause of student behavior, zero-tolerance policies remove students from their

school environment entirely, as such punishment affects “those who are already negatively affected by poverty, racism, academic failure, and other realities” (Casella, 2003, p. 879). Zero-tolerance policies do not address a problem for students; rather, they deal with the situation by putting it to the side, failing to create any change.

Restorative practices offer a different path. Through community circles and structured conversations, students are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions and learn awareness to understand the impact of their behavior on others (Kehoe, 2018). This process supports students’ moral development and self-reflection in ways that punitive means don’t. Martin (2015) reflected on how a simple series of five questions in restorative protocol used in classroom settings to guide students to consider what happened, who was affected, who they take responsibility for, and what they could have done differently and made things right was extremely beneficial.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an additional layer of problems to address these student needs. This experience has “led to feelings of isolation, challenges to social identities, and disappointment at missed experiences” (Velez, 2021, p. 11), leaving many students disconnected from school communities they depend on for social and emotional growth. Cullen (2025) further found that students returning to school post-pandemic demonstrated greater difficulty with moral decision-making, suggesting a pressing need for school-based interventions that rebuild community and restore trust. Restorative practices, with their emphasis on human connection and shared accountability, are well suited to address these emerging needs for youth.

Impact on Teachers and Teacher-Student Relationships

Scholars have pointed out that restorative practices do not only benefit students but also improve teacher-student relationships. Using student surveys, Gregory et al. (2016) discovered that teachers who used restorative practices had more positive relationships with their students, with higher student and teacher cooperation and a student view of their teachers as respectful. Accounting for race/ethnicity consideration combined with restorative practices, teacher respect also went significantly higher. From an educator's perspective, the use of restorative practices created a shift from fear-based compliance to an empathy-centered practice giving students the skills for future adult conflict resolution (Martin, 2015). They provide a framework for educators to build meaningful relationships within their classroom (Glover & Clarke-Glover, 2025). Teachers themselves can find personal benefits in community circles, discovering common bonds, expressing emotions, and forming deeper connections with their coworkers (Silverman & Mee, 2009).

However, the perception of restorative practices is not uniform across all school staff. Administrator and teacher perceptions differ significantly, as teachers perceive the addition of these practices to be more work while most administrators view them as less resource-intensive (Carter, 2025). This disconnect is important to acknowledge, as successful implementation of restorative practices requires the full investment and work of both teachers and administrators, and a shared understanding of the commitment these practices demand (Archibold, 2014).

Racial Equity and Restorative Practices

As mentioned previously, racial disparity in discipline is a common theme in the education system, magnified by zero-tolerance and punitive policies. The disproportionality of discipline given to students of color extends to criminal summons that can affect them later in

life (Glover & Clarke-Glover, 2025). This extends to office discipline referrals (ODR); a study conducted by Welsh and Little (2018) found “across 45 elementary schools in one Virginia county and found that Black students were 2.27 times more likely to receive an ODR than other racial groups when controlling for behavior.”

The use of restorative practices doesn’t automatically eliminate this disparity; instead, it merely reduces it. Lustick (2021) found that while restorative interventions reduced overall suspension rates for all students, the gap between Black and White students narrowed only partially, leaving Black students still at a higher likelihood of suspension. This raises important questions about how administrators classify student behavior and whether bias continues to shape their decisions even within restorative frameworks (Gregory et al., 2018).

Lustick (2021) further discovered that restorative practices can either challenge or reinforce traditional sequestration and surveillance on students that have been historically marginalized. The study found that schools consistently hired young non-white staff to serve as restorative coordinators while the white faculty depended on them to help students of color. While the coordinators hired had the skills to help students understand oppression and resist it, their actual role was to meet the status quo, forcing them to only work on their individual relationships with students instead of the entirety of restorative practices. One principal referred to their coordinator as the “paid older siblings” to compensate for white teachers’ inability to connect with culturally diverse students (Lustick 2021).

These findings make it clear that restorative practices alone are not sufficient to address racial inequity in school discipline. For restorative practices to serve all students, educators must undergo training that addresses racial dynamics, implicit bias, and culturally responsive teaching

instead of remaining race-neutral (Archibold, 2014). The goal of restorative practices is to create safe and connected school environments for every student, and to achieve that, current power structures in education need to be looked at.

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation

Restorative practices begin with work among teachers and their classrooms, but require a school-wide commitment and administrative leadership to truly thrive. Research consistently finds that “administrators must prioritize comprehensive and ongoing training for teachers, staff, and fellow administrators” (Carter, 2025, p. 21). Without this top-down support, individual teachers attempting to implement restorative practices in isolation are unlikely to see meaningful results, as the community aspect of RP becomes difficult to sustain without a shared school culture supporting it (Archibold, 2014).

Funding and resources are present as a significant barrier for many schools. With already tight budgets and existing discipline policies that appear to be functioning, administrators may be reluctant to invest in a new approach that requires substantial time and financial commitment (Carter, 2025). Long-term professional training is one of the most constituent requirements for successful implementation. Restorative justice can be complex, and multiple studies have found that teachers need to experience restorative practices themselves to develop a deep understanding of what they will be facilitating with students. One solution proposed by a scholar is to have a “RJ practitioner in the faculty who is well-positioned to champion, design, and teach an experiential course” (Hollowek et al., 2019, p. 18), to help teachers and staff stay on the same page of the school-wide practices. As Martin (2015) reinforces, “Strength comes from the

consistency of school-wide implementation” (p. 17), suggesting that isolated or inconsistent effort falls short of the promise of RP.

Additional challenges emerge around measuring the full scope of RP’s impact. Despite its connection to student behavior, research has struggled to identify the effect on students’ mental health outcomes (Velez, 2021, p. 11). The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have further complicated this idea, introducing new student needs that existing restorative frames were not originally designed to address. These gaps in the research do not diminish the promise of restorative practices, but they do highlight the need for continued study and implementation support to meet students where they are today.

Conclusion and Implications

Current literature surrounding restorative practices remains overall positive, though tentative in its conclusions. Research consistently supports that restorative practices positively impact student behavior, relationships, and social-emotional development when implemented properly and with school-wide support. The evidence further suggests that restorative approaches offer a meaningful alternative to zero-tolerance policies that have failed students, particularly those from marginalized communities.

The implications for practice are significant. Administrators, teachers, and school counselors each play an integral role in the success of restorative practices, and meaningful implementation requires all to be involved. Training must be culturally responsive, aware, and ever-evolving to meet the needs of all students. The social-emotional benefits of RP also align

closely with the developmental needs of adolescents, suggesting that these practices are not only a discipline alternative but a developmentally appropriate framework to build a child's character.

However, significant gaps remain in existing literature. Research on the impact of restorative practices, specifically in elementary school settings, is limited, with insufficient long-term outcome data. These make it difficult to assess the substantiated effects of RP on student development over time. Additionally, there is a lack of standardized implementation metrics across schools, which makes it challenging to compare findings. The roles of family and community involvement in school-based restorative practices also remain unexplored, leaving a possible missing piece for implementation.

These gaps directly support the need for my research. By examining restorative practices at the elementary level and exploring the perceptions of both teachers and administrators, this study aims to contribute to an area of the literature that remains underdeveloped. The evidence reviewed here establishes a strong foundation for understanding both the promise and the complexity of restorative practices, and the importance of these practices for benefiting youth.

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