

Reflective Essay

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For this project, my research process was shaped by discovery, revision, and narrowing rather than by a fixed plan from the start. I did not begin with a fixed argument and then search for sources to support it. Instead, the project developed as I searched, read, narrowed terms, and realized what the available scholarship could and could not answer. My original topic focused on transformative and restorative justice approaches in schools, specifically how lived experience from formerly incarcerated advocates shapes these debates. That initial topic reflected my interests, but it was too broad and ultimately too difficult to support with the available scholarship. I realized that clearly when I could not find a single source directly addressing that exact question. The final paper grew out of that problem. Rather than forcing the original idea, I allowed the research process to redirect me toward a more answerable and more analytically useful question.

A major part of that shift came from learning how to search more deliberately through UC Davis Library resources. During class, librarian Sheena Campbell introduced strategies for information searching, including identifying the vocabulary scholars use, selecting the appropriate subject database, and thinking about the kinds of data a project requires. She also came over to me directly and gave me a specific link to EBSCOhost Education Source, which became one of my most useful databases for this project. That mattered because once I moved into a more education-centered and K–12-specific research process, I needed a database that would help me locate scholarship on school discipline, restorative practices, educational outcomes, and related structural concerns rather than more general results. Her session also emphasized using background knowledge to develop search language and using database strategies to move from a broad topic to a more focused and workable question.

My earliest search terms reflected the breadth of my original topic. I searched combinations of terms such as “transformative justice,” “restorative justice,” “formerly incarcerated,” “incarcerated,” “impacts of the carceral system,” “justice impacted,” “educating the

justice impacted,” and “educating incarcerated children.” Those searches helped me see the limits of my initial framing. Many results were off target for the project I actually wanted to write. Some focused on adults educated while incarcerated. Others focused on educating children in a much more general way without a strong connection to school discipline, K–12 settings, or the institutional logics I was trying to understand. The problem was not that the scholarship was unimportant. It was that it was not answering the question I was asking. That forced me to refine both the language and the scope of the project.

As the project evolved, my question became more grounded in what the scholarship could actually support. I became less interested in a broad question about lived experience shaping debates and more interested in how carceral logics operate within school discipline systems, how restorative and transformative justice are understood in relation to those systems, and why intended outcomes so often remain partial or uneven. That process eventually led to the final guiding question of the paper: “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?” In other words, the library research process did not simply help me locate evidence for a question I already had. It helped me discover the sharper question the project was actually capable of answering.

The scope of information I needed shaped the tools and strategies I used. I was not looking for general material on justice reform or incarceration. I needed scholarship that was explicitly concerned with K–12 schooling, carceral or ant carceral concerns, and outcomes. I needed sources that could help me think about how carceral logics affect school discipline and whether restorative or transformative approaches genuinely disrupt those logics. The thematic concerns that became central in the final paper, especially race, disability, belonging, and educational access, were not preselected in advance. They emerged through reading and connecting the research I found. In the same way, the balance between empirical and conceptual sources was not fixed from the start. It developed naturally as I discovered that I

needed both: empirical studies to show what happened in practice, and conceptual or qualitative work to help explain why outcomes remained uneven.

I searched across UC Davis Library databases, especially EBSCOhost Education Source, PsycINFO, and ERIC, and I also used Elicit. I was somewhat surprised by how useful Elicit was. It surfaced several empirical studies that became central to the paper, including Augustine et al. (2018), Huang et al. (2023), Davison et al. (2022). Elmesky and Marcucci (2024) was found in EBSCOhost Education Source and also identified by Elicit. Elicit was especially helpful in surfacing empirical work efficiently, and one aspect I found useful was that I could filter results using categories such as limitations and strengths. That gave me another way to assess relevance as I sorted through sources. The strongest process turned out to be a mixed one: the library databases gave me control, disciplinary relevance, and credibility, while Elicit helped me identify useful studies I might not have found as quickly on my own.

A surprisingly efficient part of my search process was title screening. I made early decisions by paying close attention to titles, and in practice that turned out to be very effective for me. Titles that explicitly named restorative justice, school discipline, ant carceral or carceral concerns, educational access, or outcomes immediately signaled possible relevance. Those were the titles that pulled me in. By contrast, if a title pointed toward adult prison education, incarceration in a broader sense without a clear school connection, or education too generally, I moved on. Once a title seemed promising, I read the abstract and then the full text. In my case, every source whose title led me to read further ended up being used in the project in some meaningful way. That taught me that even an intuitive first step can still reflect a strong research judgment when it is grounded in the actual needs of the project.

The most difficult parts of the process were narrowing the question, finding the right language, and deciding what to cut. Narrowing the question was difficult because the original topic was not only broad but also, in a practical sense, too new for the literature I was finding. I could not locate scholarship that directly addressed the exact question I initially wanted to

pursue. Finding the right language was also challenging. Terms like “restorative justice” brought back many different kinds of results, not all of them useful for my project. I had to decide what to center and how to frame the project in a way that was broad enough to capture relevant scholarship but specific enough to avoid drifting into unrelated work. I eventually decided that anything that examined, resisted, or countered carceral logics in schools was potentially relevant, which helped me build a more coherent body of sources. Deciding what to cut was more personal. In earlier drafting, I included more of myself, but that did not belong in the review itself. What belonged was my positionality and acknowledgment of possible bias, not extended personal narrative. That was difficult for me, because I care deeply about the subject, but it was an important rhetorical decision.

I evaluated sources in a layered way. First, I screened titles. Then I read abstracts. Then I moved into full texts. The seven central sources that shaped the paper were all entered into a research matrix, which helped me compare them, identify methodological diversity, and notice recurring themes across them. That matrix was important because it helped me see connections that were not obvious at first. The themes of race and racism, disability and educational access, and relationships, belonging, and school climate emerged through that comparative process rather than being imposed in advance. I selected those seven sources not only because they were relevant, but because together they gave me empirical, qualitative, and theoretical ways to answer the final research question.

Peer review also helped sharpen the project, though not by changing its structure or tone. The main feedback I received was that my methods needed more detail, that the distinction between restorative and transformative justice needed to be clearer, and that I needed to define carceral logics more fully. That feedback was useful because it pushed me to make the logic of the project more explicit for readers. It did not change the overall shape of the paper, but it strengthened the clarity of my methods and key concepts. In that way, revision was

not about reimagining the project so much as making its research process and analytical terms more visible and precise.

My lived experience directly shaped the lens I brought to this topic. As a formerly incarcerated person who encountered the school-to-prison pipeline at a young age and later navigated probation supervision during high school, I came to this project with firsthand awareness that punitive systems in schools are real and consequential. At the same time, I did not want to write a paper that exaggerated the issue or reduced it to a simplistic claim that children are essentially going to jail. My goal was to shed light on a real pattern I had firsthand experience with and to let the scholarship make that pattern visible. I wanted the paper to say, in effect, that this is real, it is happening, and something has to change. That meant using the literature carefully, allowing it to show complexity, and resisting the urge to center myself beyond the positionality relevant to the project.

My final paper uses existing scholarship to create something new through synthesis. Rather than presenting the sources one by one, I organized the review thematically in order to show how different forms of scholarship converged on a shared problem. Across the literature, restorative reform often showed promise, but that promise remained uneven, especially when deeper racialized and ableist structures were left intact. The most important insight I gained through the research process was that the real issue was not simply whether restorative justice works. It was whether schools were engaging in procedural reform or something closer to structural transformation. That distinction became the paper's central contribution. The project, then, is not original because it invents a new theory or produces a new dataset, but because it draws together diverse scholarship to clarify a pattern that becomes visible only through careful comparison and refinement of the research question itself.

Overall, this project taught me that information research is not merely the act of locating articles. It is a process of developing a question, refining language, choosing tools strategically, evaluating evidence carefully, and allowing the available scholarship to reshape your thinking.

For me, the most important lesson was that the research question became stronger because of the search process, not before it. The library research process did not simply help me find support for an idea I already had. It helped me discover what the real question was.

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. No generative AI was used to create content. The author assumes full responsibility for this work.