

Independent Thinking on

# Restorative Practice

The blueprint for belonging in schools

**Mark Finnis**

*Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* is a tour de force in restorative working. Practical, authentic and intelligent, this book is crucial for anyone serious about a relational approach to teaching.

Mark Finnis is quite simply the don of restorative practice.

**PAUL DIX, BEHAVIOUR SPECIALIST,  
WHENTHEADULTSCHANG.COM**

I adore the fact that one of the first things Mark addresses in this book is the 'L word' – love – and that in our school communities we need to 'spread it thick, like my mum spreads butter'.

He uses strong evidence to show that when schools use restorative practice effectively, both attendance and attainment improve. This is no woolly idea, and he provides a cohesive strategy for changing schools towards becoming relational. A happy, well respected child is a child who can learn and engage.

In these times of isolating pupils, he shows us that the way to reduce negative behaviours and communication is inclusion over exclusion and problem-solving over punishment. However, he doesn't share a one-size-fits-all mentality here; instead he offers a plethora of fantastic ideas to build this change.

His writing is quite simply a groundbreaking dive into the importance of social capital, relationships, humanity and compassion – in fact all the things that we know bring out the best in a whole community.

*Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* is a compelling and articulate read, and by the end you are brimming with ideas and love.

**CHRIS DYSON, HEAD TEACHER,  
PARKLANDS PRIMARY SCHOOL**

For far too long the education world has needed a thorough, authentic and expert guide to restorative practice, written by someone who really knows their stuff – and here it is!

In *Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* Mark Finnis harnesses his years of experience to bring us the perfect balance of theory and practical advice. He is a true champion of relational practice and shows us how values and cultural development can lead to strong relationships and therefore positive behaviour, of both adults and children.

If you truly want to embrace relationships as the heartbeat of your school culture, then this book will show you how. This really is a book to change hearts and minds.

**DAVE WHITAKER, DIRECTOR OF LEARNING,  
WELLSPRING ACADEMY TRUST**

This must-read book is the perfect balance of the principles and theory underpinning restorative practice and relational leadership – and it is peppered beautifully with practical examples of how to make it happen. Mark's warmth, humour and non-judgemental manner is palpable throughout, and his writing serves up a 'chicken soup for the soul'.

We will definitely be buying *Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* for all our MAT's leaders.

**KATE DAVIES, CEO,  
WHITE WOODS PRIMARY ACADEMY TRUST**

Mark's common sense is remarkably uncommon. Detailing the 'why?', sharing the 'how?' and evidencing the impact, in *Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* he takes you through working restoratively in a way that leaves you wondering why you didn't do it sooner and why you didn't read the book quicker! Mark's personal style of high

challenge and high support echoes in dulcet Liverpudlian tones from every page of the book, provoking you to consider your leadership style, your values and what you really want to achieve.

**LUCIE LAKIN, PRINCIPAL, CARR MANOR  
COMMUNITY SCHOOL, EXECUTIVE HEAD  
TEACHER, WETHERBY HIGH SCHOOL**

Part personal, part theory, part practical application, *Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* is an eminently readable and always inspiring reminder of the power of working 'with'. Writing with passion, humour and enthusiasm, Mark has successfully managed to capture the essence of restorative practice he so expertly and inspiringly talks about at his training events. While the content is primarily focused through an education/school lens, the theory and practice described in the book is equally applicable across all disciplines.

If you are new to restorative practice, this book is a great place to start as a welcome and timely introduction to restorative practice from one of the UK's leading trainers. If you are someone who is more familiar with the subject, this is a really helpful 'go to' reminder that you can dip in and out of for inspiration.

**NIGEL RICHARDSON, CBE, FORMER DIRECTOR OF  
CHILDREN'S SERVICES, LEEDS CITY COUNCIL**

Restorative practice is not simply a way of doing; it's a way of being, and it takes practice! In *Independent Thinking on Restorative Practice* Mark sets out key principles and their application, as well as the opportunities and challenges around their use, in this accessible, easy-to-read book. Furthermore, this book is not just for teachers – because restorative practice is not just for schools. It works for children, young people and families in a wide variety of

contexts and settings, with young and old, with peers and colleagues, and in our work as leaders and managers.

In short, anyone interested in the power of human relationships to enable change to happen will find material in this book to help them.

**ANDY COULDRICK, CHIEF EXECUTIVE,  
BIRMINGHAM CHILDREN'S TRUST**

In this book Mark Finnis guides the reader through restorative practice with clarity, insight, real-life examples and clear direction. It is full of practical ideas and advice on how to build relationships and create a restorative ethos at whole-school and classroom level.

Mark's words inspire courage and a belief that small changes will have a huge impact. Restorative approaches are not just for resolving conflict, and this book suggests many ways in which it can be built into day-to-day interactions throughout a school. Restorative practice is not a 'soft' or easy option, and the structures suggested in this book guide the reader through its many functions and possibilities.

Mark describes the challenges and successes of restorative practice with honesty and gentle humour, sharing his rich experiences in these approaches. The value of strong relationships underpins every chapter, empowering educators to build trust and reciprocity across their school community.

For any teacher or school leader, this is the handbook you are looking for on restorative practice.

**JENNIFER M. KNUSSEN, HEAD TEACHER,  
PITTEUCHAR EAST PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Independent Thinking on

# Restorative Practice

**The blueprint for belonging in schools**

**Mark Finnis**



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# FOREWORD

In 2005 we had a significant piece of work ahead of us but also a great opportunity. The school, run-down and spread across two sites, was in recovery from a difficult period and, against the odds, had been thrown a lifeline. We were to have a brand new building.

We had many tremendous staff, plus a team of governors who were determined to renew the school and take the lifeline offered. However, there was a lack of capacity across the staff team and confidence from parents and the community was at an all-time low. The new Year 7 intake numbered 86 children. There were meant to be 235. There was clearly a lot to do.

With the old building up for demolition, we decided to destroy some of our old practices too. Only our best approaches made the move with us, to be joined by some new mission and vision statements, which – looking back – tell a story in themselves:

- Allow teachers to teach.
- Keep learning going.
- Know our children well.

This last one – the need every school must address if it is to take the whole community on its journey – became the mantra for our relationship-led approach to school improvement and provided the platform for our commitment to inclusion.

We quickly witnessed significant improvements built on clear organisational structures – ‘controlling the controllables’ – and through our tightening up of systems and processes with highly reliable operational procedures.

From the outset, we had a determination to be inclusive – ‘every child, every chance’ as we called it. What this meant in practice was that we promised that we would *never* permanently exclude a child from the school, while – at the same time – worked to reduce fixed-term exclusions. We also committed to improving progress for *all* pupils through an equity approach that went across every aspect of our curriculum.

Of course, how to remain inclusive and build a brand new culture with the limited resources available was always going to be a challenge. We introduced a range of strategies to build trust and loyalty across the school, working with staff and pupils in order to create capacity for inclusion. Some of these approaches worked and are still working over a decade and a half later. Some fell away once they had served their purpose. The coaching programme was introduced in 2006 and has since become the essential platform for our relationship-led community.

By 2010 we found ourselves in a position where we could revisit and adapt our mission and value statements. To ‘Know our children well’ we also added:

- Partners in learning.
- Character for learning.
- Enjoy and achieve.

However, what we didn’t have was a unified language to help make clear the expectations and the desired impact of this approach. That next leap came to me as a result of working in the Leeds Children’s Services team for a period in 2009/10, when I was able to collaborate with Nigel Richardson and colleagues, who were discussing and developing restorative approaches as part of a strategy to

change practice and move the directorate out of intervention.

On return to school I was determined to look at whether this approach could provide the structure to support the inclusive approach we had been nurturing for the previous five years. However, the school was used to a way of working that we felt was successful. I was concerned that adopting a restorative approach now would lead to too much change and a weakening of the grip the leaders had on the school. However, too many children were not making the progress they were capable of, we were excluding too many for fixed periods, had too many educated in alternative provision and we were still dependent on having an inclusion/isolation room.

I knew the next step was going to be critical.

To test whether the school was ready for a more restorative approach, I invited Mark Finnis and his team of trainers to introduce the staff to restorative practices, the theory behind it and some of its potential impacts. I was confident that the staff were already working with an inclusive and relationship-led mindset, but I was also aware that the shift to using restorative language and ways of working might be a stretch for us all. The day went well. Mark and his team pitched the training at just the right level for the staff and we never looked back.

One thing became clear right from the outset – a restorative approach is not just about how we resolve conflict when it arises but about how we think, how we make strategy, how the adults behave and what we expect from the children. It quickly became obvious that implementing a restorative approach to leadership and management was not a risk to what we had achieved but actually made us all the more effective, not only in terms of outcomes but also in building capacity and establishing

shared ownership and a sense of community across the school. A relational approach substantially supported the school's well-established mission, and values, and had immediate impact on the capacity of the school to move forward.

We set about creating a training programme for all staff – and *all* children – that is continuous and ongoing. We looked to develop and embed a school culture of relationship-led working using restorative practices. Simplicity of language is critical when it comes to helping the school community get, and stay, on board. For us, the three key restorative practices that we find work and are easy to adopt and understand are:

- Engage, explain, expect.
- Build, maintain, repair.
- High challenge and high support.

We embed these in *every* aspect of school – with governors, staff *and* students – and also in our work with parents, partners and other stakeholders.

We continued to work with Mark, Paul Carlile, Paul Moran and others to further develop restorative leadership, intent on making restorative approaches a 'way of being', rather than a set of policies and procedures to follow. We still keep it simple; we do not deviate from our chosen approach and we do not make excuses for non-restorative practice.

Our story is, of course, unique and the 'ducks lined up' for us in a particular way. However, as the leader of the school for 16 years – at the time of writing – I am very clear that the introduction of restorative practice and the spring-board of Mark Finnis' training has been the most important strategic decision we have ever made. The domino effect

## FOREWORD

on the way we work and the impact on outcomes has been remarkable. The school has grown into an all-through-school, with nearly 1,500 pupils, up from a roll of just 638. We have a waiting list for each year group and, most importantly, student outcomes and pathways are routinely secure. We have *never* permanently excluded a child. We have had fewer than eight children sent home for a fixed-term exclusion in each of the last four years. We don't have any children in alternative provision. And, I am delighted to say, we shuttered our inclusion/isolation room three years ago.

While our school may be unique, our story is simple, really. Make sure the leaders and staff are committed to going 'the long way round' when necessary. Make sure they are relentless in building and maintaining a culture that promotes the best outcomes for *all* children. Make sure they are all facing in the same direction day after day. Relationships lead to connection and connection leads to community. A community facing in the same direction is a powerful force for change and impact.

We are grateful to Mark for being there at the start of our restorative journey, for advising then and since and, most importantly, for encouraging us to keep developing our practice and understanding. Mark is a national advocate for relational and restorative practices in schools and across all organisations. His work has touched many professionals and impacted on their practice and thereby on the outcomes for so many children and adults. I can wholeheartedly recommend Mark's words of wisdom to you – they will in themselves provide high challenge and high support.

**SIMON FLOWERS**  
**EXECUTIVE PRINCIPAL**  
**CARR MANOR COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

In a school setting, when a student feels more connected to the adults, to their peers and to the school as a whole, they will feel happier and therefore be more productive. We could even think about the 'L word' in this instance. They might love being at school, they might love being with their teachers – or at least certain ones – they might love learning, they might love themselves. After all, it is said often enough that the quality of a student's learning can't exceed the quality of their teachers. But I suggest that neither the quality of the teaching nor of the learning can exceed the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the learner.

I'm sure that few teachers would disagree that the relationships they have with their students matter, but I know that many feel they don't have the time to invest in them thanks to the stresses of our results-focused system, our crowded classrooms and our overcrowded curriculum. What's more, relationships are both simple and hard in equal measure, so it's easy to direct our focus onto the more tangible areas of school life – such as results – and, in doing so, fall into the trap of forgetting that not everything we count counts, and that not everything that counts can be counted.

Do we hit the target but miss the point?

## WHAT IS THIS BOOK ABOUT?

This, then, is first and foremost a book about relationships.

The first tool to rethinking success is to review the value of relationships.

PAOLO GALLO<sup>1</sup>

A relationship-based school – a relational school, as the terminology goes – puts creating and strengthening the ties of human connection as its number one goal, something that is written through its policies and actions, like the word ‘Morecambe’ in a stick of rock.

This is a book about compassion.

Empathy can be described as compassion with imagination. Who would turn a blind eye to human suffering when it is right in front of us? What if we were to step outside of ourselves to imagine the suffering of others and then react? Most of the time, there is a reason for a behaviour. Maybe we are part of the problem and, once we understand that, it makes it a lot easier for us to be part of the solution. After all, crime and punishment is easy. Crime and compassion is a lot harder.

This is a book about behaviour.

Despite pressures to the contrary, a relational school does not intentionally shame children. It doesn't dole out punishments like rice at a vegetarian's wedding. It doesn't isolate children, because it remembers that their basic

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1 P. Gallo, *Why Positive Relationships at Work Matter More Than You Think*, *World Economic Forum* (16 March 2016). Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/03/why-positive-relationships-are-key-to-real-success-at-work/>.

need is to be connected. Perhaps the behaviour that provokes the punishment of isolation is a misjudged attempt to connect?

This is a book about behaviours.

What if schools were committed to adopting behaviours that promoted consistency in building and managing all relationships? What if they insisted on behaviours that articulated explicitly that creating and strengthening human relationships was the basis of their practice? Everyone involved would be required to challenge and support each other using relational practice as a point of reference. There would need to be agreed processes to follow which strengthen relationships and seek to repair harm when those relationships break down.

This is a book about change.

This book is about how we might adapt, change slightly or even change radically the system and the behaviours that operate within it, to better meet the needs of everyone involved. To say you believe in relationships is simply not enough. We have to be prepared to let go of certainty, of being in control, of always being right, of asserting ourselves because of our age, position or the length of time we've had a staffroom pigeonhole with our name on it. We have to give more time to considering options, to being open rather than closed, to seeking change for the better.

Changing attitudes is at the heart of any change process; this is just as important as changing behaviours. Your attitude grows out of your mental map, the way in which you see the world without needing to look at it, the things you think without actively thinking. Your attitude is what lies behind your behaviours. Change your attitude and watch the dominoes fall.

This is a book about children and young people.

... in order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody's got to be crazy about that kid. That's number one. First, last, and always.

URIE BRONFENBRENNER<sup>2</sup>

This is a book about leadership, whatever your role.

Change *from* is one thing. Change *to* is where leadership comes in. 'What will it look like when it's done?' as the saying goes. We need, therefore, a shared vision *and* a strategy for building that vision. An organisation with relationships truly at the centre, and a vision owned by everyone and understood by all. The vision needs to be clearly communicated and backed up with strong leadership, leadership that exists at all levels and across all areas, driven by those who command respect for their personal attributes rather than their status.

This, in turn, requires clear priorities for the entire staff community, with key actions and objectives owned by everyone. To grow this requires not only specialist and bespoke training, but also the development of local thinking – what does that look like here, in our context, with these children, in this community, at this time?

This is a book about communities.

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2 Quoted in National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships*. Working Paper No. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2004), p. 1. Available at: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Young-Children-Develop-in-an-Environment-of-Relationships.pdf>.

The restorative world that I am describing shares 'power' across communities and with families. It acknowledges people and communities as experts in their own solutions. It utilises informal restorative meetings in everyday situations, and more formal restorative conferences when there are serious concerns to be addressed. It uses proactive and/or responsive approaches to address concerns safely, empower change and maximise personal responsibility.

This is a book about collaboration.

At a time of shortage, resources need to be focused on responses to unwanted behaviour and conflict that are efficient, effective and, more importantly, which meet the needs of the school community and wider society. It must be a multi-agency, cross-service approach, involving criminal justice, education, social care, housing, police, healthcare providers, the voluntary sector and all other key partners – working together so that children and families experience coherence.

This is a book about restorative practice.

Put all these things together and you have a vision of restorative practice. Do them all and you have restorative practice in action. I am proposing, then, that restorative practice is the central delivery concept in everything a community does. It is the glue that binds together all services, with common values owned by all, and builds the bridge between teachers and children, and schools and communities.

This book is an introduction to restorative practice, not a how-to guide. I will share what it is and, in so doing, together we can understand better what it isn't. For example, we start with the distinction between restorative justice and restorative practice, as confusing the two is like referring to the Scottish as 'English'.

Just remember while you read, there is, as we at Independent Thinking keep banging on about, always another way.

## WHY RESTORATIVE PRACTICE?

Every day, in lots of different ways, our students ask: do I matter to you, do you notice me, do I belong here? And, if we aren't careful – because actions speak louder than words – the answer will be seen in the behaviours that play out. It's not always what we say or what we do, but how we do it and how students end up feeling.

I've been working with children, young people, families and across communities for over 20 years now and in a range of settings. In the early part of my career I often thought that it was my job to have all the answers. As the person in a position of authority, that it was up to me to find the answers rather than ask the right questions to help others find their answers. That it fell to me to dole out solutions, to rescue children or to make excuses for their behaviour, or, often, that of the adults. I guess you can easily get sucked into that way of working when you spend long enough in organisations in which that's how the system operates. You learn to silence that voice in your head shouting, 'Just because we've always done it that way, it doesn't mean it's not incredibly stupid!'

Of course, it's difficult to change, to move away from traditions, especially in areas of society in which traditions are held up as a good thing, such as education. It's like folding your arms the other way, or putting the other sock on first, or supporting Liverpool; it's just wrong. Within seconds of folding your arms the 'wrong' way, you will have refolded them the 'right' way. It's hard to break habits and because

it's hard, and because humans don't tend to like hard, we go for the easy route and think we can get away with it by calling it 'tradition'.

Yet doing things better means doing things differently, which, in turn, means that we need to be ready for those feelings of discomfort: up for embracing them rather than avoiding them. We need to start striving to be better at discovering how we can stop doing old things and start doing new ones. Or, at the very least, to do old things in new ways. After all, the most dangerous phrase in any organisation is: 'We've always done it that way around here.' Not because the old way was wrong by definition, but because you aren't questioning whether it might be.

Now, don't get me wrong, lots of practices, policies and systems *do* work, but do they work for everyone, all of the time? How inclusive are they? Do they serve to create and strengthen connections across the organisation? After all, for the organisation to flourish, that's got to be the measure. Or, as I tell schools when delivering restorative practice training, 'connect before content' (see Chapter 1 for more on this, especially in our post-COVID world). After all, as humans, we are hardwired to want to connect and to belong. It's how we've lasted so long as a species.

Schools that explicitly put a greater focus on proactively building and maintaining relationships will find that there will be fewer occasions when relationships break down and, therefore, there is a need for them to be repaired. Getting involved earlier in the life of a problem will also help. For children to feel able to talk, you need adults who are willing to listen. When we have adults who are unwilling to listen, we end up with children who are unwilling to talk.

The ultimate goal is the adoption of restorative principles to inspire communities to feel able to shape their own

futures. This is aimed at providing them with the confidence to resolve their own problems and generate their own values. Children, families and professionals all need to spend time investing in their own social capital, being proactive in capitalising on relationships and putting the repair of harm and relationship breakdowns as a key priority. We want to encourage a shift away from a reactionary culture, in which our responses are often emotional and un-thought-through, to a more considered and responsible approach.

Such an undertaking needs everyone to act explicitly, across the whole school, with these goals in mind. This entails keeping a close eye on our own behaviours and habitual practices – which speak louder than any list of values on a lanyard, poster or school website – and ensure that we treat everyone with respect. We must involve people in decisions that affect them, listen actively to each other, be empathic and deal with conflicts and tensions in a way that seeks to repair harm and sustain relationships. This is the core of restorative practice.

## A practical and inspiring introduction to the use of restorative practice in schools to improve behaviour, foster a more caring culture and forge relationships that work.

For those educators who are uncomfortable with the punitive world of zero tolerance, isolation booths and school exclusions, Mark Finnis – one of the UK's leading restorative practice experts – is here to show you that there is another way.

Drawing on his many years' experience working with schools, social services and local governments across the country, Mark shares all you need to know about what restorative practice is, how it works, where to start and the many benefits of embedding a relational approach into any educational organisation that genuinely has people at its heart.

Covering coaching circles and the power of doing things *with* (and not *to*) children and young people, to moving your values off lanyards and posters and into the lived experience of every member of the school community, this book sets out how restorative practice – when done well – can transform every aspect of school life.

**Suitable for school leaders, educators and anyone working with young people.**

Mark Finnis is quite simply the don of restorative practice.

PAUL DIX, BEHAVIOUR SPECIALIST, WHENTHEADULTSCHANGE.COM

An eminently readable and always inspiring reminder of the power of working 'with'.

NIGEL RICHARDSON, CBE,  
FORMER DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES, LEEDS CITY COUNCIL

If you truly want to embrace relationships as the heartbeat of your school culture, then this book will show you how.

DAVE WHITAKER, DIRECTOR OF LEARNING, WELLSRING ACADEMY TRUST

**Mark Finnis** is an Independent Thinking Associate and one of the UK's leading exponents of restorative practice. With many years' experience working with schools, local government agencies and social services, he is in great demand as a speaker and trainer – helping organisations adopt restorative practices in a way that is practical and achievable and that never loses sight of the children and young people they are all aiming to serve. @Markfinnis

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