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# Schools Know Best

Organisational development  
coaching as an underdeveloped  
practice in schools: a research  
synthesis

Shane Leaning, May 2026

# SCHOOLS KNOW BEST

***Organisational development coaching as an underdeveloped practice in schools: a research synthesis***

Shane Leaning

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**AI-assisted research disclosure.** This paper was prepared with substantial assistance from Claude Opus 4.6, a large language model developed by Anthropic, which was used for literature synthesis, drafting, and fact-checking support over the period February to April 2026. The author conceived the research question, directed the synthesis, reviewed and corrected the output across multiple revision cycles, verified all sources and claims, and takes full responsibility for the analysis, arguments, and conclusions presented in this paper. A detailed account of the division of intellectual labour is provided in §2 (Methodology and positionality).

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## Abstract

Schools around the world have built sophisticated traditions of instructional coaching, leadership coaching, and coaching cultures, yet there is no widely understood category of practice for what happens when a coaching stance is brought to the work of developing the school as an organisation. This paper calls that absent category organisational development coaching, locates it in a four-quadrant map of the schools coaching field, and argues that the practice appears to have broad applicability across school systems, from the multi-academy trusts of the English state sector to the international school groups of Asia and the Middle East, although the commissioning routes and economic conditions under which it can take root differ significantly by context.

The paper synthesises twenty years of research from organisational development, executive and team coaching, and educational leadership, building on Bushe and Marshak's distinction between diagnostic and dialogic OD, Hawkins's systemic team coaching tradition, Schein's process consultation philosophy, Knight's instructional coaching evidence base, and the most recent systematic review of coaching for school leaders (Collins et al., 2025). It triangulates this synthesis against the only published case study of dialogic OD in a school setting (Cantore and Hick, 2013), which took place in a UK state primary school in special measures, against evidence from adjacent sectors including aviation Crew Resource Management and surgical safety improvement, and against a cost analysis comparing corporate and educational pricing for organisational-level help across different school contexts.

The paper makes five contributions: it names and defines a category of practice currently absent from the schools coaching literature; it explains why the absence has persisted across different school systems; it offers three composite scenarios, drawn from different national and sectoral contexts, showing what the practice could look like in schools; it presents the first published cost analysis of OD coaching at school prices, including the different commissioning routes available to fee-funded and publicly-funded schools; and it honestly addresses the contextual limits on where the practice is likely to be applicable. It concludes with eight directions for further research, intended as an invitation to practitioners and academics to build on a conversation that began in 2013 and has, until now, gone largely unanswered.

**Keywords:** organisational development coaching; school leadership; systemic team coaching; multi-academy trusts; international schools; dialogic organisation development; school improvement.

## Key findings

For readers with limited time, the paper makes the following five claims.

**1. There is a category of practice missing from the schools coaching literature.** Current schools coaching traditions (instructional coaching, leadership coaching, coaching cultures) all operate at the level of the individual or the relational pair. None of them treats the school itself as the client of a coaching engagement. The corporate sector has had a name for this category, systemic team coaching or organisational development coaching, for at least fifteen years. The schools sector does not.

**2. The absence reflects structural, cultural, and economic factors, and the structural factors vary by context.** Three factors explain the absence across most school systems: the dominance of instructional coaching in schools professional development; the accountability environments that reward expert-led answers over coaching-led inquiry; and the inward-looking nature of the schools coaching literature itself, which the most recent systematic review (Collins et al., 2025) describes as “slow to draw on industry research.” How each of these factors plays out differs between the UK state sector, national independent schools, multi-academy trusts, and international school groups.

**3. The practice has broad applicability across school systems, but different commissioning routes are needed in different contexts.** For fee-funded schools and international school groups, direct commissioning from professional development budgets is viable at the right price point. For publicly funded schools in systems like the UK state sector, the viable routes are trust-level commissioning by multi-academy trusts, foundation and charitable grant funding, and sector bodies such as the Education Endowment Foundation or Ambition Institute. The cost analysis in §7 sets out four price models and the funding contexts in which each is plausible.

**4. The corporate pricing model for OD coaching does not translate to any school context and a different pricing structure is needed.** A six-month corporate-style team coaching engagement would consume between a quarter and a half of a single mid-sized school’s annual professional development budget and would be completely out of reach for most publicly funded schools buying from their own accounts. Four workable alternative models are proposed: diagnostic engagements (£8,000–£20,000), retainer engagements (£24,000–£48,000 per year, typically commissioned at trust or group level rather than single-school level), group- or trust-level engagements (~£100,000 per year spread across multiple schools), and foundation or grant-funded engagements (typically £100,000+ per year spread across multiple schools with third-party funding).

**5. The empirical base for OD coaching specifically in schools is thin, and the one case we have is from the UK state sector.** Cantore and Hick's 2013 case study of dialogic OD at Manorfield Primary, a UK state school in special measures in Tower Hamlets, remains, more than a decade later, essentially the only published example of its kind that extensive searches of the schools literature have revealed, though unpublished doctoral research may well address this territory. The author welcomes examples from readers who are aware of work not captured here. This paper is intended to revive that conversation, not to close it.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 The head teacher who already knew

In 2012, a head teacher named Wendy Hick took over Manorfield Primary School in the East End of London. The school, with around 650 pupils and 87 staff, had been judged inadequate by Ofsted and was in special measures. The conventional playbook for that moment is well known: bring in a school improvement consultant, run a diagnostic, build an action plan, drive it through. Fast.

Hick did something different. She prioritised building the conditions for honest professional conversation before doing anything else. She brought in a consultant called Stefan Cantore, who at the time was researching conversational approaches to change at the University of Southampton. Together, they designed a one-day whole-school conversation. Not a training day. Not a strategy session. A conversation.

They wrote about it the following year in *OD Practitioner*, in a special issue on dialogic organisation development edited by Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak. The paper is called “Dialogic OD in Practice: Conversational Approaches to Change in a UK Primary School.” It runs to six pages.

In the course of the literature search for this paper, the author has been unable to find a single subsequent publication of its kind. To the best of the author’s knowledge, no subsequent publication of its kind has appeared, though unpublished doctoral research and work in progress may well address this territory.

That absence is the question this paper sets out to explore.

## 1.2 What this paper suggests

Schools around the world have built sophisticated traditions of instructional coaching, leadership coaching, and coaching cultures. None of these traditions, however, treats the school itself as the client of a coaching engagement. The category of practice that would treat it that way, what this paper calls organisational development coaching, is well-established in adjacent sectors but essentially absent from the schools coaching literature. In aviation, Crew Resource Management (CRM), which emerged in the 1980s after analysis showed that 70–80% of accidents resulted from human error rather than technical failure, has been widely credited with contributing to a significant decline in commercial accident rates. In healthcare, the WHO Surgical Safety Checklist (2009)

demonstrated that the rate of death fell from 1.5% to 0.8%, and the rate of complications from 11% to 7%, across eight pilot hospitals around the world. In the corporate world, OD consulting has persisted for decades as a means of addressing post-merger integration, senior team alignment, and culture change, with annual expenditure on executive coaching reaching \$1 billion in the United States by 2003. Each of these sectors found that treating the organisation, not the individual, as the unit of intervention produced measurable benefits. Education has not yet made this shift. The category of practice where dialogic OD and coaching meet does not yet have a settled name in the literature; this paper uses the term “organisational development coaching” as a working label (the naming question, and how different traditions label the same territory, is discussed in §3.3). The argument that follows is a reformist one, not a utopian one: it does not claim that existing coaching practices are without value, only that something is missing from the current field.

This paper suggests that the absence is shaped by structural, cultural, and economic factors rather than mere oversight, that the practice appears to have broad applicability across school systems, and that the routes by which it can be commissioned differ depending on the context in which a school sits. It draws on twenty years of research from organisational development, coaching, and educational leadership to map the gap, explain its persistence, illustrate what filling it could look like in different national and sectoral contexts, and analyse what doing so would cost through different funding routes.

A further dimension of this argument, addressed fully in §8.9, concerns who gets to do this work. The international schools sector and the wider education consulting market are dominated by practitioners who are, in the main, white, Western, and English-speaking. Any new category of practice risks reproducing those patterns unless it is deliberately designed not to. The values embedded in dialogic OD, including individual voice, psychological safety, and the surfacing of disagreement, are themselves culturally situated. This does not disqualify the approach, but it does mean that the question of who practises it, where, and on whose terms, cannot be separated from the question of whether it works.

The argument matters because the organisational conditions that make OD coaching necessary have intensified across most school systems in the past decade. In England, the rise of multi-academy trusts has created organisational structures whose leadership challenges, integrating schools into a trust, developing cross-school leadership, managing senior team transitions across multiple sites, look a great deal like the classic OD problems the corporate sector solved with a coaching stance twenty years ago. Those problems included post-merger integration failures, senior leadership team misalignment, cultural clashes during restructuring, and cross-functional collaboration breakdowns in

increasingly complex organisations. The corporate sector addressed them by investing in coaching interventions that treated the organisation as the client, working with whole teams over extended periods rather than sending individuals on courses. In the international schools sector, consolidation into groups has produced similar complexity: according to International Schools Consultancy (ISC) Research's January 2025 figures, there are 14,833 K–12 international schools worldwide, serving close to 7.5 million students with a combined annual fee income of around \$67.3 billion, with about 38% of these schools now belonging to a group. National independent schools and publicly funded schools in many other systems face versions of the same challenges.

What makes these challenges distinctive is not simply their organisational complexity but the particular conditions under which school leaders must address them. School leaders operate under dual accountability to both governing bodies and external inspectors. They manage organisations whose core work, teaching and learning, depends on the professional judgement of highly qualified staff who expect collegial rather than managerial relationships. They face staffing constraints that make restructuring far harder than in the corporate sector, where roles can be created and eliminated more freely. And they do all of this in institutions whose purpose is fundamentally moral and relational, not transactional. These features do not make schools more or less complex than corporations. They make them differently complex, and the forms of organisational help that work in one setting do not automatically transfer to the other without adaptation.

The structural conditions have changed. The schools coaching market, which was always somewhat limited in its scope, continues to offer essentially the same products it did fifteen years ago. The existing models were never designed for organisational-level challenges; they have always focused on individuals rather than institutions. As the complexity of school governance has grown, this limitation has become more consequential.

Two clarifications about scope before proceeding.

First, the author suggests that OD coaching appears to have broad applicability across school systems, but it does not suggest that it is applicable everywhere or in every circumstance. The conditions under which the practice is likely to work, and the conditions under which it is not, are set out in §5 and §8. In brief, the practice depends on organisational complexity that exceeds the capacity of a single senior team, a commissioning route with enough budget flexibility to fund non-mandated work, leadership continuity long enough for the work to bed in, and a leadership culture open to being examined honestly and willing to engage with the process in good faith and with a commitment to reflexivity and change. Where these conditions are absent, the practice of

OD is not the right answer. Where these conditions are present, the author argues, the practice of OD can be of benefit. However, there is, to date, little empirical evidence of these benefits. This paper highlights the need for research in this area and seeks to contribute to deeper understanding in the field.

Second, this paper is a synthesis and an argument, not an empirical study. It draws on the existing research base in adjacent fields and on the author's professional experience working with school leadership teams, predominantly in international contexts. Where claims are speculative or extrapolative beyond the author's direct experience, and particularly where they extend to the UK state sector and to publicly funded schools elsewhere, they are flagged as such. The paper's intended contribution is conceptual: to name a category of practice, locate it in the relevant literatures, and offer a framework for thinking about how it could be commissioned, priced, and developed across different school contexts.

### **1.3 Two helpers**

A short illustration may help to ground the distinction the paper turns on.

Imagine two professionals walking into a school on the same Monday morning, both hired to help with a three-year strategy. The first is a consultant. She arrives with a slide deck, a discovery questionnaire, and a project plan. She knows what good schools look like. She will spend a week interviewing staff, two weeks analysing what she has heard, and on day twenty-one she will present a fifty-page report containing recommendations.

The second is a coach. She arrives with a notebook and a list of questions. She does not tell the school what good schools look like. In addition to knowing what the leader who has engaged her believes they need help with, she asks a variety of stakeholders at all levels what their experience of the school is, and builds up a picture of the needs of the school. She spends time with leaders, teachers, admin staff, parents and even students, not interviewing them but inviting them to share their perceptions and perspectives in semi-structured conversations. The contrast with the consultant is not just one of method but of assumption. The consultant assumes she knows what good looks like and that the school's job is to get there. The coach assumes the school already contains most of what it needs and that her job is to make it visible. After three months, the school's community has written its own strategy, in its own voice. It is shorter than the consultant's report. It is also owned in a way the consultant's report could never be.

Both professionals are external. Both leave eventually. The difference between them is the difference between a transaction in which expertise is imported and one in which expertise

is surfaced. The first is the conventional mode of help in the schools sector. The second is the focus of this paper.

#### **1.4 Structure of the paper**

A note on scope: this paper does not attempt to make causal or quantitative claims about the effectiveness of OD coaching in schools, because the empirical base for such claims does not yet exist. It is an exploratory, inductive contribution that seeks to open up a line of inquiry rather than to close one down. Where effectiveness data is presented, it relates to adjacent sectors and is offered as suggestive context rather than as direct evidence.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the methodology and positionality of the author, including a detailed account of the role artificial intelligence played in producing this paper. Section 3 defines the field, tracing the parallel histories of organisational development and coaching, the current state of their convergence, and the location of the underdeveloped category this paper is concerned with. Section 4 examines evidence from adjacent sectors, aviation, healthcare, manufacturing, and the corporate world, where the practice has taken root. Section 5 explains why the practice has not taken root in schools, identifying three inhibiting factors. Section 6 offers three composite scenarios showing what OD coaching could look like in school contexts. Section 7 presents a cost analysis comparing corporate and educational pricing for organisational level help and proposes four workable pricing models. Section 8 discusses the limitations of the practice as it might apply to schools. Section 9 sets out recommendations for policy, practice, and research, including eight specific directions for further empirical work.

## 2. Methodology and positionality

### 2.1 The question this paper asks

A note on sequencing: this section sets out the methodology and positionality of the author before the literature review that follows in §3. The decision to lead with methodology is deliberate. Because this paper's central argument depends on the reader understanding how the author came to the question, and what kind of evidence he is and is not using, the methodological grounding needs to be established before the reader encounters the literature. The reader who knows the author's vantage point is better equipped to evaluate the synthesis that follows.

This paper began with a practitioner's observation. In the course of six years working with senior leadership teams in international schools across Asia, Europe, and the United States, the author kept encountering organisational challenges that did not fit comfortably into any of the recognised categories of professional support available to schools. The challenges were not pedagogical: instructional coaching had no purchase on them. They were not individual-leadership challenges: executive coaching of the head solved only part of the problem. They were not strategic in the consulting sense: a written report would not change them. They looked to anyone with corporate exposure, like organisational development problems. But the language of organisational development is rarely heard in school staffrooms, and the practice of bringing a coaching stance to OD work is rarer still in schools than it is in the sectors from which it originates.

The question this paper asks is therefore narrow but consequential, not least because schools continue to invest significant resources in external support that may not fully address their organisational needs. It asks three questions:

- 1. What would a category of practice called organisational development coaching look like if it were applied to schools?*
- 2. Why is it currently absent from the schools coaching literature?*
- 3. What would need to be true for it to take root?*

### 2.2 Positionality of the author

The author is a British organisational coach based in Shanghai, with fifteen years of prior experience in international education, latterly as a regional head of teaching development

for a large multinational school group operating across more than 80 schools globally. He is the founder of Education Leaders, a consultancy practice working with international school leadership teams, and the executive director of Work Collaborative, the not-for-profit research organisation under which this paper is published. He is the co-author, with Efraim Lerner, of *Change Starts Here* (Routledge, 2026), a practitioner-focused book on collaborative change methodology in schools. He holds an organisational development coach credential and is a CollectivED Fellow at the Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University.

The author has a direct commercial interest in the conclusions of this paper. The category of practice the paper describes is one he sells. Readers should weigh the analysis with this in mind. The paper has been written to be useful regardless of whether the author personally benefits from its uptake, but readers are entitled to know that the two are not separable.

The author's vantage point gives access to a particular kind of evidence: extended professional contact with senior leaders, executive teams, and operational directors at international school groups across multiple regions. It does not give access to several other kinds of evidence that would matter for a complete picture. The author taught for three years in the UK state sector before moving abroad but has not worked in that system in a leadership or consulting capacity, nor in publicly funded school systems elsewhere, or in early years or special educational needs settings. He has worked predominantly with English-medium schools serving expatriate and globally mobile families. His access to teachers and pupils, as opposed to leaders, has been limited and indirect.

The methodological basis of this work is broadly auto-ethnographic: the author has drawn on sustained professional engagement with school organisations over many years, reflecting systematically on that experience to produce the analysis presented here. This approach sits within an established tradition in the social sciences, where practitioner-researchers use their own situated knowledge as a starting point for inquiry (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). The approach is inductive and exploratory rather than deductive; the paper does not seek to prove a hypothesis but to surface patterns and propose directions for further research.

In terms of ethics, no individual school or person is identified by name in this paper, and the composite scenarios in §6 are constructed from aggregated experience rather than from any single engagement. The author has taken care to ensure that the account can be told without compromising the confidentiality of any organisation or individual with whom he has worked.

Where this paper extends its argument beyond the international schools sector, and particularly to UK multi-academy trusts and to other publicly funded school systems, the extensions are drawn from the published literature, from the author's reading of sector conditions, and from conversations with UK colleagues in those systems. They should be read as informed hypotheses rather than as claims grounded in the author's own direct experience. The scenarios in §6 are explicit about this: the international school scenario is drawn more directly from the author's professional practice than the UK state sector scenarios, which are constructed from public sources, published case studies of multi-academy trust integration, and the work of UK-based colleagues whose writing the author has followed closely. Readers with more direct experience of these systems are invited to test the claims against their own knowledge, and the author would welcome correction where the extensions fall short.

### **2.3 Approach to the literature**

This paper is a research synthesis rather than a systematic review, and the choice of format is deliberate. A systematic review using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) or comparable protocols is the right tool when the research question is narrow enough to be answered by aggregating a defined body of empirical studies, and when such a body exists. Neither condition holds here. The research question asked in §2.1 is definitional and exploratory rather than empirical: it asks whether a category of practice is missing from a field, why that absence persists, and what filling it might look like. The most relevant literature sits in at least three separate disciplines, organisational development, coaching, and educational leadership, that use different terminology, publish in different venues, and rarely cite each other. A systematic review protocol applied to any one of those disciplines would miss the connections between them, which are precisely the object of study. The decision to work as a synthesis rather than a review was therefore driven by the shape of the question, not by convenience.

The synthesis method used here is closest to what Grant and Booth (2009) call a critical review: a purposive reading of the literature that identifies conceptual contributions, traces intellectual lineages, and uses the resulting map to advance an argument. The paper traces the parallel histories of OD and coaching, the points at which those lineages converge, and the underdeveloped intersection between them. It also draws on evidence from adjacent sectors where the practice has taken root, on the grounds that learning from sectors that have already solved a version of the problem is the most defensible move available when the target sector has not yet begun to try.

The literature search drew on five sources, each chosen for a specific purpose. As described in §2.4, the search was conducted primarily through AI-assisted literature retrieval using Claude Opus 4.6, which identified and synthesised sources under the author's direction, supplemented by the author's own professional reading and knowledge of the field. First, peer-reviewed academic articles, identified through AI-assisted search of academic databases and cross-referenced against Google Scholar and the Education Resources Information Centre, used to establish the current state of empirical knowledge and to anchor theoretical claims. Second, foundational and current monographs in OD and coaching, including the canonical reference texts in each field, used because the conceptual spine of this paper runs through books rather than journal articles: Schein (1969, 1999), Hawkins (2021), whose systemic approach to team coaching treats leadership teams within their broader organisational and stakeholder systems; Cummings and Worley (2025), whose textbook is the standard reference for applying behavioural science to organisational strategy and change; and Bushe and Marshak (2015), who introduced dialogic OD as an alternative to classical action research, emphasising how organisations are socially constructed through conversation, are monographs, not papers, and a paper-only search would miss them. Third, practitioner-oriented publications including *OD Practitioner, Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, and the *International Journal of Coaching in Education*, used because the Cantore and Hick (2013) case study at the heart of the paper appeared in exactly this kind of venue (*OD Practitioner*, Vol. 45, No. 1) and a journal-ranking-driven search would have excluded it. Fourth, sector data from ISC Research, the International Coaching Federation, and Consultancy.uk, was used to establish the scale and structure of the international schools market and the corporate coaching market against which it is compared. Fifth, the published websites and rate disclosures of relevant providers, used for the cost analysis in §7, which depends on market pricing data that is not available in the academic literature at all.

Selection within each source was guided by three criteria. Relevance to the research question took priority: material was included when it spoke directly to the intersection of OD, coaching, and schools, and excluded when it did not, regardless of how well-regarded the source. Recency was weighted for empirical claims about sector conditions, which change quickly, and weighted less for theoretical and foundational claims, where older sources remain canonical. Primary sources were preferred to secondary where both were available, and claims resting on secondary sources are flagged as such in the text. Sources were evaluated for currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose. Where the author was unable to verify a claim against a primary source after reasonable effort, the claim has been removed.

As noted in §1.4, the paper does not make causal claims about OD coaching effectiveness in schools. Where effectiveness data is presented, it relates to adjacent sectors (Crew Resource Management in aviation, the WHO Surgical Safety Checklist in healthcare, instructional coaching in schools) and is offered as suggestive context rather than as direct evidence for the paper’s central argument. This restraint is itself a methodological choice: the author’s view is that a working paper is more useful when it is clear about what it can and cannot claim than when it overreaches for the appearance of rigour.

## **2.4 The role of artificial intelligence in producing this paper**

This paper was prepared with substantial assistance from Claude Opus 4.6, a large language model developed by Anthropic, used over the period February to April 2026. The use was deliberate, sustained, and central to the paper’s production. It was not limited to copy-editing or grammar correction. In keeping with current best practice for AI disclosure in academic publishing (Hosseini et al., 2025; Weaver, 2024; AMEE Guide No. 192, 2025), this section describes the division of intellectual labour in detail.

The author conceived the research question and the central argument. He directed the literature search by specifying which traditions to investigate, which authors to prioritise, and which claims to test against primary sources. He made all structural decisions about the paper’s scope, sequencing, and emphasis. He provided the sector knowledge, the case examples drawn from his own practice, and the framing of the cost analysis chapter, which is the most original contribution in the paper. He reviewed every section of the draft across multiple revision cycles, corrected factual errors, removed claims he could not verify, calibrated voice and tone to match his own published writing, and made the final decisions about what the paper would say.

Claude conducted the literature searches under the author’s direction, synthesised the resulting material into draft prose, identified connections between sources, drafted the chapters, performed fact-checking searches against primary sources where the author flagged claims as needing verification, and offered structural suggestions when the author requested them. The first complete draft of every chapter was machine generated. No section of the final paper is the work of either contributor in isolation.

The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and intellectual content of the paper as published.

The contributions are summarised in Table 1, adapted from the Artificial Intelligence Disclosure (AID) Framework (Weaver, 2024).

*Division of intellectual labour, after Weaver (2024).*

<b>Contribution</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Claude</b>
Conceptualisation of the research question	Lead	None
Framing and structural decisions	Lead	Suggestions on request
Literature search	Direction and verification	Execution under direction
Information synthesis	Review and revision	Lead
Drafting of prose	Editorial direction	Lead
Factchecking and source verification	Direction and final judgement	Search and cross-reference
Sector-specific knowledge and case examples	Lead	None
Cost analysis (\$7)	Lead concept and framing	Drafting and price research
Voice and tone calibration	Lead	Revision under direction
Final accountability	Lead	None

This division of labour is offered transparently to allow readers to weigh the paper’s claims appropriately. The author’s view is that the paper could not have been produced in this form, in this timeframe, without AI assistance, and that the resulting analysis is more thorough than he could have produced unaided in the same period. He also believes that the paper’s central argument, its sector analysis, and its core ethical commitments are his own, and that he would defend each of them against any reader on his own authority.

## **2.5 Limitations of the methodology, and why it was still the right choice**

Three limitations of the methodology should be noted explicitly. Each is followed by a note on why the author considers the approach defensible despite the limitation.

First, this is a synthesis of secondary and tertiary sources, not primary research. No interviews were conducted, no surveys administered, no schools observed for the purposes of this paper. All claims about the practice of OD coaching in schools are inferential, drawn from adjacent literatures and from the author’s own professional experience. For a paper framed as an inductive, exploratory contribution to the field, however, this is less a limitation than a feature of the methodology: an exploratory paper

that seeks to open up a line of inquiry would not be expected to produce the kind of positivist, “this works” conclusions that primary empirical research might yield. The paper ends, accordingly, with eight specific research questions rather than with conclusions. But primary research was not the right first step for this particular question. Before a field can investigate a practice empirically, it needs a shared vocabulary for what the practice is and a defensible claim that it is worth investigating. Neither currently exists in the schools coaching literature for OD coaching. The purpose of this paper is to establish both, so that primary research becomes possible. A paper that skipped straight to data collection would have been collecting data about a thing the field could not yet name.

Second, the literature search was non-systematic. A formal systematic review using PRISMA or comparable protocols would likely surface additional sources, particularly in non-English-language educational research traditions, in coaching and supervision literatures the author is less familiar with, and in regional educational research from outside the Anglophone world. The author acknowledges that a more formal review would be a valuable next step, and §9.4 lists it as Question 1 in the research agenda. The reason this paper did not take that route is given in §2.3: the research question is definitional and cross-disciplinary, and a systematic review protocol designed for empirical aggregation within a single discipline would miss the connections between disciplines that are the object of study. A systematic review would answer a different question, and it is a question that deserves to be asked. It is not the question this paper asks.

Third, the use of AI in the production of this paper introduces a specific risk: that the synthesis reflects the patterns and priors of the language model rather than the actual state of the literature. The author has tried to mitigate this risk in four concrete ways: by directing the searches narrowly to named traditions and named authors rather than open-ended queries; by verifying key claims against primary sources, including several that turned out to be misremembered or misattributed in the first drafts and were corrected; by removing material he could not independently confirm, even where it would have strengthened the argument; and by disclosing the division of labour in detail in §2.4 so that readers can make their own judgement about where the risk bites hardest. The risk is real and cannot be fully eliminated. The alternative, working without AI assistance, would have made this paper take considerably longer to produce and would almost certainly have resulted in a narrower synthesis, because a single author cannot read across three disciplines at the speed the question demands. The author’s view is that the right response to the risk is transparency about the method, not refusal of the method. Readers who wish to test the paper’s claims against the underlying literature are encouraged to do so, and the author would welcome correspondence from anyone who finds errors or omissions.

A further reflection is warranted on the possible epistemological biases of AI tools themselves. Large language models are trained predominantly on published, peer-reviewed material and may consequently exhibit a bias towards positivist research paradigms that privilege quantitative evidence and causal claims. In the social sciences, where inductive, interpretive, and qualitative traditions carry equal weight, this bias may manifest as an implicit preference for “what works” framing over the kind of exploratory, critically engaged analysis that this paper attempts. The author has sought to mitigate this by maintaining clear ownership of the narrative thread and interpretive judgements throughout. The AI’s role was primarily one of information gathering, cross-referencing, and synthesis; the critical engagement with that material, the decisions about what to foreground, what to question, and how to frame the argument, remained the author’s throughout.

### 3. Defining the field

Organisational development is a term with a long history and a fuzzy edge. The field was born in the late 1940s, in the encounter groups associated with Kurt Lewin and the National Training Laboratories. Lewin’s three-step model of change, unfreeze, change, refreeze, is still taught in management courses, although Lewin himself died in 1947 and never wrote it down quite that way. From those origins, OD grew into a distinct discipline of helping organisations change themselves through behavioural science, action research, and group process work. The standard reference text is Cummings and Worley’s *Organization Development and Change* (Cengage, 12th edition 2025), which catalogues four broad categories of OD intervention. Table 2a summarises the categories and their principal approaches.

*Four categories of OD intervention, after Cummings and Worley (2025).*

Category	Principal approaches
Human process interventions	Process consultation; team building; third-party conflict resolution; organisation confrontation meetings; intergroup relations; large-group interventions
Technostructural interventions	Structural design; downsizing; reengineering; employee involvement; work design
Human resource management interventions	Goal setting; performance management; reward systems; career planning and development; managing workforce diversity; employee wellness
Strategic change interventions	Integrated strategic change; mergers and acquisitions integration; culture change; self-designing organisations; transorganisational development

OD is what large companies call the function that designs leadership programmes, runs culture change initiatives, manages mergers, and helps senior teams work together. It is the methodology behind much of the work the NHS in the United Kingdom has used to redesign hospital trusts. It has been used by the United States Army since the 1970s. The principles of continuous improvement and employee involvement that OD shares with the Toyota Production System have shaped manufacturing worldwide. Its persistence in these sectors owes much to the measurable outcomes it produces: reduced error rates, improved safety cultures, and stronger alignment between teams and strategy. OD is not without its critics, who note that it can be slow, culturally intrusive, and difficult to evaluate on its own terms, but the breadth of its adoption suggests that organisations continue to find value in the approach. The phrase “we are doing some culture work,” wherever it is heard in a large organisation, almost always indicates the presence of an OD practitioner.

### 3.1 The parallel evolution of coaching

Coaching, by contrast, is much younger. In its modern form it dates to the early 1990s, when Sir John Whitmore published *Coaching for Performance* (Nicholas Brealey, 1992) and introduced the Goal, Reality, Options, Will (GROW) model that became the field's lingua franca. Whitmore was building on Tim Gallwey's 1974 book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which argued that the biggest opponent on a tennis court was the player's own self-doubt. From 1979 onwards, Whitmore worked with Gallwey, alongside Graham Alexander, applying Inner Game ideas to business leaders. Whitmore and Alexander, together with Alan Fine, developed what became GROW, and Whitmore made it the centre of his book. The International Coaching Federation, founded in 1995, now has more than 60,000 members in over 150 countries, a measure of how rapidly the coaching profession grew once it had a name and an institutional home.

For most of the past three decades, OD and coaching have grown in parallel without quite meeting. OD has worked at the level of the system. Coaching has worked at the level of the individual. The space between them, where a coaching stance might be applied to organisational development work, has been thinly populated.

### 3.2 The space between

A handful of authors have tried to fill that space. Peter Hawkins, Emeritus Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School, has built the most influential body of work (Hawkins and Smith, 2013). His 2011 book *Leadership Team Coaching* (Kogan Page, now in its fourth edition, 2021) introduced what he called systemic team coaching: a way of coaching senior teams that explicitly attends to the wider organisation in which they sit. His Five Disciplines model has become the standard reference for anyone working at the boundary between coaching and OD. The model is described in more detail in §4.

Edgar Schein, the late MIT professor whose 1969 book *Process Consultation* is the philosophical ancestor of much of what this paper is concerned with, captured the underlying ethic in his 1999 update *Process Consultation Revisited*: "It is the client who owns the problem and the solution." That sentence is, more or less, the entire ethical foundation of OD coaching. It is also the sentence that most clearly distinguishes it from conventional consulting, in which the consultant owns the diagnosis and the solution is what the client pays for.

Gervase Bushe and Robert Marshak, two North American academics, published an article in the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* in 2009 that has come to define the contemporary OD field. They argued that there are now two paradigms of OD. The first, which they called diagnostic OD, is the classical Cummings and Worley tradition: organisations are open systems, problems are real and discoverable, and the consultant’s job is to find them and recommend solutions. The second, which they called dialogic OD, treats organisations as socially constructed realities created and sustained by the prevailing narratives, stories, and conversations through which people make meaning. On this view, change happens not when leaders are shown what is wrong but when the stories they have been telling themselves are disrupted and new stories become possible.

The distinction matters for this paper because it is the dialogic tradition of OD, rather than the diagnostic, that maps most cleanly onto coaching practice. A diagnostic OD consultant runs an organisational analysis and writes a report. A dialogic OD practitioner designs a conversation. The two activities feel, to the person experiencing them, quite different. They produce different kinds of change, and they require different skills from the practitioner. Both have a place. It is the second that this paper is concerned with, and the second that has the most to learn from coaching.

Table 2b summarises the distinction.

*Two paradigms of OD, after Bushe and Marshak (2009).*

<b>Diagnostic OD</b>	<b>Dialogic OD</b>
Organisations are open systems with real, discoverable problems	Organisations are socially constructed realities held together by stories
The consultant’s job is to find what is broken	The practitioner’s job is to disrupt the prevailing narrative
Change happens when leaders see the data	Change happens when people start telling new stories
“Let me show you what is broken”	“Let us have a different conversation about what is possible”
Cummings and Worley tradition	Bushe and Marshak tradition

### 3.3 The naming problem

The category this paper is concerned with, the place where dialogic OD and coaching meet, does not have a settled name. The French call it *coaching d'organisation*. Some North American practitioners and training providers call it organisational development coaching. The British, characteristically, talk about systemic team coaching and leave the organisational level implicit. None of these terms is widely used outside the professional networks that invented them. Inside schools, rarely are they used at all.

The terminology has continued to shift. In 2025, Hawkins and Carr introduced the term systemic team of teams coaching to describe work that extends beyond a single team to the web of connections between teams across an organisation (Hawkins and Carr, 2025). This latest iteration reflects a growing recognition that organisational coaching cannot stop at the boundary of one leadership team, particularly in complex multi-site organisations like school groups and multi-academy trusts.

This paper uses the term organisational development coaching, or OD coaching, throughout. The choice is partly pragmatic: the term is descriptive enough to be understood by readers who have not encountered it before. It is also strategic. Naming a category of practice is a precondition for thinking about it clearly, and the paper's argument depends on the reader being able to hold the category in mind as a distinct thing.

### 3.4 Where OD coaching sits

Figure 1 maps OD coaching against the four categories of practice that already exist in the schools coaching field: OD consulting, instructional coaching, leadership coaching, and the underdeveloped quadrant where OD coaching belongs. The two axes of the diagram are: the level at which the practice operates (individual versus system), and the stance the practitioner takes (directive versus dialogic).

## WHERE OD COACHING SITS

*The gap in the schools coaching landscape*



**Figure 1.** Where OD coaching sits in the schools coaching field.

The map is offered as an analytical device, not as an empirical description. Real practitioners often move between quadrants. Real engagements often have elements of more than one. The underdeveloped quadrant, system-level work conducted with a dialogic stance, is the one that has the fewest practitioners, the smallest literature, and the most plausible claim to being the missing piece of the schools coaching field.

The limitations of the quadrant representation should be acknowledged. Real coaching practices do not sit neatly in one box. Instructional coaching, for instance, spans a broader spectrum than the diagram suggests: some versions are highly directive, while others are more dialogic. OD consulting, as it appears in schools, is often what schools default to precisely because OD coaching does not yet exist as a recognised option. The quadrants are therefore better understood as tendencies than as fixed categories, and the boundaries between them are porous. The diagram is offered as a thinking tool, not as a map of the territory.

The definitional fuzziness around this quadrant is a problem. It is also the opportunity.

## 4. Evidence from adjacent sectors

When considering how a practice might work in one sector, it helps to look first at the sectors that have already done it. Healthcare. Aviation. Manufacturing. The corporate world. Each of these has wrestled with the question of how to develop a complex organisation full of expert professionals, and each has things to teach the schools sector.

This section examines four examples. None of them was explicitly framed as organisational development coaching at the time. All of them, in retrospect, used the same underlying logic: that lasting change in complex professional organisations depends on the quality of the conversation as much as on the quality of the intervention.

### 4.1 Aviation: Crew Resource Management

In June 1979, NASA's Ames Research Centre hosted a workshop in San Francisco called "Resource Management on the Flight Deck" (Cooper, White and Lauber, 1980). Out of it came a discipline called Cockpit, later Crew, Resource Management, which started as a way of training airline pilots to communicate better in the cockpit and grew into a whole-system approach to safety. CRM treated cockpit crews as small teams whose performance was shaped not only by individual skill but by communication patterns, hierarchy, psychological safety, and the wider system around them. It was, in everything but name, an early version of what would now be called team coaching with an organisational lens.

The airline industry did not implement CRM by sending pilots on individual training courses. It implemented it by working with whole crews, on whole airlines, over whole years. It treated the airline, not the pilot, as the client. The result, over four decades, has been one of the most dramatic safety improvements in any industrial sector in history. According to the Aviation Safety Network, the fatal accident rate per million commercial flights has fallen from around six in the 1970s to less than one today, a reduction of approximately 90%. CRM is one of several major contributors to that improvement, alongside better technology, stricter regulation, and ground proximity warning systems. It is, however, widely credited as the cultural change that made the technical and regulatory improvements stick.

The lesson for schools is not that they need their own version of CRM. The lesson is that the airline industry treated safety as an organisational property, not an individual one, and built its development practice around that assumption. When schools treat teaching quality as

an individual property, to be developed one teacher at a time, they import a different and arguably weaker assumption.

This connects to a growing body of evidence within education itself. Jenni Donohoo's work on collective teacher efficacy (Donohoo, 2017) reports that when teachers share a belief in their collective capacity to influence student outcomes, the effect size reported in earlier syntheses ( $d = 1.57$ , though this figure has been contested and revised in subsequent analyses) ranks among the largest of any educational intervention. The implication is the same one the airline industry arrived at: the unit that matters is the team, not the individual. Development practices that treat teaching quality as an organisational property, not a personal one, are better aligned with what the evidence suggests actually drives improvement.

## **4.2 Healthcare: the surgical safety checklist**

In the early 2000s, the surgeon and writer Atul Gawande began documenting why medicine kept making preventable errors. His book *The Checklist Manifesto* (Metropolitan Books, 2009) became famous for its argument that even the best doctors needed simple checklists to manage complexity. What is less remembered is the change methodology Gawande and his colleagues used to introduce checklists into operating theatres around the world. They did not impose them. They worked with each hospital on how to integrate the World Health Organization's nineteen-item Surgical Safety Checklist into local practice. They talked to surgeons and nurses about what would and would not work. They treated implementation as a cultural change rather than a procedural one. When the WHO published the results in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2009 (Haynes et al., 360, 491–499), surgical mortality across eight hospitals around the world had fallen from 1.5% to 0.8%, nearly half.

The checklist was the visible intervention. The invisible intervention was the conversation around it. The conversation was OD work, even though nobody called it that.

There is a coda to this story worth noting. Subsequent attempts to replicate the WHO checklist results in other contexts have produced more mixed findings. A 2014 study in Ontario, in particular, found no significant mortality reduction when checklists were rolled out across Canadian hospitals (Urbach et al., 2014). One credible explanation for the different results is that the original Haynes et al. study involved sustained organisational engagement at each site, while the Ontario rollout treated the checklist as a procedural mandate. If the explanation is correct, and it remains contested, it strengthens rather than weakens the proposition of this paper. The intervention was not the checklist. It was the conversation about the checklist.

## **4.3 Manufacturing: the Toyota Production System**

In 1950, a Japanese engineer called Taiichi Ohno was working at Toyota, a small post-war car company struggling to compete with American giants like Ford and General Motors. Ford's River Rouge plant in Detroit could produce several thousand vehicles a day. Toyota was producing about 40. The conventional advice was to copy Ford's mass production system: bring in American consultants, buy American machine tools, build a smaller version of Detroit in Aichi Prefecture.

Ohno did something different. He spent years walking the factory floor, watching what his workers actually did, asking them why they did it that way, and inviting them to suggest

improvements. He had no strategy document. He had a question: what if the people closest to the work already know how to do it better?

What emerged became the Toyota Production System (Liker, 2004), which in turn became the global lean manufacturing movement, which in turn made Toyota the largest car company in the world. The methodology had a name, *kaizen*, continuous improvement driven from the bottom up rather than the top down. The philosophy had a phrase, *go and see for yourself* (Liker, 2004). The underlying assumption was that the answers were already in the building, and that the job of the manager was to create the conditions in which they could be heard.

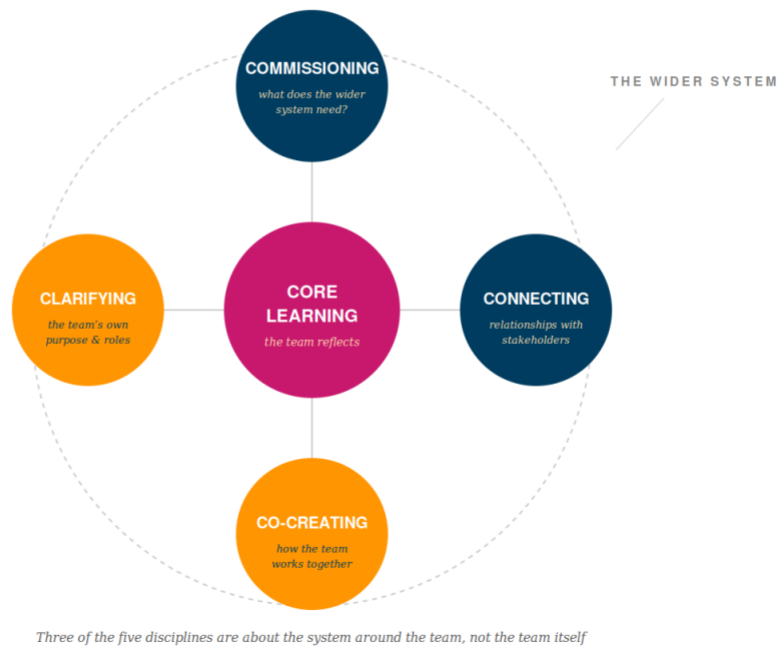
The Toyota story is the philosophical mirror of the argument this paper makes about schools. Most school improvement, like most management consulting, operates on the implicit assumption that the answer is somewhere else: in the latest research, in a model from another sector, in a consultant's head. The school's role is to receive it. Ohno's instinct was the opposite, and the global lean movement is the evidence of where that instinct can lead. Schools, this paper suggests, would benefit from a version of that instinct. They would benefit from helpers who arrive assuming the answers are already in the building.

#### **4.4 The corporate world: Hawkins's Five Disciplines**

Peter Hawkins has spent forty years working with senior leadership teams in major corporations and public-sector organisations. His Five Disciplines model (Hawkins, 2021) treats every senior team coaching engagement as having five dimensions, illustrated in Figure 2.

## THE FIVE DISCIPLINES

*Hawkins' framework for systemic team coaching*



**Figure 2.** Hawkins's Five Disciplines of systemic team coaching.

The first discipline is Commissioning: clarifying what the organisation actually needs from the team. The second is Clarifying: the team's own internal alignment around purpose and roles. The third is Co-creating: the quality of how the team works together when it is in the room. The fourth is Connecting: the team's relationships with stakeholders outside its boundaries. The fifth is Core Learning: the team's capacity to reflect on and adapt its own performance over time.

The striking feature of the model is that three of the five disciplines are concerned with the system around the team, not the team itself. Hawkins's argument, which the author finds compelling, is that a senior team cannot be coached well without coaching the relationships it has with everything outside it (Hawkins and Turner, 2019). Coaching only what happens inside the room is team building, not team coaching.

### 4.5 What this might look like in a school

Consider how Hawkins's model might apply in a school context. The senior leadership team of an international school in Singapore: six people, the head, the deputy, the heads of primary and secondary, the head of curriculum, the head of operations. They meet weekly.

They make decisions. They feel busy and harried. The decisions do not always land. The departments do not always pull in the same direction. The board sometimes asks questions they cannot quite answer.

A conventional consultant would map the team's processes, recommend a new meeting structure, and write a report. A leadership coach would work one-to-one with the head on her communication style. A team facilitator may take the team off-site for a day and run trust exercises.

A systemic team coach, working from Hawkins's model, would do something different. She would begin by interviewing not only the team but the people around it: the board chair, the heads of department, the parent association chair, perhaps a sample of teachers and students. She would ask each of them what they need from the senior team that they are not currently getting. She would then bring all that data back into the room and let the team see itself through the eyes of its stakeholders. The first conversation would not be about what the team wants to fix. It would be about what the system needs the team to become.

This is not consulting. It is not training. It is not therapy. It is a form of structured collective seeing, and it is what good organisational development coaching at the team level looks like. It is used in hundreds of senior teams in corporate and public sector contexts every year. It appears to be rarely used in schools.

Hawkins has since extended this framework further. In *Team of Teams Coaching* (Hawkins and Carr, 2025), he and Catherine Carr introduce what they call systemic team of teams coaching (STOTC): an approach that moves beyond coaching a single team to coaching the web of connections between teams across an organisation. Their argument, supported by a survey of 76 global organisations, is that real transformation requires looking outward, coaching not just how a team works internally but how it collaborates across boundaries with other teams, stakeholders, and the wider system. The distinction between what they call the incremental journey, starting with one team and expanding outward, and the transformational journey, committing to whole-system change from the outset, has direct implications for how schools and school groups might commission this work. For multi-academy trusts and international school groups, where the challenge is precisely one of cross-team and cross-school coherence, the STOTC framework may be more directly applicable than the single-team model from which it evolved.

## 5. Why the practice is absent from schools

If OD coaching has improved safety, alignment, and institutional effectiveness in aviation, healthcare, manufacturing, and the corporate world, why has it not taken root in education? The benefits documented in these adjacent sectors, reduced error rates in aviation, lower surgical mortality in healthcare, stronger team alignment and faster post-merger integration in the corporate world, suggest that treating organisational effectiveness as a collective rather than individual property produces measurable improvements. Education has not yet tested this proposition.

This section identifies three structural factors. None of them is the only reason, and each interacts with the others. Together, they suggest why the schools coaching market may have continued to develop in directions that exclude the category this paper is concerned with.

### 5.1 The dominance of instructional coaching

The dominant model of coaching in schools is instructional coaching. It was popularised in the United States by Jim Knight, a researcher at the University of Kansas, whose book *The Impact Cycle* (Knight, 2017) is the most-cited text in the field. Instructional coaching pairs an expert coach with an individual teacher to improve classroom practice. The cycle is straightforward: identify a student-focused goal, learn an evidence-based strategy, implement it with support, measure the impact. It is structured, evidence-led, and demonstrably effective. The most rigorous meta-analysis available, Kraft et al. (2018), examined sixty causal studies and found average effect sizes of 0.49 standard deviations on instruction and 0.18 standard deviations on student achievement. Those are real numbers. Instructional coaching works.

In the United Kingdom, the model has been championed by Ambition Institute, Steplab, and Tom Sherrington and Oliver Caviglioli's Teaching WalkThrus, the latter now reaching approximately 5,000 schools and colleges in total, with about 900 international schools across 55 countries (June 2025 figures). Ambition Institute's instructional coaching programme has been adopted by a significant number of trusts. Steplab has built a technology platform specifically designed to support instructional coaching at scale, and its adoption across English schools has been notable, though some trusts have since reconsidered the approach. The Department for Education's Early Career Training Programme (ECTP, formerly the Early Career Framework), which all early career teachers (ECTs) in England now follow during their first two years of teaching, mandates structured mentoring and uses instructional coaching as a primary delivery mechanism. Delivery is

outsourced to approved lead providers, including Ambition Institute, the National Institute of Teaching, and Education Development Trust, with in-school mentors supporting ECTs on the provider's programme. The programme is funded by the DfE, as is the associated mentor training. The ECTP does not mandate instructional coaching by name, but the coaching model is deeply embedded in how the framework is delivered in practice across most trusts.

This is good news for classroom practice, because it means that ECTs now receive structured, evidence-based support during the period when they are most likely to leave the profession. The rapid adoption of these models at scale has, however, raised questions about implementation quality and the effect on teacher agency. Where instructional coaching is implemented well, as part of a coherent professional development strategy, the results can be strong. Where it is adopted formulaically or without sufficient attention to context, it risks reducing professional learning to compliance. Some trusts have begun to move away from these approaches for precisely this reason, and practitioners within those trusts report that even the originators of these models acknowledge the scale of the implementation challenge. It is also part of the reason OD coaching has nowhere to go. When the schools sector says coaching, it usually means instructional coaching. When it says leadership

coaching, it usually means one-to-one executive coaching for a head or deputy. When it says school improvement, it means a diagnostic visit, an action plan, and a set of recommendations from someone external. There is no widely understood category for what happens when a coaching stance is brought to the work of developing the school as an organisation, treating the school itself as the client rather than any individual within it.

## **5.2 The accountability environment, and how it varies**

A second factor is harder to talk about. Schools across many national systems have spent the past two decades inside accountability environments that punish uncertainty. Inspections, league tables, performance management cycles, capability procedures: all of these reward leaders who can demonstrate that they know what to do and are doing it decisively. In that environment, a coach who walks in saying "I do not have the answers, but I can help you find yours" is professionally unwelcome. The system wants experts. Taylor (2026), working from four decades of evidence about compliance cultures in English schools, argues that this dynamic creates vicious cultural cycles in which repeated, frustrated attempts at change erode trust and drain resources, making each subsequent initiative harder to land than the last. The pattern is self-reinforcing: the more schools

experience failed change, the more they default to directive, expert-led interventions, which in turn reproduce the conditions for the next failure. How strongly this dynamic operates, however, varies considerably by context, and the variation matters for where OD coaching is likely to take root.

There is also a subtler form of resistance that operates at the level of institutional identity. Schools, particularly those that see themselves as fundamentally different from businesses, often actively resist frameworks that sound corporate. The language of organisational development, with its roots in management consulting and industrial psychology, can trigger a defensive response in school leaders who see their work as vocational rather than managerial. This identity resistance is not irrational. It reflects a genuine concern that importing business models into education risks flattening the distinctive moral and relational character of schools. But it also means that practices which could help schools are sometimes rejected before they are understood, simply because they carry the wrong label. The naming problem discussed in §3.3 is not only a taxonomic inconvenience; it is a barrier to adoption.

Three contexts are worth distinguishing.

In the **UK state sector**, Ofsted inspection remains the dominant shaping force on what kinds of help schools feel able to commission. A school under inspection pressure, or recently emerged from a requires-improvement judgement, is unlikely to commission an external coach whose defining characteristic is restraint from giving answers. There is a complication, however, and it matters for this paper's argument. England's multi-academy trusts, which now account for the majority of state-funded secondary schools and a growing share of primaries, commission professional development and strategic support at trust level, not school level. At trust level, the unit of commissioning is large enough, the leadership hierarchy layered enough, and the organisational complexity sufficient that OD coaching is a more plausible category of help than it is at the single-school level. A trust CEO dealing with the integration of a newly-joined school, a trust executive team wrestling with distributed leadership across fifteen schools, a trust board working out how to manage the transition between founding leaders and their successors: these are classic OD problems, and they are being faced in large numbers across the English state sector today. The fact that the DfE's Trust Capacity Fund and the Education Endowment Foundation now fund trust-level leadership development work is evidence that the funding infrastructure for this kind of commissioning is beginning to exist.

In **national independent schools**, in England and elsewhere, the picture is different again. These schools typically operate outside Ofsted and with significant organisational autonomy. Their accountability is to parents who pay substantial fees and expect

academic results, to governing bodies, and in some cases to the Independent Schools Inspectorate. They have the budgetary flexibility to commission whatever professional development they choose. The barriers to OD coaching in this sector are not financial or regulatory; they are cultural. Many national independent schools remain organisationally conservative, with leadership traditions that value expertise over inquiry and that prefer well-known external names over less familiar categories of help. Where an independent school has commissioned OD coaching, it has often been under the banner of strategy consulting rather than coaching.

In **international schools**, the focus of the author's own practice, the accountability environment is softer. International schools are not subject to Ofsted. Many of them are part of large, often private equity-backed groups. Nord Anglia Education was valued at \$14.5 billion when its acquisition by EQT Partners and others was agreed in October 2024 (Financier Worldwide, 2024). International Schools Partnership operates more than 100 schools across 25 countries. Cognita has more than 100 schools in 20 countries. These groups face a set of organisational challenges that look almost nothing like the challenges of a single state school. How does a group integrate a newly acquired school into its culture? How does it develop distributed leadership across forty campuses on four continents? How does it retain teachers, when ISC Research's 2024 Teacher Movement Report found that most international schools can only expect to retain teachers for one to six years, with nearly half of survey respondents saying they planned to move on within that period? These are classic OD challenges, and the international sector has the budgetary flexibility and the organisational autonomy to commission work at the right price point. What it does not yet have is a well-developed market of providers offering that work under the OD coaching banner. The closest commercial offerings, from organisations like Growth Coaching International, ECIS, and the International Centre for Coaching in Education, sit in the coaching cultures or instructional coaching tradition. Membership bodies such as the Council of British International Schools (COBIS) and the Federation of British International Schools in Asia (FOBISIA) provide professional development and networking opportunities but do not typically offer bespoke organisational consultancy of the kind this paper describes.

The common thread across all three contexts is that OD coaching is most plausible where four conditions are present at once: organisational complexity that exceeds the capacity of a single senior team to manage alone; a commissioning route with enough budget flexibility to fund non-mandated work; leadership continuity long enough for the work to bed in; and a leadership culture open to being looked at honestly. Many English multi-academy trusts meet all four conditions. Many international school groups do likewise. Some but not all

exist in national independent schools. Where one or more conditions is absent, the practice is less likely to take root, and this paper is explicit about that in §8.

### 5.3 The inward-looking literature

The third factor is the most uncomfortable for the schools coaching field itself. Christian van Nieuwerburgh, Professor of Coaching and Positive Psychology at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and the most prolific academic in the coaching-in-education field, has been arguing for over a decade (van Nieuwerburgh, 2012, 2016) that schools need a more sophisticated theoretical foundation for coaching work. His Global Framework for Coaching and Mentoring in Education, developed with John Campbell, identifies four portals through which coaching enters schools: leadership, professional practice, student success, and parent and community engagement. It is an excellent piece of thinking (van Nieuwerburgh et al., 2019). It is also concerned with coaching in schools, not with coaching the school itself as an organisation. The schools coaching literature has, until very recently, simply not had a category for OD coaching.

The most current systematic review of coaching for school leaders, published by Ciaran Collins and colleagues in *Frontiers in Education* in July 2025 (10, Article 1601455), used Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to map what is there. The Bronfenbrenner model, originally developed in the 1970s to understand child development, treats every person as nested inside multiple systems: the immediate environment, the relationships between environments, the wider community, and the cultural and historical context. Collins and colleagues argued that coaching for school leaders has been “largely inward-looking and slow to draw on research from industry.” They found only one study in their review that involved both business and school leaders.

Their conclusion deserves to be read carefully. Coaching school leaders well, they argued, requires multi-level, ecologically informed interventions that account for the full system in which leaders operate. That is, in essence, a description of OD coaching. The term itself is not used.

Taylor (2025; 2026), writing from a UK secondary school perspective in work commissioned by Work Collaborative, reaches a similar conclusion from a different direction. Using Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory and Schein’s (2017) work on organisational culture, she argues that schools are complex, interdependent cultural systems where competing professional assumptions and high-stakes accountability systems generate tensions that inhibit professional learning and undermine lasting change. Her analysis distinguishes between vicious cultural cycles, in which rushed or poorly contextualised change initiatives

erode trust and trigger resistance, and virtuous cycles, in which leaders create the conditions for collaborative, democratically curated professional learning. The virtuous cycle she describes, what she calls “tight democratic implementation,” depends on accurate diagnosis of genuine organisational needs, the reduction of learning anxiety through psychological safety, and the design of collaborative professional development grounded in shared purpose. That description maps closely onto what this paper calls OD coaching.

The conceptual case for OD coaching in schools has therefore been made, from at least two independent directions. It has just not been built.

#### **5.4 The market reality**

There is a related market reality that advocates of OD coaching must contend with. Commercial organisations offering structured, packaged approaches to school improvement, whether instructional coaching platforms, assessment tools, or curriculum programmes, are currently winning the argument in many school systems. They win because they offer something that OD coaching, by its nature, cannot: visible, immediate, packageable results that satisfy accountability systems and give leaders something concrete to point to when asked what they are doing about improvement. The slower, more emergent work of OD coaching is harder to sell, harder to measure, and harder to explain to a governing body that wants to see progress by the end of term. This does not make the packaged approaches wrong. Many of them are useful. But it does mean that anyone advocating for OD coaching needs to be honest about the competitive disadvantage they face in the current market, and clear-eyed about the need to articulate the value of slower, deeper work in terms that the people who commission it can understand and defend.

## 6. What the practice could look like in school contexts

This section moves from analysis to illustration. Because the practice this paper describes is essentially absent from the schools market, there is no body of empirical case studies to draw on. What follows instead are three composite scenarios, each constructed to show what OD coaching might look like in a different kind of school context: an international school going through a leadership transition, a UK multi-academy trust integrating a newly joined school, and a national independent school writing a new strategy. Between them, the scenarios are intended to show that the underlying practice is the same across contexts even when the commissioning route and the institutional environment differ. None of the scenarios is real in its entirety. All are plausible. All are intended to give the reader something concrete enough to think with.

As flagged in §2.2, the three scenarios are not equally grounded in the author's direct experience. Scenario one, the international school in transition, is drawn closely from the author's professional practice. Scenario two, the UK multi-academy trust, is constructed from the published literature on trust integration, the author's reading of sector conditions, and conversations with UK colleagues. Scenario three, the national independent school, sits between the two in terms of the author's direct exposure. The scenarios are offered as illustrations of how the practice might work, not as evidence that it does work. The empirical question is open. Section 9 returns to it.

### 6.1 Scenario one: a senior leadership team in transition

Consider a medium-sized international school in Hanoi: six hundred students, a mix of Vietnamese and expatriate families, an established reputation in the city. The school has just appointed a new head from outside. The previous head was in post for nine years and ran the school in a tight, directive style. The senior team grew up under her. They know how she thought, what she would approve, what she would reject. The new head is different: more distributed in style, less directive, more interested in dialogue. The team is six months into the transition and wobbling. They keep waiting for her to tell them what to do. She keeps waiting for them to take initiative. The deputy heads are quietly resentful at being asked questions instead of given answers. The new head is quietly worried that she is not leading well.

A conventional response to this situation might be to send the new head on a leadership programme, or to send the team on a team-building day. Both responses treat a system problem as an individual one. They also, as Taylor (2026) argues, following Schein and Schein (2017), risk raising survival anxiety, the team's fear that something is wrong with

them, without reducing the learning anxiety that prevents them from changing. The more productive move is to create the conditions in which the team can safely examine what it is doing and try something different.

An OD coaching response would look different. It would begin with three opening interviews, one with the head, and one with each member of the team, using questions designed around Hawkins's Commissioning discipline. What does the team think it is for? What does the head think it is for? What do the people around the team need from it? The interviews would be followed by a one-day off-site, but not for trust exercises. The off-site would be for surfacing the data: for letting the team see how each member has been answering those questions, and where the answers do not match. The work after that would be a series of structured team conversations, perhaps once a fortnight over six months, in which the team learns to talk to itself differently. The coach would not give answers. The coach would ask the questions the team is not yet asking itself and would hold the space for the team's own answers to emerge.

The change, if it sticks, is structural. The team begins to write itself a new story about what it is for. The head stops feeling that she must lead from the front and starts feeling that her job is to hold the conditions for the team to lead together. The deputies stop waiting to be told and start owning their own decisions. The cost is moderate. The disruption is minimal. The work is slow.

## **6.2 Scenario two: a multi-academy trust integrating a newly joined school**

Consider a medium-sized multi-academy trust in the north of England: twelve schools, a mix of primaries and secondaries, a trust board drawn from education, business and the local community, a CEO in her fourth year of a post she grew into from a secondary headship. The trust has just taken on a formerly standalone primary school that requested to join after a difficult period under its previous governance. The joining school has its own culture, its own staffing structure, its own unwritten rules about how decisions get made. The trust has a central team with clear views on what good looks like and an established offer of curriculum support, professional development, and governance infrastructure. Conventional integration would mean bringing the joining school into line with the trust's systems within the first year, often through a combination of structural change, staff training, and a series of monitoring visits from the central team.

The trust CEO has seen this pattern enough times to know its costs. Integrations that move too fast leave the joining school resentful and the trust's central team exhausted. Staff in the joining school feel their existing practice is being dismissed rather than engaged with.

Parents sense that something has changed and cannot quite say what. The joining school's head, often an experienced leader who has run the school well despite the earlier difficulties, starts looking for another job. The trust loses the one person who most understood the school it has just acquired.

An OD coaching response would treat the integration itself as the intervention. Working from the Bushe and Marshak (2015) dialogic tradition, the coach would design a twelve-month process in which the conversation between the joining school and the trust becomes the means of integration, rather than a step that precedes it. The work might begin with a series of listening conversations at the joining school, talking to staff, governors, parents, and the head about what they value most about how the school has operated and what they most fear losing. A parallel set of conversations would happen at the trust: with the CEO, central team, and the heads of other trust schools who will be working with the new school. The coach would then bring representatives from both sides together for a structured encounter, not to negotiate, but to surface the assumptions each side has been making about the other. From that encounter, the integration plan gets written jointly. The joining school's head is positioned as a contributor to the trust's practice, not only a recipient of it.

The work is slow. It is also the kind of work that, done well, protects the trust's investment in the acquisition by ensuring that the joining school's most valuable people stay, its strongest practices are preserved, and its weakest practices are changed from the inside. At the end of twelve months the trust has a genuinely integrated new school rather than a nominally integrated one. The coach leaves. The conversation continues without her.

This scenario is constructed rather than observed. The author has not run this engagement. But the pattern of trust-integration challenges it describes is well-documented in the UK state sector literature (see, for example, Greany and McGinity, 2021, on structural integration and knowledge exchange in MATs), and the dialogic OD approach to integration has been used in corporate merger contexts for many years. What is missing is a published example of the two being brought together in a UK multi-academy trust setting. This is exactly the kind of work that needs to be done, and that §9 recommends.

### **6.3 Scenario three: a single school writing its strategy**

Consider an established national independent school, long running and well-regarded, that needs to write a new three-year strategy after a change in headship. The school has a history of strong academic results, a loyal parent body, and a senior team that has worked together for a long time. It also has a quiet awareness that the world has changed around it

and that its previous strategy, essentially “keep doing what we do, do it well” no longer fully answers the question of what the school is for. The conventional approach would be to hire a strategy consultant, run a few staff workshops to give the appearance of consultation, and deliver a polished document. The document is launched at the start of term and quietly fades by Christmas.

An OD coaching approach would look quite different. Over three months, the school’s community would run its own strategy process, with the coach providing structure. The structure might be something like the Double Diamond model developed by the author and Efraim Lerner in *Change Starts Here* (Leaning and Lerner, 2026), adapted from the British Design Council’s design model for use in educational contexts.



**Figure 3.** Leaning and Lerner’s adapted Double Diamond Model

The model moves through eight stages grouped in pairs: Connect and Discover (divergent exploration of the challenge from multiple perspectives), Define and Align (convergent definition of a shared goal), Develop and Learn (divergent ideation of possible solutions), and Deliver and Sustain (convergent action and embedding). The model is driven by questions rather than directives: forty carefully designed questions, five for each stage, that invite the whole school community into the process of sense-making. The approach rests on the premise that the school already contains the expertise it needs, and that the coach’s job is to create the conditions in which that expertise can surface. The coach brings the structure. The school brings the content. The strategy that emerges is shorter than a consultant’s report would have been. It is also written in the school’s own voice, owned by the people who will have to deliver it, and built on a process that the team can repeat

without the coach the next time it is needed. The coach's task, ultimately, is to make herself unnecessary.

#### **6.4 What the scenarios have in common**

Each of these three scenarios shares the same underlying structure, despite operating in different institutional contexts. The help is real, but the locus of expertise stays inside the school. The work is structured but emergent. The visible outputs are modest, but the underlying capacity built is significant. None of the engagements would generate a fifty-page report. All of them would build a school that could solve its next problem without the coach.

That is what OD coaching looks like, in a school context, when it is done well. It is not exotic. It is not new. It is, however, almost entirely absent from the market that schools currently buy from, whether that school sits in an international group, a multi-academy trust, or a national independent tradition.

## 7. Cost analysis and pricing models

The first question heads tend to ask when the practice in this paper is described to them is whether it works. The second question is whether it is affordable. This section addresses the second. The first is taken up in §8 and §9.

The answer to the affordability question requires honesty about the gap between what corporate OD coaching costs and what schools can plausibly pay. That gap is part of the problem this paper is concerned with, and pretending otherwise would weaken the argument.

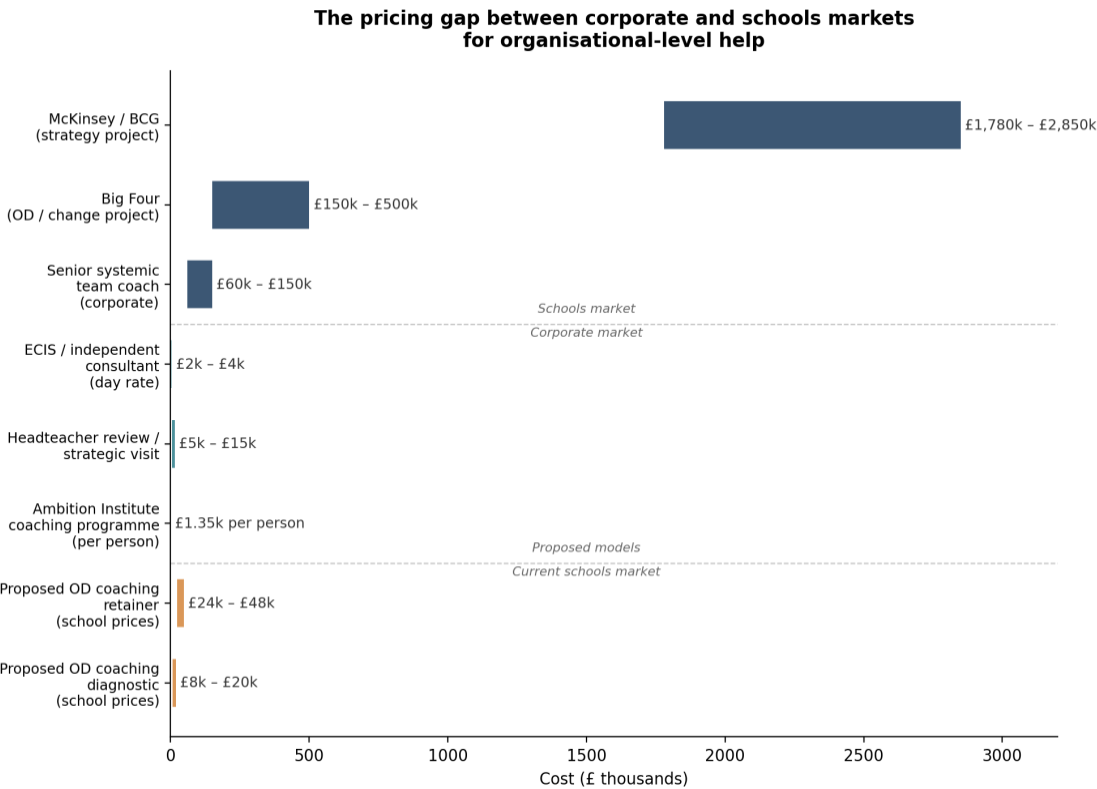
### 7.1 What the corporate world charges

The Hawkins-style systemic team coaching described in §4 is, in the corporate world, expensive work. A senior systemic team coach in the United Kingdom or United States, working with the executive team of a FTSE 100 or Fortune 500 company, will typically charge between £2,000 and £5,000 a day. A six-month engagement of the kind described in scenario one of §6, diagnostic interviews, an off-site, twelve fortnightly team sessions, would run to perhaps thirty days of coach time and cost between £60,000 and £150,000. Larger engagements involving multiple coaches run higher.

The strategy consulting world charges considerably more. McKinsey's published rate card for the United States federal government in 2024, available through the GSA Advantage portal, lists a senior partner at \$1,194 per hour and an engagement manager at \$834 per hour. Most McKinsey projects bundle partners, managers, consultants, and analysts into a fixed fee. McKinsey's work for the Financial Oversight and Management Board for Puerto Rico, for example, was reported by the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (2018) to cost approximately \$2 million per month, accumulating over \$50 million in fees by late 2018. These are the prices for pure strategy and analysis, before anyone has touched the question of how the organisation actually changes.

Even the Big Four consulting firms, Deloitte, PwC, EY and KPMG, which price below the global strategy houses, will typically charge £5,000 to £15,000 a day for partner-level transformation work and £1,500 to £3,000 a day for senior consultants. A medium-sized OD or change project at a Big Four firm might be priced at £150,000 to £500,000. Industry data from Consultancy.uk puts the Big Four's revenue per consultant at \$300,000 to \$400,000 per year, which gives a rough sense of what gets passed on to clients.

These numbers will look obscene to anyone running a school, and they should. Figure 4 visualises the gap.



**Figure 4.** The pricing gap between corporate and schools markets for organisational-level help.

## 7.2 What schools currently pay for adjacent services

Compare those corporate prices to what schools currently pay for the closest things they buy.

The most rigorously priced product in the schools coaching market is Ambition Institute’s Instructional Coaching programme, which costs £1,350 plus VAT per person for a one-term programme delivered over twenty-seven hours of contact time. The International Centre for Coaching in Education’s ILM Level 7 coaching qualification sits at around £3,000 plus VAT per coachee for a year-long programme. The Academy of Executive Coaching’s Systemic Team Coaching Certificate, run in partnership with Peter Hawkins and Renewal Associates, is priced at around £2,500 to £5,000 per participant depending on the package selected.

Bespoke consultancy from organisations like ECIS and independent school improvement consultants working in the international sector is rarely published but anecdotally sits at

£2,000 to £4,000 per day plus expenses. A typical headteacher review or strategic visit from a respected school improvement consultant might cost £5,000 to £15,000 for a few days' work and a written report. Tom Sherrington's WalkThrus subscriptions, which give a whole school access to instructional coaching content, cost a few thousand pounds a year per site.

The existing schools market is therefore approximately an order of magnitude cheaper than the corporate equivalent, and often two orders of magnitude cheaper for engagements at the systemic level. The gap reflects funding, not complexity.

### **7.3 What schools can actually afford**

The economics differ significantly between school contexts, and any serious discussion of affordability has to hold both the fee-income world and the public-funding world in view at the same time.

In the international schools market, ISC Research's January 2025 figures put annual fee income at around \$67.3 billion across 14,833 schools. Divided evenly, that is approximately \$4.5 million per school per year. Schools are not divided evenly: a premium British international school in Singapore or Shanghai will turn over \$30 to \$50 million a year; a smaller school in Pakistan or Kenya might turn over \$1 to \$3 million. International school fees range from about \$3,000 a year at the budget end of Southeast Asia to over \$40,000 at the premium end. Most international schools allocate somewhere between 1% and 3% of their operating budget to professional development. For a \$20 million school, that is \$200,000 to \$600,000 a year. Of that, the lion's share goes on individual training. Whole-school organisational development work, when it happens at all, is a small fraction of the total.

In the English state sector, the funding picture is tighter and more regulated. Per-pupil funding in mainstream state schools in England is currently around £6,000 to £7,500 depending on phase and context. A typical state secondary school serving 1,000 pupils therefore has an annual budget in the region of £6 to £7 million, the vast majority of which is committed to staff pay, premises, and statutory spending. Estimates of professional development spending in state schools vary considerably. Some analyses suggest schools spend around 1% to 3% of their budget on CPD, though much of this is committed to contractual obligations, subject-specific training, and Early Career Training Programme (ECTP) provision, which is DfE-funded. The discretionary portion of the professional development budget, the amount available for non-mandated organisational-level work, is

typically a small fraction of the total. There is little room in a single state school's budget for organisational-level work commissioned directly.

National independent schools in England occupy a middle position. Their fee income is typically lower per pupil than premium international schools but higher than state per-pupil funding, and they retain considerable autonomy over how their professional development budgets are used. A well-resourced independent school can commission diagnostic or retainer engagements directly. A less well-resourced one operates under constraints closer to the state sector.

The practical implication is direct but differs by context. A six-month Hawkins-style team coaching engagement at full corporate prices would consume between a quarter and a half of a single mid-sized international school's entire annual professional development budget. That is not going to happen, and it should not. In a state school, the same engagement would consume the entire annual professional development budget and then some. The corporate price point does not translate to either context. What translates is a different structure of commissioning, priced for the sector that commissions it.

#### **7.4 Workable models by context**

The practice therefore needs a different pricing structure from its corporate origins, and the structure itself varies by context. Four plausible models are proposed below, each suited to a different commissioning route, with a fifth explored in §7.5. Table 3 summarises the four primary models. Each is then discussed in turn.

*Four workable commissioning models for OD coaching at school prices.*

<b>Model</b>	<b>What it is</b>	<b>Realistic price</b>	<b>Where it fits</b>
<b>Diagnostic engagement</b>	2–4 weeks of coach time over a couple of months. Stakeholder interviews, an off-site to feedback what was found, a clear picture of the school	£8,000 – £20,000	Fee-funded schools and well-resourced independents commissioning directly. Out of reach for most single state schools
<b>Retainer engagement</b>	2–3 days a month for 6–12 months working with the senior team on real organisational challenges	£24,000 – £48,000 a year	International schools and independents with discretionary PD budgets and a clear organisational challenge to address
<b>Group- or trust-level engagement</b>	One coach working across 6–8 schools in a group or trust. Day rate spread across multiple budgets	~£100,000 a year	International school groups (Nord Anglia, ISP, Cognita) and English multi-academy trusts commissioning centrally
<b>Grant- or foundation-funded programme</b>	Multi-school programmes funded by foundations, endowments, or sector bodies rather than schools themselves	£100,000+ over 1–3 years, typically cross-subsidised	Publicly funded schools unable to commission directly, where a foundation, endowment, or sector body bears the cost

The **diagnostic engagement** is a short, intensive piece of work, perhaps two to four weeks of coach time spread over a couple of months, in which the coach interviews the senior team and key stakeholders, surfaces what they find, runs a one or two-day off-site to feed it back, and leaves the school with a clear picture of itself. Realistically priced for a fee-funded school, the engagement would cost £8,000 to £20,000. It is affordable on a single international school’s or well-resourced independent’s professional development budget. It produces immediate value. It also does not, on its own, change much. Diagnostic work without follow-through is a more sophisticated version of a strategic visit. For a typical state school commissioning directly from its own budget, even this low price point is difficult to justify, which is why the fourth model matters for publicly funded contexts.

The **retainer engagement** contracts the coach for two or three days a month over six to twelve months, working with the senior team on specific organisational challenges. Realistic pricing is £2,000 to £4,000 a month, or £24,000 to £48,000 for a year. This is a

significant line item, equivalent to perhaps 10% to 25% of a mid-sized international school's professional development budget, depending on the school's size and how much of its budget is allocated to professional development. It is defensible if it is solving a real organisational problem and building capacity that outlasts the engagement. In the state sector, a retainer model is generally only viable where the commissioning unit is the multi-academy trust rather than the individual school.

The **group- or trust-level engagement** is the most economically efficient of the four for any school system that has consolidated into larger units. Where international school groups exist, Nord Anglia, ISP, Cognita, the smaller chains, the not-for-profits, a single coach can work across six or eight schools in a region, spreading the day rate across multiple budgets. The same logic applies to English multi-academy trusts, whose central teams commission professional development and strategic support on behalf of multiple schools and whose scale increasingly resembles that of international school groups. A £100,000 annual contract becomes plausible at a trust or group level, paying for around forty days of senior coach time supporting heads, integrating newly joined schools, and developing distributed leadership across the network. That is a fraction of what a single Big Four consulting engagement would cost. It is well within what a group or trust can justify against the cost of a failed integration or a head departure, both of which cost the organisation considerably more than £100,000 in lost momentum, recruitment fees, and disruption.

The distinction Hawkins and Carr (2025) draw between incremental and transformational journeys is useful here. A diagnostic engagement (Model 1) is inherently incremental: it begins with one team and produces insights that may or may not lead to further work. A trust-level engagement (Model 3) can be either. An incremental version would start with the CEO's executive team and expand outward as the value becomes visible. A transformational version would begin with a whole-system commitment, coaching not only the senior team but the connections between school leadership teams, the central team, and the governing body from the outset. The latter is more ambitious, more expensive, and more likely to produce lasting change. It is also, in Hawkins and Carr's terms, what genuine systemic team of teams coaching looks like.

The **grant- or foundation-funded programme** is the route most likely to open the practice to schools that cannot commission it directly. A foundation such as the Education Endowment Foundation, a philanthropic endowment, a sector body like the Chartered College of Teaching (which announced in March 2026 that it will take on the Teacher Development Trust's work from summer 2026), or a university-led research programme can fund a multi-school OD coaching engagement on behalf of participating schools. The schools themselves bear little or none of the cash cost. The funder typically requires

rigorous evaluation as a condition of the funding, which in turn addresses one of the biggest gaps in the current picture: the absence of empirical evidence about whether the practice works. A grant-funded programme is, for this reason, arguably the most strategically important of the four models for the long-term development of the field.

### **7.5 Building internal capacity: a model worth investigating**

A fifth model deserves consideration, though its viability in this specific context remains untested. The train-the-coach approach has an external provider develop internal coaching capacity at the school or group, so that the OD coaching work can eventually be sustained without external support. Translated to schools, this might take several forms: training senior leaders or experienced heads to coach their peers across schools in a trust or group; establishing school partnerships in which trained coaches work reciprocally across paired schools, each bringing an outsider's perspective to the other's organisational challenges; or developing local practitioners within a region who can offer OD coaching at school prices because their cost base is lower than that of international consultancies. The model is cheaper at scale, and it builds genuine internal capacity. It also faces real challenges. Trained coaches who return to their day jobs frequently find that the coaching work does not survive contact with their existing role demands. The quality of internal coaching can be difficult to assure without ongoing supervision. And the relational dynamics of coaching a peer within the same system are different from, and in some respects harder than, coaching as an outsider. These challenges are worth investigating rather than assuming away. The most promising variants may be those that preserve some structural distance between the coach and the coached, whether through cross-school partnerships, regional practitioner networks, or trust-level coaching roles that sit outside any single school's line management. The empirical question is open, and it is one of the directions for further research proposed in §9.

None of the four models supports the kind of long, deep, multi-year engagement that some of the best corporate OD work involves. Such engagements, in education, are almost always funded by something other than the schools themselves: research grants, philanthropic foundations, sector-wide partnerships. The author's expectation is that the most ambitious OD coaching in education will, for the foreseeable future, require some form of subsidy or pooled funding. The unit economics of a single school do not support it. There is, however, a further possibility that deserves attention: building OD capacity into the roles that already exist at trust level. In England, a growing number of multi-academy trusts now employ CPD leads or directors of professional learning whose job is to design the infrastructure for professional development across their group of schools. If these roles

were to include training in OD approaches, the practice could be embedded within the trust's existing system design function rather than bought in from outside.

This is not a hypothetical model. In England, a growing community of trust-level CPD leads and directors of professional learning already exists, and their role is, in essence, system design: looking across groups of schools and designing the infrastructure that makes professional learning effective. Some of these practitioners are already working in ways that closely resemble the OD coaching approach described in this paper, developing teams of subject leads who lead professional learning communities, creating the conditions for rich dialogue about practice, and building distributed leadership capacity across their schools. The gap is not in the role itself but in the training and conceptual framework available to support it. If the people doing this work were equipped with the language, tools, and theoretical grounding of OD coaching, the practice could be embedded within the system rather than bought in from outside. This may prove to be the most sustainable and affordable commissioning route of all, particularly for publicly funded schools where external coaching at scale is financially out of reach.

This is compounded by a tension between the timelines that school improvement typically operates on and the timelines that OD coaching requires. Schools, and the accountability systems around them, tend to expect visible results quickly. A trust integrating a new school wants alignment within a year. A board reviewing a new head wants evidence of progress within two terms. An inspection cycle does not pause while the team learns to talk to itself differently. OD coaching, by contrast, works on a slower rhythm: building trust, surfacing assumptions, and allowing new patterns of working to emerge. The tension is real and cannot be wished away. Practitioners who promise fast results from slow work are being dishonest. But the alternative, fast interventions that produce surface compliance without deeper change, carries its own costs, and those costs tend to compound over time.

## **7.6 The reframe**

A final observation. The right question may not be how much the practice costs, but what the cost is of not doing it.

A failed school acquisition in a private equity-backed group can destroy roughly the value of one school's annual fee income before anyone notices. A bad senior leadership transition burns through eighteen months of momentum and a head's reputation. A culture problem that drives twenty teachers out costs the school somewhere between \$40,000 and \$80,000 in recruitment fees alone, before the impact on continuity is counted. Against

those numbers, an OD coaching engagement of £30,000 to £100,000, done well, is not expensive. It is unfamiliar.

The market is going to need to develop a fair pricing structure of its own. It has not yet. Anyone working in this space at the moment, including the author, is to some extent making it up as they go along: learning from corporate analogues and adjusting downward to what schools can actually afford. The most defensible position is to acknowledge this openly.

## 8. Limitations

This paper has proposed that organisational development coaching is an underdeveloped category of practice across school systems and that the conditions under which it can take root are present, in varying forms, in multi-academy trusts, international school groups, well-resourced independent schools, and, under the right commissioning arrangements, in publicly funded schools more widely. Each part of that argument has limits, and this section sets them out. The strongest version of any practice is the version that knows what it cannot do, and where it cannot do it.

Before proceeding, a framing note. For a paper grounded in an inductive, exploratory methodology, some of the items below are genuine limitations: constraints on what the analysis can claim. Others are better understood as features of the chosen approach rather than shortcomings. An exploratory synthesis that sets out to name a category and propose directions for research is not diminished by the absence of the kind of primary empirical data that a different kind of study would produce. Where the distinction matters, it is noted.

### 8.1 Time

OD coaching works through conversation, reflection, and collective sense-making. These take months, sometimes years. If a school is in genuine crisis, a safeguarding failure, a financial collapse, a leadership scandal, it needs decisive expert intervention, not slow facilitation. Cantore and Hick's primary school in special measures is a partial exception, because Wendy Hick used dialogue alongside direct action, not instead of it. The general principle holds when the building is on fire, the right call is to phone a fire brigade, not a coach.

### 8.2 Readiness

OD coaching is unlikely to succeed unless the senior team is willing to look at itself honestly. Not every team is. Some teams are too defensive, too factionalised, or too dominated by a single personality to be coachable as a unit. In those cases, the coach's responsibility is to notice early and either work with individuals first or recommend a different intervention. There is no shame in saying "this team is not ready for this work yet." There is considerable damage done by coaches who proceed regardless.

A related problem is the single evangelist. Sometimes one person in a school's leadership, genuinely committed to systemic change and OD thinking, tries to drive everyone forward without first taking a clear-eyed look at their team's readiness. The evangelist's enthusiasm is real, but enthusiasm is not the same as readiness. If the rest of the team has not arrived at the same place, the OD coaching process can become something the evangelist is doing to the team rather than something the team is doing together. The coach's job in this situation is to slow the evangelist down, not speed the team up.

### **8.3 Evidence**

The empirical base for OD coaching specifically in schools is thin. Cantore and Hick's 2013 paper remains essentially the only published case study of dialogic OD in a school setting. The coaching cultures literature, led by Gormley and van Nieuwerburgh's 2014 review and updated by Kapoutzis and colleagues in 2024, is theoretically rich but empirically sparse. Anyone who recommends OD coaching to schools today is recommending something that is well-grounded in adjacent research, corporate team coaching, healthcare improvement, dialogic OD in non-school sectors, but relatively under-tested in education itself. This should not stop practitioners doing the work. It should stop them claiming the work has more empirical backing than it does.

### **8.4 The practitioner**

Good OD coaching requires a particular combination of skills that very few people have. It requires the relational depth of an executive coach, the systems thinking of an OD consultant, the pedagogical understanding of an experienced educator, the political sensitivity to read a senior team, and the discipline not to fill silences with one's own opinions. A practitioner who trained as an executive coach may lack the systems lens. A practitioner who trained as a consultant may struggle to stay in inquiry. A practitioner from a teaching background may find it hard not to revert to telling. The training pipeline for this work, frankly, does not yet exist. The author trained piecemeal, and his impression is that most of his peers have done the same.

Hawkins and Carr (2025) make a related point. They call for what they describe as integrated development professionals: practitioners who can move fluidly between coaching and consulting, hold multiple perspectives, and cultivate relational intelligence across human and organisational systems. This is not a job description that any current training programme produces. It is, however, a recognisable description of what the work

requires, and its articulation by the most established voices in the systemic coaching field suggests that the practitioner gap is widely felt, not just in schools but across sectors.

## **8.5 Power**

Schools are not flat organisations. Heads have power. Boards have more. Owners and trustees and inspectors have more again. A coach who pretends those power dynamics do not exist is fooling themselves. Some conversations a senior team cannot have openly because the power imbalance in the room makes honesty unsafe. Part of the OD coach's craft is to know when to surface a power dynamic, when to work around one, and when to refuse an engagement because the conditions make real work impossible.

An honest question follows from this: is the OD coach ever truly surfacing power, or are they sometimes doing the work insidiously, manoeuvring around power structures to create conditions for change without ever naming the power dynamics at play? Both approaches exist in practice. The first is more aligned with the dialogic values the profession claims; the second may sometimes be more effective in hierarchical school cultures where direct confrontation of power is career-ending. The tension between these two stances is not resolved in the literature and may not be resolvable in principle. What matters is that the practitioner is honest with themselves about which one they are using, and why.

## **8.6 Some change requires telling**

This is the limitation most uncomfortable for advocates of the practice to acknowledge. There are moments in a school's life when what is needed is a clear directive: a non-negotiable standard, an expert saying, "this is what good looks like and you need to do it." OD coaching, with its commitment to surfacing rather than telling, can become a form of indecision when decision is what the moment requires. Part of the practitioner's job is to know when to step out of the coaching role and say what they think. Coaches who can never do this become useless. Coaches who do it too often stop being coaches. Taylor (2026) makes a related point about de-implementation: leaders must sometimes give explicit guidance on which less impactful practices can be stopped, because without that guidance teachers will either heroically continue doing everything and burn out, or decide for themselves what to drop, leading to inconsistency. The OD coach who refuses ever to offer a clear steer in such moments is not serving the school well.

## **8.7 Schools do not always know best**

The title of this paper is a deliberate provocation, and the provocation must be qualified. Schools do not always know best. There are schools whose internal expertise is genuinely insufficient to the challenges they face. There are schools whose dominant internal narratives are wrong, or harmful, or self-serving in ways that the people inside cannot see. There are schools where the right intervention is genuinely external knowledge, brought in and applied with authority, because the internal resources to do otherwise do not exist.

The proposition of this paper is not that schools always have the answers. It is that schools more often have the answers than the conventional model of help assumes, and that the conventional model, by defaulting to the imported expert, tends to underestimate what is already in the building. The right question is not “do schools know best?” but “what proportion of the help they currently buy assumes they know nothing?” The author’s view is that the proportion is too high, and that there is room in the market for a category of practice that begins from a different assumption.

This is a reformist argument, not a utopian one. It does not claim that internal expertise is always sufficient. It claims that internal expertise is more often significant than current practice acknowledges, and that an underdeveloped category of help could redress some of the imbalance. The Double Diamond model described in §6 offers a useful way of thinking about when external expertise becomes appropriate. The first diamond of the model, Connect, Discover, Define, Align, is concerned with understanding the challenge and agreeing a community goal. That work is best done from within: it depends on the school’s own knowledge of its context, its people, and what matters most to them. It is in the second diamond, Develop, Learn, Deliver, Sustain, once the school has a clearly defined and collectively owned goal, that external expertise becomes useful. A school that has done the first diamond well knows what it needs. It can commission external help precisely and evaluate it honestly. A school that skips the first diamond and goes straight to the external expert is buying a solution to a problem it has not yet understood in its own terms. The Double Diamond model therefore does not reject external expertise. It sequences it: internal sense-making first, external input second (Leaning and Lerner, 2026).

## **8.8 Applicability varies sharply across school contexts**

The broader the scope of a claim, the more honest a paper has to be about the contexts in which the claim holds least well. This paper suggests that OD coaching has applicability

across school systems globally, but the applicability is uneven, and some of the unevenness is sharp enough to qualify as a genuine limitation of the argument.

The practice is most plausible where four conditions hold together: organisational complexity that exceeds what a single senior team can manage on its own; a commissioning route with enough budget flexibility to fund non-mandated work; leadership continuity long enough for the work to bed in; and a leadership culture open to being examined honestly. Where all four are present, as in well-run multi-academy trusts, international school groups, and well-resourced independent schools, the practice is viable. Where one or more is absent, the practice gets harder in specific and predictable ways.

Tight accountability environments are the first challenge. In school systems where inspection cycles are short, stakes are high, and leaders are judged on the decisiveness of their response to problems, a coaching stance is professionally risky for the leaders who commission it. The honest picture in the English state sector is that a head working inside a tight Ofsted cycle may simply not have the political space to commission slow, emergent, dialogic work, however much they would benefit from it. The same constraint applies, in different forms, to state schools in Singapore, to charter schools in the United States under performance contracts, and to any publicly funded system where job security is tied to short-cycle metrics. The limitation is not that the practice would not help these schools. It is that the commissioning act itself becomes a professional liability for the people who would have to authorise it.

Funding structure is the second challenge. A single publicly funded school in most national systems simply does not control enough of its own budget to commission organisational-level help directly. The viable routes in these contexts are trust-level or network-level commissioning, sector body sponsorship, and grant-funded research partnerships. Where none of these exist, the practice has no economic home, however strong the conceptual case.

Leadership turnover is the third challenge. OD coaching depends on continuity. A six- or twelve-month engagement with a senior team whose head is likely to be replaced during the engagement, or whose composition is likely to change significantly, is an engagement that should probably not start. In systems where head turnover is high, the English state sector has particular problems here, as does the international sector at the budget end, the window in which the practice can work is narrower than the practice needs. This does not invalidate the argument. It bounds it.

Language and cultural context is the fourth challenge. The dialogic OD tradition, and the coaching tradition it draws on, are deeply rooted in Anglophone Western assumptions about individual voice, psychological safety, and the appropriateness of surfacing disagreement in group settings. In cultural contexts where those assumptions do not hold in the same way, in parts of East Asia, in many Middle Eastern school contexts, in some African school traditions, the practice needs adaptation that the author is not equipped to specify from his own cultural vantage point. The honest answer is that this is work that needs to be done by practitioners rooted in those contexts, not imported wholesale from London, Boston, or even Shanghai.

The argument of the paper is therefore not that OD coaching is universally applicable in its current form. It is that the conceptual category is universally useful, that the practice appears to have broad applicability across school systems in principle, and that the conditions under which it can actually take root vary sharply enough that the commissioning routes, the pricing models, and in some cases the practice itself need to be adapted to context. Some of those adaptations are worked out in this paper. Many are not. Naming the limits is the first step towards addressing them.

### **8.9 The Western consultant problem**

The most uncomfortable limitation is the easiest to overlook. There is a real risk that any new category of help becomes a way for educated, mostly white, mostly Western consultants to charge schools in other parts of the world significant fees for the privilege of being asked questions. The international schools sector has a long history of this. Development aid in education has a longer one. OD coaching could become another version of either.

The defence against the risk is to be ruthlessly clear that the value lies in capacity built, not in time billed; to work in ways that genuinely transfer skill rather than create dependency; to charge in proportion to value delivered rather than days consumed; and to make room for practitioners rooted in the cultural contexts where the work is happening, rather than defaulting to imported expertise from high-cost markets. The author has no clean answer to this concern. He thinks anyone working in the space needs to keep the question in front of them, and to be willing to refuse work where the conditions for genuine capacity transfer are not present.

These limitations are real. They do not undermine the case for OD coaching. They sharpen it.

## 9. Recommendations and directions for further research

This paper has proposed that the schools coaching literature has a missing category, that the missing category is well-established in adjacent sectors, that the conditions under which the practice can take root exist in several kinds of school system from multi-academy trusts and international school groups to well-resourced independent schools and, under the right commissioning arrangements, publicly-funded schools more generally, and that the empirical case for the practice remains to be built. At the heart of this argument is a single shift in assumption: that development can be treated as an organisational property rather than an individual one, and that the school itself, not the teacher or the leader, can be the client of a coaching engagement. This final section sets out what might be done about each of those claims, differentiated where necessary by the kind of school system involved.

### 9.1 Recommendations for policy

For policymakers in education, and particularly for the agencies, foundations, and ministries that influence what kinds of professional development schools commission, four recommendations follow from the analysis above.

First, the dominant funding pathways for school improvement should be widened to include organisational-level development, not only individual-level training. Most current funding mechanisms reward investment in instructional coaching and individual leadership development. These are valuable and should continue. But they implicitly exclude work that operates at the level of the team or the institution, and the exclusion has shaped the market in ways the literature has yet to acknowledge.

Second, the inspection regimes that govern many national school systems should be examined for their effects on what kinds of help schools are willing to commission. Where inspection rewards confident, expert-led answers, the result is a market that prefers consultants to coaches. This may not be the intended consequence of any individual inspection framework, but it is a consequence worth surfacing.

Third, where governments and foundations fund research into school improvement, they should consider funding empirical work on the practice this paper describes. The empirical base does not currently exist. The reason it does not exist is partly that no one has paid for it.

Fourth, in multi-academy trusts and other school groups, the existing infrastructure of trust-level professional development leads should be recognised as a viable route for embedding OD capacity. As discussed in §7.5, many trusts already employ CPD leads and directors of professional learning whose role is, in essence, system design. Equipping these roles with OD thinking and facilitation skills may prove the most sustainable route to organisational development in the publicly funded sector.

## **9.2 Recommendations for practice**

For practitioners, both schools and the consultants and coaches who work with them, four recommendations follow.

Schools and school groups considering organisational-level help should ask three specific questions of any potential provider.

1. What is the locus of expertise in this engagement?
2. What capacity will remain in the school when the engagement ends?
3. And how will success be measured in terms that the school itself can articulate?

A provider whose answers privilege their own expertise, leave little behind, and measure success by the production of a report, the delivery of a training day, or the provision of a product or platform is offering a different category of help from the one this paper describes.

Coaches and consultants working at the boundary of OD and education should be honest about which tradition their training equips them for. The skill set required for OD coaching is not the same as the skill set required for instructional coaching, executive coaching, or strategy consulting. Practitioners who have one of those backgrounds and who want to move into OD coaching should be explicit, with themselves and with clients, about what they are still learning.

School groups in particular should consider whether the costs of an underdeveloped OD coaching capacity are showing up elsewhere in their accounts, in the form of failed integrations, head turnover, or culture problems that drive teacher attrition. The reframe at the end of §7 may be the most consequential idea in the paper: the cost of the practice is more usefully compared to the cost of not having it than to the cost of other kinds of help.

Finally, practitioners should attend carefully to whose voices are shaping the organisational conversations they guide. The proposition of this paper is that OD coaching works through better conversations, but the quality of those conversations depends on who is in the room. The WHO Surgical Safety Checklist, discussed in §4.2, succeeded in part because it

was developed and integrated with the people actually doing the work. If OD coaching in schools confines its conversations to the senior team and the board, it risks reproducing the same top-down assumptions it claims to challenge. Widening participation, bringing teachers, middle leaders, and support staff into the process of organisational self-examination, is not an optional extra. It is the mechanism by which organisations come to see themselves more clearly. This matters all the more as school groups grow in size: the distance between a trust central team and the classrooms it is ultimately responsible for increases with every school that joins, and without deliberate structures for cross-level dialogue, the risk of disconnection between teachers, school leaders, and the centre becomes a structural feature rather than an accident.

### **9.3 Recommendations for the academic field**

For the academic field, the recommendation is simpler. The category of practice this paper describes is currently invisible in the schools coaching literature. Making it visible would not require the displacement of any existing tradition. It would require the addition of a new strand of empirical and theoretical work, and the creation of space for that work in the journals, the conferences, and the doctoral training pipelines through which the field reproduces itself.

### **9.4 Eight directions for further research**

The empirical questions this paper raises and cannot answer fall into several categories, ranging from those that could be addressed in a Master's-level study to those that would require a multi-year programme of work. Eight are listed here as starting points, covering both international and state-sector contexts.

**Question 1.** Is there empirical evidence, published or unpublished, formal or informal, of OD coaching practice in schools beyond the Cantore and Hick (2013) case? The author's literature search found none, but the search was non-systematic and limited by language and disciplinary boundaries. A formal systematic review would be valuable, even if it confirmed the absence.

**Question 2.** What are the actual organisational challenges that senior leaders in different school systems currently face, as identified by the people running them? The author has

formed views from his own professional experience with international school groups, but a structured survey across contexts, international school group CEOs, multi-academy trust executive leaders, state school head teachers, and independent school principals, would provide a much stronger empirical basis for the claim that different parts of the schools sector have unmet OD needs. This is the kind of comparative study a doctoral student could pursue, and it would sharpen the cross-context argument this paper advances.

**Question 3.** When school groups commission organisational-level help, what do they currently buy, who do they buy it from, and how do they evaluate it? The author has been unable to find published data on this. A market study would be a valuable contribution.

**Question 4.** What does a successful OD coaching engagement in a school context actually look like, observed in real time? An ethnographic case study of a single engagement, conducted with appropriate consent and methodological rigour, would generate the kind of evidence the field currently lacks. This is the methodologically ambitious version of what Cantore and Hick attempted in 2013.

**Question 5.** How does the cost-of-not-doing-it argument advanced in §7 compare to the actual costs of failed integrations, leadership transitions, and culture-driven teacher attrition in school groups? A quantitative study of these costs, even at one large group, would either strengthen or undermine the central commercial claim of this paper. The author would welcome either result.

**Question 6.** Is there something about international school contexts, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, geographically dispersed, often expatriate-heavy, that requires modifications to the corporate OD coaching tradition before it can be applied? The author suspects there is, but he cannot specify what the modifications would need to be. A practice-based research project led by someone with a foot in both worlds would be the natural format.

**Question 7.** What does OD coaching need to look like in publicly funded school contexts, and particularly in the English state sector, for it to be commissioned, delivered and sustained without compromising the dialogic stance that defines it? The accountability pressures, funding constraints, and leadership turnover patterns described in §5.2 and §8.8

all bear on this question. A practice-based study conducted inside a willing multi-academy trust, or a comparative study across several trusts operating in different regional and demographic conditions, would begin to answer it. The author would welcome being proven wrong about the constraints, and welcomes being shown contexts in which they bind less tightly than he has suggested.

**Question 8.** What does the practice need from a training pipeline that does not yet exist, and what would such a pipeline look like? This is the most strategic of the eight questions, and the most difficult. It is also the question on which the long-term future of the practice depends. It would suit a research collaboration between a coach training institution, a school group or multi-academy trust, and a university with a presence in both fields.

## 9.5 A closing observation

The paper began with a head teacher who walked into a school in special measures in 2012 and decided to have a conversation instead of bringing in a consultant. Manorfield Primary came out of special measures and was rated Outstanding by Ofsted in July 2013, barely a year after Hick arrived. As of its most recent inspection in June 2024, the school is rated Good overall with Outstanding features. Cantore went on to become a Senior Teaching Fellow in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Southampton and co-authored a second edition of his work on appreciative inquiry. The conversation they started at Manorfield, in other words, did not end there. But nor did it spread in the way this paper argues it should have.

Cantore and Hick wrote up their work in a small practitioner journal because they hoped someone would build on it. Twelve years later, no one has. This paper is, in part, an attempt to pick up the question they asked and ask it again, in a slightly louder voice, in front of a slightly different audience. Whether it gets a response is a matter for the readers of this paper, and for the field.

The argument can be reduced to three propositions, each of which is small and none of which is original.

The first is that the schools coaching literature has a category-shaped hole in it, and the hole has the same shape as the corporate practice known as systemic team coaching or organisational development coaching. Once the shape is named, it is hard to unsee.

The second is that the organisational conditions which make this practice useful, complexity that exceeds what a single senior team can manage alone, consequential transitions and integrations, cultures that need to become capable of examining themselves, are now present in school systems around the world: in English multi-academy trusts, in international school groups, in well-resourced national independent schools, and, where the commissioning infrastructure exists to reach them, in publicly-funded schools more widely. The commissioning routes, the price points, and in some cases the practice itself need to be adapted to context. The underlying category does not change.

The third is that the school in front of any external helper, whatever its problems and wherever in the world it sits, more often contains the wisdom to address those problems than the conventional model of help acknowledges. The job of the helper is to make that wisdom visible to the school itself. Everything else is technique.

If there is an invitation in this paper, it is to consider whether these three propositions are right, and if they are, to do something about them.

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