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A Network Policy Analysis of England's National Tutoring Programme: COVID-19 and the Embedding of the Private Sector in State Governance

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Abstract: This paper examines the UK government's main intervention in education during and after the COVID crisis—the National Tutoring Programme (NTP)—which operated in England from 2020–24. It involves a truncated genealogy of the NTP which shows how, when learning loss emerged as a key policy problem, the private sector was promoted as the main policy solution. We trace the evolution and decline of the NTP in response to schools' experiences and needs. We also conduct a network analysis of the final iteration of the NTP and suggest that although it can be seen as a policy failure, it set a significant precedent in the extent to which the private sector became imbricated into the machinations of governance.

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We use the construct of heterarchical governance to argue that the NTP saw the establishment of a mezzanine level of governance which saw the involvement of the global education industry, with its concomitant neoliberal imaginary of education, embedded at a powerful level of the policy process. This raises questions about how privatisation might be conceptualised and articulated as well as raising concerns about the capacity for global actors to access and shape national education systems, notably during times of crisis.

Keywords: privatisation; tutoring; COVID-19; policy networks; governance

Un análisis de política en red del Programa Nacional de Tutorías en Inglaterra: La COVID-19 y la incorporación del sector privado en la gobernanza estatal

Resumen: Este artículo examina la principal intervención del gobierno del Reino Unido en materia de educación durante y después de la crisis de la COVID-19: El Programa Nacional de Tutorías (*National Tutoring Programme*, NTP), que operó en Inglaterra entre 2020 y 2024. Presenta una genealogía resumida del NTP que muestra cómo, cuando la pérdida de aprendizaje emergió como un problema clave de política pública, se promovió al sector privado como la principal solución. Rastreamos la evolución y el declive del NTP en respuesta a las experiencias y necesidades de las escuelas. Asimismo, realizamos un análisis de redes de la última versión del NTP y sostenemos que, aunque puede considerarse un fracaso de política pública, estableció un precedente significativo en cuanto al grado en que el sector privado se entrelazó con las dinámicas de gobernanza. Utilizamos el concepto de gobernanza heterárquica para argumentar que el NTP supuso el establecimiento de un nivel intermedio de gobernanza que implicó la participación de la industria educativa global, con su correspondiente imaginario neoliberal de la educación, incrustada en un nivel influyente del proceso de formulación de políticas. Esto plantea interrogantes sobre cómo podría conceptualizarse y articularse la privatización, así como preocupaciones sobre la capacidad de los actores globales para acceder y moldear los sistemas educativos nacionales, especialmente en tiempos de crisis.

Palabras-clave: privatización; tutoría; COVID-19; redes de política; gobernanza

Uma análise de política em rede do Programa Nacional de Tutoria da Inglaterra: A COVID-19 e a incorporação do setor privado na governança estatal

Resumo: Este artigo examina a principal intervenção do governo do Reino Unido na educação durante e após a crise da COVID-19: O Programa Nacional de Tutoria (*National Tutoring Programme*, NTP), que funcionou na Inglaterra de 2020 a 2024. Apresenta uma genealogia resumida do NTP que mostra como, quando a perda de aprendizagem surgiu como um problema central de política pública, o setor privado foi promovido como a principal solução. Acompanhamos a evolução e o declínio do NTP em resposta às experiências e necessidades das escolas. Também realizamos uma análise de redes da última versão do NTP e argumentamos que, embora possa ser considerado um fracasso de política pública, estabeleceu um precedente significativo no grau em que o setor privado se imbricou nas engrenagens da governança. Utilizamos o conceito de governança heterárquica para sustentar que o NTP representou o estabelecimento de um nível intermediário de governança que contou com a participação da indústria global de educação, com seu imaginário neoliberal correspondente, incorporado a um nível influente do processo de formulação de políticas. Isso levanta questões sobre como a privatização pode ser conceituada e articulada, bem como preocupações sobre a capacidade de atores globais de acessar e moldar sistemas educacionais nacionais, especialmente em tempos de crise.

Palavras-chave: privatização; tutoria; COVID-19; redes de políticas; governança

A Network Policy Analysis of England's National Tutoring Programme: COVID-19 and the Embedding of the Private Sector in State Governance

This paper examines the UK government's main intervention in education during and after the COVID crisis—the National Tutoring Programme (NTP)—which operated in England from 2020–24. This programme involved funding schools to employ tutors for students in primary and secondary schools via private companies, initially to help young people “catch up” after school closures. The total spent was £594 million by 2021 (Public Accounts Committee, 2023) and a further £349 million in 2022–23 (DfE, 2022). “Tutoring” in this context means students having additional one-to-one or two-to-two sessions before or after school, online or in person, organised by their school. Previously and traditionally tutoring has been understood as something paid for by parents, in addition to normal schooling, that takes place in homes or in tutor centres run by private companies (Exley, 2025). It is associated with middle-class parenting, for example when used to prepare children for school entrance exams and is regarded in the research literature as a method of social reproduction (Holloway & Kirby, 2020). The NTP therefore potentially represented a marked change in the nature of the tutoring industry in England.

During the four years of operation, the NTP evolved, with different rules on how schools could spend the money and changes to the roles played within the programme by the private sector to deliver the tutors and quality assurance of tutor companies. In this paper, we explore the NTP as an example of heterarchical governance—a term that references a more polycentric system of state governance and aims “to capture the operations and influence of new epistemic communities and knowledge networks” (Wilkins & Mifsud, 2024, p. 352). We use a genealogical approach drawing on Foucault (1977, 1981) to first examine how the NTP operated and the background to the key concepts shaping its introduction. We then analyse the network of private operators involved in the NTP as an example of privatisation that embeds the private sector as a critical and powerful player in and part of the process of governance.

It should be noted that the participation of private actors in the design and delivery of state education in England is not a new phenomenon. The recent history of the privatisation of state education in England can arguably be traced to the landmark 1988 Education Reform Act (Bailey & Ball, 2016), which introduced what Ball and Youdell (2007) conceptualise as endogenous and exogenous forms of privatisation (also, see Ball, 2008). While the former refers to internal reforms to the practices, culture, and values of the education system to render it more market-like (such as the introduction of choice, competition between schools, and performance management), the latter refers to the opening up of public education services to participation by private actors, in the form of funding, management, regulation, and delivery (Gutierrez & Exley, 2025). Existing research in England has explored this ongoing and increasing private sector participation in relation to, for example, independent state schools known as academies and free schools (Ball, 2009a; Olmedo, 2014; West, 2014), the teacher training organisation Teach First (Bailey, 2015; Olmedo et al., 2013), and online learning and resource platforms such as Oak National Academy (Peruzzo et al., 2022), which was conceived and launched during the COVID pandemic.

We begin by introducing the NTP, before we explain the theoretical framework for the paper and our methodology. We then set out our findings through the genealogy and network analysis. We argue throughout that the NTP represented a significant step change in the nature and extent of the involvement of the private sector in educational governance.

Introducing the NTP

Initially described as part of the UK government's "£1 billion COVID Catch Up Plan", the NTP began as a response to school closures during the pandemic. It was announced in June 2020, as concerns about the "lost learning" of young people grew. The first stage of the programme involved schools receiving funds to buy in tutoring from "tuition partners," who were already established tuition agencies around the country and abroad. This was organised by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).¹ This tutoring involved tutors providing one-to-one or small group sessions to students from Year 1 to Year 11 in England (age 5–16), either in person or online. A second strand of the NTP involved academic mentors in schools in the most deprived areas, who would be "in-house" mentors, based in schools, providing intensive catch-up support. Original estimates were that the NTP would involve 15,000 tutors offering tuition to around 250,000 children (Department for Education [DfE], 2020).

The NTP continued in the academic year 2021–22 and beyond, with the final year of operation being 2023–24. The government awarded the contract for operating the programme to different organisations and shifted the emphasis from COVID catch-up to reducing the attainment gap between disadvantaged young people and their peers in their promotion of the programme. There was also a shift over time in how much autonomy schools were afforded in making decisions about how NTP money was spent. There was a decline in the proportion of schools taking up the NTP funding, from a peak of 87% in 2021–22 (NAO, 2023), largely due to funding issues (NFER, 2024), and the programme stopped in 2024.

Estimates of the overall impact of the 5 million courses (each made up of multiple tutoring sessions) taken during the years the NTP operated, based on assumptions from other studies of the impact of tutoring, suggest significant gains in terms of grade improvements and thus future earnings (Savours & Rodriguez, 2023). However, evaluations of the programme were equivocal about its impact, and there remain significant doubts about the value for money it provided (Styles, 2024). There were also criticisms voiced by school leaders about the NTP, and the external providers used as tuition partners (Weale, 2021). These and the evolution of the programme are discussed in more detail in the genealogy section below. The NTP is a clear example of government's turn to the private sector to help during a time of crisis. Our interest lies in understanding the NTP as a form of privatisation of the education sector and this informs our theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis developed below draws upon a toolbox of theoretical, conceptual, and methodological resources. Our key theorisations concern privatisation and heterarchical state governance, which we discuss below. To operationalise these theorisations, we deploy the methodologies of genealogy and network analysis, which we return to in the methodology section.

Processes of privatisation are increasingly global in reach and scope, with national governments "more open and willing to incorporate the support and policy influence of different actors from the private sphere and third sector in the delivery and governing of education" (Olmedo et al, 2013, p. 492). With regards to the specific case of the NTP, while it is important that such privatising impulses and practices are understood within the context of the COVID pandemic, and can be understood as an example of "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007), it is not surprising that the UK government turned to the private sector for support at this time.

¹ The Education Endowment Foundation is a charity with the aim of "supporting schools, colleges, and early years settings to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence" (EEF, n.d./a). The Foundation was founded in 2011 with a £125 million grant from the Department for Education.

While this was certainly a time of significant crisis, such a response was a continuation of what are now well-established modes of government and governing characteristic of what Ball (2009b) terms the “governance turn” in education. This “turn” refers to the shift from government to governance; that is, from centralised and bureaucratic government to governance in and by networks and heterarchies (Ball, 2009a). It is worth noting that privatisation and governance are treated here both separately and together: while an understanding of governance necessitates an understanding of the different ways in which public education and policy are being privatised, it will still be fruitful to separate them at times to ensure conceptual clarity. We attend to privatisation first and then return to heterarchical governance and policy networks.

Privatisation

Privatisation has been a key strategy adopted by national governments in reforming their public education systems. Both the modes of, and rationale for, reform have been substantially informed by neoliberal discourse which critiques excessive state intervention and regulation, encompassed by the mantra “more market, less state.” Our interest here is the observation that privatisation is increasingly global in scope (Gutierrez & Exley, 2025; Verger et al., 2017). Indeed, the conceptualisation and identification of a global education industry (GEI) is an attempt to capture a significant change in the impact and scope of privatisation in education. It “explicitly focuses on the transnational dimension of education marketisation and on the emergence of new global businesses specialising on education services and products” (Verger et al, 2017, p. 31). Verger et al. mark out some of the key characteristics of the GEI that evidence an escalation of the influence of different forms and modalities of privatisation. They point to an industry that features: a network of private, for-profit and not-for-profit organisations; a heterogeneous collection of actors including large multinational corporations involved in the distribution of educational goods and services, management consultancies, international organisations such as the OECD, IT companies and national actors, philanthropists, charities, think tanks; integrations, mergers and acquisitions between companies and organisations; global scale operations including cross-border supply of services such as online learning technologies, assessment services, professional development; competition between businesses and providers in a way that incentivises business-like practices; access to financial capital markets to support expansion (Verger et al., 2016, p. 12). In this context, the state often has a central role as a connecting agent, notably in the “initiation and mediation of networks” (Parreira Dol Amaral & Thompson, 2019c, pp. 276 and 281 cited in Gericke, 2022, p. 842) and heterarchical relations (Ball, 2009a). It is through such networks and heterarchies, moreover, that the GEI operates at both a national and international level extending and intensifying the reach and influence of the private sector. Such influence and reach extend to policy and policymaking itself, to the very work of government from policy development/conception through to provision—that is, privatisation of and through policy. Taken together, these different modes, forms and scales of privatisation reflect not merely changes in service provision and policy influence, but more significantly changes in the forms and modalities of the state. To develop this, we now turn to new governance, policy networks and heterarchies.

Governance, Policy Networks and Heterarchies

We conceptualise governance as representing a shift in the form and modalities of the state and a change in the very operation of government, whereby the state is increasingly reliant on a diverse range of policy actors in policy processes, from planning and development, through to delivery. This is a “reshaping ...[of] the traditional image of policy processes in sub-national, national and supranational politics” (Ball, 2010a, p. 124), and through which new interests and voices—especially from the private sector—are represented and established within (global) policy processes. Jessop’s (2004) notion of the “competition state” is relevant here, in which the state’s role has become to structure opportunities for global capital to expand and operate,

reflecting “a shift in the fundamental structures of the real world and a corresponding shift in the centre of gravity around which policy cycles move” (Jessop, 1998, p. 32). Scholars have proposed the concept of heterarchical network governance (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Jessop, 1998) to try and capture the sense that the forms of private sector involvement in previously state-run endeavours, such as education, do not represent a withdrawal of the state but rather a reconfiguration of the state; in effect the privatisation of education facilitates the spread of powerful networks of private and non-state actors (NSAs) and organisations that constitute systems of new, more light-touch forms of political governance. Heterarchies are a complex organisational form “somewhere between hierarchy and network” (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 138). They “enlarge the range of actors involved in shaping and delivering policy” (Newman, 2001, p. 125) and represent and establish a “polycentric state” and mode of governance which involves a “catalyzing of all sectors—public, private and voluntary—into action to solve their community’s problems” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 20). Heterarchical governance combines elements of previous forms of governance, such as the “anarchic” market form and hierarchical authority of the nation/territorial state (Jessop, 1998), with networked forms of organisation, resulting in “more flexible, asymmetric, heterarchical relationships, within which responsibilities and processes of decision-making are shared by a heterogeneous mix of old and new policy actors” (Avelar & Ball, 2019, p. 20). While the resulting shape of heterarchies is that of a network, or more precisely, “a web of interconnected and interdependent political and economic networks” (Olmedo et al, 2013, p. 493), it should be noted that the term “network” is contested and can be misleading. Indeed, the extent to which our analysis of the NTP and the organisations and relationships involved can be characterised as a network is open to question and further scrutiny. As Gjaltama et al. (2019) note, “the literature differs greatly about what constitutes a network. In some cases, networks are abstract groups of actors without clear linkages, whereas in other cases networks are very well-defined groups of interdependent actors” (p. 1767). Perhaps our analysis leans more towards the former than latter conceptualisation of the networked heterarchical relationships of the NTP, although further research is needed here.

Methodology

In this paper we employ two distinct methods—genealogy and network analysis—which we use both separately and together to understand the NTP as a form of privatisation within the education system in England. Our aim here is to explore what the NTP represents in terms of the evolving role of the private sector in the policy process of a neoliberal state, particularly in the context of a global crisis.

Foucault’s genealogical method, as he explains in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (1981), involves writing histories that reject certainty and universals. Genealogy is “concerned with the processes, procedures and apparatuses by which truth and knowledge are produced” (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 202). It is a way of writing a history which views the present as an episode, not the culmination of a linear process of historical development. Engaging with a “critique of the present” as a moment in the struggles between different ideas involves taking a position marked by “profound scepticism”, which is “directed to the present, in particular to those truths, ideas and “constants” that appear to have or present themselves as having no history” (Jones, 2022, p. 12). A genealogical approach challenges accepted truths about what happened and aims in Tamboukou’s (1999) words, to “provide a counter-memory that will help subjects recreate the historical and practical conditions of their present existence” (p.203). While our brief genealogy does not lay claim to such an achievement, we do explore the alternative ideas that were forgotten in the focus on children “catching up” during the pandemic. It is important to remember, as COVID passes into memory, that there was nothing inevitable about the focus on learning loss and the resolution of this through tutoring. As Jones (2022) writes,

genealogy “shows that things are not as necessary as all that and may well have been, and critically therefore could be, different” (p. 12).

Foucault (1977) used the terms *descent* and *emergence*, drawing on Nietzsche, to describe the different elements of genealogy. *Descent* is an exploration of multiple beginnings rather than a single origin, through an objective examination of the complexity of ideas. It focuses on heterogeneity, rather than a linear passage of progress. *Emergence* focuses on the way in which an idea or an event emerges into a field at a particular time, while other ideas disappear. Considering this subjugation and disappearance of “disqualified knowledges” is as important as exploring those that gain prominence. The result of a genealogy is never to find a “real truth” or produce a better history, but to challenge and critique the production of narratives that obscure the production of and insubstantiation of power. This method influences our genealogy of the NTP.

Our network policy analysis follows the approach of network ethnography (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Hogan, 2016). This approach aims to understand the nature and features of heterarchical network governance and often focusses on the relationship between state and NSAs within given policy networks. It does this by paying “close attention to the organisations and actors within a field, to the chains, paths and connections that join these actors and to situations and events in which policy ideas are mobilized and assembled” (Santori & Jin, 2023, p. 509). Network ethnography can involve a combination of different techniques for data gathering but often paramount are “deep and extensive” internet searches (Santori & Jin, 2023, p. 510). Our network analysis of the three organisations involved in the final iteration of the NTP is based on internet searches that entailed a “deep dive” of the organisations’ websites as well as related DfE and NTP web pages.

The initial aim and focus were to identify and trace the involvement of these three key organisations in the management, design and delivery of the tutoring programme. As it became clear that we were investigating organisations with considerable global presence, our search widened to explore the nature of these organisations, particularly their relationships to a wider international network characterised as a global education industry. This entailed expanding the search to financial and “professional” websites such as LinkedIn as well as financial news and journalism. Combining our searches, we were able to build up a more complete and multi-angled understanding of the way in which these organisations have evolved and currently operate.

Our network analysis provides us with an initial understanding of the way the NTP has evolved and the role of certain organisations in this. This analysis is based on publicly available documents and websites, and this brings with it limitations to what we can claim. We have not probed into what might be described as the “lived reality” of the relationship between government and the private sector—its various alliances and partnerships. Undoubtedly, interviews with and observations of the people who inhabit these networks would bring a different and additional perspective to this current work. What we have tried to do is a preliminary mapping that sheds some light on the way that the private sector became part of the architecture of state education policy during and post COVID-19. Our analysis has also explored the way that these organisations’ websites, documents, and practices function as sites that constitute a powerful milieu in which an understanding of what tutoring is, what it is for, and what it should look like is produced. This aspect of our analysis owes much to Ball’s “policy as discourse” approach which understands policy documents, texts, and websites as socially constitutive. The focus of this kind of analysis is on the work the text does to create and sustain certain imaginaries, values and truths. We offer an analysis of that milieu as a medium through which neoliberal tropes and values about education are reproduced and reiterated.

Findings

A Brief Genealogy of the NTP

In line with Foucault's (1977, 1981) principles for a genealogy, we begin this section by focusing on the contemporary situation—a “critique of the present”—before exploring the process by which we arrived at the current context. The NTP, as it operated 2023–2044, was a system of funding for schools based on the level of children eligible for the Pupil Premium (PP)². In the fourth year of the NTP this funding was set at a minimum of £67.50 per PP-eligible pupil (DfE, 2023). This money was intended to fund 50% of the cost of tuition programmes for all pupils, with the school paying the remainder using their usual PP funding or other budgets. At this stage, schools were able to use the funding in three possible ways: to access tuition provided by external private tutoring organisations (“tutoring partners”) that have been quality assured by Tribal Group, a private company; to employ academic mentors, who are “in-house staff members recruited on your behalf by Cognition Education, and employed by your school to provide intensive support to pupils” (DfE, 2023); to fund tuition led by school staff (either staff or those employed for tuition specifically).

In this formation, quality assurance undertaken by the private providers Tribal and Cognition Education is integral to the NTP. The programme could be used to pay private tutoring companies, but choice is restricted to those that are quality assured. Alternatively, individual staff from within the school, current or new, could be used as academic mentors. The DfE suggests for the latter that these people could be “supply teachers and support staff, or retired teachers” (DfE, 2024). Eligible tuition could be conducted in flexible ways, either in person or online, taking place outside of normal school hours, such as after school, at weekends, during school breaks or during the summer holidays. There were restrictions on the use of the funding; however, in primary schools, tuition could only be for the core subjects of English and Mathematics; in secondaries, it could be used for tuition in English, mathematics, science, humanities and modern foreign languages (the subjects prioritised in other policy such as the EBacc³ measure). Tuition could be used for children who are learning English as an additional language, but not for direct English language teaching. Thus, while there was some flexibility in how the money was spent, there were also limitations. These were enforced through the requirement that schools keep data on how tutoring happens and how the money is spent. Moreover, the DfE pointed out that the NTP funding will feature in school inspections, noting “Ofsted will inspect all schools by summer 2025, during which process they may look at available tutoring data” (DfE, 2023).

The NTP as it operated in 2023–24 represented a new front in the advance of privatisation within the education sector in England. Government funding was spent on tutors from private companies, via schools, while at the same time private organisations were charged with important roles within this system—providing quality assurance of tutors (Tribal) and academic mentors (Cognition Education). It can be seen as, in Foucauldian terms, *a discontinuity* in the established set of relations between schools and government. State funding is explicitly earmarked for the involvement of the private sector in the provision of private tuition for individual students. Tutoring is no longer positioned as supplementary and personally secured educational support, it is promoted and prioritised as a form of legitimate and indeed invaluable

² Pupil Premium is additional funding paid to schools per child who is eligible for free school meals, or has been in the last six years, and those children currently or previously looked after by a local authority or other state care.

³ The EBacc measure is an accountability mechanism which records in performance tables the proportion of students attaining the benchmark grade at age 16 in five subjects (English language and literature, maths, the sciences, geography or history, and a language). The EBacc (English Baccalaureate) was introduced to encourage schools to focus on these “academic” subjects.

aspect of state education. Furthermore, the decision to focus on tuition marks a significant departure for the UK government in terms of the definition of who is appropriate to teach children. Traditionally, qualified teachers were the only possibility, but this has eroded through policy allowing higher level teaching assistants able to take classes, and schools classed as academies not having to employ qualified teachers. Within the NTP, extra time spent with external tutors, rather than with teachers or teaching assistants they know and trust, was presented as equally if not more valuable (DfE, 2023). However, a key aspect of this final iteration of the NTP was that schools were also able to use the funding to subsidise their *own staff* to do tutoring, or to employ new staff for this purpose. This is a fundamentally different model from where the NTP began in 2020 and suggests a degree of *ad hocery* in the evolution of the NTP, which is significant. To understand this evolution, we need to return to the beginnings of the programme during the COVID pandemic, when the NTP was promoted as a response to a specific policy problem.

In 2020, the dominant idea during the early phase of school closures was that children would “lose learning.” This was largely based on data from tests taken by children before and after long summer holidays, which showed that learning was lost when children were out of school (Harmey & Moss, 2021). In contrast, as Harmey and Moss argued at the time, the literature on “learning disruption,” drawing on case studies of sudden unplanned school closures due to natural disasters or epidemics, was far more pertinent to the COVID pandemic situation. Indeed, during COVID schools quickly produced home learning resources and online learning systems, which meant that many children continued to receive some schooling; at the same time, children whose parents were key workers and those deemed “vulnerable” were able to attend schools, which remained open for them. As a result, it was not simple to estimate how much learning children had “lost” and which children had lost it. For example, the variation in children’s access to laptops and other devices to use for online learning was a notable problem; the “digital divide” meant that some children were unable to access these lessons. Moreover, research conducted with those on the ground during the early months of the pandemic found that school leaders’ main priorities were ensuring that children were safe and well fed. The burden of caring for children fell unevenly on some schools, of course, so that potential gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers were a major concern (Moss et al., 2020). Thus, although there were questions around the nature, understanding, and extent of learning loss, this policy problem nevertheless emerged as the key concern of the time. Further, in this *emergence* phase, to use Foucault’s term, learning loss was constructed as important for all children, but especially for disadvantaged children. The terms “catch-up” and “learning loss” at this point “gained political and social *value* and heft” (Platten, 2024, p. 19, emphasis in original). At the same time, other ideas were subjugated in governmental discourse, such as the need to address issues of child poverty.

As the policy problem was constructed primarily as one of children needing to “catch up” on what they had lost, the policy solution of tutoring was constructed in response. Leaving aside the idea of catching up which suggests pre-defined requirements to be reached by certain ages—akin to a race where some children fall behind (Bradbury, 2021)—we consider here in more detail the way in which tutoring was constructed as the ideal remedy for learning loss.

To understand the ease with which large-scale tutoring emerged as a policy solution to learning loss, we need to look further back at the wider influences and evolutions that were already underway in this field. Drawing on Foucault’s *descent* (1977), it is important to note that tutoring has a long history in England but is strongly associated with particular groups of parents and as entirely separate from the state school system (Holloway & Kirby, 2020). Private tutors, usually individuals who attend a child’s home, are used by some families to help children prepare for entrance exams to selective and private schools at age 11, and to help children with exams at age 16 and 18. There are also tutoring companies that offer group tuition in an external location, which are cheaper. They are also used to complement general schooling by some families,

though the high cost prohibits widespread use. Tutors are not accredited by any organisation and do not have to have a teaching qualification or experience; this is an unregulated market. An alternative form of tutoring, where tutoring included working with children *within schools*, gained traction in the 2010s, however. Notably, the EEF, who are a government-funded body charged with assessing effective approaches in education based on evidence, promoted this form of tutoring to reduce the disadvantage gap, although they defined the security of the evidence as “moderate” (EEF, n.d./b). Thus, the term “tutoring” had blurred meanings, providing a useful ambiguity when it was presented as a solution. Tutoring for everyone, and particularly the disadvantaged, suggested a levelling of the playing field between those who traditionally benefitted from it, and everyone else.

In addition to this shifting perception of tutoring, the construction of tuition as a solution was bolstered by the argument that this solution was evidence-based. When the NTP was announced, the then-secretary of state for education referred to funding for “measures proven to be effective, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged” (DfE, 2020), and a link to the EEF guide on effective tutoring was provided. This suggests that the effectiveness of tutoring was one “truth” already established by 2020, even though the EEF was not overly confident about the evidence. This shift in the understanding of the term provided an ideal context for the NTP to be presented as a viable solution to learning loss.

Bearing in mind this background of ambiguity, we now turn to the significance of the NTP as a form of privatisation. As noted, the programme changed through the four years of operation, with first EEF and then the company Randstad operating the programme, before the contract was awarded on to Tribal, Cognition Education, and also the Education Development Trust (EDT) for the final two years. As a policy solution, the NTP was marked by a degree of discontinuity that contrasted with the long-term ambitions to bring about a “tutoring revolution,” with “long term reform to the educational sector,” as stated when it was announced (DfE, 2020). One continuity, however, was the reliance on the private sector as a solution. Turning to the private sector was a common response during COVID—seen also in the use of private companies to provide the Track and Trace system, for example—but, as in other sectors, this move was not without its attendant problems. In particular, there were issues during the second year of operation under Randstad. The format remained largely the same, but a major problem arose with the volume of tutors available, given the high level of demand from schools who wanted to use the NTP funding. A *Guardian* investigation found one tutoring company was paying 17-year-old students in Sri Lanka £1.57 an hour to provide tutoring to pupils in England, raising ethical questions (Weale, 2021). A report in 2022 written by the House of Commons Education Committee was critical of the NTP under Randstad, describing it as a “bureaucratic nightmare” (HoC Education Committee, 2022), and they were criticised for failing to operate an effective online tuition hub.

In applying evidence from tutoring in “normal” times, the NTP programme also ignored the particularities of the time such as the unique challenges of re-entering school after the closures. Research in 2020 and 2021 with primary schools found that headteachers rejected the need for external tutors, preferring instead to use their existing staff (Bradbury et al., 2022). For many children, the greatest challenges at this point were related to adjusting back to school attendance after months away, and so additional tutoring sessions online with tutors unconnected to their school were not an appropriate solution. Privatisation at this point was failing to resolve the policy problem of lost learning, leading to the need for further revisions to the NTP. The incoherence and *ad hocery* continued, perhaps because of a misdiagnosis of the original problem schools faced and a failure to listen to those on the ground (Moss & Bradbury, 2021).

By the academic year 2022–23, the contract for the NTP operated on a different basis, as explained above, with private companies used primarily at the mezzanine level to ensure quality, though private tutoring companies still provided some of the actual tutoring sessions too.

Significantly, schools were given more autonomy on how to spend their NTP funding and were able to employ their own staff. This marked a fundamental shift in the operation of the NTP and undermined some of the logic of the first two years; no longer was the private sector the only solution. It remained important, however, in a quality assurance role. This change represents what some might regard as the adaptation of policy during a time of crisis to better serve children's needs, while an alternative viewpoint might see the final formation of the NTP as an attempt to preserve the role of private companies within a system which could have simply delivered extra funding straight to schools. Here, the useful ambiguity of the term allowed this change to seem logical, especially after the first two years of the NTP.

In writing a brief genealogy of the NTP, the shift towards allowing schools to spend the funding on their own staff is highly important. In doing so, the NTP wrote the story of its own demise. Funding became another way to pay existing or past staff for extra hours, without the bureaucracy of the external systems. There seemed to be some implicit acknowledgement that the private sector could not solve the problem of learning loss alone, and that schools' expertise might be better used to address the issues children faced. The construction of the final iteration of the NTP must be understood within this context, of a plan which has only partially worked, which has been altered to make it more effective in ways which fundamentally undermine the principle of private sector efficiency. In some ways, then, the evolution of the NTP can be seen as a failure of privatisation; however, as we discuss below, this is not the complete story.

In keeping with the genealogical approach that Foucault argued should avoid neat unifying explanations for events, we can see the evolution of the NTP as *ad hoc* policy making, rather than as a well thought-through plan to impose further privatisation onto the sector or to denigrate the need for qualified teachers. It does represent, however, a failed attempt to shift the sector towards more private provision, based on the antecedents that made tutoring more ambiguous; these opened up the possibility and intelligibility of the NTP as policy solution to learning loss. This "win" for the state sector is only one part of complex pattern of gains afforded by the NTP, as we argue in the following section on the final iteration of the NTP.

Policy Analysis: NTP

In this section of the paper, we want to focus on the last iteration of the NTP and on the role of three key organisations: Cognition Education, part of the Cognition Learning Group, Tribal Group, and the Education Development Trust (EDT). Between 2022 and 2024 these organisations were responsible for devising the criteria and guidelines that determined whether tutoring organisations or individuals were accepted onto the NTP as tuition partners and academic mentors. They were given considerable agency in shaping the NTP and whilst the programme ended in 2024, we argue that their involvement represented a significant extension of the involvement of the private sector in England's policy process that can be understood as a form of heterarchical governance. It constituted a mezzanine level of governance which sat between government itself and those private tutoring organisations that delivered tutoring into schools and as such constituted a significant arena of delegated power. Further, our analysis situates these organisations as part of a wider network of global actors characterised as the global education industry that promote and normalise a neoliberal vision of education.

Mezzanine-Level Governance

Tribal, Cognition Education, and the EDT were appointed by government to be responsible for recruiting, vetting, training, and supporting a myriad of grassroots organisations and actors to provide tutoring and mentoring at the "chalk" and "screen" face. Their quality assurance responsibility also lay in facilitating contacts and contracts between appropriate teaching partners/mentors and schools. Tribal were appointed in 2022 by the DfE to become "a delivery partner...to quality assure all NTP Tuition Partners" (Tribal Group, 2024a). This meant that any tuition group that wished to deliver tuition for the NTP needed to apply to Tribal to

become an approved NTP tuition partner. Tribal developed a framework that they used to assess all prospective candidates prior to their acceptance onto the “find a tuition partner” service, which is broken down on their website (Tribal Group, 2024b). The criteria listed inevitably legitimate a certain kind of tuition partner; they identify three key areas of focus: organisation, safeguarding, and quality of provision (Tribal Group, 2024b). Across those areas, various requirements are identified such as the need for; a “clear governance and management structure,” “well-identified lines of accountability,” established human resources policies, “accurate and timely monitoring reports,” regular observation of tutors, and evaluation of their performance “against a competency framework” (Tribal Group, 2024b). Various forms of documentation could be provided by tutoring companies to Tribal to evidence successful fulfilment of these criteria, such as an organisation process manual, induction handbook, staff behaviour policy, diversity and inclusion policies, and marketing plans and materials. These criteria point to organisations that already function as established businesses replete with management and organisational structures and practices. The full list of requirements is extensive, which is arguably desirable; however, they undoubtedly favour certain types of tuition partners. Moreover, these requirements are productive and actively shape the market of providers since organisations need to model themselves in line with these stipulations to secure contracts. In respect of this, it is notable that there does not seem to be a requirement to discuss an organisations’ pedagogical or educational approach.

Cognition Education’s role on the NTP was to “oversee the recruitment of well-qualified people to work as academic mentors and deploy them to schools most in need of additional in-class tutoring resource” (Cognition Education, 2024a). Legacy NTP webpages give some indication of the job description and application process. The NTP website introduces you to the application process with Cognition Education, which involves an online 30-minute interview including competency-based questions and a screening process. Once accepted, you undertake an online training programme delivered by the EDT (NTP, n.d. a). It is difficult to know the criteria for acceptance on to the scheme beyond having a minimum of three A*-C or equivalent) and Grade 4 GCSE English and Maths, as this does not appear to be published. However, the job description explicitly says:

You don’t need to have experience of working in education to become an Academic Mentor as our fully funded training will ensure that you have all the knowledge you need for your new role. As long as you have enthusiasm and a passion for making a difference to the lives of young people, we’ll cover the rest. (NTP, n.d., b)

It is notable here that there is not simply an omission of reference to views on educational approaches or pedagogy, it is actively cited as of no concern.

The EDT provided an NTP training course for school-led tutors and academic mentors. This was a four-week course accessed completely online. There were several pathways on the NTP training course and aspects of the training aligned with principles from the Early Career Framework and Teachers’ Standards (Education Development Trust, 2024a) and assessment and certification has been designed and endorsed by the Chartered College of Teaching, an independent professional body for teachers (Education Development Trust, 2024b). The EDT also offered a “dedicated online platform” that gave school leaders access to “resources, official guidance, and best-practice recommendations” designed to help them improve the tutoring outcomes in their schools (Education Development Trust, 2024b).

It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the training course involved, not least because of the multiple pathways, but there is clear evidence of liaison with the Chartered College of Teaching and statutory guidelines on teacher training and development (Education Development Trust 2024a, 2024c). This presents a blurred picture of the design and nature of the training indicating that this aspect of the NTP sits in a particularly complex in-between, intermediary space between government, other NSAs and tutors at the chalk/screen face. The EDT appears

to be in a powerful position to shape an understanding of what constitutes good education, good tutoring or good pedagogy, without giving an account of how they understand these things.

These three organisations are situated in a powerful middle space between government and potential tuition partners and mentors that we argue constitutes a mezzanine level of governance. This echoes Ball and Juneman's (2012) understanding of the heterarchical form as drawing together "diverse horizontal and vertical links that permit different elements of the policy process to cooperate" (p. 138). They have a key role in the vetting, selection, training, and monitoring of services provided by tuition partners and mentors. They are not simply implementing government devised systems of accountability, they are actively involved in building those systems. In differing ways, they design, implement and monitor the systems of admissions and accountability that determine which individuals and organisations might gain employment through the NTP scheme. This means that the private sector is an arbiter of what constitutes adequate, relevant or good educational provision. They are responsible for defining and controlling a field of judgement which in turn legitimates and rewards certain values, practices, and approaches. Their decisions not only control access to a market of state education through the NTP but also shape that market.

These organisations were strategically positioned not simply as gatekeepers but as gate-builders. Through the design and implementation of various vetting, training, and monitoring practices, they were able to define what constituted appropriate and valid tutoring and select and deselect accordingly. This represents a significant extension of power to a network of private providers embedding them more deeply into the policy process. But as Parker (2007) states, these are not "just" networks. These networks function as and constitute a site of regulation, brought into being by public policy that distributed authority and power to NSAs. It may not represent an absolute delegation of the power of the state, but we argue that it indicates a shift in balance that privileges the private sector—a "disaggregation of state authority" (Peruzzo et al, 2022, p. 12). We suggest that what we witness with the creation of this mezzanine level is a form of "heterarchization of the state" (Jessop, 2016) which entails a "conception of policy as the collective effort of a set of players" (Olmedo, 2014, p. 253). This raises significant questions about who this network of players is and what this level of involvement in state governance might represent.

The Global Education Industry

As discussed, the conceptualisation and identification of a GEI is an attempt to capture a step change in the impact and scope of privatisation in education. Through extensive networks, the GEI operates at both a national and international level extending and intensifying the reach and influence of the private sector. In the following section, we suggest that Tribal, Cognition Education, and the EDT can be considered as representative of the GEI. We consider their global reach and involvement with governments worldwide; their "key" people and the roles they play; the prevalence of acquisitions and mergers; the importance of edtech to their services and global reach.

Global Networks, Government Contracts, Mergers, and Acquisitions. Tribal have offices in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, the Middle East, Philippines, and Malaysia and operate in 55 countries. Cognition Education is UK-based but is part of the Cognition Learning Group (CLG), which began in New Zealand and has six international offices. They operate in 30 countries world-wide. The EDT began life as the Centre for British Teachers in 1968 but now undertake work and consultancies in over 100 countries working as "trusted partners" alongside governments, states, and multiple organisations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The global presence of these organisations is integral to their "brands" and mention of their global reach features heavily on their websites. It is emphasised through the imagery and photographs that represent their activities in multiple countries. The relaunching and rebranding

of Tribal's Education Services as Etio in 2024 makes repeated mention of their partnerships "worldwide" and "around the world" (Tribal Group, 2024c). Cognition Education refer to themselves as "global" providers of education consultancy and as transformers of "global education systems" (Cognition Education, 2024b). The EDT has numerous sections on their website reporting on their work in multiple different countries. Both Tribal (and their educational services arm, Etio) and Cognition Education draw attention to the work that they have done with the governments of multiple different countries, and both have previously secured contracts with the DfE (Noble, 2023; O'Brien, 2018; Tribal Group, 2024c).

The CLG, of which Cognition Education is a part, has built up its portfolio of companies through a series of acquisitions which expand its reach and provision, presumably also its market share. Indeed, Cognition Education is one of four brands that is part of the CLG. Aligning with Verger et al.'s (2016) observation of the GEI's propensity for integrations, mergers, and acquisitions, three of CLG's four brands have been acquired over the past decade. CLG acquired Wavelength Learning—a company that produces digital content and publications for clients in 2015 (Wavelength Learning, 2024); Begin Bright—developers of educational programmes in 2016 (Begin Bright, 2024); and Aspire, a "leadership and management development consultancy agency," in 2022 (Millward, 2022). These organisations have significant global presence that has been enhanced through expansion and acquisition. They are all involved, to some degree or another, with large multinational corporations and the education departments of various nation states. Their activities involve consultancy and policy advice and educational provision—they are involved at all stages of the policy process. Their activities and connections provide them with significant capital and leverage that is influential on the global education stage.

Policy Entrepreneurs and Boundary Spanners. Tribal is a UK-based company, founded in 2000. The business has two key foci: students information systems (SIS) and inspection and review services. Tribal claim to be the UK's number one provider of SIS to higher education (Tribal Group, 2024d). The founders have had successful careers as businessmen, entrepreneurs, CEOs, and finance directors in a variety of areas from healthcare, construction, investment, publishing, and more (Lawton, 2024; Pitman, 2024). The current CEO and management team are high-flyers with multi-sector backgrounds in the business world, particularly in technology (Tribal Group, 2024e). All very much fit the profile of what are often referred to as "boundary spanners," individuals whose career trajectories move between different sectors and fields. Such individuals move easily between different business, social, and political worlds and can forge the connections and overlaps that foster networking activity often cited as fundamental to the success of modern-day business (Williams, 2002). This straddling of and movement between different worlds allows the boundary spanner to assume the role of an archetypal entrepreneur who offers innovative solutions to "wicked problems" (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 90). In this case, technological solutions are offered to pressing issues and concerns of accountability in the education sector. In this respect, Tribal and its founders and executive officers can also be understood as policy entrepreneurs for whom education policy operates as an opportunity to develop their business (Ball & Junemann, 2012, p. 140).

The importance of edtech and financial and business connections is seen further in the profile of the CEO of the EDT, Dan Sandhu. His wider background is in the global education and commercial sector, as a founder, CEO, and investor in technology, education, and edtech. In 2020, he founded the EdTech Evidence Group to support evidence and efficacy in the edtech sector and in 2022, he was awarded the Asian Tech Pioneer award by Diversity UK (Education Development Trust, 2024a). A defining feature of his success appears to be his ability to take businesses from start up to global scale. In addition, Sandhu has worked in non-executive roles including sitting on the board of a Venture Capital Trust (Education Development Trust, 2024a). His cross-sector experience and ability to connect finance to education in lucrative and

successful ways evidences the significance of his role as a boundary spanner and policy entrepreneur.

Another policy entrepreneur is Tina Lucas, CEO of CLG, who had previously worked successfully both as a CEO and in other capacities for several successful edu-businesses. Her forte is in developing international and overseas business, which directly led to her appointment at CLG in 2016 (Atherton, 2015). She was also the founder of STEM Tech Education, a company that managed several different STEM initiatives including hosting conferences and career events and a magazine for teachers (Culwick, 2014). This kind of activity resonates with the actions of the policy entrepreneur, drawing “actors and policy communities together and align[ing] perceptions to formulate common goals and interests” (Oborn et al, 2011, p. 340 cited in Ball & Junemann, 2012, p.140). The founders and executive staff at Tribal, EDT and CLG are clearly highly mobile policy entrepreneurs and boundary spanners moving from and on to other business opportunities in both related and contrasting fields. Their experience and expertise are located firmly within the world of business rather than education, and it is their ability to grow and expand business that legitimates their current positions.

We suggest that all three organisations can be characterised as part of a global education industry. Their organisations’ history and practice speak to a form of sophisticated and strategic business development that is focused on global expansion through global networking, acquisitions, and venture capital. Their personnel exhibit as classic boundary spanners with career trajectories that show experience and expertise in multiple areas though often not education—a “cadre of “heterarchical actors” ... defined by mobility and hybridity” (Ball & Juneman, 2012, p. 139).

The involvement of these global actors and organisations in nation-state policy processes speaks to the international nature of heterarchical network governance (Ball, 2010b). Here, a global education industry is embedded as part of a strategic decision-making process in a nation-state response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Of course, the significance of the role of the state in identifying, selecting and establishing networks and partnerships to develop and deliver this policy is significant. Clearly, in the case of the NTP, the state was “an initiator or facilitator of private sector participation on a global scale” (Peruzzo et al, 2022, p. 13).

Transforming Global Education Systems

We have suggested so far that these organisations are situated in a powerful place in the policy process and can be understood as players in a global education industry—they represent the involvement of the global education industry in the governance of the English education system. Given the degree of influence that these organisations have it seems important to try and understand their vision and mission for education.

One of the things that is immediately apparent in examining these organisations’ websites is that they see themselves as offering a new and innovative way of thinking about and doing education. This is clear, particularly for Tribal and Cognition Education/CLG, who have grandiose visions of their ability and mission to transform education globally, offering solutions, and offering change! The CLG are quite clear that they are “changing the way the world learns.” Their purpose is to “unleash the power of education to transform the lives of children, young people and adults around the world” (Cognition Learning Group, 2024a). Their goals are ambitious, and the rhetoric and imagery are exciting and inspiring. It is hard not to be carried along by their message of transformation and progress. Cognition Education situates the support and services they offer as transformative: “Cognition Education is transforming global education systems...” There is an almost evangelical belief in and commitment to the power of education to allow children, young people, adults, and businesses “to achieve anywhere.” Indeed, the message from the CEO Tina Lucas is that the transformative power of learning “has the ability to change lives, strengthen communities, build business and ultimately change our world” (Cognition Learning Group, 2024b). Similarly, Tribal’s message is one of empowerment and opportunity.

Their slogan is “Tribal—Empowering the world of education” (Tribal Group, 2024f). They have an “inspirational” video that presents education as an opportunity for empowerment. Characters who may have not succeeded in achieving what they wanted to in a traditional education system claim that when they are empowered, “education can take us anywhere.” The rebranded education/government services section of Tribal, Etio, intensifies this message and clarifies how they support and supplement government projects. Etio’s strapline is “Elevating Education, Everywhere” and they promote themselves as “the difference that turns ideas into realities” (Etio, 2024a).

However, alongside this sits a rather different discourse. As compelling as their emancipatory visions are, in multiple ways the image of education they evoke on their websites, is of a more standardised neoliberal version of education. These companies are largely concerned with offering support to existing educational institutions and governments: consultancy firms whose success depends on their capacity to adapt themselves to their client’s visions of educations and client’s demands. Unsurprisingly therefore, the more detailed elaboration of their approach exhibits more pragmatic and business-oriented rhetoric and focus. Customer experience is of paramount importance. CLG are explicitly and unapologetically customer facing and describe their focus as to strive to ensure “the best outcomes and experiences of our clients and customers” (Cognition Learning Group, 2024a). Cognition Education are also customer focussed, promoting themselves in a supplementary or supportive role: “At Cognition Education we’re dedicated to helping our clients achieve their most pressing education goals” (Cognition Education, 2024b).

Tribal emphasises how they can help institutions effectively improve their customer experience. “We empower our employees to make decisions that not only benefit you, but that also benefit your customers.” This “difference” they offer is centred on their expertise in strategic planning, accountability and knowledge improvement, technological expertise, and performance benchmarking. They exemplify and epitomise a neoliberal approach to education and draw on classic discourses of “evidence-based action,” “efficiency,” “excellence,” “effectiveness,” “impact,” and “expert insight” (Etio, 2024a). They offer a “tailored approach” that fetes “adaptability” and help all stakeholders to “understand the efficacy of education expenditures” (Etio, 2024b). Their “robust financial benchmark analysis.... provide[s] a comprehensive view of the return on investment...” (Etio, 2024c). Their goal is to prepare, equip and empower a “high performing workforce” (Etio, 2024d). Of course, it might be argued that drawing on this kind of discourse is largely expedient, “merely a pragmatic approach” that otherwise allows network members to promote what they may see as an alternative vision of education (Jones & Bradbury, 2022, p. 10). However, the fact remains that this discursive framing serves to reiterate and legitimate a peculiarly neoliberal imaginary of education.

Tribal, Etio, Cognition Education, and CLG offer a quintessentially neoliberal vision of what “good” education should look like. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more apt description of the archetypal neoliberal *homo economicus* than the one promoted in the CLG’s four guiding principles “Be better, be impactful, be agile and be ambitious” (Cognition Learning Group, 2024a). Despite these organisations’ enthusiastic visions of education, the nuts and bolts of what they promote is securely anchored in a highly technocratic, commercially attractive and thoroughly neoliberal vision. In many ways, it constitutes a “rolling out” of neoliberal values and truths. This is a quantifiable, datafied educative experience that features spreadsheets, impact assessments, and productivity. It is glossy, professional, and marketable; a product that is attuned to the current global neoliberal education field and is saleable in that field. The question arises then to what extent these organisations, responsible for recruitment, training, and monitoring on the NTP, are likely to choose academic mentors and tuition partners that align with and replicate this vision, and what then are the ramifications of this for schools and students.

Discussion

Through our genealogy and network ethnography-influenced policy analysis, we have traced the way that learning loss was established as a key policy problem in the aftermath of COVID and how the use of private tutoring companies was positioned as the appropriate solution to this problem. As a basis for the NTP, this diagnosis was ill-conceived and did not reflect the reality on the ground for students, teachers, and schools (Moss & Harme, 2021). Perhaps because of this, the NTP quickly ran into problems, which prompted a period of what can be understood as *ad hocery* in the evolution of NTP policy and programme. Whilst this may be seen as ultimately leading to the demise of the NTP and a certain degree of success for teachers and schools, it did not mark a consequential change in the level of private involvement. Instead, there were significant developments in the imbrication of the private sector in key aspects of state-funded education policy development and provision. This we consider to be a substantial and significant embedding of the private sector in state governance that goes beyond the more traditional and accepted forms of private sector involvement in state education. Conceptualising and articulating the novelty and importance of this is difficult.

One of the key features of the integration of the private sector into public governance, as observed by Cone and Brogger (2020), is the provision by government of a “necessary leash” that in effect circumscribes and controls the activity and practices of the private sector. This leash commonly takes the form of “[c]ross institutional benchmarking, measurements, testing and extensive standardisation technologies” (p. 386). In other words, the employment of private actors depends upon the creation and maintenance of some kind of standardised field of operation that governs the activities of multiple and diverse actor—a form of meta governance. The creation of this field in turn functions as a form of accountability. Interestingly, this does not seem to be the pattern or form of privatisation that characterises what has happened with the NTP in England. With the NTP, the private sector was directly tasked with providing its own leash as the very processes of standardisation and accountability that governed the involvement of private sector actors in the tutoring field were handed over to the private sector itself. This happened through the creation of a mezzanine level of operation that, over time, afforded considerable autonomy and control to three key organisations. In controlling the selection, vetting, training, and monitoring of tuition partners and academic mentors, these organisations were positioned not merely as gatekeepers but also as gate builders. They were not brought in to deliver existing accountability, training, or monitoring systems; they both devised and delivered these systems. This position afforded them considerable influence over shaping and legitimating a market of state-funded education providers. This represents a step change in the nature and extent of privatisation of the policy process as their activities go beyond advice and consultancy and beyond delivery. It is a more substantial and significant embedding of the private sector further up the chain of command.

To try to grasp the significance of this, it is critical to have a clear idea about the nature of such organisations. Our analysis here makes it apparent that these intermediary organisations can be situated as part of a global education industry, characterised by its global scale operations, its combination of for-profit and not-for-profit actors, the prevalence of acquisitions and mergers, and personnel whose expertise spans multiple areas and whose background and experience is business oriented. Allied to these features, we also see the promotion and legitimating of a peculiarly neoliberal vision of education with the well-worn tropes of managerialism, performativity, accountability, and datafication. Given the influential position that these organisations have in selecting and monitoring tutoring companies, we simply note their power to reinforce and reward this imaginary of the educative experience. This chimes with Parreira Dol Amaral and Thompson’s observation (2019) that the GEI is heavily invested in changing our ideas about what a good education looks like.

As globally situated players, Cognition Education, Tribal, and the EDT were able to use their business expertise and international experience in planning, accountability and technology to benefit from the policy opportunity that was the NTP. In doing so, they acquired considerable experience of operating at a new and powerful level of education governance. It is perhaps impossible to conjecture on the significance of this for these organisations. Our concern regards what this represents for the nature of governance in the English education system.

Heterarchical state governance references the shift towards a polycentric state—“a de-governmentalisation of the state” (Rose, 1996) in which new NSAs, notably from the private sector, are imbricated in the act of governing. We suggest that our analysis shows that the NTP has afforded the global education industry a significant step up in its level of involvement in England’s education governance. Indeed, it is alarming to see the relative ease with which a crisis generated an opportunity for global capital to establish a precedent for such extensive and high-level involvement in the education system. NSAs, due to the unique conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, were given the opportunity to create a market which they were then responsible for controlling and from which they have benefitted. Jober’s (2024) analysis is helpful here, with her identification of the emergence of what she refers to as “policyneurs”—individuals, groups or organisations that are not simply benefitting from policy, they are so involved in the enactment and crafting of it, that they *do* policy. We argue that the three organisations fundamental to the last iteration of the NTP are powerful policyneurs: “[t]hey are policy, they are the process, they are policyneurs” (Jober, 2024, p. 36).

Conclusion

By 2024, the NTP had ceased to operate, despite the promises of a long-term “tutoring revolution” that accompanied its announcement in 2020. Schools’ use of the funding had declined, and confidence in the effectiveness of the programme had wavered due to the inconclusive findings of EEF evaluations of the NTP, which struggled to collect evidence of significant gains (Styles, 2024). A review of the four years of the programme conducted by the National Foundation for Education Research found that some schools had never used it because they did not have the funding to top up the subsidy, while others had stopped because the funding was now too low to pay for tutoring (NFER, 2024). One headteacher described it, in another publication, as “a white elephant⁴ that few in schools wish—or can afford—to engage with” (Platten, 2024, p. 18). Nonetheless, NFER noted that “three quarters of senior leaders who had participated in the NTP agreed that pupils had engaged with the content of the tutoring, had built positive relationships with tutors, had found tutoring beneficial and had enjoyed the tutoring sessions” (2024).

Looking back on the NTP, as we have done here through a brief genealogy and policy analysis, we can come to a number of conclusions about its significance and what it represents in terms of privatization within education. First, we note the importance of a policy which uses public money to pay tutors who are not necessarily qualified teachers to teach within state schools, as seen in all iterations of the NTP. This is a departure from the norm and has muddied the waters around what constitutes tutoring in a way that benefits providers but arguably not students or schools - or indeed qualified teachers. It chimes with multiple antecedents including the encroachments of private providers within schools more broadly and the weakening of commitments to qualified teaching status. The construction of learning loss as the main educational problem during COVID facilitated this form of privatisation, as the private sector were brought in to solve another pandemic-induced problem. Second, we have found that the evolution of the NTP to allow schools to decide how they spent the NTP funding and to pay their own staff represented a further discontinuity, as this challenged the premise of the first

⁴ This phrase refers to a something which is expensive but unhelpful and no longer needed.

version of the NTP that the private sector could deliver a solution to the problem of learning loss. The resulting tensions between the trend towards privatization and schools' desire to use their own staff were resolved through the construction of a complex network of private providers operating at the mezzanine level, as guarantors of quality. We argue that this represents a ratcheting up of the involvement of the private sector in state governance where globally active NSAs were able to extend their networks of operation to mould and govern the state provision of tutoring. We argue that we have witnessed the creep of a heterarchical form of governance further into a higher level of government. Third, for the three providers in the final iteration of the NTP, though it was short-lived, there were significant gains and influence. They were able through their mezzanine-level roles to shape a market of state-funded education providers. Their participation allowed these global organisations to influence the sector through a vision for education that is neoliberal in nature and at the same time serves their business goals. Whilst in some ways the NTP may be seen as a failed policy, in other ways it represented an opportunity for the private sector to successfully prove and establish itself, and further its vision of education, at a new level of state governance. This requires us to develop our understanding of what the privatisation of education can look like, to include what might appear to be policy failures which have longer-term effects. The “policy-neurs” involved in the NTP programme were able to take full advantage of the opportunities presented by the COVID crisis to extend their networks and influence and in so doing engender significant shifts in the operation of the education sector. A critical result of this was that “new unelected and, in many ways, unaccountable voices [have had] a significant say in determining the methods, contents and purposes of education” (Avelar & Ball, 2019, p. 272). The implications of this for democracy, transparency, and accountability are difficult to establish but remain troubling.

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