**Abstract**

In this article we examine a network of philosophical and critical thinking 'policy entrepreneurs' (Ball and Junemann, 2012) and consider to what extent they operate as conduits of or challenges to a neoliberal discourse of education. The neoliberalisation of education has brought about a new mode of heterarchical network governance in education where the traditional hierarchical power of the state and local authorities has dissipated, and new policy actors have emerged. We ask whether it is possible for alternative 'grass roots' networks to operate within this quintessentially neoliberal framework of heterarchical network governance to challenge neoliberal discourses of education (Ball and Junemann, 2012). In considering the space that network governance potentially opens up for challenges to neoliberal orthodoxies, we are trying to take the study of network governance in a new and different direction. We draw on Foucault's notion of the dispositif to probe the tensions that exist as members of this 'philosophers' network operate as both advocates of an alternative progressive pedagogy disrupting key tenets of neoliberal thinking on education and neoliberal entrepreneurial subjects who embrace and benefit from a system of heterarchical networks and justify their alternative approach in distinctly neoliberal terms. This research points to the complexity of the relationship between network governance and wider forms of neoliberal governance.

**Key Words**

**neoliberalism, heterarchies, network governance, dispositif, philosophy education**

**1. Introduction**

In this article, we look at a network of education providers who specialise in offering variations of the Philosophy for Children programme (P4C) or some form of children's philosophising programme. These are organisations or individuals who go into schools to teach a way of thinking about and discussing social and ethical issues that is rooted in a particular 'philosophising' approach. These providers offer training for teachers as well as running sessions and programmes in schools. We have termed this connected group of individuals and organisations the 'philosophers' network'. We consider this network from the perspective of heterarchical network governance but beyond this, we take up Ball and Junemann's speculation that regimes of heterarchical governance may facilitate the 'opening up of some new opportunities for some local, grassroots activity' illustrating the 'ambiguity and polyvalency in network governance' (2012, p.142). We explore the possibility that the philosophers' network might be such a grass roots activity that represents a resistance and challenge to neoliberal educational practice. However, aware of claims about the cannibalising and colonising tendencies of neoliberalism (Jones and Ball, 2022, p.1), we interrogate the way these actors operate and examine their position as successful negotiators of a system of governance that is distinctively neoliberal.

This leads us to consider the relationship between network governance and other more subtle forms of small 'n' neoliberal governance (Ong, 2007). Ultimately, our questions are whether the philosophers' network promotes an alternative pedagogical approach that challenges neoliberal educational thinking, whether it represents an adaption and extension of neoliberalism that masquerades as an alternative or whether it exhibits a more complex relationship to strategies of governance. To address these questions, we employ Foucault's notion of the dispositif to explore the relationship between the philosophers' network and the wider neoliberal milieu. This exploration points to a degree of tension between some of the neoliberal discourses and practice that the philosophers' network draw on and exhibit and the progressive educational approach they espouse and offer. We conclude that this network highlights the difficulties of challenging neoliberal pedagogical and educational values and practices from within the system.

## 1.1 Introducing the philosophers' network

Research has documented the impact that neoliberal regimes of high stakes testing have had on many areas of schooling, from teacher identity and teacher pupil relations to classroom practice and curriculum design (see for example Au, 2011; Bradbury *et al*, 2021; Lewis and Hardy, 2015; Lingard and Sellar, 2013). A particular concern has been the limitations that mass scale intensive testing place on pedagogical approaches in the classroom. It seems that the neoliberal outcomes approach to education has fostered a renewed emphasis on more neoconservative styles of didactic teaching. There has been a returned emphasis to rote learning and instruction rather than problem solving (Johnston and McClune, 2000). A narrowing of the curriculum and the devaluation of arts and humanities subjects accompany this (Boyle and Bragg, 2006; Hall *et al.* 2004; Lauen and Gaddis, 2016; Löfgren *et al.* 2018), as the requirements of the knowledge economy and the job market come to dominate curriculum decisions. The prioritisation such testing regimes place on the acquisition and regurgitation of certain types of knowledge shape how education is understood and practiced. We understand this outcomes-oriented approach, together with the didactic and traditional pedagogy it prompts, to come under an umbrella of neoliberal pedagogical practice. More progressive approaches to education and pedagogy, emphasising dialogue, exploration, collaboration, understanding and pupil voice have fallen by the wayside as they struggle to fit into standardised, industrial scale assessment programmes. Allied to this, the demands and pressures of such an intensive and restricted system have led to an impoverished educational experience in which academic results are prioritised to an extent that troubles teachers and students alike (Ball, 2003; Bradbury *et al*, 2021).

In light of this, it is interesting to note the rise of a network of organisations, individuals, edu businesses and charities offering schools resources, training, courses and programmes in some form of philosophising pedagogy. Such an approach stands in contrast to the more didactic and teacher centred pedagogies that have been prioritised by an education system skewed and framed by systems of high stakes testing. Indeed, there is a cottage industry of actors, edu-businesses and charities that specialize in different styles of pedagogical practice designed to introduce philosophising into schools, develop critical thinking or dialogic learning, reasoning skills, collaborative learning and on. It is not easy to demarcate or categorise this

network. There is a considerable blurring between programmes whose goal is to introduce philosophising into schools, dialogic teaching, critical thinking skills and metacognition programmes and many of these can overlap with values and character education programmes. However, whilst there may be points of difference between different approaches and groups, there is an important continuity and similarity that merits attention. They all commend, and indeed sell, alternative pedagogical approaches to education- rooted in philosophical thinking of varying kinds- which are either intended to supplement, improve and even challenge forms of traditional pedagogies. This often, though not always, contributes to a wider perspective and/ or desire to envisage education differently with echoes of multiple progressive 'whole child' approaches. They certainly advocate for a broader understanding and practice of education that emphasises value, meaning, collaboration and creativity.

The range of organisations and individuals offering 'philosophising' approaches to education is wide and diverse. As noted, they can include a variety of critical thinking, metacognition and thinking skills programmes, community of enquiry approaches and dialogic reasoning (Jones and Bradbury, 2022). For example, Osiris Educational offer a year long teacher training programme 'building a whole-school metacognition model '(Osiris Educational, 2022), Thinking Matters delivers on line and face-to face workshops to schools, training teachers to 'use a pedagogy which enables students to master a range of thinking skills, intelligent learning behaviours and metacognitive tools' (Thinking Matters, 2022), Structural Learning offers resources to schools promoting and supporting dialogic pedagogy and thinking framework guides ( Structural Learning, 2021).   In this article we focus on ones that are loosely based on Philosophy for Children (P4C).  P4C is an educational 'thinking skills' programme that promotes thinking and reasoning skills by encouraging students to take part in philosophical enquiry and dialogue. It was developed in the US in the 1970's by Professor Matthew Lipman and is characterised by a pedagogical approach based on the establishment of a Community of Enquiry (Lipman, 2003, p. 20-21). Students sit in a circle and a trained facilitator offers a stimulus for discussion in the form of a philosophical novel/story. The children work and think collaboratively to produce a philosophical question to discuss and teachers facilitate an open-ended dialogue (Gatley, 2020, p.551). P4C encourages the 4C's of thinking-caring thinking, collaborative thinking, critical thinking and creative thinking

(Lipman, 2003). Indeed, Lipman specifies his goal as developing 'more thoughtful, more reflective, more considerate and more reasonable individuals' (Lipman *et al*, 1980, p.15).

Over the past 40 years, P4C has developed into a global 'network' used in schools in over 60 countries (Gatley, 2020, p. 550; UNESCO, 2007). However, in this article, we hone in on seven organisations that offer a range of P4C courses and training, thinking skills programmes and values education in the UK: Dialogue Works, Thinking Space, 21st Century Learners, The Philosophy Foundation, The Philosophy Man, Lifeworlds Learning, and Values-based Education (VbE). Most of these involve some variation on the P4C approach and they are interconnected to a greater or lesser extent as Figure 1 shows. For example, the following are all accredited trainers for Dialogue Works, one of the UK's leading providers of P4C training: Rosie Wilson-the co-founder of Lifeworlds Learning; Sue Webb, Consultant for VbE International; Grace Lockrobin, Founder of Thinking Space; and Dr. Neil Phillipson, Founder of 21st Century Learners. In addition, Grace Lockrobin's Thinking Space website lists Emma Worley of The Philosophy Foundation under 'People' and partners listed on the website include Dialogue Works, The Philosophy Foundation, and The Philosophy Man. Many of the key actors mentioned here are involved in more than one organisation as the network diagram makes clear (Figure1). There is considerable mutual interdependence and support, as organisations and individuals partner one another and support new ventures. It is evident these connections and relationships constitute a network of interconnected and interdependent groups and people.
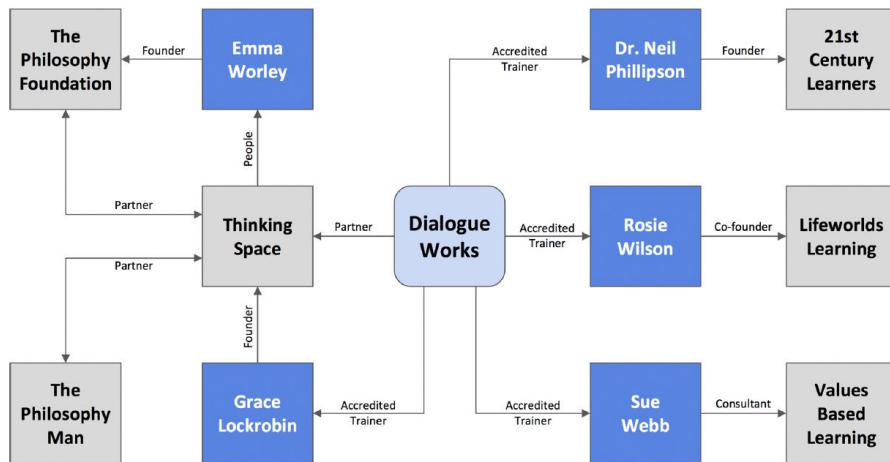
Fig. 1. Philosophers' network diagram.

Figure 1 Philosophers' network diagram

However, the significance of all this is uncertain and it is not clear that this network operates in a way that can be understood as heterarchical network governance. Below we consider and explain this.

## 2. Theory
### 2.1 Network governance

Neoliberal educational reform is characterised by, amongst other things, processes of decentralization, deregulation and privatisation that have changed the way in which education is organised, delivered and done. Such policies have led to the creation of a quasi-market in education that involves an increasing role for private firms, companies, organisations and individuals and expanded practices of privatisation (Au and Ferrare, 2015; Ball, 2007; Macdonald *et al*, 2020). The state's engagement with connected networks of these multiple organisations and actors represents a significant structural and cultural shift in the way government operates (Jessop, 1998). In this new context, these networks of influential and connected policy actors and organisations take on a new significance and importance. The altered landscape or

modality of government is perceived as a flattening of the structures and flows of influence that is also disparate and fluid as the boundaries that demarcate the 'state' become increasingly blurred. This contrasts with the previously hierarchical, clear cut and formal structures of the state that characterise a more traditional configuration of government.  This transition is articulated as a shift from government to heterarchical network governance and far from representing a rolling back or hollowing out of the state is understood as a reconfiguration or reregulation of the state (Ball, 2017, p.51). The way in which these networks of actors and organisations have gained access to government influence and power and how the state in turn works with and through them has been analysed as a distinct form of neoliberal network governance (Ball, 2007; Ball, 2012; Ball and Junemann, 2012).

However, it is important to remember that networks themselves are not new, but rather what is new and different and therefore of interest and concern is 'their extent, specificity, directness and degree of integration with government and state organisations' (Ball and Junemann, 2012, p.10). Precisely because networks are neither new nor uncommon, the claim that a network functions as a form of reconstituted state governance needs justification. Devolved and fragmented educational provision has spawned a wide array of providers who are interconnected and mutually supporting, but this does not necessarily mean they constitute or even contribute to a new state modality. As Parker succinctly points out 'in order for networks to be regarded as a form of governance they must play a role in steering, setting directions and influencing behaviour' otherwise they are just a network (Parker, 2007, p.114).

This seems fair and we are inclined, following Parker's observation, to suggest that the philosophers' network does not exhibit the hallmarks of neoliberal network governance, in that it does not appear to steer policy or connect to government in any significant way. However, our contention is that this does not mean that it is not significant and it is the nature of that significance that interests us.

On the one hand, as indicated, we are interested in Ball and Junemann's observation that neoliberal network governance might generate 'an opening up of some new opportunities for some local, grassroots activity' (2012, p.142). In other words, in the

devolved, quasi-free market of educational providers, it is not impossible that we might see the rise of a 'counter cultural' form of educational provision that would take the form of a network of mutually supportive members, pooling resources to achieve visibility and influence. Such a network would be positioned very differently in relation to governance, potentially situated as a site of resistance (Foucault, 1998, p.95). Is it possible that the neoliberal structure of a devolved and fragmented system of education providers could facilitate the emergence of a shadow network of alternative provision that would challenge neoliberal governance?  Is this what we are witnessing with the philosophers' network?

On the other hand, conceding that the philosophers' network does not appear to be an example of neoliberal network governance does not mean that it is not implicated in wider forms of neoliberal governance. This is without doubt a broader area of focus but it has considerable significance for the question as to whether alternative 'grass roots' networks can be effective in challenging neoliberal educational practice. In order to understand the significance of this network therefore we need to explore more carefully the relationship between heterarchical network governance and other forms of neoliberal governance.

Most studies of network governance in education have focused on powerful actors and companies that exert influence and shape policy and practice- big N governance if you like (Ong, 2007). The philosophers' network is not in this league or business, although, without doubt, they exist and profit from the devolved structure of education provision which has facilitated heterarchical governance. As part of our examination of this network though, we also want to consider the possibility that the same system of devolved provision that facilitates heterarchical network governance might also expediate others forms of neoliberal governance- small n perhaps-that are potentially both more sinister and more subtle. Thus, we need to consider whether this network does – possibly unwittingly- steer, set directions and influence behaviour in ways that lend support to the underbelly of neoliberal reform.

These two points of interest/focus are inextricably linked. Whether the philosophers' network represents an alternative network, generating an alternative vison and understanding of education understood as a form of resistance to neoliberal thinking

will in part be determined by the extent to which it might be implicated in broader forms of neoliberal governance. After all, neoliberal governance and its theorisations are not restricted to, and certainly does not depend upon, the notion of networks or network governance. It is essential therefore to consider the relationship between heterarchical network governance and other forms of neoliberal governance. We address this in the following section.

## 2.2 Neoliberal governance

Research and analysis have documented the neoliberalisation of the education system in England and Wales from the 1988 ERA Act onwards noting processes of commodification, marketisation, accountability, performativity, bureaucratisation and datafication and the prioritisation of discourses of instrumentalism and the knowledge economy. The education system in England and Wales constitutes a powerful vector of neoliberal influence and governance (Exley and Ball, 2014). Understanding what this means and how this works means grappling with the difficulties of conceptualising neoliberalism and neoliberalisation. This is no mean feat and is not possible to deal with in any detail here. However, it is essential to find a way of apprehending and conceptualising some of the distinctive features of neoliberalism and how they play out in a neoliberalised education system. This is the context in which all networks, powerful and connected or not, operate.

Neoliberalism is often characterised as a slippery, promiscuous and shape-shifting ideology that has evolved and adapted its market philosophy and practice to survive in divergent contexts (Peck, 2013, p.140; Peck and Theodore, 2019). These features speak to the intransigence and allure of the metaphor of the market as a rationale applicable to all areas of our life and is the result of and depends upon securing the market/neoliberal rationale as common sense. Its capacity to do this is often linked to the way in which neoliberalism operates as a form of governmentality with its inclination 'to speak in terms of neoliberal modes of subject reformation and strategies of rule' (Brenner et al, 2010, p.199). The governmentality approach stresses the way that neoliberalism structures our thinking, becomes our 'common sense' and establishes itself as a regime of truth. Education is a key component/complicit in both securing the law of the market as obvious and sensible and promoting self-governing

neoliberal subjectivities that live this (Bradbury, 2019a; Jones, 2022). The way in which this happens is complex and multifaceted and there is a tendency amongst governmentality scholars to see this process as hegemonic. We are wary of this tendency as whilst we are interested in issues of governance, we are also interested in areas of and possibilities for 'non governance'- what Foucauldians might refer to as resistance or refusal (Ball, 2016; Ball and Olmedo, 2013; Huang and Vong, 2018; Maguire *et al*, 2018).  It is essential to find a way to conceptualise neoliberalism that can identify the tensions, ambiguities and 'wriggle room' that 'actually existing' entails. We want to point out practices of governance wherever they emerge but we also wish to identify points where governance fizzles out or fails. Critically, this means two things: conceptualising and visibilising the way different discourses, practices, subjectivities, truths and values interact to create a distinctive and coherent neoliberal milieu and identifying the anomalies and assessing how they relate to that neoliberal milieu. In order to do this, we have drawn on Foucault's methodological construct of the dispositif.

## 2.3 The dispositif

Foucault is often referred to as a theorist of power and his work proposes multiple novel categorisations of power. The dispositif is not a categorization of power but rather a way of conceptualizing and apprehending experience that allows relations of power to be foregrounded. In the interview/conversation *The Confession of the Flesh* attempts to explain his understanding of the dispositif as a:

> thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions–in short, the said as much as the unsaid (1980, p.194).

A critical aspect of the dispositif is that it takes the materiality of thought and power seriously and so includes both discursive and non-discursive elements. This means that it can look like a grab bag of disparate components, however, the key is that they are cohered by a system of relations, a theme and meaning that is the dispositif. When discussing the dispositif of sexuality, Foucault refers to his realisation that the

heterogeneous elements of 'the body, the sexual organs, pleasures, kinship relations, interpersonal relations and so forth' were 'overlaid by the apparatus of sexuality' (ibid, p.210). Analyzing a dispositif therefore begins with an interrogation of concrete, quotidian practices and discourses and centres on establishing patterns of coherence and connections. It is the set of relations, a net of meaning that holds together such a motley selection of discourses, practices, buildings, gestures, signs etc. that is the dispositif. 'The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements' (ibid, p.194). Identifying this pattern of coherence is critical to visibilising the dispositif and demonstrating how it works to constitute the milieu that constitutes and shapes a given aspect of our experience.

We are interested in in the way in which the neoliberal dispositif manifests or imbricates itself in the educational field and the experience of neoliberal education. This means noting how the structural reforms of neoliberalism have reconfigured and reoriented the social, ethical and epistemological dimensions of education. It means paying attention to processes of commodification, commercialisation, marketisation, accountability, and privatisation and tracing the way they interact with discourses of enterprise and entrepreneurialism to extend market thinking. Further, it means identifying the support acts, discourses that prioritise certain kinds of numerical knowledge, of the knowledge economy and of an ethics of instrumentalism. This layering of discourses and practices cohered by their mutual relationship to market thinking, intersect and reinforce one another to create a powerful regime of truth.

However, a dispositif is not static and this is seen in the constant evolutions and adaptations of neoliberalism.  The components of a dispositif have their own histories and trajectories and bring with them and/or develop their own strategic alliances and elaborations. This means that the dispositif is malleable and fluid with multiple potentials for adaptation and change. This in turn means that there are points where the dispositif runs out of steam as it butts up against unsupportive and contradictory regimes of truth. In focusing on the everyday, concrete details of neoliberal practice, it is possible to pick out those areas and points where neoliberal thinking embeds itself or peters out. This is precisely what we have tried to do in this research.

**3. Method**

This article came out of a research project exploring the use of specific P4C resources. Our background investigations identified a network of interconnected and aligned providers of P4C and P4C style programmes, materials and training. Partially following the approach of network ethnography (Ball and Junemann, 2012; Hogan, 2016; Howard, 2002), the research is based on internet searches that entailed a 'deep dive' of the organisations' websites to identify and trace the prevalence of key terms, phrases, references, practices, visons. This scrutiny, or website audits, established both a degree of coherence and consistency in the way education is understood and articulated but also a certain dissonance with the practices and presentation of ideas that was striking. We were able to analyse and identify basic themes or codes that were found across all the websites. The quotes selected below are those most representative and illustrative of the themes identified. We identify the kind of alternative approach to pedagogy and education they offer and consider whether it is understood as a break with neoliberal discourses in education that have evolved to encompass didactic teaching styles mobilized in the project of improving results. We trace the influence and prevalence of a neoliberal tropes in their practice as evidenced on their websites, and explore this network as a site where neoliberalism may be being disseminated, transformed or challenged and possibly all three. We are deploying the dispositif as a model or method of apprehending the scope, nature and possible limitations of neoliberal governance. We highlight and trace the extent to which the philosophers' network is caught up in and possibly extends the neoliberal dispositif, or whether it succeeds in modulating, deflecting or even impugning it.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 An alternative vision and understanding of education

The philosophers' network includes a range of organisations that reflect the diversity of approaches corralled under the P4C or philosophising with children label. Nevertheless, we argue that there is a continuity and coherence across the various groups in that they are offering a different educational experience that builds on or utilizes philosophical thinking. More than this, we suggest that this approach is

presented as a respite from or an alternative to a more traditional, didactic teaching style that we noted earlier had returned to dominance in over-tested, neoliberal classrooms. We begin our presentation of findings by presenting the kind of alternative understanding of and approach to education that coheres this network. This vision is sometimes set against and contrasted to current educational practice.

The Philosophy Foundation is a charity that has developed its own approach to philosophical enquiry, though rooted in P4C, and offers training to schools, communities and organisations. It recruits, trains and accredits philosophy graduates to 'facilitate philosophical enquiries with groups of children, teenagers and adults' (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022a) The Philosophy Foundation have goals that involve a vision of how education can be improved and done differently: they state that their mission is 'to bring understanding, wisdom and eudaemonia (flourishing) to the heart of education'

Further, their aims include allowing 'beneficiaries' the opportunity to

> [i]mprove their communication skills and deepen their thinking, their understanding of the world and of themselves, their experiences and other people, by refining how they think about those things through collaborative, critical reflection.

Their goal is that

> by doing philosophy we learn to think better, to act more wisely, and thereby thereby help to improve their educational opportunities as well as the quality of their and others' lives (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022b)

The philosophical references to 'eudaemonia' 'flourishing' and 'acting wisely' convey the sense that this is education understood as the development of the whole child, not just their academic attainment. Further, the emphasis placed on a critical and collaborative approach is specifically contrasted with the pedagogy of the classroom.

> It also offers a place in the school curriculum for critical and collaborative reflection in contrast to the outcome-based learning children all-too-often encounter throughout their schooling' (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022c)

The Philosophy Man is the UK's leading independent provider of P4C training and workshops. It offers programmes, training and support on both traditional P4C and its own adapted approach. On the website, it brings out clearly the way in which the emphasis on critical, collaborative, creative and caring thinking embodies an holistic approach to education.

> P4C develops thinking that is critical, using reasoned moves to build arguments; collaborative, with the sharing and challenging of ideas; creative in the willingness to speculate, take risks and imagine; and caring, because everything is set up to foster consideration and respect for one another.
>
> It is genuinely hard to convey how different and powerful P4C can be to someone who hasn't done it (The Philosophy Man, 2021a)

This is a commitment to education and pedagogy that not only goes beyond neoliberal practice but is of a qualitatively different nature and this is made explicit. They stress the holistic nature of the educative experience that brings to life the process of learning. They present P4C, and their own approach Philosophy Circles, as creating a space within the current pressurized curriculum for teachers to educate in the way they would prefer to.

> And with the ever increasing pressure from above, genuine opportunities for face-to-face dialogue and independent thinking can be squeezed out. Our mission is to empower teachers to find the opportunities for independent thinking in their existing curriculum, (and remind themselves of why they went into teaching (The Philosophy Man, 2021b)

Similarly 21st Century Learners contrast their approach with more traditional didactic styles. They argue for a more rounded understanding of education:

> I spend a lot of time arguing that teaching young people how to engage in dialogue is profoundly important. I go as far as to argue that one of the purposes of education is to draw young people into dialogue. This can draw fire from those persuaded that education is all about giving young people knowledge, but I think this is due to a misunderstanding of the argument; I think dialogue is essential to the meaningful development of knowledge. (21st Century Learners, n.d.,a)

This contrasts with traditional teaching is also made clear by Dialogue Works, a company that offers 'P4C Plus' and their own metacognition programme 'Thinking Moves'.

> Philosophical Teaching is an inquiry-led pedagogy that develops student understanding and appreciation beyond the levels normally achievable though traditional teaching (Dialogue Works, 2021a)

Finally, Thinking Space, who offer workshops to facilitate philosophical discussion and enquiry and training and mentoring to teachers, also present themselves as offering an alternative, explaining 'we see things differently' (Thinking Space, 2020a).

The philosophers' network is united in presenting an understanding of education, which many would situate within the progressive tradition that leans toward a particular understanding of what it means to educate the whole child. This is an exploratory form of education in which traditional hierarchies of teacher and student are lessened and the child's voice becomes important, and intellectual, personal, ethical and social development are integrated. The skills of thinking are put to use and developed in the context of a community and collaborative problem solving and learning and thinking is seen as integral to helping us live 'better' lives. It is clear that the groups in this network understand their philosophising pedagogy as offering something quite different to the standardised modern day educational experience. The language used is of reflection, wisdom, collaboration, creativity, and dialogue and is often explicitly contrasted with normal schooling. It is an approach that takes seriously the holistic development of the whole child.

It would seem then that this philosophers' network has created a space in which a progressive approach to education is able to flourish and develop and find a way of being articulated. Through this network, progressive educational ideas and practices can find their way into schools - a 'grass roots local activity' and potentially transform the way that education is done. However, this is not the whole story and we need to consider how the pre-existing policy field and milieu inflects and shapes the way in which this interaction happens. In the following section, we examine to what

extent this network of organisations and individuals are shaped by and part of a wider neoliberal dispositif.

## 4.2 Neoliberal tropes found in the websites

Conceptualising neoliberalism as a dispositif facilitates the identification and tracing of key features across its multiple forms and levels. In this section, we set out certain key components of the neoliberal dispositif that seem to be apparent across the philosophers' network, namely: discourses and practices of commercialisation, marketisation and commodification, audit practices, the prioritisation of instrumental ethics and the invocation of the knowledge economy and the prioritisation of discourses of the number. We consider the extent to which these features contribute to and inflect the way the networks' vision of and approach to education is articulated and presented.

### 4.2.1 Commodification, commercialisation and marketisation

Discourses and practices of the market are, to a greater or lesser extent, found across all of the websites. This is unsurprising since they are all organisations that depend upon successfully selling their products, courses and training to schools and other bodies. Nevertheless, research has clearly demonstrated that these discourses and practices position education as a commodity and schools, students, parents and teachers as consumers of education (Gewirtz et al, 1995, Vincent and Ball, 2006, Wilkins, 2010). Our analysis of the websites reveals an arena of customers, clients and business transactions, which in turn repositions the vision of education offered as a product replete with a unique selling point that distinguishes it from other educational approaches. This is not just any education, it's *philosophising* education.

The Thinking Space website lists its main page's subtitles: 'Services', 'Portfolio' and 'Resources' (Thinking Space, 2020b). Similarly, Lifeworlds Learning have a section called 'Clients' and refer to their 'Portfolio' 'of 'small one-off engagements and larger extended research projects with multiple elements and audiences' (Lifeworlds Learning, 2021a). The home page of the 21st Century Learners website also introduces immediately to 'a portfolio of high quality, evidence-based approaches' (21st Century Learners, n.d.,b). In addition, both Thinking Space and Lifeworlds Learning offer 'bespoke' services and provision, with the former offering a service

that is 'flexible in terms of content, duration and budget' (Thinking Space, 2020b; Lifeworlds Learning, 2021b). VbE offer a 'low cost option' for training and can 'tailor the support' to specific circumstances (VbE, n.d.,a)

This is the language and terminology of business - bespoke services echo the marketing ploys of companies offering tailor made services to fit to the needs of their clients. This is a transactional relationship of customer and seller and evidences the flexibility and business acumen of an entrepreneurial figure adapting to market pressures in order to secure custom.

The Philosophy Man is an excellent example of a professional looking website that has the feel of a sophisticated online shop. It offers a variety of different courses, activities, resources and programmes colourfully presented and easily navigated. It has adapted and commodified the traditional P4C approach to include what it refers to as Philosophy Circles and spells out how this distinguishes it from the standard P4C approach. It is an approach that is shorter than traditional P4C and as such is a pragmatic adaptation intended to make it easier for schools to adopt. They explain;

> To help you embed P4C as easily and effectively as possible, we have designed a Philosophy Circles School Pack […]
>
> **To purchase, simply go to our <u>Shop</u>**, or click on the product links at the bottom of the page (The Philosophy Man, 2021c).

The courses are marketed as packages that are targeted at and appropriate for different audiences. For example, an activity called Sticky Questions, in which students go home with a sticker that has a question on it, is marketed as '3p per child per week' but also comes in a bronze, silver and gold packages, with various additions. Various training courses are clearly tailored to meet different needs and different budgets, and include a 'Premium Pack of Resources' and special offers, clearly set out with a 'Buy Now' button and shopping trolley. This website adopts the approach and language of marketing to attract the attention of 'viewers'.

> Do you value P4C but struggle to fit it in?
> Looking for a training course for just you? (The Philosophy Man, 2021d)

It prominently features testimonials and quotes from teachers to advertise its programmes and courses. The discourses and practices of commercialisation and marketisation are highly visible in this website. Education, in its various forms, is packaged and discounted, and sold to customers and clients.

On reflecting on these websites, it is difficult not to concur with Riep when he states that '[e]ducation has increasingly been rendered as a commodity that is produced, consumed and exchanged through market mechanisms' (Riep, 2019, p.407). This sits uneasily alongside the nature of the philosophising approach to pedagogy that unites this network. The wider neoliberal dispositif positions the distinctive philosophising approach as a distinctive selling point that both identifies the organisation's place in the market and distinguishes them from other providers. The possibility that such pedagogy might serve as a counter challenge to neoliberal orthodoxy appears to have dissipated as it is reframed by the discourse and epistemology of the market.

### 4.2.2 Audit culture

Audit culture in its various guises is fundamental to neoliberal education practice (Power, 1997, Lingard *et al*, 2015), evidenced in the widespread use of performance indicators, measurements, and rankings as a means of assessing and visibilising quality, efficiency and accountability. The detrimental effects of the impact of the audit culture and systems of accountability on the nature of education, on teachers and students, and the social and personal relations of education have been well documented (Ball, 2003; Cooper, 2004; Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Wood and Jeffrey, 2002; Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Many commentators have pointed to the disciplinary effects of systems of audit and accountability in establishing norms of attainment, behaviour and success. Indeed, the ubiquity of these 'calculative practices' (Rose and Miller in Shore and Wright, 2015, p.421) is a key feature of heterarchical governance, 'a rationality of governance' even (Shore and Wright, 2015, p.422) that secures small government that works at a distance through pervasive, less overt but restrictive practices.

On examining the features of the training programmes offered by a number of our philosophising organisations, it is notable that they draw on/replicate an audit model

and the measures used to structure their training programmes mimic many of the accountability practices seen in education. The issue of 'quality and validation' is clearly important to The Philosophy Foundation as it features as a distinct page in their website. Here they inform us that they

> maintain high standards with our specialists in schools by regular observation and on-going continued professional development (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022d)

They offer a staged approach to training with clearly delineated steps on a 'Facilitator Accreditation Pathway'. These stages have explicit assessment foci and criteria, compulsory benchmarks and four different level statements (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022e). The Philosophy Foundation clearly draws on audit discourse and practice to validate their training programme. This includes a prioritisation of 'high standards' and setting out 'benchmarks' with an understanding that these are secured and maintained through constant monitoring, echoing the language and practice of Ofsted inspections. The Philosophy Foundation do make note of the fact that their levels of accreditation are 'not tick box criteria and so have some room for the trainer's professional judgement' (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022f). However, it is hard not to see echoes of the auditing practices and calculative technologies that characterises neoliberal education systems (Apple, 2005; Shore, 2008)

The VbE organisation has a dedicated 'certification' page on their website in which it sets out 'an audit and certification option for schools that want to evidence their values journey' (Values-based education, n.d.b) including a 'Quality Mark Certification Scheme'. The process begins with a 'self-assessment audit tool', which guides schools through compiling evidence of the effectiveness of VbE and forms the basis of the audit.

It is important to be cautious in analysing the appearance of structured systems of training and validation, as they have long been features of professional development. However, the appearance of audit tools and frameworks in areas where they might not seem to be obvious, as in the measurement of an educational approach that prioritises values, merits attention. The critical point is that the model of the audit brings certain things into focus and not others (Shore and Wright, 2015). Any sense that a values-based or philosophical approach to learning and pedagogy might challenge the

validity of systems of auditing and assessment appears misleading. Rather, it seems that drawing on audit practices is a way of securing legitimacy for the programmes offered - these audit practices seem to function as 'rituals of verification' (Power, 1997).

The observations made here are not stand-alone critiques. We are trying to establish here is the cumulative effect of multiple overlapping and reinforcing discourses that work together to create and constitute a particular neoliberal milieu. Note the award of a 'logo' as a means of recognition as marketisation practices dovetails neatly with audit practices. This layering of neoliberal practices reiterates and reinforces a particular way of understanding what constitutes legitimate educational activity/process and this reiteration is critical to the maintenance and extension of the neoliberal dispositif. It is these multiple strategic affiliations and elaborations that cohere to generate and manifest a powerful and intransigent regime of truth.

### 4.2.3 Ethical transformations - Instrumentalising Education

Neoliberalism has shifted the epistemological and ethical framework through which we understand the value of education, encouraging the instrumentalisation of education in multiple ways (Jones and Ball, 2022). In the context of a quasi-market dominated by accountability, this means that commercial providers often prosper as providers of 'commercial products and services targeted at improved student outcomes' (Hogan et al, 2018, p.619). The educational provision offered is instrumentalised: desirable and valuable to the extent that it can help schools to improve exam results or Ofsted grades. It is possible to see evidence of this kind of instrumentalisation on the websites of the philosophers' network, where it appears as a marketing strategy.

The ethic of instrumentalism is replayed as the websites draw attention to the way in which the philosophising approach might help schools to improve their Ofsted reports or be seen to address certain policies. For example, The Philosophy Man site explains.

> This all sounds great, but what will Ofsted say?
> …We are excited about philosophy for its own sake, but it's nice to know that it has benefit for measurable outcomes, and in particular that it helps to diminish the difference between disadvantaged children and their peers (The Philosophy Man, 2021d)

They also include quotes from teachers who have undergone training that reference improvements in academic work and allude to policy areas.

> The school advises and supports other schools in the use of philosophy with children. This exemplary practice is spreading throughout the schools and is having a positive impact on pupils communication and thinking skills and this is beginning to be reflected in their achievement.
>
> This work made a particularly good contribution to developing social and moral awareness (The Philosophy Man, 2021d)

Similarly, Lifeworlds Learning highlight that their training might help schools to address policy areas such as 'British Values'.

> As values specialists we are able to use our learning Through values pedagogy to support schools to meet and exceed their requirements around fundamental British values (2021c)

There seems little doubt that this kind of instrumentalisation of education works to improve the 'saleability' of these programmes to schools. It can be seen as judicious marketing and/or a pragmatic approach tailored to a school's requirements and priorities. It plays into the audit culture in a different way. The philosophising with children approach is legitimated by its capacity to aid schools in fulfilling their own auditing requirements. This is the prioritisation and promotion of a particular instrumental ethical stance that illustrates how the audit framework reshapes environments 'in ways that mirror the values and priorities embedded within the audit technologies themselves' (Shore and Wright, 2015, p. 425). The question of how philosophising pedagogy can help schools to address their own audit requirements plays into an 'evidence based', 'what works' (or perhaps more accurately 'what can be seen to work') approach to both policy and academic research. This is evident in two large RCT trials on the use of P4C from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (Gorard et al, 2015; Lord *et al*, 2021), one suggesting a noticeable improvement on academic attainment and the more recent showing none. The individuals and organisations in our network reference the initial EEF trial and other research on their websites: Dialogue Works references EEF and comments 'Effective

metacognition and self-regulation can accelerate progress by 7 months' (Dialogue Works, 2021b).

21st Century Learners and The Philosophy Man also reference the initial EEF report (21st century leaners, n.d.b; The Philosophy Man, 2021e). The Philosophy Foundation references a number of research projects that show increases in IQ, improvement in reading ability, verbal reasoning, speaking and listening skills, confidence, concentration and behaviour. These research findings are presented as quantitative, statistical data, such as 'there was a 63% increase in successful use of critical thinking and metacognitive skills in the intervention group' (The Philosophy Foundation, 2022d)

As well as framing philosophy as of instrumental value in improving attainment, the research itself exemplifies a particular epistemological approach and kind of knowledge that is integral to a neoliberalised education system. i.e., the discourse of the number and numerical 'knowledges'. This dominance extends beyond the economic model of the market and practices of accountability or the obsession with the production of data (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2018) to include a research field that is dominated by empirical, quantitative methodologies and statistical representation that is restrictive and arguably misleading (Smeyers and Depaepe, 2006; Biesta, 2007, 2010).

Drawing on research that employs this kind of methodology and representation would appear to be at odds with the more holistic philosophising pedagogical approach these organisations promote. While there is an effect of legitimising the philosophising approach and so improving marketability, the wider implication is that an epistemological framework which arguably distorts and over simplifies the complex processes of education is adopted. The concomitant prioritisation of an instrumental ethic that ties the value of philosophising to a measurable impact on student development serves to reinforce the validity and visibility of key neoliberal practices and the truths they contain.

A further aspect of instrumentalisation is apparent in the philosophy network sites' suggestions that their approach is valuable in that it prepares students for the workplace and job market. This reflects the notion of the knowledge economy

(Drucker, 1966) where education is positioned as a private, rather than public, good. Education is a product that is valued in terms of its transactional leverage in a competitive job market, furthering the commodification of knowledge and skills; thus economic rationalism is present in our assessment of the value of education.

Whilst certainly not a dominant feature of the way that this philosophising pedagogy is promoted, there are some suggestions of value in the job market, for example in Lifeworlds Learning's section on Global Learning.

> Global Learning is based on the understanding that young people growing up today have an entitlement to learn about and prepare themselves for, the complex interdependencies and interconnections that characterise their lives, jobs and future prospects (2021d)

The Philosophy Foundation refer to a neoliberal understanding of education focussed on the knowledge economy.

> Individuals achieve better educational workplace results, have greater appetite for learning, and higher aspirations for education and work (2022b)

The point being made in this section is that the philosophising approach is positioned as an instrumental good: a policy solution, a way of improving student achievement/attainment or an approach that will improve a child's chance of success in a job market. In claiming that a particular programme can help schools meet their policy requirements, improve attainment levels, help students in a competitive job market, these sites replay and legitimate certain knowledges and truths that are fundamental to neoliberal education practice. Further, it would appear that this varied and iterative instrumentalisation of education improves the commercial viability and marketability of the philosophers' network. What appears to be a progressive pedagogy and educational approach is positioned as a means to an end - and its value lies in the end it achieves.

In tracing the interaction of various discourses of marketisation, audit, the number, the knowledge economy, we can see how the prioritisation of the ethical position of instrumentalism is legitimated. This adds yet another cohering strand to the neoliberal dispositif and constitutes a powerful milieu that inflects, arguably distorts, the philosophising pedagogical approach.

## 5. Discussion

It is clear that the philosophers' network offers an approach to education that represents an alternative to much of the pedagogy that characterises neoliberal classroom practice. It is presented as a form of educative process that concerns the development of the whole child as a collaborative, critical, creative and caring thinker (Lipman, 2003), an approach within the progressive tradition. However, there is an incongruity and tension between the way in which this network operates and the approach to and vision of education and pedagogy it promotes.

Using the conceptual apparatus of the dispositif, we have tried to unpick and interrogate this tension. We have identified and visibilised the neoliberal discourses and practices that form the context and shape the articulation of the philosophers' network's approach, indeed that are integral to its existence and survival. It benefits from a devolved form of governance that increases the market in which it operates, and employs discourses and practices of marketisation and commodification that improve its branding and market exposure. It replicates the characteristics of an audit culture to legitimate programmes and training and verify the value of philosophising as a way to fulfil policy, improve attainment and meet targets. It draws on discourses of the number and practices of datafication to evidence positive impact and success.

It might be argued that this is merely a pragmatic approach that allows network members to promote their alternative vision of education but in a sense, this misses the point. The necessity and decision to adopt this approach serves to reiterate that such an alternative can only be 'in the true' (Foucault, 1981, p.61) if it can be legitimated and justified by reference to wider neoliberal truths and values of increased academic performance and employment success. In drawing on neoliberal discourse and practice to promote their alternative vision, they are reiterating and legitimating that discourse. Whilst the nuts and bolts of their pedagogical approach may well remain intact, it is firmly tethered to a wider discourse of instrumentalism and the economisation of education that undermine the broader claims of their educational vision.

Further, these are individuals and organisations that in many ways present as archetypal neoliberal subjects. They are entrepreneurs who have successfully negotiated a competitive system and operate as the quintessential homo oeconomicus (Foucault, 2010, p.267ff). Whilst they may promote approaches to education and pedagogy that challenge neoliberal thinking on education, the process of doing that has constituted them as neoliberal subjects.

The result is that the philosophers' network reiterates particular epistemological standpoints and truths and promotes particular social and ethical relations that cohere and extend a neoliberal dispositif.

However, we acknowledge that the connections and affinities that cohere this dispositif are at times unclear and weak. Accountability and audit are strategic at the level of the teacher and the school, framing training programmes, progression and awards but students do not experience this; it does not follow down into the classroom. The practices in the classroom encourage pupil voice and resist hierarchy as children often set the agenda for discussion. Dialogue is prioritised and teachers and pupils sit alongside each other as co-investigators. This is a collaborative approach to knowledge construction, one that is not constrained by testing. It is important therefore to acknowledge that we do not know how or whether the neoliberal tropes and practices we have identified impact the experience of students. Clearly, educators retain agency in the way they might deploy P4C to challenge neoliberal pedagogic practice in individual classrooms. To understand how this plays out would require further research on the way P4C is both understood and used by its practitioners and experienced by students.

It seems therefore that this network of philosophising pedagogues is ambivalently placed. It certainly speaks of an alternative to the neoliberal straight jacket of didactics and testing, promoting dialogue, values, collaboration and critique. Indeed, the philosophers' network is premised upon the value of this alternative perspective. The difficulty is in determining how the 'value' of that approach is understood and how it is situated. Thinking about Parker's contention that 'in order for networks to be regarded as a form of governance they must play a role in steering, setting directions

and influencing behaviour', we have been disinclined to consider this network to play into a form of heterarchical network governance. However, using the dispositif as a methodological framework, it seems that it is implicated within a wider frame of neoliberal governance. In tracing the way in which neoliberal practices and discourses shape and inhabit this network, we have shown how the connections and affinities that exist between the neoliberal educational milieu and the philosophers' network work together to normalise and extend the market form.

## 6. Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the possibility that systems of heterarchical network governance might contain within them, by nature of their very structuring, the possibility for 'grass roots' movements to emerge that challenge neoliberal thinking and practice. Thinking with and elaborating upon Ball and Junemann's 'grass roots' speculation has resulted in a slightly different piece of network governance research. We looked at whether the philosophers' network represents one such potential challenge or alternative to key aspects of neoliberal thinking and practice in education. Our exploration points to a degree of tension and dissonance between some of the neoliberal discourses and practice that the philosopher's network draw on and the progressive educational approach they offer. Whilst it is clear that we cannot claim that this network is thoroughly imbricated into the assemblage as tropes peter out and are inflected by the underpinning philosophical and pedagogical approaches on offer, it is equally clear that it plays a role in legitimating neoliberal practices by accepting those practices as mechanisms of veridiction. It seems that wider forms of neoliberal governance conspire to mitigate the potential challenge posed by the alternative voices that can emerge in a system of devolved and networked power.  It is difficult to assess therefore whether this network marks out a space where a different approach to education and pedagogy might develop and grow or whether it represents the on-going commodification and marketisation of the whole child in a competitive quasi education market (Jones, 2022).

These data demonstrate a collaboration with neoliberal thinking and practice which raises some difficult questions about how effectively the neoliberal system can be played or subverted. Who is inside the Trojan horse here? Is the philosophers' network seeding an alternative pedagogy and vision of education by pragmatically

engaging with neoliberal practice, or is that pedagogy and vision simply the unique selling point of a network of private providers offering an escape from the very neoliberal education system that sustains it? There are various conclusions that could be drawn: perhaps that the neoliberal milieu is so suffocating that the only spaces of resistance are symbolic, rather than substantial; even those who think they are resistant are actually sustaining the neoliberal project (with echoes of the 'compliant resistance' of teachers) (Bradbury, 2019b). Alternatively, we can characterise the philosophers' network as using the tools of neoliberalism to establish spaces for resistance and disruption, particularly given the operation of these networks within classrooms at a grassroots level. We remain open to both these possibilities.

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