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Title: The teacher as designer, scientist and technician: Positioning private school teachers in China as post-performative teachers

Abstract:
This paper utilises the concepts of 'post-performativity' and 'the post-performative teacher' to explore the private school context in China. It does this by drawing on in-depth interviews with Chinese language teachers and utilising metaphor analysis to highlight three recurring teacher identities that collectively constitute a post-performative teacher identity. The identities are *teacher as designer*, *teacher as scientist*, and *teacher as technician*. In so doing, this paper offers emerging evidence of how teachers in private schools negotiate the dual demands of accountability and commitment to the teaching profession. The identity positions of designer, scientist and technician could be used by researchers for developing the concepts of 'post-performativity' and 'the post-performative teacher' in future research. In particular, the paper argues that the concepts of 'post-performativity' and 'the post-performative teacher' have academic currency in non-public, non-Anglophone education contexts, and may be indicative of a more general post-performative condition that requires further investigation.

Keywords: post-performativity; post-performative teachers; identity; private schools; China

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Introduction

As a technical rationalist approach to knowledge and its value (Patrick, 2013), performativity operates as policy technologies of educational reform (Hardy, Reyes & Hamid, 2019) and has been defined by Ball (2003, 215) as 'a new mode of state regulation which makes it possible to govern in an "advanced liberal" way' requiring teachers to 'organise themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations.' Performativity has also been associated with certain techniques (Frostenson & Englund, 2020) or technologies (Ball, 2003) that have reshaped what it means to be a professional teacher in the neoliberal age. These technologies include managerialism, auditing, and constant regulation (Ball 2003) and can be said to have reshaped both professional work and the professional workers themselves (Frostenson & Englund, 2020), with Ball (2003) even arguing that teachers' identities have been irrevocably transformed (for the worse) under a performative regime.

However, in recent years, researchers (e.g., Daliri-Ngametua & Hardy, 2022; Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Holloway, 2019; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Poole, 2023; Poole & Xu, 2022; Ro, 2022; Wilkins, 2011) have started to talk about the concepts of 'post-performativity' and 'the post-performative teacher.' If performativity is associated with negativity and 'terror' (Ball, 2003), the post-performative is characterised by an acceptance of performativity (Holloway & Brass, 2018). It has been suggested that in a post-performative milieu, performativity is no longer viewed as threatening, but has largely been internalised and normalised (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Lloyd and Davis 2018). The new generation of teachers (those who went to school from the 1990s onwards) who have come up through a performative schooling system have been interpellated as responsibilised, performative teachers and therefore might be described as 'post-performative teachers' (Wilkins, 2011).

Post-performative teachers occupy an ambiguous position within the performative space (Wilkins, 2011). They are neither compliant nor resistant to the demands of performativity. They may be motivated by affective rewards, but they are still ambitious. They are aware of the conflicts between the 'demands of accountability and the desire for autonomy' (Wilkins, 2011, 389), but are able to resolve these differences because the post-performative space is ambiguous in nature, accommodating, and even resolving, multiple, conflicting identities and positionalities (Frostenson & Englund, 2020).

The concepts of post-performativity and the post-performative teacher allow researchers to side-step the reification of performativity as inherently negative by keeping the more problematic aspects of performativity in focus (such as its technologies and tendency to orient teacher professionalism to a circumscribed, inward, technicist perspective) whilst also considering the positive aspects of performativity. Not only does this highlight the complexities of professional identities in a performative school system (Wilkins, 2011), but it also brings into focus the lived experience of teachers, particularly the ways in which they have come to view performativity and its techniques as unthreatening and even empowering by serving their professional ends (Holloway & Brass, 2018).

To date, scholarship on post-performativity and the post-performative teacher has focused on tensions between accountability and autonomy (Wilkins, 2011), the reconstitution of humanistic values in performative terms (Frostenson & Englund, 2020), the normalisation of performativity (Holloway & Brass, 2018; Ro, 2022), and reasons for the post-performative turn (Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Holloway & Brass, 2018). Although these studies all focus on the teacher, they tend to emphasise macro-level phenomena, such as the techniques (Frostenson

& Englund, 2020) or technologies of performativity (e.g., performance indicators, rankings and evaluations) and changes to the teaching profession more generally. What has yet to be considered are teachers' perceptions of what it means to be a post-performative teacher and how post-performativity has impacted their identities. Previous research (e.g., Ball, 2003) has identified identity as a significant concept, yet it is not clear how post-performative teachers define themselves and what role their identities play in negotiating performative teaching contexts.

This study's focus on teachers' identities is informed by Ro's (2022) study of Singaporean teachers' perceptions of performative teaching, which found that although there was a gap between teachers' conceptions of teaching and performative norms, there was little evidence of conflict. Specifically, Ro's (2022) study informs this paper in the following ways. Firstly, it valorises lived experience as a valuable unit of analysis that can add to the discussion of post-performativity. This paper develops this line of inquiry by connecting lived experience to teachers' identities and exploring how teachers perceive their role in a post-performative context. Ro's (2022) study also suggests that the notions of post-performativity and the performative teacher are evident in non-western contexts. This paper builds on this argument by shining a light on how post-performativity works in another non-western context – Mainland China (henceforth referred to simply as China). This paper also explores notions of post-performativity and the post-performative teacher within the private-school context, something which has yet to be done, as the focus of previous scholarship has been on the public-school context.

Context of this study

The impact of performativity on teachers in China is not a novel concept. Although official policy aspires to position education in China as a public good in order to promote 'su zhi jiao yu' education (holistic or all-around education), there is nevertheless ample evidence of the impact of performativity on educators' professional lives (e.g., Chiang et al., 2023; Gao & Yuan, 2021). Whilst there have also been a number of studies on teacher identity and Chinese teachers (e.g., Yuan & Gao, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022; Zhu & Zhu 2018), these studies focused on the public-school context. To date, research on teacher identity and performativity has yet to embrace the concepts of post-performativity and the post-performative teacher or consider their applicability to the private school context.

The private school context in China encompasses international schools, private bilingual schools, vocational schools, and private tutoring schools, covering kindergarten, primary, middle-school and high school years. Aside from vocational schools, which have been established to tackle issues related to educational equity, private schools in China remain inherently elite in nature. This elitism is reflected in their for-profit nature, as well as the social status of their clientele, who might best be described as an aspirant local middle class who, amongst other things, are motivated to send their child(ren) to a private school due to their perceived superiority to public education and their advantageous position as gateways to prestigious overseas higher education institutions (Jin & Chen, 2023).

Specifically, this paper presents data collected from interviews with Chinese teachers from private bilingual schools. These schools cater for Chinese nationals, are staffed predominantly by Chinese teachers, and offer a fusion of national and international curricula. There is emerging evidence (e.g., Poole, 2023) that private schools (at last in China) share the performative features of public schools in other contexts, such as the UK. In a previous paper,

(Poole, 2023) I explored Chinese teachers' struggles to implement what I described as performative learning (i.e., professional learning that is oriented inwards towards a technicist outcome) in the performative space of the private school. The teachers' struggles were largely the result of performative technologies – such as teacher appraisals, prescribed teaching materials and parental expectation – which not only regulated the teachers' actions, but also prevented them from implementing what the teachers perceived as more progressive (i.e., student-centred) approaches.

Based on the above, I proposed that the notion of the post-performative might have applicability beyond its initial context. Private schools are thus post-performative because they are characterised by accountability and regulated by performative technologies. Private schools in China can also be said to be post-performative as they are staffed by teachers, who are predominantly in their early 30s and have come up through an education system in China that has become micro-neoliberalised (Zhang & Bray, 2017). That is, the Chinese education system has come to embrace aspects of neoliberalism (such as accountability and performativity), but with Chinese characteristics (such as state regulation).

Purpose of this study

This study seeks to develop the concepts of post-performativity and the post-performative teacher by connecting them to the notion of teacher identity and the context of private schools in China. By so doing, this study offers evidence of how teachers in private schools negotiate the dual demands of accountability and commitment to the teaching profession. This study also builds on my previous study (Poole, 2023), which offered evidence to support private schools as post-performative, by zooming in on the teachers' identities and using the concept of 'post-performative teachers' in order to nuance their lived experiences of performativity as more than just 'terror' or 'pleasure'.

In order to achieve these aims, this study positions teacher identity as a site where the post-performative can be seen at work. Teacher identity is defined in this paper as 'an ongoing and dynamic process which entails the making sense and (re)interpretation of one's own values and experiences that may be influenced by personal, social and cognitive' (Flores & Day, 2006, 220) and 'political' (Mockler, 2011) factors. Teacher identity is also understood as being fragmented, constantly under construction, open and evolving (Arndt et al., 2018). Teachers' identities thus provide a window onto how post-performative teachers negotiate the demands of accountability on the one hand and their commitment to teaching on the other.

In-depth qualitative interviews with ten English teachers in private schools in China, identified three recurring identities: the teacher as scientist, the teacher as technician, and the teacher as designer. The significance of these findings lies in the fact that they represent a range of identities which reflect the multiple demands of a post-performative context – accountability (i.e., the teacher as technician) and professional commitment (the teacher as scientist and designer). The findings also offer evidence of the participants being post-performative teachers, as they did not appear to be concerned about the conflict between their identities. Rather, they adopted a pragmatic stance towards being teachers, which offers an insight into what it means to be a post-performative teacher in non-western, non-public education contexts.

The paper is guided by the following research question: How do the participants articulate their identities as post-performative teachers and to what extent is there conflict between their identities?

Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature as it focused on teachers and their identities. More specifically, this study utilised metaphor analysis as the main strategy for eliciting the participants' identities as this technique can help to shed light on the complex negotiation of professional identity against a backdrop of performativity, where teachers' grounded, emergent identities often clash with imposed or conferred identities (such as the teacher as technician) that reflect and reinforce the self-improvement logic of performativity (Hadley, 2014).

Participants

This study draws on interviews with ten Chinese ESL teachers who worked in private schools throughout Mainland China. The interviews from which this study draws were part of a larger study of twenty-two teachers examining the impact of professional learning. This paper does not explicitly discuss the connection between professional learning and teacher identity through metaphor elicitation, but rather uses reflection on professional learning as a device to elicit metaphors that signal teacher identities relating to the notions of post-performativity and post-performative teachers. This larger study was given ethical clearance by the author's then institution, Universal English (pseudonym). Participants provided written consent before data collection started and were also provided with an information sheet detailing the aims and purpose of the research project.

The participants were asked to take part in this study as they were younger teachers in their late twenties and early thirties (thereby being educated within a largely performative education system), had recently completed professional learning and were fluent in English. Their experiences offered an insight into their identities and commitments to teaching, as well as the presence of performative technologies that made realising some teacher identities difficult. Moreover, as all of the participants were English teachers, they had a sophisticated enough command of English to be able to speak at length and thus produce metaphors in English.

All of the participants worked for schools that were affiliated with an educational company (Universal English), which provided professional development and academic support to private schools in China. Although most of the participants had accrued in-service experience before undertaking their professional learning, most did not hold a teaching qualification. This is a characteristic of ESL teachers in private schools in general. In contrast, ESL teachers in public schools must hold a national teaching license and are required to undergo continuous professional development and re-accreditation. At the time of interview, all of the teachers were in their late-twenties to mid-thirties. Additionally, most of the participants were new to teaching, and as such had only ever taught in a private school. The age of the teachers will be returned to later in this study, as it is a significant factor in understanding how they articulated their identities as post-performative teachers.

Methods

In order to elicit spontaneous metaphors from the participants, semi-structured qualitative interviewing was employed (Seidman, 2013). The participants were interviewed once, with interviews lasting between 40 – 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, and were audio recorded and then transcribed. The interview questions sought to understand the teachers' motivations for participating in their professional learning and its impact on their

teaching and teacher identities. Aside from one question, which explicitly asked the participants to reflect on their professional learning in terms of the metaphor of the 'journey', the interview questions did not explicitly require teachers to produce metaphors. The journey metaphor was included to gain a holistic insight into the teachers' overall conceptualisation of their experiences of undertaking professional learning.

The flexibility of the semi-structured interview enabled the interview to move in unexpected directions, thereby providing the participants with more opportunities to produce metaphors. The participants were given the interview questions prior to being interviewed. Not only did this allow them to think about their responses beforehand, but it also ensured that during the interview the conversation would flow as smoothly as possible and thereby allow for the elicitation of spontaneous metaphors. The participants were informed before the interview that the conversation might include questions that they had yet to preview.

Data analysis

Before undertaking data analysis, it was first necessary to settle on a definition of metaphor. Metaphors have been defined as 'analogic devices that lie beneath the service [sic] of a person's awareness and serve as a cognitive device…as a means for framing and defining experience in order to achieve meaning about one's life' (Shaw & Mahlios, 2008, 35). They have also been defined as 'an implied analogy which imaginatively identifies one object with another' (Holman, 1980, 264). This study adopts Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) definition of metaphor highlighting the significance of metaphor in ever day language. Rather than being a consciously thought-out device, metaphors are often produced spontaneously and organically – i.e., individuals are not conscious of having produced them, as if the metaphor were speaking through them.

I also took inspiration from Craig's (2018) emergent approach to metaphor analysis, as it complements the qualitative nature of this study. Craig (2018) utilised teachers' emergent metaphors as a method for surfacing teachers' embedded, embodied knowledge of experience. As the name suggests, emergent metaphors are not elicited from teachers in a deductive manner (i.e., using sentence stems or being employed to summarise existing conclusions) as in the case of Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) and Tait-McCutcheon and Drake (2016), but arise organically and spontaneously (i.e., unprompted) from teacher discourse and classroom practice. In contrast to the deductive approach, emergent metaphors are inductive in nature; they are used to create conclusions, rather than to make sense of them. Rather than representing the researchers' perspective, emergent metaphors can be said to represent the teacher's perspective, and thereby offer an insight into their identities. Methodologically, emergent metaphors may offer researchers a slightly less contrived way to understand teachers' identities arising from their engagement with professional learning by attending to those metaphors that naturally occur during practice or interviewing.

Data analysis consisted of a three-step process of *mining*, *extracting* and *refining*. The reader can find a more detailed account of this process by consulting the supplementary materials.

Mining involved locating and identifying metaphors embedded within the teachers' interview transcripts that signalled an identity position. I decided to read and analyse the transcripts manually (i.e., without the aid of software) as this approach was commensurate with the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of the metaphors produced by the participants. Whilst content analysis could have been used, this would have only been useful for metaphors that

followed a predictable pattern, such as 'A teacher is a craftsperson.' Once identified, the metaphors were categorised according to an over-arching identity (e.g., teacher as technician, teacher as scientist, teacher as designer).

Extracting involved removing the metaphor or simile and its surrounding sentences from larger chunks of interview data in which they were embedded. Whenever the meaning of a metaphor was unclear, I turned to my insider knowledge as a professional learning facilitator for Universal English, additional linguistic information (such as verbs and adjectives), and larger interview extracts as contextual frames to clarify interpretation (see supplementary materials for an example of this process). Extracting also involved organising the metaphors into themes. I employed thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2018), assigning a label to a chunk of text in which a metaphor was embedded. I also reviewed the examples within each theme and assigned an additional label that indicated the nature of the identity.

Inspired by Watson (2009) the final stage, *refining*, involved rearranging the extracts in the form of stanzas. The act of rearranging the extracts as stanzas helped to foreground key words and identities and were placed at the end of a line for emphasis.

Findings

The findings section explores three of the most significant identities reported by the participants. These identities were *teacher as designer*, *teacher as scientist*, and *teacher as technician*. These identities constitute a post-performative teacher identity and were selected as they represent contrasting identity positions, thereby offering evidence that private language school teachers are 'post-performative'. The teachers in this study are post-performative not only because they embody multiple, often contradictory identities, but because they appear to be able to reconcile these identities due to the private language schooling being a post-performative context where performativity has become largely normalised. As the focus of this paper is on the participants' metaphors, the participants are referred to by number (e.g., teacher 1, teacher 2, etc) rather than by pseudonyms.

The designer[1]

The first identity to be explored is that of the teacher as designer. To a certain extent, this identity might be described as 'transformative' (Sachs, 2003) as it does not seek to ape prescribed views of the teacher as a technician (Hadley, 2014), but suggests a teacher who is able to take responsibility of their professional life by engaging in what McLaughlin (1997) refers to as 'practical action'. Such practical action is predicated on teachers having the freedom to act and take ownership of their learning and practice. At the same time, the interviews offered no evidence of teachers adopting an 'activist' (Sachs, 2003) stance (i.e., being politically engaged), which suggests that notions of the transformative are somewhat different in the private school context in China.

Rather than viewing teaching and learning as a mechanical process (e.g., the passing on of received knowledge or the fixing of errors), the metaphor of the designer suggests that the participants viewed teaching as a creative and emotional endeavour, one where they were able

[1] Some of the extracts used throughout this paper have appeared previously in Poole (2023). However, the nature of the analysis is substantially different, as this paper focuses on aspects related to metaphor/identity, whereas the extracts in Poole (2023) focus on the impact of professional learning.

to author their identities (i.e., what it means to be a teacher). The theme of the designer was encapsulated in two explicit metaphors. The first was that of the designer itself and the other was that of 'a craftsman' (sic).

In relation to the teacher as designer, the following excerpt was representative of how the participants had come to view themselves as authors of their own teaching after undergoing professional learning. Although not the focus of this paper, it is necessary to state that it is not possible to state conclusively that the professional learning itself brought about a shift in the teachers' identities. However, such a change can be inferred by the use of words like 'now' which indicates a new outlook. This is illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 1
Now I feel like a designer,
because I know the concepts,
the theories
underpinning the class activities. (Teacher 6)

Teacher 6 is now able to imagine new possibilities which previously appeared to be impossible because they lacked the conceptual and theoretical knowledge to be able to consider new ways of being a teacher. Not only is Teacher 6 able to see the big picture (e.g., how things fit together, as conveyed through the simile, 'like a designer') they are now able to connect their newly acquired theory with their practice ('class activities'). The verb 'underpinning' suggests that the teacher is also able to see more deeply into the often hidden and tacit thinking that informs practice ('class activities'). In a sense, they are now able to understand why the class activities are done the way the way they are, whereas previously they implemented classroom activities without understanding the theory behind it. This appears to be empowering, as the simile of the designer suggests a certain amount of agency, imagination and freedom.

The identity of the designer was also conveyed through metaphorical verbs, such as 'express' and 'design':

Extract 2
Especially after we learned the PDQ[2],
then we have more autonomy
to *express* or *design*
our classroom in our way. (Teacher 5)

Teacher 5 believes that their professional learning has given the teachers ('we') more autonomy – such as the ability to make their own decisions without being controlled by anyone else. The fact that the professional learning has given Teacher 5 the tools to be more autonomous and expressive suggests that before undertaking their professional learning they were constrained by their lack of theory (or their awareness of theory and how it related to their practice). Whilst it is not clear in what ways the teachers were constrained, the reference to the 'classroom' could function as a metaphor for teaching itself and might encompass a range of aspects, such as pedagogy, classroom management and assessment. The phrase 'express or design our classroom in our way' also suggests that what the teachers have learnt is able to be translated

[2] PDQ (Professional Development Qualification) refers to the programme of professional learning undertaken by the participants. It is offered by Cambridge Assessment English. The reader can find more about the courses here: https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/support-and-training-for-schools/professional-development/professional-development-qualifications/

into something more concrete (i.e., practice). The verb 'design' also echoes the simile of the 'designer' from extract 2.

Another teacher used the metaphor of a craftsman:

Extract 3
Each teacher is like a craftsman,
with their own skills
and unique features. (Teacher 1)

A craftsman (or person) is an individual who is skilled at making something with their hands. Related phrases, such as 'own skills' and 'unique features' suggest that Teacher 1, having undertaken professional learning, has started to become more individualistic, taking ownership of their teaching. The connotation of doing something with one's hands also gives a sense of creation and creativity; Teacher 1 is able to inject something of their own personality and self into the teaching process, thereby taking ownership of it and transforming it from something generic to individualised.

The scientist

The second identity to be explored is that of the teacher as a scientist. Like the designer, the teacher as scientist is largely positive in nature, although as will be pointed out below, it does gesture towards a performative reality which is characterised by objective truth and immutable laws which clashes somewhat with the more creative and emotional approach of the teacher as designer.

Metaphors related to the scientist and science tended to be produced when the participants were talking about their reasons for undertaking professional learning and its impact of their beliefs. It was not clear why this was, but it might be related to the participants' existing conceptualisations of the teacher as an 'engineer of the soul', a popular metaphor for the profession of teaching in China. As engineers, teachers are seen as technical professionals, using tools and machines to provide knowledge and skills for students and to build a stronger nation (Jin & Cortazzi, 2016). Although 'engineer' is somewhat different from 'scientist' and scientific discourse, they both could be characterised as technical-mechanistic metaphors that reflect a positivist view of teaching as underpinned by certain fixed principles.

The image of teachers uncovering the principles (or laws) of teaching is illustrated in the following extract:

Extract 5
I wanted to *verify* them [teaching activities],
to learn the science
behind them. (Teacher 7)

'Verify' means to prove that something exists or is true, or to make certain that something is correct. In this extract it also functions as a metaphor verb, resonating with other science-related terms, such as 'the science' and 'behind them. The teacher had a sense that what they were doing was correct, but needed empirical proof, which they were able to get from the theories and concepts they acquired from their professional learning. Interestingly, Teacher 7 suggests that their motivation for undertaking professional learning was not necessarily to learn

something new, but rather to 'verify' or try to uncover 'the science' (i.e., the theories or 'laws) behind what they had always done ('teaching activities).

This confirmatory discourse was echoed by another teacher:

Extract 6
I know every part I teach
has a *scientific basis*,
and the other teachers
are doing the same,
so quite confident. (Teacher 2)

Although this extract does not contain a metaphor as such, the phrase 'a scientific basis' functions as an adjectival metaphor – i.e., it gestures towards a positivist discourse where teaching is seen in terms of professional behaviours which can be empirically tested. Echoing the previous extract, Teacher 2 was not so much concerned with 'what' they have learnt. Instead, they considered the 'process' of undertaking professional learning to have provided them with the 'objective' evidence they needed to 'verify' that what they had always done in the classroom was underpinned by sound 'scientific' principles. The professional learning thus validated the teachers' previous teaching experiences, which also led to an increase in their confidence.

The science metaphor was also used to conceptualise critical reflection:

Extract 7
From a layman's point of view,
you may think a class is lively,
But in fact, if you analyse the lesson
from a scientific perspective,
you will focus on the substantial results of the lesson.
Ultimately, we see what students learn,
how teaching can be transformed
into learning. (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 juxtaposes the 'layman' and 'a scientific perspective' in order to underscore the importance of connecting theory to practice. A layman is someone who is not trained in or does not have a detailed knowledge of a particular subject. Teacher 2 clarified the meaning of a 'layman's point of view' by explaining that, 'A lot of teachers are able to complete a class—but some of them only do so some fancy activities, while some know about some theories so that they can scientifically design a lesson (Teacher 2). Teaching without theory, it is implied, is based on a superficial understanding of one's teaching, which focuses only on the students' behaviour – i.e., if they enjoyed the class. The meaning of 'scientific perspective' was not clarified by the teacher, but given its juxtaposition with 'layman', it could be assumed to mean its opposite – that is, a deeper, more objective way to evaluate one's teaching. The juxtaposition of 'a layman's point of view' with 'a scientific perspective' allows another metaphor, that of weight, to emerge. The layman's point of view is light and superficial, as suggested by words like 'lively' and 'fancy. In contrast, a scientific perspective is heavy, as suggested by the verb 'analyse' and the adjective 'substantial', and has a more positive connotation.

In many ways, the teacher as scientist resonates with that of the teacher as designer. Both are intrinsically positive in nature, both give a sense of teaching and teachers as creating something

new that can benefit humankind more generally, and both implicitly associate teaching with status, as designers and scientists are typically held in high esteem by society. At the same time, there is some dissonance between the two identities, which suggests the presence of a post-professional identity. The teacher as designer suggests that teaching is a creative and imaginative endeavour, whereas the teacher as scientist assumes that teaching is underpinned by certain immutable laws and principles. Not only does this reflect a more traditional transmissive view of teaching, but it also seems to fit with the logics of performativity, which are similarly predicated upon positivist principles, such as objective measures and evidence-based practice. The image of the craftsman seems to straddle these two identities, as it is both a creative endeavour as well as underpinned by certain principles and procedures that need to be faithfully observed. Despite this, these two identities gesture towards a more positive and perhaps even progressive view of teaching, which goes beyond the classroom, and is characterised by autonomy and agency.

The technician

The final identity to be explored is that of the teacher as technician, a term that is borrowed from Hadley (2014). The metaphor of the technician is closely connected with performativity (Giroux, 2004) and contrasts, and even clashes with, the metaphors of the 'designer' and the 'scientist' examined in the previous sections. In order to understand the metaphor of teachers as technicians, it is necessary to return to extract 1, which is now presented in its entirety:

Extract 4
Each teacher is like a craftsman,
with their own skills
and unique features.
After introducing
Those standardised procedures,
it's like making everyone
a component of a factory,
producing
the same product. (Teacher 1)

The images of the factory, component and product reflect a performative view of teaching which is at odds with the kinds of agential and creative identities the teachers associated with being designers and scientists. In addition, due to the high marketisation of the ESL industry in China, ESL teachers are often dehumanised into commodities (i.e., products) (Yang et al., 2023). The 'standardised procedures' presented earlier refer to the institutional norms of the private language school. One such norm was the requirement for the teachers to follow a prescribed curriculum in the form of classware (Power Point slides and materials that the teachers are expected to follow and are institutionally imposed). The teachers were also evaluated by a set of standardised behaviours, which did not correspond to the teachers' identities as 'designers' or 'scientists'. Teacher 1, who was also a teacher assessor in their school, went on to clarify that 'Teachers are observed using the same standardised behaviours and things like salaries and promotion are dependent on getting a good evaluation.'

Another teacher also described the ubiquitous gaze of evaluators and parents in terms of a regulatory technology that limited the teachers' ability to be scientists and designers and forced them to revert to being dutiful technicians (Giroux, 2003):

> I have to consider whether my head teacher will observe my class or what kind of feedback that students would will give to me, both me and their parents. I have to consider their parents' feeling and different kinds of expectations. (Teacher 2)

Whilst the teachers showed evidence of a more progressive teacher identity in terms of fostering greater independence, individuality and creativity, the performative reality of their classrooms meant that this impact remained largely theoretical in nature – a form of frozen praxis. Despite being able to articulate new identities, the participants had to conform to the school's institutional reality as their salaries and promotions were contingent on receiving a good evaluation. This conformity is captured in the image of the 'component in the factory' which suggests that teachers have been reduced to interchangeable, indistinguishable cogs in the neoliberal machine. Teacher 1 refers to the outcome of this process in terms of a 'product', something that is reified, commodified and created for sale. This seems to indicate a clash of identities: the participants' conceptions of themselves as 'designers' and 'scientists', which are at odds with the performative technology of the appraisal system, which positions the ESL teacher as a technician due to its focus on standardised behaviours.

The post-performative teacher

Whilst this paper has thus far presented the identities of the designer, scientist and technician separately and made some tentative remarks about how they relate to post-performativity, this section seeks to make this analysis explicit by uniting them in an over-arching post-performative teacher identity.

Overall, this study did not find any evidence of teachers adopting an activist identity (Sachs, 2003) or being troubled by 'permanent agonism' (Ball & Olmedo, 2013). Rather, like the teachers in Wilkin's (2011) study, the teachers appeared to accept the logics of performativity (e.g., evaluation, imposed use of teaching materials and classware) and were able to negotiate some autonomy (i.e., the designer) within a context of accountability. For some of the teachers, such as Teacher 6, who described themself as 'a designer', a more progressive view of teaching did not appear to contradict or challenge the logics of performativity (in the case of this school, these logics refer to prescribed teaching frameworks). Rather, the progressive view of teaching helped them to make sense of, and rationalise, such performative logics. This is illustrated in the following extract:

> The framework is like, for example, when you teach reading here, first you need to lead in, and then you need to maybe do the picture work. Then you need to read for the detail, for specific information, and after that you need to do the vocabulary, which is then followed by production. I know this is good, but I wasn't informed on why we should do this. You have to follow the framework, or else you can't pass the test. Now I understand. (Teacher 6)

The framework refers to a prescribed way of teaching a reading lesson. The self-knowledge that the teacher has gained through their professional learning is not used to develop an activist identity, but rather deployed inwardly to make sense of the demands of performativity (e.g., 'the test'). This reflects the ambiguity of post-performative contexts highlighted by Frostenson and Englund (2020). Interestingly, Teacher 6 appears to have internalised a performative logic that normalises performative technologies of accountability and measurement ('you have to follow the framework'). The contradiction between the transformative and the performative is cancelled out because the former is made compatible with the logics of performativity. This

suggests that for some teachers the logics of performativity have become internalised as a frame through which professional learning is rendered 'performative learning' (Lloyd & Davis, 2018).

Other teachers attempted to resolve the contradiction between wanting to be designers on the one hand and technicians on the other by trying to strike a balance between the two:

> Sometimes I would open my class ware and select one or two activities or just use the pictures from the PowerPoint, then use my own strategy or the activities from what I learned from the PDQ to stimulate my students autonomy to learn. (Teacher 8)

> After all, the classware is made by others, and sometimes I find it hard to understand what the original designer wants us to achieve, like I don't know why they put this content in this part of the class. I would use the standardised syllabus while replacing some language points, activities and topic-related materials. (Teacher 10)

This reflects Wilkins (2011, 404) study of UK teachers who 'were able to hold on to their sense of autonomy whilst accepting (and generally welcoming) an intensive regime of accountability to both internal and external managerialism.' In the case of the participants, the imperative to deliver standardised content was driven by both the need to meet student outcomes (i.e., high examination results), as well as to generate income for the private school, which necessitated a prescribed delivery of a standardised product to the paying parents.

In the examples above, there is some evidence of teachers being critical and reflexive (such as being aware that the classware is largely acontextual in nature), but this does not extend to rejection of the classware. Instead, the teachers adopt a post-performative position of strategic acceptance. Significantly, the teachers' gaze is not directed outward (as an activist teacher identity would be), but instead remains fixed inwards. The critical tools of activism (reflection and criticality) are thus pressed into the service of performativity and thereby neutralised, reaffirming a performative status quo, and contributing to the construction of a post-performative reality.

Discussion

This paper utilised metaphor analysis to highlight three recurring teacher identities that taken together constitute a post-performative teacher identity. The three identities were the teacher as designer, the teacher as scientist, and the teacher as technician.

The teacher as designer emphasises the creative, agential and autonomous aspects of teaching, which tend to be associated with a more progressive view of teaching as outwardly-oriented. The scientist is similarly agential, but suggests a more traditional view of teacher professionalism as underpinned by immutable principles. The teacher as technician, in contrast, is a metonym for performativity, and is presented negatively in terms of a drone or an automaton. This was most vividly seen in examples where teachers talked about the appraisal system and the need to use prescribed teaching materials, which limited their ability to be designers of their own teaching.

Significantly, there was little evidence of the participants being frustrated or pessimistic about their limited opportunities to be designers. This was a little surprising, as much research on performativity has emphasised the negative responses of teachers and researchers (Frostenson

& Englund, 2020). Moreover, the participants did not appear to subscribe to one over-arching identity (e.g., a designer, a scientist, an activist teacher). This contrasts with previous studies (e.g., Kilderry 2015), which, whilst offering complex and contradictory accounts of identity and commitment, still suggest that teachers tend to identify with just one to the exclusion of all others.

The participants in this study appeared to be comfortable with the plasticity of their identities. This suggests that the teachers did not have a commitment to one over-arching identity, but had become adept at picking and choosing identities that fit the exigencies of the moment. The identities that comprise this over-arching identity (the designer, the scientist and the technician) could be described as a post-performative teacher identity, representing the spectrum of teaching positionings within the post-performative space of the private school.

What makes the identities of designer, scientist and technician post-performative has nothing to do with their intrinsic nature. For example, the teacher as designer does not readily fit within a performative milieu of accountability that diminishes teachers' agency and autonomy. Rather, what makes these identities post-performative is how the teachers perceive, embody and use them – i.e., strategically selecting and deploying them in order to negotiate (and perhaps even exploit) the ambiguous space of the private school. The private school in China is ambiguous because it encourages teachers to be progressive and autonomous (e.g., being encouraged to participate in professional development programmes that foster this kind of attitude), but directs such development and progressive thinking inwardly into delivering prescribed materials and lesson sequences more efficiently for neoliberal ends.

Whilst the participants were frustrated by the performative nature of their teaching context (as evidenced by excerpts that talked about the need to change their teaching to suit parents and evaluators), they appeared unable to do anything about it and just accepted the situation. Far from being inauthentic teachers, the participants might be described as authentic post-performative teachers, as they were aware of the tension between accountability (the need to be technicians to meet the for-profit nature of their work and to keep the paying customers happy) and autonomy (the need to be professionally fulfilled by being designers), but did not feel overly concerned by it, as they were still able to construct authenticity through their ability to remix and mashup identities and commitments within a performative context. This reflects findings from previous studies (e.g., Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Holloway & Brass, 2018; Ro, 2022; Wilkins, Gobby & Keddie, 2021) that offer evidence of teachers being able to find 'pleasure' (Holloway & Brass, 2018) even within the 'terrors' (Ball, 2003) and restrictions of performativity.

The reason why the participants did not seem frustrated or angry about their performative constraints might be attributed to temporal and contextual factors. As Wilkins (2011) noted, the newer generations of teachers (those who attended secondary schools in the 1990s and beyond) have been interpellated as performative teachers; therefore, they do not see anything strange or threatening in performative imperatives (Holloway & Brass, 2018). In a sense, the performative might be said to be a part of their teacher DNA. This can be contrasted with teachers who came up through the education system before the neoliberal turn and who have narrated their experiences of adapting to a performative status quo in terms of 'terror' and frustration (Ball, 2003, 2016; Holloway & Brass, 2018).

Another reason why the participants adopted a pragmatic attitude towards their teacher identities may relate to the idiosyncrasies of the Chinese private school context. Despite

sustained educational reform, China still remains an examination-driven country, with high-stakes examinations such as the university entrance examination (the Gao Kao), which is considered by many parents to be the safest way to securing an advantageous future for their child(ren). There is a prevailing view that students can overcome adversity and difficulty if they just apply themselves and work hard. As such, an improvement/accountability imperative has always been part of teachers' lives as it is woven into the very fabric of Chinese society and education. Furthermore, the private school context itself is highly performative in nature due to its for-profit nature. As the teachers had only ever worked in private schools, it might be concluded that they had become habituated to performativity as a ubiquitous and taken-for-granted reality, and therefore did not feel threatened by it.

Conclusion

This study offers evidence that traditional conceptions of performativity as denoting a fixed (largely negative) reality may be insufficiently nuanced to capture the lived experiences of teachers who have been born into and educated within a performative milieu. This temporal demarcation necessitates a shift in conceptual and methodological focus. By attending to teachers' lived experiences (in the form of metaphors about their identities), this paper utilised the concepts of the post-performative and post-performative teacher in order to understand how teachers in non-public/non-western contexts negotiated the dual commitments of accountability and autonomy. Doing so allows for a more complex reality to emerge, one where contrasting and contradictory commitments to the teaching profession (as signaled through contrasting identity positions such as 'the teacher as designer' and 'the teacher as technician') are no longer indicative of fixed identities or commitments to teaching, but instead gesture towards a multifaceted fluid reality characterised by interchangeable identities and commitments (akin to a walk-in wardrobe of identities), from which teachers select in response to the exigencies of the moment. This in turn suggests that the concepts of post-performative and the post-performative teacher may be portable concepts that have potential analytic value in non-western contexts. Such portability implies a post-performative condition, one which defines multiple teaching contexts that are characterised by performativity and teachers who have been interpellated within and by its logics.

Whilst this study has added to the literature, there are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, aside from a few examples, it was not clear how specific identities (i.e., the teacher as designer) related to individual teachers. Rather, the findings suggested a spectrum of identities that constitute a post-performative identity. Future research would need to focus on specific teachers in order to identify how they interface with multiple identity positionings and how they relate to the concepts of post-performativity and the post-performative teacher. The three identity positions identified in this paper – the teacher as designer, scientist and technician – might be used as a typology for collecting further evidence to substantiate these identities and/or to expand on them. At the same time, there are likely to be other identities that this study did not identity; therefore, future studies could also focus on expanding the repertoire of identities identified in this paper.

Finally, the findings raise implications for both research and practice. In terms of the latter, the findings offer evidence of the ontological scope of the post-performative; it is not just a feature of western, public-school contexts, but can be seen in non-western, non-public, contexts, such as private schools in China. This suggests that we are now in an 'era' (Ro, 2022) of post-performativity. At the same time, the findings are a reminder that the post-performative is not necessarily homogenous in nature. Although not the focus of this paper, there was some

evidence of post-performative features with Chinese characteristics, such as the centrality of examinations and some of the metaphors (e.g., the technician). The potential heterogeneity of the post-performative needs to be investigated further, with one possible avenue of inquiry being comparative studies between countries (e.g., teachers in China and the UK) or within countries and contexts (e.g., Chinese teachers in public and private schools). Such studies would help to develop the concept of the post-performative by providing evidence of its homogeneity, but more importantly, identify instances of its localisation.

In terms of implications for practice, the findings suggest that post performative teachers tend to adopt a pragmatic approach to identity. That is, they are comfortable embodying seemingly contradictory identities and resolving potential ambivalence by recourse to an over-arching post-performative identity. This tendency to resolve contradiction appears to be a feature of the post-performative teacher, as previous studies (e.g., Frostenson & Englund, 2020; Ro, 2022) have identified similar findings. The reification of the post-performative in the form of the post-performative teacher could be utilised by teacher educators as the starting point for designing professional learning that speaks to the 'post-performative condition.' The post-performative condition is characterised by pragmatism, plasticity, ambiguity and acceptance of performativity not just as a reality, but also as a source of potential professional strength. Whilst researchers and teacher educators may perceive the post-performative as threatening and undesirable, the emerging evidence suggests that teachers view it as an 'ally' (Frostenson & Englund, 2020) and as such the condition warrants further scholarly attention.

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