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An Irish perspective on initial teacher education: How teacher educators can respond to an awareness of the ‘absurd’

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, initial teacher education has experienced shifts towards competence and school-based programmatic reforms. As a result, literature on the role of teacher educators operating within the academy suggests a sense of doom as market-based and political distrust of the academy grows. For now, initial teacher education in Ireland is largely housed within the academy. However, several governing policies have recently been published which subtly seek to marginalise the role and practices of teacher educators. Drawing on Camus’ understanding of the absurd as emerging from the interaction between the longing of human beings for clarity and the universe’s indifferent and silent reply, this paper sets out to investigate possible methods that teacher educators may select in responding to an awareness of the absurd.

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Introduction

The political discourse of ‘teacher quality’ has had a dangerous transformative impact internationally on academy-situated initial teacher education (ITE) (Barnes & Cross, 2018; Mooney Simmie et al., 2019; Wilkins & Wood, 2009; Zeichner et al., 2015). Zeichner et al. (2015, p. 122) outline ‘jurisdictional challenges’ within teacher education, as the academy has been assessed as a ‘failure’ by policymakers and mass media in the preparation of teachers, which has paved the way for ‘entrepreneurial programmes’ to emerge, that align with mandates driven by politicians, the market-economy and conservative interests (Mooney Simmie et al., 2019). Internationally, in the U.S. (Cochran-Smith et al., 2013; Zeichner et al., 2015), U.K. (Wilkins & Wood, 2009) and Australia (Barnes & Cross, 2018; Comber & Nixon, 2009) in particular, there is evidence of market-oriented shifts in ITE towards both competence-based programmes and a move towards school-based programmes. The ‘competence shift’ reflects a simplistic desire to offer ‘what works’ (Connell, 2009, p. 217) to pre-service teachers (PST) but what works is merely neoliberal, measurable outcomes focused on ‘student test scores... job placements and retention rates’ (Barnes & Cross, 2018; Cochran-Smith et al., 2013, p. 12). The movement of ITE to a more school-based apprenticeship model was viewed as an attempt to bolster the clinical components of teachers’ education and compliment the competence shift by focusing on the *training* of pre-service teachers (PST) rather than the *education* (Wilkins & Wood, 2009), so that PSTs are expected to enter the workforce and immediately *flourish*. This is reflected by particular programmes in

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Australia, such as the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) in Central Queensland University or the Master of Teaching at Melbourne Graduate School of Education which have reported high levels of PST preparedness for the classroom (Barnes & Cross, 2018). However, while this should be expected it should not necessarily be viewed as a positive.

Both market-oriented shifts have emerged as a result of a reported political distrust of the academy, suggesting a wholesale diversification of the role 'teacher educator' based on 'an unproven assumption that expert teachers are necessarily better placed to train new teachers' (Wilkins & Wood, 2009, p. 286). While 'best practice' may suggest the democratization (see Zeichner et al., 2015) of ITE (the term 'best practice' a technology of neoliberalism within itself), it has been suggested that these acts may serve to dilute the independence of the academy and allow for the values of performativity to seep into ITE programmes (Wilkins & Wood, 2009) and govern the practices of teacher educators, ultimately replacing education with clinical training for aspiring schoolteachers.

Ireland is a particularly interesting case within itself. In a review of ITE funded by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), Sahlberg et al. (2012) outlined that the Irish system possesses several advantages which distinguishes it from many European countries. Firstly, the social role of a teacher is a 'popular choice that carries strong social prestige unlike most other European countries' (p. 5) and as a result, entrants to ITE are from the top quartile of school leavers. This would seem at odds with trends and initiatives to both ensure sustainable numbers entering the profession in countries suffering a teacher shortage and also to target the recruitment of a higher calibre of entrants in other OECD countries (Barnes & Cross, 2018; Wilkins & Wood, 2009). Secondly, ITE is widely accessible throughout Ireland with numerous institutions offering programmes. However, this does not result in a diversity of entrants to the profession. On the contrary, research conducted on entrants to pre-service teacher education programmes highlights the homogenous nature of (predominantly high achieving, white, Irish, middle-class and largely Catholic) entrants (Heinz et al., 2017; Keane & Heinz, 2015, 2016). Additionally, the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2015) of Ireland published its *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015–2019)* which clearly outlined the lack of diversity within ITE and that recruitment to the profession does not reflect the school-going population in Ireland. Finally, Sahlberg et al. (2012, p. 5) propose that due to Ireland's economic and social structures, education 'has a central role to play in the future strategies of the nation', placing teacher education and an emphasis on teacher quality at the 'core of the implementation of national programmes for sustainable economic growth and prosperity'. Mooney Simmie et al. (2019, p. 58) describes a trend of educational 'consensualism' in Ireland:

...where there is little or no critical debate in education and where it is generally assumed that epistemological, ideological and cultural assumptions that shape education are widely shared and understood by all as the same thing.

Since the mid-1970s there have been calls to establish a professional body for teachers in Ireland (Coolahan, 2004; Leonard & Gleeson, 1999). These calls were largely driven by the teacher education sector rather than teachers themselves and was part of what could be termed the professionalisation of teaching in Ireland during the late 20th century. These efforts to establish such a body were partly based on the belief that it would strengthen the status of teaching and align with similar innovations in other countries. These calls found fertile ground at the end of the millennium when they intersected with more neoliberal supranational policies focused on the need for teacher 'profiles' and a refocusing on what it means to be a professional (Robertson & Keeling, 2008; Sørensen et al., 2016). Since its establishment in 2006, the Teaching Council of Ireland, heavily responsive to supranational reports (such as TALIS and PISA), have monopolised control of establishing professional standards and codes of conduct to ensure teacher quality across the continuum of teacher education, while also being the sole body governing the professional registration of teachers in Ireland and the accreditation of all ITE courses.

Prior to 2006, while teacher education programmes were overseen by an accreditation section in the DES (at the time known as the Department of Education and Science), this level of oversight could be described as 'light touch' in nature providing each respective Department/School of Education a significant level of autonomy with regards curricula design of their ITE programmes. As a result, there was a significant level of heterogeneity in the structure and format of teacher education programmes, particularly in the depth of treatment of different areas and the number and duration of school placements. However, in 2011 the Teaching Council's (2011) *Further Education: General and Programme Requirements for the Accreditation of Teacher Education Qualifications* appeared as a first attempt to both standardise and centralise the practices of ITE providers, ultimately eroding the autonomy of teacher educators via a technology of governance promoting consensualism. This erosion of autonomy was also undertaken to shift the power and 'ownership' of teacher education from the third-level sector to the newly established Council which was itself seeking legitimacy in its early years amongst both teachers and the public. Discourses downplaying the role and expertise of the teacher educator at this time were amplified by a lack of consultation with the teacher education community in relation to important policy changes in that period. The role of the teacher educator is further marginalised through the exclusive focus on ITE with little recognition of the traditional role of the academy in teachers' continuing professional development. This has resulted in an environment which is free from consultation as teacher educators' expertise is structurally isolated to ITE and therefore, may not warrant genuine consultation if deemed outside of their imposed remit.

As teacher educators practicing amidst these national and international ITE movements, it is worth considering what options are available to us in responding to these changes. There is an almost impending sense of doom within teacher education literature that feels absurd in nature. Therefore, in this regard, we consider the work of Albert Camus and his method for responding to the absurd. Our investigation is guided by the following questions: how should teacher educators respond when awakened to the absurd? and, 'does the absurd dictate death' (Camus, 2005, p. 7)? In the remainder of this paper, we explore the absurd, analyse possible responses which teacher educators may take and provide conclusions for the sustainability of teacher education within the academy.

The absurd

For Camus, conscious life is absurd. While the absurd is the backbone of Camus' writings, in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (originally written in 1942, and translated into English by Justin O'Brien in 1955), Camus (2005) outlines his philosophical stance: absurdism. He proposes that the absurd emerges from the interactional conflict between the social world and the natural world. It is human beings' innate desire to understand their place within the world and a longing for clarity, order and constancy met by the irrationality, unpredictability and disregard of the universe, which gives rise to the absurd. The absurd therefore, is a divorce; 'born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world' (2005, p. 26). As Gotz (1987) clarifies:

But the problem does not arise with the longing alone; neither does it consist of the chaos of the world taken by itself or as objective datum. The relation that is the absurd arises in the coming together of man and the world, longing and disappointment (p. 265).

However, it was not the absurdity of life that consumed Camus, as 'all this has been said over and over' (p. 14) by numerous thinkers, that conscious life exists on a spectrum between two terms; rationality and irrationality. What concerned Camus' investigation was 'not so much in absurd discoveries as in their consequences' (p. 14). That when faced with an awareness of the absurd nature of our existence, torn between longing and silence, what actions are provoked?

Therefore, an awakened realisation of the absurd, for Camus, should only be the beginning of a constant battle of the lucidity of one's actions.

The realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end, but only a beginning. This is a truth that nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not the discovery that is interesting, but the consequences and rules for action that can be drawn from it (Camus, 1979, p. 205).

In responding to this metaphysical dilemma, Camus ironically proposes what seems a simplistic binary choice based on 'two philosophical solutions, either yes or no' (p.5): one can commit philosophical suicide, or one can rebel. Seeking for guidance and unity (the absolute) outside of our own capacity destroys the equilibrium between rational – irrational, on which the absurd is founded. Thornton (2019, p. 610) explains philosophical suicide as individuals living in faith, or an 'unfounded "hope" that the universe will unfold along the lines of their beliefs and reasoning'. A hope, in which the universe will eventually correct its own course to align with the nostalgic conservatism of their positioning. However, in this case, 'everything is sacrificed to the irrational' as the individual finds solace and comfort in one side of the equilibrium, and as a result, 'the absurd disappears with one of the terms of its comparison' (p. 35). In essence, when awakened to the absurd, the individual has opted for clarity, order and knowing by solving the dilemma of the absurd and therefore, going back to sleep: committing philosophical suicide.

On the other hand, to authentically engage with this absurdity, an individual must forego such a process which tips the scales and instead, begin the art 'of living in that state of the absurd' (p. 39). For Camus, rebellion is the only genuine response to the absurd. He encouraged that 'it is those who know how to rebel, at the appropriate moment, against history who really advance its interests' (Camus, 2013, p. 244). Gordon (2016) cautioned that Camus was not promoting senseless violence, to the self or others, as a means of rebellion but instead that an individual should be consciously focused on achieving some worthy cause (freedom). Therefore, to rebel means living, understanding and creating your own social world, your own universe, as an attempt to govern one's self rather than allowing external, market-orientated, metaphysical shadowy factors alone to bind and shape our actions. By rebelling, we begin to live our lives as Camus' image of a rebel. In echoing a Nietzschean will to power (a 'holy Yea unto life: its own will, willeth now the spirit; his own world winneth the world's outcast' (Nietzsche, 1999, p. 14)), Camus describes his rebel as follows:

What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command (2005, p. 13).

Here in lies the irony of the method which Camus outlines. The rebel is responsible for balancing both yes and no. Committing oneself solely to one solution, results in becoming guilty of philosophical suicide as one prioritises one term of the absurd over another. As teacher educators, it is understandable to feel both powerless and unheard within this wave of neoliberal policy shifts eroding the academy's influence through reductionist technologies of education which have gained epistemic dominance (Connell, 2009; Mooney Simmie et al., 2019) by promoting neat and quick 'best practice' training for PSTs. This is the absurd nature of our roles as academy-based teacher educators, the interactional conflict between moral and relational longing for education and the dominant market-orientated hegemony of consensualism leaning towards models of standards-based clinical training for PSTs. What then can we as teacher educators do when awakened to the absurdity of our positions?

Camus would advocate for conscious and lucid action which is aware of the consequences of such actions and detached from hope: rebellion. However, when investigating practical applications of Camus' method, rebellion emerges as a much more nuanced journey with many treacherous pitfalls along the path leading towards philosophical suicide. The remainder of this paper will explore a number of options available to us as teacher educators and applies Camus' investigative method to each. The guiding rule being that if we propose an option, we cannot in the

same instance provide a solution to the absurd which would 'conjure away one of the terms of the problem' (p. 29). Otherwise, this would reduce our argument to leaning towards the absolute and ultimately, we risk falling on our own philosophical swords.

How might we as teacher educators respond?

Hopeful silence

Our first response is quite clear in its consequence. Given the relatively low level of resistance in the past 10 years by the teacher educator community, it could be argued that silent compliance may be the dominant response. A response in which we as teacher educators hope that such reforms will either eventually work out or begin to reflect our values and beliefs. However, there is also the potential for silent dissent. This may be evident within teacher education programmes which have engaged in programmatic accreditation processes only to elevate one of the terms of the absurd, in this case, market-led shifts in education, and that academy-based experiences of PSTs are framed by negatively targeting such shifts. Whether sitting lamenting these changes or sitting in hope that a mysteriously oppressive 'they' will at some stage 'see the light', both are similar acts of acquiescence which favour one term of the absurd and therefore, result in an act of philosophical suicide.

Self-imposed exile

Life as a teacher educator in the academy in Ireland has reflected international trends of performativity which have served to distort traditional understandings of what it means to be a 'teacher educator'. Along with the education of PSTs, institutional discourses pertaining to research, publishing, internationalisation and league tables have served to diversify the role of teacher educators through a process of dilution. As MacPhail and O'Sullivan (2019, p. 493) note, in Ireland the 'pressures to increase research metrics (more publications and successful funding bids by academic staff) is a key focus of every university strategic plan and a key expectation for teacher education staff'. Gleeson et al. (2012, p. 6) similarly identified a research shift within the role brought about by internalised discourses of performativity within the academy, of which an increasing importance was 'attached to research profiles [of teacher educators] both for academic appointments and subsequent promotions'.

The potential result of such a dilution is the creation of a new locality for us as teacher educators, one in which the academy has now become the immediate focus while 'external' policy changes in teacher education and, teaching and learning are viewed as being jurisdictionally challenging as they may lack the immediacy of demands within the academy. Instead of openly challenging such policy changes, there has been a significant increase in teacher education research in the past 10 years, reflected in the ISI ranking trends of such journals, in which policy implementation/enactment is critiqued posthumously by teacher educators. While this may appear as a form of rebellion, the ultimate consequence of the action may lead towards philosophical suicide as the individual has replaced one term of the absurd for another. By swapping neoliberal, centralised competency-based shifts in teacher education for the 'publish or perish' performativity discourses of the academy, the individual has opted to find (temporary) solace within the walls of the ivory tower of academia. By doing so, they have opted to solve the absurd through their own self-imposed exile resulting in surrendering our voice in the teacher education landscape and changing gods. This path of silent rebellion ultimately, is a process of stalling or momentarily silencing our own awareness of the absurd, only again to succumb to philosophical suicide.

Nostalgic rebellion

As seen with self-imposed exile, Camus' idea of rebellion is fraught with dangers. As human beings, Camus views an 'appetite for the absolute' (p. 16) within us which is reflective of our longing for clarity, order and certainty. In favouring our own rationality and sense of the world, we can be guilty of a 'nostalgia for unity' (p. 16) or a blinkered perspective on reality as we convince ourselves of our own command of the world and its order. However, the consequences of any action that seeks to solve the absurd results in delusionally negating its presence, regardless of which terms (rationality or irrationality) we attach our certainty to. Camus warns of individuals (re)creating the world in their own image when awoken to the absurd:

So long as the mind keeps silent in the motionless world of its hopes, everything is reflected and arranged in the unity of its nostalgia. But with its first move this world cracks and tumbles: an infinite number of shimmering fragments is offered to the understanding. We must despair of ever reconstructing the familiar, calm surface which would give us peace of heart (p. 17)

This quest for certainty is reflected in so many 'would-be' attempts at rebellion, which are essentially no more than acts of nostalgic conservatism of one's own positioning. A contemporary example of this is the increasing partisanship of modern political discourses in which political campaigns are based on the demonisation of opposing parties. This binary perspective leaves very little room for the middle ground. The consequence of this attempt at rebellion is that eventually the equilibrium is destroyed because in their actions, they have propagated a blinkered path towards certainty, and with its negation, the lucid awareness of the absurd and any potential actions resulting from an awakening.

In Ireland, the national curriculum development body, the NCCA, were met with significant resistance from the teacher unions during the reform of lower secondary education. While this resistance resulted in several industrial/strike actions, mass media appearances and spoiled public relations (Printer, 2020) this level of resistance exposed the teacher unions to criticisms of being conservative and resistant to change. We use the term of resistance because this would not qualify as responding in rebellion as Camus would describe it. Instead, it was a form of nostalgic rebellion in which the teacher unions appeared to reject the proposal for change without offering alternatives or contributing to the discussion in relation to rationales for curriculum reform. Rebellion based on a conservative 'nostalgia for unity' is also a form of attempting to solve the absurd. This focus on nostalgia suggests that the answer exists within one of the terms of the absurd; in this case, through the grasp of rationality. In this instance, genuine engagement would have been the presentation of an alternative, by offering a voice to the discussion as opposed to appearing as conservative and resistant to change. Instead, blinkered nostalgic rebellions which seek to silence dialogue similarly results in philosophical suicide.

Lucid rebellion

Our failings in the previously outlined responses lie in our unbalancing of the absurd. The guiding rule of this investigation is that in our responses to the absurd, we must preserve the absurd at all costs. But how does one live a life, not to mention enact the role of a teacher educator, which preserves the absurd and does not end in philosophical suicide? Camus believed that our primary failure in relation to the absurd was our blind exaggeration of our own ability to rationalise our place in this world. However, the actions of the rebel are 'not a matter of explaining and solving' instead, a rebel is one who should prioritise lucidity of experiences. Thornton (2019, p. 612) explains that lucidity of one's own self 'leads to an increased ability to construct and reconstruct meaning; an increased ability to adapt'. Through this lens of lucidity, Camus likens his rebel to an artist.

For an absurd work of art to be possible, thought in its most lucid form must be involved in it... The absurd work requires an artist conscious of these limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies nothing more than itself. It cannot be the end, the meaning, and the consolation of a life (p. 94).

The metaphor of action as an artform was chosen by Camus because it allows reason to return to being a form of thought and not a path to certitude. 'It illustrates thought's renouncing of its prestige' (p. 95) as a path to solving the absurd and instead, allows the rebel to create and construct for themselves while living in the absurd. By doing so, 'the artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work' (p. 94).

Herein perhaps, lies our opportunity as teacher educators to re-envision ourselves as artists. The academy offers us many various canvases on which to practice our art craft. Through pedagogical and programmatic design, we can embrace various educational discourses to challenge PSTs to position themselves and direct their own journey towards becoming educators. This would allow us to present PSTs with a mosaic of approaches and limits our expectations of students to subscribe to a particular value system espoused by us as teacher educators. The artwork involved in our writing transcends institutional metrics when we begin to view it as contribution, rather than the actuality of events or perspectives. We must view our artwork as a conversation which does not seek epistemic dominance by guaranteeing a certitude of sorts. In doing so, we try to 'maintain a sustained awareness (lucidity) of the constructed nature of knowledge' (Thornton, 2019, p. 613) while possibly leaving ourselves as teacher educators and our works of art open to further inquiry and as a result, sustain the fluidity of our lucid negotiation of the role of a teacher educator.

In adopting this outlook, we begin to view ourselves as a canvas in order to prioritise the hunting of our own assumptions, freeing us from ritualistic anchors of our past which may provide ballast in our nostalgia for unity. Our failings in the three previously outlined options indicated a nostalgic rigidity within but, instead of lamenting the condition of our role as teacher educators, we must begin to sketch out our ever-evolving role and live creatively in 'that state of the absurd' (Camus, 2005, p. 39). By doing so, perhaps we begin to recognise and reflect, like the artist, the society in which we create potentials of what teacher education 'could be' rather than clinging to contrived and blinkered utopian visions of how teacher education 'should be'.

Conclusion

It was the consequences that emerge from an awareness of the absurd that Camus was interested in. Having outlined four options available to us as teacher educators, the ironically nuanced nature of Camus' binary method is troublingly apparent as it seems seductively easier, and safer, to fall back asleep when awakened to the absurd. Whether that be through a form of hopeful compliance, rebellion through self-imposed exile or conservatism through nostalgic rebellion, each option leads to the eventual negation of the absurd and as a result, slipping off into an ignorant slumber. Our proposed 'best-practice' solution itself consists of a possibility of negating the absurd. For example, if the outcomes of our lucid actions become the means by which we live and perceive the world, then we risk inevitably also falling to nostalgic unity and an extinguishing of the sense of the absurd. There seems a sense of inevitability of philosophical suicide. Perhaps this was Camus' rationale for focusing on the consequences of our actions when momentarily awakened to the absurd rather than the absurd itself. This allows us to consider our second guiding question: 'does the absurd dictate death' (Camus, 2005, p. 7)?

No! In fact, an awakening to the absurd forces an action. The consequence of actions may result in a philosophical leap leading to the killing of that momentary feeling of lucidity. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is important to state the obvious: death is inevitable. Our understandings and definitions for what it means to be a teacher educator or what 'good/bad teaching' is are all destined for extermination as change is inescapable. One could question

if we as teacher educators have forgotten this one certainty of life? A potential result of such a philosophically redundant existence may be a detachment from the reality which we are expected to engage with. If our artwork as teacher educators no longer reflects the schools or societies in which our PSTs are entering but instead reflects our own rigid nostalgic misgivings, what can we expect? In lamenting over our own marginalisation in the broad field of education, have we participated in our own demise by allowing society to question our own relevance and the potential of our artwork?

Of vital importance for teacher educators to consider is the rise of nostalgic rebellion evident in the content of critical studies of neoliberal practices. We must consider from where these studies emerge and their purposes. Do they seek to contribute to our zeitgeist or do they arise from a nostalgic sense of the world and our supposed position in it? By assigning blame to shadowy neoliberal wizards operating behind curtains, we deify this term of the absurd and attempt to eradicate it through our own conservative values and beliefs regarding education, rather than allowing ourselves to consider the potential merit of pluralistic artforms on education. Ultimately, the absurd does not dictate death, but it is easier to live in slumber than to lucidly exist.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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