Abstract
This paper furnishes an account of research undertaken in Ireland that gleans the perspectives of beginning primary schoolteachers on their early-career workplace learning. Principally influenced by the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, the study employs a theoretical framework informed by sociocultural theory, in general, and by Activity Theory, in particular. To chart the process of workplace learning over time [one school-year] and across contexts [nine beginning teachers, in nine varied workplace settings], this qualitative research undertaking employs a multiple-case study research design. One-to-one semi-structured interviews, and the maintenance of digital logs by research participants, are the principal methods of data collection employed. Results indicate that beginning teacher learning coalesces around a number of discernable dimensions of occupational experience.

Rationale and Motivations
This paper presents the findings of research undertaken in Ireland that gleaned the perspectives of nine beginning primary schoolteachers on their early-career workplace learning. Principally influenced by the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm (Mertens 2005), the complex worlds of lived experience as understood by nine beginning teacher research participants are accessed, during the course of their initial year of occupational experience, post-graduation. In short, the purpose of the study is to determine what beginning primary teachers understand to be the dynamics of learning to teach.

General agreement exists among teacher educators that beginning teaching is an inherently complicated undertaking (Spalding et al. 2011). Located, Janus-like, between initial teacher education and continuing professional development, a beginning teacher’s first year of occupational experience, post-graduation, represents a crucial juncture in the continuum of teacher learning (McCormack et al. 2006). In many jurisdictions, this understanding is increasingly manifest in terms of supports for beginning teachers. Internationally, much research has been undertaken on supports for beginning teachers, especially in relation to the induction and mentoring of newly qualified teachers by experienced colleagues (Cameron 2007; Ashby et al. 2008; Hobson et al. 2009; Ingersoll and Strong 2011). Researching the workplace learning of beginning teachers is important, McNally (2006) posits, as it leads to a robust theory of early professional learning in teaching, and is a necessary prerequisite to effecting evidence-based improvements to initial teacher education programs and to fostering the development of supportive, yet reflective and
interrogative, school cultures for newly qualified teachers.

In an Irish context, the experiences of beginning teachers are very much under-researched. Consequently, research-based understandings of this crucial phase in the professional lives of primary teachers in Ireland are less than comprehensive. Recently, however, the developmental needs of beginning teachers in Ireland are increasingly acknowledged and are set to feature as central components in a proposed continuum of teacher learning and development (Department of Education and Skills 2010; National Induction Programme for Teachers: Primary 2010; The Teaching Council 2010; The Teaching Council 2011). The Irish Teaching Council is unambiguous on the matter; the first year of a beginning teacher’s career constitutes a “critical period” (2011, p.16). The belated acknowledgement of the needs of beginning teachers, in Ireland, ensures that the present research undertaking is timely.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the principles of the interpretive research genre. Interpretive studies contribute to an image of teaching as a complex intellectual endeavour that unfolds in an equally complex sociocultural context (Borko et al. 2007). Paradigmatically, the research is undertaken within the ambit of the constructivist paradigm. Basic assumptions guiding the constructivist paradigm are that people active in the research process socially construct knowledge, and that researchers should attempt to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of the research participants who live it (Schwandt 2000 cited in Mertens 2005, pp.12-13). Ontologically, therefore, the research goal is to understand the complex worlds of lived experience as understood by the participating beginning teacher informants. In this respect, the research undertaking privileges “insider” perspective and focuses on understanding early-career experiences in the natural settings in which individuals learn to teach (Borko et al. 2007, p.5). Seeking the perceptions of others in the research locations - pupils, parents, principals, teaching assistants and fellow teachers, - does not form part of the research undertaking. Yet, while the individual beginning teacher is the primary unit of analysis (Yin 2009, p.29), the research endeavour focuses on the individual acting in activity systems, and within groups and contexts composed of individuals (Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003).

Epistemologically, adherence to the principles of the constructivist paradigm is evident in that the guiding theoretical framework is rooted in contexts and persons other than the researchers. In this manner, a guiding theoretical framework emerges from a review of conceptual and empirical practice-based literature informed by the tenets of sociocultural theory (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) and Activity Theory (Engeström 1987, 1999, 2001). These two theories are synergistic and when utilised together as coarse-grained and fine-grained lenses, respectively, provide a richer view of beginning teacher workplace learning than either can offer in isolation. Together they act as deductive, interrogative instruments throughout (Brenner 2006, p.361), furnishing a set of analytical approaches that facilitate an understanding of the complexity inherent in beginning teacher workplace learning. Therefore, the incorporation of broad-based sociocultural understandings of learning, allied to the utilisation, as theoretical framing devices, of the principles and components of Activity Theory (Engeström 1987, 1999, 2001), help to determine the dynamics of beginning teacher workplace learning and development.
Methodology
To chart the process of workplace learning over time [one school-year] and across contexts [nine beginning teachers, in nine varied workplace settings], this qualitative research undertaking employs a multiple-case study research design (Stake 2006; Yin 2009).

One-to-one semi-structured interviews, and the maintenance of digital logs by research participants, are the principal methods of data collection employed. In the case of each beginning teacher, a three-cycle, multi-phase interview design allows snapshots of developing experience (Goos 2005, p.43) to be captured at three points throughout their first year of occupational experience, post-graduation i.e. November 2010, March 2011 and June 2011. Due to the three-cycle, multi-phase nature of the interview process, data collection and analysis overlap. Borman et al. (2006, p.133) draw attention to the iterative nature of data analysis in case-study research by highlighting that data initially collected serves to reorient the next wave of data gathering and analysis. In the present research undertaking, interview questions evolved over time as the research undertaking progressed. Interview schedules were adjusted based on previous interviews with participants (Mertens 2005, p.16). Nonetheless, the same core, sociocultural and Activity Theoretical informed questions were asked of all participants, thus facilitating the process of making direct comparisons between respondents.

Maintenance of a digital log (i.e. e-mail log) facilitated the recording of incidents and events deemed significant by participants in the context of their learning experiences as beginning teachers. The digital log is used not only to identify patterns of behaviour, but also to provide greater insight into how individuals interpret situations and ascribe meanings to actions and events (Alaszewski 2006, p.37). Each research participant authored ten digital log entries throughout the course of the 2010-2011 school year.

Data sources
The nine beginning primary teacher research participants graduated in June 2010 from five different initial teacher education programs, hosted in three different colleges, in Ireland. The selection of research participants followed a replication, not a sampling logic (Yin 2009). Therefore, rather than selecting a random sample, a volunteer cohort of approximately thirty trainee teachers was recruited via the ‘snowball’ sampling method during the spring of 2010. ‘Snowball’ sampling relies on referrals from initial participants to generate additional participants (Cohen et al. 2007, p.116). As a sampling logic is not used, the typical criteria regarding sample size are irrelevant. In selecting nine beginning teacher research participants from among a volunteer cohort of approximately thirty volunteers, overriding constraints related to feasibility, manageability and the vagaries of the beginning teacher employment market. The nature of individual employment contracts, school type and size, and geographic location of workplace setting, also determined the final selection of research participants. Therefore, the research undertaking includes beginning teachers who work in a variety of primary school settings: single gender, mixed gender, advantaged, disadvantaged, urban and rural. In this way, the degree to which the research cohort can be considered to be representative is strengthened, thus enhancing the transferability (Mertens 2005, p.256) of the research findings. A majority [66%] of research participants are female. However, the gender of the beginning teacher did
not inform the composition of the participating cohort, nor does it feature as a focus of study in the research undertaking.

Conclusions: Substantive / Empirical
A deductive, sociocultural and Activity Theoretical informed reading of interview transcripts and digital log entries reveals emergent findings coalescing around a number of major themes or discernable dimensions of beginning teacher experience. In delineating themes or dimensions of beginning teacher experience, the present undertaking reflects research conducted in the United Kingdom in relation to the occupational learning of newly qualified teachers (McNally and Blake 2010). Mirroring this work, the present research undertaking utilises a model of seven key dimensions of beginning teacher experience to frame the process of data analysis. These dimensions or themes are as follows: emotionality; relationality; materiality; temporality; structurality; cognitivity; ethicality. Contained within each of these seven dimensions of experience are a host of sub-themes that help to describe the actuality of learning to teach. These sub-themes include, among others: collegiality, performativity, limanility, visibility, agency, pedagogic authority, identity formation and the micropolitics of workplace culture. The use of a dimensional model fragments the learning experiences of beginning teachers into constituent parts for the purpose of analysis. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that the actual journey taken by each beginning teacher participant is a more complex whole than the sum of its parts: themes or dimensions are enmeshed, overlap, compete, and vary in their intensity and applicability to particular participants, and from one point during the initial year of occupational experience to another.

Conclusions: Methodological
The significance of this research undertaking stems from the manner in which it succeeds to simultaneously adhere to both the principles of particularizability and generalizability.

Particular, in the first instance, in being located in the specific context of the Irish primary school system, this research project can also be considered to adhere to the principle of particularizability in its recognition of the intrinsic value of each individual case, rather than valuing the individual beginning teacher participants for the contribution they make to empirical generalisations. Therefore, Stake’s advice (2000 cited in Mertens 2005, p.238) of not losing sight of that which is unique about each case, in an effort to find similarities with other cases, is heeded. Consistent with the core objective of interpretive research, this research undertaking is, to a large extent, a search for local meanings (Erickson 1986 cited in Borko et al. 2007, p.4). In doing so, the study captures local variation among the nine research participants through fine-grained descriptions of settings and actions, and through interpretation of how individual beginning teachers make sense of their contexts and activities. The research undertaking seeks to describe, analyse, and interpret features in each of nine research settings, preserving their individual complexities and communicating the individual perspectives of the nine research participants (Borko et al. 2007, p.4).
Simultaneously, the choice of nine research participants, whose beginning occupational experiences occur in a variety of primary school settings, enhances the representativeness of the research cohort and, as a consequence, improves the transferability of the research findings (Mertens 2005, p.256). Principally, however, the capacity of the research undertaking to successfully subscribe to the principle of generalizability is a function of the theoretical approach adopted throughout (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, p.233; Yin 2009, pp. 130-131). This involved devising a theoretically informed conceptual framework to guide the fieldwork phase of the study, undertaking a theoretically informed reading of interview transcripts and e-mail logs, and drawing connections between the data and larger theoretical issues. Employing a deductive approach helped to address a central limitation of research in the interpretive genre i.e. the lack of shared conceptual frameworks and designs. This limitation makes it a challenging task to aggregate findings and to draw comparisons across studies, even when those studies are of similar phenomena (Borko et al. 2007, p.5). The findings of this research undertaking, however, are set in a wider context of theoretically informed current themes and preoccupations emerging from the literature on beginning teacher workplace learning and development e.g. Grossman et al. 1999; Grossman et al. 2000; Conway 2001; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002; Smagorinsky et al. 2004; Borko et al. 2007; Kardos and Johnson 2007; Borko et al. 2008; Feiman-Nemser 2008; Grossman and Thompson 2008; Conway et al. 2009; Haggarty and Postlethwaite 2009; Conway et al. 2010; Kardos and Johnson 2010; Spalding et al. 2011.
References


*This document was added to the Education-line collection on 2 November 2011*