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Learning to Teach: Narratives and Counter-narratives about Preservice Teachers

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Learning to Teach: Narratives and Counter-narratives about Preservice Teachers

Abstract

The present article analyzes two critical frameworks within teacher education and how they construct preservice teachers and their learning within teacher education. These frameworks of 'Apprenticeship of Observation' (AoO) and 'Ambitious Practice' (AP) present opposing narratives about preservice teachers. While AoO directs our attention to preservice teachers' belief, AP emphasizes on developing professional practices that are core to the work of teaching. Teacher educators draw on these frameworks and narratives to inform their work with preservice teachers. Each framework has its unique stance on preservice teachers and makes noteworthy contributions that expand the field teacher education and evolve our thinking as teacher educators

Keywords

Preservice teachers, Apprenticeship of observation, Ambitious practice, Teacher educators

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Learning to Teach: Narratives and Counter-narratives about Preservice Teachers

It is the first day of my methods course class. I am all prepared with the syllabus and the readings that contain the record of learning experiences I have designed for my preservice teachers (PSTs). I want them to go and shine in their future classrooms. I want them to transform their classrooms – get interested in students’ ideas, provide students with rich tasks to nurture inquiry, engage them intellectually, and provide student agency in the learning process. I go over my syllabus time and think “I have this in all well -planned”. I do not intend my PSTs to teach science in a “prescriptive” and “procedural” manner! I go over my syllabus one more time, this time with more questions. Will this work? What do I mean when I say PSTs will learn this? How will they learn effectively?

(My thoughts as a teacher educator)

Introduction

The vignette above provides a glimpse of hopes, fears and aspirations I share with other teacher educators. My questions and concerns regarding what preservice teachers (PSTs) can learn with me in a methods course are valid and reasonable. Often times, I get to spend only a semester with my students, and it is crucial that I deliberate on how I frame my learning opportunities and course curricula to prepare future teachers. Within the educational literature, there exists various perspectives and frameworks that shape narratives and counter-narratives about PSTs. These perspectives can have implications for how methods courses are designed and taught. In this essay, I am interested in analyzing two such theoretical frameworks and how they construct preservice teachers within teacher preparation. One important theoretical perspective is of *Apprenticeship of Observation (AoO)* which argues that PSTs have implicit personal theories about teaching and learning when they arrive to teacher preparation (Lortie, 1975). The lens of *Apprenticeship of Observation* has been widely adopted in the teacher preparation literature to describe what and how preservice teacher may learn during learning to teach period (Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1993; Richardson, 1993). Another recent perspective that has gained track within the scholarship of learning to teach is the notion of “*Ambitious Practice*” (AP). The framework of AP argues that professional learning of PSTs should be situated within the core practices that signify the intellectual work of teaching and are highly significant for student learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Ball & Forzani, 2009, 2011; Forzani, 2014; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; Windschitl et al., 2012). I argue that narratives generated by these perspectives run counter to one another, while narratives based on *Apprenticeship of Observation* are resistant in nature, those emerging from the framework of *Ambitious Practice* are more optimistic. In particular, *Apprenticeship of Observation* attributes three narratives to PSTs a) PSTs’ beliefs are preceded by their changes in practice b) PSTs face “problem of enactment” which resists their learning of reform -oriented practices c) PSTs learning within teacher preparation is weak due to their *Apprenticeship of*

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Observation ideas. On other hand, the framework of *Ambitious Practice*, describes three counter-narratives a) beliefs for PSTs are integrated in Practice b) PSTs can overcome “problem of enactment” and learn reform-oriented practices and c) PSTs can learn and begin building a repertoire of ambitious teaching. Despite opposing narratives regarding PSTs, it is important to consider the unique place of each framework within teacher education and how it has advanced our thinking as teacher educators.

In the first section of this essay, I discuss the frameworks of AoO and AP. In the second section, I layout three main narratives and their counter-narratives about PSTs rooted in the framework of AoO and APs, highlighting PSTs’ strengths and weaknesses. In the final part of this essay, I make some recommendations for future research on preservice teacher education which mainly showcases my unfinished thinking as a teacher educator.

Section -I

Apprenticeship of Observation

One's personal predispositions are not only relevant but, in fact, stand at the core of becoming a teacher. (Dan Lortie)

PSTs do not come to teacher preparation with empty heads or what we call as empty slates or tabula rasa. Rather, teacher preparation is one field in which students are “insiders” and not “strangers” to the field of their study. Unlike the field of medicine or law where students are somewhat unfamiliar with the settings and environments of their fields and need time to get accustomed to them, PSTs do not feel strange to the settings of their field. They arrive to the preservice teacher preparation with tacit insights and preconceived ideas about teaching and learning (Grossman et al. ,2009, Pajares,1993). It was Dan Lortie (1975) who enlightened us with idea of “AoO” that explains prior illustrations about PSTs. Since Lortie (1975), the idea of “AoO” has been broadly discussed and adopted within the scholarship of preservice teacher preparation.

According to Lortie (1975), an average student spends 13000 hours in school before graduating from high school. These numerous hours spent in the classroom amounts to an apprenticeship during which students get exposed to multiple ideas about teaching and learning through observing classroom teaching before entering the teacher preparation themselves. Based on this apprenticeship, PSTs’ have tenacious implicit personal theories about teaching and learning. PSTs frequently leverage on these personal theories during their own preparation as teachers (Pajares, 1993, Richardson, 2003). These personal theories can be thought of as their personal repertoires of thinking and worldviews which they use to interpret the learning experiences they receive. They get socialized into the ideas of teaching and learning before they get into the socialized into their professional education. They heavily rely on these experiences and use them as frame of reference to view teaching situations, students, their teaching contexts etc. As a result, they tend to teach in the way they were taught and are resilient to professional learning that might not align with their apprenticeship ideas.

Ambitious Practice

A practice-focused curriculum for learning to teach would focus on the actual tasks and activities involved in the work. Such a curriculum would not settle for developing teachers' beliefs and commitments. Because the knowledge that matters most is that which is used in practice (Grossman et. al, 2009)

The framework of AP argues to redefine the work of PSTs professional learning. It contends that that professional learning of PSTs should be situated in core practices that are most relevant to their work (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Ball & Forzani, 2009, 2011; Forzani, 2014; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013; Windschitl et al., 2012). The use of “ambitious” denotes that these practices describe highly intellectual forms of teaching that we aim for PSTs ‘learning. Also, “ambitious” because these practices are not commonly used in most classrooms that are fertile with traditional didactic or say “non-ambitious” forms of teaching. The idea of “AP” also aligns with the kind of reform-oriented teaching reformers advocate for.

For “practice”-there exists various conceptualizations within the literature (Lampert, 2009), but one used here is that “practices”- teachable, enactable and significant for students; intellectual learning (Ball, Sleep, Boerst & Bass, 2009). AP argues for PSTs’ preparation of these high leverage practices (HLPs) within a practice- based professional curriculum for learning to teach. As Grossman et al. describes (2009) it “*a curriculum in which practices of teaching would provide the warp threads and the knowledge and skill required to enact these practices constitute the weft.*” In other words, a practice- centered teacher education curriculum aims that PSTs’ learning should be situated in practice- they should learn in- and from- practice (Lampert & Graziani). The knowledge, skills and professional identity of PSTs is developed through the development of practice itself. The implementation of such a curriculum require pedagogies that allow PSTs to engage in approximation of practice- meaning- learning high leverage practice through enactment (Lampert, 2013), rehearsals, and investigation into the enactment. PSTs rehearse HLPs, publicly, within in a community of peers and teacher educator(s). Pedagogies used to develop ambitious high leverage practices allow for interjections and interactions among PSTs and peers and teacher educator. Such interjections allow opportunities for feedback, reflections and analysis during the cycles of enactments (Kazemi, Franke & Lampert, 2009; Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten & Stroupe, 2012).

Insert Figure 1 here: Framework of Ambitious Practice

Section 2

Apprenticeship of Observation and Ambitious Practice: Narratives in Interaction

In this section I argue three narratives and counter-narratives rooted in the framework of AoO and AP. Following questions guide the following discussion: How do these narratives construct PSTs within teacher education literature? What strengths and weaknesses they allow us to view about PSTs?

Narrative 1: PSTs' beliefs precede their learning to teach the meaningful practices of teaching

Counter-narrative 1: Orientations can be developed as integrated part of their learning to teach meaningful practices of teaching

According to Lortie (1975), due to AoO, PSTs develop implicit personal beliefs about schools, teachers, learning styles, teaching and curriculum. PSTs personal theories are robust and hard to change during teacher preparation. Holt –Reynolds (1998) examined PSTs' beliefs and history-based “lay theories” regarding good teaching within a teacher preparation course. He found that PSTs within the course used their own implicit personal theories to interpret definitions of “active/passive learning”, “lecturing” and, “knowledge”. PSTs' understanding of these terms contrasted with the ideas which the teacher educator was trying to establish through coursework. Findings of this and other similar studies (Kagan 1992, Simmons et. al 1999; Leathem 2006) showed PSTs' personal beliefs are enduring and robust and influence their perceptions and judgements of what they learn.

As a result of above observation, PSTs implicit personal beliefs draw much attention within teacher preparation. They are viewed as PSTs weakness because they pose an obstacle in the way of their developing a vision of good teaching and professional practice. Scholars (Grossman 1991; Kennedy, 2005; Bullock, 2011) believe that PSTs personal beliefs grounded in their AoO need to be made explicit and tackled for their learning of any desired practice.

AP presents the counter-narrative that PSTs learning of their professional practice should take precedence over their personal beliefs. In the words of Ball and Forzani (2009), main proponents of AP, “We sought to shift teachers' training from an emphasis on knowledge and beliefs to a focus on judgement and action (p.19)”. Hence, one, focusing explicitly on PSTs beliefs is not an agenda within AP. The interest is in developing PSTs as professionals, just the same ways as professionals in other fields- focused and trained in tasks that will serve their clients best (Ball and Forzani, 2009. Grossman et. al, 2009). Second, AP considers the idea that desired orientations (beliefs, values, ideals and ideas) can be developed among PSTs along with the development of HLPs (Carroll, 2007). For instance, AP scholarship claims that because HLPs describe the intellectual work of teaching and are centered on student learning, PSTs begin to develop a vision of good teaching in the process of learning these practices and seeing their benefit for students' learning (Grossman et. al., 2008; Lampert et.al, 2010; Windschitl, Thompson& Braaten, 2011; Thompson Windschitl & Braaten, 2013). In a way, AP questions AoO heavy consideration of PSTs teacher beliefs and argues that learning of beliefs is implicit and integrated in the learning of professional practices. For a teacher educator aligning with

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AoO, beliefs are at the core of preservice teacher learning framework (Fig. 2), while for a teacher educator considering the AP lens, practices are at the center stage ((Fig. 3)

Insert Figure 2 here: Apprenticeship of Observation focus on Teacher Beliefs

Inset Figure 3 here: Ambitious Practice focus on High Leverage Practice

Narrative 2: PSTs have difficulty enacting reform-oriented teaching practices due to their *Apprenticeship of Observation*

Counter-narrative 2: PSTs begin to develop and enact reform-oriented *Ambitious Practices* early on during learning to teach

A particular weakness of PSTs due to AoO is their failure to enact reform-oriented practices. A narrative that is widespread in teacher preparation is that PSTs fail to enact reform-oriented teaching learnt during teacher preparation due to “problem of enactment” (Kennedy, 1999). Instead, they keep falling back into traditional forms of teaching they once experienced as students themselves.

One reason for the “problem of enactment” is the lack of shared language and understanding regarding the reform oriented “terms” used in classroom between the preservice teacher and the teacher educators. Due to this gap, PSTs continue to use AoO as a framework of reference to make their own meaning of these terms (Kennedy, 1999; Bullock, 2011; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983). For instance, the term “student-centered” learning can hold different meaning for a reform-oriented teacher educator and a preservice teacher beginning to learn the work of teaching. When perplexed with what “students-centered” may look like in the classroom, a PSTs can easily employ their AoO as a frame of reference to make an interpretation, based on their experience of classroom teaching. Slipping into AoO to make sense of reform-oriented terms counteracts their learning during teacher preparation.

Second, it is possible that even when PSTs may understand the theory behind the reform centered teaching terms, they do know how to enact it in the actual classroom. In such a scenario, they draw on their unconsciously gathered tacit knowledge, emerging from the images of teaching they saw enacted before them for years. These images do not allow them to see underlying complexities of teaching and in-the-moment decision making that is required to enact reform-oriented teaching. This narrative tends to create an image where PSTs espoused

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with didactic ideas about teaching are distant from professional learning and practice due to the problem of enactment.

The AP presents the counter narrative that PSTs can learn to enact HLPs early on in their careers. The AP addresses the “problem of enactment” by using the *pedagogies of enactment* within teacher preparation. *The pedagogies of enactment* pay attention to not only PSTs *knowing* about practice but also *how do it* in practice and do it *interactively* (Grossman and McDonald, 2008). PSTs engage in *pedagogies of enactment* using intellectual and practical tools that allow them to see the complexity within the practice. PSTs engage in *Rehearsals* – enacting and then reenacting the core practices of teaching with feedback. *Rehearsals*, as an important form teacher education pedagogy directs PSTs attention to their ‘doing’ of practice and its influence on learners. *Rehearsals* involve the component of collective deliberation on PSTs teaching practices, in the company of fellow peers and teacher educators. Such deliberations compel PSTs to take a critical stance on their actions and decisions during their implementation of teaching practice. Such level of professional support and reflections allows PSTs to develop a shared understanding of reform-oriented terms and experience the complexities of teaching and implications of their actions. Such explicit focus on the core practices of teaching and on developing a common understanding of good teaching during learning to teach can potentially inhibit PSTs use of AoO (Ghousseini, 2009; Windschitl et.al., 2012; Thompson, Windschitl & Braaten, 2013; Lampert et al., 2010).

The counter-narrative of AP views PSTs not distant but always immersed within the context of their professional learning. While AoO considers *problem of enactment* as a possible obstacle in PSTs socializing into professional learning, AP is aggregating alternative evidence (Ghousseini, 2009; Windschitl et.al., 2012; Thompson, Windschitl & Braaten, 2013; Lampert et al., 2010 McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh, 2013, Harvey, 2015) suggests that targeted attention on the development of HLPs as the core work of teaching immerses PSTs into the context of professional learning.

Narrative 3: PSTs Learning is weak within methods course

Counter-narrative 3: PSTs’ can begin to form a strong repertoire of professional practices within methods courses

The scholarship within teacher education (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1983; Korthagen & Wubbels, 2005; Clift & Brady, 2005; Bullock, 2010) echoes that AoO weakens the effect of PSTs’ professional learning on them. One weakness, for instance, that is attributed to PSTs due to AoO is their inability to learn through experiential learning during learning to teach. Feiman -Nemser (1983) calls it the “familiarity pitfall” and uses the metaphor of “pitfall” to signal PSTs’ failure or inability to learn through experiences. The “familiarity pitfall” obstructs PSTs’ learning because it leads them to believe that are already familiar with the learning contained in an experience and there is nothing new for them to learn. In the words of Feiman-Nemser – “the “familiarity pitfall stems from tendency to trust what is most memorable in one’s experiences” (p.6). In PSTs’ experience it is ideas and images about classrooms and teaching

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from their AoO, which they trust and make use of to understand and judge their experiences. The “familiarity pitfall” hinders PSTs’ learning if they are left on their own to learn from experience (p. 6).

Another weakness that is related to the narrative above is that PSTs cannot “transfer” what they learn in preservice teacher preparation in their future classroom. One reason for the theory- practice divide within teacher education is *Apprenticeship of Observation* (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005). Korthagen and Wubbels argue, “many studies in teacher education show that student teachers do not use much of the theory taught in teacher education.” (p.32). Similarly, Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) have also pointed out that educational notions developed during preservice teacher education are “washed out” during field experiences. When PSTs go into their teaching contexts then they try to “fit in’ and not “stand out” by using their AoO (Lortie, 1975).

AP narrative argues that a focus on core practices for PSTs learning can alleviate such doubts that teacher preparation has no effect on PSTs (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Grossman, 2011; Kazemi, Franke, & Lampert, 2009; Windschitl, Thompson, Braaten, & Stroupe, 2012). Providing PSTs with opportunities to approximate the more relevant tasks of their work within methods courses can counteract the problem of transfer. PSTs learn high leverage practices as integrated with theory, they use the theory while they enact the practice and not sent off to their teaching with theory alone, to figure out rest on their own, increasing their probability of falling back into AoO (Thompson, Windschitl & Braaten,2013). Also, narratives 1 and 2 explained in the discussion above lend supporting evidence that *Ambitious Practice* can be developed among PSTs within methods courses by using pedagogies of enactment which increases their probability of transferring their learning form teacher preparation to schools.

Contributions of AoO and Critique of AP within Preservice Teacher Education

The narratives and counter-narratives discussed about PSTs in this essay describe how using different perspectives construct PSTs abilities, strengths and weaknesses. While AoO generally narrates the story of resistance and struggle, AP brings in optimism and hope for what PSTs can learn and do. The discussion around the perspectives of AoO and AP and ensuing narratives so far creates an image where AoO seems to have a negative connotation and AP appears to be a positive framework to consider in relation to PSTs learning. In this section, I aim to address the concerns related to the competing imagery of both frameworks. I contend that both frameworks- AoO and AP have made significant contributions in relation to thinking about PSTs learning. Rather the framework of AP builds on the findings and research grounded in the theory of AoO. In addition, even though AP is generating many positive counternarratives about what PSTs can do, it also receives its own share of critiques and series of ongoing challenges in relation to PSTs learning.

To begin, Lortie’s notion of AoO brought attention to preservice teachers’ prior conceptions about teaching and learning, generating a huge research base on teacher beliefs that not only brought into surface the preservice teachers’ tacit theories on teaching and learning but inquiry into how these theories affect their classroom practices and learning within teacher preparation. The huge attention on teacher beliefs is explicit and evidence exists in the form of its presence within various theoretical frameworks suggested on teacher learning by various scholars in the last few decades. For example, *learning to teach* framework by Feiman Nemsar

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(2001) considers that it is crucial to pay attention to preservice teachers' prior ideas about teaching and learning to plan course design and to develop desirable ways of thinking about teaching and learning. Similarly, the teacher learning framework proposed by Hammond and Bransford (2007) considers a focus on teacher beliefs and suggests that preservice teachers need to learn within in a community that helps them to develop necessary dispositions regarding the use of knowledge of teaching. Likewise, van Driel, Beijaard, and Verloop's (2001) have considered teacher beliefs as a crucial part of their definition of *practical knowledge* as the integration of experiential knowledge, formal and personal beliefs.

In addition, the AoO emphasizes the need to have a shared and coherent knowledge base of teaching. It is the lack of a shared curriculum and consistent understanding of across teacher preparation contexts that is in part responsible for the situation where PSTs are left alone to interpret and make sense of teaching practices based on their AoO. In fact, such programs where faculty had a common understanding of reform practices and tried to bring conceptual and structural coherence have been found to have a greater influence on the learning of prospective teachers (Hammerness, 2006)

The consideration of AoO and resulting focus on teacher beliefs drew closer attention to the area of pedagogy and curriculum of teacher preparation. The framework of AP exemplifies yet another effort within the pedagogy and curriculum of teacher education which still in some ways builds up on the findings to the idea of AoO and related research. For instance, AoO indicates that preservice teachers find the work of teaching as intuitive and natural which may pose as an obstacle in their way to understanding the complexities of teaching and learning and weaken the effect of formal teacher education. Therefore, AP emphasizes pedagogies wherein PSTs get to enact and critique high leverage practices that describe the professional work of teaching. Also, the advocates of AP are making efforts to address the call of having a shared knowledge base for teaching based on the idea of *core or high leverage practices* so that PSTs develop consistent understanding of teaching across contexts. Developing consistent understanding among PSTs about what these core practices must entail and a common language around them affords the potential to minimize the problem of transfer based on theory of AoO.

One important of distinction between AoO and AP is that while AoO is brings the attention on the teacher as an individual- his/her orientations and dispositions, AP tends to shift the attention towards 'doing' the professional work of teaching. The new shift towards practice and the activity of teaching raises some concerns regarding what AP could be missing in terms of PSTs learning and if and how it represents a holistic model of preservice teacher preparation despite all the positive narratives. For instance, Zeichner (2012) points out the teacher preparation based on core practices may be seen as narrowing down the role of teachers as technicians detached from the social foundation of education and the relational work of teaching. He argues that although the originators of practice-based teaching intend to integrate the social and relational work of teaching with the core practices, the idea has not been fully developed. Development of PSTs cultural competence and ability to teach in culturally responsive ways is also something that is still missing from the narratives generated by AP (Zeichner, 2012). In addition to prior stance, the implementation of AP framework offers other challenges such as a clear consensus of which core practices to focus on in relation to PSTs learning, an agreement on the grain size of these practices, and most importantly how to effectively assess PSTs learning of these HLPs within teacher education and actual classrooms (McDonald, Kazemi, & Kavanagh,2013)

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In nutshell, both sets of frameworks unarguably present their own set of narratives about PSTs. However, each framework presents its own set of contributions and earns credit when it comes to preservice teacher education. Both frameworks support our understanding of teacher learning, pedagogies, and curriculum within the field of teacher education.

While adherence to AoO make us see that PSTs like “continuity than change” (Lortie, 1975), AP bears the optimism to produce reform-minded ambitious teachers. Teacher educators such as I leverage these frameworks to design our syllabi and methods courses. We must keep the following quote in mind.

“teacher educators are constantly learning and building their conceptual repertoires just as teacher education students are” (Milner, 2010, pp.128-129)

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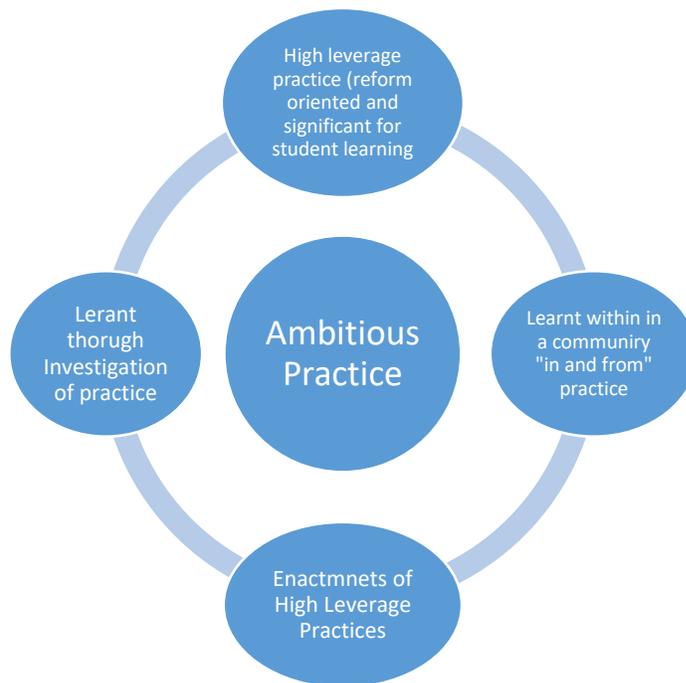
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Figure 1 :



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Figure 2 :

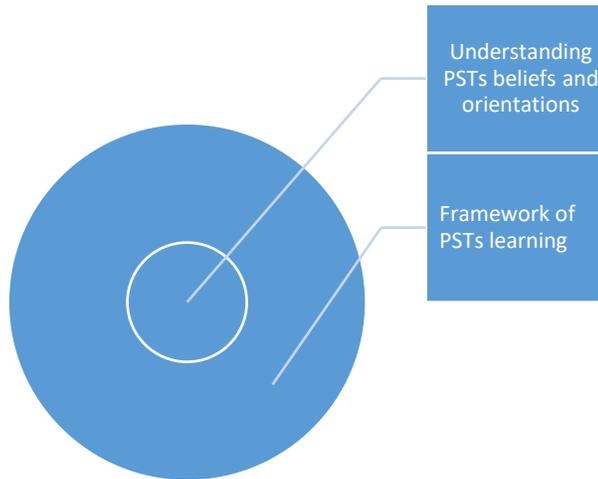
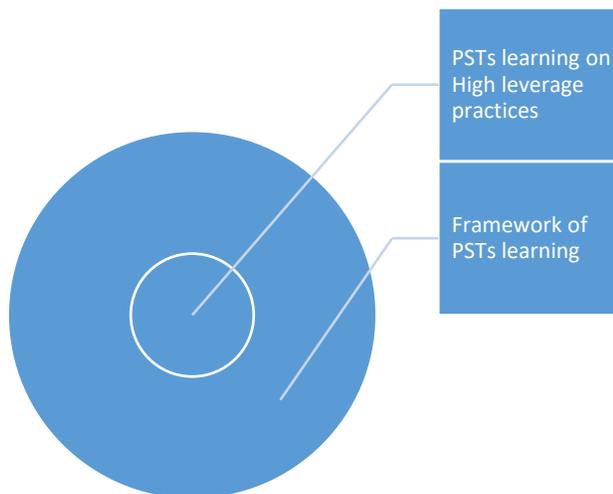


Figure 3 :



Learning to Teach