Perceptions of Elementary Teachers Who Educate Linguistically Diverse Students

Renée A. Greenfield
University of Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut, USA

This study investigated elementary teachers’ perceptions of linguistically diverse students (LDS). Using Sociocultural Theory as a lens, nine elementary teachers responded to a case study dilemma about a LDS. This study was guided by the following question: How do elementary teachers from the same teacher preparation program perceive the LDS they educate? Data were analyzed using qualitative methods, including domain analysis. The majority of teachers associated the following perceptions with the LDS case: concern for the student, use of deficit language to describe student, assumption that the student’s families had limited English proficiency, and difficulties and assumptions surrounding the identification of LDS with learning disabilities. Related to their perceptions, teachers reported they would engage in varied professional, grouping, and instructional practices when educating LDS. The following five factors lead to predictive patterns within the data: teachers’ school setting (urban, rural, suburban), school’s percentage of students with native English speakers, school’s percentage of students who qualify for special education services, teachers’ language education coursework, and the teachers’ classroom setting. Implications for LDS, their teachers, schools, and teacher educators are discussed. Keywords: Language, Linguistic Diversity, Teachers’ Perceptions, Teacher Education, Special Education

In order to understand teacher practice and learning, teachers’ social activities, previous experiences, and teaching context must be considered. Sociocultural theory (SCT) provides a lens to examine these interactions, founded on the belief that “higher-order mental functions, including voluntary memory, logical thought, learning, and attention, are organized and amplified through participation in culturally organized activity” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007, p. 220). On a daily basis, teachers are participating in one of society’s largest culturally organized activity – schooling. Nested within school cultures are diverse students and families, including those who are linguistically diverse. Therefore, teachers’ perceptions are ongoing, derived from their interactions within their school context, which have particular implications for the linguistically diverse students (LDS) they educate. This article reports on the perceptions of elementary teachers from the same teacher education program that educates LDS.

Definitions

Before beginning a discussion about linguistically diverse students and the teachers who serve them, it is important to operationalize the definitions integral to this discussion. A linguistically diverse student (LDS) is defined as a student who, at the very least, speaks a language other than English. Some LDS also possess literacy skills in their heritage languages. Finally, a LDS is a student who is learning English in the U.S. educational system. Linguistically diverse students represent a group of high, middle, and low achieving students (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Low achievers often perform much lower relative to their monolingual peers and higher achieving LDS show performance trends that are much