

Title

Migrant Families and Educational Decision-Making: A Critical Literature Review of Brazilian Families in Japan at the Upper Secondary Transition

Research Overview

This research presents a critical literature review of Brazilian transnational immigrant families' educational decision-making in Japan, focusing on transitions at the end of compulsory education. It synthesizes existing research to identify key patterns and gaps, emphasizing barriers to continued schooling and broader challenges related to migration and educational inequality.

Purpose of Study

This study forms part of a broader qualitative research project that examines how Brazilian transnational immigrant families in Japan mobilize resources, practices, and networks to support their children's educational trajectories at the end of compulsory education. Within this framework, it develops a critical literature review to examine how parental roles and educational decision-making have been constructed in existing research within transnational contexts.

Rather than providing a descriptive overview, the review analyzes how different strands of literature frame Brazilian families and how these representations shape what is recognized as educational decision-making. While situated in Japan, the study engages with broader global challenges related to migration and educational inequality, particularly in access to post-compulsory education.

Research Methods

This study adopts a critical literature review as its central methodological approach and as part of a broader qualitative research project on Brazilian families in Japan (Ridley,

2011; Ritchie, 2010; Yin, 2018). It identifies key debates, conceptual gaps, and dominant representations in the literature, particularly regarding parental roles.

To examine these representations, the literature is situated within the historical development of Brazilian migration to Japan. Migration increased significantly after the 1990 immigration reform (Yamamoto, 2008) and was initially framed as temporary labor migration, with limited attention to family dynamics and educational trajectories.

Brazilian migration to Japan has fluctuated over time, peaking at over 300,000 in 2006 and currently stabilizing at approximately 211,000 residents, with more than 55 percent holding long-term residence status (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, 2025; McKenzie & Salcedo, 2014). Despite this shift toward long-term settlement (Hayakawa, 2023), Brazilian families continue to face structural barriers within the Japanese education system shaped by assumptions of linguistic and cultural homogeneity (Miyajima, 2014). As Matsuo (2017) argues, limited social mobility and experiences of exclusion constrain future opportunities, affecting access to educational pathways for students of foreign background.

These changes are also reflected in academic research. Earlier studies framed Brazilian families through structural constraints such as language barriers, limited access to information, and demanding working conditions (Castro-Vázquez, 2009; Takenoshita et al., 2013). More recent work examines structural inequalities and policy limitations affecting students of foreign background (Ehara, 2011; Miyajima, 2014), while also highlighting how families interpret these conditions and mobilize transnational networks (Okawa, 2022; Yoshiy, 2022).

Building on these developments, this review adopts a thematic approach to examine how parental roles and educational decision-making are constructed across the literature. Drawing on transnational migration theory (Castles, de Haas, and Miller, 2014; Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004), it examines how cross-border networks, community ties, and the circulation of information between Brazil, Japan, and third countries shape educational practices and opportunities, reflecting broader

transnational connections that extend beyond bilateral relations (Yoshiy-Yoshioka, 2024).

The analysis draws on peer-reviewed articles, books, and reports focusing on Brazilian communities in Japan, examining themes such as parental roles, access to information, institutional constraints, and educational transitions, with attention to their transnational character.

Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals a tension in the literature between structural and agent-centered approaches. Structural perspectives document inequalities but often frame parents as passive actors, while studies emphasizing agency remain fragmented and insufficiently connected to broader structural conditions.

A key gap emerges at the transition from lower to upper secondary education, which marks the end of compulsory education in Japan (Ishikawa, 2014). Although compulsory education does not legally extend to students of foreign background, this institutional boundary significantly shapes their continuity in schooling. At this stage, progression to upper secondary education becomes uncertain and dependent on access to information, financial resources, and institutional support, making it a critical point where inequalities intensify and educational pathways diverge (Tokunaga, 2018) .

Educational decision-making is best understood as shaped through the interaction between institutional constraints and family practices. In this context, families mobilize resources such as transnational networks, community-based support, and cross-border flows of information, which influence how opportunities are accessed and evaluated. These practices play a central role in shaping educational trajectories but remain underexplored in the literature.

By bringing together structural and transnational perspectives, this study advances an analytical framework that foregrounds how migrant families actively shape educational trajectories under conditions of inequality. This perspective is essential for

understanding how educational inequalities are produced and negotiated in increasingly transnational and diverse societies.

Keywords

Migrant families; educational inequality; educational decision-making; transnational education; upper secondary transition

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