

Educational outcomes of migrant children

Migrant children studying in a Brazilian school in Japan (Source: Japan Times)

A recent study of the educational pathways of the children of Brazilian migrants in Japan offers a most welcome addition to the literature on the educational outcomes of migrant children, which has to date focussed mostly on migrant children in North America and Western Europe. The authors, Hirohisa Takenoshita, Yoshimi Chitose, Shigehiro Ikegami and Eunice Akemi Ishikawa, investigate the factors that influence whether migrant children enrol in high school or not.

The Japanese educational system consists of nine years of compulsory schooling, comprised of six years of elementary school and three years of middle school. These are followed by three years of high school, which is not compulsory. Even so, in practice, almost all Japanese children attend high school. However, among the children of migrants, the high school enrolment rate is only 71%. It is thus obvious that migrant children are educationally disadvantaged vis-à-vis their Japanese peers.

On the basis of a survey of 203 adolescent and young adult second-generation residents in [Shizuoka prefecture](#), Takenoshita et al. (2013) explore the family characteristics and characteristics of the local context that distinguish those who were enrolled in high school from those who were not.

Parental education and employment

It is well known that parental level of education is a key determinant of children's educational achievement both in migrant and non-migrant populations. However, the researchers found that the correlation between Brazilian parents' educational level and their children's high school enrolment was much more modest than is usually the case. That means that parental educational level gets devalued in the process of migration. The devaluation of educational credentials in the migration process with regard to the labour market is not surprising. What is surprising is their devaluation also with regard to parental ability to transmit their educational achievements to their children.

The relative unimportance of parental education can be explained with the way Brazilian migrants are incorporated into the Japanese labour market. Irrespective of their educational level and other characteristics, Brazilian migrants are incorporated into the irregular labour market working unskilled or low-skilled jobs. The regular Japanese labour market, from which Brazilian migrants are largely excluded, is characterised by strong company-based labour unions, lifetime employment, seniority earnings and, overall, a high level of labour protection and stability. However, in Japan, as elsewhere, globalization has involved a concerted assault on labour and the regular labour market has been shrinking fast while irregular jobs have been mushrooming. And that's where Brazilian migrants find themselves. They are typically employed through agencies in temporary, unstable and poorly paid jobs without benefits.

90% of Brazilian migrants work unskilled or low-skilled jobs under irregular conditions. By contrast, only 30% of all Japanese workers are employed in such jobs and, at only 12%, that figure is even lower for male Japanese

workers. As a result of their precarious employment status, migrants work longer hours than their native-born counterparts. This is significant as more time spent at work means less time spent with children – a fact that disadvantages the children of the working poor from Day 1, as Barry (2005) demonstrates.

Indeed, parental employment turned out to be the most significant factor distinguishing enrolled from unenrolled children: having a father employed in standard work was the most significant factor that correlated positively with migrant children's high school enrolment.

Gender

Gender was also highly significant but in surprising ways: a number of studies have found that, in North America and Europe, migrants girls are doing better in school than boys. However, for Brazilian migrants in Japan it is the other way round: boys are more likely to be enrolled in high school than girls. The authors explain this with persistent gender discrimination in Japan: it is more rational for migrants to invest what limited resources they may have into the education of their sons as girls, by comparison, are not likely to get very far in education and employment anyway. Additionally, when parents both have to work long and irregular hours, girls are often deployed to look after siblings and the household more generally.

Race

On the basis of other studies that had shown that non-Japanese and non-Western children are often bullied in Japanese schools, the authors hypothesized that race might influence high school enrolment, too. Therefore, they distinguished between *nikkei* and non-*nikkei* migrant children. The former are born to two parents of Japanese descent and would thus look phenotypically similar to native-born Japanese children while the latter are born to at least one parent who is not of Japanese descent.

It turned out that race played no role in high school enrolment and that *nikkei* migrant children had no advantage vis-à-vis non-*nikkei* migrant children. In fact, both groups were equally disadvantaged vis-à-vis their native-born Japanese peers. The authors explain this finding with regard to Japan's myth as a homogeneous nation and the collective denial that Japan has become an immigration country.

Age at migration and transnationalism

Like comparable studies in other contexts, the authors found that the 1.5 generation is the most educationally disadvantaged: those who had migrated at age 10 or above (the maximum age for inclusion in the study was 14 at the time of migration) were least likely to be enrolled in high school. By contrast, the enrolment rates of those who were 4 years or younger at the time of migration or who had been born in Japan were almost as high as those of their Japanese peers.

When it comes to the educational success of migrant children, younger is clearly better as these children had more exposure not only to the Japanese language but also to the Japanese education system.

By the same token, children whose parents moved frequently back and forth between Japan and Brazil found their exposure to the Japanese language and the Japanese education system frequently interrupted and these interruptions significantly reduced their likelihood of high school enrolment. Children of parents who had no history of re-migration to Brazil were four times more likely to be enrolled in high school than those who moved back to Brazil for an extended period one or more times.

Other studies have argued that a family's transnational lifestyle influences children's educational achievement favourably and equips them to thrive in more than one national context. However, Takenoshita et al. (2013) clearly demonstrate that this is not uniformly the case and the value or otherwise of transnationalism depends on the socioeconomic circumstances in which it takes place.

Where migrants are incorporated into the lower and temporary segments of the labour market, as Brazilian migrants are in Japan, their transnationalism is usually related to the vagaries of their employment. Consequently, transnationalism hinders children's schooling in this case.

Local context of reception

The researchers also explored the local context of reception as a factor in migrant children's educational outcomes. Throughout Shizuoka prefecture migrants find themselves in highly diverse circumstances as regards the targeted services available to them. The largest concentration of Brazilians in Shizuoka lives in [Hamamatsu](#), an industrial city. Hamamatsu municipal government has provided a variety of special education programs targeting migrant children since the 1990s, including the provision of Portuguese-, Spanish- and Chinese-speaking tutors to provide Japanese language support. Additionally, Hamamatsu municipal government subsidizes private ethnic schools and organizations devoted to the education of migrant children.

Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that migrant children in Hamamatsu are more likely to be enrolled in high school than their counterparts living elsewhere in Shizuoka. This is indeed what the researchers found: residency in Hamamatsu with its targeted services was favourably associated with high school enrolment.

Parental Japanese language proficiency

I have left parental proficiency in Japanese for last because the effect turned out to be relatively small. Unsurprisingly, there is a positive correlation between higher levels of self-reported parental Japanese proficiency and children's high school enrolment but it is one of the smallest correlations examined by the researchers.

The most important positive factors are the regular employment of the father and residence in Hamamatsu. The most important negative factors are female gender, having been aged 10 or older at the time of migration and having experienced multiple migrations between Brazil and Japan.

It is a frequent trope in discourses about migrant achievement that learning the language of the destination country matters most. Migrants are continuously exhorted to learn Japanese (or English or German or whatever the national language may be). Learning the destination language is supposed to be a matter of personal

responsibility and integration into the labour market and educational advancement are supposed to be conditional on language learning.

Linguists have known all along that language learning is more complicated than the mantra of personal responsibility suggests. However, even if it were that simple to learn a new language as an adult, the evidence presented in Takenoshita et al. (2013) shows that it actually doesn't matter all that much. What matters is the material base:

Notably, the family's economic resources facilitate their children's enrolment in high school. In other words, Brazilian children's schooling is impeded by employment instability among their parents. (p. 11)



Barry, B. (2005). *Why social justice matters*. Oxford, Polity.

Takenoshita, H., Y. Chitose, et al. (2013). Segmented Assimilation, Transnationalism, and Educational Attainment of Brazilian Migrant Children in Japan International Migration DOI: <http://dx..org/10.1111/imig.12057>