

Identifying factors affecting the misplacement of Brazilian children in special education classes within the Japanese school system: How can educational policy help to address the issues raised?

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Abstract

In light of the recent contention arising over the likely misplacement of children of Brazilian immigrants in Japanese special education classes, this study aims to identify specific problems that may exist regarding the placement process as well as the factors that may contribute to it so that appropriate policy can be developed. The measurement tool, consisting of in-depth interviews with 21 stakeholders including Japanese nationals and Brazilian immigrants, followed the tenets of Constructivist Grounded Theory. From the discourse, five main factors of import affecting the decisions of stakeholders emerged: Linguistic and Cultural Related Misunderstandings of Information, Limitations Concerning Counseling and Life-Educational Planning, Requests for Improving the Support System for Non-Japanese Students, Importance of a Second Opinion, Cultural and Linguistic Effects when Evaluating Non-Japanese Students. The study provides policy recommendations aimed at improving the support system for immigrant communities who face a variety of stresses living in an unfamiliar culture.

Keywords

Immigration and Education, Autism and Emotional Disturbance, Special Education Classes in the Japanese School System, Immigrant Education Policy, Brazilian Immigrant Education

Introduction

In recent years, one concern for the Japanese-based Brazilian immigrant community and Japan as a whole is the relatively high number of Brazilian students who have been placed in special education classes. Research conducted by Action for a Better International Community (ABIC) in 2015 showed that the number of foreign students placed in special education classes can be as much as two times higher than that for Japanese children (per Hirayama, 2018). This has naturally generated anxiety among those who are directly affected by the issue in Japan, culminating in several media reports (“5% das crianças”, 2018; “Alunos Brasileiros são”, 2019; Okuyama (2019). In order to provide clarity to the issue while simultaneously protecting the well-being of the Brazilian community, the NPO SABJA (Assistance Service to Brazilian People in Japan), along with the Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo and the Consulates-General of Brazil in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Hamamatsu suggested that the matter be thoroughly investigated. This report summarizes the results of a qualitative study, conducted by The Education Research Institute (ERI), an organization consisting of educators and researchers committed to investigating issues related to the academic education of the international community living in Japan.

In general, the findings of the present research represent the results of an extensive investigation leading to the following two objectives:

1. What interrelated factors can be identified that lead to the misplacement of Brazilian immigrant children in the Japanese school system?
2. What policy recommendations do various stakeholders suggest as possible remediation strategies to diminish the number of misplaced immigrant children?

The former question will be addressed via discourses extracted from extensive interview data, while the latter considers both the obtained data as well as suggestions gleaned from a roundtable organized by ERI. This said, neither the findings nor the suggestions are necessarily the institutional and/or personal positions of those involved in the research.

Literature Review

As a means to support Japanese society and as a way to compensate for the decreasing birthrate in Japan, the number of foreign nationals choosing Japan as an immigration destination has been on the rise due to the need for economically beneficial foreign labor (CAO, 2020; Ebuchi, 2019; Naruse, n/d). In addition to establishing flourishing immigrant communities in Japan, the Immigration Control Act of 1990 set strict penalties for illegal immigration but also opened the door to *Nikkeijin* [Japanese descendants] (Coulmas, 2007). The revised version also eased restrictions on the jobs ethnic Japanese of other nationalities and their families could perform (Vaipae, 2001; Sato, 1995). The policy accelerated the rapid growth in the number of Japanese descendants coming to Japan, especially from South America, which consequently had an effect on immigrant education in Japan (Shimizu, 2006). In its last survey, the Ministry of Justice in Japan (2020) reported 208,538 Brazilians living in the country (a major immigrant community). However, this number had already reached 316,967 Brazilian inhabitants (Ministry of Justice in Japan, 2007) before the effects of the economic crisis called the Lehman Shock which hit Japan in 2008. As non-permanent workers are sometimes unable to enjoy unemployment returns and benefits (Ishikawa, 2005; Kojima, 2006), many Brazilians decided to leave Japan. Nevertheless, new communities have been moving in to give life a try in Japan, so immigration has once again been on the rise (Ministry of Justice in Japan, 2020; Gelin, 2020).

Regarding education, previous survey data, as well as public data, have detailed the increasing number of foreign students enrolled in Japanese public schools for the last few decades. In 2019, 93,133 foreign students were found to be attending Japanese public schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2020-b). From this large pool, 897 of these children of immigrants have

been assigned to special education schools, known as a *Tokubetsushiengakko* [School for Special Needs Children].

Compulsory education in Japan, K-12, consists of nine years of education (six years of elementary school and three years of junior high school), and although the Constitution guarantees the right of all Japanese citizens to receive an education, right to education laws do not extend the benefit of compulsory education to foreign nationals (Nozaki, 2009; Sakuma, 2006; Ota & Tsuboya, 2005). In other words, MEXT willingly accepts the enrollment of non-Japanese students who wish to enroll in recognized schools of their own free will but is not obligated to address any problems that may be particular to them (Muramoto, 2019). As a society, it is, nevertheless, important that immigrants have opportunities for educational advancement and economic opportunities so that they are integrated into the social fabric of the society. In other words, the educational policies are fundamental principles leading to the success or failure of the immigrant population (Bilgili, Volante, & Klinger, 2018). This includes, of course, of what Huddleston, Bilgili, Joki and Vankova (2015) consider to be one of the keys to proper support for immigrant education, namely targeting the needs of immigrant children in a holistic manner. In other words, the children's needs should be considered in concert with the understanding of parents, teachers and any agencies that play a role in the educational process. In our case, assessments made regarding 'special support' needs to be considered in this light.

Special support education is defined as "providing appropriate guidance and necessary support to young children with disabilities in order to enhance their abilities and improve or overcome their difficulties in life and learning, based on an understanding of their educational needs; this notion is understood from the perspective of "providing" support for their independent efforts and social participation." (MEXT¹, n.d.-a). Depending on the level of disability and the students' individual needs, they can study in regular classes and partially receive special support or they may be assigned to special needs classes or special needs schools. The types of disabilities requiring students to be assigned to special needs classes include the: "(1) mentally disabled, (2) physically disabled, (3) sickly or physically weak, (4) visually disabled, (5) hearing impaired,

¹ MEXT documents were translated to English by the authors

(6) speech impaired and (7) autistic or emotionally disturbed” (MEXT, n.d.-b). Furthermore, with regard to measures to be taken for foreign children with disabilities, MEXT reported in the “Report of Enhancement of Education for Foreign Children” that the situation of what kinds of guidance and support are currently being provided should be determined. It also suggested “cooperation with the medical and welfare sectors and to conduct research with consideration of the situation in other countries and the characteristics of bilingual children.” (MEXT, 2020-a).

As MEXT (2020-a) pointed out that although the number of children with special needs has been increasing, special needs education is also improving, while they simultaneously call for further research and understanding regarding the current plight of foreign students with disabilities. With that said, the increasing number of foreign students enrolled in such schools and programs seems to be a source of increased anxiety (“5% das crianças”, 2018; “Alunos Brasileiros são,” 2019; Okuyama (2019), and the issue has not received the broader attention that is warranted. By addressing the posed research questions, we intend to shed more light on this neglected educational policy issue, making this particular project indispensable as a means to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved as well as opening up the doors for possible policy solutions aimed at ameliorating the problems.

Methodology

Settings and Participants

It is imperative to understand that throughout this research, it was vital to develop contacts with individuals who could introduce the research team to potential target participants who might be willing to share their experiences.

As members of the research group, we were kindly introduced to potential interviewees, who, in many cases, introduced us to friends, co-workers, children’s educators, psychologists, social workers, and community supporters. This resulted in a snowball sampling effect, which provided a diverse group of interviewees from an area in Japan where a large number of foreign immigrants reside. In addition, most of the research team members have extensive anecdotal as well as research knowledge concerning issues

related to the education and well-being of foreign students living in Japan. This proved to be critically beneficial, as matters concerning the privacy and trust of the interviewees could be more easily assured.

As a result, twenty-one (21) adult stakeholders were interviewed (please refer to Table 1). The inclusion of both Brazilian and Japanese interviewers from the research team likely contributed to the willingness of both Brazilian and Japanese interviewees to openly share their experiences, which was the key factor in assuring the content validity of the data collected. The participants included eight (8) male and thirteen (13) female participants, allowing for triangulation of data (i.e., follow-up of Brazilian parents, educators, psychologists, school counselors, social workers, and community supporters). Their names have been omitted in order to protect their identities.

Data Collection

The decision to conduct open-ended interviews arose after considering what methods would best fit the rationale for addressing the issues. Descriptive data produced by the participants were subsequently analyzed, noting the various points of view and considering both differences and similarities regarding the experiences that were shared. Open-ended style interviews were deemed as most apropos to extract interviewees' feelings and opinions. It should be noted that in most cases there were at least two researchers in attendance for each interview, and the participants were informed of the languages the researchers could use to communicate with them, giving interviewees the freedom to choose their preferred language for the interview. Considering that the researchers and all but one (1) of the twenty-one (21) interviewees currently reside in Japan, the participants were at ease code-switching between Portuguese and Japanese, thus generating a multilingual data bank. All of the Portuguese and Japanese data were subsequently translated into English for analysis purposes.

Table 1:
Interviewed Participants' Description (N=21)

Interview #	Roles/ Position/	Sex	Nationality
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1	Former Principal and Current School Counselor	Male	Japanese
2	Brazilian Father	Male	Brazilian
3	Brazilian Mother	Female	Brazilian
4	Special Education School Teacher	Female	Japanese
5	Brazilian Father	Male	Brazilian
6	Brazilian Mother	Female	Brazilian
7	Brazilian Father	Male	Brazilian
8	Brazilian Mother	Female	Brazilian
9	Brazilian Assistant-Teacher in Japanese Schools	Female	Brazilian
10	Brazilian Assistant-Teacher in Japanese Schools	Female	Brazilian
11	Brazilian Assistant-Teacher in Japanese Schools	Female	Brazilian
12	Brazilian Assistant-Teacher in Japanese Schools	Female	Brazilian
13	Brazilian Psychologist Working in Japan	Female	Brazilian
14	Japanese School Counselor	Female	Japanese
15	Foreign Community Supporter	Male	Japanese
16	Brazilian Assistant-Teacher in Japanese Schools	Female	Brazilian
17	Brazilian Psychologist Formerly Working in Japan	Female	Brazilian
18	Brazilian Community Supporter	Male	Brazilian
19	Brazilian Psychologist Working in Japan	Male	Brazilian
20	Social Worker	Male	Japanese
21	Brazilian Educator Specialized in Neuropsychology	Female	Brazilian

Data Analysis

Following the interview process, ERI analyzed the in-depth interview data provided by stakeholders. Open-ended interviews were examined following the principles and guidelines of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as represented by its contemporary revision, the Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2008; Charmaz, 2011; Charmaz, 2012; Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2016), with the aim of finding factors connected to the issue in question. The attraction of applying the procedures of Grounded Theory relates to the fact that it is “particularly appropriate in generating theoretical knowledge in areas where little is known about the phenomenon” (Dörnyei, 2007). In Constructivist Grounded Theory, the

emerging theory is “grounded” or rooted in the data (Creswell, 2012) and every new point of view becomes potentially valid data. The selection of this approach satisfied our main concern of respecting individuals and their idiosyncrasies.

Upon reaching twenty-one (21) interviews, the criterion of saturation was achieved as determined by internal triangulation and peer review. Also, two scholars working in Japan with different specialties and who were of different nationalities received the same interview and coded data and subsequently compared the results.

To fortify policy recommendations, ERI organized a roundtable event including professional stakeholders who discussed the issues uncovered at length. Fourteen (14) specialists representing different sectors and bringing their unique perspectives helped to bolster confidence in the reliability, validity and impartiality of the study. From the data and the roundtable, ERI generated five (5) critical factors associated with the placing of Brazilian children in special education classes within the Japanese school system and a list of practical policy recommendations associated with each factor (see Table 3).

Findings

In this section, the five (5) factors forming the core of the analysis are identified (please refer to Table 2) and discussed. These factors have a direct relationship regarding the placement of Brazilian children into special education classes for autism and emotional disturbances, and they are also intertwined with a number of consequences, which are hereafter considered and discussed.

Table 2:

Factors associated with the assigning of Brazilian children to special education within the Japanese school system (N=21)

Factors	Interview data indicating a strong category
Linguistic and Cultural Related Misunderstandings of Information	21/21
Limitations Concerning Counseling and Life-Educational Planning	20/21
Request for Improving the Support System for Non-Japanese Students	20/21
Importance of a Second Opinion	18/21
Cultural and Linguistic Effect when Evaluating Non-Japanese Students	18/21

Factor 1: Linguistic and Cultural Related Misunderstandings of Information

Parents unaware of their children's education or treatment in Japanese schools

This was one of the common issues in relation to linguistic and cultural misunderstandings discussed by the interviewees. A Brazilian mother, whose son attended special education classes from first to sixth grade of elementary school, said she believed her son was attending both the normal class and the special class in his school. She claims that she was not informed by the school that her son was attending only the special needs class full-time. Moreover, during her visits to the school, including visits to her son's class, she thought the class was a Japanese class (language support class) and not a class for students with special needs. She claims she tried to discuss her son's situation with the school, but the school refused to listen to her.

[My son] was simply thrown in the special education class. He stayed there the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th year. I went to the school to speak with them about my son, but it is not the parents who decide about it, it is the school. I thought he was attending the special class half of the time and the normal class the other half of the time he was in school. In fact, he was attending the special class full-time and that delayed his education until the 6th year.

(Interview 8 in Portuguese/Brazilian mother)

In connection with the same issue, a Brazilian teacher working in Japanese schools mentioned that in many cases Brazilian parents are not able to understand the problems of their children. She added that even

when the school calls the parents and invites them to school to give the results of psychological tests, parents are not always able to understand what the results mean.

Parents are not aware of the problems of the child. The school calls the parents to come to school and explains that they did a test and that their son's (intellectual) level is not (high) enough to attend normal classes, only special educational classes. The parents do not argue; they have no reaction.

(Interview 16 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

The same teacher also mentioned that parents are often completely unaware of the psychological tests being given to their children.

Insufficient information from schools or teachers

Another related issue is the need to adapt information and language to help Brazilian families and this has been an ongoing concern of foreign parents. A Japanese school counselor reported during the interview that it is probable that foreign parents do not receive enough information about the school counseling system and what opportunities are available. The counselor mentioned the notebook used by teachers to communicate with parents as an example. "Parents and teachers write in a message notebook, but foreign parents are not working on it" (Interview 4/Special education school teacher). Another special education teacher at a Japanese school said that because letters to parents are not translated, foreign parents have less information about the school and their children's well-being, especially when considering the information that Japanese parents receive. This claim was also corroborated by a Brazilian mother during one of our interviews when she expressed a desire to have more information from the school in Portuguese. "Our problem is the language, right?...If there was (more information) in Portuguese, it would be a great help" (Interview 2/Brazilian mother).

Cultural differences' influence on diagnosis

In addition, Brazilian parents tend to resist the results of diagnosis due to a lack of information about the evaluation process due to the fact that children are not being evaluated in their native language or because the evaluations are not culturally sensitive to their child's upbringing. A Brazilian teacher in a

Japanese school reported a case of a student whose school wanted him tested because he had not been able to keep pace at grade level, but the parents refused. She also commented on another student whose parents decided to take the child back to their home country to be tested one more time before allowing the child to be placed into the special education classes.

A Brazilian psychologist, working with the Brazilian community in Japan, pointed out that demonstrated behavior by Brazilian children—quite different from Japanese children—formed the fundamental information used to colligate diagnosis data. However, the differences did not represent abnormal behavior but expressions derived from different cultural backgrounds.

There was a five-year-old boy who did not pass the entrance exam for elementary school. It was believed there was a great probability of him having autism. The family refused to put him in a Japanese school. He did not know how to interact well (with other people). The problem was that he hadn't received proper stimulation. He didn't have autism. So he entered a Brazilian school and continued to study in Brazilian schools. If he had stayed in the Japanese school his future would have been different.

(Interview 13 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist working in Japan)

In support of this notion, another psychologist who had worked with the Brazilian community in Japan previously suggested that diagnosing children who have moved to a new country may be more difficult due to the struggles of adaptation to a new and unfamiliar culture by both the children and their family. According to her, labeling these children as “special” does not help them or their families. She also confessed to having doubts about the diagnosis of children she worked with during her time in Japan.

It might have changed since 2011, but it draws my attention to the cultural aspects used to make the diagnosis. How children adapted to the school, to the community, all of this was used to make a diagnosis (of Brazilian children). But sometimes these things are just different, something that is seen as normal in Brazil, there (in Japan) it is considered misconduct, a behavior out of context, or that the child does not know how to behave. But in Brazil, there is spontaneity and creativity, and that draws attention (in Japan).

(Interview 17 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist formerly working in Japan)

Parents searching for help in socially unrecognized forms

Because of the lack of information due to language and cultural misunderstandings, some Brazilian parents have sought information from secondary sources. One community supporter pointed out this problem claiming that “Parents who cannot speak Japanese often make their decisions based on information from the internet or from other parents” and “that mothers who have difficulty understanding certain points should be given clearer information so they can make decisions” about their children’s education. (Interview 15 in Portuguese/Foreign community supporter)

Factor 2: Limitations Concerning Counseling and Life-Education Planning

Poor understanding of system, language, and culture

One problem that has resulted in misunderstandings by Brazilian families is a poor knowledge of Japanese culture, the language and the educational system. During the interviews, a Japanese school counselor posited that, in some cases, besides having less interest in studying, cultural differences might result in a lack of self-esteem in foreign children. Also, due to time constraints because of work, many foreign parents offer only limited support to their children, which may manifest in school abstinence, as is supported by this counselor’s words,

(Reasons that may relate to school abstinence of foreign children might be connected to:) ...differences in culture, differences in how the family thinks and the family’s status. Some of them (the families) may not focus on studying in Japan (due to a lack of relevance to their own culture.) For instance, a child might have little interest in studying Japanese history...There are many Brazilian children who have good behavior while studying and hope to study at a university and contribute to society. They become polar opposites of their peers...They (some children) have interpersonal anxiety. Their confidence in themselves may be weak. In the case of foreign children, they tend to think (negatively) (about) being a member of a foreign family; some parents face economic difficulties and cannot care for their children properly, (their children) have less interest in studying and so on. The same things can be said about the Japanese (families) as well.

(Interview 1 in Japanese/Former principal and current school counselor)

Financial restraints

When facing such troubling circumstances, parents may make under-informed choices that lead to future problems. A social worker who works at a private entity supporting many Brazilian children with special needs, including autistic children, mentioned that sometimes families with financial instability might choose to go to Japanese public schools and then end up facing situations that are difficult for them to manage effectively, so their children may end up in special classes without much input. The interviewee stated,

Families with financial struggles tend to choose Japanese schools (for their children), and various problems arise. For example, mothers have communication problems; also, Japanese teachers can have difficulties handling (foreign) children with disabilities who stay either in a special needs class or a regular class. Psychological support classes or language support classes play the role of guiding them well, but in terms of communication and consultation with mothers, more consideration might be needed. Families are unique, so, of course, each case is different.

(Interview 20 in Japanese/Japanese social worker)

Temporary life mindset

Based upon the statements of a psychologist who has worked in Japan and in Brazil, some Brazilian parents pass on to their children the idea that life in Japan is evanescent. This, allied with the fatigue caused by cultural differences, might give room for a lack of interest concerning education in Japan. Here is what one interviewee' had to say,

...And a good number of the families, even though they have been living in Japan for a long time, the family feels it cannot help (the child). They do not fit the linguistic context and this somehow becomes a way to exclude themselves. The expectations created were to come to Japan, stay for two years, and go back...Children also absorb this feeling of "if something goes wrong, we can go back." And when arriving in Brazil, schools are noisy (a different feature from Japan). This sense is indicated through the children's words, their indecision of where (they) belong...The indefiniteness of the perspective of where I belong in fact, (and) whether (the child) will settle or not (in Japan or in Brazil).

(Interview 17 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist formerly working in Japan)

Anxiety, stigmatization and shame

According to interview data, one common cause of anxiety among Brazilian parents is the idea that if their child is attending a special needs class at school, this might result in stigmatization. While expressing concern regarding this matter, one of the interviewed parents stated,

But other people told me (my child) would be stigmatized forever. They told me not to (have my child) take the test (that serves as a pre-diagnosis of a student's possible disability), so she would not be stigmatized in society.

(Interviews 5 and 6 in Portuguese/Brazilian father and Brazilian mother)

In addition, parents also seem to worry about not completely understanding the diagnosis of doctors in Japan. Sometimes parents admit their own fear of learning that their child has special needs. The topic was raised by a parent while stating,

...Many children who have some kind of problem consult with this psychologist; however, we could not understand this psychologist, (and) it (this lack of understanding) could also be (because of) our hesitation in learning that he (our child) has something (some problem)...

(Interviews 2 and 3 in Portuguese/Brazilian father and Brazilian mother)

In other cases, parents blame themselves for not paying close attention to their children's education. In a parent's own words,

It was partly my mistake. I allowed it to go on. I didn't take measures, I focused too much on my job, and the problem at school got worse. When (my child) got into chugakko [junior high school], (the problem) got worse.

(Interviews 7 and 8 in Portuguese/Brazilian father and Brazilian mother)

Parents' lifestyle

Parents' lifestyles concerning life-education planning can also influence children's education. According to an interview with a Brazilian educator working in a Japanese school and an interview with a Japanese social worker, contact between schools and parents might be difficult due to parents' heavy work schedule, which often includes night shifts. This might lead to a lack of parental attention to children's educational needs. Here is what two professionals mentioned,

There is the explanatory meeting at the time the student starts junior high. Parents work at night and (older) children look after their younger siblings. No contact is made.

(Interview 9 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

Parents tend to be in a harsh working environment, like overnight shifts, and they are trying hard. We would like to support them because they do have certain rights (to receive social services and education).

(Interview 20 in Japanese/Japanese social worker)

Factor 3: Request for Improving the Support System for Non-Japanese Students

Isolated initiatives of some schools

Considering that the education structure—purported to welcome foreign students—differs based upon location, a general consensus is that no established guidelines actually exist to deal with special education cases for foreign students. This lack may be the source for many different understandings and points of view among Brazilian residents in Japan. One assistant-teacher brought up the issue of how the actions by school principals can influence the system. In her opinion, the system is highly dependent on the actions of each school. When there is a lack of specific recommendations from the Japanese Board of Education, foreign families must rely on other avenues to address their children's needs.

I mostly assist foreigners in (omitted city name)...Some schools have a better system, and it depends on the principal...Nevertheless, the children attending schools where the principal is attentive will be privileged...Most of the documents are translated from a few years ago, and after finishing the Setsumeikai [Orientation], there are explanations for foreigners in up to four languages. It is slowly improving...There is a problem at the moment. Someone has to plan something for the benefit of these children, and someone has to talk about it...There are these children sent to special education classes even though it is only for language problems...

(Interview 16 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

Limitations faced by teachers while trying to offer proper care

Teachers in remote areas expressed a willingness to accommodate immigrant students according to their needs, culture and language situation, so teacher-training in areas where the foreign populations are

increasing may benefit all of the people involved. A veteran school counselor, after retiring from his teaching career, mentioned that very few Brazilian students within the Japanese education system will request assistance. Another interviewee, a special education school teacher, pointed out that schools need to provide more time for translators and interpreters to act as liaisons between the schools and families because the extra work of having a foreign child with special needs in class might not be positively understood by some of the school teachers.

Many parents don't attend observation classes and meetings. Maybe they think it's meaningless to see it in Japanese...No interpreters when we (teachers) visit their home...It is helpful if an interpreter-translator staff member can directly talk to parents because we teachers cannot explain everything...The teacher has to add Japanese and clipart for parents to understand...If teachers who are in charge of foreign students do extra work (adding Japanese), the work is double...There are (teachers') courses or training (to educate Japanese special needs children) but not for foreign children.

(Interview 4 in Japanese/Special education school teacher)

Personnel scarcity

Another trouble spot is neglect in the hiring of professionals who can assist foreign parents, resulting in Japanese teachers being busier and consequently draining them both physically and emotionally, which in turn can lead to misunderstandings of foreign parents. A teacher working at a special education school shared that at her workplace, a bilingual staff member comes a few hours a week; however, she believes there is a strong possibility that many of the parents neither understand how the Japanese school system is structured nor the spoken Japanese by the teachers. As a consequence, foreign parents become disconnected from or disinterested in education. A number of Japanese Brazilian language support teachers would be capable of noticing what behaviors extend beyond simple language problems; however, support is frequently hampered because decision-making teachers routinely make draw their conclusions from feelings or experiences—not on any sound professional assessment—essentially skirting the potential knowledge available from support teachers who have the advantage of speaking in the same language as the families.

...I try to add Hiragana on the letters—but cannot do it all—so foreign parents may not understand some information... (A translator) just translates letters and has no chances to

talk to parents...It is a pity to misread the students' cognitive skills if the cause is tied to language acquisition problems, disabilities itself or language and cultural differences that the teacher may not understand...If children speak a foreign language at home, they may have a hard time at these schools for special needs education because no one can speak their language. The teacher may think a child has less ability just because of the communication barrier, even if the child performs other skills excellently. The child may get panicked. The teachers may misunderstand and insist that the child has some kind of problem.

(Interview 4 in Japanese/Special education school teacher)

Importance of professionals with skills in the languages of foreign families

Hiring Brazilian psychologists to work along with Japanese professionals in order to have specialists speaking the same language as families was another point raised. For one Brazilian educator who specializes in neuropsychology, the ideal would include support in schools or group therapy in Portuguese for parents of children with special needs. Similarly, a Japanese school counselor believes that parents might want to speak more about different issues in their native language and in the presence of non-Japanese professionals who could explain the general education system as well as to provide information about how students are placed in special education classes.

...Many (foreign parents) do not come to class observation as it is not so meaningful without any interpreters on hand, so maybe it's not worth it for them to take a day off from work...it may be useful to have consultation opportunities (in their language) which they can easily access without interpreters...it is better if parents can talk about their anxiety concerning the future and about their children...good to have a (foreign) counselor whose expertise is education. During counseling, "a pause" in the conversation is important. When having an interpreter, that "pause" might not be understood as being important, and so the counselor cannot get closer to the client's feelings...I'm sure foreign parents also feel they want to say more and express themselves better.

(Interview 14 in Japanese/Japanese school counselor)

Partnership of Brazilian and Japanese psychologists

In an interview, a Brazilian psychologist mentioned that he understands the difficulties Japanese professionals could have while attempting to diagnose a non-Japanese child, which points to the importance of having qualified Brazilian professionals assist them. Nevertheless, as the diagnosis stands solely as the

first step of the whole process, he is concerned about how the Japanese authorities look at such diagnoses and whether they would continue treatments that were suggested by Brazilians once these professionals left Japan after completing their mission.

But to have a suitable diagnosis, the child must be speaking Japanese...There are no Brazilian professionals (specializing in childhood autism) in Japan...And it is even difficult when they (Japanese professionals) come across a Brazilian child because if they do not have a specialty (in assisting foreign children) it would be difficult (to make the diagnosis) ...It would be a good idea to bring a team from Brazil but the diagnosis is just the beginning (of the whole process).

(Interview 19 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist working in Japan)

Importance of NPOs as a channel between families and Japanese society

NPOs can act as agents to assure that the system will run effectively and that all of the people involved will be provided with a better understanding of the whole process. Concerning issues of understanding the education system's structure, the need for counseling and the frequency of misunderstandings, a veteran non-profit organization (NPO) coordinator suggests that NPOs can significantly help by positioning themselves as liaisons between schools, counselors, parents and their children.

The coordinator can act as a go-between for the person giving a Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children - WISC test (school counselors, child support center), the child and the parents. In order to take advantage of the system, it is important for someone who knows well about foreigners' issues. Schools do not always know well about the problems that foreign parents have, and the Board of Education does not always know many of the vital details related to each case (of foreign families).

(Interview 15 in Portuguese/Foreign community supporter)

Factor 4: Importance of a Second Opinion

Awareness of having choices

When parents notice or become anxious about their child's development, it is essential for them to know that making decisions based on multiple opinions and being able to consider possible choices might

bring different results. A second opinion is seen here not only as a diagnosis by psychological or medical professionals, it also includes the provision of information and opinions by people such as both Japanese and Brazilian teachers as well as NPO supporters involved in a case. During one of the interviews, a Brazilian psychologist working in Japan raised the concern that foreign parents are not always aware that they have choices, as the interviewee mentioned here,

In the psychological test applied in Japan there is no regulation affecting the results. Parents either avoid confrontation or confront the test results. Not accepting the diagnosis by a family can, in some cases, make a difference in a child's future.

(Interview 13 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist working in Japan)

Another interviewee, a Brazilian educator, also mentioned that some Brazilian parents tend to feel satisfied with the limited information.

Parents are thought to believe children will benefit from Japanese schools. (Some) parents seem to trust Japanese doctors. The mother who enrolled the child in a school of special needs education seems to avoid talking to Brazilian professionals.

(Interview 21 in Portuguese/Brazilian educator specialized in neuropsychology)

The first diagnosis might not be always right

Although it was not especially prevalent in the interview data, some interviewees suggested the possibility of misunderstandings and the misreading of children's abilities in the process of diagnosing them. During the interviews, cases were found in which Brazilian and Japanese professionals offered different opinions on the same child's developmental profile. In one case, the child was diagnosed with autism because of a lack of Japanese language skills; however, a Brazilian professional with a specialization in neuropsychology diagnosed the child as not having any sort of special needs as can be seen in the professional's words,

The Brazilian professional applied the tests to check if the child had some sort of special need and diagnosed it as not. The mother however affirms her child has autism because a Japanese doctor has said so. The Brazilian professional suggests the child might have been wrongly diagnosed and that might have caused him to imitate behavior of children who have special needs while attending the same school.

(Interview 21 in Portuguese/Brazilian educator specialized in neuropsychology)

Similar concerns were raised by a Brazilian couple.

Then, once I scheduled an online appointment for (omitted/ child's name). The (Brazilian) psychologist said that he does not have any problem. From her point of view, right? That is, he does not have...autism.

(Interview 2 in Portuguese/Brazilian father and Interview 3 in Portuguese/Brazilian mother)

Considerations to the condition of bilingual and bicultural families

In the case of foreign immigrant students, the whole history of the child, including the language background and lifestyle, needs to be considered in the assessment. Multiple consultations with professionals who consider different aspects surrounding the child's life should be considered as possible safety nets to assure children are getting the proper support they need—especially when these elements are in conflict with the opinions provided only by a homeroom teacher or a Japanese psychologist. In addition, Brazilian assistant-teachers at Japanese schools can be key players who can act as liaisons between the parents and school. It is likely that they will have frequent opportunities to intervene at key moments when misunderstandings occur in the process of assessing Brazilian children.

There are some cases in which only Japanese (during the tests) is used during discussions, but (at school) they realized that it does not work. Some teachers would not let (a translator) in, but it is necessary. There is a case of a student who had a lot of difficulties. But (actually) he has difficulties speaking in front (of others). But it is the reflection from his environment; that is how he is, but he is very smart...Parents have already come to school about 20 times. They think he suffers from being bullied. (He) has never been out, (has had) little stimulation...The stage (in his life) in which he needed stimulation, but did not get any, generates these problems. One of the biggest problems was that the child's parents do not speak the language (Japanese) and I joined as an interpreter. And also, during home visits, or to collect documents, take some documents to sign. I was present during the tests and gave the meaning in Portuguese.

(Interview 16 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

Necessity of environments which families can depend upon

Nowadays there are multiple avenues of support, which immigrant families are slowly becoming aware of. An atmosphere of cultural understanding would benefit families by providing opportunities for a second opinion. If proper support was afforded to parents, the majority of them would understand and more

readily accept what their children are facing, what they can do to help their children and how they can make use of the related services provided within Japanese society. No two cases are ever identical in terms of disabilities, education, and family background; this notion needs to be applied to immigrant children as well.

(About WISC tests) It does not make sense (applying these tests only), nor does it make sense (applying) it in Portuguese for those who live in Japan. Because...you have to describe it, it is not easy. You have to be (culturally) inserted...This cultural difference, seemed, to have several behavioral protocols, what you (have to) say, how people (will) respond...No one says anything but you understand that you are not supposed to do it. There are these rules of how to behave and (that is) a very silent culture...We need to take into account these cultural differences and migration circumstances to understand this context, and how these cultures shape the behavior. It is a connection, these different cultures; they shape and dictate that what is correct here; is not the same somewhere else. Observe from an all-inclusive form, a close evaluation (from the child's reality) really.

(Interview 17 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist formerly working in Japan)

Factor 5: Cultural and Linguistic Effect when Evaluating Non-Japanese Students

Specialized staff during checking process of the intellectual level of Brazilian children

A recurring problem is that evaluations are administered in Japanese and without the presence of a professional capable of understanding the language, culture or the child's profile. According to one interviewee, a Brazilian assistant teacher in a Japanese school, the Japanese language might be imposed during assessment times, but schools soon realize that it is not effective with foreign children. Another teacher pointed out that sometimes the personal characteristics of a child might be overlooked or misjudged by evaluators.

...There was this student, (whose) mother is Brazilian and father is Russian, (I believe) he needed to attend therapy because he had some problems. But the father does not accept it. Teachers face difficulties in helping him raise his grades to get into high school. Right now, he has been attending the normal class, but (another teacher/omitted teacher name), who works in this elementary school has contact (with him) and goes to this school only once a week. Everyone is in denial, including the parents, but the school tried and executed the first evaluation. It was done with Japanese professionals and the test in the Japanese language. I helped with the translation of the test.

(Interview 11 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

Lack of knowledge of the Japanese language and culture during the assessment.

Some of the parents of elementary school-aged children pointed out that limited skills in the Japanese language, compounded by the circumstances in which a child lives in Japan, can make it more difficult for the child to understand the evaluation and the purpose behind it. Similarly, statements made by a veteran Brazilian teacher working at Japanese schools suggest that at times such academic inadequacies might also become grounds to request that the child be assessed. Consequently, at the time of the evaluation, a child's Japanese language limitations may skew the results.

There are children with special needs, Brazilians, Filipinos and Peruvians (attending the Japanese school system in special classes). I'm not against a child with problems being placed in the special class; that is not the problem; the problem is when the matter is not psychological. It is the same with many children, they do not learn their own language, nor the one of the country (Japan)...They are subjected to the test and (then) is it obvious that some problem will arise. And then they go to the classes with children who have some disturbance, and (then) what will happen to these children's minds? These children who have linguistic issues, they should have special treatment for them alone, which would prepare them for the Japanese school environment. There was one foreign child in a special education class. Now, they are four.

(Interview 16 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

Non-specialized translators/interpreters during the evaluation process

Besides the linguistic effect on the evaluation result, the absence of translators/interpreters in the evaluation process might contribute to mutual misinformation or misinterpreted information between parents and the evaluators as well as generating doubts about the diagnosis, treatment and procedures involving various legal issues. Interviews with parents showed that the information they received regarding the child's evaluation and the procedures that followed seemed to be insufficient for them to properly interpret their child's assessment.

And then, what was going on in the minds of those applying the test was that he had a psychological problem, but not, it is different when a child is mainly staying at home (and has no direct contact with Japanese children) ... (There are) Mostly foreign children in the (special needs) class and only two Japanese children. In the (omitted school's name) that's the situation.

(Interview 7 in Portuguese/Brazilian father and Interview 8 in Portuguese/Brazilian mother)

Cultural differences between Brazil and Japan interfere in the assessment

Certain professionals also expressed concerns about the effect that language and cultural barriers might have on evaluation results. During one of the interviews, a statement by a Brazilian educator working with children with special needs in Japan suggested that some teachers in Japanese public schools might view common behaviors being displayed by Brazilian children as atypical when compared to their Japanese peers. According to the interviewee, this is given as a reason to ask for a test in order to verify whether or not the child has special needs, as the educator states here,

I think so (cultural barriers faced by Brazilian in Japan could play some sort of role when the child gets enrolled in the special needs class), especially here in (omitted/prefecture name). I see that Brazilian children in Japanese public schools, they are kind of "left aside." So, many times the teachers say, "He does not cooperate with the group, he does not do this, and he does not do that. He must have some sort of problem." Then (the teacher) asks for tests (to check if there is any sort of special needs) ...then there is language barrier during the test. Then, the child will be mistakenly diagnosed. Many times, it (the diagnosis) ends up being autism.

(Interview 21 in Portuguese/Brazilian educator specialized in neuropsychology)

Educators also pointed out that among the non-Japanese students in special education classes, some children lack not only Japanese language skills but also basic daily life skills needed within Japanese schools. If that is the case, it is possible that a child without sufficient school stimuli (e.g., because of long periods of time remaining in the home), could present behaviors that do not coincide with the rest of the group. There is a strong possibility that such behaviors will be misinterpreted by the assessors.

...(There are) three classes (for children with special needs), four Brazilians after (learning) difficulties (they) considered as needing testing. But (this difficulty) is usually generated by academic problems, (such as) they do not do their homework, what the teachers ask for....(Child) ends up in the Yougogakko (former term for Tokubetsushuengakko)[School for Special Needs Children].

(Interview 10 in Portuguese/Brazilian assistant-teacher in Japanese schools)

In two other interviews, a community supporter, as well as a Brazilian psychologist, highlighted some of the differences at the cultural level. First, as they stated, we need to take into consideration that the cultural differences between both countries must be factored in; otherwise, the evaluation will reflect the bias of the

country where it is being administered. Second, the application of tests might be influenced by concerns of linguistic differences due to the limited or lack of knowledge of the Japanese language and culture at the time of the assessment.

It is difficult to make a comparison (of the diagnosis) of how it is done in Brazil and Japan because the form is different...We started to do the WISC test done by a professional team with the materials that we brought from Brazil with the suspicion that the language barriers were influencing the test.

(Interview 18 in Portuguese/Brazilian community supporter)

...The Brazilian child is more restless than the Japanese. When you are not bound by the rule, it generates a different diagnosis, in the same way (it happens with) the cultural and linguistic difference. It can influence, I believe it does, but not in all cases...

(Interview 19 in Portuguese/Brazilian psychologist working in Japan)

Conclusions

This report summarized the findings of a qualitative study conducted by ERI in Japan. The study investigated factors supporting public concern that Brazilian children are possibly being misplaced into special education classes within the Japanese school system. Via the data generated, light has been brought to an issue that would have otherwise been only anecdotally known, if at all.

It is crucial to understand the ways in which the previously discussed factors might affect the lives of individuals involved. With concerned interviewee's data as support, we suggest that there have been a number of cases of children being mistakenly placed in special education classes or even in some cases not being placed when a child could have benefitted. Highlighting such cases through qualitative research is vital to the understanding of the serious nature of this issue. This is especially true in light of the general education 'right' that children should be placed in educational environments where they can flourish. This is not just a right for Japanese children but for children of Brazilians or other foreigners who face enormous and varied stresses related to living in a culture that is markedly different from their own.

Policy Recommendations for Stakeholders

In addition to the interview data, suggestions that arose during a roundtable organized by ERI, resulted in a list of policy recommendations aimed at addressing the present situation, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3:

Policy Recommendations for stakeholders

Policy Recommendations to Address Linguistic and Cultural Related Misunderstandings in Information

1. Create a twenty to thirty-page bilingual guidebook focusing on the differences between the regular and special school structures both in Japan and Brazil with Brazilian consulates in Japan serving as distribution points.
2. Create informative materials for Japanese educators in addition to the information intended for families and students.
3. Distribute information about and emphasize the critical importance of NPOs so that these organizations can properly serve as intermediaries so that when families have doubts related to education, they have institutional resources they can turn to for help.
4. Develop a consistent and wide-reaching network to spread information about resources that are available, instead of focusing solely on locally-based projects.

Policy Recommendations to Address Limitations Concerning Counseling and Life-Educational Planning

1. Expand good practices used by some public schools, such as the idea of supporting the use of the immigrants' heritage language in addition to the learning of Japanese. Also, the practice of follow-up contacts with foreign families that fail to enroll their children in the hopes of severing potential problems before they take root (e.g., a lack of proper understanding of school notices, uncertainty about how the school system operates, etc.).
2. Open avenues of communication that promote the discussion of successful initiatives of other countries concerning the issue of compulsory education for foreigners.
3. Consider the hiring of foreign psychologists and foreign educators—especially those who have a specialization in neuropsychology. These professionals would be able to assist public schools with the process of diagnosis in a more thorough manner in cases where foreign children present symptoms that have been associated with mental disturbance. In addition, the work of these professionals would reduce the anxiety of foreign families by instilling a higher level of confidence that the 'system' has dealt properly with each immigrant child.
4. Create and print more informative materials aimed at life-education planning for foreign families residing in Japan. One specific idea raised was to find ways to distribute such materials to Brazilians before they even enter Japan (i.e., at the time of their preparation to leave Brazil).
5. Expand the links with local NPOs committed to supporting foreign families, especially concerning the schooling of their children.

Policy Recommendations to Address Request for Improving the Support System for Non-Japanese Students

1. Governmental conferences related to Brazilian and other immigrants residing in Japan should be expanded to include the topics of “regular education” and “special education” within the Japanese system. Create and document the concerns that are raised as well as establishing committees to work on such issues.
2. Push local governmental education departments to extend to foreign students the invitation to attend Japanese schools.
3. Create a ministerial ordinance and formalize the request to expand ‘best practice’ initiatives and strategies occurring at the local level, so that these ideas can be incorporated in other districts (as one example, mapping, and investigating student truancy).
4. Consider the work of non-Japanese psychologists and neuropsychologists, education specialists and learning therapists who can assist students with special needs in their everyday learning environment and who are able to converse with parents and their children in the native language.
5. Recognize the support provided by NPOs as an impartial channel between families and Japanese society.

Policy Recommendations to Address Importance of a Second Opinion

1. Create more opportunities for parents to get advice through NPOs’ education consultations. Some NPOs in (*omitted prefecture name*) are good models of how NPOs can take a neutral position and serve as a channel between parents and the education system.
2. Invest in the development of a coordinated system (rather than individual NPOs working in isolation of one another). This should include human resources development and itinerant support.
3. Provide effective counseling for families in their mother tongue and build a system that allows for fair and multifaceted opinions educationally as well as medically.
4. Make requests when needed to the Japanese authorities by representatives of the Brazilian government regarding the issue raised here.

Policy Recommendations to Address the Cultural and Linguistic Effects when Evaluating Non-Japanese Students

1. Implement a testing system, in which the “WISC test,” using Brazilian materials, would be applied together with the Japanese materials.
 2. Hire psychologists who speak the children’s mother tongues to act as evaluators.
 3. Follow-up on students after evaluations and diagnoses have been conducted to act as a further evaluation of the students and to act as support for the well-being of the children involved.
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As a final thought, the results collected in the present research provide an opportunity for reflection and should be a call to action for those involved in the education of Brazilian children living in Japan and to those in charge of the well-being of the Brazilian community as a whole. Poignantly, this project represents a wake-up call regarding the plight of immigrant children living in Japan. By offering reassuring and sound policy solutions to the proper schooling of immigrant children who are living in Japan, the project also

represents a vision of mechanisms, peoples and actions working in concert to contribute to a better life for immigrant families. Worries will always exist, but they can be attenuated when we listen to the voices of those concerned.

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