

Expanding Translocal Capability: Ethnic Empowerment Education and Social Inclusion of Brazilians in Japan

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Abstract

This study examines how ethnic empowerment education contributes to the inclusion of Brazilian immigrants within transnational social spaces. Drawing on Sen's capability approach and the concept of empowerment education, it defines ethnic empowerment education as community-driven practices created and managed by migrants themselves, which respect ethnic identity while providing resources such as language learning, vocational training, and community-based networking. Fieldwork was conducted between 2017 and 2022 at Brazilian schools in Japan, a distance-learning university in Brazil, a pastry training course, and a language school, and included interviews with students, teachers, and parents. The findings show that leveraging Brazilian educational resources strengthens social networks, facilitates integration, and opens new career pathways. Emphasizing lifelong learning and non-formal education, the analysis highlights the role of community-based programs in fostering empowerment. In doing so, the study challenges conventional perspectives that frame immigrants primarily as recipients of aid, instead presenting them as active agents within host societies. Taken together, it offers insights into strategies that can promote social inclusion and improve the quality of life of transnational migrants.

1. Introduction

The flux of migration is growing worldwide, and Japan is no exception. Over the past decade, the number of immigrants¹ in Japan has nearly tripled, reaching more than 3.7 million [1]. When Japan first began accepting immigrants, government policy primarily framed them as temporary labor force. However, recent trends show that many immigrants are staying for longer periods and bringing their families, indicating a shift toward more permanent settlement. Although more than 30 years have passed since the Japanese government revised its immigration law to attract foreign labor, government

support for immigrant integration into Japanese society have been limited and slow to develop.

Among all immigrant groups in Japan, Brazilians have faced some of the greatest difficulties in adapting to the new environment. Brazilians constitute the fifth-largest immigrant group in Japan, after Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Filipinos. [1]. While many initially migrated as factory workers, recent years have seen a growing trend toward higher education and professional development, reflecting an increasing desire to settle in Japan [2]. Nevertheless, persistent challenges including language barriers and economic insecurity have resulted in relatively low rates of higher education enrollment compared to other ethnic minorities [3]. School nonattendance and drop out are also serious issues among Brazilian youth [4]. Foreign children are not subject to compulsory education under Japanese law and enrollment in school is only encouraged but not legally mandated. This institutional gap contributes to higher rates of nonattendance and dropout among Brazilian youth.

In the absence of sufficient governmental support, forms of

"Ethnic Empowerment Education"

have emerged from within the Brazilian community itself, aiming to promote inclusion and opportunity in the transnational social space. This study proposes the concept to describe immigrant community-driven educational initiatives that respect ethnic identity while providing resources such as language learning, skills training, and networking.

The aim of this paper is to analyze the impact of such ethnic empowerment education on the quality of life of Brazilians in Japan. This study explores how these educational practices are conducted and how they contribute to the expansion of capabilities, the improvement of wellbeing, and the strengthening of translocal networks. By doing so, it seeks to shed light on both the potential and the limitations of immigrant community-led educational initiatives in fostering

¹ In Japan, official statistics use the term "foreign residents" (zairyū gaikokujin) rather than "immigrants," as the government does not formally recognize itself as an immigration country. However, since their lived reality corresponds to that of

immigrants, this paper adopts the term "immigrant" to align with international research contexts.

more inclusive forms of migrant integration.

2. Literature review

Brazilians abroad increased significantly after the 1980s due to Brazil's political and economic instability. While many first moved to the U.S. and Paraguay, the 1990 revision of Japan's Immigration Control Act triggered a large inflow to Japan [5]. Initially, these moves were conceived as short-term labor migration, yet prolonged crises in Brazil extended settlement abroad. According to Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs [6], 4.9 million Brazilians currently live overseas. Japan hosts the fifth-largest Brazilian population, with around 200,000 residents.

Globalization and advances in technology have facilitated cross-border flows of people and goods, enabling the rise of transnational migrants who live across multiple societies and ethnic diasporas [7]. Diaspora, as Brubaker [8] notes, refers to communities formed outside the homeland that preserve ethnic identity while adapting to host societies. Within host societies, diaspora communities provide immigrants with access to information, economic assistance, and psychosocial support.

Brazilians in Japan exemplify this, forming diaspora communities while frequently engaging in transnational mobility [9]. Many migrants of Japanese descent (*Nikkei*) were able to obtain long-term resident visas, which facilitated repeated cross-border mobility. Their unstable employment, often in temporary manufacturing work, further encouraged both geographic movement within Japan and continued ties to Brazil. More recently, ethnic media and social networking platforms have expanded these networks, offering new channels for information exchange and reinforcing the transnational character of Brazilian migration to Japan [10].

Japan opened its doors to foreign workers in 1990 mainly to address labor shortages in the industrial sector. Until that time, Koreans and Chinese immigrants had been the primary ethnic groups residing in Japan. Having lived in the country for generations, they were relatively more socially and economically integrated into Japanese society, despite experiencing severe discrimination rooted in historical tensions. With the arrival of new groups—including South Americans, Filipinos, and Indo-Chinese refugees—Japan began facing new challenges related to migration and integration.

Brazilians first entered Japan under this policy shift, and many initially planned to stay only two years as temporary labor migrants. However, prolonged instability in Brazil and the relative stability of life in Japan led many to bring their families, contributing to the growth of Brazilian communities in prefectures such as Aichi, Shizuoka, and Gunma. Although many were of Japanese descent, most did not inherit the Japanese language

because its use had been banned in Brazil during World War II, which made linguistic and cultural adaptation in Japan difficult [11]. These conditions fostered the development of community institutions that supported everyday life and identity maintenance. Brazilian schools, ethnic churches, food stores, and later ethnic businesses provided both practical support and cultural continuity. Brazilian schools (private ethnic educational institutions) concentrated in areas of dense settlement, follow the Brazilian Ministry of Education's curriculum in Portuguese [12]. These schools not only prepare students for potential return to Brazil but also provide opportunities to learn Brazilian history and culture, preserving ethnic identity. Furthermore, they serve as alternative institutions for children unable to adapt to Japanese schools, thus ensuring educational access for Brazilian residents. Alongside schools, ethnic businesses expanded as sentiment for long-term settlement increased among Brazilians in Japan. Education-related businesses, leveraging digital tools, have also grown significantly. Conducted in Portuguese and often advertised only by word-of-mouth or social media, these initiatives have remained largely invisible in migration research.

Earlier scholarship emphasized weak solidarity within Brazilian diaspora communities. Margolis [5] observes that Brazilian migrants are distinctly transnational yet often lack strong community cohesion. In regions such as the U.S. and Europe, precarious legal status fosters unstable leadership and hinders community-based organization, with ethnic churches serving as the only enduring institutions. However, prolonged settlement abroad and the diffusion of digital communication are gradually strengthening transnational networks. Building on this, the present study examines the role of education in the community-building process of Brazilians in Japan.

Hence, this study will highlight community-driven educational initiatives within Brazilian communities in Japan, examining their role in strengthening cohesion and fostering inclusion in transnational social spaces. By doing so, it aims to provide new perspectives on the study of Brazilians in Japan.

Empowerment of Immigrants

As international migration continues to rise, host societies have introduced or explored policies aimed at promoting the social inclusion and empowerment of immigrants. Social inclusion and empowerment refer to processes by which immigrants gain equal opportunities in host societies and improve their socioeconomic status and wellbeing [13][14]. Classical assimilation theories assumed that immigrants, over time, would fully integrate into the host society. However, studies on the second generation in the United States have shown that those

who adapt to both host and home cultures are more likely to achieve upward mobility [15]. Where public education systems inadequately support immigrants, ethnic communities play a critical role in second-generation social mobility. Portes and Rumbaut [15] emphasized that government policies, labor market structures, and the presence or absence of ethnic communities all shape educational attainment. Ethnic communities provide spaces where immigrants can access information in their mother tongue and preserve ethnic identity. In concentrated immigrant areas, ethnic businesses flourish, forming “ethnic enclaves” with semi-autonomous social structures, generating employment and vocational training for newcomers [16].

Non-formal education has expanded within these communities, enhancing educational resources outside schools [17]. Such initiatives include tutoring, language support, and vocational training and they also function as “safe spaces” for immigrants. Non-formal education is distinctive in that it often targets diverse age groups. Its flexibility allows it to respond to immigrants’ needs, though the credentials gained are not always recognized by host societies. Nevertheless, as transnational mobility increases and educational needs diversify, formal systems designed around linear career pathways are becoming inadequate. Non-formal programs therefore offer valuable lessons for building inclusive education systems.

3. Analytical Framework and Method

Brazilians in Japan have often faced restricted opportunities in education, employment, and social participation, shaped by linguistic and institutional barriers. In response, the community has developed ethnic empowerment education which is initiatives created and managed by immigrants themselves. These programs respect ethnic identity while equipping participants with the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to expand their opportunities in both Japan and beyond. Unlike state systems that frequently overlook long-term residents with limited Japanese or English proficiency, ethnic empowerment education provides multilingual curricula, culturally relevant learning environments, and practical resources such as career guidance and community-based networking.

To analyze the impact of these initiatives, this study draws on Amartya Sen’s capability approach [18]. Previous research on Brazilian migrants has tended to measure “integration” in terms of school attainment, occupational mobility, or socioeconomic status within Japan. Yet such indicators fail to capture the broader goals of migrants who build lives not only in Japan but also in Brazil and third countries. What matters is not simply whether migrants obtain a diploma or a job, but whether they are able to choose and pursue

lives they have reason to value across transnational contexts.

Sen’s framework is useful here because it distinguishes between functionings—the concrete states of being and activities that make up wellbeing, such as acquiring a language, completing higher education, or securing stable employment—and capabilities, the genuine freedom to choose among different combinations of those functionings. Ethnic empowerment education can be understood as a mechanism for converting community-based resources into both individual and collective capabilities [19]. By offering alternative routes into education and work, it expands the range of possibilities open to migrants who would otherwise be excluded by mainstream institutions.

In this study, I introduce the concept of translocal capability to capture how these freedoms extend across multiple social spaces. Brazilians in Japan do not confine their aspirations to the host country alone; they often seek opportunities in Brazil and in third countries. Ethnic empowerment education supports this translocal orientation by providing the skills, credentials, and networks needed to move between contexts. For example, programs that combine Portuguese, Japanese, and English instruction not only allow students to access Japanese universities but also enable them to pursue higher education in Brazil or professional work in other regions.

The value of ethnic empowerment education thus lies not simply in human or cultural capital accumulation, but in its ability to translate those resources into meaningful capabilities. It enables migrants to realize functionings such as language acquisition, educational achievement, occupational advancement, and social belonging, while also preserving the freedom to choose how and where to pursue these functionings. At the same time, barriers such as limited legal status, financial constraints, or lack of institutional recognition restrict capability expansion. To overcome these, Brazilian migrants-led initiatives increasingly collaborate to form transnational solidarity networks that foster mutual support and collective agency.

In this way, Sen’s approach provides the conceptual tools to examine how ethnic empowerment education affects not only individual outcomes but also the broader freedom of migrants to design their own lives across borders. Building on this framework, the analysis considers both formal programs (*curso formal*), such as Brazilian schools and distance-learning universities, and informal programs (*curso livre*), including vocational and cultural initiatives developed outside the public system.

The aim of this paper is to examine the kinds of resources Brazilians can access and the forms of capital they construct through these programs. It also explores how participation contributes to the

Table 1. Research participants

Participants (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Educational background	Years of Residence in Japan	Japanese language level	English language level	Residence status	Type of Program Attended
Camila	Female	19	High school graduate	17 years	Intermediate	Intermediate	Long-term resident	Brazilian School
Carolina	Female	27	University graduate	27 years	advanced	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian school
Eliane	Female	36	University graduate	23 years	advanced	Intermediate	Naturalized Japanese Citizen	Brazilian distance learning university
Eliza	Female	18	3rd year high school student	18 years	advanced	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian School
Henata	Female	24	High school graduate	23 years	Beginner	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian school and ethnic language school
Isabella	Female	20	Third year university student in Brazil	16 years	Intermediate	Intermediate	Unknown	Brazilian School
Juliana	Female	30	University graduate	16 years	advanced	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian distance learning university
Karina	Female	18	High school graduate	6 years	Beginner	Intermediate	Unknown	Brazilian school
Leticia	Female	19	First year students of Japanese technical college	18 years	Intermediate	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian School
Lorena	Female	16	Second year high school student	16 years	Intermediate	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian School
Mauro	Male	33	University graduate	23 years	advanced	advanced	Permanent resident	Brazilian distance learning university
Melissa	Female	16	Second year high school student	16 years	Intermediate	Intermediate	Unknown	Brazilian School
Michelle	Female	20	Third year university student	18 years	Intermediate	Intermediate	Long-term resident	Brazil School, Brazilian distance learning university and ethnic language school
Sarah	Female	16	First year high school student	16 years	advanced	Beginner	Permanent resident	Brazilian School
Shoh	Male	19	First year university student	19 years	advanced	Intermediate	Long-term resident	Brazilian School
Thais	Female	15	First year high school student (Japanese school)	6 years	Intermediate	Intermediate	Permanent resident	Brazilian school and ethnic language school

expansion of capabilities and the realization of diverse functioning and investigates the constraints that limit these opportunities as well as the strategies communities employ to overcome them.

To address these aims, fieldwork was conducted between 2017 and 2022 at three Brazilian schools in Japan, one distance-learning university in Brazil, a pastry training course, and a language school. Semi-structured interviews (see Table 1) with 16 students, 8 instructors and staff, and 4 parents provide the empirical basis for analyzing how ethnic empowerment education shapes educational and career trajectories, fosters community networks, and contributes to the improvement of wellbeing and quality of life of Brazilians in Japan. It should be noted that participants in the pastry training course were engaged through informal interviews during fieldwork and are therefore not included in the Table.

4. Accumulation of Capital through Ethnic Empowerment Education

The comparative analysis of the four forms of ethnic empowerment education shows that Brazilians in Japan acquire diverse forms of capital and resources through these educational activities. In this section, the needs of participants in each type of program will be examined, along with the forms of

capital they develop through their engagement, which serve as the basis for achieving various functioning.

4.1. Case of Brazilian Schools

Brazilian schools in Japan have played a central role in shaping the educational and social trajectories of Brazilian migrant youth since its establishment in the late 1990s. These schools emerged in response to structural constraints faced by Brazilian youth such as limited Japanese language proficiency, lack of information on further education, financial difficulties, and insufficient parental support in Japanese schools, all of which restrict the opportunities available to young Brazilians in Japan.

Within these institutions, students develop human capital through access to the Brazilian educational curriculum and teaching materials, enabling them to obtain a Brazilian high school diploma while also studying Japanese and English. This trilingual education equips them with qualifications that carry value both in Japan and abroad and provides knowledge of university entrance examination systems. Such resources create the potential for further study not only in Japan but also in Brazil and third countries.

Brazilian schools also contribute to the formation of cultural capital. Students are introduced to the

expectations and structures of higher education and develop awareness of the importance of credentials for upward mobility. Information about examination systems, encounters with role models, and narratives of success help cultivate motivation to continue education.

In addition, Brazilian schools generate social capital by fostering networks with teachers, peers, and role models. These relationships provide students with guidance, encouragement, and access to information regarding educational and career opportunities. Social capital also creates a sense of belonging within the Brazilian community in Japan and strengthens ties of solidarity.

The combination of human, cultural, and social capital obtained through Brazilian schools expands the choices available to students and creates multiple educational and career pathways. These include direct, indirect, and alternative routes into higher education in Japan, Brazil, and other countries. In this sense, the schools act as transnational nodes of opportunity that enable students to prepare for mobility across diverse educational and labor markets. At the same time, persistent barriers such as financial exclusion, low parental involvement, and limited recognition of foreign-acquired qualifications in Japan constrain the extent to which these forms of capital can be fully leveraged.

Leticia, a high school graduate of a Brazilian school, mentioned during the interview that many of her peers gave up on further studies due to financial struggles:

“Several of my peers, in fact almost everyone, ended up working in factories after graduating from vocational schools. Seeing this discouraged others from pursuing further education. On top of that, tuition fees were around one million yen, which most families simply could not afford. In the end, many gave up and went to the factories instead.” (Leticia)

This example illustrates how financial exclusion and limited institutional support can undermine students’ motivation, hindering the potential benefits of the capital accumulated through Brazilian schools.

To address such constraints, some Brazilians have turned to distance-learning universities in Brazil, which provide alternative pathways for acquiring qualifications and expanding opportunities. The next section examines how these institutions contribute to the formation of capital and the development of translocal capabilities.

4.2. Case of Brazilian Distance Learning Universities

Brazilian distance-learning universities were first introduced in Japan to meet the educational needs of

the first generation of migrants, but they have since become increasingly relevant for younger Brazilians who face barriers to entering Japanese universities. Many graduate from Brazilian schools or Japanese high schools but remain uncertain about their educational and career pathways. Distance-learning programs in Brazil offer an alternative route that allows them to pursue higher education while living in Japan. Coordinators note that the profile of students is shifting, with more 18-year-olds enrolling directly after high school. With tuition at around 240,000 yen per year, these programs are more affordable than Japanese institutions, providing families with a realistic option to continue studies without disrupting their transnational lives.

Through participation in Brazilian distance learning universities, migrants are able to accumulate different forms of capital. In terms of human capital, these institutions provide university degrees and professional qualifications that enhance employability. Students can gain credentials in fields such as business, accounting, or pedagogy, which expand their career prospects not only in Brazil but also in Japan and third countries. In addition, cultural capital is fostered through the acquisition of business etiquette, study discipline, and motivation to advance professionally. Students who may have struggled with identity or motivation in Japanese schools find renewed purpose in studying in their native language and within a familiar cultural framework.

Social capital is also enhanced as students build connections with peers, professors, and role models within Brazilian and transnational networks. These relationships provide guidance, encouragement, and access to information on career pathways across different societies. The Brazilian distance learning universities are increasingly engaging in partnerships with Brazilian schools and ethnic businesses in Japan, as well as offering internships that integrate study with practical experience. Such collaborations strengthen the transnational educational infrastructure that supports migrants’ long-term empowerment.

They also encourage entrepreneurship, enabling students to bridge Brazilian and Japanese contexts through businesses and services that cater to both communities. For example, Eliane, a former graduate of a Brazilian distance-learning university in Japan, is now running her own business assisting members of the Brazilian community offering accounting services and financial consulting. Reflecting on her educational experience, she explained:

“Studying and keeping in touch with the university broadened my perspective. My vision changed. Until then, I had never thought about starting a business, but among my peers there were those aiming to become teachers at Brazilian schools, or to study abroad since their program allowed them to

learn both Portuguese and English. I realized there were many options I hadn't considered. I had been narrowing my own choices. Because I speak Japanese, I was often placed in interpreter roles, not because it was what I wanted, but because companies needed it. It was only when I enrolled in university that I realized I could also pursue what I truly wanted to do." (Eliane)

Despite these benefits, there are significant constraints that limit the functionality of Brazilian distance learning universities for migrants in Japan. A major obstacle is the lack of Japanese and English proficiency required to transition from factory work to white-collar jobs in the host society. Even with a Brazilian degree, employment opportunities in Japan may remain limited if qualifications are not officially recognized.

For instance, Michelle, a student who majored in accounting in a Brazilian correspondence program was unable to work as a certified public accountant in Japan due to the lack of recognition of Brazilian credentials and insufficient Japanese language proficiency. Similarly, the lack of prior work experience beyond factory employment restricts students from leveraging their academic qualifications. These gaps illustrate the limitations of capital acquired through transnational distance education when it is not aligned with host country labor market demands.

Nevertheless, distance learning universities play an important role in expanding the choices available to Brazilian migrants. They create pathways to white-collar employment in Brazil, Japan, and other countries by offering flexible programs that can be pursued alongside work.

Both Brazilian schools and distance learning universities represent formal educational institutions in Brazil, and it is precisely their institutionalized status that allows students to acquire certain forms of capital, such as recognized diplomas, professional qualifications, and academic credentials. These forms of capital hold value not only within the Brazilian community but also across transnational contexts, enabling access to higher education and professional careers.

In the following section, the focus shifts to non-formal educational initiatives, such as pastry courses and language schools, which provide alternative resources and pathways for empowerment outside the framework of formal schooling.

4.3. Case of Pastry Training Course

Pastry training programs for Brazilian women in Japan illustrate how vocational education can function as a site of empowerment, particularly in contexts where migrants face structural exclusion from formal

labor markets. Many women encounter wage disparities and unstable incomes due to pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing, and for those seeking to start a side business or pursue self-employment, the lack of information, professional skills and experiences often become a significant obstacle.

As one pastry instructor emphasized, misinformation about legal requirements has been widespread. She explained that the first step is to obtain a food license by attending a hygiene course at the health center, then to secure a space, and finally to register as self-employed. Although these steps are not necessarily difficult, the absence of accurate guidance has left many women vulnerable to failure.

The training programs provide concrete resources that help participants move toward self-reliance. These include original teaching materials, video resources, and certificates recognized by the Brazilian Pastry Association. Through systematic instruction in cake production and sales techniques, participants acquire human capital in the form of technical knowledge and practical qualifications. The training also builds cultural capital by transmitting entrepreneurial skills, knowledge of Japanese food hygiene regulations, and information related to starting a business in Japan. At the same time, participants gain social capital by building networks with instructors and peers, which provide not only encouragement but also channels for exchanging practical information about the local market and legal systems.

The accumulation of these forms of capital has the potential to expand women's choices in meaningful ways. By leveraging the skills and certifications obtained through training, they can reduce the financial burden of their households by generating supplemental income. For many, the opportunity to sell cakes and pastries represents a pathway to flexible employment that accommodates family responsibilities while enhancing their sense of self-worth. In this way, pastry training responds directly to the intersection of gendered labor constraints and immigrant status, offering women a practical avenue to regain agency over their economic lives.

Nonetheless, participants face multiple constraints in turning training into sustainable livelihood strategies. Limited proficiency in Japanese complicates interactions with health centers, licensing offices, and customers. Financial and time pressures restrict their ability to invest in equipment, workspace, or marketing. Moreover, certificates earned through pastry programs are not always recognized within broader Japanese professional systems, reducing their formal value. As one student noted, even after acquiring skills, logistical challenges such as refrigerated delivery of cakes made it difficult to maintain orders, while delivery companies refused to transport fragile products. Such barriers reveal how systemic gaps limit the translation of accumulated

capital into functioning opportunities within the host society.

Despite these difficulties, pastry training programs play a vital role in strengthening participants' confidence and sense of empowerment. The encouragement provided by instructors and peers fosters self-esteem and motivates women to envision themselves as capable entrepreneurs, even when structural obstacles remain. By creating supportive spaces for learning and exchange, these programs allow Brazilian women to imagine and sometimes realize alternative futures beyond factory labor or precarious part-time work. In this sense, pastry training exemplifies how community-based vocational initiatives can contribute to the development of human, cultural, and social capital, while also highlighting the constraints that shape the extent to which such capital can be effectively leveraged in the Japanese context.

4.4. Case of English Language Schools

Language schools have become important educational spaces for Brazilian youth in Japan, especially in contexts where unclear career visions and limited language skills restrict their opportunities. Many students are unable to fully experience life in Japan because they cannot speak Japanese, and their inability to communicate often prevents them from accessing social and educational opportunities. At the same time, not being proficient in English limits their capacity to envision further study abroad or engage in global mobility. As one language school instructor explained, communication skills are essential for success in any field, and the absence of these skills means that students miss out on experiences and opportunities that could broaden their horizons.

Language schools provide resources designed specifically for Brazilian migrants. Classes often incorporate Portuguese in instruction, making it easier for students to acquire English proficiency while also learning Japanese. The provision of original teaching materials, language qualifications, and study abroad programs creates a supportive environment for developing skills that can be applied in multiple contexts. Through these opportunities, students accumulate human capital in the form of proficiency in Japanese and English, which is essential for further education and employment. They also develop cultural capital by gaining knowledge of English-speaking cultures, understanding the expectations of higher education systems, and fostering motivation for academic or vocational achievement. Additionally, social capital is built through networks between instructors and students, which provide encouragement and guidance as students navigate their educational paths.

The accumulation of these forms of capital allows students to expand their choices significantly. By

acquiring proficiency in Japanese and English, they become eligible to continue their studies either in Japan or in third countries. Language qualifications and cultural knowledge open pathways to white-collar jobs that would otherwise remain inaccessible. Some participants in this study reported that their Japanese proficiency was limited to everyday conversation. In the absence of clear role models, many felt that leaving factory work would be nearly impossible without strong Japanese skills. Yet for others, the study of English opened up new ways of imagining their futures. Renata, for example, reflected on how learning English shifted her sense of what was possible:

"I used to live a life that only revolved around the factory and home. I believed that was the reality for Brazilians in Japan, and I thought I had to accept it. But once I started studying English, I realized that was not the only option. There are other paths. Of course, there is the possibility of working abroad, but even within Japan, knowing English can create opportunities even if your Japanese is not perfect." (Renata)

As indicated by Renata's case, for many Brazilian youth, language schools serve as stepping stones to transition from precarious labor to educational and professional careers that better reflect their aspirations.

Yet, despite these benefits, there are notable constraints on the functionality of language schools as tools for empowerment. High levels of English proficiency are often required to access study abroad programs or advanced educational opportunities, and many students struggle to meet these standards. Financial difficulties also limit access, as balancing long working hours in factories with the time and costs required for language study can be overwhelming. Parents and guardians often acknowledge these difficulties, recognizing the challenge of managing both study and work commitments. As one mother noted, her daughter was trying to balance long hours at the factory with studying both Japanese and English, but this was difficult to sustain. Such conditions illustrate how economic pressure and time scarcity limit the accumulation and effective use of human and cultural capital.

Nevertheless, the role of language schools remains crucial. They provide structured support for further education, career planning, and study abroad preparation, while also facilitating community building and peer networks that sustain motivation. Importantly, they create opportunities for students to envision continuing on to university or professional careers, paths that would otherwise be closed due to linguistic and cultural barriers. In doing so, language

schools function as sites where Brazilian youth can accumulate resources that help them move beyond the limitations of factory work and imagine transnational futures that include higher education and professional employment.

5. Functioning Achieved through Ethnic Empowerment Education

The comparative analysis of ethnic empowerment education for Brazilians in Japan highlights how different types of educational activities expand the translocal capabilities of migrants by generating distinct forms of functioning. Each type of institution—Brazilian schools, distance learning universities in Brazil, pastry courses, and language schools—provides resources that lead to the functioning of language acquisition, educational achievement, occupational achievement, and social belonging. Together they illustrate the diverse pathways through which migrants navigate opportunities and constraints in transnational contexts.

Brazilian schools serve as the primary site for young Brazilians to attain the functioning of educational achievement by obtaining a high school diploma and preparing for university enrollment. They also enable the functioning of language acquisition, as students acquire academic-level proficiency in Japanese, Portuguese, and English, creating a trilingual foundation valuable for higher education and labor market participation. These functionings contribute further to the functioning of occupational achievement, as graduates access universities in Japan, Brazil, or third countries, and some secure white-collar jobs or initiate businesses. At the same time, Brazilian schools nurture the functioning of social belonging by building connections with peers, teachers, and role models. Graduates often become role models themselves, reinforcing continuity of ethnic identity across generations.

Distance learning universities in Brazil generate another set of crucial functionings. By offering open admissions, flexible schedules, and affordable tuition, they provide opportunities for the functioning of educational achievement through bachelor's degrees or specialized qualifications. They also expand the functioning of language acquisition, equipping students with business-level Japanese, Portuguese, and English. These universities strengthen the functioning of occupational achievement, enabling transitions to white-collar work or entrepreneurship in Japan, Brazil, and beyond. Moreover, they support the functioning of social belonging by fostering ties among students, faculty, and professionals, allowing participants to contribute to society by leveraging specialized knowledge. In this way, distance learning institutions highlight how transnational educational

spaces produce functionings that connect home and host societies.

Pastry training demonstrates how vocational programs address gendered constraints by enabling Brazilian women to achieve alternative functionings. These courses facilitate the functioning of language acquisition through the use of Japanese and Portuguese in learning and selling baked goods. They also provide the functioning of educational achievement by offering qualifications recognized within community contexts. Participants gain the functioning of occupational achievement by working in confectionery shops, starting businesses, or engaging in side jobs, thus reducing household financial burdens. Importantly, pastry training fosters the functioning of social belonging, as women build solidarity with peers and contribute to society through entrepreneurship, bridging cultural divides via food. These functionings enhance self-esteem and create opportunities for empowerment within everyday life.

Language schools, finally, play a distinctive role by foregrounding the functioning of language acquisition as central to educational and occupational mobility. By providing English education with Portuguese support, original materials, and study abroad programs, these schools enable students to obtain language qualifications and thereby the functioning of educational achievement through pathways to university enrollment. The functioning of occupational achievement includes moving into white-collar work, becoming English teachers, or studying abroad to enhance career opportunities. At the same time, language schools cultivate the functioning of social belonging by strengthening networks between students and instructors, and by training some graduates to become lecturers, contributing to the education of the next generation.

By situating these practices within the translocal capability approach, it becomes clear that ethnic empowerment education does more than accumulate human, cultural, or social capital; it creates conditions in which migrants can expand their freedom to achieve valued functionings. In this sense, ethnic empowerment education counteracts structural exclusion and strengthens the capacity of Brazilian migrants in Japan to pursue well-being and agency across transnational spaces.

Furthermore, the initiatives examined in this study demonstrate that ethnic empowerment education not only empowers individuals but also enriches community resources as a whole. Collaborative efforts among multiple programs contribute to the formation of

“transnational educational solidarity networks,”

which expand the trans local capabilities of Brazilians in Japan. Through these networks, migrants encounter role models with diverse career trajectories, gain

access to information essential for career advancement, and draw inspiration from shared experiences, thereby facilitating educational and occupational achievement. The empowerment of individual migrants was shown to enhance community resources, facilitating cycles of lifelong learning and strengthening collective agency through the growth of ethnic businesses.

6. Discussion

This study examined the role of ethnic empowerment education in the inclusion of immigrants in transnational social spaces, making significant contributions to diaspora, transnationalism, and empowerment studies.

Diaspora studies have highlighted that Brazilian immigrants often experience weak networks due to their mobility, making it difficult to develop human resources to lead their communities. However, this study found that Brazilian immigrants in Japan strengthened ties with their compatriots by utilizing educational resources from Brazil. While concerns exist, that immigrants may prioritize their own culture and identity, potentially creating divisions with the host country, this study's results suggest that acquiring cultural and social capital from their home countries, such as vocational skills and educational backgrounds, actually supports better their integration into the host country, improving the well-being of individual immigrants.

One of the study's contributions to transnationalism research is its exploration of the diversity of education for immigrants. Previous studies of transnational immigrants have often focused on formal schooling. In this context, this study clarifies the essential role of immigrant-based lifelong learning and non-formal education—areas that have not received much attention in Japan—in facilitating the transnational inclusion of immigrant children and adults, specifically through Brazilian-led educational practices.

Moreover, most studies on transmigrant education have concentrated on middle-class and higher-income immigrants. In contrast, this study focuses on the experiences of lower-class Brazilians living in Japan, shedding light on the diverse transnational educational strategies they employ.

This study also contributes to empowerment research by demonstrating the potential for immigrant empowerment through initiatives led by the immigrants themselves. While previous studies have often portrayed immigrants as “recipients” of support, this research shows that as their stay in Japan extends, Brazilian immigrants’ role as “citizens” within the host society evolves, and they play a crucial part in the development of their communities.

However, while ethnic empowerment education provides valuable opportunities for migrants to

expand their capabilities, it is not without limitations. Formal programs, such as Brazilian schools and distance learning universities, are often constrained by institutional curricula and standardized requirements, which may not align with the diverse needs of learners from migrant backgrounds. Long study periods and high tuition fees create additional barriers, particularly for low-income families, thereby restricting access to the functioning of educational achievement. Furthermore, migrants with interrupted or non-linear educational trajectories often struggle to re-enter these systems, highlighting how structural rigidity can limit pathways to empowerment.

Informal programs, including vocational training and community-based initiatives, offer greater flexibility and responsiveness but frequently lack formal recognition. As a result, their contribution to the functioning of occupational achievement may be undervalued in the labor market, limiting the long-term impact on socio-economic mobility. Finally, the standardized nature of many educational models risks overlooking the diversity of migrant learners’ goals, languages, and lived experiences. These limitations demonstrate that while ethnic empowerment education holds promise for expanding capabilities, its effectiveness is uneven. Addressing affordability, recognition, and inclusivity is essential to ensure that the potential for broader functionings is fully realized.

7. Conclusion

Previous research has suggested that Brazilians in Japan typically aim to work in factories, but the participants in this study challenge this stereotype by demonstrating their focus on educational and career advancement.

Despite delays in creating a system for immigrant inclusion in transnational social spaces, this study critically examines the state of education not only in Japan but also in sending and receiving countries by focusing on the transnational educational practices of Brazilians living in Japan.

Participants often experienced exclusion due to differences in language, culture, and educational and employment systems, leaving them with limited options, such as working in unstable factory jobs with precarious income. The result of this research reveals that access to ethnic community-based lifelong learning resources enhances educational and career outcomes by facilitating skill acquisition in their native language, improving overall well-being, and building social capital. These programs help establish stronger social support networks, enabling integration into Japanese society.

Unlike traditional assessments focusing solely on academic and occupational achievements to measure the level of social inclusion of immigrants, this research emphasizes the importance of immigrants' ability to enjoy “freedom” in their lives. Additionally,

it underscores systemic challenges in Japan, such as rigid institutional structures and policies that restrict immigrants' options, ultimately limiting their social inclusion. By addressing these issues, this study offers insights into strategies for enhancing the well-being of transnational migrants.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of building stronger connections between migrant communities and majority institutions in shaping and delivering educational programs. Ethnic empowerment education demonstrates the creativity and resilience of Brazilian migrants, but its long-term impact depends on whether these community-led efforts can link with broader social, educational, and economic systems. These connections are not only about providing resources or reducing costs. They are also about ensuring that the knowledge and skills migrants gain are formally recognized in the societies where they live. For this reason, government agencies, local authorities, and mainstream institutions need to treat migrant-led initiatives as legitimate partners in the educational field.

Looking ahead, more research is needed to understand how similar models are taking shape in other migrant communities and in countries with longer histories of immigration. Comparative perspectives can show what becomes possible when qualifications earned abroad are more easily recognized or when multilingual education is strongly supported. Such insights could help guide reforms in Japan while also showing how community-driven education can move from filling gaps to becoming part of broader lifelong learning systems. In this sense, ethnic empowerment education should be recognized not as a temporary response to exclusion but as an essential practice that expands opportunities, strengthens networks, and affirms migrants as co-creators of more inclusive societies.

8. References

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