

**Research Articles and Essays****Learning Crisis: Vocational Education for Students with Disabilities:  
From the Campaign of Essential Workers to the Concept of Essential  
Functions**

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### **Abstract**

The essay suggests that differences in public attitudes towards essential workers in Japan and the United States arise from differences between the vocational perspective between the two countries. The lack of knowledge about what job skills are important could lead to a vocational education crisis for students with disabilities in Japan; this essay explores the possibility of using online tools to provide vocational education.

*Keywords:* vocational education, COVID-19, online education, Manakiki

## Background

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, government officials around the world made the decision to lock down their nations. Officials urged residents to stay at home and work from there whenever possible. While the efforts of essential workers during this time of crisis have been widely recognized in the United States, where many businesses and people nationwide have publicly expressed their gratitude, the case in Japan has been quite different. Although essential workers have been crucial to maintaining Japanese society during the COVID-19 crisis, many essential workers in Japan continue to face discrimination despite heightened social media efforts to recognize their contributions (“Front-line Health Care Workers,” 2020).

Healthcare workers in Japan are among those facing discrimination. In addition to the challenges of their professional roles, many nurses and doctors have the additional burden of abuse, hysteria, and harassment from their fellow citizens (“Japan's Beleaguered Nurses,” 2020): ‘You work at the hospital, right?’ a group of mothers interrogated another nurse in a Tokyo Park. ‘We'd appreciate it if you stayed away.’ Shocked, the nurse immediately went back home with her kids. ‘It's as if they equate nurses with coronavirus,’ the nurse surmised. (“Japan's Beleaguered Nurses,” 2020).

Examining this, the following project suggests there are clear differences in the United States and Japan in public’s attitude towards essential workers. Our research focused on considering this difference in vocational perspective between the two countries. The project suggests that these differences add challenges to vocational training of students, particularly those with disabilities. The project offers a method of vocational education for students with disabilities in Japan.

## Methods

Our research had two parts. First, we compared the American campaign for essential workers with the Japanese campaign to explain differences in public attitudes towards essential workers in both countries. We then used online action research in vocational education to develop a new method of vocational education for students with disabilities in Japan.

### Differences in Vocational Perspective

#### *Definitions of Essential Workers in the U.S.*

The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) developed an initial list of “Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers” to help state and local officials make decisions to protect their communities, while ensuring the continuity of functions critical to public health and safety, as well as economic and national security (US Cybersecurity, 2020). The CISA identified essential workers in 14 critical infrastructure sectors and defined essential workers as individuals who conduct a range of operations and services that are typically essential to continuing critical infrastructure operations (US Cybersecurity, 2020).

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security explained that “[p]romoting the ability of [critical workers] to continue to work during periods of community restriction, access management, social distancing or closure orders is crucial to community resilience and the continuity of essential functions” (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2020). Essential workers are expected to perform essential functions for the benefit of the community.

Referencing CISA’s guidelines, many states published essential worker lists. For example, New York State divided the list of businesses allowed to remain open into 12

categories, explaining that “if the function of your business is not listed above, but you believe that it is essential or it is an entity providing essential services or functions, you may request designation as an essential business” (New York State, 2020). This required people to focus on the essential functions of the job to determine whether a person qualified as an essential worker.

### *Thanks to Essential Workers Campaign*

In New York State, there is considerable debate about the definition of essential workers. This is evidenced, for example, in comments from bike shop owners, whose businesses were not deemed essential (Kuntzman, G. & Kessler, E., 2020). One bike shop owner said the following:

By not including bike shops as essential businesses, Gov. Cuomo’s order compromises the health, safety, and jobs of tens of thousands of NYC delivery cyclists who depend upon bike shops to keep their bikes and e-bikes in good working order for safe travel. With mounting pressure on delivery workers to keep New Yorkers fed, some argued that the governor should ensure that delivery cyclists could keep riding safely by keeping bike shops open. (Kuntzman, G. & Kessler, E., 2020)

Clearly, in the United States, citizens understand the importance of the essential worker to the community and consequently show their appreciation. There are numerous examples of ways in which the American public expressed appreciation for essential workers. In Ilion, New York, people showed their support for essential workers by tying blue ribbons to telephone poles, street lamps, and houses (Scibior, 2020). In another example, students in Ashtabula, Ohio studied the skills used by essential workers. Students showed their appreciation by making signs to support not only their parents but all essential workers

(“Kids for Positive Change,” 2020). Clearly, students appear to have learned the importance of essential workers and have showed their appreciation.

### ***Definitions of Essential Workers in Japan***

While the word “healthcare workers” was featured in Japanese media, the word “essential workers” was not popular. This reflects that Japanese people interpreted essential workers as healthcare workers. The concept of essential workers is unfamiliar in Japan.

### ***Public Attitudes towards Essential Workers in Japan***

Consequently, there have been efforts to encourage people’s positive attitudes about essential workers in Japan. In Saitama city, for example, the city’s board of education wrote all school principals asking for cooperation with a plan to express gratitude to healthcare workers. In this instance, 100,000 students applauded to thank healthcare workers (“100,000 Students,” 2020).

However, there are reasons to doubt how genuine these responses are. For example, a mother in her 30s talked about the clapping with her first-grade daughter. ‘My daughter,’ she said, ‘seemed to clap her hands because she was told to do so. She did not seem to understand why she did it.’ (“100,000 students,” 2020). In contrast to American students, this suggests students in Japan have not yet learned the vital work of essential workers.

### ***Difference of Vocational Perspective between the U.S. and Japan***

There are differences in public attitudes towards essential workers in both countries. While most Americans pay attention to essential functions performed when discussing essential workers. Most Japanese people pay little attention to the important function performed by essential workers. This difference in attention to essential functions arises from the vocational perspective between the United States and Japan.

### *Vocational Educations Crisis in Japan*

When hiring people with disabilities, most Japanese companies provide reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities but ignore the concept of essential functions. Essential functions is an unfamiliar concept in Japan's system of hiring people with disabilities. In Japan, we realized that the lack of awareness regarding those skills that are important for a job could influence what is taught in vocational education for students with disabilities.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, schools for special needs education in Japan put effort into social skills training (SST) and workplace experience (on-the-job training) to teach students through vocational education. Students acquire communication skills through SST, and they learn skills that are essential functions-of the job through workplace experience.

Temporary school closures are a 'new normal' and this changed the ways in which students are taught. Most schools for special needs education in Japan decided to cancel workplace experiences because students were finding it difficult to arrange physical visits due to the pandemic. Counter Learning Crisis Project reported that 76.5% of special-needs schools have canceled experiential learning during the temporary school closures (Counter Learning Crisis Project, 2021). This means that students with disabilities cannot learn the skills that are essential parts of the job.

In Japan, very few websites provide clear job explanations for students with disabilities. Major websites have problems which are difficult to read using a screen reader. Consequently, it is difficult to learn the essential functions of the job. For example, Gakken provides a job explanation website for children (Gakken, 2021). Gakken describes the job of a programmer as follows:

This profession is highly recommended for... A person who has physical strength, who stays positive, and perseveres toward goals, person who is-methodical. (Gakken, 2021)

This website also provides tips for those interested in becoming a programmer, saying that this is a “Job with no qualification required. It is common to become a programmer after learning knowledge and skills at a technical high school, a vocational school, or a university” (Gakken, 2021). Students with disabilities often have difficulty learning through a website which skills are essential functions for a job.

This leads us to consider the “Vocational Education Crisis.” In Japan, to tackle this crisis, we need to focus on the essential functions of the job and develop a new method of vocational education for students with disabilities.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***The Counter Learning Crisis Project website (Manakiki)***

We posted an article on the Counter Learning Crisis Project website, Manakiki, entitled "Special Feature about Thanks to Essential Workers." In this article, we provided an explanation for students with disabilities, of the jobs of essential workers and appealed to them to learn the importance of essential workers' roles in the community.

After learning about essential workers' jobs, students with disabilities tied navy blue ribbons on a window to honor essential workers. By providing a description of the essential skills of different jobs performed by essential workers, students with disabilities

learned which skills were essential.

### *Online Workplace Visit*

In Japan, additionally, we held an online workplace visit. We held a Zoom meeting that featured three employment leaders, Sapporo Challenged, Social Good Roasters Chiyoda, and Odamaki Koubou, as good examples of workplaces for persons with disabilities. In Japan, Sapporo Challenged encourages people with disabilities to make use of computers to achieve their full potential. Social Good Roasters Chiyoda is located near the heart of Tokyo's coffee hub, Jimbocho. The cafe is staffed by baristas and roasters with disabilities. Odamaki Koubou is a welfare studio for people with disabilities. People who work in Odamaki Koubou weave bags and other decorative accessories. Each panelist joined the meeting from their workplace and introduced their job.

Students could see people, with disabilities, at work. They could ask questions about the essential skills of each worker. In this Zoom event, students were able to learn what the possible jobs they might have and skills they will need ~~in~~ for their future careers. This reinforces that students with disabilities can learn which skills are essential functions of a job through the internet.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of our project was to develop a new method of vocational education for students with disabilities in Japan, considering the differences in vocational perspective between the United States and Japan based on the differences in attitudes of people in both countries toward essential workers.

The results of this study indicate that the COVID-19 crisis made it difficult for students with disabilities to receive vocational education, but it made it possible to focus on

essential functions and the possibility to learn about the skills that are essential. Even if students cannot receive face-to-face vocational education, they can obtain practical work experience through online workplace visits. In Japan, there were organizations that utilized the concept of essential functions to enable people with disabilities to perform their abilities even if organizations' managers were not aware of it. Our study showed a new way to receive vocational education with a focus on essential functions online. It is unfortunate that our study did not include a large-scale study or quantitative data. More detailed analysis will be needed to come up with a complete solution to the vocational education crisis.

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