

## Impact Objectives

- Gain insights into how educational practices should be designed and produced within the framework of policies and institutions
- Find an effective pedagogical method for learners to learn
- Identify a learning environment that fosters and promotes the learning of 'deliberation' in terms of institutional design and policy formation

# The importance of a Kominkan learning centre

Associate Professor Tomoko Sato is a passionate advocate for the importance of lifelong learning and her research reflects this. She talks about what she is hoping to achieve through her work and some of the results she has gathered so far



Can you briefly talk about how you came to be interested in education research?

When I was a university student,

I realised that school problems could not be solved by school alone, and that the concept of 'lifelong learning' that I learned at home and university was the most effective idea for designing a better educational system and environment. When I was in high school, my father, who worked in education administration, introduced me to the concept of lifelong learning. When I was about to go to university, he reminded me that college was just a passing phase and choosing the right career was important - one that aligned with my interests. This set me on the path to understanding how best to encourage lifelong learning.

What was your experience when entering the field?

When I was studying for my doctorate, the idea of privatisation and new public management, which was modelled on British and American policies, was spreading in Japan. At that time, Japanese pedagogy was predominantly interpretive and normative, based on laws and regulations, but a younger generation of researchers were actively beginning to conduct empirical

research, and I consider my time as a graduate student to be a period of change in that research world. Under such circumstances, I was fortunate to receive support and opportunities from several researchers who were senior to me and, thanks to them, I was able to enter the field and attempt to tackle these issues.

Can you tell us what you are hoping to achieve through your current work?

I would like to achieve democracy as a way of life rather than as a political decision-making process. Many local governments in Japan are now promoting regional development based on self-government. Self-governance means to be involved in the decisions that affect our lives. But in reality, we are not involved in many of the decisions related to ourselves. This is because the head and the legislators of the state or municipality make the decisions. We do actually elect them as our representatives, but the current national and local governments have become too big for us to feel that our voices are reflected in politics.

In my doctoral dissertation, I have examined lifelong learning and social education policy from the perspective of public administration and sociology. In reflection after writing it, I found it was insufficient from an educational and practical perspective. However, in recent years, I

have gained insights into how educational practices should be designed and produced within the framework of policies and institutions.

What are you hoping to focus on in the future?

I have two main focuses at the moment. From a pedagogical point of view, the first is to develop a method of communication that supports a democratic way of life and to find an effective pedagogical method for learners to learn it. To this end, I would like to summarise the theoretical significance of 'deliberation', not as a political institution (sometimes referred to as deliberative democracy), but as a capacity that constitutes a democratic way of life. The second is to find a certain learning environment that fosters and promotes the learning of 'deliberation' in terms of institutional design and policy formation. ●



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# Researching communities of social learning practice

A research project led by the Institute for Excellence in Higher Education at Tohoku University is focused on learning centres in Japan and how they impact on community governance

A Kominkan is a type of learning centre in Japan that generally came about in the wake of World War II. To this day, they play an important role in communities, with the centres conducting a range of activities related to education and culture. Associate Professor Tomoko Sato of Tohoku University's Center for Learning Support explains that the idea of Kominkan was basically the national government-sponsored project, but also many Kominkans were voluntarily built by citizens in response to the government's call. 'Therefore, it has long been a major academic issue as to who is responsible for its operation, whether it is a government or a citizen,' she highlights. 'As the idea is that Kominkans belong to citizens, there are regulations and legislation

the first Kominkan that was put together by Mr Teranaka, who was a bureaucrat in the Ministry of Education,' observes Sato. 'Then, the focus was on how to achieve democracy in Japan and enrich politics, economics and life in a democratic way. A Kominkan is not just an adult version of a school, such as an elementary or high school - a Kominkan is a hub of social learning and integrated education for everyone, including children to adults.'

The research has been looking at the process of how community governance is determined and has focused on the fact that there are two main forms: top-down and bottom-up. While in the past Japan was more centralised, decentralisation has

responsibility for his or her own life, can choose their own direction they want their life to go, and can live a satisfying life,' enthuses Sato. 'We want every individual to be able to be given the same opportunities and environments - to achieve this, education is the most important thing.' The findings from the research have many implications, both directly and indirectly, for all those involved in actual local government policy and social learning practices. ●

*A Kominkan is not just an adult version of a school, such as an elementary or high school - a Kominkan is a hub of integrated education for everyone*

that ensure that Kominkans cannot be used for the main purpose of profit or for specific political party and religion groups.'

In the decades since World War II, college enrolment rates across Japan have risen significantly, leading many to question why Kominkans are necessary in modern times. If Kominkans were just schools for adults who could not have any opportunities at universities, it means that its role would have been almost already over. Now the study is attempting to understand the role of Kominkan and what kind is needed in the 21st century.

## HUB OF SOCIAL LEARNING AND INTEGRATED EDUCATION

Sato has a keen interest in the concept of lifelong learning. She believes that Kominkan is not only a public facility but also some necessary function within the democratic society. It has a role to play in today's society, but that a return to what they were originally conceived to be is necessary. 'I keep returning to the idea surrounding

been actively promoted in the past couple of decades. 'Even so, schools have the national curriculum guidelines, and what and how children learn are determined by the government,' outlines Sato. 'In a Kominkan, however, all people are free to learn anything they need for their life, either independently or in collaboration with others.'

## NOBLE ENDEAVOURS

The ultimate aim of Sato's work is admirable to say the least. 'My work aims to create a society where every individual can take



Deliberation workshop with a school and their community members

## Project Insights

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### COLLABORATORS

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### CONTACT

Associate Professor Tomoko Sato

T: +81 22 795 4965

E: sato-t@tohoku.ac.jp

### BIO

Dr Tomoko Sato completed her PhD in Education at The University of Tokyo in 2012. She has worked as an Associate Professor, Institute for Excellence in Higher Education (IEHE), Tohoku University since 2016, and is the Vice Director at the University's Center for Learning Support.

