Teachers' Understanding of Ethical Issues that Arise in Online Education Settings: A Report

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Abstract— Popularity of Online classes has increased globally. Specially the global pandemic (COVID-19) has increased their necessity. However, understanding of ethical issues that arise in relation to online classes is and should be of a concern. This paper reports an assessment of teachers' understanding of ethical issues that arise in online classes. The assessment was done by collecting written responses from teachers that were attendants of a brief intensive lecture regarding the issue. Unfortunately, teachers' understanding of ethical issues that arise in online classes was found to be less than satisfactory. The teachers' responses to the question "How ethical issues that arise in class room classes differ from those that arise in online classes" were too. Their responses basically state that all stakeholders should act in a responsible and ethical manner based on their innate good character. Therefore, this work shows us that work needs to be done in order to make players in online education have sufficient knowledge on the ethical issues that arise in relation to online classes.

Keywords— Ethical issues, online, education, rules, morals.

I. INTRODUCTION

On December 31-2019, from Wuhan City - Hubei Province - China, a new coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) as an outbreak of pneumonia epidemic which its cause was unknown [1]. One month later, on January 30, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a "Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)" according to the International Health Regulations [2]. In response to this decision, on February 25, 2020, Japan's the new Coronavirus Epidemic Disease Control Headquarters Announced the ``Basic Policy for Countermeasures against the New Coronavirus epidemic" [3]. After the announcement, MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) ordered educational institutions of all levels to respond accordingly [4]. However, this was to be done while still continuing to provide education service to students. Schools were required to do a balancing act of reducing exposure to the virus while keeping school going.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), based on documents such as "Utilization of Online Education in Educational Settings" (compiled on March 29, 2021), and the notification from the Higher Education Bureau Director regarding the handling of remote classes at universities (dated April 2, 2021), updated the "Q&A on the Handling of Academic Calendars and the Utilization of Remote Classes at Universities and Colleges of Technology" and issued administrative instructions to universities on May 14, 2022. They summarized specific examples of methods and forms of implementation of remote classes.

In particular MEXT prescribes that a portion of students to take class face to face while others followed online. However, this was to be done with the requirement that a student should take more than half of the class (in the course of a semester) face to face. The sum of class hours a student takes online should not exceed fifty percent of the total class hours for that particular class[7]. In cases where a student has an underlying medical condition, etc. and is unable to attend half or more of the classes face-to-face, the directive states that ``the student can take the entire class remotely"[7].

Given this social background, students from elementary, junior high, and high schools, as well as university students, have had their school attendance restricted. Each school is conducting online learning, defined as "conducting educational activities using devices connected to the Internet. Specifically, this is to be done by using electronic devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, and video conferencing services". Efforts have been made to implement remote classes with ingenuity.

Online learning hence hereafter refers to: "using devices connected to the Internet to provide and get education". Specifically, it refers to teaching and learning conducted via the Internet using electronic devices such as computers, tablets, and smartphones. Classes are conducted using video calling services etc. [8].

There are three types of online classes.
1. Collaborative type: Provides opportunities for interaction between students and teachers. (of course students and teachers are located in separate locations) and also enable having group discussions.
2. Specialist type: Classes given by experts such as ALTs (assistant foreign language teachers) and external lecturers. Usually these are used for learning highly specialized content that is not available at a given school.
3. Individual type: Online classes that are similar to one-on-one tutorial sessions that are conducted for students who require individual attention. Such as those who are absent from school due to illness.

However, new problems that were not existent in class room classes surfaced. It turns out that many students were attending the classes wearing pajamas and lying on their beds. Some were attending class while shopping at convenience

stores, dinning in family restaurants, ridding in private cars or trains taking leisure trips. Students after turning their camera off go about other activities like sleeping, or moving but while still appearing as if they are attending the class [9][10][11][12].

This paper presents results from discussions regarding online classes. The discussion was held by a group of attendees of a teacher training program. Questions to be answered individually or in groups were raised. The questions mainly focused on ethical issues to consider in online classes. The discussion is given by a professional on the topic (ethics in education). The next two chapters discuss ethical issues in class room classes and in online classes. Chapters 4 and 5 present what ordinary teachers' understanding of ethical issues in classes look like. The last chapter summarizes the paper.

II. ETHICAL ISSUES IN CLASSROOM CLASSES

Schools (kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, compulsory education schools, high schools, secondary education schools, special needs schools, universities and technical colleges) are regulated by the School Education Law.

However, there are no direct laws that handle students in the Education Law. There are specific laws regarding teachers (Article 9), there are laws for legal representatives, school workers and other entities (Article 144), but there are no specific laws for students. Hence, students are regulated and abide by school regulations. And yet, there are some elementary schools that don't even have school regulations.

However, there is unbalanced teacher to student and students to students power distribution. In teacher to student relations this is expressed in the forms of corporal punishment, and other violations that go beyond scope of school regulations. Cases which go beyond the scope of school regulations and should potentially be treated as criminal or civil are not few. Among students, there is an informal hierarchical structure called school caste (Figure 1). It is common for upper caste members to bully and abuse lower castes.
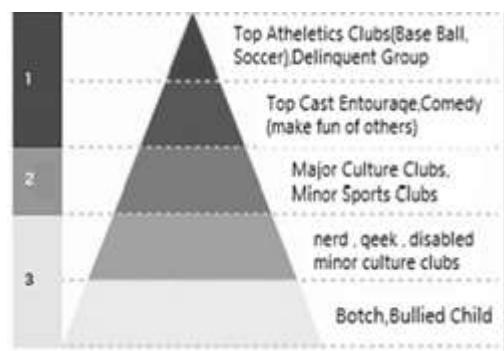

Fig. 1. School caste structure

Therefore, when it comes to schools, it seems correct not to emphasize on laws and regulations, but on developing students' and teachers' moral judgments (aptitudes).

A. Corporal punishment

Article 11 of the School Education Law clearly prohibits corporal punishment. However, MEXT states that judgments on wheatear a disciplinary act consists of a corporal punishment should be done on a case by case basis [3]. Place, time and other conditions in which the act was carried out should be taken into consideration. Other factors such as age, health and mental or physical development of the student are also used in determining whether a disciplinary action was a case of corporal punishment or not.

B. Sexual Harassment

Sexual Harassment is taking advantage of one's position in exchange for sexual favors which are then paid back in "compensations" such as good grades or successfully graduating. There are many cases where faculty and staff members who are perpetrators of sexual harassment are not aware that their words and actions constitute sexual harassment. Sometimes victims do not show resistance or complain outwardly since usually such harassment comes from their superiors. Even in the absence of complaints such acts can become so disturbing that it is difficult for any onlooker to justify them as another thing but harassment.

C. Bullying

Bullying (punching, kicking, forcing people to do disgusting or embarrassing things, forcibly taking money and goods by threatening, and posting a defamatory content on social media etc.) often is carried out behind the scenes without the knowledge of teachers and parents, and when it is finally exposed, it is often too late.

Bullying seriously infringes on the right of children and students to education. It has a serious impact on the sound growth of their mind, body and the formation of their personality. It has been pointed out as having adverse effects on the development of students social skills. It also causes decline in self-esteem, and motivation to learn. In some cases may cause serious danger to the life or body of the child.

III. ETHICAL ISSUES IN ONLINE CLASSES

Many universities and educational institutions have their own definition of information ethics when administering online classes. Information ethics defines rules and regulations used to govern creation, organization, dissemination, and use of information. For example, Iwate Prefectural University's information ethics document titled "Points to note when taking online classes" [14] talks about information ethics and copyright related issues. Also, it encourages the use of good sense when carrying out actions.

Similarly, Kyushu Institute of Technology also prohibits students from giving away class URLs, IDs, passwords, etc., and from sharing recordings of online classes [15].It also clearly states that violators will be subjected to disciplinary actions as per the university's rules.

Many universities have published similar content on their websites and other sites, urging cautions when dealing with information found in online classes. In addition, many universities are calling attention to copyright protection of lecture materials used in online classes and to regulate acts that happen in SNSs (Social Networking Service).

In these ways, universities are developing and disseminating their own rules to all participants of the education system.

In a survey done at Nagoya University of foreign studies in the 2020 academic year titled "Survey and Analysis of the Status of Online Classes" [16], there was a question asking participants regarding challenges faced when taking the online classes.

According to that table 49% of respondents have found communication with others to be difficult, 38% of the respondents pointed out that students get less chance to speak, 34 % have commented on inability to control students' concentration. Whispers from students are usually heard, and arguably many students are engaged in unrelated matters during class. Therefore, teachers are requesting control of cameras and microphones of students. There are also concerns of violation of participants' privacy rights concerning pictures taken and videos recorded when online classes are being conducted. Unlike face to face classes, online classes enable participants to take pictures and make recordings unnoticed.

According to Matsumoto et al. [17] the following three points are important considerations to make for smoothly managing online classes while taking special care for the protection of privacy rights of participants:

(1) Sharing and publishing class videos should be done within a reasonable time (sharing of videos is especially important to help students that missed class catch up. Also, watching a lecture video repeatedly can help students understand the study material better).

(2) During class sessions individuals have easy access to take pictures and videos of participants, and hence students should be allowed to turn off their camera.

(3) Set up of a help desk or office for responding to complaints of students. For example, to handle report of cases of violation of privacy rights.

The Japan constitution Article 13 states that "All citizens should be respected as individuals". However, it does not explicitly state about privacy rights. For example, the privacy right concerning photographic pictures of an individual. The right of the people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness of individuals is given the utmost respect in the constitution. That is, however, as long as exercising this right does not infringe upon the public welfare and other individuals rights. Therefore, a well-functioning information ethics regarding the conduct of online classes can be reached at by balancing the peoples' right "for the pursuit of happiness... "And respecting others rights, freedoms etc.

IV. ETHICS IN ONLINE CLASSES AS UNDERSTOOD BY STUDENTS IN THE TEACHER TRAINING COURSE : FROM THE RESPONSES TO THE INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

Next, we asked each individual to think about ``ethics in online classes'' and summarize their opinions in an open-ended format. The first task/question was: ``Please clearly explain the difference between classroom classes and remote classes." Excerpts from some of the students' submissions include: "There's a difference in the mood when there is a teacher standing in front of me and when there is not."(Student A),"in class room classes a student's actions are easily noticed, his mood can also be read...however, in online classes the student has more freedom to act as he likes."(Student B),"online classes are convenient, there is no need to travel back and forth to school, this saves a lot of time."(Student C),"there is a difference in the feeling of taking the classes. Online class feels like I am the only one taking the class; just me and the teacher. In classroom class there is a feeling of being in a group. Students can draw energy from each other."(Student D), "In classrooms one can learn much more than a subject; for example things related to lifestyle. There is also a sense of community. "I think online classes are ideal for focusing only on learning the subject". (Student E),"Class room classes are direct, online are indirect. Class room classes are active, online classes are passive, online classes are interactive, class room classes are one sided."(Student F),"In class room classes there is a sense that teachers and students are working together to accomplish learning; students can exchange ideas and ask questions on the spot; Online classes create a sense of the teacher is just teaching to me. ". (Student G)," In class, you can read other people's expressions and moods. The class is a collaboration of the teachers and students. Online classes are just like the individual study sessions in cram schools. In online classes, student's with less skill of communication will find it more convenient to ask questions."(Student H). Although all of the students' opinions posted here are understandable to some extent, Student G's opinion is closer to the authors' thoughts.

The next question was, "Please write down any ethical considerations to be taken when online classes are conducted.". The responses were the following:" As long as it does not interfere with class one can attend in any way he want (cloth choice, location, way of sitting)" (Student A), "The location a student takes class should be a place where there are no interferences." (Student B), and "regarding turning camera on and off. During class it must be on. " (Student C), "Camera should always be turned on with the face of student visible at all times" (Student D), "Even if one is faithfully listening to the class content, he must keep the camera turned on so that not to encourage others to turn off their cameras and start doing other things like play games. " (Student E)," Create an environment where everyone can concentrate, decide on the rules on how to conduct the classes beforehand, create for oneself an environment to follow class undisturbed " (Student F), "Children will always find ways to cheat out of class. So it is impossible to enforce rules. Instead teachers should revise their teaching method in order to create interesting and captivating content." (Student G) "It is one's own choice whether to attend a class or not. Also, it is ok to eat or drink during class as long as this does not bother others" (Student H) and "Just like classroom classes, do not do things that disturb or distract others" (Student I).

As shown, there are a variety of responses regarding ethical consideration to make when conducting online classes. However, the responses are more related to rules to be applied when conducting distance classes, rather than ethical considerations that were desired to be discussed here. It seems the respondents don't clearly differentiate between rules and

morals.

V. ETHICS IN ONLINE CLASSES AS UNDERSTOOD BY STUDENTS IN THE TEACHER TRAINING COURSE : FROM THE RESPONSES OF THE GROUP WORK

In August 2023, an intensive lecture to students in teacher training program was given. In the training a 30 minutes discussion was done on the question: "How ethical issues that arise in class room classes differ from those that arise in online classes". The number of students enrolled in this class was 14, they were divided into groups of 4 or 5. The sitting arrangement of the students is as shown in Fig. 2 (○△□ depict the students).
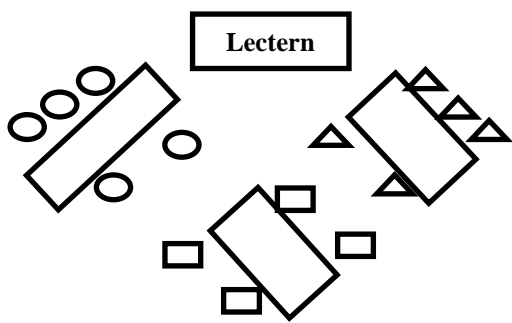

Fig. 2. Arrangement of desks and students during group work

Fig. 3, 4, and 5 show the result of discussion of group 1, group 2 and group 3 respectively. From professional point of view, it can be said that the knowledge of the students regarding ethical issues in school and classes is somewhat limited.

When the points each group has compiled are looked at, one will notice that none of them are related to the group work question, which was: "How ethical issues that arise in class room classes differ from those that arise in online classes".

Group 1 (Figure 3) Lists out the characteristics of class room classes and online classes. They describe what it feels like to take such classes. However, when it comes to addressing ethical issues they cut the discussion short by simply making statements like: "teachers should keep their morals; teachers should be role models in this aspect (ethical), show love to students.... ".

However, the group's discussion should have started by answering the question "what are the ethical issues to consider in classes". Instead the discussion has jumped towards making generalized statements like "teachers should observe their morals".

Group 2 made points like: "Don't do malice (bad things)","Do not disturb others or the learning environment" etc. However, like group 1 they have failed to define what ethical issues - with regards to class room or online ones - in the first place are. Therefore, their response is as ambiguous and unrelated to the main discussion matter as group 1.

Group 3 (Fig. 5) begin with the question, ``What are ethical issues in class?" and define it. According to them, being ethical means "creating an environment where students tolerate and even support each other ".

Since "ethics" is a very ambiguous concept, their intention to start with a definition of it is commendable. But they have not differentiated between ethical issues in classes and those in online classes. Their conclusions therefore are incomplete.
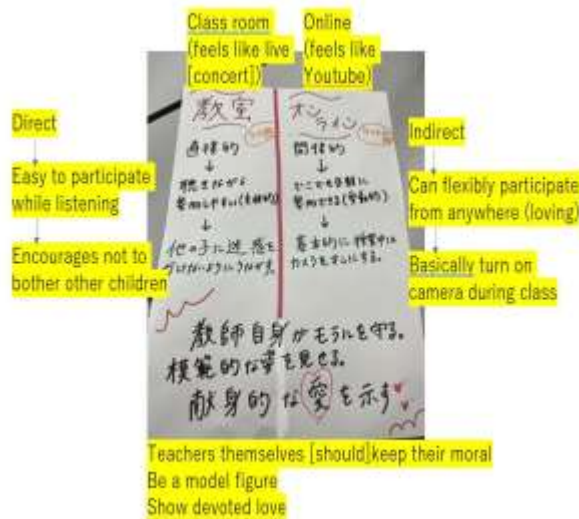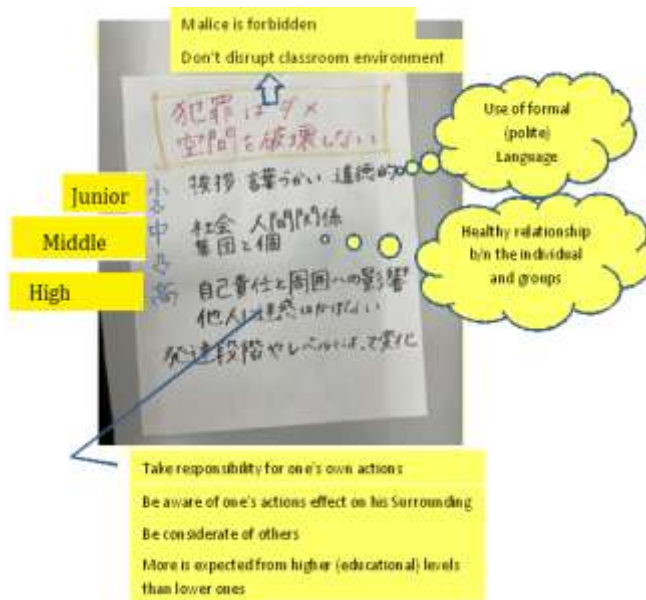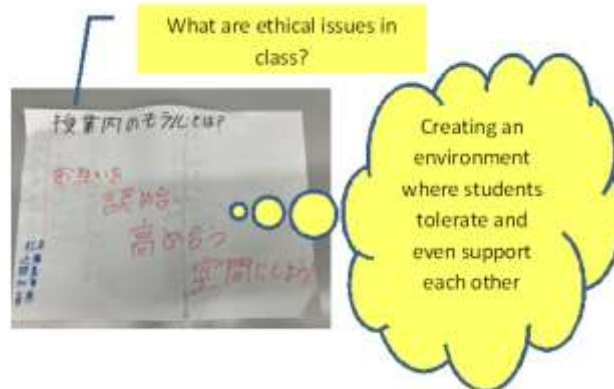

Fig. 3. Discussion Summary of group 1

Fig. 4. Discussion summary of group 2

Fi. 5. Discussion Summary of group 3

From the responses, it can be seen that, at least for the students who participated in this lecture, before considering ethical issues in on online learning they need to have clear understanding of ethical issues generally in schools and also basic understanding of the concept of ethics.

VI. CONCLUTION

In this paper we have discussed ethical issues that arise in classroom classes and online classes. Ethical issues in the classroom include corporal punishment, harassment and bullying. Online courses are subject to privacy and copyright violations.

However, the result from the small discussion group presented in the paper show that the standard teacher does not have clear understanding and definition of ethical issues that arise in online classes. When it comes to online learning there seem to be a strong tendency to depend upon good sense rather than having clearly defined ethical standards.

It's concerning to note that students have been observed acting irresponsibly during online classes. With control over their own cameras, they have the freedom to behave in various ways while appearing to attend the class.

Generally, rather than totally relying on the good sense of students and teachers, it is better for the education law to be made to have more impact on the day to day running of classes. This is so that students can have a fun and meaningful experience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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