

Iryna Pidkurkova

Department of Sociology and Political Sciences, Yaroslav Mudryi National Law University, Kharkiv, Ukraine

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4797-3718>

 podkurkovairina@gmail.com

THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL SELECTION IN THE SYSTEM OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CONDITIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING (THROUGH THE PRISM OF PITRIM SOROKIN'S THEORY OF SOCIAL MOBILITY)

PROBLEM SELEKCJI SPOŁECZNYCH W SZKOLNICTWIE WYŻSZYM W WARUNKACH KSZTAŁCENIA NA ODLEGŁOŚĆ (W ODNIESIENIU DO TEORII RUCHLIWOŚCI SPOŁECZNEJ PITRIMA SOROKINA)

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Abstract:

During the coronavirus pandemic, distance learning does not properly perform such important function of higher education as social selection. This is illustrated through the prism of Pitrim Sorokin's theory of social mobility. One of the provisions of this theory assumes that school (educational institution) is a social elevator through which there is an upward movement, and that due to the social functions of school (testing, selection, distribution) processes such as selection of best, most skilled, or talented individuals and their promotion take place. Distance education in modern Ukrainian version makes openings of the social "sieves" too large. So, firstly, not only best and most capable ones can go through them. Secondly, such system of education can lead to improper acquisition of knowledge by the students.

Keywords:

social selection, social sieve, social mobility, social functions of education, distance learning.

Abstrakt:

W okresie pandemii koronawirusa poprzez wprowadzenie kształcenia zdalnego osłabiona została funkcja selekcyjna szkolnictwa wyższego. Zostało to zobrazowane poprzez odwołanie się do teorii mobilności społecznej Pitrima Sorokina. Teoria ta zakłada, że szkoła (instytucja edukacyjna) jest społeczną windą, dzięki której następuje ruch w górę. Szkoła pełni funkcje selekcyjne (testowanie, selekcja). Dzięki tym procesom następuje selekcja najlepszych, którzy mają największe osiągnięcia, są najbardziej utalentowani i mają największe szanse na sukces. Kształcenie na odległość we współczesnej ukraińskiej szkole sprawia, że otwory w selekcyjnym „sicie” są zbyt duże. Po pierwsze, mogą przez nie przejść nie tylko najlepsi i najzdolniejsi. Po drugie, taki system edukacji może prowadzić do niewłaściwego przyswajania wiedzy przez uczniów.

Słowa kluczowe:

selekcja społeczna, sito społeczne, mobilność społeczna, społeczne funkcje edukacji, kształcenie na odległość.

Problem Setting

The coronavirus, which has caused one of the largest epidemics of modern times, not only damages people's physical health, but also affects development of all spheres of society. Countries are forced to look for optimal ways and take certain measures to maintain proper functioning of political, economic, social, or legal system. Such ways and measures have been introduced in the field of education, including higher education. In Ukraine, the answer to the challenge of spread of the disease and the need to "keep the distance" was distance learning introduced in higher education institutions. But first steps in the application of this form of education showed that our education system was not technically, methodically, and organizationally ready for this. How to present material, which platforms to use, how to evaluate the work of students – this is not a complete list of problems faced by the higher education system. This situation may negatively affect the quality of socio-professional structure in some future.

When analyzing modern problems of education, we often turn to the classics of sociology. It is in their theories where we find explanations and answers to current problems. Ideas of social selection in education from the theory of social mobility of famous sociologist Pitirim Sorokin can help to find out what can be results of the distortion and improper performance of education or its functions in the future.

Analysis of scientific literature proves that the problem of social selection is quite relevant. From a theoretical standpoint, Meiyao Wu's work *Education and Social Selection in Ancient China: Semantics, Conceptual Transformation and Social Change* (2015) seems interesting. It examines transformation of the concept of education in the Zhou dynasty of China, as for the process of social selection, which concerns distribution of both

knowledge and social ranks. The research showed that the semantics of education was closely tied to changing principles of social selection and changing Chinese cultural concept of Tian (Heaven).

The theory of cultural and social selection of Walter Garrison Runciman (1998) deserves special attention. He proposes a concept of three levels of selection which correspond to three types of social behaviour of modern man. This is, firstly, the level of natural selection, which is related to genetics. Secondly, the level of cultural selection that is associated with acquired behaviour. Thirdly, the level of social selection that is associated with "imposed" behaviour. Runciman also makes two interrelated hypotheses – qualitative change is an integral part of an object of selection, and possibility of selection depends on characteristics of environment.

The starting points of the theory of social selection are found in the works of Pitirim Sorokin. Analyses of his scientific legacy are in the works of Dmitry Uzlaner and Kristina Stoeckl (2017), Emiliana Mangone (2018), Valentina Chepak (2012). Thus, Uzlaner and Stoeckl (2017) consider Sorokin's legacy in four aspects: his emphasis on values, his notion of "sensate culture", his ideas about family, and his vision for moral revival. Emiliana Mangone (2018) critically analyzes Sorokin's theories: cultural dynamics; relationship between culture, society, and personality; social mobility; and socio-cultural causality of time and space. She notes that these theories are relevant in contemporary cultural contexts. Valentina Chepak (2012) considers possibilities of using Sorokin's ideas concerning education, social mobility, and selection in modern realities

The purpose of the article is based on the provisions of Sorokin's theory of social mobility to find out what problems of modern (emergency) version of distance learning may have an impact on proper performance of social selection function by educational institutions.

Provisions on Social Selection in the Theory of Social Mobility of Pitirim Sorokin

The basis of Sorokin's theory of social mobility is the position that between strata of society there are certain "holes", "stairs", or "elevators", which allow individuals to move up or down from one stratum to another (Sorokin, 1992). In other words, a person who is in one or another social stratum has an opportunity to change his or her social status or position in social hierarchy.

According to Sorokin, functions of social circulation are performed by various social institutions, among which school (educational institution) plays an important role. In societies where schools are accessible to all their members (in other words – in democratic societies), education system is a "social elevator" that allows a person to move from the very bottom to the very top.

Sorokin notes that in any society there is a special mechanism that controls the process of vertical circulation. This control consists, firstly, in **testing** individuals to establish their adequate performance of social functions; secondly, in **selection** of individuals for certain social positions; thirdly, in appropriate **distribution** of members of society in different social strata, in their promotion or degradation. Thus, the researcher understands social selection as social sorting of individuals within groups and strata of society: prevention or rejection of unsuitable, and, on the contrary, selection of proper individuals. It means that within a stratified society there are not only channels of vertical stratification, but there is also a kind of "sieve" that sifts individuals and determines them to have a certain place in society.

What is worth mentioning, Sorokin admits that usually the main social function of school (educational institution) is transfer of a certain set of knowledge to a student, and correction of his or her behaviour. But the fundamental social function of school is not only to find out whether the student has mastered knowledge given to him/

her or not but, above all, to determine through examinations and observations who is talented and who is not, who has certain abilities, how they are manifested, which of them are socially and morally significant. In general, the whole system of education with its obstacles, barriers, observations, with gradual progress is a rather complex "sieve" that separates "the capable" individuals from "the incapable" ones.

Sorokin's ideas are quite relevant even nowadays. Modern institutions of higher education use testing, selection, and distribution mechanisms to promote members of society on the social ladder. Thus, to enter a higher education institution applicants take an external independent evaluation test (which acts as a "sieve" through which those interested can rise to the first step of higher education) and, while studying, receive certain points and grades that differentiate students by knowledge and abilities. They also take exams, undergo internships, acquire one or another degree of professional skills, etc. As a result, some students drop out on the way while the rest of their colleagues get a bachelor's degree. But thanks to democracy of higher education, many students have an opportunity to obtain a master's degree (after passing appropriate levels of selection and testing). And these are usually the most enduring, the most diligent, the most capable, and generally the best students of their group.

Problems of Modern Higher Education in the Conditions of the Pandemic

The year 2020 made some adjustments to this selection system. Forced transition to the distance education system, caused by the coronavirus, made it clear that there were certain problems that affected functioning of education system as a whole and the performance of its functions.

As justly noted by Charles Hodges, Stephanie Moore, Barb Lockee, Torrey Trust, and Aaron

Bond (2020), effective online learning is the result of careful scheduling and training planning with the use of a systematic model for design and development that includes not only instructions how to define contents and what is necessary to cover, but also careful attention to the way of supporting different types of interaction important for the education process. The time to plan, prepare and develop a fully interactive university course is usually from six to nine months before the time to launch. In case of the pandemic, the time to plan, prepare, and develop changed to a period from one day to several weeks. Thus, training in a hurry, with minimal resources and lack of time, may be set as emergency remote teaching (ERT). The authors define emergency remote teaching as a temporary one, and as an alternative educational mode caused by the crisis circumstances. The main goal of these circumstances is not to recreate a solid educational ecosystem, but rather to provide temporary access to training and educational support in a way it can be quickly installed and also constantly available during case of emergency or crisis. A quick approach to ERT, however, may degrade the quality of the courses to be conducted (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT assessment is to be focused more on context, input data, and process elements than on product (training). Everyone involved in this abrupt transition to online teaching/learning needs to understand that these crises and disasters also create disturbances in the lives of students, faculty, and staff.

In the view of Gloria Tam and Diana El-Azar (2020), new solutions for education system (caused by the coronavirus, the pandemic, and the need to move to distance education) may bring much-needed innovations but at the same time, taking into account digital divide, new developments in approach to education increase the gap of participants equality in educational process. Thus, scientists noted that “COVID-19 has become a catalyst for educational institutions worldwide to search for innovative solutions in a relatively short period of time” (the emergence

of interactive applications, access to training materials via live TV broadcasts, etc.; Tam, El-Azar, 2020). Also, as the authors point, this situation launched “learning consortiums and coalitions taking shape, with diverse stakeholders – including governments, publishers, education professionals, technology providers, and telecom network operators – coming together to utilize digital platforms as a temporary solution to the crisis” (Tam, El-Azar, 2020). However, quality of education largely depends on level and quality of digital access. Many students in less developed countries are focused on lessons and tasks sent via tools such as social media, WhatsApp, or email. Besides, obstacles to high-quality education with digital technology may impact students’ wellbeing with regard to costs of digital devices and rates schedule.

Talking about positive and challenging aspects of distance education in the context of the pandemic, Steve Brammer and Timothy Clark note that “COVID-19 led to significant innovation in our universities regarding the processes and timetables of academic governance” and that “these innovations in normal academic processes introduced considerably greater agility and capacity for innovation into our courses and programmes” (2020). Moreover, the authors emphasize that professors/tutors have to adapt to the new circumstances and the susceptibility of scientific and educational communities to experiment with new ways to participate in teaching and research. However, Brammer and Clark admit that “the pandemic has necessitated the largest and quickest transformation of pedagogic and assessment practice ever seen in contemporary universities” and that these issues “put pressure on institutional systems of quality assurance and governance as well as increasing workload for faculty and professional staff” (2020). In turn, students are concerned about how current situation may affect their training, evaluation, organizing internships, international study tours, and exchanges.

Risks of distance education in pandemic conditions are also mentioned by Dmitriy A. Shtykhno, Larisa V. Konstantinova, and Nikolay N. Gagiev (2020). Along with advantages of online education (potentially high degree of individualization, variability of education in terms of content, presentation of material, and certification), the authors admit that there is a number of problems that many universities have experienced due to the pandemic. Among them we may find: instrumental tool set of problems (technical equipment of universities and home gadgets, stability of the Internet connection), methodological block (the need to methodically reformat educational materials, “to upload” them into a new remote format), psychological block associated with the problem of interpersonal interaction between students and professors/tutors. The scientists also talk about risks associated with already existing distance education model. These are: the risk of increasing educational inequality, growing under the influence of digital divide; the risk of overstrain both of students and professors/tutors (in remote mode that has a negative impact on their social psychological, and physical state); the risk of degradation of education’s quality.

In Ukraine, in reaction to the coronavirus, the Ministry of Education and Science announced that the transition to distance learning should ensure permanency/incassancy of educational process and at the same time observe the rules and act in accordance with all circumstances associated with the pandemic (see Letter from the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2020).

Numerous empirical studies made it available to identify advantages and problem areas in implementation of emergency remote teaching. Thus, in April and May 2020, State Service of Education Quality of Ukraine conducted an anonymous survey among professors/tutors and students of higher education institutions (see Information and Analytical Report, 2020). The above-mentioned state organization concluded that professors/tutors and students almost

unanimously identified the most important advantages of distance learning: flexibility in choosing the most convenient conditions (place and time), development of theoretical material on various online platforms, and individualization of learning. Among factors that negatively affect the quality of distance learning technologies and lead, in particular, to a low level of student involvement in learning and also prevent professors/tutors to provide quality educational services, the respondents included: problems of uninterrupted Internet access, lack of necessary equipment and skills, or lack of self-organization. In addition, both the students and the professors/tutors who took part in the survey emphasized the problem of lack of live contact, irregular communication, which can be, among other things, caused by biased evaluation.

Nataliya Vasilieva (2020) also writes about the problems of insufficient self-organization of students. In particular, the author notes here following existing difficulties: lack of desire to learn at a distance, lack of basic knowledge for distance learning in chosen specialty, insufficient recommendations of professors/tutors on distance learning tasks, lack of time to prepare for distance learning, etc. Difficulties of students’ self-organization were connected not only with lack of necessary experience of independent educational work, but also with issues of organizational-pedagogical and information-communication support of distance learning. These aspects include: difficult identification of participants in educational process, low quality of the Internet connection, and lack of direct contact between professors/tutors and students, which makes it difficult to share experiences and solve educational problems (Vasilieva, 2020).

According to the results of another survey taken among students of Ukrainian universities (Moroz et al., 2020), main advantages and disadvantages of distance learning were easily identified. As the respondents mentioned, advantages included opportunity to study at a comfortable

pace, ability to master curriculum at a convenient time and in a comfortable environment, providing an individual approach, etc. On the other hand, disadvantages of distance form of education mentioned in the survey were: imperfection of motivation system in the object of educational communication, insufficient level of self-organization and responsibility, imperfection of technology and methods of receiving/transmitting educational information (knowledge), learning outcomes assessment procedures, lack of ability to provide so-called living practice, and potential risk in unmistakable identification of the object of educational communication, especially during exams or current tasks.

Another survey on socio-economic issues during the coronavirus pandemic, conducted among students and professors/tutors of Ukrainian universities in March 2020 by H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University, identified main positive aspects and certain problems of distance education (Prokopenko, Berezhna, 2020). In the students' opinion, positive things are, for instance, development of discipline and self-organization and opportunity to receive education at a convenient time in a convenient place. Professors/tutors mention their new roles as mentors who coordinate the learning process, constantly improving their course as well as increasing their creativity and skills in line with innovation. At the same time, problematic issues became relevant – not all universities were technically prepared for distance learning. In addition, there are certain psychological problems – lack of live communication, significant increase in tasks, lack of time to complete them, and difficulties in individual counseling of students.

Problems that arise in the process of distance learning can lead to several interesting conclusions. Firstly, not only the most capable students but also those who are not endowed with the best knowledge and skills can get a university degree. Secondly, for various reasons universities can lose talented students. The result can be in the fact

that university graduates – potential future of professional structure of society – will not be able to perform their job functions properly.

Dictated by necessity, the emergency form of distance learning in the implementation process has shown a large number of problems that complicate selection and hinder its full implementation. Conventionally, these problems can be divided into technical, motivational, concerning integrity, communicational, and practical ones.

Technical problems include, firstly, different conditions of Internet access (today, unfortunately, not everyone has a stable Internet connection). Secondly, different capabilities of tools and devices with which online learning takes place (laptops, tablets or phones are not always equipped with necessary applications or have high quality of video and audio). There is also the problem of student identification – no video can call into question presence of a particular student on the other side of communication.

Technical problems can slightly change the selection according to the level of knowledge, and in learning process it is possible to “lose” talented students due to property selection or place of residence. At the same time, the problem of identification can facilitate the passage through the “sieve” of not only the best individuals.

The problem in this case may be willingness, ability, and desire of students to acquire knowledge remotely. Not every person can maintain motivation to study at home. The percentage of students who do not need this control is rather low. In addition, students have a temptation and enough opportunities for “dependent” learning. It is impossible to reliably control the observance of academic integrity during presenting homework or answering at classes (one can read directly from prepared material, so it is difficult to assess the depth of such response). The same goes for exams. It is not possible to reliably determine whether students passed the test on their own. To do this, they could use another person's (e.g. some more prepared student's) help. Thus, it is not only

a university's fulfillment of a fundamental social function – to find out whether this student has mastered the knowledge given to him/her or not, but also to identify real abilities of students, their social and moral qualities. The testing mechanism mentioned by Sorokin can “pass through the sieve” (2020) not only the worthy ones, but also those who tried to climb in dishonest ways.

Another consequence of distance education is also lack of social interaction, communication and discussion, which increases efficiency of learning process. Firstly, there is not enough communication with fellow students to share experiences. Secondly, direct contact between teacher and student is not sufficient enough. As a Japanese wisdom saying states, “one day of communication with a great teacher is better than 1000 days of hard studies”.

Due to communication, discussions, exchange of ideas and experiences, the functions of knowledge transfer and assimilation mentioned by Sorokin are carried out, and a professor/tutor has the role of a person who performs testing, selection, and determines abilities and talents of students.

Problems of distance learning concern also practical classes. Thus, laboratory work and industrial practices are somehow limited. In addition, not every profession can be mastered remotely (e.g. all medical professions). In this case, the process of testing, selection, and distribution (for suitable or not suitable to perform those or other practical functions) is much more complicated.

Conclusion

As Sorokin noted, social significance of educational institutions, which is constantly growing, opens up opportunities either to bring great public benefit (in case of proper organization) or great harm (in absence of such). The emergency form of distance education, which is currently used in the pandemic, is mostly focused on context and main components of learning process as

well as on its maintenance in a crisis situation. It has provided many advantages and has opened up new opportunities. At the same time, organized in a relatively short period, it identified a number of problems that may affect proper performance of education and its basic functions. Pitirim Sorokin's ideas concerning the role of school (university) in testing, selection, and distribution of individuals on the steps of the social hierarchy work in modern conditions. However, all of identified above organizational, technical, psychological, communicational, and other problems of modern emergency education have highlighted the risks associated with the fact that mechanisms for assessing abilities, capabilities and knowledge of students, adequate selection of the best and most capable and their distribution among different social groups may not work. The openings of the social “sieve” can become either too large and miss “the incapable ones” to perform certain social roles or, as in case of technical problems, “clog” and prevent “the capable ones”.

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