Understanding the Experiences of Mothers with Academic Socialization in South Korea: A Phenomenological Approach

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Accepted: 15 October 2022 / Published online: 7 November 2022
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Abstract
We explored academic socialization experiences of nine mothers in South Korea. Academic socialization has been defined as parents’ practices that transfer their educational expectations, values, and aspirations to their children (Hill, 2001). Adopting Giorgi’s phenomenological research method (1997), we interviewed nine mothers who had recently prepared their children to get into college. The interviews were focused on the ways in which they intervened in the academic process when their children were in high school. The data analysis proceeded along the four steps suggested by Giorgi (1997). The analysis resulted in the 12 constituents, which are the themes underlying the essential structure of the academic socialization experiences. The findings showed that during the academic socialization process, all participating mothers set high academic standards for their children. The mothers actively engaged in supporting their children through shadow education (i.e., supplementary private education) to strengthen their academic competitiveness. Further, the mothers found themselves competing with other mothers regarding the academic achievement of their children. The mothers rather than their children took initiatives for decision makings of academic matters. Some of their practices were noticed to have compromised the autonomy of their children. The mothers appeared to fulfill their needs that prove their self-worth by raising their children to be competent. The significance and implications of these results were discussed.

Keywords Academic socialization · Parental involvement · Shadow education · High school students · South Korea

Highlights
- Mothers’ practices of academic socialization in South Korea unfold under the cultural and societal contexts of educational zeal, competitive educational climate, and shadow education dependency.
- During the academic socialization process, mothers take initiatives to improve the academic rankings of their children and compromise their autonomy.
- Mothers frequently engage in competitions with other mothers regarding the academic performance of their children.
- Mothers believe that the essence of their role is providing best shadow education programs or tutors.

Academic socialization refers to parental practices that transfer the parents’ educational expectations, values, and aspirations to their children (Hill, 2001). Academic socialization has been found to have strong and positive effects on the academic outcomes of secondary education students (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Accordingly, academic socialization has been emphasized as a crucial tool that enhances students’ academic achievement (Bæck, 2017). One line of research has underscored the contextual factors such as cultural values and behavioral expectations that affect the practices of academic socialization among parents with diverse backgrounds (Keith & Lichtman, 1994; Yamamoto & Sonnenschein, 2016). Understanding the academic socialization process of South Korean parents might provide rich information about how contextual factors contribute to shaping the practices of academic socialization. The contextual factors include cultural and societal backgrounds,
The academic performance of South Korean students is renowned, as they are consistently ranked at the top of international assessments of math and science. South Korean students’ remarkable scores in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are often adduced to describe South Korea as a model of successful schooling (Kim, 2016; Park et al., 2011). Along with high academic performance, one distinctive feature of education in South Korea (hereafter Korea) is the parents’ educational zeal. Parents’ educational zeal refers to the dedicated pre-occupation of parents (especially mothers) with the schooling of their children. According to Seth (2002), parents’ educational zeal in Korea is the result of the complex interaction of traditional Confucian values and new egalitarian ideas brought from the West. Sorensen (1994) added that in the Korean context, this enthusiasm stems from the desire for upward mobility and social recognition.

Among Korean parents, educational zeal is the driving force behind their continuous and substantial investments in shadow education to boost their children’s academic achievement, according to Park et al. (2011). Shadow education is defined as private, supplementary academic lessons that occur outside of school (Bray, 2011).

The educational zeal of parents is an underlying cultural energy that affects various aspects of parents’ practices for academic socialization: very high parental aspirations for children’s achievement (Ellinger & Beckham, 1997; Rim, 2016; Zhao & Akiba, 2009); substantial spending on shadow education (Park et al., 2011); and personal networks pursued to find the best shadow education programs (Park et al., 2011). Furthermore, the conditions surrounding the Korean educational system seem to contribute to shaping parents’ practices. The conditions include strict implementation of norm-referenced evaluations and a very competitive climate in high schools (Chun et al., 2019), SES differences seen in educational attainment (Hollaway et al., 2016), intensified competition for elite university admissions (Hollaway et al., 2016), and a considerably large market for shadow education (Park et al., 2011).

Various attempts have been made to address parents’ excessive educational zeal and the competitive nature of the school system, focusing on educational policies and social inequality issues (Exley, 2020; Lee et al., 2019). However, few studies have addressed the psychological and educational meanings of individual mothers and children in Korea through the academic socialization framework. The extant literature appears to take a simple approach in conceptualizing academic socialization, focusing on its positive aspects to enhance educational aspiration. However, academic socialization involves complex psychological and educational issues. The current study sought to explore and understand the ways in which Korean mothers were involved in the academic socialization of their children. The emphasis on parents’ practice to transfer educational expectations and values fits the main tenet of academic socialization. Furthermore, it is expected that the various aspects of parents’ practices of academic socialization will be manifested through the experiences of mothers. By conducting in-depth interviews with mothers in Korea who had recently prepared their children for college application and admission, the current study aimed to understand mothers’ lived experiences of academic socialization. The phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1997) was employed to understand the essence of the mothers’ world of experiences to discover the meanings and crux of the phenomena.

### Academic Socialization as Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is defined as the parenting process by which parents interact with their children and/or educational institutions to support their children’s academic success (Cox, 2005; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Parental involvement can be differentiated in terms of its function: school-based parental involvement, home-based parental involvement, and academic socialization (Chun & Devall, 2019; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). School-based parental involvement refers to parenting behaviors consisting of direct involvement in the formal education of their children, which include communicating with teachers, attending parent-teacher meetings, volunteering, etc. Home-based parental involvement, on the other hand, refers to activities that support and promote learning outside of school, such as providing extracurricular activities (e.g., museum tours, cultural tours), creating a home learning environment, and providing resources to help with learning. Academic socialization indicates educational behaviors that parents adopt to communicate their beliefs, values, and expectations about education and to promote their children’s academic development and academic achievement (Hill, 2001).

Studies in recent decades have emphasized that academic socialization has positive effects on academic achievement among secondary students (Baeck, 2017; Hill & Tyson, 2009). For instance, Hill and Tyson (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of 50 studies addressing the aspects and effects of parental involvement in and on achievement outcomes. They reported that of the three forms of parental involvement, academic socialization had the strongest effect on academic achievement. Academic socialization includes parenting behaviors that communicate parental expectations for academic achievement, the transfer of parental values about education and parental desires for the children’s careers, and the ways in which parents engage in planning for their
children’s futures. When parents deliver their expectations, values, and desires for academic success, students are likely to personalize them, which plays an important role in their academic learning and performance (Chun & Devall, 2019).

**Previous Studies on Academic Socialization in Korea**

It might be helpful to provide relevant contextual components that have contributed to shaping academic socialization practices. As mentioned earlier, one overarching characteristic of Korean education is parents’ high expectations and zeal for the educational attainment of their children (Kim & Bang, 2017). Parents’ high expectations and heavy reliance on education could be attributed to several factors. First, it could be related to traditional Confucian values, which historically determined the nature of relationships among people. For example, parents were viewed as playing a sacrificial role in the lives of their children. Married women were more respected and valued when they had children, especially sons, in the traditional agricultural society, and rearing children was the most important role a woman could play (Kim et al., 2005). Since the 1960s, Korean society has undergone modernization, urbanization, and industrialization, which has caused many aspects of the economic, social, and cultural lives of Koreans to no longer fit with traditional Confucian values. However, the devotion and sacrifice of Korean parents for their children in modern society can still be partially traced back to traditional values.

Second, economic growth and social changes could have contributed to the perceived importance of education. The high returns of education revealed by changes in social status and income over the past six decades have made a clear case for the benefits of education, particularly for graduates from elite universities (Kim & Lee, 2010). Third, there has been a heavy dependency on shadow education in Korea. Private tutoring and supplemental academic lessons from private educational institutes are forms of shadow education. The continued imbalance between formal and shadow education could have contributed to parents’ academic socialization practices. For example, the participation rates and hours of participation per week in shadow education in 2019 were 83.5% and 6.8 h for elementary school students, 71.4% and 6.8 h for middle school students, and 61% and 5.7 h for high school students, respectively (KOSIS, 2019). Mothers begin to arrange various shadow education lessons for their children at young ages. These lessons typically begin with lessons in art and sports. Once children reach secondary education, the subjects of shadow education grow to include all academic matters, such as lessons for the Korean language, English language, math, and science. These supplemental instructional services are used to equip children with competitive records for entrance examinations for specialized high schools or elite universities. Many parents think that attending public school alone is insufficient to make their children competitive. Parents who want their children to be successful pursue excellent supplemental instructional services, which in turn, helps to create a competitive atmosphere among parents. Some researchers (Lee et al., 2018; Park, 2009; Son, 2009) have raised concerns about educational inequalities due to heavy reliance on shadow education. As greater economic resources allow students access to extra learning opportunities offered by shadow education, parental economic resources could function as a determinant of the academic success of children. The expenditure on shadow education has come to constitute a substantial component of family expenditures (Lee et al., 2019). It is necessary to consider societal and cultural backgrounds to understand mothers’ practices with academic socialization.

Few studies have been conducted to address parental intervention in Korean children’s academic achievement based on the framework of academic socialization. However, some studies have addressed topics relevant to academic socialization. One qualitative study by Lee et al. (2018) explored college students’ experiences of parents’ expectations and found that students perceived that parents insisted that their children follow their rules and that they were not allowed to make their own decisions. Lee et al. interpreted these findings to reflect parents’ tendencies to be overbearing with their children and identify their success with that of their children. Another study conducted by Park (2009) examined perceived roles and self-identity among full-time mothers in relation to their children’s academic success. During the process of helping children academically succeed, these mothers saw their roles as competing with other parents to ensure that their children attained the most competitive academic records for college admission. Furthermore, Park (2009) found that mothers made a substantial effort to build and maintain close connections with other parents to receive reliable information about effective shadow education programs and ways to provide academic support.

Similarly, Lee (2008) investigated the characteristics of parenting culture for secondary students. In interviews with mothers, Lee explored the parenting culture that placed a strong emphasis on shadow education and found that such parenting culture had three characteristics: shadow education-oriented, mother-initiated, and information-dependent. Most of the mothers interviewed believed that shadow education is a necessary component of secondary education. Lee (2008) elucidated the different aspects of parental involvement in shadow education among parents with different SESs. The results showed that middle-class mothers provided shadow education programs that were tailored to the specific academic
needs of their children, while working-class mothers provided shadow education with no special focus. Utilizing social and cultural capital, middle-class mothers took more initiative over their children’s educations than working-class mothers. Working-class mothers were found to allow children some level of autonomy or let children make their own decisions. The results also showed that middle-class mothers described the value of information about shadow education as a means that could help their children thrive academically and expressed a tendency to keep valuable information hidden from others.

In summary, although the way in which Korean mothers engage in their children’s education has represented an important topic in the field of education, few studies have examined this issue from the academic socialization framework. The current literature relevant to academic socialization indicates that mothers establish close relationships with their children, take the initiative in relation to academic decisions, and acknowledge that providing additional instruction through shadow education is their main role. In addition, the ways in which mothers are involved in their children’s education vary depending on their SES.

Methods

Research Methodology

Phenomenology is an effort to accurately and thoroughly reflect and examine the experience of objects/phenomena as they appear in human consciousness (Yoo et al., 2012). This study adopted Giorgi’s phenomenological research process, which was developed based on the fundamental spirit of ‘return to the things themselves’ that Husserl advocated in phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997; Lee, 2014), which meant returning to the actual everyday world where people experience various phenomena in specific situations (Lee, 2014). Giorgi’s phenomenological method was adopted to understand the in-depth meaning and essence of academic socialization experienced by mothers in Korea.

Participants

Nine mothers of college freshmen participated in this study. Using a snowball sampling method, the researchers used two criteria to recruit mothers: a) mothers who had recently prepared their children for college and b) mothers with children who went to four-year colleges. Each of the three researchers recruited participants using the snowball method, which resulted in a sample of nine mothers. The participants resided in two metropolitan cities in Korea and were all in their forties or fifties. Table 1 presents the age, educational attainment, number of children, and occupations of each participant. The participants were also asked about the educational attainments and occupations of their husbands. All of the mothers had the same ethnic background, and all interviews were conducted in Korean.

The interviewers began the interview with a short questionnaire asking about the jobs and educational attainments of the parents and the academic rankings of their children.

Table 1 Demographic information of participants

| Participant | age | N of Children | Educational attainment | Occupation | Participant’s husband | Educational attainment | Occupation |
|-------------|-----|---------------|------------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------|
| Participant1 | 51  | 1 Son, 1 Daughter | High School            | Seeking a job (clerical worker) | High School | Technician |
| Participant2 | 49  | 2 Daughters        | High School            | Manager    | Bachelor’s Degree | Manager |
| Participant3 | 54  | 1 Son, 1 Daughter | Graduate Degree        | Retired a couple of years ago (manager) | Bachelor’s Degree | Manager |
| Participant4 | 52  | 2 Sons            | Graduate Degree        | Housewife (quit her professional job when her child entered middle school) | Graduate Degree | Manager |
| Participant5 | 49  | 1 Son, 1 Daughter | Graduate Degree        | Housewife (quit her job when she had a baby) | Graduate Degree | Self-employment |
| Participant6 | 50  | 1 Son, 1 Daughter | Graduate Degree        | Housewife | Bachelor’s Degree | Professional |
| Participant7 | 49  | 1 Son, 1 Daughter | Graduate Degree        | Housewife | Bachelor’s Degree | CEO or Executive Officer |
| Participant8 | 46  | 2 Sons            | Bachelor’s Degree      | Housewife | Bachelor’s Degree | CEO or Executive Officer |
| Participant9 | 48  | 2 Daughters        | Bachelor’s Degree      | Housewife (quit her job when her child entered elementary school) | Bachelor’s Degree | Professional |
Their jobs were assigned to one of seven categories: service and sales; clerical; self-employed; professional; management; CEO or executive officer; and others. Educational attainment was assigned to one of eight categories: high school dropout; high school; professional school dropout; professional school; college dropout; bachelor’s degree; graduate degree; and other. Eight out of nine participants were full-time mothers at the time of the interview. However, Participant 1 was seeking a job at the time, and Participant 3 had retired a couple of years ago. Three participants (Participants 4, 5, & 9) had work experience and quit their jobs because they wanted to focus on rearing their children. Three participants were full-time mothers without any other work experience.

Procedures

Approximately 2–3 days before the interview, the researchers informed the participants about the purpose and the general research questions of the study so that the participants could think about their own experiences with regard to the topic in advance. The interviews were conducted in line with Korea’s COVID-19 prevention regulations, i.e., the researchers and participants were wearing face masks and adhered to the necessary safety guidelines. Each interview was conducted in one of the following places: the researcher’s office, the participant’s house, or a public place such as a library. The concept of academic socialization was defined for the participants, and they were asked about their experiences with it. When an interview with a participant did not go smoothly, the interviewer proceeded with planned questions (see Table 2). Once the interview had begun, most of the planned questions were voluntarily answered by the participants. Occasionally, the interviewer followed up by asking a few questions that were not addressed.

The interview questions were devised to capture the academic socialization experiences of mothers by directing the participants toward academic socialization themes. The interview questions included attitudes about schoolwork, expectations for their children’s grades, and future expectations such as college preparation and career plans that were derived from the conceptualization of academic socialization. Furthermore, one interview question was devised to encourage participants to reflect upon their personal experiences. The questions focused on the period during which their children were in high school. However, there were some cases in which participants began to freely discuss their experiences when their children were younger; the interviewers did not redirect the conversation in these cases. Two interviews were conducted with each participant, and each interview lasted 1 to 1.5 h. The second interview was arranged one week after the first interview. During the second interview, the interviewer asked questions that clarified some of the participant’s responses to the first interview. By being aware of their own potential biases, the researchers attempted to set aside personal prejudices, biases, judgments, and assumptions. Consent was obtained from each participant, and all interviews, along with behavioral notes, were recorded and transcribed. We received IRB approval from the affiliated university of the first author.

Data analysis

The current study utilized Giorgi’s phenomenological research method (De Castro, 2003), which involves four steps of data analysis. In the first step, the researchers read the transcribed interview contents a couple of times to grasp a general sense of the participants’ experiences. During the second step, the interview protocols were broken down into different meaning units; these meaning units served as smaller and more manageable units that provided the researchers with detailed accounts that made up the whole meaning. The main task in the third step was to transform the meaning units into psychological language. The fourth step aimed to describe the psychological structure of the participants’ experiences. The insights made by the researchers were integrated into a coherent psychological structure. This structure consisted of two levels: the situated structure and the general structure. The situated structure is provided in the Results section.

Giorgi’s four criteria of scientific knowledge, which are systematic, methodical, general, and critical, have guided the research procedures. The researchers maintained a phenomenological research mindset throughout the entire process of the study. The researchers set aside
Table 3: Constituents and subconstituents for mothers’ experiences of academic socialization

| Constituents                                                                 | Subconstituents                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Mother’s High Academic Expectations and Determination for Parenting Roles | Emphasizing the mother’s educational views to the child  
Mother’s wish for the child’s prosperous and stable life  
Mother’s high expectations for academic achievement  
The child’s education becoming a top priority in the mother’s life |
| 2. Adjustment of Expectations and Interventions through Trial and Error      | Providing academic and career guidance in consideration of the child’s disposition  
Differing approaches due to the gender of the child  
Worrying due to unexpected outcomes of the child  
Not intervening with the child who does well on his or her own  
Comparisons made between siblings  
The passion for education poured into the first child  
Being sensitive to grades after seeing a report card  
Setting realistic expectations for the child’s grades |
| 3. Transfer of Attitudes and Values for Academic Performance to Child        | Creating a learning atmosphere for the child  
Emphasizing time management for the child’s learning  
Teaching learning strategies to the child |
| 4. Mother’s Desire for Approval Revealed through Competition with Other Parents | Reluctantly pushing and pressuring children into competition  
Getting caught up in competition and being anxious  
Discovering the child experiencing challenges  
Strongly intervening to keep the child competitive  
Discovering mother’s own need to win competitions over others through her child |
| 5. Child’s Superior Academic Achievement  
Serving as a Testament to the Mother’s Ability and Self-worth                  | The mother’s pride determined by child’s grades  
The mother’s wishes for her child to realize her own unaccomplished dreams  
Trial to validate herself as a successful mother through the child’s grades |
| 6. Dissonance between Mother and Child Seen as Struggles for Control         | Mother’s discovery of herself in controlling the child through the academic intervention process  
Manipulating the child to follow her will  
Getting frustrated due to an uncontrolled child |
| 7. Mother’s Role as a Supporter of the Child’s Decisions and Efforts          | Trusting the child’s decisions and efforts  
Taking pride in the child who is doing well  
Respecting the child’s decisions  
Letting the child get his or her way after experiencing conflict  
Trying to maintain a good relationship with the child |
| 8. Career Decisions Made by Mother rather than Child                         | Parents’ career proposal considering only employment and economic factors  
Career intervention without considering the child’s aptitude  
Ignoring the child’s career preferences  
Mother playing a leading role in educational decisions  
Relying on the husband’s realistic judgment |
their prior knowledge, theories, and ideas (bracketing) and sought the essential meanings of the participants in their concrete lived experiences. The data analysis proceeded while closely following the four steps guided by Giorgi (1997). To check the generalizability of the findings, we reflected on whether the findings had meaning from the researchers’ own references. We also asked two nonparticipating mothers whether they could relate to the findings, and these two mothers agreed. Last, to critically review the findings, we made an effort to find exceptional cases and situations.

In terms of the number of participants, phenomenological research does not mandate specific numbers (Giorgi, 1997). Since phenomenological research focuses on in-depth understandings of participants’ lived understandings, Dukes (1984) mentioned that it would be appropriate to enroll three to ten participants. Another strategy used in qualitative research is data saturation, which refers to the point at which interviewing participants finds no additional value to describe the conceptual theme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the current study, the researchers found that the inclusion of nine participants was sufficient to provide vivid and rich descriptions of the mothers’ academic socialization practices and reach the point of saturation.

Results

The data analysis of the interviews from the nine mothers yielded 736 meaning units, 121 summaries of meaning units, 57 subconstituents, and 12 constituents. The constituents and subconstituents are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 (continued)

| Constituents                                                                 | Subconstituents                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9. Priority of Maintaining Academic Competitiveness rather than Taking Care of Mental Health | Superficial perception of the psychological difficulties experienced by the child |
|                                                                              | Being cautious not to add extra pressure to the stress experienced by the child |
|                                                                              | Consoling the child to get through the challenging process                      |
|                                                                              | Providing shadow education to promote academic achievement                      |
|                                                                              | Believing in the effects of shadow education                                     |
|                                                                              | Forming networks to provide quality shadow education                            |
|                                                                              | Doing everything possible for the academic achievement of the child            |
|                                                                              | Feeling of her limited capacity to help the child with academic performance     |
|                                                                              | Trying to imitate other mothers with high achievers                            |
|                                                                              | Attending parent meetings to have access to valuable information about shadow education |
|                                                                              | Being excluded from networks composed of mothers of high achievers             |
|                                                                              | Being influenced by external environments                                       |
|                                                                              | Use of counseling services to resolve academic stress                           |
|                                                                              | Asking for help from learning experts                                          |
|                                                                              | Provision of a timely intervention for dropping grades                          |
| 10. Parents’ Support through Shadow Education to Strengthen Child’s Competitiveness | Insufficient support for shadow education due to lack of resources               |
|                                                                              | Being criticized by the child for lacking knowledge about college admission policies |
|                                                                              | Insufficient care for the learning of the child                                 |
|                                                                              | Not meeting the expectations of the child                                       |
|                                                                              | Cooperation with husband facilitating academic intervention                     |
| 11. Use of External Professional Resources to Cope with Academic Crises       | Experiencing differences in educational values held by mother and father        |
| 12. Mother’s Role and Instrumental Support Perceived as Insufficient          |                                                                                  |
Mother’s High Academic Expectations and Determination of Parenting Roles

The participants conveyed high academic expectations to their children and expected them to enter prestigious universities that would lead to stable jobs. During this process, the participants showed a tendency to identify themselves with their children and perceived their children’s schoolwork as being the most important part of their lives. They were determined about their roles as mothers.

I thought that graduating from a prestigious university would lead to a better job and a secure lifestyle. So...I thought this amount of my sacrifice or my efforts was legitimate. My son would have different outcomes depending on the quantity and quality of my support and intervention. (Participant 7)

Adjustment of Expectations and Interventions through Trial and Error

In the process of academic socialization, the participating mothers adjusted their levels of expectations and interventions in accordance with their children’s disposition, gender, learning preferences, and interests. They were nervous about their children’s first academic grades and attempted to set realistic goals. They occasionally expressed their disappointment and pushed their children to achieve better outcomes. Even mothers with overperforming children encouraged their children to maintain high grades. The participants’ responses and approaches were adjusted dynamically. If necessary, they lowered their expectations and used realistic coping strategies. Some mothers showed a tendency to compare their children, in which case they lowered their expectations and had feelings of disappointment toward the lower-performing daughter or son.

When the grades went down, I offered my child a change in the shadow education tutor or more shadow education programs. That was all I could do. (Participant 4)

As time passed, my expectations gradually decreased. At first, I expected the grades would go up, but my child kept similar grades. Occasionally, my child got the first ranked grade, but I knew at the end of high school that my hope for higher grades was not realized. (Participant 8)

Transfer of Attitudes and Values Regarding Academic Performance to Child

The participants made efforts to help their children develop desirable study habits and positive learning attitudes. The mothers tried to set up their home environments to be conducive to learning. For example, one mother moved a TV in the living room to another room to prevent the TV sounds from interrupting any learning and decorated the living room with books and bookshelves to make it look like a library. The mothers tried to portray themselves as role models who read books and valued studying. The mothers tried to teach their children about time management, notetaking, memorization skills, learning strategies, etc. Participant 3 taught her child specific memory skills. Participant 7 sat down with her children, and the whole family studied together to instill in their children the persistence to sit and study.

It is not good to study without any specific plans. Good students have study schedules that arrange subject matters in 30-minute blocks. They don’t assign two or three hours to a subject. Reviewing learning content prior to and after class is an efficient way to memorize important information. Repeating this kind of review helps store information. (Participant 3)

I sat down with them until middle school. We sat together to do homework, with me reading a book or doing something else. The study room itself had a big table, and we all sat down to study. Because I thought study habits were important... I thought perseverance is one of the most important competencies, which is a foundation to outperforming others. (Participant 7)

Mother’s Desire for Approval Revealed as Being Swept Away by Competition

Given that their children were confronted with a competition-based relative grading system, the participants were anxious about their children who had to endure fierce competition. While carrying out their supporting roles, the participants found themselves to be competing with other parents. They saw themselves as being in the midst of a competition to pressure and push their children to gain the upper hand. In this supporting role, they discovered their own need to win the competition and recognition.

Other parents were so focused on the competition. I felt I would be a loser or I would fail if I had not been as involved as the other parents. So, I was so
overwhelmed by such a bloody competitive atmosphere... If we’re stuck in a narrow field of view... we’ll see the world like a frog in a well. If it’s not this or I’m gonna die, it’s this or it’s gonna be a big deal. After all, my greed pressured my child to study hard. (Participant 6)

Looking back, I was anxious. To be honest, I wondered if my child would fall behind, I desperately wished my child would do well... I wanted to hear from others that my child was doing better than their children... There was nothing I could help my child with. I just had competitive feelings with others. I heard that other students were very advanced with textbook contents and had finished the textbook in advance. However, my child had not studied the textbook contents yet. Then, I became so anxious. (Participant 9)

Child’s Superior Academic Achievement Serving as a Testament to the Mother’s Ability and Self-Worth

The participants regarded the role of supporting their children in achieving high grades and entering a good college to be an important task in their lives, which could prove their self-worth. The participants wanted to be recognized as ‘competent mothers’ who raised superior students. Based on this belief, the participants were focused on increasing their children’s academic grades. The child’s grade is regarded as a metaphorical report card for the mother. The participants also felt the need for their children to actualize the desires they could not accomplish in their own childhoods.

Crazy... Crazy.... I as a mother was greedy... I wanted my child to stand out with good grades. When meeting with other parents, other parents recognized and placed high values on mothers whose children had good grades. Each parent expressed respect to them... I thought it happened because mothers treated their children like themselves. My child’s grade was my own grade. Mothers were confused thinking that they made good grades due to their efforts and skills... Those mothers who were respected by others had superior feelings, which was not a little thing. It was not a joke. (Participant 4)

Dissonance between Mother and Child Seen as Struggles for Control

When choosing a career path or deciding upon a college major, the participants went beyond delivering their own expectations or values to their children and took the initiative to steer them. The participants wanted their children to accept their decisions. When the children did not, the participants experienced negative emotions such as frustration and anger. The mothers’ attempts to choose their children’s career paths were part of the struggle for control between the mother and the child, and excessive intervention from the mother was seen as undermining the child’s autonomy.

I consulted with the homeroom teacher and a counselor. When preparing college applications, I asked them to convince my child that nursing is the most popular area of study these days. When my child asks their opinion, they should recommend nursing. Therefore, I asked consent in advance for them to suggest nursing to my child. (Participant 2)

Mother’s Role as a Supporter of the Child’s Decisions and Efforts

In the academic socialization process, the participants showed support for their children’s decisions and efforts when their children did well on their own. They reported that they were proud of their children who were doing well on their own and that they respected their efforts and decisions. The participants believed in what their children wanted to do while acknowledging and supporting their autonomy. They did not have to intervene in the lives of the children whose behavior was in line with the academic values or attitudes shared by the participants themselves. The participants believed that those children would have a sufficient competitive advantage and would be able to choose a successful career path or enter a prestigious college.

I didn’t think I had much to do, just believing in my child’s efforts and decisions. There was nothing I did except for what I believed in. Even when I occasionally made some comments, inside I trusted my child. I never asked my child to study. I thought she knew so much, and I just believed in her. (Participant 1)

The participants were used to leading and controlling their children in the way they thought was right to improve their academic progress. However, when their children asserted themselves or showed unexpected negative responses and behaviors, the participants gradually began to think about the child’s opinions and tried to understand their children’s thought processes. In the end, some participants accepted the child’s will. At the same time, they felt the
importance of the interrelationship and conversations with their children.

Conversation was the most important thing, so don’t scream. Listen! Listen and talk to the child. At first, I deliberately dragged the child, even scolded him. Since then, I have tried to force a conversation with him. It doesn’t happen in a day or two, but in time it works… So it didn’t change in a month, but after doing that, he changed after some time. (Participant 1)

Career Decisions Made by Mother Rather than Child

In the academic socialization process, the mothers’ initiative was most noticeable where the decision of the child’s education or career was determined by the mother or parents, not the child. The participants suggested realistic career paths and made decisions while ignoring their children’s aptitude. Participant 6 had a plan to make her child into a doctor, no matter what, when her GPA reached a certain level. One unique aspect was the trust for the husband’s judgment in deciding on a career. This seemed to be due to the expectation that the husband, who has more experience in social life, would make more realistic career proposals.

Reflecting about the aptitude of my child now, it seemed that he had more aptitude for liberal arts. Even I thought he didn’t have the aptitude for science. He once said, “Mom, I think I would have done better if I had gone with a major in the liberal arts.” I have emphasized a stable career path too much and ignored his aptitude. (Participant 4)

My child just followed the direction we wanted. There’s no future in the liberal arts except for government-owned companies. My husband thought she should have a license just in case she might need it even though she didn’t want to get hired with the license. (Participant 7)

Priority of Maintaining Academic Competitiveness rather than Taking Care of Mental Health

The participants tried to be perceptive about the emotional state of their children and chose to be permissive when they experienced friction due to academic stress to avoid interfering with their children’s academic performance. Although they acknowledged that their children were facing emotional difficulties due to the fierce academic competition, they chose to console their children superficially rather than address these difficulties. After all, they thought the reality of competition could not be denied anyway, so they did not intervene further and ignored the difficulties in order to maintain the tension in the academic competition. All they could do is not be a factor in making things worse for their children.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s not much”… I felt like I was doing it while suppressing my concerns… I kept making it light, reminding myself “it wasn’t a big deal.” I said to him “the practice test is not important. It’s okay toRetry next year.” I was afraid I would open it up because he was so sensitive… saying to him “life isn’t all about studying.” Actually, grading was the most important thing since he was a high school student… But I consoled him while calming my mind. (Participant 4)

Parents’ Support through Shadow Education to Strengthen Children’s Competitiveness

The participants tried to provide practical help beyond passing on their expectations and views regarding the value of education to their children. As their children entered high school, the mothers thought that limiting their learning to public education was insufficient, and it made them anxious. Hence, they focused more on shadow education provided by private institutions and tutors. Since learning at school is common and provided to all, mothers firmly believed that the quality and quantity of private tutoring were the main factors that would make a difference in children’s grades. This led them to believe in and rely on information and economic resources to provide shadow education for their children. The mothers tried to support the maximum amount of shadow education possible by searching for the best resources using their networks of parents and acquaintances. Some participants said that they held parental meetings to obtain academic-related information. Participant 4 expressed that not all information was shared even in parent meetings, but subgroups formed within parental meetings and shared some important information only within the smaller group.

Mothers shared real important information only with close people… if I get a really competent teacher… Then, I’ll never let other parents know. They were serious about not letting the information be shared. So, it was really hard to find information about
competent teachers. Such a network has been formed. It seemed that when their children were in middle school, those networks started to be formed. From then on, mothers whose children were good at studying got together and did things together. Those mothers sent their children to Hanyoung Foreign Language High School together. Then, they sent their children to top universities. I felt both envy and pity toward them. (Participant 4)

Participant 9 utilized the information obtained from parent meetings. She applied the learning methods that she heard were being used by a high-achieving child to her own child. The mothers talked about the budgets they had set for shadow education.

I didn’t think it fit my child’s style, but I wanted my child to follow the ways the others claim to be helpful for grades. A lot of information on the expenses of shadow education travels by word of mouth. In my view, parents are also responsible for increased shadow education expenses. (Participant 9)

Use of External Professional Resources to Cope with Academic Crises

The participants intervened by using specialized resources to help their children in the course of academic socialization. They tried to get help with the cooperation of academy instructors, and they helped their children overcome helplessness or inferiority caused by academic stress by resorting to counseling services. Participant 5 could not stand seeing her daughter’s grades drop, so she tried to prevent further decline by quickly changing her private tutor. Wealthier participants actively made use of professional resources in situations of academic crises.

A is inferior, and B is superior. There was a point to seeing the world with that viewpoint. My child felt that as well. In the meantime, the self-esteem of my child suffered…. when he was in 9th grade, he received counseling services. At that time, he was depressed. (Participant 5)

Mother’s Role and Instrumental Support Perceived as Insufficient

The participants tried to engage actively in their children’s learning, but they felt that their support was not enough. Participant 1 was unable to go to the information session for college admission because the content was difficult to follow and she felt her economic condition did not allow her to support her child. It was not possible for her to provide expensive shadow education like the others. Participant 8 held the belief that the learner should take the initiative and play the main role in learning, and she did not rely on shadow education. However, her child resented her because of his bad test results and blamed her for not helping him. Mothers wanted to provide various types of resources and support to their children, but they regretted when they could not.

My child wanted me to be active, but I’m not very interested in that. I had a belief ‘You should do it yourself.’ Later, when the test results weren’t good, he was resentful about me not helping him. (Participant 8)

Discussion

We sought to explore and understand mothers’ lived experiences in the academic socialization process of high school students in Korea. By taking into consideration the societal and cultural backgrounds in Korea, the current study uncovered culturally nuanced processes of academic socialization among mothers of high school students. As expected, the mothers conveyed their academic expectations and values to their children both verbally and through direct academic interventions. The mothers continuously conveyed the importance of academic achievement, the attitudes required in the academic process, and the meaning of entering an elite university. In the process of delivering their academic expectations and values, the mothers were committed to their roles in providing academic interventions, and they had intricate psychological experiences during this process.

On the surface level, the evident, direct communications between mothers and children were about the transfer of mothers’ educational expectations, attitudes, and values regarding academic performance to their children. Delivering high academic expectations to children was a common practice among all participants. The expectations involved particular future college majors or prestigious colleges as well as specific career paths such as medical doctors or professionals. Pressures for good grades or amount of learning often occurred in daily life. The mothers made an effort to create a learning atmosphere at home and to teach their children about learning strategies, time management skills, and stress management.

While interacting with their children, the mothers constantly adjusted their approaches in accordance with their children’s situations and characteristics. The mothers conveyed their
intentions strongly to obedient children, but when a child was stubborn or insisted on his or her way, the mothers adjusted their approaches to suit the characteristics of the child. When a child’s grades dropped, the mother tried to cope with the situation. Experiencing trial and error in various circumstances, the mothers continuously modified their expectations and interventions. During the process, the mothers’ initiative was one of the most important features revealed in the relationships. Mother-led decision-making consistently appeared in various issues, such as liberal arts/science subject selection, study method, amount of studying, tutor selection, and coping with declines in grades. The finding of mother-led decision-making is in line with Lee’s (2008) findings.

Under the competitive educational climate, the mothers frequently engaged in comparisons and competitions. At parental meetings for information sharing, the mothers found the atmosphere to be competitive based on other parents’ attitudes and behaviors, such as intensely searching for valuable information about shadow education tutors, and the mothers found themselves caught up in this competition. In this process, an effort was made to form a personal network to follow and imitate the parents of high achievers. Through these parent meetings, subgroups were created based on the child’s grades and the parents’ SES. Participants reported feeling psychological alienation and defeat due to their relatively inferior statuses evidenced by the closed nature of information sharing within the smaller groups. These findings are consistent with the shadow education support and information security mentioned by Park (2009).

One of the most important findings in the current study was about mothers’ hidden desire for self-worth. While mothers were engaged in competitions with other mothers, they were driven by their hidden desire for recognition of self-worth. In other words, the mothers tried to prove their self-worth through their child rearing role. Although the participants did not mention this desire explicitly, many circumstances supported their strong feelings. Participant 4 reported that mothers of high achievers attained superiority and social recognition for the child rearing role in the parent community. Participant 6 expressed her feelings of competitiveness and anxiety for potential defeat in the competition. The essence of these experiences was not about genuine concerns for their children but their own feelings of superiority and failure experienced in comparison with other parents. The intensive involvement of mothers in the competitive educational environment seemed to lead them to be absorbed in their own competitions.

Complicated with their own need for self-worth, parenting practice looked to be an impediment to the child’s autonomy at some points during the academic socialization process. The excessive intervention of the mothers led them to take away the initiative from their children. The most noticeable part of the mothers’ initiatives was the decision about the child’s higher education and career. Even though both parties, parents and children, were involved in the decision-making process, parents took the lead. Furthermore, the mothers chose college majors based on their own judgment rather than the child’s aptitude. Of the nine participants, only two mothers selected college majors that fit their children’s aptitude, and most did not consider their children’s aptitude. Participant 2, for example, manipulated her child to choose the major she selected in the college admission procedure. The mothers considered easy employment or a stable life; the subjective happiness of the child did not seem to be a consideration. Mothers appeared to believe their decisions would make their children successful in college admissions and careers. Moreover, the concern for the psychological well-being of the child was second to the maintenance of his or her competitiveness. For example, although they were superficially aware of the stress and emotional difficulties experienced by their children, the participants seemed not to help their children resolve them. Rather, they thought their children did not have the time to look into the cause of the stress in depth, so they superficially consoled them and tried to pass over the issue. Even though they wanted their children to be emotionally well, their priority was to maintain the competitiveness of their children preparing for college.

Most of the participants believed that the essence of the mother’s role was providing good shadow education programs or tutors, which is in line with previous studies (Lee, 2008). All participants were providing tutoring. In particular, economically wealthy parents thought the cost of tutoring to be an investment that could predict actual outcomes such as enhanced grades on standardized exams. When shadow education programs appeared to positively influence academic outcomes, the mothers’ control was more pronounced, and the children followed the mothers’ directives. The mothers’ insistence on shadow education appeared to deprive high schoolers of the opportunity to practice their autonomy in the learning process. In addition, parents who spent a significant portion of their income on shadow education felt this economic investment legitimized the pressure they placed on their children.

As the vital component of mothers’ involvement was providing shadow education programs or tutoring, the differences in economic resources of the parents seemed to make real differences in the children’s academic outcomes. Across parents with different SES, different levels of shadow education were observed. Participant 1, who had the lowest dependence on shadow education, did not have a clear understanding of the effect of shadow education and supported modest shadow education programs at the request of her child. On the other hand, Participant 6 provided a very costly tutor who demonstrated a real difference in the
child’s achievement. Competition among mothers produced a pattern of competing with and becoming similar to other parents who shared the same SES, but there seem to be no exchanges with parents in other SES groups.

This study has important implications. First, during the academic socialization process, the mothers’ personal viewpoints on academic success that represented middle or higher SES values, such as career-linked college majors and certain professions, were strongly delivered to the children. Realistic decisions were actively made in regard to timely interventions and choices of future college majors. The mothers were actively delivering realistic values to survive in the current society, which is the main function of socialization. However, some aspects of the mothers’ methods of academic socialization do not promote optimal development but rather the economic and SES security of their children. Some mothers were clearly aware that their practices might impede the autonomy of their children, but they believed that their ways would make their children more secure in the future. They believed that economic security is a precondition for the self-actualization of children in a materialistic society. Thus, on the one hand, the current practice of mothers who try to make their children economically secure has adaptive functions in materialistic societies. On the other hand, it compromises the optimal development of their children. The negative consequence of compromising the autonomy of adolescents might not be evident at the time. However, parents need to consider its long-term effects in that mothers’ overbearing and excessive involvement is not sufficient to ensure that their children’s lives will be successful and satisfactory.

Second, it was found that mothers had needs for recognition hidden by their strong approaches. Raising a son/daughter to be a high achiever who is admitted to a prestigious college was a signature of successful mothering. The mothers’ unmet needs reinforced their excessive interventions. Similarly, Ng et al., (2019) identified parents’ child-based self-worth among Chinese mothers in Hong Kong. Ng et al. found that the more parents’ self-worth is contingent on their child’s performance, the less likely they were to have a warm response to their child’s academic failures. Thus, it appears that mothers’ need for recognition based on their child’s accomplishments affects children’s development in other cultures. To address mothers’ hidden needs for recognition, it would be important for mothers to be aware of their needs for self-validation. Additionally, developers and implementers of parent education programs need to prioritize mothers’ awareness of self-worth to a great degree.

Third, it was clear that the mothers were not aware of keeping a healthy psychological distance from their children. They tended to experience this matter through trial and error. For example, with a stubborn child, they adjusted their intervention methods to meet the child’s style, while with a submissive child, they maintained their own methods. However, in regard to high-stakes decisions, such as college admissions, they firmly took initiative and were not flexible in their decision-making. Some mothers even manipulated their children to follow their decisions. Based on their perspectives, they made decisions from long-term views that had many advantages for their children. However, when taking developmental perspectives into account, the opportunities for the children to practice autonomy were taken away by their parents. Thus, the involvement of mothers compromised the optimal developmental process.

In Korea, parental education programs have been widely implemented at the individual level. Given that society is based on collectivistic values, it is recommended that parental education programs that aim at changing views of child-rearing roles at the societal level would be beneficial.

Fourth, equity issues were one of the surprising findings revealed in the mothers’ practice of academic socialization. Even though the current study did not focus on the SES issue, the SES differences in the academic socialization process were apparent. The input from tailored and costly shadow education programs was reported to make real differences in children’s grades. However, it was also noticed that the level of the mothers’ level of control paralleled the levels of shadow education. The greater the number of shadow education programs was, the greater the mother’s control over the child. In other words, the child’s autonomy was more compromised. Thus, students from affluent families are more likely to have their autonomy compromised. It is important for mothers to support, not lead, their children. Students need the opportunity to make their own decisions and experience the consequences so that they will develop decision-making skills and learn from their decisions.

Fifth, the education climate in Korea is quite competitive. Relative evaluation systems are strictly implemented in high schools. Rankings are determined by the relative standings of students, which lead to frequent comparisons and competitions among students. The 2015 Revised National Curriculum has been implementing new evaluation systems of criterion-referenced evaluation, but implementation has not yet fully reached high school students. It is expected that the newly implemented evaluation systems will change school climates from competitive to collaborative climates. Emphasizing collaborative learning and intrinsic motivation for learning among students might have positive effects on mothers’ values and attitudes toward education and child-rearing practices.

The limitations of this study and suggestions for subsequent studies are as follows. First, more than half of the participants in this study had a socioeconomic background of middle or upper middle class, and only a few participants had a socioeconomic background of the lower classes.
Thus, the psychological and educational implications are more applicable to mothers in the middle or upper middle class. A follow-up study might explore academic socialization according to social class by including broader SES backgrounds. Second, this study examined academic socialization by focusing on mothers’ experiences, but children’s experiences of academic socialization might differ. Studying children and parents together would broaden our understanding of the interactions between children and parents and the experiences from the children’s perspective. Third, it is thought that the understanding of the academic socialization processes over time in the child’s development would provide deeper understandings of its impact on academic success. Further longitudinal research is needed to analyze this process.

There are several recommendations for future research. First, given the complicated nature of academic socialization practices among Korean mothers, it would be important to know how adolescents experience the academic socialization practices of their mothers. It would be helpful to understand the process by which they differentiate between parental support and autonomy-hampering pressure. Second, the intersection between intense practices of mothers’ academic socialization and psychological independence of adolescents needs to be explored. Third, it might be necessary to develop education reform movements at the societal level that provide opportunities for individuals of different SES. Fourth, further research might aim to promote cultural and social awareness about the desirable attitudes and child-rearing practices of mothers.

**Funding** This study was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) (No. 2020S1A5A2A0104479812). This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Korea government (MEST) (No. 2020S1A5A2A0104479812).

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no competing interests.

**Ethical Approval** This study was approved by the institutional research board of the Pukyong National University. All procedures involving human subjects were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee of the Pukyong National University.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

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