The Power of Information:
Maternal Education, Childrearing, and Unequal Childhood*

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Abstract
Contributing to research that investigates class-based differences in childrearing, this study shows how the interaction between economic constraints and mobilization of information shapes divergent childrearing strategies. Using in-depth interviews and an online survey with married mothers of young children in urban Korea, I show that they share high aspirations for educating their preschool children in academic and non-academic subjects, but their realization of these aspirations diverges based on their own education: Highly educated study participants used a wider variety of social and personal ties to gather information than less-educated participants did. These different processes of mobilizing information interact with economic constraints, causing less-educated mothers to minimize the risk of the cost of private education by selectively choosing what their children are likely to excel at, often limited to one or two areas, while highly educated mothers use diverse methods to enable children to learn every subject in various ways and to excel in all of them. These two approaches, which I call vertical cultivation and horizontal diversification, also shape the mothers’ emotional states. Less-educated mothers have lower confidence and higher anxiety about their children’s education—and therefore about their children’s future—than more highly educated mothers.

Key words: Maternal Education, Information, Childrearing, South Korea

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