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HAGWON: SHADOW EDUCATION IN THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

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Minkyu Kim

Dr. Donald R. McClure

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ABSTRACT

HAGWON: SHADOW EDUCATION IN THE KOREAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY

Minkyu Kim

Asian and Asian American students are achieving academic success at disproportionate rates, even when faced with low social capital (i.e., English is not the primary language spoken at home) and high rates of poverty (especially in urban settings like New York City). A contributing factor to their academic success is shadow education.

Shadow education (SE) is defined as systemized learning that occurs outside of compulsory schooling, at private cost, with the objective of guiding students through and providing them with a competitive edge in school admissions—often with a focus on high-stakes standardized academic exams (Bray, 1999, 2013). In Korean, shadow education is known as “hagwon.” Though hagwon has existed in the U.S. since the 1970s, almost no qualitative research on shadow education has been conducted and published here.

This ethnographic multi-case study examined the hagwon experiences of seven Asian American high school students who were studying for the SAT across three hagwons—two in northern New Jersey and one in Queens, New York. Framed through the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu’s habitus and Lévi-Strauss’s bricolage, this study situated hagwon as a field of convergence for multiple cultural streams (i.e., East and West; families and peers; local and distal communities) to create a distinct habitus,

characterized by a ubiquitous and inescapable imperative for the attendees centered on discipline and achievement. This cobbled-together “habitus of hagwon” drove behavioral, curricular, even environmental decisions on the part of the students and hagwons.

Ultimately, hagwon was part of a larger calculation: increasing as much as possible students’ odds for desired outcomes at every level of the college admissions process.

Though students perceived that content crossover between hagwon and school was minimal, participants acknowledged that certain mental tools and social capital— independent work ethic, enduring difficulty, time management, and self-generating interest in compulsory reading material—crossed over to school and professional environments. In addition, students found the camaraderie from peers and teachers to be invaluable—and built on shared cultural capital and common purpose—which separated their hagwon experiences from their school experiences and situated hagwon as an essential site of cultural replication, transmission, and negotiation.

DEDICATION

To the Asian American community, with a special nod to the Korean American community—of which I am a part—who might see a little bit of themselves here.

And, of course, to my family.



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CHAPTER 1 CONTEXT, PROBLEM, AND PURPOSE

In a humorous article entitled, “How Immigrant Parents Say ‘I Love You,’” Indurti (2021) depicted the immigrant experience through the lens of parents showing their children that they love them in idiosyncratic ways. She invoked tropes like cut-up fruit appearing at unlikely times (I remember this), or simply sitting in austere silence, as ways of avoiding any displays of overt affection spoken or physical. Indurti also described the all-too-familiar (to me) experience of doing homework for an after-school test-prep academy called Kumon:

Forcing you to do Kumon homework for three hours: That’s called quality time, O.K.? Sure, you’re not talking to each other, but your parents are sitting nearby, reading newspapers filled with misinformation and glaring at you every time you get up to pee, like they’re Amazon floor managers. That’s what love is all about. (Indurti, 2021)

Kumon is a well-known after-school test-prep center that I attended as a child (from fourth grade to seventh grade), so this tableau resonated for me. It was not my choice to take on extra homework—especially not the repetitive and rote problem set-oriented variety my instructors doled out at Kumon. The author suggested, though, that this was a way for my immigrant parents to express their love. The humor in this passage for a reader like me comes from both its absurdity (i.e., the incongruity of forced extra homework, the glaring, and love) and its truth.

Through the course of my own research, I have found that the Kumon experience—or extracurricular tutoring or test prep, more broadly known as “shadow

education” (Bray, 1999; Stevenson & Baker, 1992)—is not only alive and well, but expanding.

Shadow Education (SE)

Shadow education (SE) is defined as systemized learning that occurs outside of compulsory schooling, at private cost, with the objective of guiding students through and providing them with a competitive edge in school admissions—often with a focus on high-stakes standardized academic exams (Bray, 1999, 2013). Bray (1999, 2010) detailed the history of the term, “shadow education.” The Singapore office of Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC) investigated out-of-school tutoring, producing studies in Sri Lanka (De Silva et al., 1991) and Malaysia (Marimuthu et al., 1991). Marimuthu et al. (1991) wrote that “the practice of private tuition was so prevalent that it could be considered as a ‘shadow educational system’” (p. vi). Stevenson and Baker (1992) are credited for coining the term in its current definition [i.e., “a set of educational activities outside formal schooling that are designed to improve a student's chances of successfully moving through the allocation process” (p. 1640)] from which the aforementioned definition is derived.

Bray (2013) argued that the term “shadow education” is appropriate on several levels:

1. Shadow education exists because mainstream education exists.
2. As mainstream education moves, the shadow moves. In other words, as mainstream education evolves, shadow education evolves.
3. More attention is paid to the main body than the shadow.
4. The features of the shadow are difficult to discern.

Indeed, as the metaphor suggests, shadow education moves as the body to which it is attached moves, though, as the fourth point suggests, the definition of what is considered shadow education is not fixed. Peng (2021) added, “It is ‘shadow’ because it mimics formal schooling, reflecting its requirements, standards and processes” (p. 105). And because education policy is constantly evolving, definitive inclusion or exclusion criteria for what constitutes shadow education services can be elusive (Malik, 2017; Wiseman, 2021). Shadow education serves different functions, age levels, and purposes in different places, from remedial to enriching, depending on resources and need (Baker et al., 2001).

Thus, I extend the definition of shadow education to not just college admissions, but rather supplementary preparation at all levels of schooling, including portfolio and application consulting; supplementary tutoring, including remedial intervention; and preview learning, which is when students learn content in their shadow education learning centers before learning it at school.

In Korean, shadow education is known as *hagwon*, which can refer to both the concept of shadow education as well as the physical learning center. Since this is a phonetic transcription of a Korean word (학원), English spellings vary: e.g., hakwon, hah-gwan, et al. I will use the Revised Romanization spelling—“hagwon”—but will not alter spellings when quoting other writers who have used other spellings. The word “school” functions the same way in English; “school” can refer to both the concept of schooling and the physical place wherein one is schooled. For many Asian immigrants, shadow education is a cultural element brought over from their home countries that aligns with modern American values (Zhou & Kim, 2006), and is, therefore, entrenching itself as an essential part of the ethnic economy (Park, 2012) in their U.S. communities.

In a pilot study I conducted on the extracurricular literacies of four high-performing students (Kim, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c), I found that shadow education was a universally shared experience for the students at a majority-Asian specialized high school. All four participants of my study, who all happened to be of Asian descent, spoke about their test prep experiences. As a teacher at a school where a single entrance exam is the only admissions criteria, this did not surprise me. However, the range of responses struck me: One saw it as a source of grief or stress; another stated that he didn't like it but saw its merits; and yet another, quoted below, saw it as a transformative experience:

Kay (student): Between kindergarten and third grade, I really didn't care about school. I don't think I really paid attention, but in fourth grade, my parents enrolled me in a prep program, [name redacted]. For my middle school [name redacted], they have an entrance exam, and so they put me in for that. And so then is when I really started to know that grades actually mattered... like, "Oh this is a thing that people talk about." So that's when I started caring about my grades... There was like this group... that were like high achieving. They were like so cool... And so I feel like the pressure to be cool and smart and friendly, like to check all those boxes, like, that was a big pressure for me.

What Kay points out is that while achievement may be the stated goal, she also refers to a complex network of influence—friends, teachers, parents, and community and societal mandates—to “check all those boxes.” Thus, test preparation programs are not just about academic achievement, though that is the assumed and stated goal of shadow education. There are stories here—powerful ones, where students find language, suffer trauma, and define what it means to be “cool.”

What follows is a discussion of the larger sociopolitical issues that make shadow education a topic of interest in the broader education discussion—namely, its association with Asian achievement both in the U.S. and globally.

Asian American Achievement to De-minoritization

Students of Asian descent have demonstrated advanced academic achievement in the United States—scoring at or near the top in The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading, math, and science assessments, administered in 4th, 8th, and 12th grades (Hussar et al., 2020). They have also demonstrated advanced achievement ratings in various other measures, including standardized tests, the disproportionate rate at which they are gaining entry to schools and programs that require an entrance exam, and teacher feedback (Hsin & Xie, 2014). Students at the highly selective (i.e., based solely on admissions exam) specialized high school in New York City where I teach are admitted and considered “high achieving” based on their scores on the SHSAT (Specialized High School Admissions Test). Test-based admissions is a hot button topic, particularly around issues of race and socioeconomic equity (Shapiro, 2019).

Specifically, the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students has highlighted broader inequities in a system that has resulted in the underrepresentation of Black and Latino students and an overrepresentation of Asian students in gifted programs and schools with “merit-based” admissions criteria (Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Powell, 2022). The specialized high school where I teach, for instance, is considered both elite *and* a Title I school, which means “children from low-income families make up at least 40 percent of enrollment” (NYC Department of Education, 2020). However, in 2019, only seven Black students were admitted out of 895 incoming

freshmen (Shapiro, 2019). On the other hand, in 2020, 72.6% of its student body was Asian (US News and World Report, 2021), though they make up only 18% of the city population (Powell, 2022). The complex intersectionality of socioeconomic status, race, and achievement comes into austere focus at a school that has a standardized test as its sole admissions criteria. Similar tensions exist in San Francisco (Collins, 2021; Nierenberg, 2022) and Virginia (Barakat, 2023)—where the growing de-emphasis on test scores in admissions criteria both at the high school and university level is perceived as “people in public service actively working against [Asian] interests” (Collins, 2021).

Consequently, this tension has created problematic and, at times, acrimonious discourse: the neoconservative move that pits Asians against other minority groups (Lee & Huang, 2021; Lee, 2009; Takagi, 1993), the model minority myth (Lee, 2009), and the outright de-minoritization (Lee, 2006) of Asian have left the Asian American community feeling displaced. They are simultaneously othered by the White mainstream (Bauman, 2013; Lee, 2009; Takagi, 1993) while their minority status is erased in education discourse (Kang, 2022). Kang cited a recent workshop led by an advocacy group called the Center for Racial Justice in Education (CRJE), sponsored by then-New York City education Chancellor Richard Carranza, in which Asians were excluded as a minority group. When asked why, “the moderator said that Asians ‘benefit from white supremacy’ and therefore did not need to be included in the analysis” (Kang, 2022a, p. 127). This reductive binary racial grouping is also embedded in education discourse. Consider the following passage from a recent *New York Times* article on the Asian student experience in specialized high schools in New York City: “Citywide, elementary school gifted classes enroll about 16,000 students and are 75 percent white and Asian. Of late, the

city's new mayor, Eric Adams, has proposed adding new gifted and talented programs in Black and Latino neighborhoods" (Powell, 2022). White and Asian are grouped together, which is indicative of the de-minoritization that Lee (2006) wrote about and the perception that Asian achievement is a "benefit" of White supremacy.

The implications of this are that it makes it seem that Asian immigrant communities do not face structural boundaries, which has translated to Asian communities being overlooked when it comes to targeted social service funding meant to help minority groups (Asian American Federation, 2018). As Takagi (1993) put it:

Both popular and academic understandings of "race" are shaped and defined by the categories "black" and "white." In this conventional frame of black/white relations... Asian Americans are neither "black" nor "white" [which] has meant that Asian Americans have functioned as a "wild card" in racial politics—their experiences are frequently ignored or appropriated by others (i.e., non-Asians) in discourses about race. (p. 1)

Of course, a confounding element of this is likely that Asian families do not ask for help even if they need it, since needing help is stigmatized—which then allows them to judge those who do ask for help. These trends in both discourse and policy leave the Asian community conflicted. It explains why, on the one hand, some embrace White adjacency and attack equity measures like Affirmative Action (Lee, 2009; Liptak & Anemona, 2022; Takagi, 1993). On the other, some maintain that this is a ploy to keep White upper class hegemony intact, and, therefore, the Asian community must maintain minority status and stand in solidarity with other minority groups in the fight for equity (Lee &

Huang, 2021). How students in this study responded to this ideological tug-of-war was of interest to me. In the end, the student response was mixed.

Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Achievement

In the broader conversation about education equity in the United States, socioeconomic status (SES) has been found to be a predictor for various academic achievement measures (Battle & Lewis, 2002; Chall et al., 2009; Hedges et al., 1994; Miller, 2023; Sirin, 2005; Watkins & Edwards, 1992; White, 1982). Ravitch (2020) declared that recent test- and standard-based school reforms have been “insufficient to overcome the burdens of poverty” (p. 56), and achievement gaps have not closed in the last decade—if anything, they have widened (Hussar et al., 2020). However, students of Asian descent in the U.S. have complicated this narrative, as they have managed to achieve despite high levels of poverty, particularly in immigrant communities in urban settings like New York City.

Although Asian people in the U.S. are less likely to live in poverty than other minority groups (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021), in New York City, “roughly one in four Asian New Yorkers lived in poverty in 2020—comparable to the share of Black and Latinx New Yorkers living in poverty and double the poverty rate for white New Yorkers” (Robin Hood, 2022). Conversely, Asian Americans have been the least likely to receive government aid. Asian American Federation (2018) study showed that, despite the high numbers of poverty, “only 1.4% of social service contracts went to programs designed to serve Asian New Yorkers, who are now 15% of the population” (p. 9). Despite this, Asian students represent the overwhelming majority at the highly selective admissions exam-based specialized high schools in New York City (Shapiro, 2019; US News and

World Report, 2021). “In Sunset Park, a largely undocumented and uneducated population of Fujianese immigrants live well below the poverty line, but their children attend the specialized high schools in wildly disproportionate numbers” (Kang, 2022, pp. 126-127). More broadly, disadvantaged children of Asian immigrant families have been found to routinely surpass their native-born, middle-class white peers in terms of academic achievement (Hsin & Xie, 2014; Lee & Zhou, 2014).

During the pandemic-ravaged 2020-21 school year where only 22% and 20% of eligible students in New York City sat for the state exams in English and Math, respectively:

Asians notched the highest proficiency number in math, with 17,264 students passing from 23,809 test takers — a 72 percent rate. White students were second with 13,226 of 19,062, a 69 percent passage clip. Of the 27,443 Hispanic students who sat for the math exam, 8,411 passed — a rate of 31 percent. Of the 12,362 black children who took the math test, only 3,318 passed — a proficiency rate of 26 percent. In English, whites had the top passage rate at 79 percent, followed by Asians at 76 percent. Black students came in at 48 percent, and Hispanics at 47 percent. (Algar, 2021)

In short, in New York City, Asian students achieve despite high levels of financial hardship and even disruption to normal schooling. What’s more, “these disparities aren’t particular to the SHSAT or New York City: ‘Every American city with a significant Asian population and magnet schools has similar outcomes’” (Kang, 2022, p. 126).

Social Capital and Achievement

Furthermore, academic English language proficiency and English language fluency are “highly predictive of academic success” (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010, p. 501). In a review of literature, Hoff (2013) concluded that “the clear and consistent finding from this work is that children exposed to a language other than English at home enter school with lower levels of English skill than do monolingual children” (p. 7-8), which has long term implications for academic success. In speaking about non-native speakers in the U.S., Milner IV (2007) asked outright, “how can society and educators expect students to arrive at the same place when they do not begin their education at the same place?” (p. 391) Here again, Asian American achievement in the United States complicates this narrative because 66% of Asians Americans speak a language other than English at home, though this does not discount families where English *is* spoken at home in concert with another language (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021).

Given these data, it is a topic of interest as to why and how Asian American students are achieving and gaining access to selective schools for their children. Hsin and Xie (2014) examined three popular explanations: (1) socio-demographic factors (e.g. “their parents tend to be better educated, and they are more likely to live in stable, two-parent families with higher incomes” (pp. 8416); (2) superior tested cognitive ability; and (3) greater work ethic and motivation, instilled by “parenting practices that better cultivate ... qualities that, in turn, enable their children’s academic success” (pp. 8416-8417). Through a quantitative analysis of two nationwide longitudinal studies, Hsin and Xie debunked the first two (socio-demographic factors and superior tested cognitive ability) and determined that the major determining factors were: (1) work ethic; (2) belief

in connection between effort and achievement; and (3) immigration status—whether the student or parent or both were foreign born.

However, they added an important caveat: “this outlook is sustained and reinforced by important processes that we do not directly observe” (p. 8420). Specifically, they point to the on-the-ground reality of “supplemental schooling, private tutoring, and college preparation, and vital information necessary for navigating the education system, resources that are often unavailable to other immigrant groups and poor or working-class natives” (p. 8420). The present study aims to “directly observe” these important sustaining and reinforcing processes: namely, “supplemental schooling, private tutoring, and college preparation” (Hsin & Xie, 2014, p. 8420). In short, this study aims to examine and shed light on the people (Asian American students) behind the statistics and polemic in an oft-overlooked field (shadow education) where they can acquire vital resources for navigating the education system, but also where foundational cultural matrices converge and unfold.

It is important to note that achievement measures vary broadly among Asian subgroups, and has been acknowledged as a “unsettled and contradictory set of identities” (Takagi, 1993, p. 1). For example, the National Center for Educational Studies (NCES) (2019) reported that “[a]mong Asian 16- to 24-year-olds, status dropout rates ranged from 0.7 percent for individuals of Korean descent to 29.7 percent for those of Burmese descent” (p. v). In comparison, the same data shows the range for Hispanic subgroups to range from 2.9 percent for Peruvian students and 22.9 percent for Guatemalan (NCES, 2019). This study will focus on students of East Asian descent (Chinese, Japanese, South Korean). To acknowledge the class disparity, it was important to study two settings: an

upper-middle class suburb (New Jersey) and an urban area (Flushing, Queens). In all, I observed three supplemental schooling centers—two in northern New Jersey and one in Flushing.

Problem Statement

Students participating in the shadow education system succeed within the given parameters of the existing education system and should not be blamed for the system, its requirements, standards, or processes. The education system and the society in which it is situated was not constructed to benefit the Asian American population, per se, but they continue to excel despite structural setbacks. We need to change the discourse regarding Asian students in the U.S., which can be fraught with pejoratives and paint this community in ways that misrepresent, demonize, or outright erase them. I cannot help but think that the recent uptick in anti-Asian sentiment and acts of violence in the U.S. starts with dehumanization.

The discourse around Asian American students has characterized them as both lacking personality and deferential to authority: “robotic” (Chun, 2013; Rhee, 2016), “passive” (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b; Kim & Jung, 2022a; Min & Jo, 2022), “‘bland’ and ‘not exciting’” (Hassan, 2019), or “flat” (Hartocollis, 2018). Interestingly, the culture of shadow education has been characterized as “cutthroat” (Kim, 2019); “tiger” (Wang, 2021), “parasitic” (Dawson, 2010); “education fever” (Lee, 2011); “corrupt” (Lee, 2011). I say “interestingly” because there exists a conceptual paradox wherein Asian students are seen as overly deferential to authority, but the adults are seen as transgressive—forgetting that one group grows to become the other. This negative stigma reportedly has caused some Asian students to deny their ethnicity by checking “Other” instead of

“Asian” on college applications, and by downplaying what they perceive to be stereotypically Asian extracurricular activities, so they seem “less Asian” (Qin, 2022).

The stigmatization of Asian American achievement aligns with a general pattern of “othering” of non-White populations: “racialized systems of knowing can make it difficult for researchers and others to interpret or conceptualize a situation in a community of color as normal... Different from the White majority, in this sense, is often perceived as... substandard” (Milner IV, 2007, p. 389). In the case of shadow education in the Asian American community, even when the values (in this case productive and achievement-oriented) align, the methods by which the Asian American community overcomes its structural obstacles and pursues this common and ostensibly sanctioned objective is racialized and subordinated, if not outright demonized. As a result, Asian American students’ achievements are minimized.

Negative characterizations of Asian American students and their achievements—that they are somehow an affront to an otherwise fair system—are dehumanizing and laden with “Western, and possibly colonial, interpretations of Asian students” (Min & Jo, 2022, p. 77). Rather, Min and Jo (2022) theorized that as educational landscapes evolve, East Asian students’ identities are most aptly characterized as “nomadic” or adaptive. As Kim and Jung (2022a) put it, “unlike the ... images of East Asian students as passive learners, students take active and proactive roles when making important decisions in terms of why/how/what they learn” (p. 6). Likewise, as this study found, the Asian American students I observed who attended private learning centers were decision makers when it came to their learning and achievement, and they were conscious of, if not guilt-laden about, the pejorative discourse that existed about them and these centers.

It is my hope that the student participants benefitted from being able to speak about and reflect on their experiences.

There are substantial reasons why students of Asian descent in the U.S. (particularly in a place like New York City) should *not* be achieving—namely, high rates of poverty and low social capital (i.e., English is not the primary language spoken at home). These factors often translate to “an oppositional collective social identity that entails a willful refusal of mainstream norms and values relating to social mobility” (Zhou & Kim, 2006, p. 7). Yet, the data show that Asian American students continue to achieve according to existing standards at higher rates than any other racial demographic. This suggests not a refusal but an acceptance and conformity to existing norms and values, which has led to their excelling within existing achievement standards. For their efforts, though, the Asian community simultaneously (paradoxically) has been characterized negatively—as transgressors (i.e., gaming the system) and perpetrators of an inequitable status quo.

The reality is more complex: the Asian immigrant community is overcoming its own structural boundaries by building its own paths to the social mobility—shadow education being one. As Kang (2022a) pointed out:

These hagwons, as they’re known in Korean, have found themselves at the center of a contentious debate about education equity and testing in the nation’s largest school districts. Within New York City, they would come to be associated with a type of tacky, unfair immigrant striving that would ultimately become synonymous with supposed wealth and privilege, even when many of their students lived well below the poverty line. (2022a, p. 115)

Yet, there is not much research about shadow education in the United States; the vast majority of work has been conducted and published in East Asia and Europe (Luo & Chan, 2022). Its position outside the public education system signifies exclusivity, elitism, and classism—not to mention that they have operated mostly outside public consciousness, in the shadows, as its moniker suggests. Ironically, shadow education’s centrality inside Asian immigrant communities in the U.S. is a result of a history of colonialism and assimilation that has evolved into a pathway to social mobility.

In addition, within the shadow education field, students are learning not only the academic skills they need to advance themselves in the system, but are also experiencing cultural and ideological resonances and inscription (Bourdieu, 1998)—shaping and informing their identities in powerful ways (Bray, 1999; Han & Suh, 2020; Kim & Jung, 2019, 2022c; Lee, 2011). What those are and how they are can only be gleaned by examining the material realities and experiences on the ground.

The Purpose Statement

This study focuses on the learning lives of a community of students who are learning not only the skills to prepare them for the task of navigating the college admissions process, but also internalizing cultural matrices and imperatives. Equivalent scholarship conducted in South Korea on shadow education contributed deeper understandings of student learning and perceptions of school; teaching methods that caused students to prefer shadow education learning over their compulsory school learning; and the way shadow education shaped the way students thought of effective or even useful knowledge (Kim, 2008; Kim, 2016; Kim & Jung, 2022c).

To that end, this ethnographic case study features seven students across three shadow education centers in the New York metropolitan area and surrounding suburbs: two in Bergen County, New Jersey and one in Queens, NY. In so doing, I will illuminate the reality of an underexamined element in the discourse around Asian American student achievement: private institutionalized supplementary learning, known as “shadow education,” or hagwon. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of students in actual shadow education learning centers (or hagwons) that are independently run by Korean American proprietors (i.e., they are not large corporate franchises like Kumon or Princeton Review) and primarily serve their immediate Korean American community.

This study is an ethnographic case study—each student experience represents a case. I observed students in their natural hagwon environments, conducted open-ended interviews with them, and collected and analyzed artifacts—generated by both the researcher and participants. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of the people who engage with shadow education learning and shine a light on their experiences. In so doing, I will humanize (Paris & Winn, 2014) the participants of shadow education, by augmenting or countering (or both) prevailing narratives around shadow education (see Appendix A). As with most issues, the truth is likely a complex mixture of all these narratives and counternarratives. Unfortunately, the counternarratives are often relegated to and dwell on the outskirts of public consciousness—that is to say, in the shadows—something this study will rectify.

Thus, the study is built on the following three research questions:

Research Questions

- What are the experiences and perceptions of students in a shadow education learning center situated in a Korean American community?
- What, if any, tools and practices (e.g., resources, skills, behaviors, literacies) do students learn and/or enact in a Korean-run shadow education learning center?
- What similarities and differences emerge when comparing and contrasting different hagwon experiences?

Answering the Call

From the outside, it is easy to be reductive and assume that students attend test prep to serve one function: to do well on tests. On the inside, however, based on my own experience, preliminary research, and extant literature, they are learning much more. In addition to test preparation, they are negotiating how to fit in with their peers, please their parents, live up to cultural expectations, and endure difficult tasks while staying true to their own happiness and goals. In other words, there is social value reproduction and identity-formation occurring in shadow education learning centers that translate to shadow education's prominent and fixed position in the cultural topography of the Korean American community. In short, students who attend shadow education are not just testing machines; they are much more complex and interesting, and so are these spaces.

Consequently, several calls to action have been sounded for more qualitative data on shadow education learning centers here in the United States (emphasis mine):

[I]t is readily apparent that significant theoretical and empirical work remains.

First... is the possibility that students act like "adolescent econometricians"

(Beattie 2002), engaging in cost/benefit analyses of test preparation based on knowledge of the importance of the SAT or even the way in which affirmative action policies shape college admission chances. This assumes that high school students have fairly complex knowledge regarding admissions policies and SAT score thresholds, but the extent to which this is the case is unclear. Future scholarship should grapple with this question head on, perhaps using *ethnographic observation or open-ended interviewing of adolescents concerning what occurs in schools, their knowledge of the realities of test taking and college admission, and the extent to which they engage in systematic strategizing.*

(Buchmann et al., 2010b, pp. 488-489)

Buchmann's call is for qualitative data—observation and interviewing—regarding the students' familiarity with the complexities and intricacies of the testing system and college admissions process. As we will see, both in the literature review and findings, this information is essential knowledge capital within the ethnic economy of the Korean American community for various reasons.

When it comes to the Korean American community, there are two geographical areas of interest named by Park (2016) where sizable Korean American populations exist (and are, thus, the areas of focus in this study): Flushing, Queens, and Bergen County, New Jersey. In response to these calls for research, through this ethnographic case study, I observed, conducted open-ended interviews, and studied artifacts (i.e., photos and documents selected by both the participants and the researcher) from three shadow education learning centers run by Korean American business owners operating in Flushing, Queens, and Bergen County, New Jersey.

In line with Buchmann's (2010b) and Park's (2016) calls to action, this study takes a closer look at the way students "strategize" (Buchmann et al., 2010b) their way through the college application process with the knowledge exchanged in these centers. Indeed, while the on-the-ground reality of the centers is of particular interest, we must keep in mind that they operate within a social framework. To achieve a more nuanced understanding of shadow education and its participants, Buchmann et al. (2010a) argued that we must move "beyond basic analyses of individual/familial attributes and toward a more sociologically informed focus on the dynamics of structural opportunity and the interplay of stratification and institutional processes" (p. 456). In other words, shadow education does not exist in a vacuum. It is the site of a complex interplay of social elements that need to be considered. Indeed, this study will situate shadow education in a broader discussion of the Asian immigrant experience in the United States and see shadow education for more than a path toward academic achievement and socioeconomic advancement—but rather as a site of cultural transmission and reproduction.

Zhou and Kim (2006) suggested looking at particular "social structures" wherein members of a community participate and perform cultural values. In other words, shadow education and its students are situated in complex, networked, and embedded social spaces and fields (Bourdieu, 1998) which shape them (the institutions and their agents) in profound ways. As Zhou and Kim concluded (emphasis mine):

Ethnic social structures are manifested in various economic, civic, sociocultural, and religious organizations lodged in an ethnic community, as well as in social networks arising from co-ethnic members' participation in them. *Therefore, an examination of specific ethnic social structures, namely ethnic language schools*

and afterschool establishments that target children and youth, can provide insight into how community forces are sustained and how social capital is formed within an ethnic social structure, while illustrating how culture and structure interact to create a social environment conducive to educational achievement. (p. 5-6)

Zhou and Kim's (2006) scope is closely aligned with the scope and conceptual framework of this study. The patterns that emerge from studying multiple shadow education learning centers in and across the different Korean immigrant communities named by Park (2016) might help render a more nuanced and complex picture of not just shadow education, but also the "ethnic social structure" that Zhou and Kim spoke of.

The methodology for this study (detailed in Chapter 4) is couched in humanizing research (Kirkland, 2014; Paris & Winn, 2014), which works to examine and ultimately change oppressive narratives regarding immigrants and people of color. I focused on the lives and experiences of one such group—Asian American shadow education students—and examined them through the theoretical lens of Bourdieu's (1998) concept of habitus. Bourdieu theorized that an individual reproduces a set of socialized values (called a "habitus"), which subsequently guide behavior and thinking. Given the potentialities in how a habitus can unfold in each individual, students can choose—both subconsciously and consciously, at various times—what social capital (i.e., markers of status) to enact to give them the best chance at a desired outcome. In this way, these students behave as *bricoleurs* (Derrida, 1988; Lévi-Strauss, 1962)—cobbling together tools and practices—from the various cultural and historical threads acting on them and unfolding their habitus in a "field" (i.e., whatever part of the world they are navigating at a given time). These tools and practices can include resources (e.g., academic, emotional); skills (e.g., test-

taking strategies, resilience); behaviors, or habits (Bourdieu, 1998) (i.e., self-directed study habits (Kim & Jung, 2022b)); and an expansive definition of literacies (Heath, 1983; Street, 1984) (e.g., not only decoding, say, test questions, but also discerning the political stance of the test). In this study, the field is the shadow education learning center (both individual sites and the sites as a collective whole) and the “habitees” are the student participants.

There are also unexpected outcomes of shadow education. While parents and students who invest in shadow education do so with the intention of strategizing to advance themselves in school admissions processes and access social mobility (Buchmann et al., 2010b; Choi & Park, 2016; Jansen et al., 2021; Tessler, 2022; Wiseman, 2021), shadow education learning centers are also an expression of core cultural beliefs, expectations, and values. In addition, they also provide a safe, parent sanctioned setting outside school where young people can interact with other members of the community, from adults who echo their parents’ values to other students who might further augment or counter this cultural messaging. Put simply, there are different meanings and purposes for shadow education that make it more than just a place where test-prep occurs. As Buchmann et al. (2010b) said, “researchers should not view shadow education as a rigid stratification structure, but rather a social process, enacted in creative, overlapping ways by actors attempting to reify their advantaged positions or climb the social ladder” (pp. 489-490).

Ultimately, this study will humanize (Paris & Winn, 2014) a community of Korean American students by presenting their voices and their stories. In describing humanizing ethnography, Kirkland (2014) pointed out, “studying culture, and studying it

well, is important because our research on culture has real consequences for real people” (p. 197). Not hearing from actual participants can lead to the kind of reductive perceptions that allow dehumanizing renderings of this population. Shining a light on the on-the-ground experiences of people will show us the side that gets lost, flattened, even villainized, amid the statistics and broad discourse.

CHAPTER 2 HISTORY OF KOREAN SHADOW EDUCATION

“‘Everyone was so quiet,’ says Jin-yeong. ‘Even the teachers were told to wear trainers so their shoes didn't make any noise that could distract the students’” (Sharif, 2018).

Testing Culture in Korea

Every November, at 8:40AM on the day that the college entrance exam—called 대학수학능력시험, which is Korean for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT)—is administered, the country comes to a standstill.

Planes are grounded and military training ceases. Occasionally the stillness is broken by distant sirens - police motorbikes racing to deliver students running late to their exam. Many nervous parents spend the day at their local Buddhist temple or Christian church, clutching photos of their children - prayers and prostrating are sometimes timed to match the exam schedule. (Sharif, 2018)

In the hours leading up to the exam, the gates in front of the schools where the students take the test are lined with younger students, who hold signs, sing songs, and distribute 옛 (“yeot”), a traditional Korean candy that symbolizes luck. Once the exam begins, however, the entire country bands together to minimize any potential distractions to the test taking students. Even proctors wear quiet shoes to minimize noise. About a month after the exam, the government posts every individual student’s score on a national website for all to see (Sharif, 2018).

Testing is deeply entrenched in Korean history and culture. The first standardized exam, called *gwageo* (과거), which was a state examination used to recruit high-ranking officials, was first implemented in 958 AD (Kim, McVey, et al., 2022, p. 47). The *gwageo* has its own fascinating and fraught history—as it was, for a while, the only path

to rank for non-aristocratic people in Korea. Over time, however, corruption made it so only certain people could even sit for the exam, and eventually, it was abolished in 1894 as part of the Gabo Reforms, which tried to eradicate the old rank system and formal class distinctions. Still, Korean culture continued and still continues to measure merit and admit students to top high schools and universities based on their performance on a new system of notoriously difficult standardized exams (Kim, 2016). To this day, to gain entry into prestigious universities in South Korea, students must navigate an intensely competitive college entrance exam process (Park, 2022). Given this deep-seated cultural emphasis on exams as the foundation of their competitive educational system, and “the realization that the school exam is much more difficult than what they learn in school” (Park, 2022, p. 103), Korean students are “eager” to turn to shadow education to prepare for school exams (Kim, McVey, et al., 2022).

To provide historical context and a deeper understanding of how shadow education became a fixture in Korean culture, this chapter will detail the history of shadow education in Korea and the Korean American community in the United States. First, I will examine the longstanding relationship that the Korean people have with standardized exams. Then, I will talk about the Western influence in South Korea, post-Korean War, that laid the infrastructure for what would become shadow education learning centers there. Then, I examine South Korean immigration to the U.S., during which shadow education was brought along. Lastly, I will discuss how a simultaneous shift to STEM and data-driven education in the U.S. created the conditions for shadow education to establish itself and proliferate in the U.S., despite some political resistance.

Teaching English and Christianity

Korean shadow education “in its modernized form, called *hagwon*, first appeared in the late Joseon Dynasty when Korea began to accept western culture” (Park, 2022, p. 95). The first *hagwons* were established in 1903, and primarily served as part-time youth academies as part of a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) initiative (Kim, 2016, p. 15). As the name suggests, the original purpose of these schools had religious-colonialist motivations. Missionary schools serving Asian populations in the early 20th century were mainly geared towards assimilation: “sites for learning the English language” and converting people “away from their traditional religion and cultural beliefs and into Christianity” (Au et al., 2016, p. 55). This supplementary language and ecumenical academy system would provide the infrastructure for shadow education as we know it today.

Post-Korean War Globalization

In 1954, after the Korean War, education in South Korea became compulsory, and *hagwons* spread quickly thanks to the increase in student numbers and the growing prosperity of households in the 1960s (Park, 2022). As admission to elite upper-level schools and social success became more of a focus, shadow education continued to gain popularity. Parents who had experienced extended periods of war and poverty “prioritized their children’s education in the hope that their children would lead better lives than they did” (Park, 2022, p. 95).

South Korea’s first civilian-elected president, Kim Young-Sam, ushered in a new push for participation in the global market: “The state’s push for English speaking ‘global citizens’ in a deregulated educational climate ultimately resulted in the rise of a multi-

billion-dollar private English education market in South Korea” (Choi, 2021, p. 46). The financial crisis and IMF-bailout in 1997-1998 restructured the South Korean economy by encouraging more foreign investment into the country and making it easier for large companies to lay off workers—thus, companies remained flexible within a rapidly changing economic landscape (Saito, 1998). This created unprecedented unemployment, and English education became all the more important in a job market that was increasingly competitive and focused on globalization. In fact, one’s English proficiency became a point of national pride, and the mark of a good citizen who was “investing in their own futures and carrying the torch towards South Korea’s global ascendance” (Choi, 2021, p. 47). This fueled even more shadow education spending.

In other words, shadow education was part of a long-held cultural emphasis on academic success as measured by merit-based exams, which translated to social mobility and elevated social and economic status. And as the world becomes more competitive, the long-known advantages of shadow education are becoming indispensable. And this perception continues to grow. Indeed, “informed by a combination of parental expectations and socio-cultural characteristics, shadow education is still growing in Korea. This is due to students’ desire to enter special-purpose high schools or high-ranking universities, to get better jobs and thus higher income after graduation” (Park, 2022, p. 95).

Regulating Shadow Education

Between the 1960s and 1980s, there were efforts in South Korea to “prohibit shadow education” (Min & Jo, 2022, p. 84), but to no avail (Dawson, 2010; Lee, 2021). In 1974, the South Korean government initiated a push to abolish the exam altogether and

implement a random lottery system to assign students to regional high schools, through a policy known as high school equalization policy (HSEP), which is spreading to more cities across the country (Byun, 2010). However, Byun notes that for some, the HSEP had the opposite intended effect, as the heterogeneity in the resulting classrooms actually increased the demand and desire for tailored instruction offered by shadow education. Then, in 2004, acknowledging the ineffectiveness of banning shadow education outright, the government implemented the Policy for Reduction of Private Tutoring Expenditure through the Restoration of the Public Education System, which detailed a ten-point program to mitigate the need for shadow education expenditure:

- A. Offer e-learning courses
- B. Offer different levels of supplementary lessons after school based on school performance
- C. Enrich extracurricular activities
- D. Offer after classes for young elementary school students for working parents unable to send them to child-care center
- E. Adoption of a diversified teacher evaluation system
- F. Changing teaching and assessing methods
- G. Prioritize high school records and extracurricular activities while reducing its focus on CSAT scores in the college entrance system (Wu, 2021, p. 2689)

This effort, too, was ineffective, since most “didn’t consider the government tutoring service as an effective substitute” (p. 2689) and subsequently did little to curtail spending on private shadow education.

History of Korean American Shadow Education

In contrast to the long tradition of testing in South Korea, the first formal standardized exams in the United States emerged after the Industrial Revolution and the progressive movement, which removed school-age children from farms and factories and placed them in schools. As student numbers grew, schools turned to standardized tests to assess large numbers of students more quickly and easily (Fletcher, 2009). French psychologist Alfred Binet's standardized test of intelligence was developed in 1905; and in 1926, a 90-minute 315-question exam testing vocabulary and basic math called the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) was founded by the College Board, which was then "a nonprofit group of universities and other educational organizations" (Fletcher, 2009). The ACT came later, in 1959 (Fletcher, 2009). The SAT and the ACT are the most used and most famous exams today; high school students in the United States generally take one or the other as part of the college admissions process.

Immigrant Waves

The proliferation of standardized testing in the U.S. mid-Twentieth Century coincided with the uptick in Asian immigration to the U.S., though Korean immigration remained relatively low until after the Korean War. In 1930, there were only about 10,000 Korean immigrants, as compared to 375,000 Chinese immigrants since 1820 and 275,000 Japanese immigrants since 1860 (Au et al., 2016). The period between the late-Nineteenth Century (e.g., the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882) and the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration Act was rife with anti-Asian sentiment and violence, including segregated schools for Chinese and Japanese students, with Asian

immigration effectively ending with the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924 (see Kang, 2022a).

Then, from 1950 to 1964, the infusion of Western values in South Korea after U.S. involvement in the Korean War precipitated a second wave of immigration to the U.S. It included “primarily young Korean women married to American servicemen, Korean war orphans adopted by American families, and a small number of elite students and professional workers” (Zhou & Kim, 2006, p. 10). The third wave, post-Immigration Act of 1965, saw an infusion of over 800,000 Korean immigrants admitted to the U.S. as permanent residents (Zhou & Kim, 2006), in addition to tens of millions of new immigrants from “previously ‘undesirable’” countries ... [like] Asia, southern and eastern Europe, and Africa” (Kang, 2022a, p. 22). In 2021, there were 1.9 million Koreans Americans (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021).

Cross-Pollination

Thus, around the middle of the 20th Century, a cross-pollination of cultures occurred between the regions. As shadow education grew in South Korea in response to Western industrialism (Park, 2022), the South Korean imperative to succeed academically through standardized testing saw a new fertile breeding ground here in the U.S., where standardized testing was becoming accepted as standard practice. This is not to mention the push to make the U.S. national curriculum more rigorous, a shift that occurred during the Cold War, post-*Sputnik*:

Not only was it ideological and military; it was a "technical" war as well. There were "knowledge gaps," and our schools were under accusation for creating them.

Could our schools keep America technologically ahead of the Soviet Union in the endless Cold War? (Bruner, 1996, p. xii)

Subsequently, a curricular emphasis on math, science, and engineering was seen “as the key to world preeminence” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 268). Given this now-*global* alignment of values, it was only a matter of time before the Korean emphasis on education and the attendant shadow education system would find their way and establish themselves in the Korean diaspora, which they did, in the 1970s, in the form that we see hagwons today (Choi, 2021; Kang, 2022a; Kim et al., 2021).

Joojaewon Envy

An interesting historical note in the spread of modern shadow education in the Korean-U.S. community centers around the corporate boom of the 1980s, when South Korean companies like Samsung and LG sent workers (referred to as “*joojaewon*”) came to the U.S. on a temporary assignment, with the expectation that they would return after several years. Shadow education became a way for *joojaewon* families to keep up with the accelerated South Korean curriculum so their children would be able to transition back to the South Korean school system upon their return. However, Korean American immigrant families saw the advanced academic progress children of *joojaewon* families were making and wanted the same progress for their own children, even if they intended to stay in the U.S. (Kim, 2008): “The success of these Ha-Gwons caught on with other Korean parents who saw the benefits of this extra schooling... Other Korean parents began to seek the same advantage for their children” (p. 64).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

K. H. Kim (2021) noted that education in the U.S. has turned more test-centric since the late 1990s. In January 2002, George W. Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with the goal to “reduce achievement gaps between different SES groups and improve rankings on international tests” like the PISA exam, which the OECD began administering in 2000 (K. H. Kim, 2021, p. 21). NCLB effectively made standardized test scores “the primary measure of school quality. The rise or fall of test scores in reading and mathematics became the critical variable in judging students, teachers, principals, and schools” (Ravitch, 2016, p. 15) nationwide. Now, testing was sanctioned and ordained by the federal government as the singular standard by which all students would be measured. As Ravitch (2016) put it, “Whatever could not be measured did not count” (p. 21). This heightened emphasis on standardized testing in the American psyche only reinforced the fervor for test preparation that already existed in communities that valued test scores as a pathway to access higher education.

Rite of Passage

Thus, “for a significant portion of East Asian American students, taking SAT prep is a rite of passage during the high school years to the point where doing so has been called ‘one of the defining characteristics’ of being Korean or Chinese American” (Park, 2012, p. 626). Their aspirational pursuit of social mobility through the education system is very much engrained in the Korean American experience. The existence of specialized high schools that require entrance exams like the SHSAT; the inclusion of SAT and ACT scores in the college application process; as well as the growing emphasis on school

performance in the U.S. aligns with the primary motivation of students in South Korea to pursue shadow education opportunities.

Equity Matters: Testing Companies Combat Racial Disparity

In 2014, The College Board (2014) announced drastic changes to the SAT, among them eliminating antiquated vocabulary words; not penalizing for wrong answers; and doing away with the essay section, which brought the total possible composite score down from 2400 to 1600. The College Board decided to drop the writing section citing the wide disparity of scores on that particular section based on family income (Goldfarb, 2014).

The reading comprehension section was also redesigned to include materials that reflected typical high school and middle school curricula. Toldson and McGee (2014) wrote:

Some of the proposed changes to the SAT are aimed at addressing a known achievement gap that could be a proxy for race or socioeconomic status—the gap between students who participate in test prep and those who don’t. Currently, test-preparation materials began at \$25, and test-preparation courses and tutoring cost up to \$6,600. More-affluent families spend more money to “train” their children to take the test, which often involves skills that have little to do with crystallizing the knowledge they should have gained in high school. The significant gains in SAT and ACT scores achieved by the students, who participate in the more expensive test programs as reported by the test-prep companies, call into question the integrity of the tests. (p. 1)

The critique that “expensive test programs” and their high tuition fees perpetuates class disparities based on family income has been shown to be true (Buchmann et al., 2010a; Goldfarb, 2014; Kim & Choi, 2021). Kim et al. (2021) found that private shadow education learning centers proliferated most in communities with high parental income and education, and Jansen et al. (2021) found that shadow education worldwide generally favored high-SES students and families.

However, the story is more complex. What does not emerge in these studies is that there are low-income communities that think of shadow education learning as an essential expense and their only path to social mobility (Kim et al., 2021; Kim & Choi, 2021; Luo & Chan, 2022; Teranishi et al., 2004; Tessler, 2022). Case in point, Elma Moy, a learning center owner in New York City, said she caters mainly to “the children of Chinatown vegetable sellers who pay in \$10 bills” (Spencer, 2013). Powell (2022) cited a student whose parents enrolled them in a \$4,000 boot camp tutoring center, which to the family constituted “a small fortune,” but that it was so normalized that “everyone in the community knew it was your turn to take the test.”

In their study of Asian subgroups attending college, Teranishi et al. (2004) found that Korean American students took “SAT preparation courses” at the highest rate among Asian subgroups (52.4%), regardless of socioeconomic status. In fact, in some subgroups (i.e., southeast Asian and Filipinos), lower-income students were actually *more* likely to take SAT prep than their high-income counterparts. They found disparities between high-income and low-income Korean students in SAT prep, but Park (2012) noted that “low-income Korean Americans actually have quite high rates of SAT prep, and the gap between low-income and higher income Korean Americans is relatively slim (49.1% vs.

56.2%)” (p. 628). Researchers like Buchmann et al. (2010a) insisted, “If researchers do not attend to the growth of shadow education, they will surely miss an important process through which inequality might manifest” (p. 456). What this misses is that for many immigrant enclaves in the United States, shadow education is their way of addressing existing structural inequality (Kim, 2022d).

This is not to mention that the infrastructure for shadow education was laid originally to impart colonialist instruction. If anything, the recent fervor for shadow education could be seen as a response to the neoliberal shift towards global testing standards. This aligns with research that shows the World Bank and UNESCO initiatives pushing the rapid expansion of mandatory schooling, especially among lower-income countries, has led to an “unplanned expansion of shadow education” (Bray, 2022, p. 69), as families find themselves held to higher standards but cope with substandard public infrastructure. This is to say, any perceived inequalities are not *because* of shadow education—again, shadow education moves as the body moves (Mori & Baker, 2010). If anything, it is *evidence* of a system that has inequities coded into its structure—and, for some, shadow education is their only recourse in addressing and overcoming those inequities.

CHAPTER 3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, shadow education has been called “probably the most significant international trend in education in the 21st century” (Entrich, 2020, p. 442). Given the scope and scale of its expansion, shadow education’s influence on achievement has been described as inconclusive, even confusing (Byun & Park, 2012; Luo & Chan, 2022): from positive (Buchmann et al., 2010a; Byun & Park, 2012; Ha & Park, 2017; Jung & Go, 2021; Seo, 2018; Xue, 2019), to mixed (Choi et al., 2012; Choi & Park, 2016; Kim, 2015; Wiseman, 2021; Zhang & Liu, 2022), to modest, marginal, or null (Jung & Seo, 2019; Ryu & Kang, 2013; Zhang & Xie, 2016), even negative (Hong & Park, 2012). In other words, research is divided about the universal effectiveness of shadow education. Results seem to depend on contextual factors like student background, learning styles, and how success was measured (i.e., test scores, learning, or student well-being).

For instance, within South Korean studies, type of achievement mattered: Kim (2015) found that shadow achievement was significant on testing but not school performance; Choi et al. (2012) found that when it comes to testing, shadow education helped with math and reading but not science; Han and Suh (2020) found a short-term gain in mathematics achievement but a long-term loss in creativity. Location and grade level mattered: Ha and Park (2017) found that the biggest increase in performance among shadow education participants was high school students in urban settings. The type of studying mattered, too: studies showed shadow education led to increased “self-study” or “study-alone time” (time spent studying alone), which led to higher achievement (Jung & Go, 2021; Seo, 2018); a subsequent study (co-authored by Seo) found no relationship

between shadow education and “self-regulated learning” (self-reflective, self-motivated learning) (Jung & Seo, 2019), while Hong and Park (2012) found a negative relationship. What is clear is that the results heavily depend on the purpose of SE for students and their contexts.

Shadow education has been called a “secret weapon” (Jones, 2021), and credited with helping gifted students excel further (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022a, 2022b; Min & Jo, 2022; Seo, 2018). Conversely, shadow education has been credited with remedial intervention for students who are marginalized or fall behind (Ho et al., 2019); a particularly poignant study looked at the use of shadow education to help “left-behind” students of migrant parents in China and Tibet (Peng, 2021). Thus, individual cultural contexts need to be examined more closely: i.e., the needs and investment of the various people in and around hagwon (Jarvis et al., 2022). This literature review will examine shadow education in the South Korean and Korean American contexts. (For a table of themes and findings, see Appendix B.)

When it came to SES access, class divides in shadow education use is larger in some countries than in others. Entrich (2020) studied data from 63 countries and determined significant “cross-national variation” (p. 441) in socioeconomic access to non-formal or shadow education. The biggest factor in predicting high-SES parental investment in shadow education was incentive. Societies with institutional differentiation (i.e., tracking, high-stakes testing) within a society’s education system were more likely to see unequal access to shadow education. But in places like East Asia, where shadow education is “accepted as completely normal,” shadow education could “help reduce educational and social inequality, as socially disadvantaged students overcome their

disadvantages through the use of SE” (p. 444). A meta-analysis of shadow education in a developing area similarly showed that shadow education can be “an avenue for enhanced and enrichment learning for the student’s socioeconomic and academic development” (Kim & Zelcer, 2023, p. 4), though the same study found that shadow education can also exacerbate the disparity between urban and rural education systems. Put simply, when it comes to shadow education, “simple generalizations are not supported” (Entrich, 2020, p. 470).

Shadow Education: South Korea to U.S.

In the 2018 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report (OECD, 2018a), South Korean students were at or near the top in almost every achievement category. A report by UNESCO (2015) touted South Korean government’s equity initiatives in their public schools: “In the Republic of Korea, teachers in disadvantaged schools benefit from incentives” (p. 200), suggesting that the state-run school system was responsible for student success. However, according to the PISA report, 41.8% of South Korean school principals who participated in the study “reported a lack in educational material” (p. 23) in schools with “Advantaged students” (p. 23). That number rose to 53.7% in schools with “Disadvantaged students” (OECD, 2018a, p. 23). In comparison, participating principals in the United States complained about lack in educational material at much lower rates: 13.1% in schools with advantaged students and 17.6% for disadvantaged; in Canada, 3.1% and 21.1%, respectively. South Korea’s numbers more closely resemble developing nations like Bosnia Herzegovina’s (47.4% and 66.8%) and places South Korea well above the OECD average (20.6% and 34%) in school dissatisfaction. This survey data align with extant qualitative research, which has

observed “the limitation of schools’ learning materials in supporting the mastery of subject knowledge” (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b, p. 66).

Kim and Jung (2022a) explained, “what is largely disregarded in the discourse on the academic success of East Asian students... is shadow education, commonly known as private supplementary tutoring” (p. 2). In fact, Kim and Jung went so far as to declare, “to understand the academic success of students in East Asian countries, shadow education must be at the center of the discourse” (p. 3).

Based on my review of the literature, I synthesized the following four categories to structure and organize the findings of this literature review—first in the South Korean context, then the Korean American context:

(1) Shadow education is a normal part of life: shadow education is an accepted, unquestioned part of life for students and their families.

(2) Instruction: the instruction in a shadow education facility can vary, from remedial intervention to acceleration; from school subjects to exclusively test preparation; and consulting on holistic admissions processes (e.g., portfolio curation, interview training, essay writing, etc.).

(3) School is not enough: compulsory schooling is not enough to meet the academic needs and aspirations of students and their families. Thus, shadow education fills a need.

(4) The hidden curriculum: shadow education points to larger societal or structural issues (e.g., economy, equity, race, etc.).

Hagwon: South Korean Shadow Education

In 2021, 75.5% of all South Korean elementary, middle, and high school students attended some sort of shadow education, for an average of 6.7 hours per week (that time increases as one gets older), and at a cost of 367,000 Won (about \$300) (Statistics Korea, 2022). Wealthier families spend closer to \$1,000 per month (Kim & Choi, 2021). When compared to the 2022 statistic that showed that 73.8% of the population attend college (Yoon, 2023), one can extrapolate that South Korean students who intend to attend college must attend hagwon.

Shadow Education is a Normal Part of Life

At her young age, a student in Kim's (2016) vignette did not see the extra instruction as a burden, but rather, went so far as to call it "fun" (p. xiv). This is corroborated by extant research: South Korean students prioritize their shadow education curriculum over their school curriculum, viewing their shadow education as a "more effective way to achieve academic success over public schooling" (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b, p. 70). Kim (2008) declared, in no uncertain terms, "Korean students depend more on the supplementary education than public schools because of the competitive college entrance examinations and frequently issued reforms of the education system." (p. 101). Exley (2021) quoted a former vice-minister of education who said that hagwons market themselves by perpetuating the widely accepted belief that parents who don't send their kids to private institutes are considered bad parents—what is referred to as "anxiety marketing." Bray et al. (2018) found that families will take out loans to pay tutoring fees. Park and Lee (2021) found that families with school-aged children made housing decisions based on the availability of high-quality private education options.

Further evidence of the inextricability of hagwon in students' lives is the number of hours they spend there, which Kim (2008) detailed: "Public schools in Korea end between 3PM to 4PM in the afternoon for elementary school students and 4PM to 5PM for middle and high school students. Most students head to Ha-Gwons immediately after they have been dismissed from school and it is not unheard of for older students to work at the Ha-Gwons until 1AM or 2 AM" (p. 101). This is such an issue that in 2006, the government imposed a 10PM curfew on hagwons, with public officials patrolling the streets to ensure compliance, but the hagwons get around them by either turning out the lights or paying officials to inform them when inspections are coming (Exley, 2021). Put simply, hagwon is a reality that is ingrained on an individual, family, and community level.

Instruction Meets Individual Needs

South Korean students can get help in targeted subjects of study, in this case, math, English (i.e., language), and academic writing. Expanded "varieties of learning materials that a student can use regarding the level of content and their specific learning purposes" (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b, p. 65). A wider variety of resources translates to more individualized instruction, tailored to the particular needs of the student (Park, 2022).

In other words, shadow education can tailor its instruction to meet the varying needs of students at all levels of need, from remediation to acceleration: "Students who are behind in their schooling receive remedial programs that have tailored learning materials to help them catch up [...] Advanced students have accelerated learning opportunities at PTIs [private tutoring institutions] through advanced and condensed learning materials" (p. 64). Indeed, shadow education learning centers are perceived as

“meccas for gifted education” (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022a, p. 195), and are effective for the very same reasons that they are effective interventions for struggling students. As such, Kim, Jo, et al. (2022a) attributed shadow education as a major contributing factor in Korean students’ consistent success in international Math and Physics Olympiads. Jung et al. (2022) added that the repeated exposure to the curriculum material results in a deeper level of learning through a process called “elaborative rehearsal,” which guides students from novice to mastery in a way that turns learning into long term memories.

Kim (2008) found that instruction materials can vary depending on the type of hagwon: independently owned hagwons can have tailored instruction designed and delivered (i.e., lectured) by instructors whereas franchise owned hagwons often have branded workbooks and instruction materials published by their companies. Hagwon instructors are generally licensed, having teaching experience, and in some regions, intimately familiar with the requirements of the nearby schools, which aligns with Bray’s (2022) research that the roles of school teachers and shadow education instructors are starting to blur.

Other common practices include the creation of portfolios and emotional coaching (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022a; Kim & Jung, 2022b; Kim, McVey, et al., 2022; Park, 2022). Individualized portfolios contain evidence of student learning, accomplishments, and information about that student’s best learning practices. These portfolios inform further coaching and for elite high school admissions (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022a). Portfolios demonstrate that shadow education has the ability to adapt, which is significant as American holistic admissions standards make their way to South Korea (Bastedo, 2021). Shadow education also provides psychological coaching and counseling (Park, 2022) to

help students overcome emotional and psychological difficulties—which provides a “counter-narrative to the predominantly negative interpretations of shadow education in terms of students’ emotions and well-being” (Kim & Jung, 2022b, p. 27).

School is Not Enough

It is possible that the elevated standard to which South Korean students hold themselves has created a need for more difficult exams to further differentiate between students within the South Korean system. This could explain why it is known and accepted that the material on the exams exceed the material taught in school (Park, 2022). “The levels needed for elite high school entrance tests are beyond a school’s curriculum, as they require more knowledge and higher levels of thinking skills” (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b, p. 71). This last point is corroborated by Jung et al. (2022): “Entrance examinations for top schools in Korea [...] often include questions about material that has not yet been taught in school classes, or that may have been presented in school classes but not at a complex level. Therefore [...] mastering school content cannot guarantee success in admission” (p. 117). Thus, shadow education is no longer a luxury for those who want to excel; rather, it becomes a necessity.

To take on the challenges of the school and testing curricula, students engage in “preview learning,” wherein students learn ahead of time in their shadow education institutions what they are about to learn in their public schools. For instance, “many students study the entire content of the first semester of fifth grade during the winter break of fourth grade” (Jung et al., 2022, p. 115). They further found that Korean “students who are preparing for admission to upper schools may learn school materials that will be presented one to six grades later” (p. 117).

Preview learning can have varied effects. On the one hand, Jung et al. (2022) found that students who engage in preview learning in their shadow education “tend to lose interest in classroom learning” (p. 111) and will spend school hours doing shadow education homework or sleeping (Bray, 2013; Jung et al., 2022). On the other hand, Kim, McVey, et al. (2022) also found that given the difficulty of the national curriculum in South Korea, preview learning reduced stress and increased confidence about school learning. Kim and Jung (2022b) found that “basic learning skills, self-directed studying habits, and positive attitudes about learning” helped students to be “more likely to become active participants” (p. 26) at school. Thus, “Korean students and parents consider SE [shadow education] preview learning to be a normal and effective part of education” (p. 45).

In a study of preview learning in South Korea, Jung et al. (2022) cited an educational NGO in Korea that analyzed the curricula and textbooks used to teach mathematics in six advanced regions (U.S., Japan, Singapore, U.K., Germany, Finland), and compared them with the curricula and textbooks used to teach mathematics in Korea. The NGO found that “Korean mathematics curriculum progressed faster than the other six regions, with Korean students learning mathematics about 25% more rapidly. It also found that Korean fifth grade students study material similar to that learned by eighth grade students in the U.S.” (p. 113). Jung et al. (2022) also cited a YouTube video that shows university students in the U.S. and U.K. having difficulty answering questions on the English section of the Korean university admissions exam (CSAT): “The English section in the CSAT is notorious for its severe difficulty” (p. 113).

The Hidden Curriculum

Kim, Min, et al. (2022) found that South Korean shadow education comes with a hidden curriculum. Students internalize the following: (1) a stratified selective attitude towards school subjects; (2) a value system of education that equates learning with improving rote test-taking skills and gathering test-related information; (3) a devaluation of their public-school teachers' professionalism and opinion; (4) become aware of social inequities due to the family's obligation to pay tuition.

A Stratified Selective Attitude Towards School Subjects. There is a heavy emphasis on math achievement since perceptions of academic prowess and future career prospects both heavily favor mathematics (Baker et al., 2001; Choi & Park, 2016; Han & Suh, 2020; Kim, 2008; Kim & Choi, 2021; Yoon et al., 2021). Yoon et al. (2021) explained that mathematics, specifically calculus, is “viewed as both a token of academic excellence and a significant contributor to student stress... An underlying assumption here is that colleges use mathematics scores as the primary selection criterion in admission decisions and that mathematics provides access to opportunity and status” (p. 665).

Learning Equals Test-Taking Skills. Kim, Min, et al. (2022) found that students who attend shadow education adopt a pragmatic attitude toward achievement over learning: “genuine understanding and mastering of knowledge is often believed to be unnecessary” (p. 217). Han and Suh (2020) found that shadow education resulted in a short-term gain in mathematics achievement but a long-term loss in creativity. Since shadow education learning centers answer to the needs and desires of their customers—the students, but more so their parents—who pay for results, “many shadow education

practices are focused on test-taking skills... Because shadow education is oriented toward students' academic success and the success is measured by exams, shadow education practitioners provide students with the quickest methods for enhancing their academic achievement" (Kim, Min, et al., 2022, p. 217).

A Devaluation of Public School Teachers' Professionalism and Opinion. Jung et al. (2022) found that students who engage in preview learning in their shadow education "tend to lose interest in classroom learning" (p. 111) and will spend school hours doing shadow education homework or sleeping (Bray, 2013; Jung et al., 2022). Not only do students prefer shadow education learning, they "prioritize" it, (Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b) since high test scores lead to desired outcomes (Kim & Choi, 2021).

Awareness of Social Inequalities Due to Tuition. Studies have shown the association between upper SES families' ability to afford shadow education as a way to maintain social status for their children (Byun, 2014; Choi & Park, 2016; Dawson, 2010; Entrich & Lauterbach, 2022; Kim & Choi, 2021). When students become aware of social inequities due to tuition, it is yet another signal to students that ultimately what matters is financial stability and social mobility—the ability to afford hagwon is increasingly associated with success (Kim, Min, et al., 2022).

There is an added emotional toll that this culture of pressure and competition takes on the students. Asian students reported lower "positive feelings toward themselves ... less time with friends ... more conflict with both parents," culminating in a "lower subjective well-being" (Hsin & Xie, 2014, pp. 8420-8421), not to mention sleep deprivation (Noh et al., 2020; Rhie et al., 2011). On the other hand, contrary to the prevailing narrative, shadow education can be one of the tools students use to cope with

and navigate the increased pressure and content demands (Bray, 2013; Jung et al., 2022; Kim, Jo, et al., 2022b). It could be that the *need* for shadow education is a referendum on a larger global ethos—one that is making its way to the U.S.—that fosters pressure, desperation, and despair.

Korean American Shadow Education Theory

U.S. shadow education is defined as privately run (as in paid for) learning centers specifically engineered to advance students in the college admissions process (as opposed to in-home private one-on-one tutoring) (Buchmann et al., 2010a, 2010b). In fact, Byun and Park (2012) found that private one-on-one tutoring (as opposed to formal testing center education) had “trivial” impact on SAT scores compared to taking a commercial test preparation course. [Incidentally, studies South Korea also found that receiving instruction at a formal learning center was more effective than private home tutoring (Byun, 2014; Ha & Park, 2017; Jung & Go, 2021).]

Shadow education has exploded in the U.S.; Kim et al. (2021) estimated that the number of private tutoring centers has grown “steadily and rapidly, more than tripling from about 3,000 to nearly 10,000” (p. 2) between 1997-2016. The increased interest in shadow education in the U.S. seems to be a result of increased reliance on standardized testing after No Child Left Behind and an overall increase in a general sense of “increased competition and pressure among high-ability students [that] leads them to search for ways to maximize their chances for success, including the use of private tutoring” (Kim et al., 2021, p. 3).

In the following section, the similarities and differences between shadow education in South Korea and in the United States are broken down according to the four-point Shadow Education Theory.

Shadow Education is a Rite of Passage

E. J. Kim (2021) characterized the shadow education industry in the U.S. as “evidently unique” (p. 55)—that is, because the U.S. education system is different from the rest of the world’s, the attendant U.S. shadow system does not follow SE trends found elsewhere. For instance, the existence of charter schools allows for school choice that is unique to the U.S., whereas the homogeneity of the South Korean school system is cited as a reason for the need for hagwon. Kim intuited that school choice would have a negative correlation to private tutoring; however, Kim found that school choice (i.e., the presence of a charter school in a district) had only a weak correlation—and a positive one, at that—to the prevalence of private tutoring.

On the surface, it would seem U.S.-Asian shadow education should be different from East Asian shadow education since testing is more deeply integrated into school system in East Asian countries than it is in the U.S. Admissions into the top high schools and universities in South Korea rely solely on standardized admissions exams, as opposed to being one component of a more holistic application or portfolio, as it is in the U.S. (Bastedo, 2021).

However, akin to South Korea, in the United States, shadow education has a "substantive and empirical focus on college test preparation" (Buchmann et al., 2010b, p. 483). The existence of elite specialized high schools that require entrance exams like the SHSAT; the inclusion of SAT and ACT scores in the college application process; as well

as the growing emphasis on school performance in the U.S. aligns with the primary motivation of students in South Korea to pursue shadow education opportunities. Thus, as has already been mentioned, shadow education has become a defining rite of passage for the Asian American students (Park, 2012). Tessler's (2022) longitudinal quantitative study of rejection rates of Asian students in the U.S. found data suggesting that "shadow education' is justified and necessary" (p. 17). The aspirational pursuit of social mobility through the education system is very much engrained in the Korean American experience.

Shadow education learning centers in the U.S. can vary in shape and scope. Some test prep centers are recognizable brand names like Princeton Review, Kaplan, Kumon, Sylvan, and Huntington Learning Centers (Byun & Park, 2012; Kim et al., 2021). In cities and suburbs with high concentrations of one ethnicity, tutoring centers cater to the students from that specific background: "These institutions are fixtures of the ethnic economy: A drive down the streets of Koreatown in Los Angeles or any community with a high concentration of Korean Americans reveals the wide availability of 'hah-gwans,' after-school tutoring centers that cater to students of Korean descent" (Park, 2012, p. 627). These local centers are generally run by small business owners from the same countries of origin as the families they serve, and model their centers on the centers in their home countries (Baker et al., 2001). The immigrant community then supports these centers through the "ethnic economy" network: i.e., their services are advertised in "ethnic media," like local Korean newspapers carrying advertisements "touting the prestigious colleges that clientele gain admission to" (Park, 2012, p. 627), as well as the other course offerings and services beyond SAT prep they might offer. In some cases,

students can enroll in shadow education for general enrichment and tutoring services prior to high school—which we saw in the case of my research participant, Kay, who enrolled at her shadow education center in fourth grade to prepare for a middle school entrance exam. SAT prep courses and college application consultation become a logical next step (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Still, Kim (2008) explained that in the United States, hagwon is not as academically needed as it is in South Korea. Learning centers can be seen as needed supplementary test prep and preview education (more on that in subsection 3), but they also serve as information centers to navigate the byzantine admissions process for schools of all levels (especially for parents who are new to the country), and even after-school childcare. Still, its academic necessity does not preclude its inclusion in one’s daily life or consciousness. Powell (2022) cited an interview with a former student in New York City (of Bengali descent) who spoke about having her and her peers’ names and pictures published in the local Bengali newspaper upon gaining admittance into the specialized high school in New York City, so much a part of the Asian immigrant community consciousness are admissions tests and the preparation process. In the Korean American community, hagwons will run ads in local Korean newspapers “touting the prestigious colleges that clientele gain admission to” (Park, 2012, p. 627). [On a personal note, when I was hired by my specialized high school, a New York-based Korean newspaper ran an article on me, for which I interviewed.]

Instruction: Not Much Known

For all the attention and curiosity that shadow education has garnered in the last 20 years, there were no formal studies done that went into a U.S. shadow education

center and spoke to the students in the center engaging in its instruction (Luo & Chan, 2022). There were quantitative and meta-analysis studies. Ho et al. (2019) found that the use of shadow education breaks down along racial lines: Black and Hispanic students use PSEAs (private supplementary education activities) to “catch up,” whereas Asian students use them to “get ahead.”

Buchmann et al. (2010a) used the phrase “systemic strategizing,” defined as a “fairly complex knowledge regarding admissions policies and SAT score thresholds” (p. 489). Park (2012) specified in more detail that test-specific preparation teaches the students about the intricacies of the test itself and the strategies they will need to solve it (e.g., the format of the test or the benefits of guessing versus skipping a question), as well as the ins and outs of the selective admissions process (e.g., “the difference between getting a 650 versus 700 on SAT-Verbal or the pros and cons of taking the test multiple times” (p. 627)). In this way, test prep is akin to a sort of hack, but this seems to carry a sinister connotation. To wit, Toldson and McGee (2014) argued, “Whether changes to the SAT will make scores more predictive of college performance and reduce affluent families’ ability to ‘game’ the test will not be known until years after changes are implemented” (p. 1).

In a different primarily English-speaking OECD country, a mixed methods study in Australia found that 100% of surveyed students found their shadow education to be effective in some way (Gupta, 2021). A theme in Gupta’s qualitative student responses seemed to be that shadow education [they referred to shadow education as “tuition”] made up for the shortcomings of their compulsory schooling: “Tuition helps to understand intricate concepts better than schools” (p. 101). Students perceived personal

attention (i.e., one-to-one or small group instruction) as beneficial or potentially beneficial.

This preliminary picture of shadow education instruction is complex. My interview data suggest varied instruction methods, cultures, and student perceptions of shadow education learning centers in the U.S. that the literature has yet to explore. Namely, the level of instruction depends on individual contexts: the cultures, needs, and investment of the various students, teachers, and communities of each center.

School is Not Enough

In contrast to the demanding standards of the South Korean tests, which knowingly go beyond the scope of the school curriculum, U.S. standardized tests like the ACT are intended to reflect what is taught in school—at least in theory.

Ed Colby, a spokesman for the test-preparation organization, said the test is intended to measure skills that students should have learned in high school, and that college professors expect their students to have mastered. The best preparation for students is to take a broad and rigorous high school curriculum, he said.

“ACT prep is learning the material you're being taught in your classes,”

Mr. Colby said. (Samuels, 2008, p. 6)

However, 83 percent of the Chicago high school juniors surveyed “believed that ACT scores are primarily determined by test-taking skills. Only a third of English and science teachers said they believed the ACT is a good measure of learning in schools” (Samuels, 2008, p. 7). Likewise, critics of New York City’s specialized high school entrance exam, the SHSAT, have noted that the material being tested on the exam is beyond what is

being taught in the state's Common Core middle school curriculum (Hu, 2018). In short, school is not enough.

In 2014, The College Board (2014) announced drastic changes to the SAT: eliminating antiquated vocabulary words; not penalizing for wrong answers; and making the essay section optional, which brought the total possible composite score down from 2400 to 1600. The College Board also decided to drop the writing section, citing the wide disparity of scores on that particular section based on family income (Goldfarb, 2014), and redesigned the reading comprehension section to include materials that reflected typical high school and middle school curricula. The changes had little effect. Despite the redesigns, Asian performance across the board (i.e., Math and Verbal scores) only got stronger between 2015-2021, and the disparities between ethnic groups remained largely the same (The College Board, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

The Hidden Curriculum

K. H. Kim (2021) wrote about an unintended consequence of the test-centric education model in the U.S. post-No Child Left Behind: “High-income families spend more than low-income families, but enormous burdens are on low-income families as they spend higher percentages of their incomes on test preparations” (p. 22). This study showed that students in the U.S. are aware of class and the financial considerations of their shadow education experience (and of the college admissions process in general) the way South Korean students were (Kim, Min, et al., 2022).

Comparing South Korean and Korean American Shadow Education

While applying South Korean shadow education theory to Korean American students in the United States can illuminate some of the cultural carryover from the

country of their origin (e.g., seeing education as their path to social mobility), it is important to note that there are essential differences, too. In synthesizing the literature from the two regions (South Korea and U.S.), important similarities and differences emerged.

Kim (2008) pointed out a major discrepancy in not only the perception of shadow education between South Korea and the U.S.—“the role of Ha-Gwon in Korea is more academically crucial than in the United States” (p. 101)—but also a cultural difference that is likely more impactful on the influence of shadow education on achievement. Namely, in South Korea, as was previously noted, it would not be unusual for students to get to hagwon right after school and study there until 2AM:

This would not be practical for students in the United States... The educational environment for United States students is not nearly as competitive and extracurricular activities are valued nearly as much as academic achievements, so consequently, Korean American students do not have as strong a need for long daily Ha-Gwon sessions. In Korea, however, it is very difficult to follow the general curriculum without supplementary help. (p. 99)

Practically and culturally, the idea of a middle- or high-school student at a test prep center until 2AM is not palatable in the U.S.

What is unclear is how much the other themes (i.e., instruction, school is not enough, and the hidden curriculum) are carrying over. How do students perceive the relationship between their shadow education learning and their school learning? How normalized is it? In South Korea, school and shadow education are integrated. It is unclear if this is the case in the U.S. Furthermore, it is unclear what kinds of teaching our

students are experiencing in their shadow education learning environments, and whether students privilege shadow education learning over their school instruction. Globally, Bray (2022) noted that school teachers and shadow education instructors must increasingly account for one another. Whether students have noticed this happening in a U.S.-specific context is unclear. Bray further noted a linguistic stratification in English between “tutor” and “teacher” that does not necessarily exist in the same way in other languages (p. 65). I happen to know that in Korean, instructors both at school and in their hagwons are referred to as “sun-seng-nim.” One wonders how much the linguistic stratification in English contributes to a perceived difference here in the U.S.—if it exists at all—on the part of the students.

Relatedly, whether shadow education has caused students to look at their schoolteachers as less professional than their shadow education instructors is also unclear. Kim (2008) found that hagwons in South Korea often require not only teaching licenses, but also teaching experience, “because a university degree or specialized knowledge does not always translate to effective teaching ability” (p. 97). They recruit top teachers “who are known for their teaching abilities” (p. 97)—based on the input of parents and students—from the local schools to make sure hagwon instruction will prepare students to succeed academically. They are also then observed to ensure quality control.

These are the type of qualitative data missing from the literature here in the U.S. that this study aims to fill. Further, U.S. shadow education is perceived as a need in the Korean immigrant community to compensate for what they perceive as higher test score standards for Asian students in the college admissions process (Byun & Park, 2012; Lee

& Zhou, 2015; Liptak & Anemona, 2022; Qin, 2022; Timsit, 2019). This need to compensate could be responsible for increased motivation and performance. The extent to which students are calculating which subjects to focus on because of the climate of testing is unclear, and a question raised by Buchmann et al. (2010b), which I allude to in the introduction of this chapter. Perhaps most crucially (at least to this educator), whether shadow education learning is translating to students perceiving rote learning as the most effective or *important* form of learning is also unclear—and therefore, again, worth asking students directly.

Lastly, how the issues of equity and economy are being internalized are unclear. In the U.S. context (and, to some extent, the U.S. as part of the global context), Korean American students' presence in a shadow education learning center reaffirms the reductive and stereotypical narrative as achievers—which, on the surface feels like a positive thing. However, when it is paired with the prevailing perception that that is their exclusive domain with nothing else much to offer (Hartocollis, 2018), or that it is in some way illicit or testing the boundaries of fair play (Bray, 2022; Toldson & McGee, 2014), their being viewed as studious and achievement-oriented somehow turns negative. There is an equity piece to this too, as the existence of shadow education implies that compulsory school as not enough, whereas for other populations, compulsory school is all they have access to or even know about. Thus, shadow education is implicated in perpetuating class disparity (E. J. Kim, 2021; Ravitch, 2016, 2020), since shadow education tuition can be prohibitive (Buchmann et al., 2010a; Byun, 2014; Choi & Park, 2016; Dawson, 2010; Entrich & Lauterbach, 2022; Kim & Choi, 2021).

This stigmatization of Asian American achievement aligns with a general pattern of “othering” of non-White populations: “racialized systems of knowing can make it difficult for researchers and others to interpret or conceptualize a situation in a community of color as normal... Different from the White majority, in this sense, is often perceived as... substandard” (Milner IV, 2007, p. 389). In the case of shadow education in the Asian American community, even when the values (in this case productive and achievement oriented) align, the methods by which the Asian community overcomes their structural obstacles and pursues this common and ostensibly sanctioned objective is racialized and subordinated, if not outright demonized.

Implications

Mori and Baker (2010) specified how shadow education will continue to evolve: "As the nation’s official education system moved toward the world model of education over time, the structure and logic of the educational system shaped the practices of shadow education, as to who purchased them for what goals. So as education changes as an institution, so does shadow education" (p. 45). Mori and Baker further predicted that “mass shadow education will be a legitimate part of education itself” (p. 46). As it stands, Mori and Baker’s prediction seems to be materializing both internationally and increasingly in the U.S.

However, in comparing the South Korean and U.S. (with a particular focus on Korean American) shadow education systems, what is most clear is the dearth of literature on shadow education here in the U.S. Kim’s (2008) dissertation comparing the hagwon experience in South Korea and the United States relied mostly on interviews of math instructors to speak on behalf of the students. Kim looked at the learning materials

in one subject—math—and concluded that the role of hagwon in the U.S. is far less essential, though not unimportant. In the thirteen years since that study, as Luo and Chan (2022) pointed out, there is no research that speaks to the on-the-ground experience of shadow education students here in the U.S.: “in terms of methodology, an overwhelming percentage of studies adopted quantitative surveys. More varied research methods, including narrative inquiry, ethnographic approaches and multimodal analysis, would contribute to meaningful findings” (p. 14). The larger ethnographic case study that this review is attached to is meant to illuminate the students and their stories.

CHAPTER 4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The imperative to achieve, which is shadow education's *raison d'être*, is a reproduction of a societal imperative towards productivity and industrialized conceptions of work. Bourdieu (1998) acknowledged the power of the institution of education, specifically the standardized exam, as “reproduction strategies” (p. 19) of social elitism: “By means of the competitive examination and the ordeal of preparing for it, as well as through the ritual cut-off—a true magical threshold separating the last candidate to have passed from the first to have failed, instituting a difference in kind indicated by the right to bear a *name*, a *title*—the school institution performs a truly magical operation, the paradigm of which is the separation between sacred and the profane” (p. 21). In other words, the “ritual” of separating the elite and the non-elite, akin to the way Medieval societies separated the sacred and the profane, is structured according to quantifiable terms that generally benefit those already in power. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) referred directly to the school institution and its exams as a way of perpetuating the status quo—or a “pedagogical action”—an idea that has been reaffirmed (E. J. Kim, 2021; Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; Ravitch, 2016, 2020).

A key phrase in Bourdieu's (1998) aforementioned quote is particularly relevant to this study: “the competitive examination and *the ordeal of preparing for it*” (p. 21, emphasis mine). Incidentally, Bourdieu acknowledged the presence of private learning centers, naming Japanese Juku and Yobi-ko (the Japanese equivalents of hagwon) as ways for families to invest money into their children's education (p. 19) and assert their financial advantage in service of preserving their status. Bourdieu bracketed shadow education into the domain of the elite, but we know better. In the Korean American social

space, the “ordeal of preparing for” exams (and whatever other gatekeepers to higher education access) has the potential to be a destabilizing variable in the fixed education narrative reinforced by having to *bricolage* (or cobble together) (Derrida, 1988; Lévi-Strauss, 1962) from cultural threads that foreground the same achievement imperative. Given this starting point, shadow education is situated in a complex position: by acknowledging the reality of the exam and preparing its students for it, shadow education is perceived as an extension of an unjust system. On the other hand, the service it provides for families with low social and/or economic capital (e.g., the mainstream language not being spoken at home or low level of parent education) sometimes makes it the only recourse for those families to overcome structural obstacles and access social mobility.

The conceptual framework for this study pulls together Bourdieu’s (1998) habitus and Derrida’s (1988) poststructuralist breakdown of Lévi-Strauss’s (1962) *bricolage* to examine the culture of shadow education, aka hagwon. First, a discussion of habitus describes the process of value reproduction: In a shadow education context, this might look like a student who attends shadow education in order to score well on the SAT. In so doing, the student then perpetuates the virtues of standardized testing as a meritocratic measure of aptitude and the Confucian maxims that obedience to one’s parents, hard work, and discipline—even at the expense of one’s own immediate happiness and comfort—are the keys to a good and virtuous life.

Then, a description of Lévi-Strauss’s (1962) concept of *bricolage* examines the shadow education student’s construction of their individual habitus as a process of cobbling together various tools, perspectives, and resources from cultural and historical

threads that are both distinct and convergent in the shadow education field. For instance, a student sitting with a difficult problem set for a long time may be able to transfer that same perseverance with difficult problems at school or in a game they like to play. Derrida's deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss's bricolage idea makes the point that students in a shadow education field are engaging in a process of learning and becoming that is dynamic, transboundary, and universal, but is not exclusive to any one group. Derrida would argue that the aforementioned student is no different than any person or discourse that is a product of a variety of influences—which is everything and everyone. In short, shadow education students are simply doing what all students do; the difference is that their resources and values align (by design) with the values that are privileged by organizations like OECD, assessments like PISA, and other gatekeepers of the Western industrialized world. This, of course, is no accident. Shadow education tailors itself to the movements of the main body to which it is attached (Mori & Baker, 2010); it is a “rational calculation” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 76) by the Asian community to optimize their odds for success.

Habitus

Bourdieu (1998) defined the habitus as a “generative and unifying principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices.” (p. 8). In other words, Bourdieu argued that our behaviors and perceptions are an embodiment of a set of tastes, values, and behaviors: we are inscribed beings who are—both consciously and subconsciously—acting out a kind of script, one that was given to us by external influences, beginning with our parents and immediate families.

Habitus, then, is a disposition of the subject that embodies the values of the spaces in which the subject is situated. An individual's habitus unfolds in the material world or whatever segment of the world is in question, or what Bourdieu (1998) referred to as "fields" (i.e., in this study, the shadow education field):

This philosophy is condensed in a small number of fundamental concepts—habitus, field, capital—and its cornerstone is the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the habitus). (vii)

In other words, habitus is the set of values that the individual internalizes. The field is the physical place or setting where a person constructs their habitus. Capital are symbolic elements that signify social, economic, or cultural value that are displayed and exchanged within the field (Bourdieu, 2018). As we will see, Bourdieu resisted fixed definitions; thus, "field" can refer to a shadow education learning center (as in this study) or an entire country (as in Schmidt's (2013) study of the Barongo iron smelting group in Tanzania).

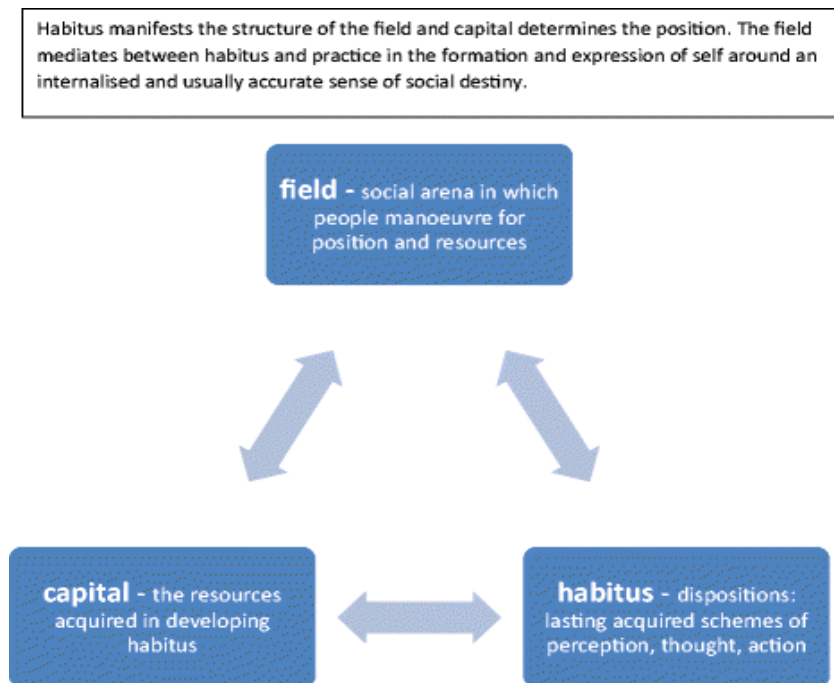
A helpful clarifying point here is that Bourdieu made a distinction between habitus and habit: habit focuses on the behaviors themselves. Habitus zooms out and thinks about the habits within the conditions that *predispose* people to those behaviors. This is not to say that habits are not important, too. But Bourdieu sees habits in context; they are shaped and inscribed by the value systems in which they are situated. Thus, the habitus is "a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world—the field—and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81). The habitus, then, is corporeal: the body is the site of internalization and

performance of a “unitary” set of values in a homologous process of transfer and action, which all takes place within a field. Thus, as illustrated in Figure 1, habitus, capital, and field are in a constant negotiation as they influence and shape each other. As Figure 1 visualizes, a habitus is inscribed with cultural values—the material trappings of those values are called capital. This interaction plays out in a site—or a field—which, in this study, is the shadow education learning center.

In sum, habitus is a homology wherein the habitee (the student with an internal habitus) reproduces capital (behaviors, tastes, symbolic cultural currency) within a field (a shadow education learning center or hagwon). Habitus reproduces the values and structures of the field in which it is situated; capital are the material signifiers of value hierarchy, which are how habitus show themselves materially.

Figure 1

Bourdieu’s Theory of Embodied Practice (McAdam et al., 2019)



The extent to which individual agents can successfully position themselves within a field vary, which creates variance across habituses (called “social space”) *and* within an individual habitus: “Like the positions of which they are the product, habitus are differentiated, but they are also differentiating” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 8). In other words, not everyone who is exposed to a given set of values will respond to them in the same way, much less turn out the same. Indeed, Reay (2004) pointed out that choice is an essential element of habitus. But that freedom also functions within a set of limitations, and those limitations are determined by time and place: “Choice is at the heart of habitus... but at the same time the choices inscribed in the habitus are limited. I envisage habitus as a deep, interior, epicenter containing many matrices. These matrices demarcate the extent of choices available to any one individual. Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in, her external circumstances” (p. 435). Here, Bourdieu (1998) considered the *statistical*, and how agents—once they are wise to the rules of the game and determine that it is worth playing—are strategic in the way that they might increase their odds of achieving desired outcomes. This is particularly applicable in the shadow education space, which is explicit about strategizing ways to optimize scores and subsequently odds for admissions into elite academic institutions (Buchmann et al., 2010a, 2010b; Tessler, 2022). This strategizing, and the end goals of that strategizing, reveals the set of values that make up this habitus: e.g., academic achievement, social mobility.

That said, Bourdieu (1998) also pointed out the limitations of habitus: (1) some of these social codes inscribe themselves in a pre-reflexive state; and (2) there are only so many responses one can have to a given set of social imperatives. Thus, on the one hand,

there is a determinism to Bourdieu when he argued for the homologous reproduction of social values, or the “unitary”: structures suggest a center or origin, and those structures are reproduced in the world. This is limiting and somewhat fatalistic. In fact, he went so far as to say that the universal “go hand in hand with the development of highly rationalized forms of domination” (p. 90-91). On the other, people have freedom and choice (though limited) within those structures. This is contingent and open-ended. Habitus finds, as Nash (1999) put it, “a ‘middle ground’, a form of ‘soft determinism’, in which the oppositions of objectivism and subjectivism are transcended” (p. 179). Habitus accounts for the negotiation of structure and subject—“social space and the space of the disposition of their occupants” (p. 15)—and acknowledges both the limitations and potentialities of the interplay between them as a habitus unfolds within a field.

The determinism in habitus acknowledged that to be of a culture or social space means that there will exist limitations in the way one can respond to said social environment. For instance, a Korean American hagwon is limiting in that the participants, by virtue of attending, are participating in test preparation on some level, and therefore are operating within the confines of the testing system as a component of the admissions system. At the same time, habitus is “soft,” or open ended, in the individual subject’s *choice* of response—albeit among the limited responses to the environment—which will subsequently manifest in their observable behavior (e.g., use or disuse of the tools and resources of a shadow education learning center). In other words, while subjects in a social space are said to reproduce its values, there is still difference among the subjects in a shared social space. In fact, Bourdieu (1998) considered the possibility of delinquency, wherein students “make a violent break with the scholastic order and the social order” (p.

28). Bourdieu spoke to the contrarian reaction to the values of the pressure-packed schooled society, but to Bourdieu, a contrarian reaction is *equally indicative* of the system. For instance, given that the students in this study are participating in shadow education, the range of reactions to the testing system is limited. Reactions might range from the traditional stance (i.e., that testing is a meritocratic measure of aptitude), to a contrarian stance (i.e., that tests measure how well one takes tests, and are therefore spurious, inequitable, or even harmful). Even a student who decides to opt out of taking a test they have prepared for will be making a strategic decision based on the same habitus as a student who commits fully to doing well on it. On the other hand, this habitus certainly will not include ignorance of testing in the admissions process. Thus, the potentialities are both unpredictable but limited by context.

The complexity and contradictions of habitus accurately reflect and serve as a framework for my object of study: just as the habitus relies on both the limits of structure and open-endedness of subject, students are both limited and expansive; the resources they cull from the shadow education space are both closed and versatile. Students who attend hagwon, with all its cultural imperatives (which we will detail in more depth later in this chapter), will react differently to the same social forces. Given that the field (hagwon) is shared but the internal lives of students are varied, this study aligns with Bourdieu's theory that the development of habitus is both unpredictable and limited.

Social Space and Field

“The social space is indeed the first and last reality, since it still commands the representations that the social agents can have of it” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 13).

Bourdieu (1998) defined the “social space” as “structures of differences that can only be understood by constructing the generative principle which objectively grounds those differences” (p. 32). Any group that shares social practices based on a structure of power distribution, interests, goals, proximity, even love or friendship, within a specific place and moment—“*collective histories*” (p. 3, emphasis his)—can be considered a social space. The field is the world or parts of the world in which social spaces operate.

The social space is Bourdieu’s foundation for his deconstruction and reconstruction of the idea of social grouping. A clearer picture of the concept of social space may be in his definition of a successful one: “the social agents on which it is exerted are more inclined because of their proximity in the space of social positions—and also because of the dispositions and, interests associated with those positions, to mutually recognize each other and recognize themselves in the same project (political or otherwise)” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 33). In short, Bourdieu’s reconstitution of the idea of “class” means that any group, if properly framed and bounded, can constitute a social space. The word “class” felt limiting for Bourdieu, as it connotes a socioeconomic group, which is only one of the many ways one can group people. Bourdieu was clear that basing a social space on one thing—whether that be socioeconomic, cultural, or even symbolic—would be a mistake. There are far more compelling ways to group people, lest we become like “those who pretend that nowadays the American, Japanese, and French societies are each nothing but an enormous “middle class” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 12). Rather, Bourdieu’s social spaces were based on embodied social practices—tastes, behaviors, rituals, etc.

It is important to note here that Bourdieu (1998) realized that “this does not mean that, inversely, proximity in social space automatically engenders unity. It defines an objective potentiality of unity” (p. 11). Again, Bourdieu eluded definitions, and often his terms were fluid. He was also reluctant to say that the unitary nature of the values being reproduced means that all habituses in a social space will be uniform. Indeed, habitus allows for the reproduction of the values of a social space to vary from individual agent to individual agent, though the mandates of the space can limit the range of those responses. Even within a single agent, an internal struggle can occur. Bourdieu (1999) considered this ongoing negotiation with a field or social space a part of habitus too: “A habitus divided against itself, in constant negotiation with itself and its ambivalences, and therefore doomed to a kind of duplication, to a double perception of the self, to successive allegiances and multiple identities” (p. 511).

The simultaneous limitation and open-endedness of the habitus was an important tenet for its inclusion in this conceptual frame, to account for differences among and within people in the restrictive nature of shadow education’s singular stated purpose. For those who come into the shadow education learning center environment, conforming to the culture of the center can be a motivating force. For those who are intrinsically motivated, the culture of the social space can be affirming and a place where one can cultivate and grow an existing desire to study and succeed academically. However, it can also be a traumatic experience; Bourdieu left room for that possibility, too. Ultimately, once a student enters the shadow education learning center orbit, seeing the embodied learning center culture can have a powerful influence on the students, though their

experiences and their reactions to those values can vary—both across participants, and within each.

Why Habitus?

While there is much written and theorized about identity construction, when it comes to education (especially Asian Americans in education), identity discourse can be tied to reductive labelling (Lee, 2009) and misrepresentation (Philip, 2014). To illustrate how labeling and identities can become conflated, I refer to Popkewitz and Brennan (1998), who explained a binary narrative in academic discourse, which breaks down students into 1) the at-risk, disadvantaged, urban child and 2) the “lifelong learner.” On the surface, Asian American academic success suggests that they would be situated as lifelong learners, but this categorization is reductive, and part of the de-minoritization (Lee, 2006) that occurs in the model minority trope (Chang & Shih, 2021; Ho et al., 2019; Lee, 2009)—the very discourse this study is designed to complicate. It also excludes the type of strategic learning occurring in disadvantaged urban immigrant communities who participate in shadow education (Buchmann et al., 2010a; Luo & Chan, 2022; Powell, 2022; Tessler, 2022). Moreover, it eliminates important distinctions within the Asian American community. To wit, Philip (2014) pointed out that the label, “Asian American,” struggles with a tension. On the one hand, it fails to “recognize the diversity among Asian Americans” (p. 224); on the other, there is a need to “unwaveringly [situate] Asian American as an identity that reflects struggles against racism, economic inequities, political disenfranchisement, social injustices, and exploitive immigration practices” (p. 224). The fluid, if not outright elusive, nature of Bourdieu’s (1998) definitions (e.g., “real” class as practice-based grouping) acknowledges and functions

within this seeming paradox (Harrison, 1993). Even within the Korean American community exists a complex tapestry of socioeconomic realities that shape identity and experience.

More broadly, Goffman's (1959) work on performative identities is focused much more on the fractured and contextual nature of the individual self. But this study is focused on the self (*habitus*) as well as a community of selves (social space). Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizomatic theory posited that influences on identity are mutualistic and interconnected. Min & Jo's (2022) study in South Korea that adopted rhizomatic theory examined students negotiating learning between *hagwon* and compulsory school. In contrast, my study is focused on how cultural influences and messaging converge on experience and perspective in *one* context: the shadow education learning center, though school is folded into the discussion as a point of contrast. For theorists focused on contextual identity formation and learning in situated spaces (Gee, 2004, 2015; Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991), expertise within the context of the learning space is the focus. For the participants of the current study, while the learning center may provide desired knowledge and expertise—and moving up the ranks of the *hagwon* may be a desired benefit—the participant response to the broader cultural impulses that inform the institution setting are of equal interest to this study. The cornerstone of *Habitus*, as defined by Bourdieu (1998)—i.e., “the two-way relationship between objective structures (those of social fields) and incorporated structures (those of the *habitus*)” (vii)—is uniquely equipped to address the cultural value reproduction and mutually inscriptive relationship between the participants of this study and their respective learning centers.

The Korean American Social Space

“The consumers include the parents as well as the pupils” (Bray, 2013, p. 415).

In writing about education (in France and in Japan), Bourdieu (1998) referred to families as “corporate bodies” (p. 19) and the noble class as a “corporate body” (p. 22), which demonstrates the fluidity of his terminology when it came to social spaces (i.e., *class*). For Bourdieu, social spaces were made real when they were mobilized toward a common goal, or else they were merely “theoretical classes” (p. 10), “class-on-paper” (p. 11), or a “*probable class*” (p. 11, emphasis his). The “real” class is one that is “realized” and “mobilized” that embodies some “properly symbolic (and political) struggle to impose a vision of the social world, or, better, a way to construct that world, in perception, and in reality” (p. 11). In this study, I will apply Bourdieu’s definition of social space to the Korean American community, which is a network of realized concrete spaces that are inscribed by the values of that community (Park, 2012; Zhou & Kim, 2006). A shadow education learning center reflecting an emphasis on academic achievement is an example of a field that reflects the values of the Korean American social space: specifically, a heavy emphasis placed on education and test-based achievement.

The Ethnic Economy

The Korean American community is structured around what Park (2012) referred to as the “ethnic economy,” which is “an ethnically based network of businesses and civic organizations that facilitate the flow of information and resources within an ethnic community” (p. 625). Kang (2022a) described these communities as “rigorously capitalist, insular cities” (p. 114). This network of fields—i.e., physical places—represent

a material infrastructure for their collective immigrant identity, where they can share “vital information necessary for navigating the education system, resources that are often unavailable to other immigrant groups and poor or working-class natives” (Hsin & Xie, 2014, p. 8420). Zhou and Kim (2006) argued that both the social forces and tangible institutions are necessary: “intangible community forces and social capital must be supported by tangible ethnic social structures in order to generate resources for upward social mobility beyond mere survival” (p. 5). Kang wrote, in line with this idea, “One of the most enduring expressions of this philosophy was the opening of independent schools and tutoring centers, which began in Queens and then spread across the country” (p. 114). In other words, hagwon is part of a value-laden ethnic economy, an example of a tangible institution infused with intangible community forces and social capital.

The ethnic economy also is how families find out about which hagwons are reputable, rigorous, and produce results. In the Korean American community, the church is a powerful site of information exchange (Min, 1992; Park, 2012; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Zhou and Kim (2006) went so far as to say, “The Korean church is perhaps the single most important ethnic institution anchoring this ethnic community,” as it is a site for “meeting religious and spiritual needs, offering socio-psychological support, economic assistance, and educational resources” (p. 12). Within this field, parents who do not send their children to hagwon risk looking jejune, if not downright negligent (Exley, 2021), since they are seen increasingly as “managers” (Vincent & Ball, 2007) of their children’s learning. This dynamic speaks to the idea, stated by Gusfield (1986) and quoted by Kliebard (2004), that education is, in a sense, just as much “for adults, not for children... There is an effort to dominate the rituals by which status is discerned” (p. 289). In other

words, structural definitions of success and by what measures success is measured as a society are defined more by the adults. Zhou and Kim (2006) also pointed to two main newspapers—*Korea Times* and *Central Daily*—as sources of information for Korean parents to stay informed regarding American education:

Korean immigrant parents learn about the American education system, average SAT scores of local high schools, rankings of top American colleges, college admission requirements and strategies, how to finance children’s college education, and parenting strategies in general... In addition, education-related articles published in mainstream newspapers or weekly periodicals such as *Time* or *Newsweek* are translated and published in the Korean newspaper the very next day. The ethnic newspaper is also where education-related advertisements are found. A typical education section has advertisements for SAT schools, Korean-language schools, day care and preschools, college-preparatory summer camp, and Ivy League campus tours operated by Korean immigrant tour companies. (p. 11-12).

The information gleaned from these sources then distills to the family system: parents inform children of these opportunities, and students act out their parents’ desires.

In this way, the adults shape definitions of success and the rituals their children will use to pursue them. Subsequently, students engaging in shadow education learning can be seen as pursuing social mobility as a response to parental and cultural desire. Compounding this pressure is the felt financial obligation, on three levels: (1) “Students become more desperate to ensure the effectiveness of their learning in shadow education when they are aware of their parents’ financial sacrifice” (Kim et al., 2022, p. 69). In

short, Korean American students' efforts and pursuits—including their participation in shadow education—align with familial and cultural values. (2) A child's economic success is an important reflection of the family status. (3) Asian children are often seen as “retirement plan” or safety net for their parents, especially in working class immigrant families (Dang, 2023).

The cultural pressure to attend shadow education in the Korean American community is layered. It includes a desire to succeed on an individual level, both to honor the sacrifices of their parents and elevate the status of their families. There is also a cultural emphasis on achievement within their families and community, which align with the stated goals of the larger habitus—both within their Korean immigrant social space and the broader U.S. social space. Again, these values shape and are shaped by the individual agents who reproduce these values.

The Bricoleur-Student

Lévi-Strauss (1962) conceptualized *bricolage* in the context of his structuralist breakdown of myth making. He theorized that myths were made of “continual reconstruction from the same materials” (p. 21). In other words, myths across cultures are made up of the same “constitutive units” (e.g., character archetypes and story elements), and further, these units are “pre-constrained,” meaning they have predetermined ways in which they can be deployed. But the *bricoleur* makes do with what is available, and thus, new myths are constantly being written, though the materials myth makers have to work with are largely the same. Lévi-Strauss (1962) applied this idea to makers in various trades and professions, arguing that the *bricoleur* is a particular type of craftsman who is able to “make do with whatever is at hand” (p. 17), and able to tackle many tasks using a

limited set of generic tools. This infers that the *bricoleur* has a level of mastery of the repertoire of available tools and a level of creativity in being able to reappropriate those tools for different tasks that may not have been what the *bricoleur* had in mind when acquiring said tool.

The present study focuses on the student-*bricoleur*, who is gathering their own tools, and using them to construct their own stories and identities. In this case, “tools” can mean any constitutive unit of identity used in learning and becoming: e.g., academic strategies, social behaviors, cultural values, et al. These students draw from their social spaces, which provide the messages, codes, and values that inscribe themselves in the student through instructions from parents and teachers, and messaging from both antiquity and modern society. These imperatives are then embodied as a part of a complex, bricolaged, habitus that includes multiple cultural strands and their attendant tools.

Kim (2008) began his discussion of hagwon in both the Korean and Korean American communities by describing the influence of Confucianism on education in South Korea, declaring in no uncertain terms, that Confucianism “is the basis for the historical and societal backgrounds of Asians' view of education and learning... The teachings of Confucius shaped the very foundation of the theory and practice of education” (p. 5-6). The foundational tenets included: “high expectations for students to achieve”; “all are educable”; “it was more will power and effort rather than innate abilities that succeeded in achieving knowledge” (p. 6); and cited a Korean saying that goes, “King, parent, and teacher are the same” (p. 8). A child’s education is a family affair on every level: “Most Asian families consider their child's academic successes as

the primary source of pride for the entire family” (p. 8). When it comes to the makeup of the habitus of the students who come from this tradition, deference to authority and a disciplined pursuit of academic excellence to honor their families are pre-reflexive: inherited and reproduced by the student daily at home, at school, and at hagwon. In practice, a habitus with a Confucian foundation might look like diffidence or passivity: for instance, when Asian immigrant students do not look a teacher in the eye because it is considered disrespectful; or do not participate in class discussions because they defer to the expert in the room, i.e., the teacher.

Within this context, students try to reclaim a modicum of agency and power however they can. Min and Jo (2022) theorized that as educational landscapes evolve, East Asian students’ identities are characterized as “nomadic”: constantly shifting, transitory, and transgressive:

South Korean students are no longer single entities engaging in a learning process. Instead, they are engaging in a synthetic and interactive learning process involving multiple agents and subjects including students, parents, teachers at school, and teachers of shadow education... In other words, every aspect of learning among South Korean students is interconnected and interrelated...making it difficult to explain students’ learning with just one or two factors such as students’ individual capacity or efforts. (p. 86)

In other words, students are resourceful; they acquire and synthesize learning from many different people and spaces, which all spawn from and towards one another, in a great tangle with no discernable beginning or end—akin to the way rhizomes propagate in nature. Thus, the constructed boundaries between these spaces are grown over, around,

and through. For instance, students reappropriate strategies from their shadow education learning and employ them at school (and vice versa), making it difficult to discern what is learned where, particularly when one considers that South Korean students are often introduced to the material at hagwon, then reinforce that learning to the point of mastery—or sometimes even go straight to *demonstrating* mastery—at school. Kim and Jung (2022a) asserted that this image of the East Asian student runs counter to prevailing perceptions: “unlike the ... images of East Asian students as passive learners, students take active and proactive roles when making important decisions in terms of why/how/what they learn ... As they cannot increase school grades and maintain high grades by simply being obedient to their schoolteachers, Korean and East Asian students directly lead their learning, and thus create a balance between the two spaces” (p. 6). As the focus shifts from what East Asian schools are doing to what East Asian students are doing, what comes into clearer focus are East Asian students’ resourcefulness and agency.

Similarly, Asian American students are decision makers when it comes to their learning and achievement. They also navigate the movements and discourses that exist both in and between their school spaces and their shadow education learning center spaces here in the U.S. to construct their identities as learners and their identities in general. Given that this study will focus on students in one particular space—the shadow education learning center—and not, as Min and Jo (2022) did, the broader network, this conceptual framework leans on another paradigm: one that is focused on the individual habitus acquiring a context-specific set of tools that are generic enough to be transferrable across contexts.

In this way, Korean American students in a shadow education learning center resemble the *bricoleur*, with one important distinction:

[The *bricoleur*'s] universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand', that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the '*bricoleur*'s' means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose besides, that, as in the case of the engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or 'instrumental sets', as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the '*bricoleur*' himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy'. (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, pp. 17-18)

In other words, the *bricoleur* gathers generic and dynamic tools that are always at the ready. The *bricoleur* is then at liberty to employ them on a task should they become useful or necessary. A point of emphasis here that the overall "universe" from which the *bricoleur* draws their tools may be limited, and the repertoire of tools, too, is limited. Lévi-Strauss (1962) specified, "such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the '*bricoleur*' not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have only one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are 'operators' but they can be used

for any operations of the same type” (p. 18). This is to say, out of necessity, bricoleur-students can repurpose and reappropriate academic tools (i.e., enduring unpleasant tasks like seeking out one mistake in a 20-question problem set) and apply them in other parts of their lives, like suffering through the drudgery of household chores.

Here is the point of distinction, which will transition this framework from structuralism to poststructuralism: Lévi-Strauss (1962) emphasized that these tools are not acquired with any specific “project” in mind—that is the domain of the “engineer” or craftsman, who culls specific tools for specific projects. However, the student engaging in shadow education *does* have a specific project in mind. Students acquire tools that help them in a singular pursuit—the SAT, or more broadly, academic learning that leads to college admissions.

At this point, Derrida’s (1988) deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss’s (1962) concept is useful. Derrida argued that if bricolage is “borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage... it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*” (p. 115). Whereas Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist conceptions were fixed and definable—a *bricoleur* is *x, y, z*, and distinguishable from an engineer—Derrida had “no qualms about embracing ‘a world of signs... without origin’” (p. 107). Thus, Derrida countered that all makers, and in fact, everything, on some level—including Lévi-Strauss’s engineer—“are also species of *bricoleurs*” (p. 115). Applied to this study, Derrida’s deconstruction of Lévi-Strauss’s concept aligns with the idea that students who attend and benefit from shadow education are simply doing what is called on all students, all *people*, to do. Put simply, the students in this study are making the best of their circumstances by traversing various spaces and cobbling together the resources they have at hand—the ones they have inherited and

acquired over time—as most students do, and applying them in whatever context they “come in handy” (Lévi-Strauss, 1962, p. 18).

Synthesizing Bricolage and Habitus

“Do working-class children really get working-class jobs through the celebration of their own cultural values?” (Nash, 1999, p. 185)

It feels timely to circle back to Bourdieu by way of critique: Harrison (1993) noted that in Bourdieu’s (1999) discussion of school and its power to ordain what he called “dignitaries,” or the “titled” (i.e., the elite), Bourdieu overemphasized “the symbolic dimension of the process of being invested with a title compared to the technical dimension of possessing a rare skill in the market place” (Harrison, 1993, pp. 47-48). In other words, while Bourdieu argued that the habitus of the elite is internalized on some level pre- and subconsciously, in Harrison’s mind, these distinguishing behaviors are conditioned or learned. Harrison further argued that “what this position forgets is the social process of the creation of monopolies and, therefore, the artificial nature of scarcity itself” (p. 48). In short, these supposedly dignifying behaviors are not the exclusive domain of any one group, and if they are, they are made so artificially. Language proficiency, for instance, is conditioned through consistent dialogue with people who speak a particular language in a particular register, which is then rewarded in social institutions like school as “proper” or “academic.” Another example might be the model minority myth, where Asian students are seen as disciplined and achievement oriented. In reality, Park (2012) noted that the emphasis on discipline, academic achievement, and success, often attributed to “Confucian values... are not the exclusive domain of any ethnic group” (p. 629). Further, Confucian deference to (often patriarchal)

authority and emphasis on the collective over individual—I would argue the emphasis on academic achievement is an offshoot of these broader imperatives—pervade many cultures, even if not labeled “Confucian,” necessarily.

If anything, the Korean American student must engage in an ongoing negotiation and assessment process as they cobble together—as in a *bricolage* and *habitus*—sometimes conflicting, other times aligning cultural values. As Schmidt (2013) pointed out in his study of the ancient ritual of iron smelting in Barongo, “their multi-ethnic makeup compels a different approach—addressing the needs and sensibilities of multiple lines of ancestors, a condition that creates a competitive bricolage” (p. 66). He went on to say, “the improvisational bricolage of the Barongo intertwines ritual solutions with technological solutions,” and that “the technological behaviour of Barongo iron smelters is deeply influenced by the results or what they assess as the effectiveness of ritual interventions” (p. 66). In short, they engage in an ongoing negotiation with the ancient, invoking the ancient so long as it continues to produce results in the present. Likewise, for a Korean American student, the Confucian cultural ancestry and the Western cultural values in which they operate daily are the domains from which the student cobbles together their *habitus*—a sort of abstract “species” of *bricolage* of multiple cultural strands, both ancient and modern. Thus, while an ancient ritualistic value system may have been internalized in a pre-reflexive state, they are engaged in an ongoing negotiation with it and others. Thus, there are many paths leading to valuing academic achievement in their lives, particularly when one considers the global shift towards productivity and industrialism. In this way, the student participants carry their backgrounds (plural) with

them, just as Bourdieu (1998) prescribed, and *bricolage*—or cobble together—from three distinct cultural streams to construct their individual habitus.

As much as this study is predicated on Bourdieu’s (1998) idea of difference, distinction (as in, Korean Americans are distinct from other ethnic groups), and the internal cohesion baked into habitus as a theory, I reiterate here Harrison’s (1993) critique: that many of these values—especially academic achievement—are not the exclusive domain of the Korean American social space. The essential values reproduced by the Korean American social space is a *bricolage* of the values of their native culture, their current host country, as well as the increasingly global standard that promotes competition through quantifiable achievement measures. Bourdieu’s homologous reproduction of values is likely a *bricolage* of multiple fluid layers. In other words, these students could be culling habitus matrices from multiple social spaces: “Korean,” “U.S.,” “global.” Students are receiving the same messaging about productivity, achievement, and utility everywhere they look, which only serves to confirm the centrality of these values as fixed truth.

Therefore, the idea that shadow education and its participants “are challenging the authority of schooling” (Min & Jo, 2022, p. 77) discounts the larger social spaces, social project(s), and fields in which students operate (e.g., family, school, friend groups, etc.). We cannot underestimate the influence of the larger systems—the psychological, cultural, and structural value constructs and matrices of control (Foucault, 1995, 2003)—in which shadow education and its agents operate. However, it can still hold true that shadow education field empowers students and parents to retain a modicum of agency when it comes to their learning. In essence, students partaking in shadow education move freely

across physical and conceptual fields and social spaces while *bricolaging* or cobbling together (Derrida, 1988) what they need as a result of intentional “statistical” or “rational” calculation (Bourdieu, 1998), an essential element of Bourdieu’s habitus. Herein lies an interesting theoretical tension. Shadow education is both an extension of the larger system and the means by which they overcome the realities of that system.

Figure 2

Bricolage and Habitus

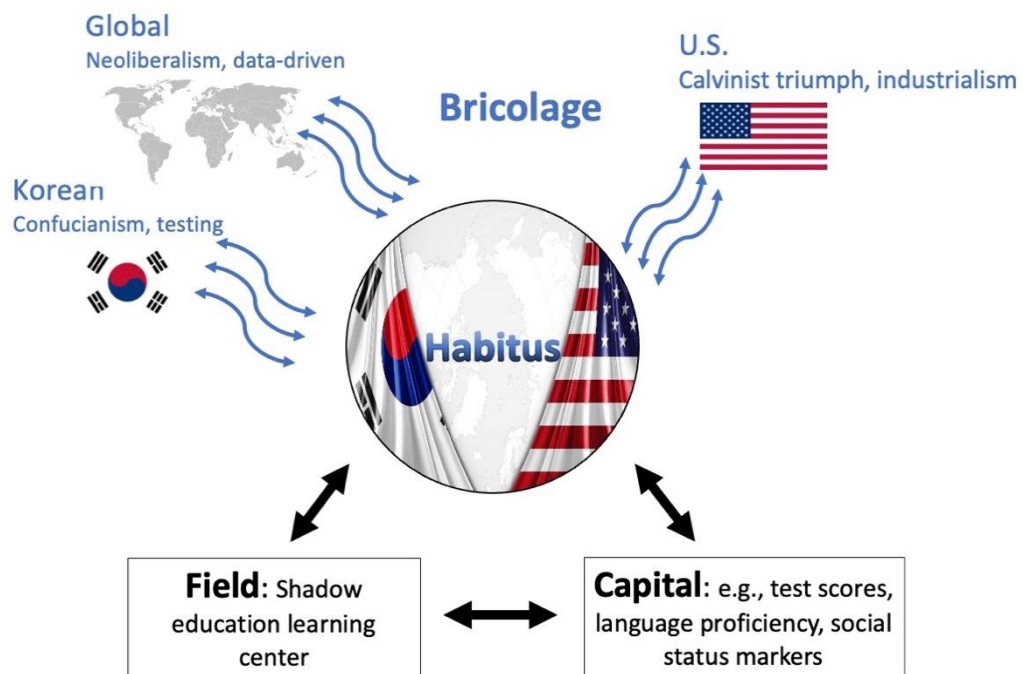


Figure 2 depicts the cobbling together of elements of three cultural threads—and the attendant symbolic values, capital, and tools—that are the focus of this study: i.e., the Korean, U.S., and global imperatives that promote increasingly standardized and quantified achievement measures. The Korean thread includes elements like Confucian deference to authority and emphasis on education. The U.S. thread includes the Calvinist triumph narrative built on a “new rugged industrialism” (Kliebard, 2004, p. 289), i.e., an emphasis on industry, productivity, and self-reliance. The global thread includes the

proliferation of neoliberal corporatist culture and participation in the economy of production and consumption. The resulting habitus is a hybrid of these threads; this “successful” or ideal student becomes the site for macrosystem ideals of “fast capitalism,” or the “top-down model of business (and classroom) leadership” (Rogers, 2004, p. 1), thereby situating knowledge acquisition in relation to the “world of work” (Rogers, 2004, p. 1). Consequently, this habitus is placed in mutual negotiation with the field in which it is situated, as described in Figure 1. For the purposes of this study, the field is hagwon, which caters to outcomes that position students in the most advantageous position to contribute to a culture of productivity, which subsequently gives them the highest statistical chance to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

Korean American Habitus to Habitus of Hagwon

For Bourdieu (1998), student achievement and schooling was a way for a society to assert and reassert its values, thereby preserving itself. Korean American students navigate multiple learning fields—school, shadow education learning, and their self-selected extracurricular literacies—and cultures—Korean and American—to pull together, or *bricolage*, whatever tools are available to them in those spaces to optimize their odds of achieving their goals. Empirically, this means finding joy in the menial, or conflating or even displacing personal success measures with external achievement measures. These strategies are in response to an immigrant culture that privileges advancement in education above all, as well as a Western (and increasingly global) cultural imperative to achievement as measured by one’s potential to be productive and contribute to a market economy-based world (OECD, 2018a).

Academic achievement in the Korean American shadow education community aligns traditional Korean values (e.g., an emphasis on testing and academic achievement) with Western neoliberalism. As Zhou and Kim (2006) explained, “just as some aspects of immigrant cultural patterns may continue in a state of uneasy coexistence with the requirements of the host country, other aspects of immigrant cultural patterns may ‘fit’ the requirements of life there” (p. 3). The alignment of Korean immigrant values with American values that combine to promote academic achievement, productivity, and upward social mobility creates a powerful alignment of goals, which contributes to this unified and ubiquitous imperative becoming even more deeply entrenched in the student’s habitus. If a shadow education learning center’s stated mission aligns with the messaging at home, which also aligns with cultural messaging from the broader society, there seems to be no escaping it. This is to say, no matter where the bricoleur-student is culling their cultural messaging, achievement and competition are centered and privileged. In detailing East Asian students’ acquisition of “learning capital” in shadow education, Kim and Jung (2022b) presented the following inventory: “basic learning skills, self-directed studying habits, and positive attitudes about learning at school, so students are more likely to become active participants,” (p. 26). These virtues align with the Eastern virtues of conformity and obeisance.

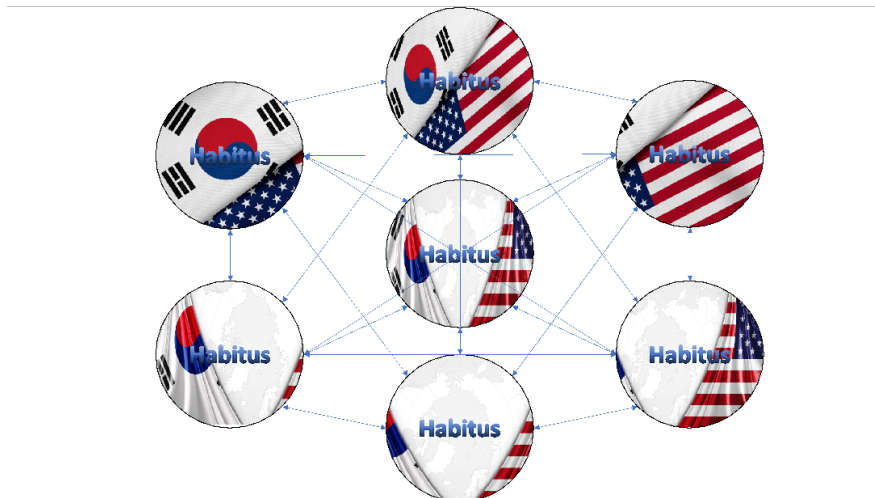
What Bourdieu (1998, 1999) offered was room for negotiation on the individual level, or the level of habitus. In fact, Bourdieu was open to outright rejection or hostility towards a field’s values as evidence of habitus. So, while the learning capital in the field of shadow education may be basic learning skills, self-directed study habits, and positive attitudes towards school, Bourdieu allowed for the possibility that a student *not*

demonstrating those values is a valid response and can evince a habitus that is in negotiation with that set of values. In addition, students may be drawing from different cultural impulses to order which social capital is most valuable to them. For instance, if we recontextualize Kim and Jun's (2022b) inventory in a Western context, the individualism implicit in self-directed learning and the collectivism of being an active participant in school may conflict rather than align.

Figure 3 illustrates the multiplicities of potential habituses even within a shared social space or field. Some will privilege their Westernized upbringing, and others will privilege the culture and capital valued by their home country. Consequently, the social space is subject to and reproduces the same forces as the individual habitus but is open to various levels of negotiation with them.

Figure 3

Bricolaged Habituses Make Up a Social Space



If we consider shadow education and its effect on the habitus of the student, we must examine the influence of the shadow education field (the place) and the social space (the group of shadow education attendees) (Figure 3). Bourdieu (1998) acknowledged the power of the “social space” in setting the parameters and limitations of the responses available to the “agents” of a field. We must consider that for every straightforward homologous value transfer, Bourdieu allowed for an opposite response. For instance, though my study does not include siblings, in theory, two siblings raised in the same household forcing both siblings to the same hagwon can have opposite reactions: one enthusiastic, the other hostile.

Bourdieu’s (1998) concept posited that the habitus is in a continuous negotiation with the structural forces at play. Indeed, “within Bourdieu's theoretical framework he/she is also circumscribed by an internalized framework that makes some possibilities inconceivable, others improbable and a limited range acceptable... Dispositions are inevitably reflective of the social context in which they were acquired” (Reay, 2004, p. 435). My current study is predicated on the students’ attendance, and participation (at its most baseline definition) in shadow education learning, and thus are bounded by an important limitation, which is that they will be response behaviors *to the field*. I surmise that these responses will span from enthusiastic to begrudged to apathetic, leaving open the possibility of “psychological crisis” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 28)—hence, Figure 3 illustrates the multiplicities of potential habituses even within a shared social space or field. Some will privilege their Westernized upbringing, and others will privilege the culture and capital valued by their home country. Consequently, the social space is

subject to and reproduces the same forces as the individual habitus but is open to various levels of negotiation with them (Figure 4).

Figure 4

A Social Space in Negotiation with Habitus Forming Elements

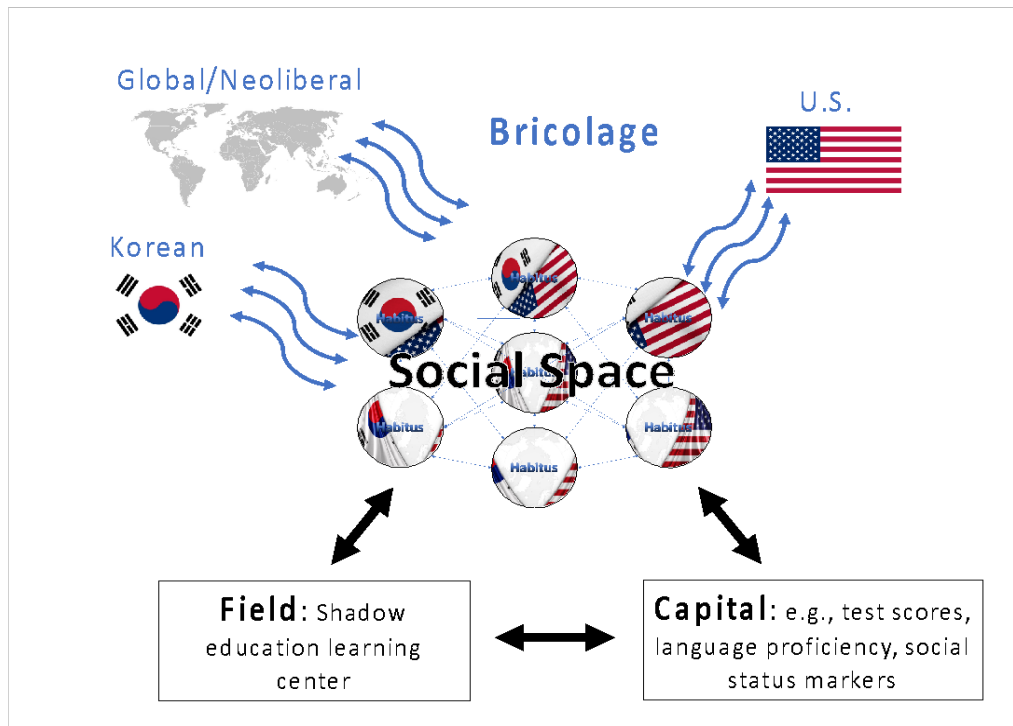


Figure 4 situates the concept of the social space—with all the possible responses to the multiplicity of cultural imperatives—within the *bricolage*-habitus conceptual framework. All these elements—individual habituses, which make up a social space—reproduce the social capital and thus influence the field in which these negotiations play out. These dialogic interactions reproduce the larger cultural forces, but in negotiating them and responding to them, influence the respective cultures through the habitus agents, in turn. Thus, this creates a complex, multidimensional, and dynamic matrix of mutual influence that is constantly and fluidly evolving over time.

Ultimately, though, the students in this study seek academic success for themselves, which they believe will translate to success in life, and to that end, become *bricoleurs* by cobbling together resources and tools from their existing learning spaces, which they deploy across their learning and social environments. However, in so doing they perpetuate the existing definitions of success and their attendant power constructs and social values. Thus, students simultaneously become agents of their own learning but also function within the confines of a restrictive imperative to achievement and productivity. Within this context, the student participating in shadow education is simultaneously an individuated agent *and* pawn, disruptor *and* conformist. So, not only does the operationalization of habitus allow for multiplicities across individual habituses in a field, it also allows for “contradiction and tension between the social order and psychological processes rather than the 'homology, redundancy and reinforcement between the two systems' that Bourdieu... asserts is normative” (Reay, 2004, p. 440)—or, “a habitus divided against itself” (Reay, 2004, p. 440).

Conclusion

Incidentally, there has been strong recent pushback in the U.S. (Ravitch, 2020) and South Korea (Byun, 2010) against the use of standardized tests for various reasons, with a growing movement at American universities to stop considering them altogether (Bennett, 2022; Frankel & Kartik, 2023; Furuta, 2017; Strauss, 2020; Visé, 2022). But the reality is that high test scores are still a valued measure in academia. Todd Rinehart, vice chancellor of enrollment at The University of Denver, was quoted in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article: “Whether we like it or not, students with high SAT scores have a market value, and certain schools are willing to pay merit money for a certain range of

test scores... We could say we're not going to play in this space because we see the inequity, but if we want to have a competitive chance of enrolling them, we better pay market value" (as quoted in Belkin, 2020). Which is to say while schools who have a glut of top tier candidates may be able to renounce the use of testing data, "certain schools"—Belkin clarified to mean lower ranking schools—will offer merit scholarships for students with high test scores to incentivize them to enroll at their institutions. Furthermore, studies measuring the validity of experimental curriculum (Hoffman & Martin, 2020), school quality (Dobbie & Fryer, 2014), international education systems (OECD, 2018a, 2018b), and pre- and post-COVID achievement (Shen-Berro, 2022) still referred to standardized test scores as their touchstone measure.

That said, Rinehart's (as quoted in Belkin, 2020) use of the phrase "market value" was indicative of a transmutation of the student to commodity. This collective obsession with achievement permeates our students' psyches and behavior. Randall et al. (2016) found that students engage in extracurricular activities "because it is good for my future" (p. 1562) even though those activities were less satisfying or joy-inducing than activities they did for fun. In other words, students put aside their own desires to cater to a distal authority or ideal, sacrificing or outright displacing their individual subjectivity and agency in deference to a structural imperative—precisely the kind of value reproduction in one's habitus that Bourdieu (1998) wrote about. This ethos is tacitly coded in the discourse around global education. The PISA-D report's stated goal for students was "to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society" (OECD, 2018a, p. 15). The idea of a direct line from education to economic development and the preservation of the state perpetuates a discourse that reduces its populace to inventory—a

shift that promotes mercantilism, industry, and consumption as the most important feature of our humanity, effort, and attention. As society shapes and is shaped by school as an institution, shadow education follows suit, and operates as another institution perpetuating existing values and success standards. Shadow education exists because of the establishment of schooling as an essential part of culture—what Mori and Baker (2010) referred to as a “schooled society”—as opposed to school as preparation for entry into society. As Western industrialist standards metastasize, and neoliberal capitalist structures become more and more entrenched, the Western standard—adapted globally—becomes the ground on which education and shadow education create and impose policy.

In the Korean American social space, the students’ efforts to level the playing field have only compounded conditions of inequity; their pursuit of deliverance from the limitations and oppression of the system only serves to further perpetuate the system. To a Korean American student, the school system and its attendant shadow system is a *bricolage* of the values of the various social spaces and fields in which they float: e.g., individual achievement, utility, and capital acquisition leading to social mobility. To this, the student brings their habitus with its matrices of ancient deference to authority, discipline, and bringing honor to the family. Together, they create such a powerful combination and alignment of goals, that they seem compelling, fixed, and inescapable.

One can imagine the confusion, then, when these same students also perceive that the very system in which they are trying to advance is not a welcoming place for them—if not openly hostile towards their efforts. Through shadow education, the community from which this study draws its participants is attempting to simultaneously fit *in* to and excel *within* the existing system. If we recall, these schools began as training grounds to

be more English-speaking and Christian (read: Western). So, generations of Korean students have developed their habituses to foreground and privilege Western social capital. When the societal response, as measured by policy and media response, to their attempts to play by the rules and achieve success within those imposed (i.e., not created by them) if not outright colonialist parameters is negative, it presents a contradiction that suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of these people and this community.

Shedding light on the experiences and perceptions of students in a shadow education learning center is an important enterprise because it offers a complex narrative where there is too often a reductive one. These students are conflicted too: there is internal conflict on an individual level, and a varied range of responses on a collective level. They are drawing from the various forces that can supplement and mitigate their ability to actualize a cobbled together (or “bricolaged”) identity and claim whatever vestiges of agency they can—all while negotiating their parents’ and community’s expectations and their own individual goals, whatever those might be. Others have used pejorative phrases like “game” the test (Toldson & McGee, 2014, p. 1) or “systematic strategizing” (Buchmann et al., 2010b, p. 489), which carry negative stigmas. The current study aims to change the narrative and undo the stigma around these students and their “strategizing” to foreground the Asian American community’s resilience and adaptability. In writing about the potential for the habitus in education discourse, Nash (1999) said, simply, “It offers explanations” (p. 185). I would go one step further: It humanizes (Paris & Winn, 2014).

CHAPTER 5 METHODOLOGY

Paris and Winn (2014) defined a humanizing approach to qualitative research as one that counters oppressive narratives that subordinate traditionally marginalized communities:

[Humanizing research], then, joins what we view as a trajectory toward a stance and methodology of research that acts against the histories and continuing practices, ideologies, and accompanying dehumanizing policies of discrimination and unequal treatment based on the race, ethnicity, and belief systems of Indigenous peoples, other U.S.-born people of color, and people of color who immigrate to the U.S.; of class stratification and economically impoverished communities; of patriarchal norms and the unequal access to opportunities for girls and women; of the unequal, heteronormative, and discriminatory treatment of LGBTQ people; of the mistreatment of immigrant people due to citizenship status; and, broadly, of the discriminatory treatment of those who speak languages other than Dominant American English (commonly referred to as “standard English.” (p. xv)

The tense discourse around Asian immigrants in the U.S. (Collins, 2021; Kang, 2022b; Liptak & Anemona, 2022; Nierenberg, 2022; Shapiro, 2019; Timsit, 2019) has coincided with increased violence against Asian people (Lee & Huang, 2021; Mai, 2021). I want to tell my participants’ stories to complicate the narrative around students of Asian descent, and humanize (Paris & Winn, 2014) a population that is often reduced to statistics that render them de-minoritized (Lee, 2006), even demonized (Dawson, 2010; Kim, 2019; Lee, 2011; Wang, 2021), in education discourse. Specifically, students who attend

shadow education are doing more than trying to achieve, though that is the stated purpose of shadow education. Rather, the students are fulfilling parents' wishes, living up to cultural standards, and trying to fit in with their peers, with an eye toward securing a stable financial future—all values that are part of an overall habitus that is a *bricolage* of multiple cultural threads (Korean, U.S., and global).

Purpose and Rationale

This study will be an ethnographic case study, concerned with the culture of a group—or “cultural milieu” (Heath, 1983)—by examining individual stories in concert with thematic understandings of the collective whole (Stake, 2006). In keeping with the spirit of humanizing research (Kirkland, 2014; Paris & Winn, 2014)—specifically, countering pejorative perceptions of Korean American students participating in shadow education—this ethnographic case study will examine the experiences and perceptions of students at three shadow education learning centers (aka hagwons): two in Palisades Park, a suburb in Bergen County, New Jersey, and one in the Bayside area of Flushing, Queens, NY, during the spring semester of the 2022-23 school year. The two New Jersey locations are Crown Academy and Ace Academy (Bergen); and the Queens location is Queens Institute (all names have been changed).

This methodology will draw from Stake's (2006) multicase study framework; the immersive longitudinal aspects of ethnographic research (Heath, 1983); the participant-centered storytelling of narrative ethnography (Agar, 1996); and the intersubjectivity of sensory ethnography (Pink, 2007, 2009). For data analysis, I will employ cross-case analysis (Stake, 1995, 2006), looking at each individual participant as their own case, then eliciting themes for analysis for both individual cases and the case set as a whole.

While my study is about the individual students' experiences, as outlined in my purpose statement and conceptual framework, it also involves a cross-case analysis to reveal patterns and distinctions that exist between students and different student experiences across hagwons to identify elements of shadow education culture or habitus that subsequently influence student behavior and identity (Bourdieu, 1998). Both parts are of interest and inform the other. While the lives of each individual participant is an essential part of the study (RQ1 & RQ2), their experiences will also be compared and synthesized to gain a deeper understanding of (1) the Korean immigrant community (Bourdieu, 1998); and (2) the shared culture and practices of Korean-run shadow education (RQ3).

Ultimately, the goal is to shed light on an important cultural touchstone for the Korean American population—shadow education, aka hagwon—that is not well known and needs closer examination (Buchmann et al., 2010a, 2010b; Park, 2016; Yung, 2022; Zhou & Kim, 2006). As Paris and Winn (2014) outlined, “we conceptualize humanizing approaches as those that involve the building of relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness raising for both researchers and participants” (p. xv). This study aims to work *with* participants to present their experiences and perceptions in the shadow education space in a way that is loyal to the on-the-ground reality of Korean American hagwon students.

Participants

I interviewed a total of seven students. The age group was high school students who were studying for the SAT. Priority was given to juniors but recruiting at Ace Academy was particularly difficult, so a sophomore was included. The overall participant pool was six juniors and one sophomore. Thus, the student populations across different

hagwons was roughly comparable (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2006). The students and their experiences were the focus of the study; whatever discussion(s) of culture and cultural reproduction were through the lens of the student experience via their interview responses, survey responses, and my own observations. I also spoke with one of the hagwon owners as a way to supplement and enhance my understanding of the student experience (see Appendix H for interview protocols). I asked for one to two sit down interviews (one hour each)—one main interview and one follow up interview to review artifacts and ask follow-up or clarifying questions. One participant required a third interview because she had so many artifacts. Lastly, I offered all participants an opportunity to member check; four of the participants did.

Table 1

List of Participants

Name (pronouns)	Grade	Ethnicity	Hagwon	High SAT Score
HyeJoon (he/him)	11	Korean	Crown Academy	1490
Noah (he/him)	11	Korean	Crown Academy	1450
Troy (he/him)	11	Korean	Crown Academy	1470
Olivia (she/her)	11	Korean	Crown Academy	Not disclosed
Emmie (she/her)	10	Korean	Ace Academy	Not disclosed
Grace (she/her)	11	Korean	Ace Academy	Not disclosed
Joyce (she/her)	11	Chinese	Queens Institute	1370
Jane (she/her)	11	Chinese	Queens Institute	1570

Note. All student and hagwon names are pseudonyms.

Methodology: Ethnographic Case Study

“There is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practiced”

(Pink, 2009, p. 8).

Ethnography

In the prologue of her landmark decade-long ethnography of language learning in two communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the late 1960s and 70s, Heath (1983) said in no uncertain terms: “This book is not, however, intended as a model for future ethnographic studies of education in and out of schools” (p. 7). She noted that the access she was granted, given an “on-going relationship over nearly a decade... is not likely to be repeated by another researcher” (p. 7). However, Heath acknowledged that “many features of [her work] could be adapted for use by other anthropologists studying communities and schools” (p. 7). In other words, Heath’s study opened a methodological space: one that showed the value of immersing oneself in a community over time. Her study told the story of the people in a community through their acquisition of a particular skill (in her study, language; in my study, college admissions prep), which is the foundational premise of the current study.

Similarly, this study will focus on two communities in the New York metropolitan area—one urban, one suburban. Like Heath’s, this study will be ethnographic; I will “record the natural flow of community classroom life” of shadow education learning centers in two Korean American communities (Bergen County, NJ, and Bayside, Queens, NY)—and, within those walls, examine “the descriptions... of the actual processes, activities, and attitudes involved in the enculturation of children...

[which] will allow readers to see these in comparison with those of mainstream homes and institutions” (p. 8).

My methods themselves are couched in humanizing research. As Kirkland (2014) stated in his study of the literacies of a small group of Black male students in central Michigan:

ethnography [is] a humanizing approach to social science research in that its processes of inquiry, explanation, and representation are grounded in the cultural artifacts located in human reality and curve toward the visceral will housed in our participants’ voices. Indeed, the work is polymorphous and always in conversation with and through the many voices that exist within and upon the communities and peoples we seek to better know. (p. 197)

This study will likewise focus on the voices of the students and cultural artifacts that represent the material reality of a particular community we seek to better know. Similar to a study of two high schools by Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge (2006), this study will perform longitudinal qualitative case studies that rely primarily on “observation and semi-structured interviewing, supplementing these strategies with document analyses” (p. 199). The interviews, observation, artifacts gathering, and artifact analysis described in this chapter are aimed at answering the research questions (RQs):

(1) What are the experiences and perceptions of students in a shadow education learning center situated in a Korean American community?

(2) What, if any, tools and practices (e.g., resources, behaviors, literacies) do students learn and/or enact in a Korean-run shadow education learning center?

(3) What similarities and differences emerge when comparing and contrasting different hagwon experiences?

Heath's (1983) particular focus was on language acquisition and use, which grounded her observations and artifact selection. Her tables and transcripts were focused on oral speech like "Types of questions" (pp. 104, 251) and print literacy like "Types of uses" of reading and writing (pp. 198-199, 218, 251). She examined formal academic literacies (e.g., school lessons) to informal ones (e.g., game play), and ones in between (e.g., Bible readings and sermons). I was also interested in the formal and informal literacies of the learning center: how students interact with each other, with their instructors, with their learning materials, with the test itself, in and out of class. Like Heath, I had a particular focus when it came to my participants: they were observed within an academically oriented space with a stated focus on test preparation. However, just as Heath's focus on language use and acquisition gave her the access and grounds to make profound observations about the *culture* of these communities, observing and eliciting the experiences of the students engaging in shadow education tasks spoke to deeper cultural underpinnings of these students' lives.

Pink (2009) argued that to know other people's spaces, we need to understand how those people "experience, remember, and imagine" (p. 23) those spaces. Pink (2009) cited Bourdieu (among others) in her discussion of "embodiment"—an integration of the mind and body (whereas, before, they were separate) wherein the physical body is the site of knowledge transmission (learning) and knowledge reproduction (acting). Sensation "needs to be overlaid with a body of knowledge" (p. 26). In other words, the way people experience, remember, and imagine places and things is mediated through the habitus that

have shaped the way they intake sensory data (what they see, hear, smell, etc.) and subsequently act on that data. A place, then, is experienced, remembered, and imagined by its inhabitants, which makes each level of the ethnographic enterprise—i.e., the participants' behaviors; the recounting and reflexivity upon those behaviors in interviews; and the ethnographer's observations and analysis of those behaviors—political. The layering of lived experience of the participants with “politics,” or broader cultural messaging, is fundamental to this study, in which the cultural and ethnic background of its participants is central to its purpose.

Heath (1983) pointed out the important limitation of ethnographic description to “capture the influences and forces of history on the present” (p. 9). However, she acknowledged in her analysis of language use the way language simultaneously shapes and is shaped by heritage: “The Trackton blacks and Roadville whites described in this book have different ways of using language in worship, for social control, and in asserting their sense of identity. They do so, however, because they have had different historical forces shaping these ways” (p. 10). As Reay (2004) argued, “Habitus are permeable and responsive to what is going on around them. Current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon but are internalized and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socializations” (p. 434). In other words, observable behavior is often an embodiment of circumstance and history, writ large. And, as Bourdieu (1998) stipulated, these embodiments are limited by circumstance and history, but still can manifest in many different ways by different people, though they may share the social space or even physical place. Thus, Heath began her ethnography with a history of the region. The students in this study were likewise a product of a cultural heritage that presented itself at

home, in their hagwon classrooms, and even in their social interactions. (My history of the shadow education systems and testing cultures in both South Korea and the U.S. can be found in a previous chapter.)

In telling the story of language learning in these communities, Heath (1983) humanized two communities—one White, one Black—and humanized them amid a fraught period of racial tension in the U.S., particularly in the South. One of the major contributions of her study was to reveal how “cultural milieu affect the ways in which children learn to use language” (p. 11). My study also occupies this research space. Issues of equity and access in education have made the current climate a fraught one—particularly when it comes to racial equity and underrepresentation in selective schools (Kang, 2022b; Liptak & Anemona, 2022; Shapiro, 2019). Furthermore, in studying hagwons in two different socioeconomic communities, we might come to deeper understandings of how cultural milieu affect the ways high school students perceive education (RQ1), which may give us insight into broader cultural perspectives (RQ3). For instance, I found that there was a distinction to be made between *living up* to the example of professional parents (as in the case of “Grace”) versus *making good* on the hardships and sacrifices of their parents (as in the case of “Joyce”), which speaks to the complexity of hagwon, as facilitator of both status quo *and* social mobility.

Ultimately, Heath’s (1983) study emphasized the commonalities of two seemingly distinct communities: for instance, “a strong ethos of wanting their children to get ahead and of depending on the school to play a critical role in plans for their children’s future” (p. 350). Again, the participants in my current study are part of the same ethos. I would likely be hard pressed to find any community that is not. But the Asian pursuit is

perceived differently. The current study is a longitudinal community immersion project that aims to humanize. And, like Heath (1983), who grew up in a neighboring state to her participant communities—“so the customs of both communities were very familiar to [her]” (p. 5)—I grew up in the same northern New Jersey Korean immigrant suburban network of towns where the New Jersey learning centers are situated. Moreover, the student body at the school where I teach is made up of students from the Queens area where the Queens Institute is located. Thus, the customs of this community and their families are familiar to me. Though I make no assumptions, I surmise that the cultural commonalities will make cultural elements of the Queens location familiar to me, too, in the same way that both communities were familiar to Heath.

While Heath’s (1983) work was reliant on observation, description, and analysis in a traditional sense, Pink’s (2009) work on “sensory ethnography” called on researchers to rethink the very nature of observation, and subsequently, the very nature of ethnography. While Heath (1983) was a full time resident and an active participant in the communities she wrote about, Pink (2009) conceded that most contemporary studies cannot achieve Heath’s level of access, immersion, or time: “While classic observational methods certainly produce valuable in-depth and often detailed descriptions of other people’s lives, this type of fieldwork is often not viable in contemporary contexts. This might be because the research is focused in environments where it would be impractical and inappropriate for researchers to go and live for long periods with research participants” (p. 9). For me, a full-time high school teacher and part-time PhD student, observing classes that are only held once a week, Pink’s acknowledgement is an important premise.

Pink's (2007) definition of ethnography was based fundamentally on a construction of the social space based on the researcher's limited experience:

Ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations, and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (Pink, 2007, p. 22)

Pink's definition of ethnography spoke to the idea that all observation is mediated through the observer, whose ability to observe is constrained by their sensorial experience. It would be dishonest to argue otherwise. Therefore, an ethnographer's job is not to portray "the" truth, but rather to present their collected data, while being reflexive of their academic frameworks and biases. Thus, a deeper look into the senses—the tools we use to observe—is warranted.

This chapter will detail ethnographic case study methods, namely: observation, interview, focus group, and cross-case analysis.

Case study

"Qualitative case study was developed to study the experience of real cases operating in real situations" (Stake, 2006, p. 3).

Stake (2006) wrote, "Even when our main focus is on a phenomenon that is a function, such as 'training,' we choose cases that are entities" (p. 2). For this study, the entities are the three hagwons that will be observed. Each participating student will constitute a case. Using ethnographic methods, I will "carefully examine [the]

functioning and activities” of students in their natural hagwon setting with the primary objective of “understanding the case” (p. 2). Each case then can serve as a “host or fulcrum to bring many functions and relationships together for study” (p. 2). Together, the cases constitute a “quintain”—defined as “an object or phenomenon or condition to be studied” (p. 6). In this study, each student’s set of experiences at a shadow education learning center is the case; my quintain is made up of seven student cases total.

Stake (2006) emphasized: “if the study is designed as a qualitative multicase study, then the individual cases should be studied to learn about their self-centering, complexity, and situational uniqueness. Thus, each case is to be understood in depth, giving little immediate attention to the quintain” (p. 7). Then, however, “the researcher is pulled toward attending more to both the pieces and the whole” (p. 7), and ultimately, “The aim of multicase research... is to come to understand the quintain better” (p. 14). Stake’s emphasis on the “particular and the situational” (p. 8) align his case study methodology with my research questions, which is concerned with both observing the students’ individual on-the-ground experiences *and*, through Stakean cross-case analysis, render a clearer picture of shadow education as a whole—namely, as a site of cultural reproduction and transmission (Bourdieu, 1998). This study will focus on seven students at three shadow education learning centers (hagwons): two in Bergen County, NJ and one in Bayside, Queens, NY. Each student represented their own case, to be studied for their unique experiences and perspectives (RQ1 + RQ2), then analyzed together to elicit deeper understandings about the shadow education experience (RQ3).

Recruitment

To find research sites, I leveraged personal and family relationships. The first hagwon proprietor who agreed to speak to me and offer up her hagwon as a site for study was my sister's childhood friend. For the other centers, my parents' friend, who worked in the hagwon space both as an owner and instructor for decades, relayed names of owners and hagwons whom he knew well and would be willing to host me. I reached out to them by phone and email to schedule introductory meetings to explain the project and answer any questions they may have had. Informal preliminary observations were subsequently scheduled over email. (See Appendix C for interactions.)

Coordinating the times with the hagwon owners and teachers, I determined which classes I observed and introduced myself to the students. After initial class observations and upon coordination with the teacher, I solicited students for participation in the study. I asked the students if they would be interested in telling me their opinions and thoughts about their hagwon experiences and asked for contact information if they were interested. I sent the student assent (Appendix F) and parental consent (Appendix G) forms via email. Participants also had the option of submitting the forms to me in person, which one student did. I will stress that their decision to participate or not participate in the study would not affect their grades or test scores, and that they had the option of dropping out any time.

For those who submitted signed assent and parental consent forms, I emailed them the preliminary questionnaire (Appendix D) to be filled out at home before our first scheduled sit-down interview. I focused on high school juniors first, then sophomores,

who were preparing for a standardized exam for their college applications (e.g., SAT or ACT).

As an incentive, I offered reciprocity: in exchange for participating in formal and informal interviews over the course of my observations, students were offered college essay consultation. When the time comes, they will be able to send me a draft of their personal statement for their college applications, and I will provide two rounds of personal written feedback on it. To receive this benefit, students were required to complete the project—i.e., sit for all interviews—to qualify for personal essay feedback.

Anticipating more student interest than I could accommodate, my plan was to screen students based on their preliminary questionnaire responses to create a representative cross section of participants—from students who enjoy hagwon to students who don't, and students in the middle. Then, I will read the open-ended questions at the end of the survey: (11) I'm interested in participating in this study because... and (12) When are you most available to interview (i.e., weekday evenings, weekend evenings, immediately before or after hagwon)? Priority will be given to those who can articulate a compelling reason as to why they would like to participate as well as their availability to engage in the study.

As it turned out, recruiting participants was more difficult than I had anticipated. When I first approached Rebecca, the proprietor and head teacher at Ace Academy, she warned that recruiting participants would be difficult. She told me that she tried getting students to talk about their experience for promotional videos, but eventually had to resort to paying them, and even then, she didn't get many who wanted to. At both Queens Institute and Ace, the owners referred a student each for the study. At Crown Academy, I

received some interest, but when I sent out the preliminary study, students dropped out by not responding. I also had one Crown participant submit all requisite paperwork but did not sit for interviews. The seven-student participant pool represents all the students who expressed interest and were willing to sit for all the components of the study. In short, I did not exclude any willing participants.

As for the teachers and proprietors, I wrote in my introductory email that I would be happy to be of service to them and to the center during my time there—either tapping into my professional teaching knowledge (e.g., college essay writing instruction) or just employing me as an administrative assistant (e.g., making copies, arranging desks, handing out materials, etc.), or all of the above. I was asked to do occasional tasks, but not asked for input on teaching at any time during the study. (For emails detailing the incentives to proprietors, students, and staff, see Appendix C.)

Instruments and Measures

“Before proceeding it is important to account for the impossibility of being completely prepared or knowing precisely how the ethnography will be conducted before starting” (Pink, 2009, p. 45).

Saldaña and Omasta (2016) cited a study by Rebekah Nathan (2005), who posed as a university student. I was not covert; my role as a researcher was made clear. My goal was to, over time, make the students comfortable enough with my presence that they would speak candidly and openly about their experiences, perceptions, and general lives in and out of the center. Agar (1996) noted the importance of participation in observing students in real time: “Raw material comes from active participation in those moments, and ‘data’ appear in the narrative form that naturally represents them” (pp. 10-11). Stake

(2006) argued that that the researcher can cobble together knowledge, relying on “both direct observation and learning from the observations of others. The latter, indirect method is necessary for activity at which the researcher is not present; the researcher needs to ask someone who was there, and to find records kept of what happened and artifacts that suggest it” (p. 4). Indeed, data gathering relies heavily on multiple and varied interviews over time; observation over time—both of formal instruction and down time between classes; self-selected and researcher generated artifacts; and triangulation methods like member checking. Because I was shuttling between three locations, I could only see each site sporadically. Thus, I had to cobble together knowledge out of my students’ interviews, artifacts, and my own observations.

Observation

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that research must be carried out in the “natural setting or context of the entity for which study is proposed,” since “realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their contexts” (p. 39). This ethnography included extensive observation and field notes, to establish “thick” descriptions of the centers, as well as their routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). While this level of immersion required consistent visits over time, Pink (2009) acknowledged the limitations of modern life.

Stake (2006) estimated that a dissertation-length study could take place over two months, with two- to three-day site visits for each case. I rotated on-site visits at two Queens centers and one New Jersey center from January through June. I observed Crown Academy seven times, Queens Academy six times, and Ace Academy five times, for a total of 18 observations and 108 observation hours between January 7th to June 10th. Ace

started their semester later and ended earlier than the others, which explains the discrepancy. I also missed a week in February because I tested positive for COVID, and I missed a week in May because of a family event.

Table 2

My Observation Schedule

Observation Date	Hagwon	Times	Hours
1/7/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
1/14/23	Ace Academy	10AM-5PM	7
1/21/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
1/28/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
2/4/23	Ace Academy	10AM-5PM	7
2/18/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
2/25/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
3/4/23	Ace Academy	10AM-5PM	7
3/11/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
3/18/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
4/8/23	Ace Academy	10AM-5PM	7
4/15/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
4/22/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
4/29/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
5/6/23	Ace Academy	10AM-5PM	7
5/20/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
5/27/23	Crown Academy	10AM-5PM	7
6/10/23	Queens Institute	9AM-1PM	4
		TOTAL	108hrs

I observed both in-class and out-of-class time because “the time before and after classes, when teachers were not within earshot, was instructive” (Saldaña & Omasta,

2016, p. 147). That said, there was an element of openness to this design since, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) accounted for, qualitative study in a natural setting is unpredictable and “largely emergent” (p. 248). My observations of the hagwon sites revealed that in-class time and lunch and break times offered students the opportunity to socialize. I overheard student conversations while sitting in classrooms before and after classes or during breaks, and while eating at nearby offsite public spaces (e.g., cafes and restaurants) where students also ate. Observations only took place in public spaces, with other students and people present. I tried to interfere with the participants’ and other students’ obligations as little as possible.

I included photos and artifacts, just as Heath (1983) included visuals over the course of her study. What I saw and heard within the walls of the learning center informed the memos, coding for themes, and analysis I did. As Agar (1996) argued, “One’s job as an ethnographer is to account for what goes on, on the ground, in living color” (p. 10), especially when interviews alone are “fruitless” (Heath, 1983, p. 208). For instance, when Heath went to a Black church and none of the congregants—even those who had formal music training—could articulate how they learned to raise hymns, she relied on her immersive participatory observation of situated speech (as opposed to the kind of speech one hears in interviews) to understand that hymns were part of an “oral performance pattern of building a text” acquired through “practicing and playing in their language learning” (p. 211). She listened to general on-the-ground “talk,” and in so doing, was able to come to important conclusions about the culture of Trackton—namely, “certain types of talk describe, repeat, reinforce, frame, expand, and even contradict written materials” (p. 196).

Similarly, my presence at the test prep sites enabled me to hear firsthand the on-the-ground talk. My immersive participatory observation—as well as my prior knowledge of both the Korean immigrant and hagwon experience—informed a deeper understanding of the space and the students’ experiences. As Pink (2009) argued, ethnography is “a participatory practice ... framed with ideas of learning as embodied, emplaced, sensorial and empathetic” (p. 63), and the “methods and approaches of conventional participant observation benefit from being combined with the reflexive and emplaced methodology” (p. 65). What she was arguing for was a shared “sensory sociality” (p. 83) between researcher and participant, wherein the researcher experiences what the participant experiences—whether it is by engaging in the same dance instruction or literally walking with the participant—to feel what they feel, which is not necessarily something that can occur when observing at a distance. Indeed, there were times when I felt waves of nostalgia.

Since all reality, in a sense, is “constructed” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), there is significance in seeing the “everyday consciousness of reality” (p. 70) through the eyes, ears, etc. of the participants themselves, in their natural setting. For this study, this meant me trying to follow along with a lesson and then trying to answer the questions myself. I found myself feeling quite inadequate, while acknowledging that my anxiety is much lower stakes than the students’, who were taking these exams under the pretense that their futures potentially hung in the balance. I also will talk about my shared experience with the students in terms of working toward a long-term goal—which meant being stuck in a classroom on a nice Saturday, longing to be out with friends instead.

Interview

“Building on these understandings, I see interviews as social, sensorial and emotive encounters” (Pink, 2009, p. 83).

Citing Kondo’s work in and around the Japanese workplace, Agar (1996) opined, “observation is subordinate to what one learns in interviews. Observations are ways to test out what you’ve learned... develop additional interviews and conversations based on those problems... Kondo, and the new ethnography in general, goes after narrative ethnography with participant observation data; the encyclopedic material serves as background for its analysis” (Agar, 1996, p. 10). While I am not arguing that one is subordinate or not, my main takeaway from Agar’s statement is the importance of observation and interview and their interdependence.

This study combines observation notes and memos, interviews, and narrative through participant observation, while considering context to situate the experiences of the students historically and culturally.

I conducted between one and three interviews over Zoom: a semi-structured biographical interview; an artifact elicitation interview; and a follow-up interview. Students were also given the option of member checking their narrative; three did. I also included some email interactions within the number of interactions allowed by my IRB. All one-on-one student interviews were conducted virtually. I also had a lunch interview at a restaurant with the owner of Ace Academy.

The semi-structured biographical interview elicited background—education and general—and asked them to elaborate on the answers they gave on the Likert scale preliminary survey (see Appendix D for the survey; see Appendix H for interview

protocols; and Chapter Six for survey results) to get a general sense of their experience with hagwon (RQ1), their general feelings about hagwon (RQ1), what they think they are learning there (RQ2). González and Moll (2002) employed questionnaires to signal to families that “they are approaching the households as learners” (p. 630). They further describe the use of questionnaires as a “guide rather than a protocol, suggesting possible areas to explore and incorporating previous information as a platform for formulating new questions” (p. 630). In other words, the questionnaire signals both that I am there to learn from the students and will be a way to guide a conversation, rather than an instructional tool or rigid data gathering structure.

Between the first and second interviews, there was a three-month (or more, in some cases) period during which the participants and I gathered artifacts that represented or connected to the hagwon experience. This is the same process I followed in my pilot study on extracurricular literacies (Kim, 2022b). In that study, I created a Google Drive folder for each student to aggregate with screenshots, photos, text, and links. These artifacts informed the second interview. The artifact gathering was more successful with some participants than with others. Given that I made all parts of the interview process optional, I worked with what I was given. Some, like Joyce and Grace, gathered many artifacts and documented their semester thoroughly. Others, like HyeJoon and Noah, did not gather any. In the latter cases, our second interviews were open ended conversation. This follow-up interview allowed me to address larger questions like the role of hagwon in Asian American culture and vice versa (RQ3).

In theorizing the interview, Pink (2009) said, “Talking undeniably plays a central role in the interview. Yet a notion of the interview as simply an encounter that benefits

from the intimacy of face-to-face conversation is insufficient. Rather, it is a social encounter—an event that is inevitably both emplaced and productive of place. (p. 82)—includes nonverbal communication. Further, Pink (2009) stated that “an interview is not an exclusively aural encounter or event but one that also involves the materiality of the environment and of artefacts” (p. 85). My approach to the interview in this study was informed by this idea. Pink (2009) encouraged the “use of material objects to elicit responses or evoke memories and areas of knowledge” (p. 93), citing her use of sensorial engagement with material objects to elicit meanings of home from her participants. Likewise, artifacts were an important part of the interviewing process in this study; I pulled up photos of signs and notes I found, in addition to asking about the photos and notes the students — the ones who did — provided.

Artifact Elicitation and Analysis. Pink (2009) described the “photo-elicitation practice” of viewing visual images produced by the interviewer or the research participants themselves, and “to ask them to discuss aspects of these images in interviews” (p. 110). She cited work by Samantha Warren wherein Warren combined three methods: semi-structured biographical interviews, respondent-led photography, and aesthetic ethnography, “which involves using the researcher’s own aesthetic experience to inform her or his understandings” (p. 111). Pink (2009) went on to describe that “Participants were invited to photograph their experiences of the department as they chose and the photographs were then discussed in interview” (p. 111). Here again, Pink’s idea of shared sociality played into the interview process, as I tapped into my own experience of an artifact (e.g., the motivational posters on the walls) to frame and understand a participants’ experience.

Saldaña and Omasta (2016) cited a study by Clark-Ibañez (2008) that utilized photo-elicitation interviews wherein “participants were given disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of what was important to learn” (p. 149). Thankfully, with modern phone camera technology, most students have cell phone cameras with them. Between the first two formal interviews, I asked my student-participants to take photos of their experiences—including anything that they felt was remarkable in some way—whether they found it particularly useful, edifying, boring, interesting, motivating, traumatizing, or triggering, etc. I also asked students to take and self-select existing texts and artifacts of anything in their lives that remind them in some way of hagwon—whether it be a text from school that related to something they covered in hagwon or some other activity or task in which they use skills acquired, developed, or refined in hagwon. In this way, the inclusion of artifacts in the data collection phase helped to confirm and clarify data from observation, interview, and sensory experiences, thereby supporting my data analysis and construction of meaning

Different students interpreted “artifact” in different ways. For instance, Grace generated a written log wherein she wrote about various milestones and feelings over the course of the January to June 2023 observation period (see Figure 13). Joyce kept an artifact log wherein she posted screen shots of lists she made and reminders she set on her phone. She also posted photos of the notes she took and drawings she did in the margins of her practice test materials (see Figures 16-18). These artifacts served as talking points during our second interviews. I mention these two participants because they both spoke about their anxiety, and their artifacts lent me insight into the depth of that anxiety (e.g.,

Joyce calling herself derogatory names as negative reinforcement; Grace not being able to look at her scores).

Member Check. As a triangulation method, I offered all participants the opportunity to member check after I had written their narratives, where I talked them through what I had written about them “for accuracy and possible misrepresentation” (Stake, 2006, p. 37). As this study focused on the student experience, it was of utmost importance that those experiences were accurately portrayed in a way that felt representative of the participants’ intended meaning.

Memos and Contact Summary Sheets. It was also important to memo (Saldaña, 2021) throughout the process (i.e., after each interview and observation) and keep Contact Summary Sheets (see Appendix E) (Abrams, 2009) to maintain researcher reflexivity and be open to emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Contact Summary Sheets helped me to remain organized and served as a way to find data more quickly. Interviews were conducted throughout the study and, as with any research, participants had the right to withdraw from the study or opt out of answering interview questions at any time and without consequence.

Data Analysis

“If there is not a saying that ‘Content trumps method,’ there should be” (Stake, 2006, p. 31).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified inductive data analysis as the preferred data analysis method in qualitative research because: (1) it is more sensitive to “multiple realities” in the data; (2) the investigator-respondent (or object) interaction is likely to be more “explicit, recognizable, and accountable”; (3) it will better “describe fully the

setting”; (4) it will better identify “the mutually shaping influences that interact”; and (5) “values can be an explicit part of the analytic structure” (p. 40). The nature of this ethnographic case study was exploratory, so I left the interview and coding processes open-ended to accommodate multiple realities in the data, as I did not know what responses the participants were going to produce in advance (Stake, 1995). The open-endedness and broad scope of inductive analysis aligned with the openness of Bourdieu’s (1998) habitus, which situated practices and a value system in a mutually inscriptive relationship, and was inclusive of all potentialities of that interaction.

At the same time, as a result of writing my literature review (Kim, 2022d), I synthesized a four-point shadow education theory that served as a point of entry for the first round of data analysis (see Appendix B), which meant that some of the coding was deductive, “e.g., codes are identified prior to analysis and then looked for in the data” (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007, p. 565). This round of data analysis helped in the initial organization of themes as I clarified, challenged, confirmed, and augmented extant understandings of the hagwon experience (RQ1), and matched data (quotes, observation notes, memo notes, etc.) with initial themes.

Below, I detail my data analysis process: the recursive coding (both inductive and deductive) throughout the interview and observation process as I traveled back and forth between the research sites. Then, I detail the cross-case analysis process of revisiting data—from individual cases (i.e., students), and the case quintain—recursively over time to elicit themes.

Coding

The coding process began as I transcribed interviews, as I finished collecting and began formatting my data, “not after all fieldwork [had] been completed” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 31). Saldaña explained that annotating transcripts—via digital or nondigital margin notes—is the first step towards finding categories, patterns, themes, and sub-themes. Thus, my coding process commenced as soon as I began transcribing my interviews and taking observation notes. Saldaña also asserted that coding and analytic memo writing are “concurrent qualitative data analytic activities” (p. 58). Thus, after each interview and interaction was transcribed and pre-coded, I wrote short analytic memos with the objective of researcher reflexivity and working toward “deeper and complex meanings” (p. 58). These memos were also used as data as part of the coding process. Contact summary sheets (Appendix E) helped me to document and to navigate data sources (e.g., survey response data, interview transcripts, field notes, artifacts, analytic memos), provide quick re-orienting tags, suggest further codes, and guide further data analysis (Abrams, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994). It was helpful to put together these memos and summary sheets, as I found myself noticing and writing about initial patterns and themes.

I performed multiple rounds of coding, both inductive and deductive. In-vivo coding used participant-generated words, which “prioritize[d] and honor[ed] the participant voice” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 138), and was therefore inherently inductive—something Saldaña said would be “particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth” (p. 138), as this study was. I was open to unforeseen patterns and themes as I heard and learned from the students themselves and revisited the data throughout the

process. The initial deductive coding then evolved into inductive coding, which enabled me to find sub-themes that were more specific and elaborate and spoke to the varied experiences I was observing. For instance, I did not know what I would find by way of a “Hidden Curriculum,” but very quickly, I noticed that academic achievement was a major part of the students’ informal interactions (i.e., out of class and during breaks); thus, I developed a sub-heading, “Academic Achievement as Part of Youth Culture,” which then became something I looked for and coded for deductively. The memos allowed me to reflect on the existing themes and posit new developing themes as they were emerging. Thus, coding, memo writing, and organizing my data became a recursive and mutually generative process.

The deductive categories were culled from my research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework (Table 3):

Table 3

Research Questions Connect to Deductive Categories and Theories

Research Questions	Literature Review Themes	Conceptual Framework Themes
RQ1: student experiences and perceptions	hagwon is a normal part of life; instruction; school is not enough; hidden curriculum	habitus
RQ2: learned or enacted practice or both	tools and resources, behaviors, skills, literacies	bricolage (tools)
RQ3: hagwon culture	hidden curriculum	bricolage (cultural); habitus

I also conducted a cross-case analysis, detailed below, to identify and detail what similarities and differences emerge when comparing and contrasting student hagwon experiences (RQ3).

Narrative

The next significant step was to synthesize my observations and the participants' interview transcripts to construct narratives. I started with thick descriptions of the hagwons to establish the context in which the student experiences unfolded. Then, I used the student interview transcripts and field notes to construct their narratives. Agar (1996) argued that “when you feature narratives of everyday experience, you find out that people don't just implement the shared knowledge in the encyclopedia. They mix it up with other things, ‘contest’ and ‘subvert’ it, to use the fashionable terms, maybe even ignore it” (p. 10). Indeed, each student case experienced hagwon in vastly different ways, though there were distinct similarities. This was a crucial step. As I studied my transcripts and notes, themes started to emerge, and these emerging themes then helped shape my narratives and subsequent cross-case analysis and discussion (detailed in the next sections). Indeed, Bourdieu (1998) acknowledged the likelihood of varied responses and identity formations in response to habitus. The shadow education learning center environment was no different—from the triumph narratives to students who did not want to be there—and subsequently contested, subverted, or ignored its values in different ways. Hence, Reay's (2004) assertion: “first and foremost habitus is a conceptual tool to be used in empirical research rather than an idea to be debated in texts” (p. 439). The cross-case analysis and discussion sections that follow are organized using the four-point shadow education theory that organized my literature review (see Appendix B).

Cross-Case Analysis

Stake (2006) stated that each individual case (in this study, each student) “has its own problems and relationships. The cases have their stories to tell, and some of them are

included in the multicase report, but the official interest is in the collection of these cases or in the phenomenon exhibited in those cases” (p. vi). Agar (1996) also noted the power of cross-case analysis: “with a shared knowledge goal, an ethnographer ranged across cases and looked for the common threads, the famous ‘patterns’ or ‘themes’ or ‘value configurations’” (Agar, 1996, p. 10). In other words, the individual cases are important step on their own, but equally important is the synthesis that happens when the cases are considered together.

Thus, once the individual cases (i.e., each student) were analyzed for themes, I performed a cross-case analysis of the transcripts and artifacts using a method that Stake (2006) called a “case-quintain dialectic” (p. 46). This dialectic is “a rhetorical, adversarial procedure, wherein attention to the local situations and attention to the program or phenomenon as a whole contend with each other for emphasis” (p. 46). In other words, I recursively considered the individual cases *and* what Stake calls a “quintain,” or “the entity having cases or examples.” (p. vi). In my case, this was a two-level process: (1) I grouped the students attending the same hagwon together; (2) then I considered all seven students across the centers together. This involved grouping coded quotes together under developing theme headings, then grouping those headings together as I sharpened and regrouped my themes for the whole quintain, emphasizing similarities or “common relationships across cases (Stake, 2006, p. 39).

To do this, I narrowed my scope of analysis to a few themes, starting with the four-point framework from my literature review. But through the process of constructing the narratives, I also elicited codes that were not included in my literature review. For instance, I knew that “school is not enough” or the separation between school and

hagwon was going to be a major theme. But I also started to notice that the influence of social media was something that all my participants spoke about and that teachers spoke about in my observations. Thus, I found a place for social media influence in my themes and gathered data to substantiate it. This involved visiting and revisiting my transcripts and artifacts over time for social media because while, initially, it may have seemed like an idiosyncrasy for one student case, I had not thought of it as significant for the whole quintain in an earlier round of coding.

Agar (1996) emphasized the importance of situating ethnography in the context of the broader political discourse: “Whatever else we do now, we have to connect local ethnographic detail with the nature of the 'state, the nature of the world” (p. 12). How we go about doing that is by talking to people—i.e., interviewing them—and analyzing those narratives for patterns: “By analyzing the narratives, one explains the variation by bringing those ‘different things’ to light” (p. 10). The differences and contradictions in individual narratives still speak collectively to broader structural forces at play if we are vigilant in analyzing individual narratives and looking for patterns. Thus, “stretches of everyday life were little dramas of political economy and history, what I think of as Foucault in living color” (p. 12). His point was that, as Foucault argued, there is no escaping the power networks in which we operate. The way we examine those power networks is by listening to the people who navigate and negotiate them on the ground. My cross-case analysis of multiple student experiences revealed similarities and differences across hagwon experiences, which provided insight into a broader hagwon culture or habitus (RQ3). In addition, in our last round of interviews, I directly addressed

with my participants a major political event that occurred during this study: the Supreme Court decision striking down affirmative action, which is also a section in my themes.

Positionality

“There is no value-free science in this world” (Stake, 2006, p. 85).

It feels appropriate that this study began with my personal connections in this community: my family introduced me to my research sites. It is important to note that being directly introduced to the owner of the hagwon was essential. Any unsolicited calls and emails I sent to hagwons went unanswered. One hagwon I called was a referral from a former student of that hagwon, and though the person I spoke to took down my information and assured me they would get back to me, they did not return my call. Another was the Queens franchise location of one of my participating New Jersey hagwons. When I visited that Queens location, the owner stopped me at the reception area, answered a few questions, and asked me to email her, but she never responded to my email. In other words, access to one hagwon in a franchise did not translate to access to another location. There seems to be a guardedness around hagwon that might be worth further study. Though my emic positionality allowed me access that someone else might not have, even one degree removed from the hagwon, I found it difficult to gain an audience, much less participation in the study. These types of responses could explain why there is such a dearth of qualitative research on this topic.

When I first conceived of this study, my initial impulse was to study one site in Bergen County, NJ. This spoke to my own background studying in hagwons in the middle-class suburbs of New Jersey. However, what felt missing was the fundamental reason why I got into education research in the first place: my students and their families,

for whom hagwon represents an access channel to social mobility. I became interested in the topic of shadow education as a potential topic of study because I found that my students universally engaged in it at some point in their lives. They mostly come from urban settings like Queens, NY, which is more economically disadvantaged than the New Jersey suburbs where I grew up—hence why my school is considered Title I. Examining hagwons in an urban setting like Queens will render a more nuanced, and therefore richer picture of the Korean immigrant experience—one that is more inclusive of the class disparities that exists across this community.

My interest in researching the hagwon phenomenon is layered: both my personal and professional investment in this topic are equal parts why this is such a deeply personal project for me.

Personal Background

It has been shown that Asian accented voices (i.e. my parents' voices) are perceived by people in the U.S. as lower in intelligence, attractiveness, status, and dynamism (Bauman, 2013). I am a child of immigrants, and technically an immigrant myself (I moved here when I was three). Growing up, I saw firsthand my parents' struggle to be understood and dignified in non-Korean establishments: the American grocery store, non-Korean restaurants, and the like. Understandably, my parents were much more comfortable dealing in the Korean-owned establishments, where the proprietors and workers spoke Korean. This is what Park (2012) referred to as the "ethnic economy." We bought groceries at the Korean grocery store, rented videos from the Korean video store, and navigated the morass of cell phone service at Korean-owned cell phone stores in the northern New Jersey suburb where I grew up.

My non-accented English language proficiency was itself capital (Bourdieu, 1998; Choi, 2021) that was gifted to me when my parents moved me here at an early enough age that my native Korean was not yet baked into my phonemes. I attended expensive American private schools and was immersed in Western popular and academic culture, and their attendant texts, literacies, and discourses. Subsequently, I entered a *détente* with the Western academy, and subordinated my native tongue and identity. Upon reflection, I was influenced by the societal forces that permeated and shaped my consciousness—starting with the decision my parents made to pursue “better” opportunities in the U.S., which they did.

At the same time, my parents are products of the historically intense testing culture in South Korea. My parents tested into top universities. My mother often speaks about sleeping at school so that she did not waste any studying time by traveling to and from school. My late grandmother described my mother as having a “toxic” work ethic (translation mine; the Korean word she used is “독해,” which is used to describe medicine that is so strong that it borders on poisonous). Their perception of learning, academic excellence, and their economic stability is rooted in the study habits that helped them navigate a strict and rigorous testing system. I must acknowledge that I have benefited from a system that rewarded my parents, who subsequently contributed to my own achievements, such as they are.

I should also acknowledge recent news stories that have influence my dissertation topic. The recent uptick in hate crimes and subsequent focus on Asian issues (Lee & Huang, 2021; Mai, 2021) was a catalyst for a positionality reckoning wherein I realized that I was subjugating this side of my own identity because of an “internalized

oppression” (Paris & Alim, 2014, p. 95), conditioned through decades in Western academia and culture. Subsequently, my pilot study, which was more exploratory in nature, ended up focusing on the potential of Korean pop music and multilingualism in English curriculum (Kim, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Upon reflection, my previous dismissiveness of Korean immigrant culture came from an internalized “panoptic White Gaze” (Caraballo et al., 2020, p. 698) or “White standard” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006, p. 59) that I was not only wielding against myself, but against my parents and the Korean American community that helped them feel somewhat at home here in the United States.

When it came to my parents’ perspectives on education, I thought their study habits were antiquated, and their overemphasis on tests was not in line with what was valued here in the West. At the same time, I was forced to attend shadow education test prep classes as a child and benefitted from it: first to prepare to take the SAT in seventh grade so I could attend advanced college-level summer courses at a camp called CTY (Center for Talented Youth) then to hone my test-taking skills to prepare for the college admissions process. As a result, I became a very good test-taker, which helped me not only then, but also over twenty years later when taking my teacher certification exams and when applying to the PhD program I am writing this dissertation for, both of which required a standardized test.

Kim and Jung (2022b) noted the need the necessity of research from an emic perspective:

Many shadow education studies employed quantitative methods, which provide statistical analysis based on the large-scale data of the Programme for

International Student Assessment (PISA) reports and/or national surveys. Such studies fail to comprehend insiders' perspectives, as these positivistic researches [sic] are conducted from the researchers' standpoints and outsiders' views.

Instead of conducting fieldwork in specific contexts, many exclusively rely on statistics from national and international archives. (p. 19)

Their point is that “positivistic”—or seemingly objective—poring over pre-existing quantitative data sets are telling only a partial story. They went on:

Moreover, some qualitative research in East Asia is conducted by researchers who lack linguistic, cultural, and historical backgrounds necessary for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon... While they may have done their best under the circumstances in which they were situated, we cannot help questioning the amount and quality of the data they, as outsiders who do not speak the native languages, collected. (p. 20)

Indeed, there are elements of Korean culture—like any culture—that are difficult for an outsider to fully grasp. As someone who grew up in the setting being observed (a Northern New Jersey Korean immigrant community), I had a deeper, more personal connection to my target research participants and their families. This allowed my participants to say things like, “In the Asian community, as you know yourself,” as HyeJoon did during our first interview. I’ve previously stated that my access to the research sites were predicated on my emic positionality.

Professional Background

Additionally, my positionality as a public educator who teaches students at a high school that is urban, high achieving, Title I, and majority-Asian is part of this study, too.

The students I teach at my job are the supposed success stories of testing culture. My students take these tests very seriously: they study for them despite the negative messaging around standardized testing because they need every advantage, every credential, when it comes to applying to college. And when it comes to the AP exams, they need to do well on them to save tuition money on remedial college courses.

Consequently, what I see daily is a wide range of student responses to an environment that leverages their ability to hunker down and study, even if they don't feel like it, or even if the subject does not interest them. Subsequently, teachers demand more of them than some of the other schools I have taught in, observed, and experienced myself. The new (i.e., post-COVID) supposedly kinder homework policy limits homework to half an hour per day per subject, which calculates to about four to five hours a day—which still sounds like a lot. I can't deny that my assignments and grades contribute to the competitive culture that both shape and necessitate the shadow education system. I sometimes feel guilty about the toll this takes on students' mental health. But I also silently nod when my parents and their friends assert that this type of culture (i.e., students competing and extending themselves to meet their full potential) fosters excellence, and why a tiny nation like South Korea (population 50 million, compared to the U. S.'s 300 million) can top PISA reports (OECD, 2018a) and rise to become a global economic power. Then again, while true, I can't help but think we are measuring the wrong things to define success, and that hagwon both reflects and feeds into that system.

Ultimately, this study was inspired by my students, and is therefore as much about them as it is about me. I feel protective of my students, especially when their efforts are

painted as a negative, and they are therefore perceived as an affront to equity and justice even though many of them come from impoverished immigrant families. Telling their stories feels important. Given this past, but also acknowledging the amount of time that has passed since I was their age, I am positioned in this study at a “midpoint of the continuum representing the place where emic and etic viewpoints are maximally interactive” (Onwuegbuzie, 2012, p. 205). Onwuegbuzie (2012) called this the *emic* perspective.

Limitations

My emic perspective can be seen as a limitation. I must acknowledge that this is a deeply personal project for me. I am, in a sense, examining a major element of my own childhood, and thus, I come with my own conflicting feelings about the long-term implications—the benefits, yes, but also the shortcomings, and even dangers—of shadow education. My etic perspective has to do with time. I am significantly older than my participants, and times have changed. I can say that, from my perspective, the intensity and uncertainty surrounding the college application process have increased, though the rituals look and sound familiar.

In terms of this study, my professional position, which I disclosed to my participants, both ingratiated and distanced me from them. In a sense, I was on the side of the gatekeepers in the system from which the students are trying to navigate and seek validation. Most had heard of the brand-name school where I teach, and if they hadn't, they looked it up—because due diligence is something they have learned to do. I could sense their nerves at the beginning of our interactions, but over time, I found it easy to talk to them, and that they were forthcoming and honest—almost to a fault. Sometimes,

their truths hurt. The other limitation was that I only had access to students who attended their classes, which meant that they were not rebelling to the point of truancy. This limited my participant pool to ones at a baseline level of compliance; thus, Bourdieu's (1998) contrarian perspective was not an empirical part of this study, except anecdotally, second-hand.

I found that participants were more difficult to recruit than I anticipated. Students are busy and they did not find the prospect of talking about their test prep experience particularly exciting, despite my offer to help them with their college essays. The responses to questions 1 and 2 on the preliminary survey were high. Thus, I heard mostly from students who found test prep to be useful and has helped them. In his preliminary survey, HyeJoon wrote that he wanted to participate in the study because he wanted to talk about "my interactions and emotions with my second home." So his willingness to share about a place stemmed from positive feelings about it.

In a memo I wrote after my first interview with Emmie, I wrote about the surprising lack of parental influence on my participant pool:

I'm surprised at how many of these participants would go to hagwon even if their parents didn't make them. But this could also be a biased participant pool, since kids who are being forced to be there might be less likely to want to talk about it with a researcher.

In a representative comment, Emmie indicated an awareness of students who were not as committed to hagwon learning as she was. In one of her interviews, she points out a distinct dichotomy in the student population at hagwon:

You can obviously tell who's like kind of good at it and who knows their stuff.

And kids were just there because they're there. You know what I'm saying? I feel like that's in every classroom, but like it's kind of you could really point it out in hagwons, I feel like. They're not honestly engaged with the class and really just do work just to finish it. I mean, this is my opinion, but like, they're not really there to actually learn. I think their parents kind of forced them, honestly.

Noah and HyeJoon similarly indicated a difference between students like them, who gave their all and others who did not. Noah said of students who did not make it to the advance class, “If they’re doing bad and not in the advanced class, it’s usually because they’re not trying,” and added that these students did not last very long at hagwon. I noticed this dichotomy, too. Unfortunately, the type of student Emmie and Noah were describing would likely not be inclined to speak to a researcher like me. This would explain the low mean score on the preliminary survey, where the participants generally were not there because of their parents (2.75 out of 5).

The students who did participate in this study—ones who bought in to hagwon and felt comfortable enough about it to speak to me about their experiences—varied when it came to thinking about the SAT and their test prep experience. However, the one perspective that was missing here was someone who felt strongly about getting rid of the SAT altogether. There is plenty already written about getting rid of the SAT altogether, even from people whose business it has been to teach it (Katzman, 2014). I once was a proponent of this idea; but I no longer share this sentiment.

Lastly, as an English teacher, I have much deeper insight into the SAT reading section and how it is and is not connected to English class at school. The implications for

my classroom section in Chapter Nine is focused mostly on analytical essay writing. A math teacher might have more insight into the math section and how a school math teacher might reconcile math class and the SAT math section.

Conclusion

I have complicated feelings about shadow education, as well as the larger discussion that shadow education is a part of: the ongoing racial tension surrounding school admissions—from specialized high school admissions (Collins, 2021; Nierenberg, 2022; Powell, 2022; Shapiro, 2019) to college and university admissions (Hartocollis, 2018; Hassan, 2019; Liptak & Anemona, 2022; Qin, 2022; Tessler, 2022; Timsit, 2019). In writing about the complexity of the Asian issue as a standalone issue, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the larger discourse it is a part of. By the end of the study, my feelings remained just as complex, though I achieved some clarity on what I think about the SAT, that it *does* mean something.

Black and Latino students have been disproportionately underrepresented in elite academic institutions and gifted programs (Ford, 2010; Ford et al., 2008; Grissom & Redding, 2016; Powell, 2022), including the test-based admissions school where I teach (Dobbie & Fryer, 2014; Shapiro, 2019). Affirmative Action thus served an equity and justice-based purpose in this country. But I also can't help but empathize with the Asian community's indignation when they mobilize in response to existing admissions policies (that they did not create), then have the rules change because "critics imply that the presence of so many South and East Asian students, along with the white students, accentuates... injustice" (Powell, 2022). The lumping together of Asian and White students—not to mention the demonization of the Asian population as somehow

perpetuating systemic oppression, as if the Asian population is not also overcoming systemic barriers themselves—perpetuates reductive de-minoritized (Lee, 2006) perceptions of the Asian community. Case in point: “Salma Mohamed, a child of immigrants from Alexandria, Egypt, and a graduate of Brooklyn Tech [a NYC specialized high school], added: ‘It’s very interesting to me that the word segregated is used in a school that is predominantly Asian. It connotes white and class privilege. That’s not us’” (Powell, 2022). As is the case with most education issues, the story is more complex.

My methodology and methods were designed to offset as much as possible my own personal feelings and biases. That said, my emic positionality—with a shared linguistic, cultural, and historical background—fostered a comfort level with participants that allowed them to open up to me about their thoughts on mental health and their feelings on affirmative action. I was also one degree closer to the sensory experiences (Pink, 2009) of these students, since I had experienced many of the pressures and expectations they did. This led to a deeper connection to and understanding of their experiences and perceptions, and subsequently, a more “holistic understanding” (Kim & Jung, 2022b, p. 20) of the students in this study.

Given the dearth of qualitative research of student experiences at hagwon here in the U.S., this dissertation will complicate an existing narrative that I feel to be reductive, and thus humanize (Paris & Winn, 2014) it. The breadth of experiences detailed in the coming chapters confirmed what Bourdieu (1998) said, that there is often diversity where one expects to find homogeneity. At the same time, I came away with a deeper understanding of what hagwon is and what it means to our community because it is also

important that “we seek patterns as somewhat stable indicators of humans’ ways of living and working” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 8). I hope this will help the reader to understand our world a little better.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS

This chapter is about each hagwon and the people who attended them. I detail each student experience, craft from interview, survey, and observation data. I group the student cases by the hagwon they attended during this study, and I precede each student group with a description of the hagwon. Pseudonyms obscure all names and identifying information.

As Bourdieu (1998) theorized, I found “diversity where one expected to see homogeneity, conflict where one expected to see consensus, reproduction and conservation where one expected to see mobility” (p. 12). The students’ experiences and perceptions (RQ1) were different, though they all shared an Asian immigrant background and time spent preparing for the SAT at a test prep center. Fracturing the homogeneity further was that the hagwons themselves were so different—with distinct personalities and cultures of their own. Despite the standardization implicit in the task of studying for a standardized exam, the three hagwons provided three very different environments. As a participant named Grace said, “In math problems, there's research. Like a survey done. And in other research papers I've seen, I guess, there's people. I realized that they're actually real people that responded.” Humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2014) the Asian American hagwon-attending community starts with seeing the variety of personalities contained therein.

In a study of a specialized high school in a large urban city, Lee (2009) broke down the Asian-descendant students into four distinct groups: Asian, Asian American, Korean, and new wave. The Asian group was characterized as recent (within five years) immigrants; the Asian American group were either born here or raised here since

childhood; the Korean group generally came from middle to upper class families and came from the same Korean neighborhood; and the new wave groups were working class and actively subverted the Asian stereotypes of achievement and deference to authority. Lee's nuanced look at the Asian population within a specialized high school aligned with something Bourdieu (1998) said about complicating our perceptions of class or social space:

And in the United States, every day some new piece of research appears showing diversity where one expected to see homogeneity, conflict where one expected to see consensus, reproduction and conservation where one expected to see mobility. Thus, difference (which I express in describing social space) exists and persists.
(p. 12)

For Bourdieu, trying to render fixed conceptions of class revealed as much difference—what they don't share—as any concrete definition of what they do. For instance, even within Lee's deconstruction of the broad-brush category of "Asian," while "Korean" was its own category, there were students of Korean descent represented in all the Asian groups, and they did not align in much else besides ethnicity. In my study, I interviewed students of Korean and Chinese background who attended Korean-run hagwons seamlessly.

Thus, as Harrison (1993) pointed out, Bourdieu was operating within a paradox: "the paradox of Bourdieu's sociology is that it is postmodern in its attempt at cultural declassification through its critique of the functionality of the merit principle and the formalism of the aesthetic judgment, but that it still retains a very modernist approach to sociology as a science that 'unveils' the class basis of all forms of symbolic

classification” (p. 49). Harrison noted that Bourdieu seemed to want to break down classes, or “de-classify,” but ultimately “remained wedded to a typically structuralist faith in science as a process of uncovering unconscious or second-order determinants” (p. 49). In short, there is something reductive about grouping people together, but groupings are necessary for the sake of argument building.

Oliver and O'Reilly (2010) used habitus to examine British migrants in Spain: “[Bourdieu’s] synthesis of both objective analyses of relative positions and the qualitative means of (re)creating divisions, including preferences in art, culture, taste, education, lifestyle and cuisine, helped us explain British lifestyle migrants’ practices in Spain” (p. 50). They found that while British migrants sought out a new physical setting, “on the whole their class positions were reproduced through habitus and the continued distinctiveness of economic and cultural capital. Class in this context is dynamic, circulating through symbolic and cultural forms as much as through economic inequalities” (p. 50). In other words, British habitus survived the physical move and could be differentiated from its host culture.

For me, what was insightful to think about in this study was to examine the habitus of hagwon in a similar way. Bourdieu deconstructed class groupings, but ultimately, habitus as an idea is predicated on the idea that an Asian identity exists and can survive a move to the United States. In this study, the Asian American habitus was a necessary starting point to address the extant narratives around them.

The following findings section starts by breaking down the unity of the Asian American shadow education student identity—by treating each participant as their own case. I break down each center by Setting; Classes, Teachers, and Students; and Culture.

Each student case is organized by Family; Hagwon Experience; School Life; and Work/Volunteering (if applicable). In Grace's case, hagwon and school were so inextricably linked that I collapsed those categories into one; Troy did not mention work or volunteering experience. Then, I work towards reconstructing a habitus of hagwon in the cross-case analysis and discussion sections according to observed themes and patterns, as well as material and symbolic differences (e.g., each hagwon environment was so distinct). My goal is not to deconstruct to eradicate completely; rather, the goal was to destabilize, complicate, and ultimately illuminate.

Hearing directly from seven very different students about the on-the-ground reality of their experiences with shadow education in the U.S., I learned things I did not expect. Hagwon is a difficult and complex space. While many of the critiques of the institution are likely warranted, which I address, some of them were not. Most importantly, the students were likewise complex and had varied experiences and perspectives to share. As Kirkland (2014) said about humanizing research, in countering reductive and oppressive narratives about a population, it is important to offer “complementary and sometimes contradictory information complicating the body politic of large ‘generalizable’ findings” (p. 180).

Crown Academy

“You feel, like, real welcome there.”

The Crown Academy I observed was in Palisades Park, New Jersey. I visited Crown a total of seven times, all Saturdays, between January 7th and May 27th, between 10AM to 5PM for a total of 49 observation hours.

Setting

As soon as I walked into a Bergen County branch of Crown Academy (there are other locations in Queens and other parts of northern New Jersey), I was greeted by front desk staff who were all wearing Crown Academy merchandise—sweatshirts, T-shirts. Two or three staff members were available at the front desk to greet and answer questions at all times. They were friendly and greeted me in the traditional Korean way, with bows and smiles. “I feel like it’s out of Korean respect,” said HyeJoon, a Crown Academy student and participant in this study. Indeed, there was something comforting about being greeted this way. But what separated this center was that the front desk staff were more than just front desk staff. I would see the same people step in and teach classes if the regular scheduled teacher was sick or away. This is indicative of a familial atmosphere, where the hierarchy is a bit muddled and staff members are ready to chip in and take on almost any role. Students are welcome to ask staff for help, or “just like walk in and occupy space there ... You can come in anytime, even after if, like, you used up all your classes”—this, according to Troy, another Crown student and participant of this study.

In fact, Troy said, the first thing students learn when they sign up for classes is that they are welcome any time: “Like anytime, like Sunday or during the weekdays, just if they want to come and study by themselves, like do work.” They are encouraged, even, to come in and take practice tests during the week, even favoring the ones who do: “One of the people by the desk, he’s always like, encouraging me, like, ‘Where are you? Why aren’t you coming in?’ Like, ‘You haven’t been coming this week.’ They tend to like students that show that they want to put in more work.” Indeed, students who succeed

were a point of pride for them. There were clear physical markers that made this eminently clear.

The lobby was adorned with large posters that boast the accomplishments of Crown Academy alumni (Figure 5). One featured “[Crown Academy] College Acceptances,” with various colleges and universities listed with names of alumni listed underneath each school. At the top of the poster were the schools I expected to see (Acronyms and abbreviations were used to reflect what was on the poster. Full school names are in parentheses; from left to right): Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, MIT, and Columbia. The other schools listed (in no particular order) were: UPenn (University of Pennsylvania), Johns Hopkins, Dartmouth, Brown, Northwestern, UChicago (University of Chicago), Williams, Duke, Emory, West Point, Notre Dame, Amherst, UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles), CMU (Carnegie Mellon University), WashU (Washington University in St. Louis), Rice, NYU (New York University), UC Berkeley (University of California, Berkeley), USC (University of Southern California), Georgetown, UVA (University of Virginia), UMichigan (University of Michigan), Vanderbilt. Aligned neatly next to this poster were colored paper printouts displaying the names of students who had achieved perfect scores on AP Exams (Figure 6). On a large television screen, a promotional video played on a loop wherein alumni wearing sweatshirts adorned with the names of the colleges they attended spoke about their experiences at Crown, and how Crown helped them achieve their goals.

Figure 5

“College Acceptances” Poster



Note. A poster boasts names of alumni and the schools they were admitted to. The poster indicates “ACCEPTANCES”—whether the students matriculated or not was unclear.

Figure 6

Perfect AP Score Wall



Note. Printouts boast student names with perfect AP Exam scores (names redacted).

Troy, for one, noticed, and could not help but feel that Crown was feeding into Asian stereotypes: “The stereotype is Asians are high achievers. So that’s the stereotype. And then it's like, as soon as you walk in, it's like, students from [Crown], the list of colleges, or they post all the scores, immediately when you walk in. So I think it's like [Crown] feeding into that ‘if you're a high achiever, this is where you have to go,’ you know. So I think it's like, playing into stereotype ideas in a way.” Personally, I will admit to looking for my undergraduate college, and being hurt when I did not find it listed. I did like that the center celebrated their students’ accomplishments as if they were theirs, though one could also read this as added pressure.

The Crown Academy walls also served as a de facto resource center, as various flyers went up throughout the semester, featuring opportunities to enter academic and art contests, and even a sports management summer program that included a tour of an unnamed Ivy League school (Figure 7). (Sports and entertainment management are big business in Korea now, according to my mother, who translated the flyer [pictured, middle] for me.) One sign was for an SAT Competition, sponsored by Crown, awarding a \$1,000 credit for 1st place, \$700 for 2nd place, \$500 for third place, and \$100 for all who score over 1400. “DON’T MISS THE OPPORTUNITY!” the sign implored. The walls spoke at Crown.

Figure 7

Hagwon Walls Serve as Resource Centers



Classes, Teachers, and Students

I could understand why this center was so well-attended, which it was. Crown had two full tracks—intro and advanced. They filled up with so many students that they had to divide each track into two sections of 18-20 students. I don't know how they assigned the cohorts, but students who were friends seemed to end up in the same class. The classes tended to be loose, and could, at times, feel chaotic (in this teacher's opinion). I watched students play chess on their computers; students tear each other's test booklets apart and hit each other with them; students toss candy into each other's mouths; students surreptitiously try to throw as many rolled up balls of paper into the hood of a student in front of them; and students listen to music on shared headphones and practice dance choreography at their desks. Students managed to sneak their phones into class, despite staff asking them to hand them in before entering classrooms (Figure 8). Eventually, the staff had to start counting the number of phones to match the number of students. And still, somehow, I would see a phone.

Figure 8

Collected Phones



On one occasion, I watched a student across from me watch MMA and tennis videos on his phone. On another occasion, I saw a student showing off his bets on Turkish basketball to other students and the teacher, and then explain why he doesn't bet on NCAA games:

“They're too unpredictable. They score like crazy or they don't. It's so random. It's literally 50/50.”

“Get a job,” his friend told him.

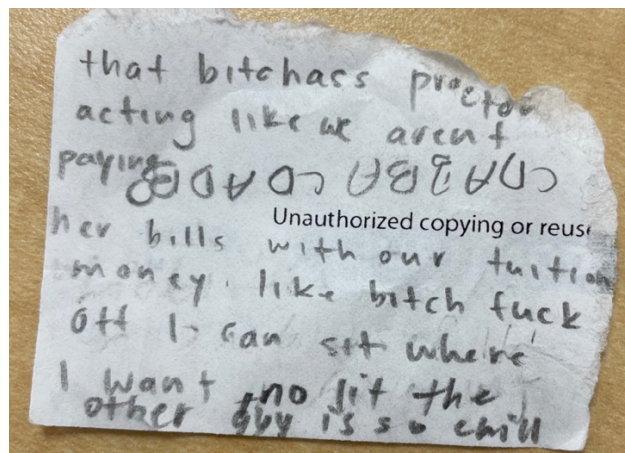
On another, watched two separate groups of girls gather around two computers, divide up their ear buds, and watch *South Park*, the animated television show, in the back of the room while the teacher was teaching. The students seemed to have license to pay as much or as little attention as they wanted. An illustration of this dynamic was a note I happened to find on the ground during one of my observations (Figure 8) that read, “that bitchass proctor acting like we aren't paying her bills with our tuition money like bitch fuck off I can sit where I want to sit the other guy is so chill.”

But the same study showed that students took their private tutoring classes *more* seriously because they were paying for them. This was illustrated by Troy's reaction to

the note when I showed it to him: “If you're placed in [hagwon], like several hours a week when you don't want to be there, or if their parents are trying to push too harsh expectations of what score they want you to get, I feel for them. I feel sad that they have to go every day, or every week. But I don't think that directing your anger on the proctor who's just there to help is nice.” The relationship between students and staff was one of the features of this center, according to all three participants: “The staff and teachers too, they're always so supportive,” HyeJoon said.

Figure 9

A Discarded Student Note



The day ran from 10AM—5PM. Classes were structured by ability. The beginner track had classes in the morning from 10AM—1PM, one hour each for math, reading, and writing. Lunch was from 1PM—2PM. Then, in the afternoon, they would apply their learning on a three-hour practice test, 2PM—5PM. The advanced track flipped the day; they had a practice test in the morning from 10AM—1PM. Then, they would break for lunch and finish the day by reviewing their practice test by section.

The math, reading, and writing teachers rotated between the classes. They also took tutoring jobs during their free periods, so I heard teachers sometimes tell their

students that he had no time to eat or go to the bathroom. The teachers I observed were often local college students and all Korean American—some more Korean than American. There was a lot more Korean spoken at this hagwon than any of the others. Case in point, when one of the teachers was asked how tall they were, they answered in centimeters.

Teachers started classes by looking at their students' score sheets individually and commented on whether each student had improved or had had a bad day. Which is to say they knew their students individually. This was something that Noah would highlight in his interview as one of the major features of coming to hagwon—the personalized targeted instruction, which was related to how comfortable he felt around the teachers and staff. He could order lunch with them, ask where they lived, what kind of food their parents used to make them, their other jobs, or even their drinking habits: “I asked [a teacher], were you one of those stereotypical Korean guys that would meet up at *pocha* [i.e., street vendor carts where people in Korea meet to eat and drink late at night], and he was like, ‘Yeah,’” Noah told me, something he could only do because he felt so at home there. He once asked if he could visit the teacher who also worked as a bartender if he could visit them at their bar. The teacher joked, “Sure, I’ll give you a free Capri Sun or something.” This happened to be the same teacher who got perfect a perfect SAT score, but said to his classes on the first day, “It’s funny, your parents want you to do well on these tests so you can have a better life than I do, but I got a perfect score and here I am.” This was my favorite moment in the entire study.

The Crown Academy I observed in Palisades Park is part of a larger Crown Academy network: there are multiple locations in northern New Jersey, Queens, and

other parts of New York. In the interest of full disclosure, I approached the Queens location about participating in this study but did not hear back even though they knew the Palisades Park location was participating—which is to say each location operated independently. While each franchise location has its own independent owner, Crown’s score sheets were networked. Every question on every practice test was tracked across the network. When a student got their score sheet back, they knew what they got wrong, but also what percentage of all Crown students across all Crown locations also got that question wrong. Thus, students knew if a question was unusually difficult (i.e., many students got it wrong) or if they had misunderstood the task or made a silly mistake (i.e., they were the only one who got it wrong).

Culture

Breaks between classes, lunches, and even class time were often spent socializing at the nearby café, restaurants, or in the otherwise unused classrooms. One time, right before class was about to start, I watched a student lead his classmates in solving the day’s Wordle (a word game that was popular at the time) on the classroom projector. (It took them the full six guesses; one of the guesses was “bitch.”) But they would also compare answers and ask who got what wrong and why. If someone got an easy question wrong, they were “roasted” by their peers, but in a way that felt familial. It was something I noted to Troy: “It is interesting to see friend interactions, or you and your classmates. You’ll do the occasional off topic joke, but a lot of them are about the test. Like, even when you roast each other, it’s about getting a question wrong or getting this math thing wrong. Which, it seems like it’s roasting but like you were saying, the spirit of it is that you’re rooting for each other to be better. It’s why it’s funny, and not just mean.”

“Exactly,” he said.

It was a culture build on a foundation of competency. But it also demonstrated at its core a positivity beneath the surface level teasing. Below are some excerpts from my observation notes that illustrate this culture—one that has woven academic success into the fabric of their youth culture:

“[Answer choice] B? What is this tomfoolery?”

Student 1: “Dude, just plug it in!”

Student 2: “That’s why I got it wrong!”

Student 1: I thought I got it wrong, but I got it right.

Student 2: So, you just wanted everyone to know you got this one right?

Student 1: What’d you get today?

Student 2: 1470. It’s not good.

Student 1: It’s good for *you*.

[Room erupts in laughter]

Student 1: How many APs are you guys taking?

Student 2: I’m taking seven APs.

Student 3: *Seven?! Are you taking AP gym, too?*

Student 1: You made it way too complicated.

Student 2: Tell that to your score.

Other students: Ohhhhhhhhhh!

Indeed, from what I observed and what I heard from the students, this hagwon embodied a feeling of community. “I’ll miss the people the most,” Troy said during our last interview. The students seemed, at times, *too* comfortable, but that was part of what made this center appealing to them. They got from it only what they needed, and the rest of the time, they were allowed to socialize with the other students—some of whom were or became good friends through this shared experience.

For me, being at this center cause mixed emotions. The teacher part of me wanted to step in a get some of the classes under control. The researcher part of me was fascinated by all the shadow education research and theorizing I had done coming to life before my eyes. The English teacher part of me was horrified at students admitting that they do not read, but still expected to do well on the reading and writing sections, and then actually did well. The civilian part of me was amazed at how little of this SAT math I had retained and used. The cynic part of me felt this *was* gaming the system. The Korean part of me felt that I was someplace familiar, that I knew this place deep down. The human part of me wanted to be anywhere else. The achiever side of me felt I was doing work that was worthwhile and important. But mostly I felt nostalgic, maybe a little jealous—these kids had their whole futures ahead of them—and I wanted to join in on the laughs, especially at the “AP gym” line (I may have laughed; I can’t remember).

HyeJoon

“It’s not the work itself at hagwon, but the entire habit—a habit that fixes into your body and mind.”

Before HyeJoon and I began our first interview, I asked him as a courtesy, “Do you have any questions before we start?”

“I do have a question,” he said. He wanted to know what he got out of participating in this study; or rather, his parents wanted to know. “When I asked them to sign the consent form, they asked, ‘What are you getting out of it? Like, is this worth your time?’” As I would find out, this was an apt introduction to HyeJoon, a junior. He is tenacious, driven, and disciplined; everything he does is intentional. [Note: HyeJoon was the only student in the study who had a non-anglicized name. While “HyeJoon” is an alias, it was chosen to reflect that his real name is not anglicized.]

Family

While his hard work is ultimately make a stable life for himself, this outcome is the also a way to honor the sacrifices of his parents: “there is a factor with my parents where I want to make them feel proud.” He did not make it a point to tell me about this in our interviews, but when he sent me his college essay, it was about how he had to read legal documents as a child and try to translate them for his parents when they were evicted from their apartment for late payments.

HyeJoon is what is known in the Korean-American community as a “P.K.,” i.e., “pastor’s kid,” which addresses the other major cultural fixture in the Korean-American community: the Christian church. HyeJoon described his father as a traditional man with traditional values, which still boils down to one thing, even more so than the religious affiliation that defines his life’s work: “He was the textbook Korean, back in the old days-, study-person. Staying up until 5am at hagwon, all those things.” This discipline has been passed down. HyeJoon is also a “study person,” which we will see. His mother

works as an accountant (“she works pretty late”). Together, his parents form a support system at home that expects what HyeJoon calls the “bare minimum,” which is “As, minimum Bs,” at school. “Getting bad grades is a sign of laziness,” according to his father, HyeJoon told me.

Beyond that, his parents do not force him to do anything he doesn’t want to do and encourages him to do whatever makes him happy. His mother is mostly concerned with his well-being: “When she does talk about school, it’s usually, are you doing well, is there anything hard you’re going through?” When HyeJoon spoke about his parents, I felt a warmth coming from him, and I was reminded of my own supportive parents, who sounded very much like his. His parents were not the ones who forced him to attend hagwon: “I wasn’t really pressured into going,” he said. It was hearing about what other students were doing to get ahead through friends and even social media that made *him* want to go. His older brother, a year older than HyeJoon, going through the process of applying to colleges also had a deep impact on HyeJoon. Being able to post a high SAT score, for his brother, was meaningful. So he felt he had to follow suit: “It’s like having another EC [extracurricular],” he said. Being able to post a high SAT score had to be better than not posting one, was their thinking.

Hagwon Experience

HyeJoon started at Crown during his sophomore year of high school: “I thought all the Korean people around me were doing this, so I guess I should start, especially with the SATs.” His main motivation, he said, was the pressure of being compared to other kids in his community: “So obviously, especially in the Asian community, as you know yourself, you get compared to this unseen home. Oh, this is the bare minimum. It’s kinda

the reason why I started. Obviously as a sophomore there were friends around me that were getting 1400s as sophomores, and I'm here taking the test at 1100, like, that is NOT enough. That was my main motivation.”

He said that he had always been a motivated student. So, when he saw a glaring weakness—his initial SAT scores—he had to make those commensurate with the excellent student he had always been: “School’s easy. Like if you do your homework and you study, you should be passing with As. Minimum Bs.” He eventually did close the gap between his school performance and test score, thanks to the rigorous environment he found at hagwon: “The entire hagwon system itself, of me going there and feeling that motivation and confidence. And, you know, grinding—that grind.” This is a word he would use throughout our interactions, the word “grind.” He was willing to do it, and when I heard him describe his process, I couldn’t think of a better word for it. What really helped things click in for HyeJoon was when he took a staff member’s advice and started reviewing his mistakes at home. The four hours of review at hagwon weren’t enough to get past the 1400 plateau he (and many others) inevitably hit. He would take question types one by one and practice them until he mastered each one: “Let's say I get one question wrong on math, like say, a fraction question or a geometry question. So for that geometry question, that question specifically, I must master it by the end of the day. And it's not hard. It really isn't hard. That's what you need to improve.”

This was all part of a broader strategic system that targeted particular sections. The sections that were conquerable were the ones that were more objective and rule-driven; it was just a matter of learning all the rules:

Math and writing, to me, were the easiest to improve, right? Because for math, there's like a set of rules, right? I think it's from like pre-algebra, geometry, algebra 2, a little bit of trig, right? And it's not even in depth, it's just like the basics. And there's only certain rules you have to know for each subject, right? For those you could just, you know, study and if you search it up on online, there's pretty decent explanations for each topic on math. Same with writing, grammar; there's grammar rules.

In a relatively short time, HyeJoon saw “incredible growth”: “I went from 1,100 to averaging mid-1400s. I just got a 1530 the other day, so I saw a huge increase and it’s ‘cause of hagwon.” This was in February. By July, when we last spoke, he had taken an official test and scored 1490 (780 Math; 710 ELA) and was looking to cross the official 1500 mark later in the summer.

For HyeJoon, what helped about hagwon was more about the setting—one that matched his own combination of work ethic and positivity:

I gotta say the most important thing is the environment... You could say, why don't you study at home? But hagwon gives you that image of everyone around you are all together and the teachers and staff there. For me, personally, it gave me that focus, and the concentration, and it took away the distractions. You know, they take our phones. And they give you worksheets and then you review, and then the entire environment puts you in a situation where you can study and grow.

In thinking about the environment, he pointed to his fellow students, who had the shared goal of doing well on the SAT and getting to college: “friends are just friends and they just make it fun... we help each other.” At lunch, he said, they’ll talk about the practice

test questions—e.g., what was hard and what was not, how they approached a particular passage or question. “All those things come into making the place what it is,” he said.

But his highest praise was reserved for the staff, who provided support and encouragement along the way: “They always say good job or you could do so much better, you know? They give all these positive vibes.” There is a safety cultivated by the adults at Crown that provided for HyeJoon a place he called a “second home”:

My interactions and emotions make me feel like that’s a second home. Both my interactions with the people and the work, my emotions with the people and the work, they all build up and I’ve come to realize that if I ever need another place, I always thought of hagwon. If I just need to go and chill, or I just need to go and concentrate on my work, it can be for schoolwork, and just go to hagwon and that environment, once again, meet the people.

The staff ranged from college students to people 30 years older than him, and yet, he felt like he could go up to any of them at any time and not only ask for help but ask how they were doing and engage in a human way. This helped him become more comfortable around new people: “Through hagwon, one hundred percent, I built this confidence, and I kinda came out of my introversion—like I was kind of quiet and introverted. But obviously, getting to meet new people was probably a good thing for me.”

That positivity was important for a student like HyeJoon. Early on, in addition to his introversion, he reported struggling with feelings of inadequacy—he went so far as to call it depression—when he saw others around him doing so much better than he was doing. “I was, I don’t wanna say depressed, but I don’t know how else to describe it. I was kind of depressed, like, am I not enough? Everyone else is doing so well around me.”

It was only when he to see returns on his effort that he started to feel better about himself: “As I saw my scores increase, I realized, as long as I put this effort in, these small successes—oh, I rose 50, oh, I rose 100. And all these things, overall, gave me more motivation to study, and that’s probably increased my confidence, as I realize, if I put the effort in, that effort will provide a mission, and makes me feel better.” He remembered looking at his score sheets and seeing small weekly gains, but they also provided six-week overviews, and “bam, I’m suddenly like, from back then, 150 points, 200 points increase. And I look at it, and I’m like, this is what’s keeping me going.”

The success begot more success, as his incremental achievement became a source of enjoyment: “That achievement is what keeps me going... Yes, the work is arduous and the teachers can be annoying, but every time I enter the building, I always get greeted well, and I kind of switch into that zone and go straight to work and practice. So now I realized while I was filling this [preliminary survey] out, like, wow I actually *enjoy* coming to hagwon.” He said that if his parents told him not to go, he would argue with them that not only does he need to attend, he wants to attend. In fact, he said that he would head there right after school and stay until 8 or 9PM sometimes doing schoolwork and taking practice SATs, and staff would make themselves available if he needed help.

When I asked about some of the more rambunctious classes I observed him in, he admitted that certain teachers allow a looser classroom atmosphere. But no matter how silly things get or disengaged certain kids seem, if the students are there, it means they want to be there deep down. He doesn’t think any of them would attribute their being there entirely to their parents forcing them: “whether they’re there because they’re

forced, but I don't think they are, but even if they are forced to or not, they're still there to improve themselves."

There is a mindset, he thinks, cultivated at hagwon, that will be advantageous for him as he sets off for college and career. While he doesn't subscribe fully to the binary where a prestigious college equals a good life and a community college or no college guarantees a bad one, he does think the process by which one gains admission into a good college does serve a person well: "So, how I'm putting in the effort into hagwon right now—that motivation and confidence—it's gonna apply similarly to college. And that same mindset is going straight into a job. That's why I believe it's not the work itself at hagwon, but the entire habit. A habit that fixes into your body and mind—that component will help me get a better job."

He transfers this same mindset to other parts of his life, like sports. HyeJoon plays volleyball and climbed the ranks of his school's volleyball teams the same way he climbed the SAT percentile table: "I played volleyball since my freshman year. It was during COVID so it was kind of shaky, but when I started, obviously, I wasn't the best. I kept fumbling, kept injuring my hands cause I kept doing it the wrong way, just like the same way I did with the SAT. Like I knew the basics and I knew what I had to do, but I didn't know how to apply it. It might seem pretty obvious, but as I did more, that sudden small success, that sudden hit or pass, like I noticed a change and I noticed an improvement that helped me improve to the next level as I went from the freshman team to the JV team by the end of freshman year and then by sophomore year, I was already on the varsity team." The pattern is the same in both domains: assess weaknesses, learn the proper techniques, and grind.

School Life

In school, he is a law and public safety major, and hopes to study something in the area of “pre-law, social science, political science” with an eye toward helping people like his own parents, who needed help navigating the complicated legal system. He thinks preparing for the SAT has been an important skill that he will carry with him in this pursuit: “You know, the LSATs, the bar exam, very tough, very time-consuming, you know, pressure of the exam, who wouldn't be nervous, right? But for me, I feel like maybe, like, the SAT has kind of given me a preview or a boost of confidence in that. I feel like if I didn't take the SAT and if I didn't get the experience from the hagwon that through studying and through diligent studying methods, that you do actually improve, that when you put the time and effort into studying, you get the results. And I feel like that experience has taught me and given me the confidence that it would be the same thing for whatever, if it's the LSAT or the bar, it would be the exact same method.” When it comes to applying for college, he hopes that his SAT score will reflect that he has the ability to persevere through difficulty. That score represents something important to HyeJoon, and something he is proud of: “it shows responsibility and definitely hard work... I studied; I know what it feels like, right? I know the grind it takes. I know the time it takes. I know the effort.”

Work and Volunteering

In addition to school, SAT prep, and sports, HyeJoon participates in many extracurricular activities, both through school and church. He is in Model UN, for which he travels to conferences. He also volunteers with various Christian organizations that

help women in crisis, children on the autism spectrum, and the elderly. And that's not all. It seems that the more he takes on, the better he does.

It gets really, really busy with APs, ACTs, and the SATs, obviously, extracurriculars, all those things combined—it's not a burden, but sometimes, you need to balance it out well. So, I have good friends. I'm also in a relationship. I think all those things combined along with the sports I play, and there's also an organization I'm in, it's called AYL [Asian Young Life]. That organization is just purely for having more friends and connections. Joining those clubs kinda relieves my stress—not stress, release my tension that I'm always in. I feel like that's how I'm getting through.

When we did our second interview, he had just come back from volunteering as a counselor at a camp by Lake Placid for two weeks, and he was already thinking about doing some preview learning for his classes next year: “I got my schedule out for next year's classes. So, I'm looking into previewing some stuff as well.”

How does he balance it all?

“Time management,” he said. “Right now, it's no problem. I'm sleeping a decent amount.”

Noah

“You're going to college for one reason really, and that's to learn what you want to do as your job.”

“You are my white whale,” I told Noah, a junior at a prestigious magnet school in Bergen County, NJ, before our second and last interview. His video call setup was elaborate and suggested that he had some expendable income. He had a professional

recording-level microphone on an adjustable stand with a pop filter on it, which looked to be for gaming or music recording—both of which were hobbies.

Family

Noah did not reveal much about his family, except that he had some high standard bearers—two siblings who were both done with college and in medical school.

Throughout our interactions, he talked about wanting to please his parents. It was clear that taking care of his family, more than anything else, was his motivating factor:

So, for me, personally, I do and try to perform my best as possible for my parents, because at a young age, and currently as now, I was able to learn and be very thankful for my parents. In terms of what they've done for me. So, I always try to improve myself for them so that later I could provide for them, or just generally just be a good son that they want, as like a way of showing respect and thanks.

Noah was constantly weighing how best to use his time, not just on the test, but in his life, to optimize his college application and college readiness to be successful. During one observation, I saw him on his laptop and he was working on his resume while the teacher was at the board explaining math problems to the class. This is to say, Noah is an ambitious kid, first and foremost. He is willing to work, give up his time and social obligations because he thought that was all part of working towards his goals.

In fact, when I asked what his definition of success was, he said, “My dream is to be able to provide for all the people that I've met, and that I truly hold, like, very close connections with. If I had like, all the money in the world right now, the first thing I'd do is retire my parents.”

Hagwon Experience

The reason he became so motivated, and started hagwon in the first place, was that he felt that he had a lot of catching up he had to do, he said. Noah said he does not remember learning anything his freshman year—the COVID year—which he felt acutely when he was faced with the SAT math section. It makes sense that Noah could see it in the quantifiable math section, which requires specific types of math that Noah hadn't learned—"I was limited to only Algebra 2. I learned a lot of geometry because of hagwon... and not only that, it taught me and strengthened my skills in algebra, geometry, and trigonometry." The math section was the easiest to conquer though, he said, because it was just a matter of learning a finite set of rules and formulas.

What surprised him was how "atrocious" he was at grammar and reading. Just learning the fundamentals brought him up 200 points, he said. This included things like basic grammar (he referred several times to nonessential, dependent, and independent clauses) and basic test taking strategies—e.g., being able to get the basic idea of the passage in one quick pass, then going back to the passage for the answers to each question. The hard part was learning to apply these skills consistently, learning how to manage his time, and maintaining focus.

When we spoke in February, he was "still in that plateau, from 1300s to 1400s," where many students (including most of the ones in this study) seem to hit a ceiling. "But it's definitely I'm learning a lot more about the test, and eventually I'll be able to start averaging 1400s," he said. When we spoke again in July, his prediction had come true, and he had recorded an official score of 1450 on the June exam, with his sights now set on the 1500 mark. "What I did to get over that though is I really just focused on math,

right? Not making silly mistakes.” The next topic to focus on, he said, is grammar, which functions a bit like math in that it is a finite set of rules to learn. I noted that he sounded a lot like HyeJoon, who said the same thing. “Yeah, we’re pretty tight,” he said.

Interestingly, Noah mentioned that having his actual friends (like HyeJoon)—who are either done, switched hagwons, or are self-studying—no longer attend Crown helped him improve: “I definitely say because they're absent, I'm a lot more focused.”

Rather, the teachers’ role in his improvement was something Noah emphasized throughout our interviews. He felt his teachers really knew him, his tendencies, what questions he struggled with, and relayed very targeted strategies to address those weaknesses. For instance, he mentioned that his reading had improved, thanks mostly to his reading teacher. Essentially, he said, the reading teacher worked under the assumption that his students did not read much and doled out strategies to identify and navigate the test’s patterns and tendencies:

Cause like reading, if you really think about it, you can't improve on reading unless you started reading when you're like five years old, like reading *Harry Potter* and like, I don't know, all these like advanced books, like learning these advanced vocabularies. The only way to get better at reading is to read challenging texts, but it's about too late for any high schooler to improve on that. So that's why [the reading teacher] told us to like, look for more patterns within the questions to help you answer it. ‘Cause he used to read a lot as a kid, but he knows that other kids, they don't read as much as he did. So he had to find ways to answer the questions without really reading it.

Effectively, he was given strategies to overcome a lifetime of *not* reading:

I was always told you have to read books when you're younger or you're going to be struggling when you read the SAT section. But I just didn't read in my middle school life. But with hagwon, especially, I can read the science passages very easily, and I understand it very quickly. So I can skim it pretty fast and understand it just as well as if I was reading a history passage and taking my time reading it. Knowing the general structure of the different types of passages allowed him to navigate difficult passages very quickly.

He decided to do the summer '23 session at Crown because he wanted to improve on the 1450 official score (780 Math; 670 ELA) he got on his June test, so his days were devoted to SAT prep, specifically the reading and writing sections. "Reading was like 670, but I know I can bring that up to 720." On practice tests, he was consistently near-perfect to perfect on the math section. "I'm just really trying to learn grammar, man. Like, if I just get, like, maybe two to like nothing wrong on grammar, I should get like a really good score because everything else is fine. It's just grammar." This was a long way from where he started: "I originally started off with like a 1050," he told me, with a laugh. "It started with me averaging 10s to 11s to 12s to 13s and then eventually 14s and 15s. But that increase was literally only because I took the initiative to go to hagwon and actually take the tests and genuinely try to learn." His high practice score to date was a 1560.

School Life

Noah had a very industrialist model of education: "You're going to college for one reason really, and that's to learn what you want to do as your job." He had internalized the idea that education is solely for students to become employees who will

contribute to the economy; the way he spoke about the world of work was couched in the language of economics, which is what he wanted to pursue, ultimately:

The reason college and the whole education system is set in place is because they want you in the economy, in the employed economy, so you can help build revenue for the entire economy as well, not just for yourself... You get into school, learn these specific things, and specific skills, and if you're good in them, you'll probably get into a good college, which will give you more job opportunities... You get money, and you can exchange those for goods and services.

When I pushed back on his assertion that education was solely to train people for jobs, he said that while that might be true, for him and most of his peers, they had to acknowledge the reality that the economy as it stands prioritizes people who are specialized experts in one field.

This pragmatic view shaped the decisions he made about optimizing his time—skipping the last week of school to go on a networking retreat, for instance. It also meant that he was willing to do the extra grunt work because he has calculated that he has to in order to achieve his goals. In fact, he lamented the two-year break he took from hagwon and wondered where he would be if he hadn't taken those years off. His middle school experience, looking back, was too easy—which suggests that he was not prepared properly for the rigors of the more advanced academic tracks he aspires to now:

If you could learn at a younger age, instead of learning them in your current pace, I would be way, way more successful than I've ever been. And for people to go to hagwon and learn things like how I learned algebra in second grade, it just made

my whole entire middle school a complete joke for me. The only thing that I regret is that I didn't continue on with hagwon. Because I probably would have been able to go into higher math and reading sections which would have way helped me in terms of my preparation and my fundamentals toward the SAT. Like I probably would have started with a way higher score than where I am now... I know some kids that have better education in terms of math in middle school and that's the only real reason they're in a higher math class than I am.

There was always this sense that he was chasing his peers—people ahead of him that he had to keep up with. Compounding this feeling was that he had also done his research, and had a comprehensive understanding of the college admissions process, down to what “district” he was in (including the names of the other towns in his district). In his estimation, he was in competition with his community's Asian peers—all of whom know about and attend hagwon, just like he was doing, which made the two years he didn't attend hagwon feel all the more significant:

Because 1) you're competing against other Korean Americans. If you realistically think about it, everyone in Bergen [County, NJ] is essentially competing against each other, where they want to go for college. I know this because I'm trying to apply to West Point. And I know that the specific districts, they all compete. So I'm in district 5, so I'm competing with high schools in Hackensack, Glen Rock, Old Tappan, NVD (Northern Valley Demarest), Dumont, like all these very hugely [Korean American]-populated high schools, and if I never went to hagwon, I probably would have a lot harder experience trying to get into college.

His knowledge extended to the purpose of college—that it's not only about the classes one takes, but the networks one has access to. The more prestigious the institution, the more likely it is that one can connect to more rarefied power networks.

He even looked into moving to Korea, if he might have an edge in the admissions process there. But when he took a trip to Korea and asked the adult chaperones on the trip about college admissions there, he was told that the universities in Korea did not have the kind of international standing that the top 20 schools in the U.S. did. "They were telling me that it's kind of messed up there [in Korea]." His thinking around this issue was provocative: it didn't make sense to him that Korean universities were not top schools, given the culture of academic rigor in Korea. He wondered:

Their whole entire system is like, OK, I'm studying really well, right? And it's to get into college, right? And [Korean] elementary schoolers and middle schoolers are so smart and brilliant, right? And high school students, too, right? They're way smarter than probably U.S. kids, because they're spending their whole lives studying. But they're studying and if they want to stay in Korea for the purpose of going to a pretty mediocre college compared to all these international colleges... I don't know. I just think the whole education system there is messed up.

Suffice it to say, he planned on staying in the U.S. for college. His dream school, he said, was Boston College. When he found out that I was an alum, he asked me for tips. I chuckle now thinking about how even in an interview where he was the research subject, Noah was doing his own research. I told him that BC's ethos is service oriented and that he should highlight his community service in his application. This brought up an

interesting conversation about why schools pick certain students and why “application stats” can only go so far.

And Noah did have many interests to choose from—ones that showed him to be more well-rounded, with talents and skills he didn’t necessarily see as “useful” in his utility-centered view of the world. He expressed an interest in history (his topic of interest at the moment was the Rwandan genocide); the stock market (which he says allowed him to get close to his business teachers); skateboarding (which he used to do as a kid); gaming (“very stereotypical stuff that you can expect from a Korean guy, like League of Legends and Valorant”); music (he played the guitar in his free time); and sports. He played volleyball, where he met HyeJoon; he loved playing basketball with friends; he swam competitively, but gave it up because he did not see a path to the kinds of scholarships that would be worth the time commitment (“probably D-III... not the kinds of schools I would want to go”); and he said he spent two hours a day at the gym to stay fit. Staying active was important for his mental health, he said. While he knew that most of these interests might not help him get into school, he could even place his recreational interests within the context of utility: “Music taste, that’s such a good trying to get-to-know-someone opener. Cause you not only get to know what type of music they like but you can also generally find out their emotions and their attitude based on the music they listen to... I’ve met so many great people because I’ve talked about music.” But he didn’t see any of these advancing his college credentials.

Work and Volunteering

We tried to schedule our follow up interview in early July, but for various reasons, we could not sync schedules. I received emails like these, sometimes after our

meeting time had passed and I had been waiting in the Zoom meeting alone for twenty minutes:

July 24, 2023:

I got off work late today because my boss wanted me to work late. Is it fine if I call you tomorrow night? I'm really really sorry for constantly pushing this back.

July 25, 2023:

Actually is it fine if we have the meeting on Sunday night? I'm just extremely busy this week with work and my schedule became super tight. Sorry for any inconveniences.

His job was at a swim club where he helped coach the competitive team that trained there, give private lessons, and lifeguard.

When we finally did sit down for our second interview, he had just come back from a week with a Christian organization called Asian Young Live (AYL), where like-minded Asian teens spent the week doing fun activities and taking the week off from thinking about school, tests, and college admissions. The name of the organization sounded familiar to me because HyeJoon had told me that he was involved in the same organization. "Yeah, HyeJoon was there," Noah told me. Earlier this summer, Noah skipped the last week of school to go on a trip with an organization called Boy State, which is a "military kind of program, but it's really good for, like, a pre-college type of program as well. You just learn a lot about political science, and you get a lot of connections from people within whatever sector that you're interested in. And you do a lot of activities; you also serve the community and stuff." Then, immediately after that, he went on a church retreat.

Troy

“There were weeks where going to hagwon was actually the most fun part of my week.”

Family

Troy learned about Crown Academy through classmates at his school, who were preparing for the SAT. “I tried to study independently for the SAT,” he said, “but my score wasn’t really improving. It wasn’t like satisfactory.” When Troy started hagwon, he was scoring in the mid-1300s. Consequently, he begged his parents to let him attend Crown, not the other way around. Growing up, he said, his mother did not place high expectations on him, so he never took school seriously: “I kind of like took as a joke, like it was like not that important. But then eighth grade, where it was like, now you’re applying for high school—now I think it’s serious.” His mother’s low expectations for him turned into motivation: “My mom was like, I don’t think you’re going to be able to get into this school, this school. So, then I was like, okay, well now I’m actually going to try. So that’s when that happened.”

Hagwon Experience

Troy’s experience at Crown was so fun he wasn’t sure his experience was representative of the typical hagwon experience. What struck him immediately about Crown was the culture: “everyone was like, super talkative, like super jokey. I think that made me feel more free [and], like, calm in that environment.” That loose environment may have been the draw, but the real substance of the place was a mission driven atmosphere, and the combination of the two mindsets matched Troy’s personality—silly but driven: “I think that the environment at hagwon that I’ve seen is also very representative of how I am. That mix of getting the education and learning and also

fooling around. And I think that's exactly how I viewed hagwon." At Crown, he found a group of like-minded peers: "I think it is a collaborative experience that, whether it's lighthearted or whether it's competitive, I think we're all there to learn. I think we all do learn there."

As a non-Korean student at a Korean-run and mostly Korean-attended center, he said he never felt unwelcome there, though there were times he did not understand some of the Korean words his peers and the staff would use. "Sometimes," he said, "they would say some random Korean word or Korean sentence or something that I wouldn't understand. And then [they'd say] 'Oh, wait, you're Chinese,' you know, like, joking." In short, it was mostly a non-issue. "I learned some curse words in Korean," he said; he learned what a "PK" was—things that one would only learn when immersed in the culture. But he also recognized shared Asian cultural fixtures, like kids whose overbearing parents forced them to be there—though he was not one of them—or more generally, "being a high achiever, like, having a strong emphasis on education." Most of all, he felt a camaraderie that, for Troy, felt separate from ethnicity but rather a common drive:

The shared thing is, like, we're all trying to learn. We're all trying to get the same goal at the end of the day, being there. I think, obviously, the [ethnic] culture isn't the main focus at the hagwon. It's not going to be like a big [thing]. It's not going to be separated, like, oh, you're not Korean, so then you get different treatment or something like that. So it's not the focus. But I think it was just like, we're all trying to help each other.

He also had a cousin who was attending Crow' with Troy during the semester I observed, making it quite literally a family affair. After about two months, Troy had improved his average by 100 points to mid-1400s, which he was grateful for because "I don't think I would have ever reached that score by myself." The improvement was the result mostly of repetition, "taking a test every week, going through similar type questions. And I think actually having someone to guide me through questions that I noticed I'm getting wrong repeatedly."

Troy's goal was to post an official score in the upper half of the 1400s at least by October. He took an official test and scored a 1410. He was looking to improve by August or October, though there were no plans to return to hagwon before sitting for another test. After a certain point, he said, he had to take what he learned from hagwon and study them on his own: "I think at this point, individualized questions that I know that I get wrong, I can just study for that." He struggled most with the reading comprehension questions, he said—namely, the "word-replace questions and some of the grammar questions." He has gotten better at SAT reading in part by employing the strategy of reading the first sentence of every paragraph to get an idea of the passage's overall trajectory—a tip he picked up from his reading teacher. But he did not think these tips were useful anywhere else. In fact, he did not think of SAT prep as useful in any way except increasing his odds: "I view hagwon something that will help me build my SAT score solely. And building a strong SAT helps me get into a better college, which helps me get a better job." And the reality is that "top rated colleges have a higher range of SAT scores."

What kept him going back was not the learning or achievement or career prospects, though. It was the “social aspect”: “I think, at times, there were weeks where going to hagwon was actually the most fun part of my week. It’s like we’re all taking the same test. If it was hard, we’re all struggling with the same test. If it was easy, we’re all relieved of it being an easy test. Like we all share that same happiness that we get. Like, if we get a high score or even a lunch break, like we’re all like eating our lunch together, it’s things like that. It was a really fun environment.” The bond and even friendships built through common struggle or celebrating each other’s achievements was powerful.

It was interesting to hear Troy’s perspective on the goofing around that I observed during classes. The little moments in between the instruction and practice testing (e.g., he mentioned the time he and his classmates played Wordle on the projector screen, which I was there for), the lunches (“sharing scores... talking about random things”), the jokes—they were not interstitial or secondary for Troy; they were part of the point of going there. He recounted the time when there was a quiz on transition words, and he got 100 on it, but stole an extra treat from the grammar teacher (which he ended up giving back). He also mentioned the running competition he had with his cousin, where they would draw portraits of the teachers and ask whose was more accurate. And, of course, he mentioned the “out of pocket” jokes that the reading teacher made throughout the term. This familiarity with the teachers and staff, where he could talk to them as if they were friends, was part of the appeal too: “I think it’s just a fun environment. Like it does contribute to keeping [hagwon], like, something that’s appealing.”

What added further to the appeal of hagwon was when he started seeing returns on the passages he read about seemingly random topics on practice tests. In his artifact

log, Troy highlighted fortuitous content crossover between his SAT prep classes and school. He listed three specific instances: (1) An SAT practice test at [Crown] used an essay he read in class, called “Mother Tongue” by Amy Tan. (2) The Science Section of the NJSLA (New Jersey Student Learning Assessment) featured a passage on evolution that was very similar to one he had just seen on an SAT practice test at Crown. (3) The AP Language Test featured rewilding, which he had just read about on an SAT practice test at Crown, as the topic of one of the essays that present multiple articles and ask for an essay. “I was like, ‘Oh, this is cool.’ And, like, I know about this already. It gave me that much of an advantage; the fact that I had background knowledge, I think it made me more interested in reading it. It’s almost like they have a bucket of topics and they’re kind of just like juggling them and jumbling them.” Collecting topics that he knows at least a little something about had to be advantageous, Troy thought. Plus, “What else was I doing on Saturday?”

During our member check in October, he gave me an update on his latest SAT score: “I got a 1470,” which puts him squarely in the median of his target schools. “I was so stressed about it, like thinking back on questions I thought I got wrong, but I did better than I thought.”

School Life

Troy attends a prestigious magnet school in Bergen County, NJ, where he just finished his junior year. “It’s ranked like 90-something in the United States,” he made it a point to tell me. His school had him choose a major early on. He chose one of the less demanding STEM tracks because he wanted to be in the engineering field but did not want school to be hypercompetitive and therefore stressful for him. He regretted his

choice, especially once he developed an interest in computers: “So at our school, there's two majors that are known for not doing anything: [redacted] and mine. So, like, I regret not choosing computer science just because like now, that seems like the major I'm more interested in.” Eventually, he wants to get into IT and working with computers, though that is “very open to change.”

On the bright side, it did make his work life balance at school more manageable: “But I'm also grateful that the workload is, like, the work environment is very lenient. And so that's one less class I have to worry about.” Grades and test scores and where someone gets into college really matter at his school; the students talk about these things and share and compare.

He expressed interest in participating in this study because he has an interest in empirical research. When we spoke for the final time in July, he had just finished his culminating research project that he was just starting when we spoke for the first time in March. The study looked at the response in California to a Senate bill that pushed school start times back. At first, he sent out response surveys to 200 school principals that he found by scouring school websites and asked them to administer the survey to their students. But, he said, he only got a few responses back and only four actually administered the survey. So he changed course and used a Twitter scraper to aggregate Twitter responses—they had to either be verified or had ten or more comments—to the new policy and analyzed them. “What I did was, I separated the comments based on when it was posted, so, like, I separated between before the before the bill was implemented, and then I gave a month after the bill was implemented because I wanted to see how the perception changed over time.” Then he did a chi square test on his results.

Overall, he said, the responses to the new policy improved over time, but skewed generally negative: “I think it's interesting because the body of research is like strongly supportive of delaying start times. But the perceptions are largely negative. I think the most common code was ‘catering.’ So a lot of people were saying this will make kids lazy. We’re not disciplining them. They're like, this is catering to kids, like they should just sleep earlier so that they're not like staying up too late, stuff like that.” He mused that when people call the youth dumb or worse than the older generation, they don’t understand that young people are the ones who have more to learn, more data and information to wade through, and “just more content” vying for their time and attention: “Just like constant content.”

Most of all, though, he was surprised, he said, that something that was so clearly better for kids was so negatively received: “I think that was really shocking.” He also noted the limitation of studying a public online space like Twitter is that people are more likely to post when they have strong negative feelings about something, and those who are neutral or like it will stay quiet so as to avoid getting attacked or seeming like they were boasting. He liked research overall, he said, and was currently looking for internships that might usher him into the research world and to satisfy his senior internship requirement. I could not help but think about the spirit of his study, and how it aligned, in a way, with my own. Essentially, Troy was asking: Here is something that benefits students; why was the public reaction to this thing so full of resentment?

At the end of our final interview, he thanked me for allowing him to participate in this study, as if I wasn’t the one needing participants.

“This was, like, pretty cool to be in,” he said.

Olivia

Olivia expressed interest in participating in the study initially. She sent in her preliminary questionnaire but did not show up for her scheduled first interview. When I emailed her to follow up, and then again to see if she was still interested in going further with the study, she did not respond.

In class, Olivia was part of a group of students who would disengage from instruction and resort to other things like throwing paper, vandalizing each other's test packets, and during one observation, I observed her and some other students watching *South Park* on two different computers. Her written response to the open-ended question, "I'm interested in participating in this study because..." addressed this:

While one can argue that a student can use their own time to study themselves, I believe that hagwon did definitely help me, specifically with the SAT. It forces me to practice and understand how to fix my mistakes and perform better while also being able to take classes with my friends.

This response, while brief, sums up the experience for many hagwon students. In particular, this is the general feeling I got when I observed Crown. The regimented, weekly structure forced her to spend time preparing for the test, but the more relaxed atmosphere of this particular center—surrounded by her friends—made the experience not only bearable, but probably fun. I got the sense that they used hagwon as a central meeting place, sanctioned by their parents, and then would use class time to joke with each other, and then lunches and break times to discuss whatever else they wanted to.

Ace Academy

“It’s not the score. It’s the character—the persevering and optimistic spirit.”

The Ace Academy I observed was in Palisades Park, New Jersey. I visited Ace a total of five times, all Saturdays, between January 14th and May 6th, between 10AM to 5PM for a total of 35 observation hours.

Setting

In contrast to Crown, the signage throughout the center are not names and scores or universities, but rather, motivational quotes. The classrooms and common areas are adorned with signs with motivational quotes on them, the most notable (to me) being Winston Churchill’s wartime declaration to his people: “If you’re going through hell, keep going.” Below are the others:

Sign 1: “The difference between ordinary and extraordinary is that little ‘extra.’”
“You don’t always get what you wish for; you get what you work for.” (No attribution on this sign; Figure 10)

Sign 2: “If it’s important to you, you’ll find a way. If not, you’ll find an excuse.”
“If you’re going through hell, keep going.” -Winston Churchill- (Figure 11)

Sign 3: “Don’t wish it were easier; wish you were better.” -Jim Rohn-

Sign 4: “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” “The secret of success is to do the common things uncommonly well.” -John D. Rockefeller-

Figure 10

A Poster Featuring Two Unattributed Motivational Quotes

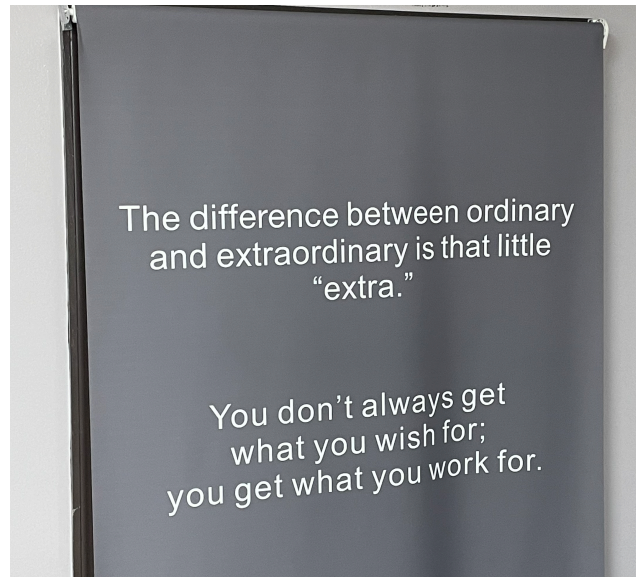
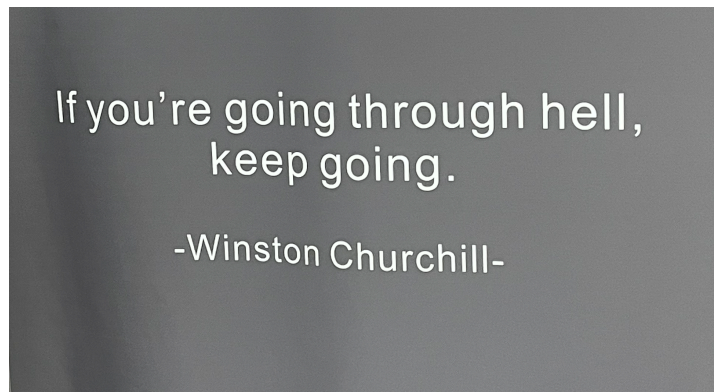


Figure 11

A Poster Featuring a Wartime Winston Churchill Quote



The signs reflect the attitude of Rebecca, the owner—"the quotes were a very deliberate choice," she told me—which permeated the culture of the center itself, including the students and teachers. Rebecca opened Ace Academy first, then her college consulting business (a separate company, though it is housed in the same building complex), to serve her community and provide the kind of service she would have

wanted for herself. Indeed, this is mission-driven and personal for her. When we met, she recalled being in high school and not having access to proper college counseling. As a result, she ended up at a local state school. Not knowing all her options and how to optimize her skills to access all those options was the part that frustrated her the most, she said. Thus, her hagwon and college consulting businesses were created to remedy that for students, like her, who are in need of real quality help.

Currently, Ace Academy has multiple locations in northern New Jersey and has a sterling reputation in large part because of Rebecca's knack for getting her students into top schools. "30 Ivy League admissions in the last year," she told me. Her reputation is known not only in the northern New Jersey area, but also in Korea, where she has taken on college consulting clients. She is known worldwide now, my sister told me. In my semester observing and speaking with Rebecca, observing her operation, and interviewing her students, I would come to understand why.

Classes, Teachers, and Students

On the first day of the spring semester, Rebecca made her presence known and established the tone of the place by giving an introductory speech that included (from my observation notes):

- Look up your target college and look at average scores—scores have gone up at places like NYU.
- The SAT is not about intelligence; it's about determination. How hard are you willing to work to get good at this?

- Have self-awareness: Every year I have students who don't do the work and then complain that they're not improving. I'm not a magician, it's about your hard work. I'm helping you improve.
- If you're not going to do the work, you should leave and get more sleep. I'll give you a refund.
- Memorize
- It takes daily work and discipline: Take a practice test every day

Her speech included a slide with a quote from Nietzsche: "He who has a WHY to live for can bear almost any HOW." In other words, if getting to a dream school is the "WHY," then the students should be willing to work for it, and students would have to be honest with themselves and set realistic goals based on how much work they were willing to put in. Then, she told a story about one of her students who got into Columbia early decision. He had studied for two full summers. The skills that students would take away from her classes transfer to high school and college, she said. "It's not the score. It's the character—the persevering and optimistic spirit. So many students are prone to complain. Be positive and optimistic." And with that, Rebecca made clear that this was a serious place, and she was not there to waste time or money.

Emmie articulated how Rebecca's energy affected her. The emotions varied, depending on the question. At first, Emmie remembered feeling fear: "I know at the beginning it was like, is she actually going to like speak like this? The whole time? Like, kind of threatened by her aura."

"And it turns out she does. She does speak like that the whole time," I replied.

"Yeah. The whole time. I'm like, wow, she really goes off," Emmie said.

Rebecca's peremptory energy, though, was also part of what inspired and motivated students: "Miss Rebecca, she was a very enthusiastic teacher, like she puts a lot of emotions to her teachings. And I really like that. And it keeps you awake in a way. But it also kind of motivates, like, I better get this right, or she's gonna, like, kind of be mad. After the mock [exam], and she's like, 'You guys, your scores are so bad.' And we were, like, kind of eyeing each other." When I asked if Emmie ever felt like she'd be letting Ms. Rebecca down if her scores didn't improve, she did not affirm or deny, but rather, "Oh, she'll let us know, but like, really, she'd let us know." Needless to say, there were no illicit cell phones at anyone's desk.

That said, for Emmie, she knew that Ms. Rebecca's methods came from a place of encouragement, and that she really cared about her students doing well—and that when she had to be harsh, she was strategic about where to direct her harshest criticism. Emmie knew Rebecca picked on kids she knew could handle it. In other words, she would not single out a student she knew would crumble under that type of scrutiny or pressure: "[Ms. Rebecca] tries to like, generalize it to the whole class. So like, I kind of don't mind it. It was funny sometimes. But she obviously does it, kind of like, if she points out something, she obviously does it to a person, like, she knows they know how to joke but doesn't mind really. I think she kind of knows." When I told Rebecca what Emmie had said, Rebecca nodded in recognition: "Oh, so she picked up on that. Kids are so perceptive."

And, in the end, Ace got results: "It's actually effective. I know what I'm doing now because I do as she told me to. And it actually works. It's so crazy." This is well known about Rebecca, so students will travel from afar to make sure they are taught by

her. Grace attested to this: “Rebecca was my teacher for hagwon, which is why I went to Palisades even though it's farther.”

“Do you think that's common that people travel to have her as their teacher specifically?” I asked.

“Honestly, yeah. She's a good teacher.”

There were moments when I found myself amused by some of Rebecca's methods. One moment in particular stands out, when she looked out at the class and noticed that not many students were taking notes. In response, she snapped, “For those of you who are taking notes, great job. For those of you staring, good luck.” During my observations, I made it a point to try to stay as neutral as I could, but occasionally, I would laugh. In this instance, I laughed audibly. In another instance, I heard a teacher tell his students, as Rebecca was entering the room, “Don't make Rebecca angry today; she's not well.” Rather than fear, this elicited laughter, which spoke to the culture of the place. Rebecca's perfectionism is not reserved only for her students. “[She] gets really mad if there's like an error on the answer sheet,” Emmie told me, laughing.

The defining feature of Ace, to me, is that the teachers at Ace are full time, which is to say this was not a “side” job for college students to make some extra money. Her staff was made up of professional full-time test prep teachers and private tutors—except one, who I found out was an opera singer on the side. Suffice it to say, I did not observe her front desk staff step in for one of her teachers to teach a class. Early on, when I was observing one of the teachers, Rebecca pulled me aside and told me that the teacher I was observing was new and that she was glad someone would have eyes on him. Rebecca hired her teachers full time to develop curriculum and teach classes both during the week

and on weekends, which she did as well. “I teach from my own books and my own lessons,” one of the math teachers told me, who has been an SAT teacher for 14 years.

The SAT curriculum that I observed was structured. There were slides and detailed explanations about what students were expected to know that would ultimately help them with the test, and beyond. Rebecca was adamant that the annotations she was teaching them to do on their reading passages would help them in their high school and college classes.

She had also created her own bespoke dogma, replete with its own lexicon and “10 Commandments” (Figure 12). The first commandment was, “Thou shall RTFQ,” which stood for Read The Freakin’ Question. Commandment 5 was RTFA stood for “Read The Full Answer.” These were reminders to make sure to know what the question is asking, and to read the answer carefully, so they do not fall into traps. She told students that in interviewing past Ace Academy students with the highest test scores, RTFQ and RTFA were the most helpful. Commandment 4 was QPA (Question, Passage, Answer), which was more about sequence. Students who read the answer choices before going to the passage to find information were often lured by a tantalizing answer choice and then *justifying* their pre-selected answer choice with something from the text and ultimately getting it wrong. I heard her say things like, “If you picked ‘D’ for [question] 9, you did not QPA.”

She had slides that taught how to approach the different types of passages, and different types of questions (i.e., small picture vs. big picture, and different types of each)—all of which she posted on her [private to her students] Instagram page (Figure

13). She encouraged students to read through them before sitting for the test. “Don’t go in with a blank slate,” she said.

Figure 12

Two of the Ten Commandments: RTFQ & QPA

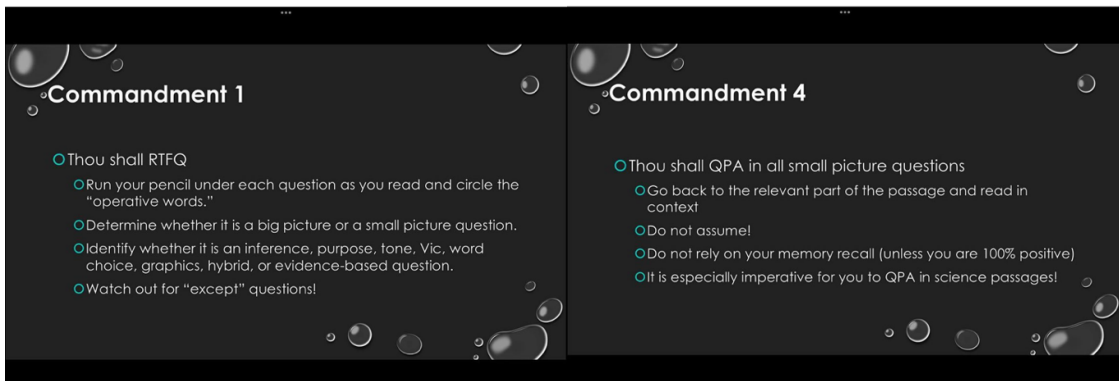
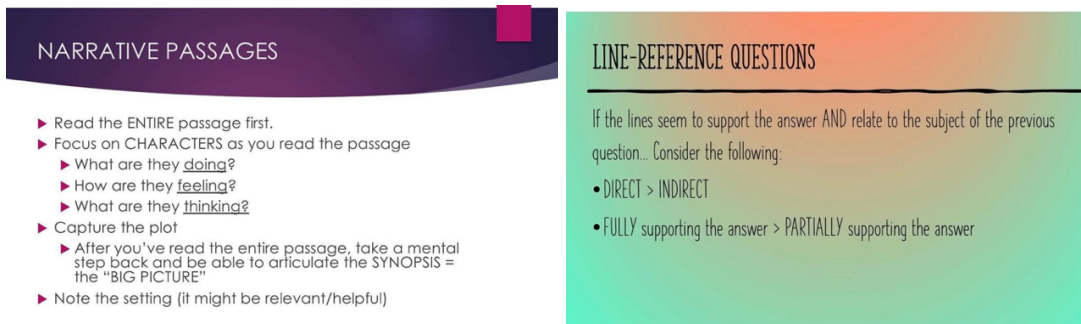


Figure 13

Ace Academy’s Owner Posts Lesson Slides on Instagram



Note. Images from Rebecca’s private Instagram account were posted with permission, which was reaffirmed during a post-observation member check.

I found the lessons on how to read certain texts to be helpful not just for the SAT, but in general. For instance, one of Rebecca’s reading lessons I observed broke down how to read scientific studies:

“What are the four components you want to look for?” she asked.

“Hypothesis, Methodology, Result, ‘So what?’” was the answer.

This is a good breakdown of most scientific studies and would likely benefit students who have to read and write scientific studies in their science classes. Reading with that framework in mind can help break down a passage into more digestible parts and make finding information easier—not just on the test but if they were to do research for college or beyond. In other words, having a frame of reference before reading a difficult text will help them navigate it more efficiently.

Rebecca went on to reiterate an Ace Academy mantra—that every passage is the most interesting thing in the world, something she repeated often. “You’ve got to have my level of enthusiasm,” she implored her students. “If you don’t get the objective, your reading gets hazy because you aren’t really reading, or you’re reading without purpose. When you get to the third part, you should get excited! When you know the objective, you should be reading the results with great interest. Don’t get bored, get yourself psyched up! What is the result?! That is super cool!” For me, this attitude going into any text is something students need, especially in high school, where it is likely that most of what they are asked to read will not be of inherent interest. Then, she added a note specific to the test: “Remember, in a science passage, out of 10 questions, 9 will be small picture questions.”

Teachers also had private tutoring clients. I overheard one on one sessions through the walls as I waited for classes to begin. I heard students being tutored in math and in essay writing, where the tutor was helping a student write an argumentative essay on meat consumption in the U.S. “Your hook should say, ‘Although Americans love their meat, it comes with many negative side effects — not only on our bodies but also on our environment,’” I heard the tutor say. The tutor was helping with big picture revisions,

e.g., “If you’re confused about what your thesis should be, look back at the question”; “Meatless Mondays—what it is, why people are doing it, that’s context; then your thesis is what we should do about it”; and “how do you position the information in your body paragraphs?” The tutor was also helping with line edits, e.g., changing “huge amounts” to “a majority”; “a policy of the school” to “school policy”; and “at its max” to “at its highest point.” I could not help but think that this was the type of help that a highly educated parent might be able to provide, but a child of immigrants might not have access to otherwise.

Classes were split in two tracks: beginner and advanced. The beginner track met in the mornings: writing 9:30-10:45; reading 10:45-noon; lunch noon-1:00; math 1:00-3:00. The advanced class tested in the morning 9:30-1:00PM, had lunch between 1:00-2:00, then reviewed from 2:00-5:00. Rebecca also encouraged students to attend Thursday night classes that she taught personally during the week that were included in their tuition. “Guys, it’s not a coincidence that the more I see people on Thursday, the better their score is,” she told her students.

Culture

Over the course of my time there, I noted a marked shift in the culture of the classes. At the beginning, the overall tone was the aforementioned fear but also a sense of focus. According to Emmie, “In the beginning, you're all kind of like lost and just trying to figure out what's going on. There's no real anything to talk about yet. You're like, what am I doing? I have to focus.” In a humorous moment, a fly was buzzing around the room, and Rebecca said, “Yes, there is a fly. Treat this as an opportunity to learn how to stay

focused.” After going over a passage, she would ask who got everything right, and when a student did, she would say things like, “Doesn’t it feel good to improve?”

Over time, the students felt more comfortable asking and answering questions. I also started to see some fooling around. For all its militant rhetoric, there was plenty of levity. For instance, I listened to a teacher talk about a McDonald’s in Wayne, NJ, having “always good” fries. This turned into a debate about whether Chick-Fil-A or McDonald’s had better fries, which led to a debate about the ethics of chicken sandwiches:

Student 1: Chick Fil-A has the best fries.

Student 2: But know you’re putting money into conservative causes like homosexual conversion therapy and basically signing a contract with the devil.

Teacher: I just go for the chicken sandwiches.

Student 1: I like Popeye’s chicken sandwiches, too.

Student 2: They treat their chickens terribly.

Teacher: So basically you can’t eat any chicken sandwiches.

The “fooling around” even felt purposeful; the teachers were trying to connect with the students, as opposed to the students going off on their own or acting in ways that might be perceived as misbehaving. The following moment occurred during a lesson on punctuating conjunctions:

Teacher: Comma FANBOY. Comma “but,” semicolon “but.”

Student: [laughs]

Teacher: Why are you laughing?

Student: You keep saying “but.”

This felt more playful than misbehavior. The students generally did not leave their seats to socialize with other students and the teacher was often in on the jokes, if not the one initiating them. I recall one instance when a student stood up at her desk, and when the teacher asked her if everything was ok, she laughed and said that she just felt like standing because she had been sitting for four hours. I have to think that part of the shift also had to do with students seeing their performance improve, and the confidence and comfort level that came along with that.

Sitting in Ace classes, I felt a sense of connection and familiarity. This was the type of environment I try to cultivate in my classes: structured, purpose-driven, but also familiar. Rebecca's mission-driven ethos also resonated with me. When we met after the observation period was over, and I read her what I had written about Ace Academy, Rebecca said that it was "meaningful" to see her daily existence presented this way. "It's actually making me emotional," she said. Then, when I told her that Emmie (one of my participants) begged her parents to attend Ace, she was shocked:

"She had to beg?" she asked, wide eyed.

"Yeah," I said. "Her parents didn't want her to go. I think tuition is an issue."

Rebecca responded that she knew that there were kids in her classes whose families, when they paid for housing, food, and hagwon tuition, had nothing left over. She knew because her family was like that, too. She said she tries to identify these families and gives discounts when she can.

"See, you can't tell me things like that," Rebecca said, laughing through tears. "I feel such a big responsibility to these kids and these families."

My sister relayed a story about when she attended Rebecca's birthday party and described some of the activities my niece (i.e., my sister's daughter) was participating in, Rebecca's response was that they would make up a good college application. My niece is five years old. In other words, Rebecca lives and breathes her work.

Rebecca had many careers before finding her passion: she was a singer, then a lawyer for a prominent public figure, then worked as a test prep teacher at a larger test prep academy. She became disillusioned with some of the policies and operations of hagwons, which she said were more about making money than actually helping students, and subsequently opened her own center. The singer part I found out from Emmie, who relayed this information to me. Emmie was both incredulous and impressed:

That is so wild. So many occupations in one life. I think it takes a talent to sing and a different type of mindset to be in the law firm and, I mean, you gotta have some grit to work with students. I'm not her age, but in a person, overall, I think that's really impressive.

Rebecca found her calling. She was not bashful about being good, if not the best, at what she does. During a class changeover, I observed the following exchange between her and another teacher, in front of the students:

“I can't quit,” she said, loud enough for her students to hear. “This is my 22nd summer yet again with a Vitamin D deficiency because I'm in a windowless room. If I don't teach, who will? And I'm the best at what I do. Imagining my kids dumped to some other place...”

She took a pause.

“I feel bad for students I taught 15 years ago; I know so much more now than I did then.”

“You should get an apprentice,” the other teacher said.

“I tried. I don’t know how long I’ll do this. Probably until I die.”

Emmie

“You just have to try.”

Emmie was the only sophomore in high school in my study. She was born in Korea and moved to the U.S. when she was in kindergarten. She first started attending hagwon in first grade, where someone from her school would take her to an afterschool learning center where older students would help her with her homework. She did that through sixth grade, when she started receiving one on one tutoring. Then, starting her sophomore year, she started attending Ace Academy, where I met her. She had heard about it from an older friend who had just attended, with good results: “I had like a senior, like an 언니 (*un-nee*) (this is an honorific title that a younger female would refer to an older female counterpart; it applies to family members and non-family members), a family friend, and they also went to [Ace Academy] and apparently they got into West Point... So [Ace] must be good. And they recommended Ms. Rebecca and suggest I should try it.”

During my observations, I often sat next to Emmie, as she was always seated in the back corner where I was stationed. If I had a question about materials or what the teacher was doing, I leaned over and ask her. When I got no response in my general call for participants, I felt comfortable asking her directly if she might be interested in participating in my study. She agreed but said she would need to ask her parents if it was

ok. They agreed. When I asked her what her parents do, she asked if she “could not state that,” but would reveal that they work late nights.

Family

Emmie’s parents’ story is one that I am hearing more frequently from my Asian immigrant students. Her father moved to the U.S. in the early 2000s while she and her younger sister (by one year) stayed in Korea with their mother. Then, they reunited in the U.S. in 2012 when Emmie (the oldest) was ready to start schooling: “I moved here in kindergarten.” This is a phenomenon known as “satellite babies” (Bohr & Tse, 2009), where parents separate from their infants while one parent (or sometimes both, while the children are left with extended family) work to establish financial security for their families. Generally, families resort to separating temporarily because “it’s for the good of the family” (p. 274), though they negotiate feelings of sorrow, hardship, and guilt.

Emmie did not remember her early years in Korea, and she was not old enough to begin schooling or hagwon there, though she mentioned on a few separate occasions during our interviews and in her written survey that people in Korea take education, specifically hagwon, very seriously (“I was always interested in hagwon since it was a big deal in Korea”). What she does know about education in Korea is through her extended family:

My cousin and my family relatives live in Korea, so I hear a lot about it—how they can literally come home until like 11. And they are back, their schedules are back to back to back. And they have to do independent studies after hagwon too. And how much homework they give. And like how Korean school schedules are like, the expectations are really high.

What's interesting about her case is that Emmie's parents actively did not want her to attend hagwon because they were "really big believers of self-teaching." But she convinced them by showing them low practice scores, so she ended up at Ace. They also brought up the tuition cost to her frequently. She had to convince her parents to *let* her go to hagwon. "Tuition was an issue. It kind of was, yeah... my parents really are against it, first of all. And they tell me all the prices, like, how can you pay this much? And the materials are extra." Thus, she felt like she had to live up to that investment and get her parents' money's worth. But she also acknowledged the hidden cost of attending hagwon, which is her time: "It's your parents money, but like, you're spending a lot of your own private time—that you could be spending on your own studies—invested in this institution. So you're paying a lot." When they saw real improvement in her test scores *and* school grades, she said, "they gave up at that point."

This meant making some sacrifices of her own, beginning with a self-imposed "dopamine detox," which involved deleting all her social media apps. The time commitment (10AM—5PM every Saturday, plus independent studying) got in the way of not just her own private interests, but her other studies: "Sometimes with the schedule, it really doesn't match up. And there's a lot of tests crammed in one day. The times are very limiting. So it's kind of difficult for me to adjust to that... I was doing a project before and I had to apologize to a lot of my teammates just because I really wanted to attend this SAT clinic [i.e., Ace] and it was interfering against the time."

"But again, you feel like you have to do it," I said.

"I *want* to do it," she said.

But she still made time for her friends, with whom she discusses political issues, like affirmative action (more on this later). Emmie had read up on the issue and was well-versed in the history of systemic oppression in this country: “History kind of like made it really difficult for African Americans to survive. That affects the current lives of African Americans today. And that really kind of changed my view on African Americans in education. Cause it's like, when you start out poor, there's not a lot of chances that you can get. And that's why you kind of stay on that path.” This is an important perspective for Emmie, and is part of why, I think, she appreciates her own hagwon experience. She knows that given her own family history, the level of sacrifice that her parents have made and are making avails her of an opportunity that is not necessarily available to everyone.

Hagwon Experience

When I asked if hagwon had helped her “improve her scores,” her mind initially went to her school grades. She said over the course of her schooling, hagwon was the difference between being a B student and an A student, especially in math. For instance, she struggled with math her freshman year, and the one-on-one tutoring service helped her both review what she didn't get right away and preview the math that was coming up. Subsequently, when she saw it at school, she was already familiar with it, making it easier to learn: “Sometimes I couldn't understand my teacher and it wasn't clear enough. The tutoring really helped me understand... And understanding the topic itself before I actually go into the topic and learn it. A lot of times, the schedule is kind of compact. There's a lot you have to fit in in the time that you learn.” She found that the pace was too fast for her to learn it all and she needed constant reinforcement to keep up.

Emmie relied on hagwon to make up for gaps that were not closing at school: “I went to hagwons so that I can improve upon the skills that I lack.” When it came to things like grammar, vocabulary, and math—for a student like Emmie, whose parents do not come home until late at night, and when they are home, don’t speak much English—the extra schooling she received at hagwon represented her only recourse to closing a structural achievement gap for children of immigrants, like her, in non-English speaking homes. This was support she was not getting at school.

When I clarified that I was asking about SAT scores, she said that her scores had gone up around 200 points in five months—“definitely went up a lot”—but that “I have to improve more.” She started at Ace because she had the goal of taking the SAT in the summer before her junior year, but she was not making the progress she wanted self-studying. With the help of her teachers at Ace, she improved: “I could understand these passages because before I couldn't really understand any of them. And how am I supposed to solve this? I was thinking when I did the test and now it breaks down much easier. It's a lot improved.” Unfortunately, towards the end of the school year (again, her sophomore year), she found that her various responsibilities started to collide with one another, and she couldn’t quite reach the SAT score goal she had set for herself, which was a 1500. (She would not reveal what she got on her final mock test.) When we met for member check, she updated me that she had signed up for the August, October, and November tests; and if she had to, she would deal with the new digital SAT, starting in January. “We’ll see what happens,” she said.

The most important thing she learned at Ace Academy, though, had to do with time and effort: that putting in time is the only way to get better at something. It was part

of the ethos of the center: “I really like the environment. I really like how they push the kids. I'm learning what I want to learn, so I'm like getting the most benefit out of it.” In addition to the teachers pushing the students, the students push each other, which she found to be healthy motivation for her.

I strangely found friendly competition among students. Like I don't talk to them a lot. But interacting with them kind of makes me see where I am among my peers. And sometimes they actually help me—like, you're supposed to do this in this way. They said, “When I was problem solving this problem, I thought about this way instead of doing it like that.” And “I saw this and I switched answers at the last minute.” So, I was like, “Oh, that was kind of obvious.” That helped me.

Furthermore, Ms. Rebecca's motivational strategies *did* land. Emmie said seeing students raise their hands when teachers would ask if anyone got everything right, one wrong, two wrong—“and I got like five wrong. Like, what's going on?”—motivated her to try harder. Emmie believes that the rigorous culture of the center helped her realize that, in the end, she is responsible for her own learning and putting in the time:

Hagwon definitely puts you in a situation where you have to go do the work by yourself. They kind of teach that you have to work on this for a certain amount of time. You have to study every day almost... I was sent to hagwon because I was struggling in class and because I was not getting the results that I should be getting. You know what I'm saying? So hagwon really like enforces to just sit down and do the work.

In short, for Emmie, the center created an atmosphere where she saw what hard work really looks like. And to be surrounded by other students who do put in the effort and get

results inspired her to do the same. I wrote in a memo immediately after this interview that her thinking was very true to the Ace Academy brand, with its motivational signs about work ethic and not making excuses. They can tell students the things they need to do, but it's up to the student to practice them on their own, something Emmie reiterated (almost recited) in her interview: "They say that a lot. Even though you're taught in a certain way, you still have to enforce these practices and learn it yourself and kind of master the subject in order to get good grades." Putting in some effort for a few hours on Saturdays is not enough, which is something that Emmie learned: "even though [Ace Academy] helps, it really just comes back down to me, having to really [be determined] and practicing every day and reviewing all the materials that I have."

School Life

When asked if this mindset transfers over to other parts of her life, she pointed to sports. Emmie is a pole vaulter on her school's track team. These are "basic habits in life," she said, "How, like, athletes kind of have to practice a lot in order to get at that sport." When I asked if she was scared, having to vault so high, she said, "You kind of have to get over that in order to get over the bar, you know? You have to just roll with it."

I told her I don't think I could get over it.

"You just have to try," she replied.

This, to me, is representative of Emmie's personality. She had a very matter of fact way about her and expressed her ideas simply. Her responses were succinct; she did not say any more than she needed to. This was her manner in classes at Ace, too. She did not say much, but she paid attention and took diligent notes. When I asked her about what was going on, she could explain things quickly and clearly. She was a valuable resource

for me during my observations, especially in the fast-paced environment of Ace. I was grateful for her help.

Her plan is to continue to attend Ace until she reaches her score goals, or at least gets closer to them than she is now.

“I just go there to learn. I go there to review,” she said. “I must get a good score. That's my mindset. I'm not thinking too much about how each individual day goes. I just learn. I just hope I could look back and just be like, ‘I tried.’”

Work and Volunteering

Between AP Exams and a field trip she was planning for the Korean language school where she volunteers (as a teacher and administrative assistant), she found herself struggling with time management: “I was trying to like cram that all in. So, yeah, there was a lot.” The field trip she planned took a group of Korean families with kids between the ages of five and thirteen to tour the Princeton campus. The interest was mostly focused on the school's name recognition and prestige: “The kids were very interested in everything. And like they were like, ‘Oh my goodness, this is Princeton.’ And the parents were talking about how they're like, ‘Oh, my God, this is the Ivy Leagues,’ and stuff like that.” Emmie remembered taking a similar trip when she was young, which evoked in her a similar reverence.

Emmie imagines herself going into STEM fields like bio or chem, but she was ok with not having a clear idea of what she wants to do career wise at the moment. Her school choice is also unclear. Her safety is Rutgers; her reaches are Yale and Cornell, but she is also open to picking a geographic location and attending the state school that gets her there. The reality is, she said, that just because you go to a good school does not mean

that that will translate to a good job anymore. But her ultimate dream is something many can probably relate to, if they were being truly honest:

“Do nothing and get money.”

We both laughed.

I replied, “I thought we learned all these life lessons; to get what you want you have to work really hard.”

“I just don't want to do anything. I just want to rest,” she said.

Grace

“I first opened my score and covered my screen.”

Grace was a junior, Korean American, who was referred to me by Rebecca, the owner of Ace Academy. Grace was a college consulting client, whom Rebecca was helping in more than just test prep. Rebecca recommended she participate in this study in part because Grace had just written a research essay about shadow education in a developing part of the world, so had some background knowledge on the topic. Rebecca noted that Grace was not the best SAT prep student and during my first Grace corroborated this, noting that her score did not improve much after having attended Ace. When we spoke again in July, she said she had stopped studying for the SAT altogether and was planning to go “test optional,” which means that she intends not to send an SAT score with her college applications.

Family

Grace was soft spoken during our interviews, which made her come off as nervous and shy. She mentioned early on that she has struggled with anxiety throughout her life. At one point, she said something telling: “I have a path being paved for me, but I

don't think I'll make it anywhere." She has had every advantage—her parents' financial standing has afforded her tutors multiple times a week starting in fourth grade: "I was kind of struggling in math, so my mom set me up with one. And then I guess ever since then, I've never not had a tutor or went to hagwon." Her father is a business owner—he owns a laundromat—and her mother is a stay-at-home mom. She has a good relationship with both parents, she said, and she is grateful for their involvement: "everything they do is like for a good reason." Her relationship with her mom is "typical mother-daughter": "We do fight sometimes but she just wants what's best. And yeah, most of the time she's right, so I just listen to her." Her father was the person who sparked her interest in shadow education in developing areas: "I remember when I was younger, he used to sponsor kids from areas like that. He sponsored kids from Africa and South Asia, kids from that area. I remember he always told me about it. I think it was so I can be grateful for what I have." She has kept a letter that one of the students wrote to her father. "It was really inspirational," she said.

It seems to have worked; she is thankful for everything: "I used to not like having tutors because and I was because I could be doing something else. But now I'm starting the college process, I'm more grateful to be able to have access to this because honestly, I thought everyone had tutors. But yeah, I guess most people don't. So I'm more grateful that I have the resources and people to reach out to for help." Her experience with shadow education is something that is so entrenched into her daily routine that she does not even think about it as extra; it is an assumed part of her day, and has been since she can remember: "Most of it was private tutoring, like at home. So it was like I was so used

to it. Just part of my regular like after school schedule. It's just always been part of my life.”

Hagwon and School

Now, as a junior in high school, Grace is working with a top college application consultant in Rebecca who is advising her through the process. They meet once a month to check in about what Grace is “supposed to be doing,” and then Grace gets those tasks done before the next check in: “it is different every month, but just little assignments for [me] to do. Like, I was supposed to do a volunteer thing that she wanted me to try. And yeah, so she tells me what to do and I follow her.” Grace has had tutors through Ace Academy and independent tutors in all of her academic subjects, and she currently attends a separate art hagwon (which I will talk about more later), so she is well versed in shadow education in all its facets. “I think I've had help for at least like every subject at least once, but mostly for math... I've had a lot of tutors so it's hard to keep track,” she said.

Grace even wondered if working with a tutor made her overly reliant: “Sometimes I feel as if I became too dependent on a tutor, especially on the STEM side.” In a separate reflection, she wrote, “We had a free period to study for a math test and I found myself doing other work while thinking, I don't need to study right now, I can go home and ask my tutor. I didn't realize how often I did this (which is like every free period for a test time).”

Ultimately, though, she knew that hagwon and the extra tutoring has been beneficial to her: “I don't like particularly enjoy the subjects, which is why I go to hagwon. It was what was best for me”—and has given her an advantage in the college

application process. She was very forthright about acknowledging the financial advantage she has over other students: “I guess, like tutoring's original meaning was like to just get kids ahead, like what they were behind in. Its meaning is diluted so much nowadays because college is so hard to get into. Like, you have rich people getting ahead, like more ahead of what they're doing. So, like, I feel like sometimes I'm one of those people. Like with Rebecca, I definitely would not be where I am. But I just think about all the other kids who didn't have that chance. I don't know, it's definitely my work, but I wouldn't have known to do it if someone wasn't giving me a direction.”

Consequently, she wanted to live up to the advantages she had been given and the investment her parents made in her education—an investment they made with one objective in mind: get into a top college. “I feel like my parents, they pay a lot for me, so I don't want to like waste anything... Yeah, I want to do well. Like make use of what I have.” Getting into a good college was “very important” to her. When I asked why, she pointed to the competitive culture of Bergen County, NJ, where she lives, and wanting to seem impressive to the people around her. At her high school, she said you can tell the difference between “the kids who care and the kids who don't.” Her AP track cohort is about ten students who all travel together: “the AP and honors, I follow the same, like 10 kids. We have the same schedule.”

This has had a good and bad effect on her: “It's made me better. It made me want to be a better person being surrounded by such good, hard, like hardworking people. But also it's easy to get caught up in comparing yourself.” In fact, in thinking about the students who haven't had the same enrichment opportunities as she has had, she sometimes finds herself comparing herself to them, and this can have a negative impact

on her self-esteem: “I definitely have a lot of more self-esteem issues because my peers, they just feel really far ahead sometimes without tutors.” This aligns with “the Natural” narrative that exists: for some reason, culturally, it is perceived that doing well after getting help is worse than not needing it in the first place.

The effects of these expectations are uneven. Like I said, my first impression of her when we started interviewing was that she presented as insecure. Case in point, she would not reveal her SAT score—not just to me but to anyone:

I don't know why I do this—but it's just for the SAT—I like, I get really sensitive when I get something wrong. And then like, sometimes a lot of the kids after would compare their scores. And I never showed anyone my score. It was kind of stressful trying to hide it because they were trying to like, pull it away. They pressure you to get it. And then I remember, I know it was a joke, but like, there were kids in the other class who were forced to sing if they got the lowest grade. And it wasn't my class, but like, that was really, like, stress. I found hagwon to be kind of like—just specifically SAT hagwon—to be stressful because of the environment.

I recognized immediately the singing punishment from when I was at Korean schools and hagwons in my youth. This is a common Korean hazing ritual. It is meant to be light and all in good fun, and in the end, everyone including the one being “punished” is meant to laugh. But for Grace, it was a major source of anxiety. Her reason for hiding her scores was twofold: “First of all, they had higher scores than me. But also I just don't really show people. Like, I don't do that.” This pressurized high-stakes environment—no matter how shrouded in levity—led to anxiety attacks:

I think I made the situation worse than it was. But like, I just didn't really like how people compared their scores. And I guess something that someone else would consider bad, like, I would consider a good score. And then so I don't know what they consider my score. But it was just, yeah, just all the comparing. And I had a lot of anxiety attacks. Like I remember I had to be called in by the principal once because I had like a couple during my month or two there.

She described the attack itself: "I remember I was supposed to have lunch with [Rebecca], but then when I got to her door, I started crying and then I didn't go to the afternoon class. And I guess another teacher found me and told. So that's how she found out... I was, like, hyperventilating." What triggered this was that her hagwon session was ending and her score had not improved much. "Mostly I was overwhelmed and frustrated. Yeah, I guess. So the test was like right after hagwon ended. And this was like one of the last weeks, I think. Yeah, so I was just really stressed out... I guess my score went up by about 100 points." Likewise, when she wrote about her personal goals in her artifact log, she redacted her score numbers.

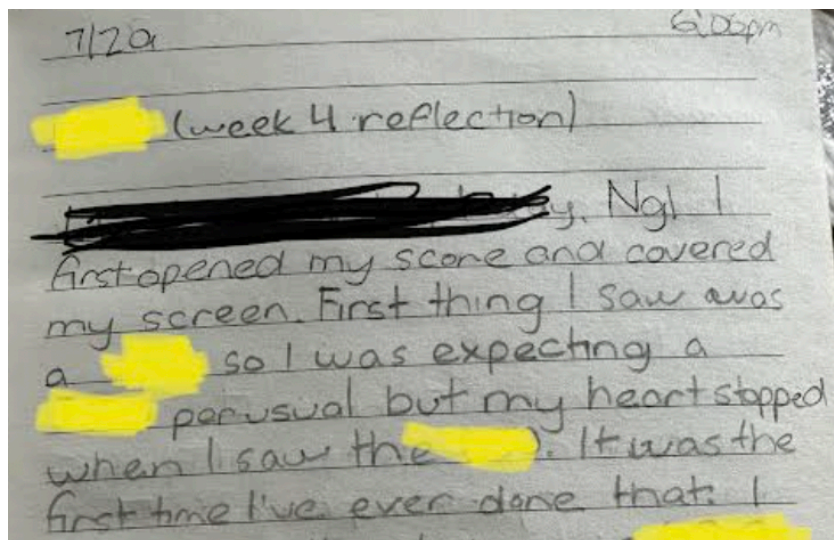
In a written reflection dated April 12, 2023, Grace seemed to be losing confidence that she could *prepare* for a test as general as the SAT: "For any test, I was able to know the material beforehand and study. However, this test felt as if it could not be studied for. I feel as if the content was too general and something that had to be built through foundational years. SAT information felt sporadic and something I lost confidence for. Especially since I'm from a high-income area and expected to have tutoring." The most discouraging part was that there was really only one method to study for the SAT, which was to take a lot of practice tests and review her mistakes, which is how hagwon classes

are generally structured. But Grace's weaknesses seemed to be different every time: "You get your score back and then you see the mistakes, but then every time it's like different mistakes. So it's kind of hard to memorize all the concepts if you haven't done it consistently."

She reaffirmed this feeling when we spoke again in July: "For all the tutors I've had, this is the only thing I couldn't do." In a written reflection, she wrote that when she got her first official SAT score, she had to cover the computer screen (Figure 14): "Ngl [not gonna lie], I first opened my score and covered my screen. First thing I saw was a [redacted test score] so I was expecting a [redacted test score] per usual but my heart stopped when I saw the [score redacted]. It was the first time I've ever done that." In our interview, she explained: "I guess like, like I didn't really, I never really thought I was good at math. So when I got the scores back and like it just confirmed my thoughts."

Figure 14

A Page Out of Grace's Reflection Journal



This obsession with comparing, competition, and prestige made her hagwon experience a negative one. Making things worse was that "nobody seemed to be bothered

by it,” which felt to Grace like tacit endorsement. This culture, of course, extends to considering what colleges she will apply to—the end goal of the entire hagwon enterprise. State schools, she said—“like Rutgers”—are looked down upon: “they have to get into the best, like anything above a 30% acceptance rate is bad.” When I asked why she thought all of this mattered so much to her peers, her answer was simple, if simplistic: “Cause they're Asian.” So pervasive is this competitive way of thinking that she “actually thought this was normal, like for every school, but I guess it's not. I just thought this was how it was supposed to be.”

While Grace differentiated SAT prep to individual tutoring—since one-on-one tutoring provided her privacy and spared her the indignity of having to share her scores with peers—she did reveal that she had broken down during one-on-one tutoring, too: “I'm just really sensitive to like people yelling at me and then I guess he [the tutor] was just frustrated. So, it was like, I don't know, it was also like AP season too. So, I guess combined with that...” In other words, the pressure to achieve in general—which includes being able to show a good score to peers and show progress in tutoring sessions—was a connecting thread in causes for her anxiety. Breaking out of this mindset is a work in progress: “I think it's made me a harder worker, but I'm still working on how to not compare myself, or like, care about prestige that much. In the long run, it shouldn't matter too much where you end up.”

Letting go of having to focus so much of her energy on the SAT opened her up to pursue her two main interests: art and writing. She also said that she quit marching band, which she only joined because they gave out varsity letters, which she thought would look good on a college application. She played the flute, which she didn't really like,

though she said she liked the people she got to play with and that many of them remain friends. She was glad to quit the band, though, because it was such a time commitment (“23 hours a week”) and, again, her true passions were writing and art. “Rebecca told me to drop it if I didn't like it. So I did end up going a different direction. That's where I picked up journalism and art again. Yeah, I guess without her, I wouldn't have known.” Grace currently writes for a journalism club and attends an art hagwon. The hope is that the other parts of her college application besides the SAT score will compensate for going test optional: “I don't know how much they care about tests. I just hope the other parts of my application, they'll overlook it instead of test optional... I got a job recently. I'm putting that on my application. Just polishing up like extracurriculars.” Her job is working at a popular Korean bakery chain. And her extracurriculars focus on her interests, namely writing and art.

Her list of accomplishments in writing and art is impressive. Her essay on shadow education in a developing area was published by the *Journal of Student Research*. Grace looked at around 30 articles to examine economic disparity and effectiveness of shadow education in a developing area of the world. “It was a lot of work. It was my first time doing something that work-heavy. It was pretty interesting, but I was pretty stressed out for most of the time. It was an interesting experience.” She logged the day when she found out that her article had been accepted (my favorite moment in the entire log): “My research paper got accepted let's gooooooooooooo.” Another more general essay she wrote on education won her a Scholastic Silver Key Award. Her art has won her several awards, including a Congressional Art Award, an American Art Award, a Scholastic Arts Silver Key, and one from a competition run by a Korean newspaper.

The more I spoke to Grace, the more I got the sense that Grace's soft-spoken-ness belied the person underneath, who was more enterprising, opinionated, and sure of herself than she might seem on the surface. For instance, she had done her research on me and the school where I teach: "I looked them up and they're like very competitive. Like, your school students." She had posted her high school's average SAT score (1290) on her artifact log, and when I told her that my students' average SAT score was 1500, she said, "Yeah. I looked that up too." Her next question made me laugh because after all we had discussed and reflected on when it comes to college admissions and breaking free of the tyranny of chasing prestige, she just could not help asking, "Do [your students] go to a lot of Ivies?"

I asked if sometimes she wished she cared less about prestige and where she goes to college; she took a second to consider, but concluded, "No, I think I care like just the right amount. I was kind of caught up in all that for a while, too, but then I realized it's also a privilege to go to a private school because college is really expensive. I think the people I meet at the end of the day are more important than where I end up so I'm okay with where I'll go." This shift in attitude has garnered the attention of her mother, too. When it came to studying for the SAT, she said, "my mom described me as like a deflated balloon, compared to last year. It's like I had motivation, but now it's, like, kind of gone."

"Is that freeing in some way?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's over, so, like, who cares," she replied.

This new outlook allowed her to get through difficult subjects like physics without torturing herself about it: “I just didn't care. I did try but physics just doesn't matter to me. I don't think I'll ever do it again.”

Work and Volunteering

In her free time, Grace volunteers for a program that teaches art to elementary school kids from lower income neighborhoods. Given all these accomplishments, it struck me as odd, or maybe sad, that her answers often skewed toward self-deprecation or minimizing her accomplishments. She noted that she comes from a privileged background and lives in a high-income community, and that she was provided tutors multiple times a week to help her with her schoolwork. Her art hagwon (also Korean run; “she went to Cornell, the woman who runs it. A lot of the kids go to good art schools and Ivy Leagues”) was geared toward submitting to and winning awards for the sole purpose of listing them on college applications”: “It was very known for like winning a lot of competitions. So Rebecca sent me there.” She noted that she would rather have drawn with graphite but focused on painting because it won more awards:

They made everyone like exclusively paint because they knew drawing with pencil didn't really win. And like, they were very focused on detail and literally just winning, like getting as many competitions [as possible]. Because the kids there all wanted to go to very prestigious schools and art schools, specifically, also. So they were catered towards just being the best.

This aspect of art hagwon made her not like it as much as she could have: “I actually didn't really like it there because they just made you like— there was a formula. That's really not what art's supposed to be.” When I asked her why she wasn't considering an

art school for college, she said, in a similar vein, “I don't want to burn out my passion for art with school.”

Her ultimate goal is to major in communications and work in managing social media or public relations, though she is not entirely sure yet what she wants to do. For now, she wants to continue to pursue her interests—art and writing—and try to branch out in terms of writing about topics beyond education. She currently writes for the school newspaper and runs their social media marketing. And she is becoming more comfortable with the idea that she is good at certain things (arts and humanities) and she simply can't conjure the necessary effort to excel at things that don't interest her (math and science): “If I care about something, then I put a lot of work into it. But if I don't, I completely neglect it.” She has accepted this about herself, and even between her first and second interview with me, she seemed much more at ease. She was shaking throughout our first interview, she told me.

The last part of our conversation was about her college essay, which she had started working on with Rebecca. Grace said she had a basic idea of what she wanted to write about—something about how high school did not live up to her fantasies. But I told her that *this* story—the one where she foregoes torturing herself over the SAT, which was expected of her, in favor of pursuing her interests for the sake of her own fulfillment and mental health—is a very compelling story. When she sent me samples of her writing, I wrote to her, “This is a very impressive list [of accolades]. I've taught a handful of students at [school name redacted] who've managed to be published and win Scholastic awards and I can say that those are honors reserved for our top kids.” I wrote again ten

minutes later asking for sample artwork, which she sent, but I decided not to show for purposes of anonymity. She did not respond to my praise.

Queens Institute

Queens Academy was in Bayside, Queens, New York. I visited Queens Institute a total of six times, all Saturdays, between January 21st and June 6th, between 9AM to 1PM for a total of 24 observation hours.

Setting

Queens Institute is a test prep center in Queens, NY. The original proprietor, Mr. Oh, is a friend of a family friend, a gentleman in his 70s, who has passed down the daily operations to his son, Tom, with whom I dealt mostly. I spoke to Mr. Oh once, and when I told him about my parents' friend, who put me in touch with this center, Mr. Oh recognized his name and asked about his health. (He also offered me a job teaching there, which I declined.) Tom seemed eager to participate in the study, and in our first meeting, he ended by asking if my dissertation would be available for him to read and quote in the literature for his center to recruit new students. He agreed that there is an unfair narrative going around about test prep centers and he was excited to contribute to a more well-rounded discourse about the work he does and the service he provides for his students. I wrote at the time that I could see why parents entrust their children to Mr. Oh and his son Tom.

The building was a two-level, all glass-front building with the name of the center in large bold signage at the top. The front doors and side paneling were covered with text, advertising their many services, including SAT prep, ACT prep, state test prep, after school instruction, and private tutoring, by "Ivy League" and "Experienced

school/licensed teachers.” In addition to common core ELA, math, and writing, the signage also boasted help in biology, chemistry, physics, and world history. Once I entered the lobby, I was met with a standalone digital thermometer that took my temperature by laser sensor (a vestige of the COVID era), and a narrow staircase that went up to the second floor where the classrooms were.

Upstairs, there were two main classrooms: one for SAT prep for high school students, and one for SHSAT prep for middle school students who are vying for a coveted spot in one of the test-in schools in New York. The desks in the classrooms have materials that look like they are for more general enrichment classes. In the metal bins underneath the desks, I saw copies of *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and other worksheets meant for younger grades or perhaps older English language learners. Past the classrooms are what look like conference rooms for general use, but the signage indicate that a church group meets there, and during one of my observations I did overhear a meeting where a group of people met, socialized, and prayed together. This is to say, the walls at Queens Institute were thin. Often, I could hear the instruction that was happening in the next room. At around 11:00AM, I heard Korean pop music from a nearby store leak up through the floor. This did not seem to bother the teachers or students, or if it did, they did not say so. It was a little distracting for me, though.

Saturday SAT classes started at 9:00AM with reading and grammar until 11:00AM, then math from 11:00AM to 1:00PM. There was no official lunch break, but there were five-minute breaks in between classes.

Classes, Teachers, and Students

On my first observation day, Tom encouraged me to see the SHSAT prep course. The head of instruction would be focusing on helping their middle school students gain admission into the New York City specialized high schools. When I told him that I teach at one of those schools, he said that he had graduated from one, too, and that he hoped that I would eventually see all of his students in my class one day. He also spoke about how his students are giving up their Saturdays to be there, and that if they do well on the test, it will be because they worked hard. He then talked about how at his day job (as a math teacher at a local high school), he watched students who did no homework and did not work hard get into colleges over more deserving candidates because of affirmative action. But he also acknowledged that the 70% Asian population at the NYC specialized high schools was “a lot” and understood why colleges couldn’t base admissions on just one test.

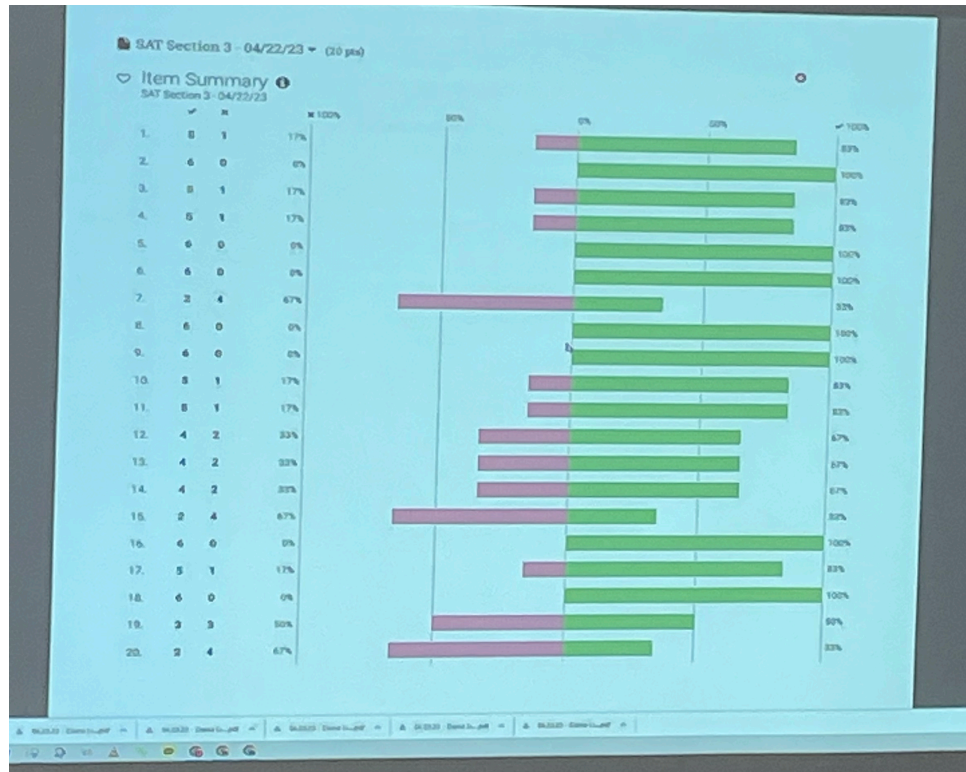
The other teachers at the center handled the SAT prep, which is where I spent most of my time. The ELA teacher was the same throughout—a Korean woman with a strong Korean accent, who Joyce described as “sweet.” She spoke with a Korean accent that reminded me of my mother’s friends. When I announced my study to her class, she encouraged them to participate and take advantage of my offer to look at their college essays. I was appreciative of her endorsement; she did not have to do that. The SAT math teacher changed midway through the semester. The first teacher worked as a nurse and would show up sometimes directly from an overnight shift. He ran a very strict class and cold-called on students, sometimes showing some exasperation, if not frustration, if they did not know the answer (e.g., “We’ve been over this so many times”). The new math

teacher did not look up from his desk as he solved problems on his tablet device, which was projected on the screen.

Classes generally began with students given time in class to complete practice packets. They would turn their answers in and during a short break—during which students generally sat quietly in their seats scrolling on their phones or with their heads down—the teacher would grade the papers using the scantron machine; the new math teacher used an app on his phone. The on-the-spot question data—how many students got each question wrong—would then be projected onto a screen (Figure 15) and dictated what questions the teachers cover during their review sessions.

Figure 15

A Sample Digital Class Score Report



Note. Instant score reports guided which questions would be reviewed.

The pink bars on the left indicated the number of students who got a question wrong; the longer the bar, the more students got it wrong, which indicated that those questions were more difficult. This did away with asking students for the questions they wanted explained, which made the process more efficient but less interactive. Students did have the opportunity to have questions explained if the teacher got through all their questions first.

Culture

The classes were sparsely attended. I observed classes of seven, five, sometimes even four students in the SAT prep class at Queens Institute. This made for a quiet and detached atmosphere. The students did not sit next to each other and did not interact during breaks. During class, they did not participate much, because the teachers would go through the practice problem explanations sometimes without even looking up from their papers or screens. It was up to the students to follow along and listen for the explanations they needed. Occasionally, Joyce, one of my participants, would speak up and correct something a teacher said or ask a question. But she was the only one I heard with any regularity. There were days when she said nothing, too. This was the thing that stuck with me most about Queens Institute: the students were largely silent, with the teachers doing most—if not all—of the talking.

Joyce

“I’m just trying to survive. Day by day.”

The first thing that stood out to me about Joyce was her style, which was a mix of RiotGrrrl, punk, and rave. Dressed in all black, her exterior belied the softspoken, dutiful,

and deferential person I spoke to. When I shared my first impression with her during our member check, she said, “I get that a lot.”

Family

Joyce’s parents immigrated from China in the 1990s before Joyce was born. Her mother moved here first because she already had family in the area (Queens, NY). Then, her father “out of love ... chased her here,” and they married. The rest of the story is a typical Asian immigrant story—i.e., living in squalor to accrue savings and investment capital with an eye toward long term stability. They were eventually able to save enough to buy an investment property: “And yeah, they just worked their asses off. They told me about how they started living in basements with many people in one room with one mattress and then they loaned money from the bank, bought a house, and then got tenants.” Currently, in addition to being landlords, her father works as an Uber driver while her mother stays home. Thus, the tuition for Queen Institute is a conscious family budget decision. “It’s definitely not like, ‘Oh, this is a little amount, it’s ok, whatever.’ It’s a decision to take this part of their income to send me there,” she said. Joyce did acknowledge that they have more than other families who scrape together tuition, take out loans, and go into debt to send their kids to test prep, which she has heard about, too. But that is in large part because of the immense sacrifices her parents made when they first moved to the U.S.

In getting to know Joyce, I noticed that she can be very hard on herself, and this mostly centers around academics, her grades, and test scores, which she feels define her as a person: “I hold my grades as like my sense of value. So, I need to get a good grade to feel good about myself.” In thinking about where this motivation to succeed comes from,

she estimated that it broke down to 90% herself and 10% her parents: “my parents, they trust me. I’ve always been a good student getting straight As. They don’t even check my report card because they know I do well. I think I put more pressure on myself than my parents do.”

“Where does that come from?” I asked.

“No idea.”

But when we dug a little deeper, living up to her parents’ sacrifice and expectations weighed on her: “I have to go to college. That’s what my parents want. They came all this way from China as immigrants and they want their children to be successful and go to college.” I think Joyce may have downplayed the weight and impact of this responsibility.

Hagwon and School

Joyce has struggled with anxiety and depression, which she told me seven minutes into our first interview: “I do have a history of anxiety and depression.” During our second interview, she said, “At SAT prep, I’m still on edge, on the verge of a mental breakdown constantly,” which, I have come to understand was not hyperbole. Nor was she exaggerating when she credited “multiple burnouts” for teaching her to organize her time. She discussed one period that led to a burnout when she tried to do too much in a short period of time: “I was doing full length SAT packets every single day because I was pretty motivated to get a good score because my mentality was, I want to get the best score I possibly can in these two tries, because I want to be done with this. Like, I’m tired. I don’t want to deal with this anymore.”

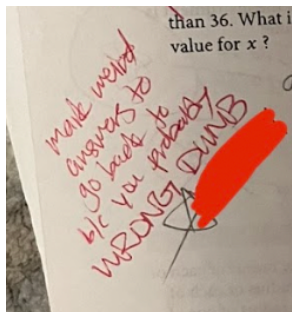
In another instance, she remembered having to calculate whether to spend her time redoing an English final or preparing for the SAT, and she ultimately chose the SAT: “If I redo this, even if I get a hundred, it's going to bump my grade up a little bit, but it's not worth me getting like a 1200 on the SAT cause I practiced so much for this. It's just more important right now.” When we discussed whether she thought people learn better under the high stakes pressure she feels at SAT prep, she said, “People can definitely learn that way. It's just, I hate it at the same time. Like it's mentally exhausting. I could never do that long-term... If that was what school was like, I'd be dead.”

There were times when she would say self-deprecating things that felt overly harsh: e.g., “I don't respect myself, but I respect teachers”; “I suck at reading”; “I'm not the greatest typer”; “when I get a question wrong, I'm like, you're the stupidest person alive, why did you get that question wrong?” She wrote harsh notes to herself to avoid making, and especially repeating, mistakes. One test annotation that she posted to her artifact log struck me as particularly harsh: “Mark weird answers to go back to b/c you probably WRONG DUMB B----” (Figure 16).

When I asked her about the note (she had blacked out “the b-word”), she said, “I'm mean to myself. It's like negative reinforcement.”

Figure 16

Joyce Wrote Notes to Herself in the Margins of Practice Packets



Joyce's days hinge on how she does on her practice tests, and she judges whether it's a good day or bad day based on how she feels she is performing on these questions:

I do remember the first day of prep, I was like, it was so bad. I was not feeling good. And then I was getting all these questions wrong. It was a terrible, terrible day... Some days, I'm feeling good. Like, 'I got a lot of questions right today.' And then, I go into the work and I'm like, 'I got this, I can do this.' And it goes pretty well. And even if I get some questions wrong, I'm like, 'I'll get it next time.' But sometimes, I'm getting so many questions wrong and it's like, 'This is so not worth it. Like, all this work.' And I feel bad. My parents are putting so much money into this, if I don't do well, it's like oh, no, I feel so bad. So, it depends on the day.

There are many factors going into her bad days. The smallest hesitation can derail a good day: "During the timing, the time limit, I'm stressed, and one hesitation and my confidence just shoots down. It's like 'Oh no!'" Then, if she runs into a question where she has no idea what it is even asking for, she "spirals": "And the problem is, even though I'm aware I'm spiraling, I can't stop it. So like, it's, it's hard to keep going. Like, it's like, oh, you got this question wrong. That means what if the questions before you are wrong too? If you're unsure about this, you probably made a mistake on something else. Are you even going to finish on time? You're spending too much time on this problem."

The avalanche of self-doubt can be debilitating, and once that happens, her day is effectively ruined. And given that these tests are meant to trip up and induce feelings of doubt, it is rare that Joyce can get through a section, much less an entire test, without

spiraling. A neutral day, a day when nothing bad happens, she said, is a good day: “when I’m, like, not totally defeated.”

Her test anxiety makes her second guess herself to the point where she can question herself on the most basic knowledge: “Like, I’m like, two plus one is three, right? It’s three.” I noted at the time that she was not concerned with what this means for her mental health, but rather, that “it wastes a lot of time.” In other words, the test is having an impact on her confidence and wellbeing, but optimizing test management is the main concern, taking precedence over anything else. Thus, she enters a vicious cycle—one where the only thing that puts her in a good mood is getting good scores, but to get those good scores, she has to be in a good and confident mood.

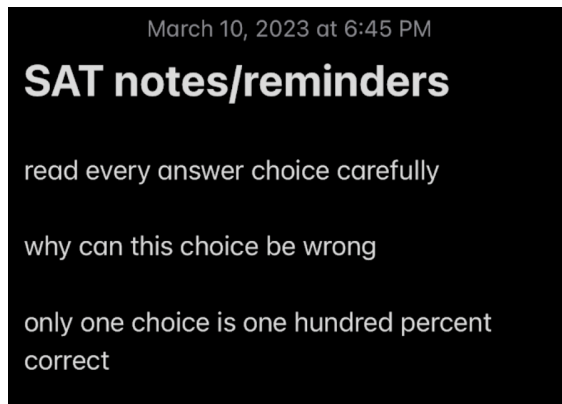
A similar tension exists as she struggles to manage her many responsibilities: “I care more about my school grades than SAT grades but at the same time I *really* care about my SAT score. But it’s hard like after a week of school, I have to go to SAT prep at nine in the morning. And it’s like, I just want to sleep. Please give me a break.” However, her breaks “aren’t really breaks”:

It’s like procrastinating break. I just watch mediocre YouTube videos that I’m not really interested in. Because like, I like I’m only allowed like to me, I’m only allowed to watch stuff I enjoy after I finish my work. Because if, if I do that before, then I’ll get too immersed. And I don’t deserve that yet. I need to finish my work. So it’s like watching mediocre videos, passing the time a little bit, hopefully, I’ll find the motivation to start my work. And it’s like, in the back of my head: ‘You should be doing work right now. Stop wasting time.’

The YouTube videos she is referring to are things like “How I Got a 1600,” and while she watches them, she takes notes reminding her to “Read every answer choice carefully. Why can this choice be wrong[?] Only one choice is one hundred percent correct” (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Joyce Made Lists to Remind Herself of SAT Tips



She also took notes that remind her of her weaknesses—specifically what types of questions have given her the most trouble (“systems of equations; shifting transformation translation; parent functions; geometry; statistics; practice math times tables; be careful with signs + —; practice historical and double passages”)—and things she needs to review or work on before she next takes the test (“practice math times tables”), though whether she actually does or not is a different story. Often, she does not live up to the aspirations of her lists.

Joyce has done better on the math section than the literature sections and cannot seem to break through on the reading passages. She got a perfect score on the math one time, which she is trying to replicate on the official SAT, but she can’t seem to break the mid 1300s (her score was a 1370; 690 Math; 680 EVBRW, which stands for Evidence-Based Reading Writing). This constituted an improved EVBRW score, but her math

score went down, and as of our third and final interview, she still had not registered an official math score that she was happy with.

“I improved a little bit, but at some point, I stopped improving,” she said.

“How does that make you feel? Do you, are you mad?” I asked, somewhat leading.

“Yeah, but I've been worrying about this for like a year. I'm kind of numb to it at this point,” she said.

In her last email update to me, on August 2nd, she told me that she had signed up for the October test because all the August seats within a 25-mile radius were filled.

When I asked Joyce how she felt about having to do well on this test, and why it continues to be a measure that colleges look at, she said, “I actually never really thought about it. I just knew that SAT was a thing I needed to do, and I needed to do well. And lately I've been hearing my cousins, who are already in college, that they hate these types of standardized tests because they don't really measure your capabilities, and I even had an English teacher in freshman year that said that SAT is stupid. Same thing, that it doesn't really measure your abilities.”

“So how does that make you feel?” I asked.

“I think it's pretty unfair, but either way, it doesn't change the fact that I need to do well, so I don't think about it too much.”

Hagwon has helped her, though, in one way: being more assertive. Joyce noted that she is more assertive in her test prep classes than at school. For instance, she is willing to speak up and correct her test prep teachers when they make a mistake, which is something she would never do at school. She said she generally does well in school

academically, but there are social factors at school that make her not want to draw attention to herself, But test prep is different:

During school I'm a lot more nervous in a social sense because I'm around people I know every day and they know me. And my anxiety is like, 'stay quiet and don't bring any attention to yourself, don't raise your hand, nothing.' But in SAT prep I don't care as much about the opinions of others in class, 'cause after prep I'm never going to see them again. I don't see them in school, so I don't care as much. That's why I'm like engaged in SAT prep. I call out [the teacher's] wrong answers—I would never do that in school.

In other words, test prep gives her a space where she can try on a personality that is more outspoken. "It's like I'm two different people." Her explanation as to why this shift happened at SAT prep, she pointed again to living up to the investment of both time and money that goes into hagwon, and feeling compelled to ask for what she needs: "A few weeks go, something clicked: like, dude, you have to start asking questions and like correcting [the teacher] if he's wrong 'cause if you don't know if it's wrong or right, then this prep is useless. Like don't waste your time or money. So that was my mindset going into the last few weeks. Do the work so you can benefit from this instead of just being there."

She wouldn't go so far as to say that any of this will help her in life, though. I got the sense that she was pushing back on my questions about larger cultural significance or life tools: "It's just work. It's not like my teachers are giving me inspirational life advice. It's SAT prep, so." When I asked about learning resilience or sacrifice, she dismissed those as takeaways too: "I don't know. Maybe I've heard it before, but I don't really

listen to it, or my mind doesn't see it as valuable information. I'm more focused on getting that good score. That's really what's most important to me. Which I know shouldn't really be the case but..." In other words, she resisted putting any more significance on SAT prep than what it was—in the end, just another obligation, and a means to an end: "It's just something on my schedule. I just do it. I don't think about it. It's just something I have to do. You know? I don't really know the deeper meaning of it."

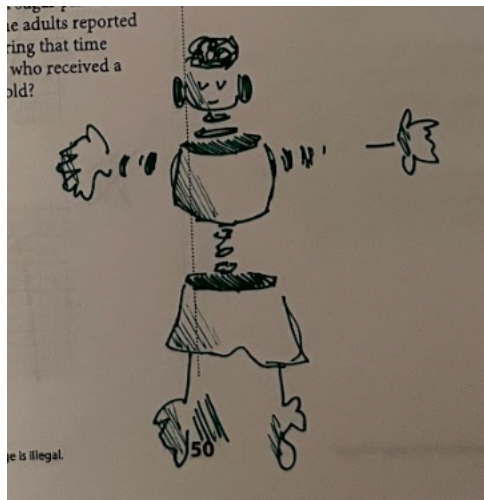
At school, she said, she is more confident about her academic abilities:

"Sometimes I talk to my friends about SAT prep and it's like, I feel smart in school. I'm always finishing the problems first and getting them right. But I tell my friends, I'm smart in school but I'm the dumbest person there in SAT prep. I'm the slowest person and I get the questions wrong all the time." It's possible that because she doesn't necessarily perform to her own high standards on the SAT, there is an urgency that doesn't exist at school, where she does do well. Or, maybe she does better in school *because* there is less pressure, and instruction at school is more structured and targeted: that is, in geometry class, you get geometry questions, not a jumble of everything you've learned. They study a specific thing and then the test is on that thing. The SAT is less predictable, plus it is higher stakes, which is a lethal combination: "SAT math prep is just harder cause I don't understand what I have to do, and there's more pressure to it. Cause I'm studying for something that'll affect my future. But in school it's like if I get this question wrong, it's fine, it's just classwork or homework. It doesn't have the same weight. It's more consequences to not doing well on the SAT than not doing well on a test in school."

To keep herself entertained during her obligatory prep classes, Joyce tried focusing on little things that bring her joy: “I like to see my English teacher’s hair. I think it’s cute. It’s like a short bob and it’s like a little curly. And I like her outfits. And she’s such a nice, sweet person and I think she’s really cute.” Joyce also doodled during classes. Her doodles on her worksheets and practice tests were quite charming, especially her robots (Figure 18).

Figure 18

Joyce’s Doodle of a Robot



Work and Volunteering

In her “free” time, Joyce scooped ice cream at Carvel to make money, and she volunteered at the library for community service hours, which is something she would have done willingly anyway: “I genuinely like working there, so I have like 150 hours.” On Saturdays, she would leave Queens Institute and go straight to the library to volunteer. When we spoke at the end of May, she told me that they had granted her leave to prepare for the SAT and all of her finals and Regents exams. When we met for our member check in August, she informed me that she is back working at the library.

Ultimately, she wants to pursue psychology to help people like her, who struggle with anxiety and depression: “I’ve been going to therapy. I always try to avoid thinking about [what I’m going to major in], ‘cause I don’t want to think about it. But I would be ok with psychology and trying to help people with depression and anxiety. ‘Cause in the beginning, I definitely didn’t think it would work, but I was pleasantly surprised.”

Jane

“I’m not really sure if it helped or not.”

Jane was referred to me by the owner of Queens Institute. She was a student at one of the exclusive test-in magnet schools in NYC, which indicated that she was a good test taker coming into high school. In her interviews, her responses were sharp, to the point, and self-assured.

Family

Jane’s mother signed her up for the Queens Institute “because she couldn’t trust me to do the SAT by myself.” She described her mother as “the typical Asian parent who just really wants the best for you so they enroll you in like a bunch of stuff.” Her parents are immigrants from China—they moved to the U.S. when they were teenagers (Jane was born here)—but they did not go to college and Mandarin is the main language spoken at home. Her mother is in real estate and her father is unemployed, and they heavily emphasized education before hobbies or anything else not having to do with school, lest Jane ends up struggling like they did: “I’m also going to be like a first gen college student. So they’re like, ‘Oh, we don’t want you to end up like us. So do these things.’” Her parents were concerned that *not* going would put Jane at a disadvantage compared to

her peers, which is the inevitable result of community pressure, i.e., hearing about what other families are doing:

In Asian culture or Chinese culture, it's a lot of comparison that can become toxic, a little. And since they want the best and then they hear about other children or people going to test prep and then getting a good score or whatever, they're like, "Oh, I don't know if my child would get in[to college], but if I send them [to test prep], then she'll be fine." So it's kind of like an assurance or a safety.

It's likely, according to Jane, that her mother heard about Queens Institute on a WeChat group. WeChat is a primarily Chinese messaging app (Koreans have their own version of this, called Kakao, colloquially known as Ka-talk), and there is a Stuyvesant WeChat group that shares information about the college application process.

Hagwon Experience

Indeed, the most notable takeaway for me was that Jane not afraid to tell me that she did not find her test prep experience at Queens Institute to be very helpful. Jane first attended test prep (at a different center) starting in 7th grade to prepare for the SHSAT because her parents wanted her to attend a specialized high school. She remembered fondly the middle school test prep center she attended—"all of the Asian parents would talk about it"—but only because she attended with a friend, and they would use that shared setting to "just hang out." However, she noted that SAT prep generally relies on reviewing questions students get wrong as opposed to presenting a structured curriculum.

You have the practice test and everything, but a lot of times teachers don't or can't really explain why you get something wrong or what you can do to make it better. And how the lessons are structured is very, you do the tests and then you go over

them, but then there's just more tests and it's not really teaching you specifically about ... That specific prep place didn't really give lessons, but more so reviews. The difference between teaching and reviewing became even more obvious when, once she aced the SHSAT and finished her freshman year at the top magnet school in NY, she was a teacher's assistant at a summer test prep program to middle schoolers who were also prepping for the SHSAT. She acknowledged that her association with the top magnet school in the city carried a lot of cache among the students she taught. The program, which focused on middle schoolers of Chinese background, asked her to help "create lessons specifically about certain topics that appear really frequently in the SHSAT and it'd be split up into ELA or math"—which is something she did not see at Queens Institute. As an assistant, she created slides and reviewed homework for the teacher. The experience, she said, gave her "higher standards for what test prep could do," which made her experience as a student at Queens Institute the following summer feel "lackluster," especially for how much her parents had to pay for it (Jane estimates that it was around \$2,000 for the summer session.)

Jane has sought out her paid work on her own through one of the job opportunity bulletins sent out by the guidance office at school. And this seems to be a theme in Jane's life: in her mind, she has figured things out on her own. On the SAT, she said self-study was the most effective method. She had a book, called *The SAT Prep Black Book*, which her brother used and then gave to her: "It [was] pretty detailed. It had like, practice tests and the answers and it was like way better than like any other books that gave explanations on the answers. So that was one book that I like liked." Among the tips she picked up in this book was "the answer is always in the text and you just got to look for

it.” She found that other books did not accurately represent the questions she had seen on actual SATs she had taken. But, for the most part, she said, “I kind of figured it out on my own.”

Jane broke down her process on both sections. The math section is really about finding neat and tidy answers. From what I observed, the math questions are generally engineered to work out neatly—one side will match the other somehow—and if it’s not working out neatly, then you’ve probably made a mistake.

It's like figuring out what it wants you to find, honestly. Like for the math, I know, like some people struggle with math, but for me, it's just knowing like what they're looking for, and how you get to that point. And I just like figure out the answer. And it's like a lot of repetition with like, oh, this is geometry. So you have to know the triangle thing about the degrees, which I don't remember the name of, and then it's like, you just have to know the really typical like, what you'd find on the test.

The English section, though, is where Jane shows an ability that feels special—i.e., her memory. In essence, she is able to keep what she has read in her mind and remember that certain parts of the passage contain certain pieces of information:

Then like in the English section, I guess the English section, it would just be like, I wouldn't call it analyzing the text, but being able to find the answer quickly, but also accurately—reading it over and then kind of remembering what part of the text, like breaking it down, like, “oh, this part is the introduction so it explains this part” and then like keeping it in your mind for later when you encounter the questions. Because what I like to do is like, I read it over really quickly. And then

I skip the main idea questions, just because if I take the other questions first that dive deeper into like what the passage is really about, then I can just easily figure out the main idea question in like a minute. (Jane, interview 2)

It sounds like she mind-maps the passages and is able to keep those maps in her head while she goes through the small picture questions, then builds on those details to figure out the bigger picture main-idea questions, which she leaves until last. When I asked how she developed these strategies, she said, simply, “I just figured it out on my own.” She did acknowledge that she saw some “tips and tricks” on social media (more on this later), but ultimately, it came down to her practicing, figuring out what works for her, and executing.

As for test prep centers, she thinks it is more for a particular type of student (not her, in case that wasn't clear already):

I think prep is like more helpful for people who like don't know how to go about the test like, oh, they don't know, like the patterns or like they don't know what to look out for. And they're taking it like for the first time. But also when you take the SHSAT you're kind of already set for the SAT, as long as you know the rest of the math stuff and then just brush up on knowing what words mean, honestly.

Her strategies clearly worked. Jane had the highest score among the participants in this study: 1570 (800 Math; 770 ELA), with no plans to retake the test. She scored a 1550 on her first official test before she started at Queens Institute and found that it was not helping her get any closer to the perfect score she wanted. She found her score fluctuating, sometimes even going down, and was disappointed that her teachers couldn't seem to explain why she wasn't getting certain questions wrong. This is exclusive to the

English section, and every time she took the test, she said, she would get a different type of question wrong. “I had trouble [with the English section], yeah... But there's like a method to it where you just have to like learn how to do it, I guess.” When asked how she learned this, she said, “mostly by trial and error and figuring out patterns of like, the answer is like always in the text. So you just have to look for it. And if it's not, like if you can't find it, then the answer choice you're looking for is probably wrong.”

After she took the official test for a second time during the school year and scored 1570, she decided that she was happy with her score and that it would be a waste of energy and time to take it again, since in her practice tests, her mistakes—again, all on the English section—seemed to have no discernible pattern: “Some people might get like, oh, you're always getting like the main idea question wrong or something like that. But mine would be scattered all over the place.” It’s also worth noting that leading up to her second attempt, “through the whole junior year, I did not study a single time for the SAT,” only looking at a couple of passages the week leading up to the test. [In a researcher’s memo immediately after our interview, I wrote, “Minimal study for second test. Her preparation was in the years leading up to final attempt.”] Looking back on her Queens Institute experience, she could not say that it helped her much, though it did not hurt. She just lamented the summer she had spent doing test prep when she could have been doing other things.

Work and Volunteering

When I spoke to her in July, after she had finished her junior year, she seemed to be making up for that lost summer: “I don’t feel like the school year has ended; I’m pretty busy these days.” When we spoke, she was involved in two MIT Beaver Works

programs—engineering and cybersecurity—as well as working a job where she was paid to give feedback on AI-generated AP (Advanced Placement) Exam prep materials for online tutoring programs like Albert and Khan Academy (“they want to get with the times”). She has been at the job since the previous summer, so in a way, Jane has leveraged her testing prowess and become a professional test taker. It was not lost on me that this repeated exposure to testing material—as a test prep student, test prep teaching assistant, and test prep question tester—could have had a compounded impact on her ability to figure out what the questions are looking for. When asked, Jane said that her job had no correlation to her performance on the SAT, since she was given calculus questions and calculus is not tested on the SAT. If anything, she said, her job helped her more with her math courses at school versus the SAT. She hopes to attend MIT, though she doubts that she’ll get in, but also mentioned Cornell, with the hope of ending up with a job in cybersecurity or web app development.

For Jane, success means “happiness, just like being the feeling of being fulfilled, that you have done everything that you can possibly do, and that you want to do.” As for how the college admissions process plays into that, she acknowledged that it’s stressful but a necessary step: “It is stressful, it’s the next step in life. It’s something that I feel like I should go through, just because it means that it opens up more opportunities for me to like get jobs that help me feel fulfilled. Because after all the struggle, and when you have like a job that you like, or you like doing, and having money that can support yourself or like sustain yourself, then you can do things that you really want to do.” Ultimately, Jane, the goal is to be financial secure in order to be independent and enjoy the little things in life: “Every day you just gotta keep going on what you need to do. And then it’s just the

little things where you get to, like, go out with your friends or do something you enjoy. That makes everything kind of have a meaning to it.” Those hobbies include drawing, playing video games, watching YouTube, and getting on group calls with her friends.

A revealing moment with Jane happened when, towards the end of our second and final interview, I offered to help her with her college essay (which I offered as reciprocity to all my participants). She said that she wanted to write about the one and only extracurricular activity she had participated in—a group that performs dances in the dark using glowsticks. As a freshman, she struggled to overcome her social anxiety and stage fright but had the desire to perform on stage in some capacity—to be seen but not seen:

I like the idea of, of performing in the dark where no one can see me, because I'm afraid. Sorry, this is really emotional for me. I'm afraid to like make mistakes, or like people knowing that I failed in some way. And then I've kind of always liked the idea of being on stage, but also scared of it, like stage fright.

Though I got the sense throughout our interviews that she was a perfectionist, this was the first time she openly and directly acknowledged this part of her personality. This dance group gave her the perfect opportunity to make mistakes, since she is hidden in darkness, and freely express herself on stage. She knows there are a lot of students like her at her school, and over the course of the last three years, she became the confident person she presented in our interviews. In fact, she had taken on a leadership position in the club. She wants to offer incoming freshmen the same opportunity to shine as she did.

There is a connection to be made, I think, between this club and Jane's test taking ability. It's something she knows impresses people. But for reasons that are not immediately clear, I got the sense that she will not permit herself to be proud of it. It

struck me as sad. Jane could shine—if given a task and the tools—but when it comes to conquering the SAT, she is hiding in the shadows. It's not embarrassment or shame, but maybe akin to people in another one of Jane's interest domains: gaming. The knowledge, skills, and achievements acquired in these specialized somewhat insular spaces are often exclusive to and acknowledged by those respective communities (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Gee, 2007).

CHAPTER 7 CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

To structure my cross-case analysis section, I start with my preliminary survey results. Then, I structure my cross-case using the four-part shadow education framework that organized the findings in the literature review section (see Chapter Three). While transcribing the participant interviews, I deductively coded for patterns that fit into the four umbrella categories: (1) Hagwon is an assumed part of culture; (2) Hagwon curriculum; (3) School is not enough and/or School vs. hagwon; (4) Hidden curriculum and/or cultural implications. This four-point structure is imported from my literature review, and it will also organize both the findings and discussion sections that follow. Then, I inductively coded the students' responses shape how those larger theme categories took shape. I was then able to engage in a cross-case analysis of the hagwons and the students' experiences for themes. In other words, I came to the themes and analysis with a heuristic framework, but the participants shaped the themes and analysis to a level of complexity that I simultaneously expected and found surprising and fascinating.

Preliminary Survey Results

The preliminary survey was the first thing students filled out as part of their participation. The numerical values in Table 4 represent a Likert scale from (1) "Strongly Disagree" to (5) "Strongly Agree." (3) was "Neutral." Our first interviews were structured by the ten questions listed in Table 4.

Table 4*Survey Question Response Ratings*

Survey Question	Crown	Ace	Queens	Total
1. I find hagwon to be useful	4.5	4	4	4.25
2. Hagwon has improved my test scores	4.2	3.5	3.5	3.875
3. Hagwon has improved my grades in school	3	4	2.5	3.125
4. I have learned things at hagwon that have helped me in life	3.5	2.5	2.5	3
5. I come to hagwon because I have to	3	3	4	3.25
6. I come to hagwon because of my parents	2.75	1.5	4	2.75
7. I come to hagwon because I think it will help me get into a better college	4.25	4.5	4.5	4.375
8. I come to hagwon because I think it will help me get a better job	3.75	3.5	4	3.75
9. I would come to hagwon even if my parents didn't make me	4	4	3	3.75
10. I enjoy coming to hagwon	4	3	2.5	3.375

Note. Table organized by Hagwon; scores are means; for more detailed results, see Appendix I.

Preliminary Survey Analysis

The first thing I noticed in looking over these scores was the disparity between finding hagwon to be useful and improving test scores. At every hagwon, the students found hagwon useful even if it did not necessarily improve their test scores. This suggests that for the students who participated in this study, there was more to hagwon than just

improving test scores, though they would not go so far as to say that it had an impact on their lives outside schooling or even work.

I also noticed that that the questions that addressed being there against their will (Q6 and Q9) both skewed toward the students wanting to be there of their own volition. The feeling of having to be there skewed a tick higher, though generally settled on neutral; the Queens students felt hagwon to be more obligatory than the New Jersey students. There are several explanations as to why: (1) they have internalized the importance of the SAT score as part of the college admissions process and understand hagwon to be a helpful resource; (2) they have bought into the cultural imperative to attend hagwon, which is itself layered. A third explanation has to do with students who have been in hagwon for much of their lives and accept it as part of schooling. As part of this, a fourth explanation is that they have built a social networks and friend groups centered on hagwon and go there to participate in a shared experience that is productive and beneficial, and therefore parent sanctioned. The exception, as mentioned, was the Queens Institute, where the students rated their desire to be there low. Based on my observations, this does not necessarily have to do with region but rather the culture of the centers (more on this later).

That the participants generally thought hagwon would lead to a good job suggests an understanding of a particular life trajectory: Better grades and test scores equals better college equals better job prospects. But these students understand more about this process than we think. As Grace pointed out, “If you do get into a better college, it does help create connections and helps you set up for a job.” This demonstrates a different level of understanding than I certainly had at her age—that college is more about who you know

than what you know. But what this showed to me most of all was that these students are working towards an objective, and if hagwon will help them get there, they will do it.

Subsequently, whether they *wanted* to come to hagwon and whether they enjoyed it was also subtly different. The only place where they matched was at Crown Academy. That speaks to the atmosphere of that center, as we will hear from the students who went there. The other two saw a drop: students were not necessarily forced to be there, but they did not go so far as to say that they enjoyed it. Again, this is a reflection of the cultures of the different hagwons. As we will see, Crown Academy had a welcoming environment that made students want to be there. In fact, one participant went so far as to say there were weeks that it was the best part of his week. The other two were more transactional: students were there for a singular purpose, and once that purpose had been served, there was no other reason to be there. I will say, though, that a culture did develop in one of the transactional ones, too—surprisingly, in the most militant of the three hagwons.

Overall, the results of the survey reflect a variety, or heterogeneity. As Bourdieu (1998) theorized, while a homogenous hagwon culture exists—i.e., set of values (e.g., hard work, achievement), social capital (e.g., high test scores equating merit)—each individual field and individual agent responds differently to those generative values and regulations. In other words, a seemingly cohesive habitus plays out in different ways in each individual setting, and then, within those disparate settings, it fractures further when we consider each individual habitee. Thus, while the three hagwons collectively perpetuated the Korean and Asian American cultural centering of education, achievement, and success, the seven students' responses to this universal imperative were varied. These preliminary survey results are a numerical representation of the experiences

of seven students across three hagwons who, alternately, found it useful and not; felt welcome and scared; were engaged and bored; and felt anxiety and relief.

Shadow Education is a Normal Part of Life: Hagwon is an Assumed Part of Culture

“It’s always been part of my life” (Grace).

On my first day at Crown, I sat in on an enrichment class for middle school students. In truth, I had walked into the wrong room. This was not your typical test prep course. Their textbook had “Language Arts 7/8” with the Crown logo on the cover. There was a quick grammar lesson on pronouns—masculine, feminine, gender neutral, emphatic—and then a brief conversation broke out about how gender-neutral pronouns do not exist in Korean, but that Korean is starting to emulate English and creating them. The four students in the class had done a shared text (called *Forget Me Not*, by Ellie Terry) reading that the class then discussed, the way I would in my own English class. At the end of the class, a student admitted that they would probably not read a chapter book this long if it were not for this class.

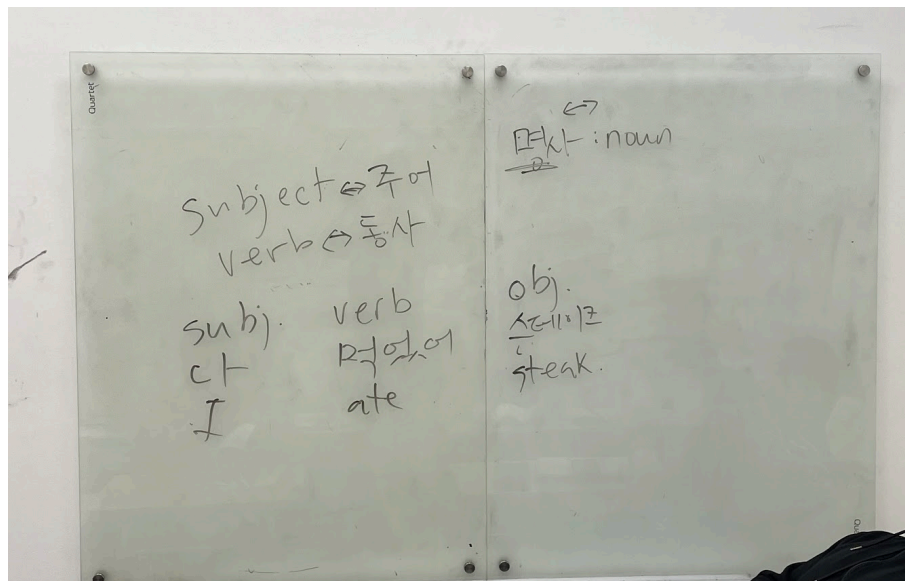
The students had all written five poems in a particular format and were sharing them with each other, giving each other encouragement, and reading aloud parts that they loved of each other’s work. Comments ranged from “So deep. He should be a philosopher!” to “I like your handwriting.” And there was some good-natured teasing of the poet who dared write about “an unattainable crush,” which prompted a panicked response: “I made it all up! I made it all up!”

Then, about an hour in, a new student entered the room, and a few things happened that I would like to unpack. First, the students—who had been sitting in pairs—decided that they would move the new student’s desk into the space between the paired desks so he

wouldn't feel like he was sitting alone. Then, when it became clear that the student had just moved to the country and spoke very little English, the teacher started to translate his instruction into Korean so the new student could understand. When the teacher let students work independently and read each other's poems, the teacher brought the new student up to the board and taught him individually (in Korean) what the subject, verb, and object are in a sentence (Figure 19), before moving onto pronouns—the lesson the rest of the class had just covered in English. He then showed the student how to use Google Docs to take notes. The student said he had been taking notes by hand at school and writing out all his assignments with pen and paper.

Figure 19

A Teacher Teaches Sentence Elements in English and Korean



During our first interview, I relayed this moment to Noah while discussing hagwon as a fixture in the Korean American community. Noah reflected:

It shows that hagwon is a huge part of Korean culture in general. To know that when he [the new student] came here that there would be a hagwon that is

predominantly Korean, and he can attend it, and he can have a Korean teacher that knows Korean... Because it's so predominant in the Korean culture, you *can* assume that.

In short, institutional help with school is woven into the community's fabric. I was told by both owners of Crown and Ace that they offer steep discounts for families that demonstrate need, though I was not given further details on how they determine need or what the discounts were. I am left wondering where that new student would have been without this place to go to. For someone who just moved here, there is a big content gap that they need to make up language-wise that schools historically have not adequately addressed (Yoon, 2009). Even comprehending math problems is still about reading and comprehending.

Furthermore, hagwon represents a physical manifestation of an ethnic community's cultural solidarity. If one of their members moves here and is struggling with the language, there is a place to go—an infrastructure to get help, not just with the language but also with occupational skills like how to use Google Docs to take notes. The teacher helped a primarily Korean speaking student through basic English grammar within minutes of his arrival, but he also helped him with clerical things like Google Docs and note taking. It was a necessary level of intervention, if for no other reason than to have his needs be acknowledged and to be not cast as an “invisible outsider” (Yoon, 2009, p. 80).

This is all to say, Hagwon is a fixture in the Korean American community. As Noah said, “If you're Korean, you're going to know about hagwon. There's no way

you're not going to know about hagwon." Grace made the connection between Korean American culture and its generative culture in South Korea:

Everyone I've known like has definitely gone to some institute. At least all the Asians. It's definitely a big part of the culture. In places like Korea, families take out loans to send their kids to shadow education.

In addition to hearing about his father's experience with it, HyeJoon saw it all around him—at school, in his family (he has an older brother), on social media. Likewise, Troy said he was influenced by the students at his school.

Emmie acknowledged that it is a stereotype that Korean American culture is known for a level of studying that feels excessive when seen from the outside. But Bourdieu (1998) distinguished between strict rules and regulating elements in a social body. Bourdieu allowed for cultural capital and value reproduction to be open-ended and individual.

For instance, Emmie said she stood apart from the fixed "tiger" parent narrative (Wang, 2021) that characterizes Asian parents as toxic or draconian:

I know it sounds rude, but it's like a stereotype. Like [we] study harder. And also like the toxic culture where parents push kids into these hagwons and stuff like that. But it's not really, though. These are just the stereotypes. I'm happy. It's not the case for me. Cause like I want to go myself. My parents don't want me to.

Still, Emmie considered hagwon so normal that *not* attending felt negligent: "I feel like it's the basics. I feel like this is the minimum I should be doing as a student at this age, at least to know that I tried a bit more while I still had the chance." Similarly, Noah lamented taking time off from hagwon, indicating that a two-year hiatus from hagwon

was a “quite a long break,” and that he needed to redouble his efforts to make up for the lost time. He also spent time imagining where he might be if he hadn’t taken that time off. This struck me as an extension of “anxiety marketing” that makes parents feel negligent if they don’t send their children to hagwon (Exley, 2021).

Troy reflected on the spirit of hagwon, and how it embodies the need to be excellent, not just as good as everyone else, and what others may perceive as toxic, Asians see as a foundational virtue:

I don’t think that it would be the same in the sense that if everyone didn’t care as much, if the proctors didn’t put as much emphasis, I don’t think that hagwon would be nearly as effective. The whole basis of hagwon is, like, it’s separate from school. It’s a place where most Asian parents are rooting for their kid to rise above school. Like, you have to learn more, right? You have to be better than people that are just in school. The whole foundation of hagwon revolves around this idea, that kids should get additional opportunities, in terms of education, than what is given to everybody else. Hagwon wouldn’t exist without that, right?

In other words, in the spirit of why hagwon crossed over to the U.S. and spread, hagwon is about more than just catching up. It is about excelling. Federal data shows that when it comes to students reaching calculus in high school, 22 percent of White students, 11 percent of Black students, 14 percent of Hispanic students, and nearly half of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders do (Loveless, 2021; Meckler, 2023). Asian Americans more than doubled the next highest demographic taking calculus in high school. This is also the kind of material result of a symbolic value that Bourdieu wrote about: Yoon et al.

(2021) explained that in Korea, calculus is viewed as “a token of academic excellence” (p. 665).

There are reasons for this that go beyond just hagwon, though I imagine it was motivating, though admittedly in a shame-laden way, for students to hear a test prep teacher point to the national average SAT math score (~500) and call it “ridiculous.” Hagwon (and calculus, for that matter) are symbolic, representing the cultural emphasis on academic excellence. To a family who is seeking to be upwardly mobile, the next step is always what is just out of reach, and once it is in reach, they will reach even higher, which has historically been how the Asian American community has lifted itself up out of the cycle of poverty in America. At some point—in no small part due to messaging coming out of America itself—this community has decided that America is the setting that provides the best opportunities.

HyeJoon said that he was proud of this part of his upbringing—specifically the part that strives for excellence. “I’m definitely proud of that culture,” he said. “I’m glad I lived through it.” Moreover, HyeJoon assured me hagwon will be in his family’s future. At the end of our final interview, I asked HyeJoon whether he would send his kids to hagwon. He replied, “Definitely.” The reasons for this enthusiasm were layered, in my mind, which speak to the cultural threads cobbling together to create the habitus of hagwon. It will teach the value of discipline and hard work, passed down from generations of test-takers. And it will give his children the best odds of wielding a top SAT score—which, as schools and applicants shift their focus away from standardized testing, is becoming an increasingly scarce and therefore valuable credential. To this community, the testing system offers an opportunity to demonstrate their value and

values. Lastly, whatever feeling HyeJoon gets when he thinks about the sacrifice his parents make daily to send him to hagwon is something he would like to pass on.

Instruction: Hagwon Classes and Curricula

“I didn’t get this one; I’m gonna listen” (Unnamed hagwon student).

The classes themselves had similarities and differences across the centers. But HyeJoon summed up the hagwon experience “academic-wise” (his phrasing) clearly: “you learn test taking skills, test management skills, time management. I go to hagwon for SAT. So they teach concepts, what to do and how to take it, and they teach the timing, and they teach the entire format and guide you through what you should do.” With such clear objectives and outcomes, the curriculum is tailored to those objective and outcomes.

All classes were run basically in the same way, where students had to take practice tests at some point during the day. Sometimes they would take an entire test in the morning; the center would grade that test during lunch; then the students reviewed that morning’s test in their afternoon classes. If the classes were in the morning, sections were assigned for homework, and they would review the homework during morning classes then apply their skills on a full-length practice test in the afternoon. In others, students would be given time to work through a section, after which the teacher would scan answer sheets during a short break, and then the class would run through corrections after the break.

During classes, teachers would ask students for questions they got wrong or needed explained, would list the question numbers on the board, then go through each one. In other words, the classes themselves are structured in a way that address mistakes, and whatever content is taught is in the process of addressing those mistakes. This can

make the classes week after week seem repetitive. Hagwons generally are not teaching math and reading in any sequential order, though they do review basic concepts that might appear on the test—again, if and when they come up. The ones I observed were teaching into test question types, patterns, and what thought processes addressed most effectively the kinds of answers that the test makers had in mind. This represented a departure from their classes in school, so the classes are also structured differently. Bray et al. (2018) might argue that this was, in part, due to the market structure of hagwon wherein the centers served at the mercy of paying clients, not so much as students, per se.

If a teacher was going over a question that the student got right, then the student generally had the freedom to turn their attention to something else; it was their prerogative. Joyce said as much: “If the teacher is going over a problem that I already understand, I don't need to pay attention. But I think subconsciously I can hear if I need that information.” In other words, students demonstrated the capacity to disengage from the teacher's instruction but listen for keywords or prompts that snapped them back to attention. I heard a student tell their friend once, “I didn't get this one; I'm gonna listen.” She had to stop their regular conversation as if her number was called at a deli counter.

This structure allowed students to pay attention only when what was being explained applied to them. The rest of the time, students could do other things, as in Joyce's case, who doodled, or, as Noah put it, they could “goof around” with their friends. Some continued to pay attention and take notes as a way of reinforcing skills they already had. It all depended on the culture of the center. As long as it was not disrupting students who were paying attention, the teachers generally did not discipline students. They were allowed to behave the way they want without threat of consequence. Once in a

while, a teacher would say, “Guys, please,” to calm down a particularly rambunctious group, but for the most part, students could decide when to pay attention or not. If they didn’t want to learn anything, they didn’t *have* to. That is the privilege of being a paying customer; in theory, you can do what you want with the product you’ve purchased, including not use it. I observed students who appeared completely disengaged, even sleeping, without anyone bothering to wake them. In fact, on one occasion, when classmates pointed out a sleeping student, the teacher said, “Let him sleep,” then commenced on a discussion of how much teenagers should be sleeping more. Even in the more militant Ace Academy, where Rebecca would cold call students and put them on the spot, the student I observed sleeping was left alone. Perhaps this is what prompted Noah to say: “If [students are] doing bad and not in the advanced class, it’s usually because they’re not trying.”

In my first conversation with Rebecca, the owner of Ace Academy, she said, very simply, that there is no “secret sauce” to what she does. And that is coming from the center and teacher who had the most structured lesson sequence I saw. For Jane, Queens Institute ended up just being a place where she was freed from having to go find practice materials on her own: “If you went to the SAT Reddit page, then there would be a whole collection of all the past SATs that were released. So you could have easily gotten those resources for free.” Furthermore, I overheard a student say she goes on a site called CrackSAT[.net]. Grammar lessons were readily available on Grammarly. And books like *The SAT Prep Black Book* explained what certain questions were looking for and why certain question choices were right and wrong, according to Jane. Hagwon simply cut out the hassle of aggregating all these materials together. Indeed, to these students, time was

a precious commodity. Anything that could save precious time or mental bandwidth was seen favorably.

Sequenced vs. Bespoke Curricula

Along with the distinct cultures of the three hagwons, the different centers had different curricular methods. Ace Academy had lectures with slide presentations and more structured lessons that presented strategies and things to look for. Rebecca would then post her slides on a private Instagram account so students could refer to them throughout the week as they studied and did practice questions on their own. Crown Academy had a textbook for their intro and middle school students that had the materials for students to follow along as they made their way through the structured curriculum. Their advanced students were more on the bespoke model. Queens Institute did not have a sequenced curriculum, instead relying on a series of practice tests to cover the various question types as they came up.

Jane—who did not get structured curriculum at Queens Institute but did make slides for the instructors at the test prep summer program where she worked—would have preferred the more structured curriculum at Ace Academy, I think. On the other hand, Emmie preferred the practice questions and review structure and did not like the lectures that Jane pined for. Of the two styles at Ace, Emmie liked the teacher that was “less lecture oriented,” she said, because “he does a lot more practice questions, which I kind of prefer a lot more. Cause even though you know it—you know what I'm saying?—this [method of teaching] is a lot more on how you can understand the question and how you could solve it.” For Emmie, the teaching she experienced at Ace was crucial. “There's a lot of parts as a student, when I come across questions that I can't really go

through by myself, and like, sometimes Google search doesn't even help me.” At that point, a thorough step-by-step explanation in real time, or explanations on how to tackle certain types of questions were irreplicable. “I think that's the most helpful,” Emmie said. “I think that's the biggest part that helps me. That clarification of questions.”

Reading vs. the Reading Section

During one of my observations, a student raised their hand and asked the age-old question, “Do you have any tips to get better at reading comprehension?”

For the SAT, the teacher said—drawing a distinction between reading comprehension and the reading comprehension *section* on the SAT—you just have to read enough of these passages so you feel like, ‘Oh, I’ve seen this before.’

He suggested looking at the first sentence of each body paragraph because students generally do not remember body paragraph details anyway. So, it’s better on the first pass to map out the passage and get a sense of where to find information later, so the student can go back and find the answer in the text quickly. If the student *were* the type of person who could read the entire passage and answer 10 questions about it without looking back, they probably didn’t need tutoring. The teacher then recalled teaching a student like that once.

These passages, the teacher explained are difficult and generally above the level of the average high school student. Making up for years of not reading would have taken longer than these students had. “You don’t have that kind of time,” the reading teacher said. Noah regurgitated this during his interview: “The only way to get better at reading is to read challenging texts, but it's about too late for any high schooler to improve on that.” Consequently, he relied on test strategies to see him through the reading section.

This moment stays with me still. Indeed, the reading level of the reading passages are likely difficult for most students without help. Joyce admitted that she needed to look up summaries of most of her school texts: “I don't understand their way of thinking behind these reading comprehensions because with my essays that I do for school, I always search up what it means because I always don't understand. I need other people to tell me what the author is trying to say before I understand. So it's difficult for me.” But those aids and resources are not available on SAT day. Likewise, Grace's tutors do not sit with her on test day. One could argue that this is exactly what the SAT is testing for—to determine who can and cannot interpret these texts on their own. But what SAT prep is doing, according to the reading teacher, is to help students *look like* they can navigate these texts, which is all they'll need, realistically, anyway.

But the disconnect between English class and the SAT was a source stress for some. Joyce's recent experience in her English class at school sums up this point: “We had to come up with our own prompt after reading a short story, write about it, but I, when I, I got like an 80 on that and I was really upset and I asked my teacher if I could redo it and she told me that a lot of people had trouble with this essay because of the ‘thinking of our own prompt’ thing, saying that I basically wrote a very in-depth summary. So that was difficult. I feel like we didn't focus on reading like the SAT does, y'know? Because we're not supposed to analyze in SAT, it's just supposed to be reading comprehension.” Thus, regurgitating what the passage said is rewarded in one space but punished in another.

Jane concurred: “You can't really make inferences because a lot of it is like, once you make it, it's the wrong answer because it's not in the text... it feels weird because in a

way it also kind of punishes any kind of like, thinking. I can't call it creativity because it's not creativity either. But like, analysis in some way. And it punishes that and just wants you to like, look specifically in the text for like, reworded answers.” However, in a way, this made the reading section easier than most people make it out to be. She surmised that many students think themselves out of a good SAT reading score: “The [SAT] English is very like straightforward, I think. I think a lot of people have trouble with it, but in my experience, like everything you can find is in the text... And right now in like school school, like high school, your English classes are more like, I guess, analytical, but it's also based off of your writing rather than like marking like multiple choice questions.”

The classic English teacher’s gripe, speaking as one, is that the SAT has a closed conception of reading. As an English teacher myself who *does* encourage analytic thinking and inference making, I can see why the reading section gave the students in this study the most trouble. What students are taught to do in English class at school—the exploration, the idea building, looking at texts from multiple perspectives—would likely hurt them on the SAT reading test, which sends mixed messages. The passages on the SAT are presented as ciphers to be cracked, with only one solution. Joyce lamented this seeming contradiction:

I'm really bad at interpreting the passage, because I feel like every time I answer one of the questions, or it's like, what, what do you think this character is actually like, their motive or something? But I always get those questions wrong because I always interpret it a different way than what the SAT interprets it.

HyeJoon noted that it was the section he focused on last because there were no hard and fast rules to learn, as opposed to math and writing, which is more objective. Troy outright

said, “reading is the most ambiguous one.” Grace summed up the difference between school and hagwon as conceptual learning versus test taking tips, respectively. Joyce said, simply, “I don't know, I feel like it doesn't use the same skills.” Despite the subjectivity of the reading section, however, the overarching theme was that the question-and-answer-choice structure of the test left no room for creativity. Alternative readings were discouraged, and students were discouraged from diverging too far from any interpretation that was not directly supported by concrete evidence from the provided text.

In the end, though, Grace acknowledged that the SAT asks questions “just to make sure you really understand what you're reading.” After all, the section is called *Reading Comprehension*, which is different from an English *Composition* course.

Reading Section Patterns

On the first day of the spring semester (my first day of observations), a reading teacher at Crown gave an introductory lecture. The teacher began by describing the overall structure of the SAT reading section: 65 minutes, 52 questions. Then, he said, it requires “Efficiency, Focus, Timing.” He reminded students that the most important thing to do well on the reading section was managing attention span and fatigue—not just on the reading section, but on the entire SAT. “You still have to do three sections after this one,” he said. “The human brain is not mean to do anything for that long. The longest is 50 minutes, with breaks.” Then, he turned his attention to reading.

“No one reads,” he said bluntly. “I don't even read stuff for my classes.” He explained that he was studying comparative literature at Columbia University. He asked the class how many of them read everything for all of their classes. One or two hands

went up. “SAT passages are not like what you read for fun. Can I teach you how to read?” At this point, he wrote “How to read?” on the board then crossed it out. To go up a reading level, he explained, it takes about a year. “If you’re at a sixth-grade level, as many of you probably are,” he said, “we can’t bump you up to 11th grade level in one semester.” (Although the teacher did not clarify his stance, it is possible that he was referring to the commonly cited statistic that most Americans read at a middle school level.) His job, then, was to teach students test specific patterns and question types so they could get through them more quickly—to be able to have a basic understanding of the passage without having to spend too much time reading it. The test doesn’t test who you are or intelligence. In a sense, “I’m contributing to inequality of the world,” he said, citing an oft-repeated critique of shadow education. He then went on to detail the different types of passages: Literary narratives, current social, historical argument, science.

In contrast, Rebecca at Ace Academy had a different approach to teaching the reading passages, which focused more on the types of skills I am used to seeing in a classroom. Rebecca from Ace Academy, though, argued that she thought teaching reading on the SAT *was* teaching essential skills. “Reading is reading,” she said to me. Vocabulary, grammar, annotating, reading for main ideas, reading with purpose, reading with enthusiasm transfer no matter what the text. She also had a breakdown of the different passage types, and while their approaches were different, the breakdowns of the passage types were the same.

Literary Narratives. Literary narratives are generally plot driven or character driven or both. On the SAT, literary narrative passages will be mostly character driven

because there is not enough time for a plot. Students should look for character's traits, relationships. Something about them will be odd. Otherwise, why would they write about it? So, if a 16-year-old goes to high school, that's not remarkable. If a 29-year-old goes to high school, it is, referring to a trending news story at the time about a 29-year-old woman who was caught trying to pass as a high school student. Or the narrator might be unreliable in some say, as in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

But these tests are also culturally sensitive, he said. The passages will be politically correct and wholesome. "They're never going to say anything negative about non-White people or women." He detailed a passage that talked about a new way of making soy sauce versus an ancient way of making soy sauce, and how the point of the passage was that the ancient Chinese way was ultimately better. (More on this later.) "Literary passages are generally wholesome," he went on. "Typical immigrant stories end in optimism." At this point, he told a personal story of a Wendy's bag thrown at someone and having "Chink go home!" screamed at him. "That might have happened to me, but they [i.e., the SAT test makers] generally don't go that direction." There was one exception to this rule, he said: "Depressing passages are generally White rich people, so it's ok." One passage he saw was where a character hated his boss, and the boss hated him; hates his house; hates his life; then at the end, thinks, 'I wonder if at least the fire at home will be warm.' "I saw no cheering red gleam," he quoted from memory. I looked up the quote, and the passage in question was from *The Professor*, by Charlotte Brönte. I was struck by the implications of a test that allows White male characters to experience despair in their passages in exchange for imposing the language of White mainstream academia onto the test-taking populace. Then, here was hagwon—both reinforcing this

messaging, but also doling out tips to, in a sense, circumvent the necessity of internalizing this language full board was part of the tension of this enterprise. I could see why hagwon stood in a liminal position between perpetuating a White supremacist status quo but also as the subversive insurgent, and therefore, anathema to both progressives and conservatives.

Current Social. The next type of passage is the “current social,” which will be where you see charts and graphs. These types of passages will be about the human mind, brain, behavior, and psychology. The teacher connected these types of passages to when stores paint clouds on the wall to sell more couches, which is a way to manipulate “our stupid monkey brains,” by which he was referring to people who fall for marketing ploys. These passages are, he explained, all about how prevailing wisdom is often wrong, and there is a lot of work being done to reveal these misperceptions. A current social passage will present a problem; then the passage will reveal that what we have been doing is inefficient or suboptimal in some way. The passages will present another way. “Otherwise, why bother writing about it?” the teacher would ask.

Historical Argument. The next type of passage is the historical argument, which generally deals with human rights, natural rights, justice or injustice; in short, “things are bad, we gotta do something.” These tend to be persuasive, and it helps to know argument frameworks beforehand. “I already know what Thurgood Marshall argues,” he said, “or Stephen Douglas.” Knowing a historical figure’s ethos might be helpful to know, as previous knowledge of a subject has been shown to help with comprehension, and that the test recycles the same handful of people.

The earliest the passages will go is pre-American Revolution, around the late 1700s. That is as far back as The College Board will go. For example, “the British are taxing us” might be a topic. If it is about women, it will be that women are being treated badly, so depending on the time, it will be about voting or working rights. Colonialism and imperialism are bad; communism is bad. “Politically correct applies here too,” he said. There are only a certain number of arguments they can present. If a passage is about women’s education, it will argue that women deserve education. “Even on the two-passage one [referring to when the SAT presents two opposing opinions on one topic—what Rebecca would call the ‘global conversation’], the anti-women’s rights passage will be a gaslighting passage. Because we love women, we will protect them from the harsh reality of having to vote and we men will make the choices for them.” The fixed political bent of the College Board (the writers of the SAT) aligned with the broader purpose of testing writ large, which, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), was to perpetrate a “pedagogical action,” wherein broader social values were inscribed through schooling or formal education. Here again, hagwon was situated in an interesting liminal position, where they taught these political stances, but at a distance. They did not *teach* these political stances for students to internalize them as in a civics lesson, but rather to *inform* students that this was the test’s stance, as a testing strategy. Put simply, hagwon taught the SAT’s political positions not to say, “Learn this so you believe it,” but rather, “Know this so you can choose the right answer.”

Science. The last type of passage is the science passage, which can also have a chart or graph. They are generally not that complex; they are mostly about research: “We thought A, but it turns out reality is B. For instance, if the passage says cocaine is bad,

that is not noteworthy. But if it says, as it turns out, cocaine can help you with the SAT — *that's* noteworthy. Or asymmetrical thoughts about gift giving. Common sense says if you buy more expensive gifts, they will like it better. Everybody thinks this... Recent findings suggest otherwise. That's what passages will deal with.”

In a scientific or narrative passage, he said, wrapping up his lecture, the test will rarely make the right answer contain an absolute like “Never” or “Always,” he explained. In a historical passage, one *could* see that, at which point he quoted Martin Luther King: “Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere.” What the teacher was trying to impart to the students was that the test has patterns and that they are learnable. And these patterns spoke to a particular positionality that the test had to take, which was that of neutrality. In a way, this neutrality aligned with an overall testing and testing center habitus, which restricted thinking that was too radical or might offend.

The Politics of the Test as a Reading Pattern. If there was any question as to whether these types of lessons were received, my questions were answered when I spoke to the students. At one point, Noah summarized the teacher's lecture almost verbatim:

I think any hagwon can really improve your test score because the SAT test as we all know is very pattern like. Which is why some tutors quite literally teach you the patterns of the test instead of teaching you how to read a passage quickly in time for you to take the SAT because it would just be too difficult, because to read fast you need to read more... For writing and reading, there's a pattern that you learn, where the first passage is usually literature, second passage [through the] fourth passage is either science or history. In the science passages you learn that there's a pattern where there's a new discovery, or what we originally thought

is now considered wrong and this is what the new one is. And for history, the range of the history that it goes into is from the Articles of Confederation, the Bill of Rights, Abolitionist movements for women's suffrage and racism within the time as well. And you generally know these things already because of 8th grade history.

When it comes to the reading section, there are only so many types of passages and opinions that the SAT is willing to deem "correct." Learning the patterns of the test—as Noah put it—helped students understand that the test is quite limited in what it will allow itself to say and how they will present those things. Learning the ethos of the test—from what information they could present to interpretations they were willing to stand behind—was a key in unlocking the test, and ultimately, identifying the right answer choices. Most of the time, this meant staying clear of controversial or even definitive stances.

During observations, I often heard advice like this: The SAT will never be attacking towards the author. The default setting for the passages is neutral. Exception: two passages may critique each other, but generally, students were instructed to pick answers that were bland and even-handed. Granted, vague, bland, and even-handed answers are not exactly inspiring, profound, or particularly insightful, but the tradeoff is that they also don't offend. When the aforementioned class actually did get to the passage about soy sauce, the teacher explained that the point of the passage was "The old Asian way is always better." He went on to explain, "So there is a beautiful ancient way of making soy sauce, then this uncle has this White people way. The test is not going to be like, 'Chinese people have been doing it wrong for 2000 years, and the White people are

showing the way.’ They’re not gonna say that.” This aligned with something Noah told me in our interview: “The SAT passage will never talk about how like an Asian man failed to be successful in whatever he did.”

In another instance, the teacher summed up a section of a historical passage where a Black author described his hardships growing up in America. “Line 17,” the teacher pointed out, “here are all the bad things that White people have done to Black people.” Then, pointing to an answer choice that said that the author might be “exaggerating,” the teacher asked the class, “Would the SAT ever say that the Black man is exaggerating?” he asked. Of course, the answer was no, so they could safely eliminate that answer choice.

These types of clues can be helpful in—if nothing else—eliminating answer choices, even if the student did not fully understand what the passage was saying. Sometimes, it was enough to know what the passages were *not* saying.

It was helpful, too, to know these idea frameworks—who *would* say what: “You should have some background knowledge on some of these speakers because it’s easier than trying to figure it out cold on the day of the test.” There are figures who come up a lot on these tests, he said, framing a two-passage conversation between Frederick Douglas and Booker T. Washington.

Frederick Douglas was indignant and angry and impatient. He’s fed up. This isn’t going to come up on the SAT because it’s too angry, but he was invited to speak on July 4th. ‘You ask me a former slave to come celebrate your White independence from other White people?’ That’s his tone. He says about Abe Lincoln that he’s a White man’s president who frees the slaves. Booker T.

Washington—the second passage—Black people shouldn't wait for White people to help because they're not going to. Black people need to help themselves through education and banking. This passage is going to be about economy.

Booker T Washington is not as sassy as Frederick Douglas, but he does have a bit of an attitude, with good reason.

Knowing this overall idea framework would make it much easier to answer questions about excerpts, the teacher explained. Other idea frameworks included, ironically, over-commercialization: “The whole country being a business is bad. There are people who think that's a good thing, but you won't find that on the SAT.” The irony, of course, is that the standardized testing industry is perceived as both a perpetuator of White supremacy—“the SAT was a racist test,” I heard a teacher tell his students; “It was supposed to confirm the intellectual superiority of White people over Black people”—as well as a money-making enterprise, preying on ambitious students for their test fees.

The political climate has even impacted the grammar section in recent years. “His' or 'her' is singular,” a writing teacher said. “But because of gender politics, SATs are trying to stray away from 'his' or 'her' answers.” The test is a living, breathing thing that continues to evolve and respond to changes in the world. In a way, the SAT itself is a shadow, too. If the purpose of education is, on some level, the pedagogical moment (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), then the test and attendant test preparation converged to reinforce a habitus of socialization and conformity. At the same time, by exposing the underlying politics of the test and its proprietors, hagwon also taught students to read the test critically and see its implicit political stance.

Vocabulary

“What is a metaphor?” (Hagwon student)

In testing for comprehension, a major issue is the reading level of these passages, which are difficult. They require more esoteric and sometimes specialized vocabulary to comprehend. Through the course of the study, the consensus seemed to be that the reading passages were meant to be 11th grade level. The following is an excerpt from my observation notes at Ace Academy, where Rebecca engaged her students in a vocabulary challenge. Students were asked to stand and say the definitions of words that often appear on the SAT.

Rebecca: “Resignation.”

Student: Give up.

Rebecca: Can you explain? Kind of.

Student: Like when you quit?

Rebecca: No. You give up but because the result is inevitable. [Pause]

“Indignation.” I am indignant right now.

The rest of the challenge did not go well. The students remained largely silent as Rebecca went through the next two words, “conviction” and “substantiate.” When the students did not reply, she said, “You see this word [“substantiate”] a LOT. If you don’t know these words, these passages are not going to be clear to you. I gave you a list, a cheat sheet, and you’re not memorizing. Put it in front of your toilet and read it as you’re peeing.” The rote memorization technique of vocabulary instruction has been a point of contention (Boulware-Gooden et al., 2007), but in the habitus of hagwon, there was no metacognitive instruction—“generating synonyms, antonyms, and other related words”

(Boulware-Gooden et al., 2007, p. 76). In line with the do-or-die ethos of hagwon and the right-or-wrong nature of testing, you either know it or you don't. There is no "try."

All three sites I observed emphasized the importance of learning and expanding students' vocabulary. Students received a list of important words to memorize. They took quizzes (Figures 20 & 21) and got prizes for doing well on them. They played vocabulary games. And students felt comfortable asking questions about words they might have asked about in a school setting. For instance, I saw one student ask, "What is a metaphor?" I have to imagine that was a word the student heard frequently at school but did not have the courage to ask what it meant until they were in a hagwon setting.

Figure 20

Hagwons Tested Students on Vocabulary



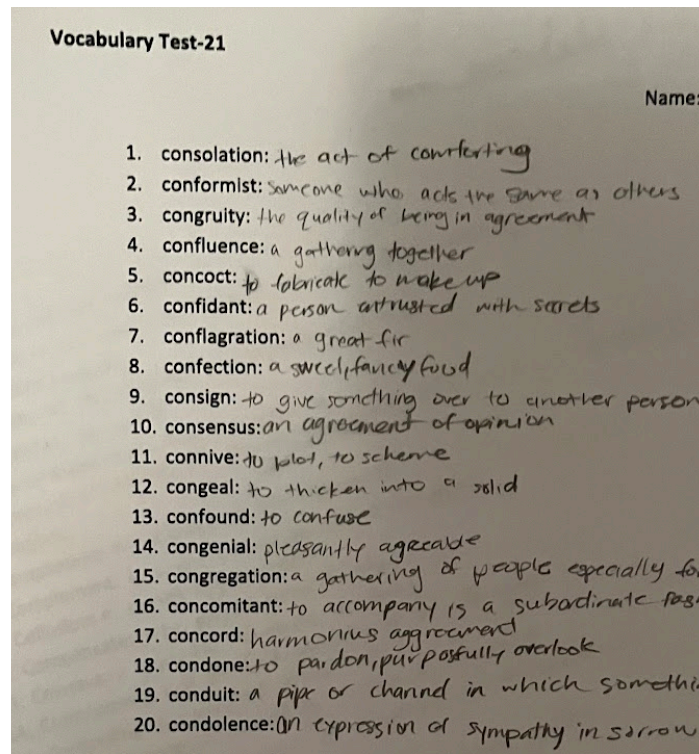
Note. This social media post reminds students of an imminent vocabulary test.

For Noah, studying vocabulary led directly to increased literacy: "But it has also helped me in terms of my understanding of vocabulary for other books that are deemed to

be hard.” For instance, he spoke about a book he read for his economics class, called *Naked Economics*, that contained the kind of vocabulary he was forced to learn at hagwon. Something he might have struggled with “was a lot easier to understand” because he had been exposed to similar texts on practice tests. “The SAT reading portion actually helped me understand,” he said. Emmie said something similar: “I’ve seen I read a lot faster. I can understand a bit faster.” Joyce specified that the passages in the reading and writing sections could be challenging for her, and that it took having to practice for the test to force her to engage with texts at this level, whereas at school, she could just look up summaries to get by.

Figure 21

Hagwon Vocabulary Test



Note. Joyce used the word “consign” from this hagwon vocabulary test in a school assignment.

Conversely, Joyce shared with me that the vocabulary she learned at test prep generally did not stick. She would memorize the words and definitions for the quizzes but then forget them. Every once in a while, she said she would recognize a word in a school text, remember that it was an SAT vocabulary word, but not remember the definition. Except one. She used the word “consign” in a paper for her CollegeNow course: “my topic was should some juvenile offenders be treated as adults in the justice system? And it was like, we shouldn't consign our juveniles to be tried as adults.”

“That’s not nothing,” I said.

“That’s not nothing,” she agreed.

Grammar

“There’s no need to think here.” (Hagwon teacher)

During a lesson on parallelism, a writing teacher told his students, “I’m looking at the previous sentence and follow through. There’s no need to think here.” Indeed, the overall message when it came to the writing section, which focused mostly on grammar, was just to learn and memorize the rules of grammar:

Reading is all about understanding context and understanding deeply; writing is more about sentence structure. Don’t try to read too deeply. Reading is about understanding and getting things right; writing is more about not making mistakes.

At the hagwons I observed, I saw structured lessons for grammar. Crown had a textbook with units on things like nonessential vs. essential and dependent vs. independent clauses. There were also workbooks, in which students had to correct sentences and explain their reasoning. At Ace, I observed an engaging lesson on subject and object pronouns that

included a humorous video clip from the popular sitcom *The Office*. Emmie’s comment about grammar instruction was representative: “Commas and semicolons, and when to use past tense and, like, it’s kind of basic things.” Though they knew these rules were “basic,” the students were glad for them. Even Jane, who did not take away much from Queens Institute, conceded that the grammar instruction was helpful:

They did go over, let’s say, in the grammar, there would be stuff like parallelism—that’s how you go about it. Or the different kinds of questions where it’s like, pay attention to subject-verb, or the tenses being the same throughout, or which one makes more sense. So in that case it was more structured, which I liked better.

Universally, the participants in the study said that they were not taught grammar in school. Thus, hagwon filled in an important gap that the SAT addressed. Noah’s comment was representative:

With the hagwon teachers there, they actually do teach everything in and out, and teach you certain skills too. Like for my middle school education, I was never really taught proper grammar rules. Instead, I was just told to write these essays: “Oh yeah, just analyze this history paper.” I was never really taught things like non-essential clauses, independent clauses, and dependent clauses, which seem like very normal and very basic things. But because I was never taught those in middle school, I never had that kind of background [knowledge]. So with these hagwon teachers, I was able to learn these basics.

Noah pointed out that learning basic grammar was the first significant jump he saw in his ELA score. He referred to the writing section as “math but applied to the writing,” replete with formulas and processes to memorize and follow. For instance, Crown had a formula

for checking for mistakes: check subject-verb, then parallel, then tense. There were ways to identify questions and solve them quickly, like when a teacher said about lists, “When I see a list, I immediately think parallelism”; or dangling modifier questions, “If you don’t identify this type of question properly, you’ll spend 5 minutes and still get this wrong. Dangling modifier question—if there is an action, followed by a comma, there has to be who is doing the action. If you can identify this, it’ll take you 3 seconds; if you don’t, you won’t and you’ll get it wrong. This is how you time save on the SAT writing section.” There were also instant criteria for process of elimination: “Period answers are generally not the answer when combining sentences.”

A moment that spoke to a larger equity issue was when a grammar question required students to know an idiomatic phrase — specifically what article should follow the word “proficiency.” Students were asked to choose between “in,” “on,” “about,” or leave the sentence as is, which had it as “proficiency of.” The instructor told their students, “You just have to know this, so just memorize it.” Native English speakers would know how to complete this idiomatic phrase intuitively because it sounds natural to them. But to a room full of non-native speakers, it presented an unsolvable problem, which was why many of the students in the class got this question wrong. There was no strategy or intuitive way to figure out this question through context or any other process. It’s simply a question of how much exposure the student has to “proper” English.

Math vs. the Math Section

“I do like math... But I suck at SAT math.” (Joyce)

The content separation between the SAT and school is not unique to reading. Joyce liked and did well at math in school but struggled with the math section on the

SAT: “Personally I do like math. Sometimes I think it’s fun. But I suck at SAT math. So it’s not fun for me, the SAT math.” HyeJoon said explicitly that the geometry learned in school was different from the geometry on the SAT: “It’s like a separate study on top of your school stuff. It’s like, just because you took geometry in high school does not mean you’re going to do well in the geometry section in SAT math.”

Noah pointed out a tension that exists when it comes to math at school versus the math section on the SAT. For him, he was already studying calculus as a junior, which is not tested on the SAT. So for him, he needed “a big refresher” on algebra content that he could not get at school: “you’re just gonna forget that stuff because it’s from so long ago.” This represents a sort of paradox—one where a more advanced student could be at risk of doing worse on a subject they were supposedly good at because of timing. But knowing this allowed him to review only what he needed to do well on the math section, which he did, posting a near-perfect score: “I know patterns for SAT math, knowing that it doesn’t predominantly go into geometry so much in detail, or trigonometry, as a matter of fact. They don’t tell you to graph the SINE graph, or how do you graph COSINE of whatever. And that is predominantly algebra, so I know that I can review predominantly algebra for the test.” Jane, on the other hand, was so advanced in math that the SAT math section was easy for her. She scored perfectly on the math section both times she sat for the official test: “the math, in my opinion, is severely behind the high school curriculum,” she said, though the math curriculum at Jane’s high school is more advanced than a typical high school curriculum.

However, it is not just about knowing all the formulas; it is about knowing WHEN to deploy it that’s hard, according to the math teachers I saw. This was a

representative quote: “There’s always a step in the math problems that requires knowledge of a formula or manipulating something that is tricky.” In other words, to quote another math teacher, “SAT is all about analyzing — not about solving.” The following quote is reconstructed from transcript notes of a math teacher’s mini lecture on the topic:

That is the nature of the SAT. There are a lot of questions that are not correlated to each other. Just knowing formulas and applying them to different types of questions—that’s all it is. In school, you go from algebra to geometry. Then there is some geometry in trig. There is a flow; one builds up to another. The SAT is not a good way to test your math knowledge. It really tests how much you studied; how much you prepared. It’s really a test of work ethic. But it doesn’t mean you’re good at math. There is barely any trig. You’ll only see sine, tangent, cotangent. Our class seems random, but that’s the nature of the test. *This* is the stuff that people get wrong. They’re never going to teach you this in school. But that’s also why the national average for the SAT math is like 500, which is ridiculous. If you do even just a little bit of preparation, it’s not hard to do well on this. I get it, it’s a messed-up system. But that’s why your parents send you here.

That’s why I’m going over these weird questions you’ve never seen before.

In other words, a math class focuses on one concept at a time: you know that in geometry class, you will need geometry concepts. And even within that class framework, each individual unit will ask students to demonstrate the skill from that unit. This explains why, after getting a question wrong and watching the teacher explain the solution,

students said things like, “I follow it, but I’d be afraid that I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

Furthermore, while at school, there has been a heavy emphasis on knowing the math concepts, the SAT has no such mandate. I heard math teachers say things like “If you don’t understand it, just memorize it.” Or, in the following exchange, the teacher discouraged a student from trying to find a “creative” solution:

[Student suggests a way to solve a problem]

Teacher: Which way is simpler? Your way or my way?

Student: Your way.

Teacher: You want it as simple as possible. Your way works but there are a lot more places where you could make a mistake.

Teacher, to class: Don’t be creative. SAT math is not for your creativity. 99.999% exponential functions are about the remaining value. Get used to this format. This is the simplest form.

In fact, it was a point of pride if a student could score high on the math section without actually knowing the math, as in the following exchange I saw:

“He is math God.”

“I deserve some credit that I can score this high even though there’s so much math I don’t know.”

“I give you credit; I give you credit.”

To reiterate a major limitation of this study, I do not have the kind of expertise to speak in much depth about the math section or what happens in math classes at schools. But students experienced the difference and were aware of it and hagwon teachers taught

under the premise that they were teaching students something more than what they were taught in school. (For more, see Kim, 2008).

Cracking the Test: Patterns Over Content

“Being able to score higher is just like figuring out how everything works rather than like mindlessly just trying to get a better score” (Jane).

I observed a writing teacher once tell his class that a good general “cheat code” is if you see a verb choice, and you see three plural options and one singular option, the singular option is probably right. This struck me as clever, and the type of tip that Troy was referring to when he said, “The best thing about hagwon is the tips, right? Like for certain questions, it's the workaround, or what to look for. Not actually how to solve it.” In other words, what students come to hagwon for is this type of insider knowledge, as opposed to expanding their reading and writing abilities.

Students were taught to look for patterns; once they took enough practice tests, they would start to see them and become familiar with them. For instance, another thing to look out for was tone:

9 times out of 10, if the tone is too formal, if it's some word that is fancy, that's not the answer. Straightforward, direct answers are generally right.

I saw a more formal lesson that talked about tone similarly. These were the teacher's notes I transcribed from the whiteboard:

Four tones in both reading and writing section:

Too informal - X

Friendly formal - O

Academic formal - O

Too formal - X

The teacher described “too informal” as language that includes slang, or how one might speak to a close friend. “Too formal,” the teacher described as difficult to understand and obfuscates its meaning: “Like, speak English, man,” the teacher said. Distinguishing between “academic formal” and “friendly formal” is subtle. “Academic formal” is the language used in a lab report, which requires *some* formal or specialized vocabulary. “Friendly formal” is more conversational, but still professional—think about how you might speak to a teacher at school.

I also saw teachers telling students to eliminate answers if they were too extreme. “Extreme answers are bad,” a teacher told his students. “In historical passages, extreme answers are ok, but answers are better if they’re less extreme. Exception: historical passages, the people will have strong opinions.” Students were taught to eliminate answers that had “always,” “never,” “all,” or “none.” I observed another teacher explain, “[answer choice] C is out because it says it is ‘too’ something to be studied. If this is ‘too’ whatever to be studied, that doesn’t make sense because there is a whole article written about it. If it was something like ‘this is difficult to study,’ we might consider it.” Another instance was when an answer choice suggested that the author was the only one with the expertise to speak with authority on the topic: “Number 34, A, that will never be the answer. He won’t ever be like ‘I am the only one who can do this, or write this, or get this.’ They will not gas themselves up, at least in this section.” This way of thinking about the answer choices was something I observed in reading classes across the centers, where teachers would encourage students to find the least offensive, least ambitious answer choice. Teachers would offer edicts like: “Words like ‘suggest’ are very weak,

which makes them better answers”; “[Answer choice] ‘A’ is a nothing answer, which is why it’s a good answer for the SAT”; “I like words like ‘possible,’ ‘may,’ ‘could.’ I don’t like words like ‘never,’ ‘always,’ ‘only’”; “‘Insightful’ or ‘aware’ is almost always the answer. How can an author not be insightful or aware? ‘Insightful,’ ‘aware,’ ‘perceptive’ are default answers.”

Noah internalized this message, too: “Just general trends like that, and generally how the questions are answered. Like for reading, the less specific it is, it’s usually the answer.” When Noah was struggling with big picture questions, he said he was looking for the best *sounding* answer choices, which is a common mistake. He was overlooking the plain and simple answers that were not necessarily profound or insightful but said nothing wrong. When his reading teacher noticed this pattern, he pulled Noah aside and told him to look for answers that were “technically not wrong” and “very vague”—“because if they’re vague, they can’t be wrong.” But if there was something stated very simply, that is “not technically wrong,” then “it’s technically right as well, so that would usually be the answer.” Jane’s process, sometimes, came down to process of elimination, after which the answer she was left with was wholly uninspiring, if not unsatisfactory: “You cross out answer choices that are wrong, and then you look at the right answer choice, but it doesn’t seem right, but it’s the only one that’s not wrong.”

In essence, the SAT had a distinct lexicon to be learned. Grace saw how important it was to be keyed in on the patterns of the SAT to achieve a good score, which presented an issue of equity: “Kids who can’t afford tutors can’t see these things; that’s why there’s a correlation between income and SAT score.” The other equity issue, and what did not sit well with me—besides the idea that students just don’t read (heartbreak)—was the

weaponization of formalized language on the test; the implication was that the test writers use inaccessible overly formal language to lure students to choose the “fancy”-sounding answer choice and overlook their instinct to choose an answer that is right, but not *profound* enough. It’s the same instinct that keeps students from speaking up in my English class, I think. I also wonder at what point does academic formal become too formal—and what happens when all the formals all sound too formal, and the student chooses the one that is too informal because it’s the only one they understood.

Us Against Them

“They got you.” (Hagwon teacher)

During a practice test review, there was a question that all the students in the class got wrong. When the teacher explained the solution, the reaction was a general “Ohhhhhh.” Then, one student said, “Why would they *do* that? That’s evil.”

“They got you,” the teacher said. “The test maker is succeeding.”

“Wait, that’s so stupid,” another student said.

“The question thinks you’re stupid,” said the teacher.

“These kind of questions, don’t they make a graph? That would be more understandable.”

“Why would the test makers consider your needs and make it easy?” asked the teacher.

“Because it’s more understandable!”

“Hey, kid. Life is not easy,” the teacher concluded.

There is a general feeling in studying for the SAT that the test is designed to trip the test taker up. Teachers used terms like “trap answers” and warned students to not be fooled by the test designers.

Emmie learned from Ace Academy that “the SAT tries to trick you. They lay out the answers in a way that every answer can be correct in a sense. It's obviously not.” As an English teacher who does like to entertain multiple possibilities, or finds insight in the tangential truth, this sentiment annoyed me to hear. She went on: “Sometimes, there's two really wrong ones and two really similar ones. What I learned is that there's going to be a direct one or indirect answer that's not going to be connected to the question *and* passage. It's tricky.” In other words, the trap answer choice will *sound* like it is answering the question, but it will say some generic sounding truth that is not connected to the passage, or it will speak to the passage but not be answering the question. I remembered this from when I took this test in high school—trying to choose between two answer choices that both sounded right. Emmie went on: “When the question asks, how does the author think about this in this paragraph, there could be an answer that relates to the whole passage instead of that paragraph. They're not always the same.” This would be an instance where an answer choice speaks to the passage but not the specific question.

Emmie also highlighted the SAT's fixation on “punctuations, commas, how they use verb tenses, like if like this certain sentence fits with the paragraph and does it correlate with the main central idea? I mean, these are basic common English like things, but yeah, SAT like goes really gritty, I guess, in some aspects.” When I asked what she meant by “gritty,” she reiterated, “There's a lot of ways that SAT tries to trick you, in a way, and they kind of twist it so that you can be like some students that don't know well

enough about how [the] SAT does it will get it wrong, you know? So, in that way, it's kind of, I guess, it's gritty, how they like twist everything.” I came to understand that she did not mean the definition of “gritty” that implies resilient or courageous, but rather the definition of “gritty” that is grimy and dark—shadowy.

HyeJoon also used the word “twist” to describe what the SAT does to the content to trip up test-takers: “And then ... it twists the content a little bit. Like you think you learned this thing at school and you've mastered it, but then the application of it doesn't necessarily match. And so you think to yourself, ‘Oh, am I not paying attention? Am I a little dumb?’” The general strategy when it came to the SAT was related to this and could be summed up in a note that Joyce wrote to herself: “Only one [answer] choice is one hundred percent correct.” The whole thing struck me as pedantic; right or wrong hinged on technicalities.

Jane countered by saying that while the reading section does try to trick test takers, it is not quite as difficult as most people make it out to be: “I'm not sure how exactly to describe it, but it feels like [the test] out to get you, but at the same time, not really because if you just look at the text, then it's there.” But I will counter that by saying that she had been trained not to fall for the fancy answer and knew to choose the answer that was not wrong, as opposed to being tempted by the professorial sounding, but misleading, answer.

It's not just reading that is set up this way. According to Grace, “SAT math is also designed to trick you. And the answers are very intentionally put so like they're like pretty common mistakes that students might make.” For instance, I began to notice that mean, median, and mode questions were tripping up students week after week. When

reviewing Joyce’s artifact log, I saw that she had posted a median question she had gotten wrong, so I asked Joyce why it is that this simple seeming topic appears to befuddle students so consistently. Her response was that these concepts were deceptively easy: “That was like a middle school thing. I know what median and mean is, but still sometimes it's like, it's really easy to make a mistake... It's pretty easy to get right, but also it's pretty easy to get wrong too, if you don't pay attention. I guess in some cases, it's like, you think you know it, but then you're overconfident and you don't read the question fully, and then you get it wrong, and then you feel stupid.” This sentiment is in keeping with SAT questions—both in the math and reading sections—engineered to test if the test-taker is paying attention to miniscule details.

I heard one teacher say that the test makers were onto hagwons and were starting to throw curveballs in recent tests that countered some of the tips and tricks they were teaching: “On the new digital SAT, they have caught on that we’re onto them... So they will add more paraphrased answers, he said.” Rebecca warned against so-called “trap answers” that preyed on past testing strategies: “You get so comfortable finding a word in the answer choice that you saw in the passage, and you pick it. It’s like advertisements. Don’t do that. Break down the answer choice. The correct answer sometimes never uses the key word.” I also saw math teachers struggle with problem and say things like, “Since two years ago, they never had this type of question,” or, “I’ve never seen math like this before. Is the test getting harder? Trickier?” It was as if the test was getting stronger as the students were getting stronger. It presented a formidable adversary, and if the students wanted to conquer this adversary, they had to think like their adversary.

What the Test Makers are Looking For

“It's like a way of making you do what they want you to do.” (Jane)

Emmie thought that taking so many practice tests helped her “pinpoint what kind of questions they're going to put on SAT itself. I think that really helps me try to understand *why* they ask these questions and how I can prepare myself more to tackle it... Kind of like patterns they look for, and questions they constantly ask.” In other words, once she started to understand the test’s patterns, it was almost like she could get into the test makers’ minds. Getting into the mind of the test-makers and, variations of “what they’re looking for” were a common theme among the participants. It was almost as if the test had a psyche or a personality the students had to figure out so they could appease it. Part of tackling the SAT, then, was reading the test like one would read a room or a person.

When it came to the SAT, Emmie acknowledged that the test has its own language and thought processes with which one must become familiar: “The SAT is like, not really, like, real English, you know what I'm saying? Like how we normally functionally use it in the real world. Hagwon class kind of gears it for me to understand what they want, what the SAT wants from me. So I'm kind of like seeing how *they* [the test makers] want me to answer it. Tricks and things like that.” Joyce talked about thinking like the test makers, too, and that was how she figured out the math section. Joyce said she developed an intuition for answers that seemed right and wrong based on if the math worked out neatly or not: “I remember at one point I got like a perfect score on math section four and I realized that because I've been working with this SAT format for so long, it's just, I got used to its way of thinking, so I knew how to approach the

problem the way an SAT maker wanted me to so it was easier to solve the problems.” In other words, she had spent so much time looking at the test makers’ work that she developed an intuition for how these questions would unfold. I noticed this, too, and was something the math teachers pointed out. At some point, both sides of the equation will start to look nice. You just have to figure out the initial trick to get you there.

What this meant for the classes themselves was that the discussions were limited because there were right answers. Thus, when I watched a student try to explain their answer choice, the conversations were not very long, which makes sense since it’s hard to sustain a discourse when the student knows they chose the wrong answer choice and they are just waiting for the right answer to be explained. It is the type of top-down banking model that Dewey (1997) critiqued, and likely a point of contention for many educators. Nevertheless, when students explained their point of view in an SAT prep class, it was only to justify their misunderstandings, since there was only one way to read these passages—and that was how the test makers read the passages. It was up to the students to read the test makers’ minds, in a sense. And they did that by spending time with their work, internalizing the patterns of the test and developing the type of intuition that comes from being around someone or something for a long time.

Trap Answers

“My tutors have, like, told me that they do that, and how to avoid falling into those traps.” (Grace)

In the following observation notes, a teacher listed the types of answer choices that could serve as trap answers—answers that might entice a student to pick it but is incorrect on account of a small technicality:

Too broad

Too extreme (never, only)

Too narrow (passage talks about strawberries and bananas; answer only focuses on one)

Only partially correct

Factually true but not answering the question

Factually true but not in stated in the passage (no assumptions)

The result of this was that the students found themselves hunting for mistakes and contradictions in answer choices that would eliminate them from being correct instead of searching for a right answer. There were multiple answers that *could* be true or even were mostly true. On an Instagram post, Rebecca posted a slide that addressed this: “FULLY supporting the answer > PARTIALLY supporting the answer.”

Furthermore, Grace pointed out that the test makers assume students will come to conclusions that are tangentially related to the text. The test makers offer students answer choices that seem like easy conclusions to come to but will punish students for coming to them: “Well, it seems like the test takers know that the kids will go off to their own conclusions. And so, I mean, it's multiple choice; it's not like it's open answer. So [the test makers] will put in answer choices that kind of—not encourage—but kind of acknowledge that students will come to this conclusion, knowing that that kids are going to get it wrong... My tutors have, like, told me that they do that, and how to avoid falling into those traps.” Note, again, the word “trap.”

In fact, hagwon teachers could predict what answers tripped up students. In one instance, Rebecca predicted that many of her female students would be tripped up by a

passage in which the main character married someone in finance because she knew that her students would assume that the character would find this impressive, which the passage did not explicitly say: “I know what is going on in your mind by your wrong answers. Girls pick answer C, ‘impressed,’ because they think she married an investment banker. You’re committing the sin of assuming.”

This was a point of contention for me. I found it bad faith design to engineer answer choices that were meant to trip up students who are trying to decipher a difficult passage and answer questions that, on some level, felt like they are meant to trick you. At one point, Noah explained that if he saw a simple idea explained in a complex way, he would cross it out, because it was meant to be a trap answer. In other words, test makers decorated incorrect answers in order to lure students into picking them and getting the question wrong.

On the other hand, if the test could defend itself, I would imagine it would say that it requires (and perhaps teaches) a level of meticulousness when reading both the passages and the answer choices that could be beneficial. Some of these reading strategies *are* significant. For instance, while reading a passage on cloud seeding, one of the answer choices that many students fell for was presented as a trap answer because the test makers correctly predicted that students would conflate critiques of the experiment with critiques of the thing being tested: “You misconstrued weakness in cloud seeding versus weakness in the *experiments* to test whether cloud seeding is effective. Weaknesses in studies are things like ‘not statistically significant or not repeatable.’” Then, the teacher had to clarify that the word ‘conviction’ meant belief. I would argue there *is* a difference between the virtues of the thing being tested (in this case, cloud

seeding) and the validity of the experiment itself, and that that distinction is significant.

Perhaps it can be seen as pedantic. But maybe what the SAT is promoting as an important skill is to read closely—an invaluable tool no matter what one would like to pursue.

There are Questions You Can and Cannot Get Wrong

“How do you get that wrong?” (Hagwon teacher)

Something I heard often during hagwon instruction was that every question was worth the same, though the questions had varying levels of difficulty. If students made mistakes on “easy” questions, they would be penalized the same as if they got a “difficult” question wrong. Rebecca told her class as much: “During the test, all questions are worth the same. Don’t get easy questions wrong. And don’t get hung up on difficult big picture questions and sacrifice the first five easy questions on the last passage.” Teachers would also say things like, “If you got 26 wrong, that’s forgivable. 25 is a question I don’t want you to get wrong”; or “Don’t get these wrong. It’s an underhanded throw”; or simply, “You need 25? *Really?*”

The new digital SAT is adaptive, the teachers pointed out. According to the teachers’ preliminary knowledge of the new test, and videos available online that are already speaking about this (Applerouth Education, 2023), getting easy questions wrong could have dire consequences—even putting a ceiling on someone’s score because a mistake on an easy question would preclude them from even *seeing* the more difficult questions. This would put an even heavier premium on getting easy questions right (and a heftier penalty for getting them wrong).

Students experienced this anxiety by admitting to making “dumb” or “stupid” mistakes. In front of teachers, they were generally apologetic or self-deprecating. In the

company of their peers, the students would laugh or tease each other for making mistakes. In one instance, a student admitted to making a bubbling error—meaning they filled in the wrong answer choice on the answer bubble sheet. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?” the teacher asked. “Actually, it does make me feel better,” she ended up saying.

Whatever the students felt when teachers would make these types of comments, I will admit that I felt on a sensory level (Pink, 2009) a bit of embarrassment. The math was confounding, though I was eventually able to recall some of the material I had forgotten from high school. I found myself re-learning it over time, but most of the trigonometry concepts were beyond my comprehension. In other words, I would not do well on this test, and I found myself thankful that I did not actually have to demonstrate mastery of this material. It made me wonder what I would say to a student who questioned why they had to learn this type of math if I could be this far along in my education without having used any of it.

Even the reading sections presented a challenge. I fell for trap answers, too, when I ventured guesses at some of the reading questions. As a professional English teacher, I found myself at once annoyed at the test makers, but also identifying with my participants’ recollections of what it felt like before attending hagwon—namely, “Am I a little dumb?” Here, I identified with Grace: I put my practice packet away quickly before anyone could see it.

Timing

Something that I heard universally that is an underrated element of the SAT was that the repeated practice tests helped students get used to the test’s time limit. It was an

issue that the teachers addressed in class often and something that came up in my participant interviews often—both pacing (i.e., leaving yourself enough time to get through the test) and stamina (i.e., developing the ability to maintain focus over the course of a long exam).

“I’m not trying to like, say it’s like really easy and whatnot, but I feel like once you get like the basics down and the know-hows and the how-to’s, it’s really all about, I think, speed, right. And then the ability to like manage your time and answer the questions quickly,” HyeJoon said. For Joyce, timing was a major factor in creating the kind of panic and stress that affected performance: “Like after the explanation, I was like ‘Oh, why didn’t I get that?’ But it’s just during the timing, the time limit, I’m stressed, and one hesitation and my confidence just shoots down.”

During reading lessons, I often heard the timing broken down to the minute: students know they have about 13 minutes per passage; they encouraged students to get passages down to about eight minutes. During reading lessons, teachers would project a timer that would count down the desired number of minutes on the projector, and have students go through passages within that amount of time. The theory, of course, was to train students to feel what 13 minutes or 8 minutes felt like, and ultimately get used to completing a passage within those time frames. “The SAT is a race against the clock,” I heard one teacher say. “If you’re spending more than 30 seconds on one question, it’s not worth it. Just move on,” I heard another say.

The timing element can turn the reading section into something else entirely. It promoted the idea that test is meant to be read and understood quickly, or you’re not a good reader. Joyce lamented, “Honestly, I suck at both analyzing and comprehension

because I'm a slow reader.” But the SAT *is* timed, so being a slow reader *is* an obstacle: “Sometimes I read too slow and I end up having like very little time for the last passage,” Noah said. Troy said that he changed the way he read the passages to navigate them efficiently:

One thing that I've tried to implement that's helped me was, [the reading teacher] gave me advice on how I read, and how I break down the passages themselves. For example, like, I used to just read from start to end, like straight through every single word. And like, that takes a lot of time; that wastes a lot of time. He recommended reading the first sentence of every paragraph. After implementing that, like, I think my accuracy has either stayed the same or improved while spending less time to read the passage.

Reading the first sentence of every paragraph is a strategy that I heard across the hagwons to speed up the comprehension process. I don't know what to call this type of “reading.” It's not even skimming.

In English class at school, on the other hand, the type of analysis Troy is asked to do requires him to read texts in their entirety—something that English teachers would probably hold up as why multiple-choice question-based comprehension is a poor facsimile for what students are asked to in their classes. Troy noted the difference:

I think it's different things. I'm in AP English language. A lot of reading at school is like analyzing the rhetoric used or analyzing how, like, the imagery of the author. And I think that's different than SAT. SAT is literally like you have to put an answer that they explicitly say in the passage. So I think that's different. And I think for something like analyzing rhetoric, you have to sit down and just read

from start to end because, like, you can't just read the first paragraph of a passage and understand the rhetoric used, you know? So I don't think it directly applies. He has developed a knack for switching back and forth between reading methods. He likened it to switching between different types of math, which is something they ask you to do on the math section: "Like, geometry or algebra. It's just like two different types of math, but like you're able to transition based on what kind of thing they ask. It's just like that." Asked if SAT reading might help him to read more quickly in his school subjects or in other parts of his reading life, he said, "Not really. SAT learning is specific for the SAT."

Luck

There was a moment during an observation when students were made to solve a problem using something called "synthetic division." While the students were working, the teacher announced, "To be honest, this is not that important."

Justifiably, the students asked, "So why are you making us do it?"

"Just because it's not that important doesn't mean it won't appear on the test," the teacher responded.

Jane, Troy, Joyce, Noah, and Grace all mentioned the idea of luck in terms of what questions appear on the test that day: "Sometimes [the] SAT is based on luck depending on what kind of questions," Grace said. For instance, when a student answered a math question using a different method than what the test called for and still got it correct, the student asked if they could use the same method every time. The teacher told the student, "The hidden purpose of this question is the discriminant. You got lucky this

time.” In other words, if the given values had been different—on a different day—the student would have gotten that problem wrong.

Noah also commented:

It's kind of just grammar that's been messing me up because some days I would get like two wrong on grammar, like one wrong, but then other days I'd get like seven wrong and it's just a constant back and forth. So it's like, I have to be very lucky with grammar, if I had to say.

When asked what he meant by “lucky on grammar,” his response was layered. The first layer was what kinds of tricks the SAT was trying to pull that day; the second layer was whether his brain was keyed in on picking up on them or not. This led to the issue of mental fatigue—or, whether he was in what athletes refer to as “the zone” or not: i.e., when players “are so locked in that they like don't even notice they're scoring all these points.” This connected to Joyce’s “good day” and “bad day” system. Unfortunately, there are days when that feeling is just not there:

I feel like when I'm not hyper-focused, I go on autopilot mode, which is kind of what happens when I'm [doing] grammar. Like, sometimes I'm taking it and I'm just like, oh shoot, wait, I got to read these questions properly.

In short, as Troy put it: “I think it comes down to luck of like, what questions are on it, how you're feeling that day.”

Yet another layer was test day conditions. Troy even mentioned that allergies were particularly bad this year. In the spring, he said, there were students taking the test with tissues stuffed in their noses because their noses were running the entire time. This

includes even the conditions in the testing room. Consider the following exchange between two students during a break:

“When people take the test and make noise, I get irrationally angry.”

“I saw you there.”

“Yeah, I studied for like five days, and I heard you shake your leg, and I was getting so angry.”

Joyce learned from hagwon that performance hinges on confidence, though this wavers more for her: “With test prep, I learned that my performance during the prep is based off my confidence when going into it.” Unfortunately, confidence is also fickle. It is difficult to gauge how you will feel when you wake up on test day—i.e., whether, to put it in Joyce’s terms, that day will be a “good day” or a “bad day.” And this partially hinged on the types of questions she was faced with.

Indeed, for Jane, the only thing standing between her and a perfect score was two or three questions, and it was luck whether she was keyed in on whether she would be fooled by a particular type of question on that particular day or not:

When I took the SAT, like for real, when I got the score, I'm like, yeah, I don't think there's any point in me trying to like get that perfect score just because it's like a waste of time because it would probably take me a lot of effort and probably a bit of luck—just like getting that right test that where I won't make any mistakes—rather than me, like, grinding the questions out just so I can get a perfect score every single time.

Jane further noted that even her SAT teachers would get questions wrong, “and when that happens [the teachers] kind of have to like make an excuse for it for like why [they’re]

wrong and why like the test is right. But you kind of realize that the people who write the test are also kind of stupid.” For all the rules about what types of questions require vague answers versus detailed answers, the tests are not one hundred percent consistent—where even the teachers get questions wrong from time to time. I observed this more often than one might think. As Jane pointed out, the excuses can range from “I don’t like this question” to “I think the answer key is wrong.”

Something else I considered, in speaking with Troy, was that these students are being exposed to different topics every week that seem to be making their rounds in the various standardized tests. Getting a passage or a set of passages on a topic that you have background knowledge in can help you get through the passages and the questions more quickly: “I kind of knew everything it was talking about... So then I can kind of like answer the questions without even reading some of it.” In this sense, hagwon students may be making their own luck—and not just on the SAT—by expanding their knowledge base, if we consider that prior knowledge increases reading comprehension and knowledge retention (Abdelaal & Sase, 2014; Baldwin et al., 1985; Johnston, 1981; Yin, 1985), especially when it comes to science texts (Ozuru et al., 2009).

What Actually Improves Scores

For those who *really* want to excel on the SAT, the weekly test and review classes were not enough. This was reiterated by teachers throughout my time at hagwons. The following is an excerpt from my observation notes, where I tried to transcribe a motivational talk a teacher had with their students:

Is one day a week enough to study for the SAT? It’s not. If this is the only time you’re studying, you’re not trying hard enough. You’re not committing enough

hours. I'd love to say that this is above and beyond and this is enough, but it's not.

There's infinite resources online you can access: Reddit r/SAT

Illegal tests that are not supposed to be published, but they're there in PDF form

If this is all the time you're putting in, it's bare minimum

Invest one to two hours every other day

Have a separate notebook of notes just for this

In short, the hagwon can provide weekly opportunities to take the test for students who otherwise wouldn't take practice tests, but that can only get you so far. Jane, who flirted with a perfect score, achieved her score by taking the tips and tricks she picked up at hagwon, and then worked things out on her own. Ultimately, as most of my participants said, it's up to you how much effort you want to put in.

The biggest improvements occurred at home. HyeJoon described what it took to get past the 1300-1400 plateau that he hit:

[People] think to themselves, 'I studied at hagwon for three, four hours [a week].

That should be enough.' And that just isn't true. You have to study back at home.

You have to review what you got wrong and make sure you never get that

question wrong again. That day, that same day, or at least the next day. I also

plateaued around high 13s to low 14s, so maybe even, like, lower than some

students. You know, as I was plateauing, I asked one of my hagwon teachers, like,

"Oh, how do I increase my score?" They said, "Do you review?" I'm like, "Kind

of." And they're like, "No, no, no, no. Do you *really* review back at home," right?

And I'm like, "Uhhh," you know, kind of laughing because, you know, I know I'm

gonna get in trouble because I'm supposed to review, but I don't. And I told them

the truth, and they're like, “See, this is why. Trust me and review at home, and you will see improvement.” And I trusted them, and there was drastic improvement.

For HyeJoon, the strategy of systematically conquering one type of question at a time was a revelation. A math teacher I observed had the same exact advice, about focusing on one type of question at a time: “If you’re getting geometry question wrong, gather these questions in a separate notebook and get used to it; recognize faster, that’s how you get good at geometry questions.”

More broadly, having a concrete overall strategy for improving was crucial—and something he wanted to share::

So, might not seem much, but to those students that are trying to get above 1450s, right, I'd say master math and writing first, and then grind reading later because if you get perfect score on math, 800, and a very high score on writing, you will get around the score I got, right, 1490 to, like, low 15s. So, yeah, that tip, reviewing at home has helped me the most.

He must have shared it with Noah, too, because Noah regurgitated this strategy when I asked him how he got past the 1400 plateau.

School is Not Enough: School vs. Hagwon

“You have to be better than people that are just in school” (Troy).

The general consensus among the participants is that SAT test prep is so different from what they are doing in school that it might as well be another subject. “SAT is very different from what you do in school,” Jane said; “It’s like another subject that I’m not

learning in school,” said HyeJoon. These feel like simple enough sentiments, but there are deeper implications here. Jane elaborated:

The stuff you learn in school, I guess maybe will help you a little on the SAT, but mostly the SAT is a separate problem. So, like, you really have to focus on the wording of the SAT and how the problems are structured in order to do well. And that's why like a lot of the times you'll see a lot of really good students do really poorly on the SAT, even though they do super well in school.

Joyce unpacked the disconnect further in the following representative quote. She addressed the separation both in math and ELA—and in ELA, not just in high school, but in a college level course she was taking:

Maybe it's just me because I'm not taking classes that revolve around what's in SAT prep. Like, for math I'm taking pre-calc, and I'm learning about cosine and stuff, but it's not too connected to this stuff in SAT prep... I took a College Now English composition class for the first time this semester and it already ended and it's just writing essays and stuff, but there's no connection to the grammar or the analyzing of the text [in the reading section]. It's writing essays. I mean, maybe it has a little something to do with grammar. But yeah. We don't really focus on that in class.

Asked if this bothered her, she said, “I don't really mind. I never thought about it. Like, English Composition is just my school class. SAT prep is a different class.” The main issue, of course, is that the test is not focused on any one topic, the way school is set up. Grace said, “School tests are easier because it's just one topic and you know what to expect.” The SAT's extra layer of challenge is that not only are all the math subjects

jumbled up, it is up to the student to know all the concepts well enough to deploy them at the right time. As I will talk about later, this is universally seen as the challenge of the SAT math section. The reading and writing sections present their own idiosyncratic challenges, which I will go into more depth about, too. But for now, suffice it to say, having to read difficult texts in a timed setting without the aid of online tools and then having to answer questions designed to entrap makes the ELA sections on the SAT a difficult task.

This is surely a major point of contention for people when it comes to the SAT: strong students, who are hardworking and studious, will sit for the SAT, and their scores do not reflect the kind of students they know themselves to be. Why should it take extra preparation to take a supposedly school-related test? Joyce pointed out the issue that has made hagwon such a hot button issue: equity.

It's unfair to people who don't have time or like money for SAT prep. So they have to do this outside of school on top of going to school. I feel like in elementary school, we were always studying for the state test. Like half of the school year, we took out of the curriculum to study for the state test. But I feel like the SAT is more important than the state test [and] we don't even talk about that at all. It's just like, oh, the SAT is coming up, study. Here's your ticket. That's it.

She took issue with schoolteachers dismissing the SAT as not important, when it actually is. Just because her schoolteachers didn't like it didn't mean it wasn't a reality for the students. Dismissing the SAT as "stupid," which an English teacher did, did not make the test disappear.

It's more like, [teachers will tell us] it's not that important. Okay, don't worry about it too much. I try to believe that they just want us to not feel too stressed out. But at the same time, it's like, how am I not supposed to worry about this? It affects our future so much.

Then, when schools did try to offer prep courses, they were woefully inept, which raised questions about why.

I mean, my school held SAT preps after school on Fridays and I went, and I don't know, it was definitely very different from my Saturday SAT prep. They were more set on giving the students sources on how to practice than actually practicing. There were so many links and stuff. We had a Google Classroom and it was just links, links, links. You should go here. Here's a website that tells you strategies to help you, but it wasn't as focused on the information in the test.

For Joyce, she realized that the SAT seems to be something schools do not want to address, and when she started taking test prep courses, she started to realize that it is because the SAT is a separate entity altogether; her school did not know how to help their students prepare for the SAT. In essence, they threw it back to the student to prepare themselves.

Teachers vs. Instructors

“If you can't understand it, just memorize it” (Hagwon teacher).

Bray et al. (2018) found that tutors in East Asia will employ “tricks” to recruit students, like slowing down their regular curriculum and saving their more advanced methods and formulas for their private tutoring clients. In a casual conversation with one of the math teachers at Ace Academy, he told me that he was always working to advance

his understanding of the test and improve his teaching because “SAT keeps changing every year; school keeps advancing.” And, as a math tutor, he had to keep up with the advancements in the math world. He recalled when it was unusual for high school students to take calculus: “I came here in 1997. If I took regular calc in high school, I was a genius. Now, if you take only regular calc, you’re behind. It’s expected you take multivariable [calculus] or AP stats senior year, which is sometimes third year *college* math that kids are taking in high school.” In Bergen County, schools are starting to catch up, but there are still only a handful of schools that can facilitate these advancements, which is why, for families, getting kids into those schools is at such a premium. In other words, there is such a big separation in the U.S. between school and hagwon that tutors need no tricks. “Most schoolteachers have no incentive to get better,” he said.

In fact, what I found was that a large portion of a hagwon teachers’ job was to teach students about the tricks that the SAT was trying to pull on them. In a strange way, this creates its own issues, which is that students who don’t participate in tutoring miss out completely on a content domain. In fact, the SAT tutors that I observed often stated that their instruction was *not* meant to create good readers, writers, and mathematicians; rather, their job was to get students to pick the right answers on the SAT. I often heard things like, “If you can’t understand it, memorize it”; “The point is not to understand the math, but to answer these types of questions”; “We know you’re very smart and you will infer, but that will not help you find the grammatical error”; and “Everything is to help you to get the right answer.” In other words, their lines were drawn explicitly.

The teachers at the hagwons I observed did not seem to need certification. The head of instruction at the Queens location was a certified teacher who taught math at the

local public high school. However, for the most part, the hagwon teachers I observed had other occupations, ranging from an opera singer, a bartender, college students, and a nurse who came to teach after completing an overnight shift at the hospital without sleeping. Others taught hagwon full time — between teaching classes, designing curricula, and tutoring one on one throughout the week. In one exchange, I heard a student ask if the teacher taught at school. When the teacher said no, the student said that she would make a good English teacher, to which the teacher said thank you, but she didn't want to have to go back to school. The opera singer told his students that if one of them were able to get a perfect score on the math section, he would sing for the class. “Oh my god, that's my new motivation,” a student responded. I later saw a video of the singing teacher on Rebecca's Instagram.

What did become clear was that the teachers at hagwon were more familiar with their students' tendencies and weaknesses and were able to address them with specific strategies to improve on those weaknesses. The personal, targeted instruction was something the participants in this study mentioned as a benefit of hagwon over school. Noah noted a moment in which his reading teacher pointed out the types of problems Noah was getting wrong consistently: “They just know. Like, [teacher's name redacted] told me, he was like, ‘[Noah], I know you always get these problems type wrong,’” then went on to tell him strategies to tackle exactly those types of questions. I watched teachers check in with each student one on one before starting instruction; they would tease them for doing badly and encourage them for improving, and even make threats: “I'm going to have [hagwon name] email your mother.”

That personal-level closeness also allowed hagwon teachers to say and do things that would not be acceptable in an official state-sanctioned setting. There were many instances when a hagwon teacher would look at a student's score and laugh. They were often very blunt: "Let's go over because you did very bad, right? Lots to go over." One teacher looked at a student's score, laughed, then asked the student, "Did you game last night?" This includes how content is dealt with—for instance, referring to Frederick Douglas's tone as "angry Black man mode"; or referring to Benjamin Franklin as a philanderer, and then sharing stories about going to private tutoring jobs and figuring out that one of the parents of the student he was tutoring was having an extramarital affair.

The casual atmosphere of some of the classes were loose in a way that I was not used to. Lunch was a constant topic of conversation. I saw teachers order food in the middle of class and eat while teaching; or assign a series of problems then leave the room to eat. One teacher, before starting class, would check in with each student and ask what they ate for lunch, then judge their answers—shaking his head if the student said that they had junk food or anything fried. Drinking was another topic of conversation. I saw one teacher crack open a can of seltzer, citing a hangover, and said, "I already feel better; I don't know if it's a beer addiction or soda addiction but even the sound of the can opening..." In one instance, I saw students pouring Gatorade into a bottle cap and wondering if it was enough to fill a shot glass. "That's not enough for a shot," the teacher answered. One teacher openly solicited students to follow his YouTube channel, citing the number of followers he needed to monetize it. Grace said of this casual atmosphere, "It was pretty friendly. The teachers were great. I know some people did get their social

medias. It was like a pretty playful relationship—like a lot of jokes and at the end, we got to learn a lot about them, and yeah, just talk like friends.”

It is important to note that the cultures of the different hagwons were different. At Ace Academy, teachers drew their boundaries. One teacher took offense to a student swearing. During a conversation about high schools in the area, one student said, “My school is shit.”

“Watch your language, please,” the Ace teacher replied.

“It means we think you look young,” another student said.

“I’m 38. I deserve more respect from someone who is 16, right?”

“I’m sorry,” the original student said.

At Crown, HyeJoon pointed out that, like any place with many personalities, “the casualness is different with each teacher.” He explained, “I think that the more relaxed teachers should, I mean, obviously having a good relationship with the students is important, but not during the lesson, maybe in my opinion. They should be a little more focused on the task, and once we’re done, they can be a little more relaxed.”

Overall, though, these findings align with research in which students treated private classes differently than they did school classes because they paid for them; and teachers allowed it because they were operating in a market setting (Bray et al., 2018). Joyce talked about being a different person in hagwon, and feeling like she could speak up to correct her teachers, as opposed to feeling like she should be silent at school, which further aligns with students feeling uncomfortable confronting teachers who are authority figures (Yoon, 2009). Something at hagwon shifted the dynamics of the student-teacher relationships. HyeJoon also felt more empowered to engage with adults at hagwon,

especially in contrast to the restrictive deference towards his elders embedded in Korean culture:

You know the Korean culture, you have to 존댓말 [pronounced jōn-deh-mal, which is the honorific formal language register that one must use when speaking to someone older]. But even with that, I always thought, I have to be quiet around them. But I feel like [hagwon] kind of taught me—‘cause there’s a variety of ages—there’s workers that are late 20s and there’s also like 50 year olds—so through all that, it taught me the level of respect and the level of communication where I can approach all ages. And I just got that and brought it straight to school and wherever I go.

His response hit home for me, too. I also thought of adults as scary when I was younger. It was at places like hagwon where these students could interact with adults—especially Korean ones—on a human level, and came to realize that adults are people, too. Adults like to laugh and be joked around with, and these students built that capacity to be able to approach people in positions of authority and feel comfortable connecting with them as real people. Students asked about teachers’ personal lives; shared photos of their pets (Rebecca would bring her dog in with her sometimes); and teased them about their height (one teacher lamented that he was tall in middle school but remained the same height into adulthood).

The shared culture helped in building personal connections between students and teachers. Noah wondered if he would have been able to connect with his teachers as much if they had been a different race. He said he did not think so, saying he would likely act more “professional about it”: “the most I would talk with them is probably like music

and sports, but other than that... that's as much as I can relate with him them." Because of the shared cultural capital, he felt more comfortable with his hagwon teachers:

It's not very strict. [The staff] are very flexible and the teachers as well, they're not like teachers you'd be like scared... They're not like tyrannical teachers.

They're like friends almost. Like, alot of them, we the students have pretty close connections to. They talk to them or they know them.

He noted that his reading teacher used "his experience as a Korean American" to make the passages connect with students. He recounted stories he heard about his teacher living in Alabama and facing not just racism but outright confusion about how to categorize an Asian person. I recall a story, too, where the teacher said he went to a restaurant in Alabama that had an unofficial White section and a Black section, and the hostess did not know where to seat him, or one where he had food thrown at him and was called a "chink." For context, these stories were a way for him to say that the SAT likely would not tell stories like this. He said that the test would address race, but they would do it in a way that avoided ugliness, but rather celebrated the virtues of different cultures. The irony, of course, was that this lesson was in the context of a disproportionately homogenous student body.

Not everyone felt the power of shared cultural matrices between them and their hagwon teachers. Emmie did not think much of the difference between teachers at her school versus the teachers at hagwon: "I kind of treat them, I kind of see them the same. They're still like teaching students. They're all still getting paid." And at one point, I asked Joyce about one of the teachers at Queens Institute, "What's his name, I think his name is [name redacted]?" "I don't know," she replied. "I don't know my teacher's

names.” In other words, it is possible Noah and his reading teacher simply got along; students do not automatically connect with teachers just because they look like them.

The Hidden Curriculum: Habitus of Hagwon and Cultural Capital

“It's just a bunch of Asian kids, you know, they're all in one room together studying. It got me thinking, ‘Oh, it's not just me. I'm not the only one putting in this work.’ The rooms are filled, right? It's everyone that's putting all this effort in” (HyeJoon).

Bourdieu (1998) wrote about habitus: “Habitus are generative principles of distinct and distinctive practices... also classificatory schemes, principles of classification, principles of vision and division, different taste” (p. 8). In other words, habitus are unseen and unspoken: “this invisible reality that cannot be shown but which organizes agents’ practices and representations” (p. 10). They are proclivities that dictate what people like and what people are like. He said about social spaces, where habitus unfold, “All societies appear as social spaces, that is, as structures of differences that can only be understood by constructing the generative principle which objectively grounds those differences. This principle is none other than the structure of the distribution of the forms of power or the kinds of capital which are effective in the social universe under consideration” (p. 32). That is, in response to the habitus of their time and place, people present material and symbolic capital within social spaces to be perceived in a particular way. His theory of human classification and demarcation was defined by *practice*.

One of Emmie’s characteristically folksy comments, in a way, is an apt encapsulation of the distinct practices define the habitus of hagwon: “It's embedded into the culture that you have to do this and work this schedule, in order to achieve the standard of what you should be.” When HyeJoon called hagwon a “second home,” he

was hinting at a place with a distinct set of unspoken rules that lent themselves to defining practices identifiable to all who know hagwon as hagwon culture: e.g., attending extra classes, taking practice tests, sacrificing non-academic activities and interests, and instead focusing on increasing one's SAT score.

The synchronicity of hagwon students and their mutual agreement to value certain cultural capital is evidence of a habitus (Bourdieu, 1998). Specifically, the habitus in the educative world pertains to the influence of what Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) referred to as a pedagogical action—the imposition of dominant cultural values through schooling. Within this constricted environment, is there room for individual identity and freedom? This is the part of the hagwon phenomenon that can be difficult to grasp, and why Bourdieu was a fruitful framework for this study. Bourdieu's habitus theory left room for a group of people—in this case, a group of Asian American high school students—to engage in a coordinated set of values and behaviors—in this case, studying for the SAT with the goal of getting to college—while also exercising individuality and free will—the students are still so different. The social response to their behaviors becomes something to factor into their existing propensities or dispositions, and leaves room for a wide variety of responses. Just because a group of students are taught the same thing and operate under the same rules does not mean they all end up the same, even in the most restrictive environments.

For the students in this study, how they were perceived by their parents, their peers, their friends, and the world at large were all considerations, and, to me, elicited a fascinating tapestry of responses that created a distinct culture. At the center of this habitus was achievement. The hagwon community has built a place where achievement is

built into youth culture. This was a result of multiple threads: the motherland, for which their parents act as a proxy. The cultural fixation on achievement then is internalized by the students, who feel a fidelity to their filial and cultural values. They create relationships with like-minded peers that sustain and mutually reinscribe these shared cultural values, while also providing moments of levity. Lastly, there existed a cross-generational camaraderie between the attendees and hagwon staff—who taught students how to navigate this difficult test and byzantine application process because the teachers and staff served at the pleasure of the students, and not the other way around, as was the case at school. They were all in this together. The confluence of the various cultural threads is a kind of *bricolage*, too, resulting in a cobbled together, but no less distinct, habitus.

Bricoleurs' Tools: Mental vs. Material

An insightful moment during an interview with Joyce happened so quickly that it was only when I looked back at the transcript that I recognized its significance. She said, "I'm not taking classes that like revolve around what's in SAT prep."

"Can you say more about school and test prep not being connected?"

"Well, uh, like in a work sense or a mental sense? Is it the same?"

Joyce made an important distinction between content crossover (e.g., SINE and COSINE) and mental capacity crossover (e.g., focus and concentration). The overall response across the participants was that hagwon taught test-specific strategies that did not necessarily serve them in any other context. What *did* cross over were the mental tools they acquired and the process by which they improved. This aligns with a distinction Grodsky (2010) made when he concluded that shadow education has marginal impact on

test scores, but “quite important in terms of its psychic benefits” (p. 475). The test-specific processes were defined by overcoming difficult text, questions designed to trip you up, and mastering sets of rules to the point where they could identify how and when to invoke them. The tools they used to acquire these—through discipline, focus, endurance with long-term goals in mind—*these* were the tools acquired for a specific purpose that could apply generally (Lévi-Strauss, 1962); and vice versa, there were tools they developed playing sports or learning a craft that served as the archetype for learning this new, difficult thing (Derrida, 1988).

What was noteworthy, at least to me, was that most of the students found themselves doing well in school. Noah recalled that middle school for him was a “joke,” and Joyce was a good math student in school. HyeJoon called straight A’s “bare minimum,” and Troy referred to his school classes as one less thing he had to worry about. Only Jane, who attended the NYC magnet school, found herself struggling more in school than on the SAT: “my GPA junior year was not it,” she said. For most, the SAT was where they needed to take their existing tools—whatever it was that made them successful at school—and apply them in the test prep field, but take them to another level of grit, resilience, and pain tolerance, even if the content itself was behind what they were learning in school (e.g., mean, median, and mode problems).

Situating the SAT as a test of endurance meant that things like endurance and persistence were bricoleur’s tools that students fortify, if not learn outright, at hagwon, which are indicative of an overall habitus of achievement. These tools and values are not unique to the hagwon community (Park, 2012), as Bourdieu (1998) would be quick to point out (Harrison, 1993). If anything, this indicates the power of a habitus that is

cobbled together from multiple cultural threads (old-world and new world; East and West) that promote the same values (e.g., productivity) and attendant tools (e.g., the ability to grind). While there may be some conflicting messaging when cultures collide, and students are left to decide how much to value one over the other (e.g., how responsible am I for my parents' financial future?), the most powerful internalization occurs when students receive messaging from multiple sources that values the same things (like productivity and the grind), it elevates that habitus—its values, tools, and capital—to unassailable truth.

Whom Does it Benefit?

“I think hagwon benefits anyone that tries” (Troy).

When I sat down with Derek Han, the owner of Crown Academy, before my first observation, he explained the role that hagwon plays in the lives of immigrant families. America is inequitable, he explained. There are parents who don't have time to shuttle their kids around to extra-curricular activities because they work, so their only recourse is to do well on tests and at school. Hagwon provides a service that helps students with that. Crown offers scholarships and discounts to help students and families in need, he said.

Though it may be universally known within this community, hagwon is not a panacea. Of the seven students who participated, two said that they did not benefit much from the test prep they attended. Grace from Ace Academy and Jane from Queens Institute had stopped attending because they did not see much improvement in their scores. But here again, there was diversity where one might expect homogeneity (Bourdieu, 1998). Grace did not benefit much because the test was too difficult and was having a negative impact on her mental health. Jane, on the other hand, was working

from an already near-perfect score and had mastered most of the concepts that her test prep teachers had to offer. “[Hagwon] just ended up being a place that like provided me with like materials rather than like actually taught me anything,” Jane said. Because she started with a score that was already high, there was not much that hagwon could offer her. “If you're bad at it, there's a lot of things that you can do [at hagwon] to improve. If you're already good at it, then it's hard to find room to improve,” she said.

Based on the data in this study, hagwon helped the participants most when they were new to the test. Just by virtue of the exposure and, subsequently, becoming familiar with the test, they improved. (To generalize this, you would have to assume that the student was trying to do well, which all the students in this study were.) Once students learned the tips and tricks of the various subjects and figured out time management, the real work was up to the student to improve. Noah said he scored a 1050 on his first practice test. Joyce started at 1000, which she thought of as average for having no prep, and pointed to test prep as showing her the most efficient ways of approaching different types of questions:

In the beginning. It's like I approached the problems with what I know [from school] but when I get the answer wrong, I'm like exposed to a new method of doing it. Because there's so many ways to do a certain problem, but different ones take longer and depends on the person whether you're good at that method or not. So I got used to the way that was like the most efficient to answer the questions, and I think that's what improved my score.

This seemed to be a pattern: i.e., scores in the low-1000s that, after hagwon, would hover in the 1300- to low 1400-range. This was the most common score range I overheard when

students would compare scores, though that could be because those are the scores students are comfortable sharing out loud. It's possible there were other students like Grace who kept quiet when everyone else was sharing their scores in this range. It could also be why the scores that were shared in the study fit this range, whereas Emmie and Grace withheld their scores. Nevertheless, when I asked about this plateau to those who did share their scores, most of my participants identified with it. Noah dealt with it, as did HyeJoon. Joyce and Troy were still in it.

Even HyeJoon, for all his positivity about what hagwon did for him, admitted that it can only do so much:

I did go to hagwon and I did get the help from the teachers there. And obviously, it helped a lot. But you know, pretty much what they give you is like a more, what should I say, like, you don't have to put in the effort to research yourself, and they just give it to you, right? And obviously, that's a great help. But what I'm saying is, as long as you get the information for each subject, about three, two to three weeks is more than enough.

HyeJoon, however, was speaking from his experience; he had unusually high self-discipline. The other type of student in this study who benefitted from hagwon is the one who didn't have that type of discipline. In addition to those who are not familiar with the world of testing and wouldn't know where to begin, hagwon provided structure to those who needed a regimented work environment—because they would not otherwise have had the motivation to put in the time on their own.

“There's no way I'm going to improve and no way I'm going to be motivated enough to study for the whole SAT by myself and take the time to do that,” Noah said.

Similarly, Joyce said, “For me personally, without being obligated to finish work or something, I wouldn’t practice for the SAT otherwise, so, being in like an institutional environment helps me work. Like to be under pressure.”

When asked to describe that pressure, she replied, “You’re assigned tasks, and you do them. If I assigned myself tasks, I wouldn’t do them because I don’t respect myself, but I respect teachers.”

In other words, part of what makes hagwon so important for Joyce (and students like her) is that she doesn’t have the discipline to do this work on her own, starting with gathering materials, or knowing where to even get them. She knew what she needed to work on, but also knew that without hagwon she was not likely to do it. For instance, she listed statistics as something she needed to look over. When I asked if she planned to, she responded with a laugh, “I hope so, but like, knowing me, I probably won't.”

Like HyeJoon said, after a few weeks, most hagwon students will have seen everything they need to know. But hagwon was more about repetition in an environment where they are forced to practice.

Emmie reaffirmed the idea that hagwon’s built-in structured work time—especially for someone who has trouble with discipline—was a major benefit of hagwon: “It forces you to learn in that space, that time, instead of—when you're not in Hagwon, you kind of have to make yourself your own structure and what you want to achieve throughout the day. I feel like Hagwon really just kind of compacts it all up.”

“What does it help you do?” I asked.

“Um, not procrastinate, first of all. When I get home and we're in the library, I get distracted a lot. But when I'm at Hagwon, there's teachers walking around, supervisors that tell me, I should do this, I should do that. So I think it's more structured.”

“And you think structure helps?” I asked.

“Yeah, a lot.”

Joyce ultimately made decisions about when to take the test based on the idea that she needed the structure of hagwon to keep her disciplined and sharp: “My English teacher said I should wait until November, but I said no to that because my paid SAT classes at NY Academy end sometime mid-June and I don't think I can keep up practicing until November by myself so I canceled that option.”

After all, we have to remember that hagwon students are teenagers with limited bandwidth: “Like it's four hours of practice a week which is honestly not ideal—I wish I could practice more—but it's hard to be motivated after so many other things to worry about,” Joyce said.

Working For Long-Term Goals

“If I don't work on it, well, I can't be sad and depressed if I get a bad score on my SAT”
(Noah).

Focus, Endurance, Confidence

Indeed, as HyeJoon pointed out, “it's not the work itself at hagwon, but the entire habit. A habit that fixes into your body and mind.” He added, “If there is any [crossover between school and hagwon], I'd say the study focus I learned from SAT applies to school.” Noah added that it helped him with concentration, especially when it came to reading and sitting through classes—both at school and at hagwon—which require

extended periods of focus. The lessons that used to feel long now “go by like that.” Grace said that she gained the ability to endure: “After SAT prep I've built a lot of endurance. Like, every day we had to take a test for three hours and then afterwards it was three more hours of review—every day for like two weeks. And, I don't know, I guess nothing really phases me like that anymore.” That endurance was key.

At Ace Academy, these life tools were key to instilling students with something more than just SAT knowledge. The SAT knowledge was the content, but the real knowledge takeaways were about process. Rebecca told her students about an Ace alum: “I had a student tell me that she got perfect on the reading. She studied for a year and a half. SAT is like exercise. You're not going to shed the weight in one session.” The ability to sit with this difficult task and master it was just as valuable to students like HyeJoon, who talked a lot about mindset and good habits. Then, once they were able to build those capacities, came results, which cascaded into further desire to do well.

Moreover, HyeJoon pointed out that the mindset that helped him improve in test prep is the same mindset that helps anyone get better at anything—in his case, sports: “That grind. Like I play sports too. Same application—the mindset is the same. I know have to work out to get better. That's part of what helps me in life.” That meant knowing that improvement is not a straight line. It was important to know that learning that initial struggle is part of the process, and like anything else, “it IS easier once you get it” (unnamed hagwon student, from observation notes).

All the students in the study reported score fluctuation and plateaus. A hagwon teacher I observed talked about what it meant to improve one's score on the SAT: “It goes like that. Goes up a little bit. Stays like that. Dips a little bit. But eventually it

climbs. It's never going to be a straight line up. The key is: Are you repeating the same mistakes over and over or different types of questions each time?" This teacher was talking about something we can transfer to all endeavors. The learning trajectory is the same, in other words, in every domain. Improvement and learning are not linear processes. There are ups and downs along the way, but over time, with the right instruction and deliberate practice, the broader trajectory is upward. That's the learning process. Thus, focus, endurance, and the confidence that comes from competence and achievement are not only tools that student-bricoleurs acquire at hagwon; they represent inherited and reproducible social capital within a distinct habitus—to be shared and passed around from, say, the reading teacher to HyeJoon to Noah and so on. Such is the nature of value inscription in habitus through social capital exchange. And when that social capital is infused with approval from all cultural threads available to the student, these social capital become inescapable and inextricable parts of the habitus of hagwon.

Prioritization, Time Management, and Sacrifice

"I can't take every little thing into account. It's impossible" (Joyce).

When Joyce got a bad grade on an English final and had to calculate if it was worth the time to revise it, she went through her own rational calculation to determine the order of importance. She called prioritizing a "skill":

I think the first time I really realized I like got this [prioritization] skill was during the beginning of this year [her junior year], 'cause I was practicing for SAT prep, like for my March exam, but I got a really disappointing score on my English final. I got an 82 'cause I didn't really understand the prompt well. And I was really upset. And I even went to like the office hours Zoom call with my English

teacher, like talking about how I can get a better score and redo it. But I was stressing so much over SAT prep. I was like, I cannot add this on top of that. I just need to settle with my score and deal with it. Cause I can't focus on this right now. Not redoing the English final felt like a “missed opportunity,” she said, but in the end, “If I redo this, even if I get a hundred, it's going to bump my grade up a little bit, but it's not worth me getting like a 1200 on the SAT ‘cause I practiced so much for this. It's just more important right now.” She credited multiple burnouts to finally being in a place where she could let go of her perfectionism and manage her time in a way that preserved her own mental well-being. “I knew it was better for me because I would break down if I had to redo my English final and study for the SAT. Because English and reading is already not my strong suit. So yeah, I had to like break away from my perfectionism.” Thus, doing a sort of triage and prioritizing the mountain of tasks she has at any given time was a skill she had to learn—and learned the hard way, unfortunately.

“Do you think long-term that could be a good thing? Like learning how to do that?” I asked.

“Prioritizing? Yeah, definitely,” she said. “I can't take every little thing into account. It's impossible.”

“And I hate to break it to you,” I said, “but like welcome to the adult world. It's reality. I have like a hundred and something papers to grade and this [study], but I have to manage it. Not to like mitigate or compare or whatever, but I think it is a skill you're learning.”

“Remember to take breaks,” she advised.

I laughed. The student had become the teacher.

Noah shared that he wanted to hang out with friends or sign up for sports, but couldn't because of the obligation to hagwon:

It's still a big commitment. There are days when I want to instead to hang out with my friends, or for example, I wanted to go and sign up for things like club volleyball to practice sports, especially for the college that I want to go to because I want to participate in their sports teams. But I was not able to sign up because they only have practices on Saturdays from around 12:30 - 1:30 and that was just impossible for me cause that would mean I would have to constantly miss hagwon.

When asked if it bothered him, his response struck me as indicative of the mindset where the test trumps all—a virtue that is fostered not just at home, but in his immediate friend group:

I sometimes do get bothered by it. There are times when my friends are like oh, let's go hang out and like, I'm sorry, I have hagwon... And I'm saying, oh man, ok, I'm just sitting here studying all the time, my friends are having fun, but they probably have gone to hagwon before, because a lot—not all of them—some of them, have good scores already, cause they took it freshman or sophomore year, or even like, the November or December tests, they did very well on those.

Note that his assumption about his friends is not that they were not putting in the same work as he is, but rather that they had probably already put in the work, which is why they got to enjoy some leisure time that he didn't. It further solidified in my mind the kind of social capital that is valued and rewarded in this community. Emmie commented that her obligation to hagwon prompted her to go on a self-imposed social media ban and

affected her ability to productively contribute to a group project, for which she had to apologize to her groupmates.

Then, once a ceiling is hit, Jane and HyeJoon both figured out that they had outgrown hagwon. HyeJoon said, “I feel like at a certain point, you don’t really need hagwon anymore. Say you get to the level where you’re constantly getting 1500s, at that point, I think it’s fine to say you can take a break from hagwon and when the test does come close where you have to take it, you can probably study the test on your own or just refresh the teachings that you learned from hagwon.” They were then free to focus on other things, like school grades, extracurriculars, and community service.

Grace’s case demonstrates the evolution of shadow education. There are now many ways that hagwon can help students during the college application process, especially as more schools become test optional. Grace had individual tutors for her school subjects and Rebecca helped her put together a decorated college application that included art awards, writing awards, publishing credit, strong grades, and participation in this research study—and likely no SAT score (as of this writing). Rebecca suggested that Grace drop marching band if she didn’t like it and found ways for Grace to optimize her interests (i.e., art and writing) in ways that carried weight in the eyes of potential colleges. Writing as a hobby is one thing, but having that writing published and winning awards is another.

I share Grace’s case here to say that prioritizing and figuring out the best use of time had entered the domain of shadow education—something Noah did on his own when he quit swimming competitively and instead turned it into a service opportunity that could be listed on a CV. Grace acknowledged that she would not be where she is

without these structures—almost to the point of feeling some guilt when she thought about students who didn't have this.

Social Space: The Human Connection

All of my participants said that at a certain point, they heard their peers talk about attending test prep, seeing their scores increase, and feeling that they had to go, too.

Troy's quote was representative:

Right now, like we're all trying to prep for SATs. And I tried to study independently for the SAT, but my score wasn't really improving. It wasn't satisfactory. So then I was like talking with friends and they're like I went to [Crown], so then that's how I learned about it. And that's when I was like, okay, maybe I should do that.

The one participant who did not sit for the interviews, Olivia's one open-ended survey response was telling. She liked hagwon, she said, because it helped her improve her score and that she got to be in class with her friends. What I found was that in addition to the adults in the building and their parents at home, the cultural transmission that occurred on the ground *at* hagwon was largely due to peer influence. In Bourdieusian (1998) terms, we might call this the mutual inscription of habitus within a social space (see Figure 3).

This mutual inscription manifested itself in a few ways: (1) in some cases, provided the impetus for wanting to attend hagwon in the first place; (2) it made academic achievement part of the social fabric of a youth culture; (3) for some, it made hagwon not only bearable, but fun; (4) for others, the constant comparing and tacit competition was a source of stress and anxiety. Grace summed up the tension that came from being around like-minded peers: "It made me want to be a better person being

surrounded by such good, hardworking people. But also it's easy to get caught up in comparing yourself.”

Noah said, “Especially the friends there that I’ve made too, them being ambitious as well, and them being easy people to talk to, it doesn’t make hagwon so much of a drag. It’s fun, but it also helps you get your serious work in. So it’s like a healthy balance.”

More broadly, he spoke about shared culture as an instant connection:

If they're Korean, you can talk to them a lot about like Korean foods they've had, or specific places. Like most Koreans have gone to church. And you can talk to them about church. Like, oh, did you ever have like that one kid in church who just like doesn't shut up? Or they usually all play an instrument. It’s just very easy stuff. All Asians have something in common.

Indeed, my observations bore this out. Students who were meeting for the first time were able to make instant connections based on shared interests, discourses, and social connections.

It seemed like everyone was one or two degrees removed from each other. In addition to test strategies and classes at school, hagwon attendees talked about non-academic topics like pop culture, presenting as Korean versus American (or “FOB”-y versus “White-washed”), church and piety, who people knew and where they went to college, and other typical teenage fare (e.g., junior prom). Troy referred to the lunches he had with his classmates as the highlight of his week. He said he exchanged social media information with many of the friends he made there and if they were ever to run into each other again—maybe at college, who knows—“because we've already built a friendship there. if we see each other, we’d just like click, you know.” This social element made the

whole enterprise more than bearable and identifiable: “I think that the environment at hagwon that I've seen is also very representative of how I am. I like that mix of getting the education and learning and also fooling around... I have to say it was pretty hard, but then again, it was very fun,” he said.

Academic Achievement as Part of Youth Culture

A representative quote, from Emmie, described the camaraderie that formed from shared struggle to do well on this difficult academic task: “It made it more tolerable because I guess I'm not the only person who got this wrong. I guess I wasn't the only one who really didn't get this because it made me feel more like, I guess I'm not the only one. I felt a lot closer to each other. And we talked a lot more. We were a lot closer.” Emmie and her friend would compare answers and strategies. In one instance, she recalled discussing a particularly difficult question, only to find out that “we were both wrong. So we kind of laughed at ourselves. I was like, am I really learning?” There was a solidarity to getting the questions right or wrong together—for the most part. The comparing of scores was a source of anxiety for Grace, who did not participate in this practice.

This camaraderie was something I observed, too. Students would share answers and compare methods to try to help each other, even if the teacher was at the board explaining something else—since, often, what the teacher was explaining did not pertain to everyone. And if one person could help the other, the metric was clear: the person who got the question right would explain how they got to their answer. “I was open to what they were thinking about, like, as they read the passage. It was a different view, so that was kind of nice,” Emmie said. She referred to the culture of friendly competition among

her classmates: “Interacting with them kind of makes me see where I am among my peers. And they helped me sometimes.”

Their lunch breaks were devoted to discussing the test they just took: “At lunch, we’ll talk, like, ‘Oh what do you think about this question; it was hard or not?’” HyeJoon said. Troy concurred: “I would ask around like, what would you do for this one? What would you do for this one? And I think that like, kind of sparked that peer interaction. So I guess I would say I added to what was already an existing environment, like culture at hagwon.” I observed groups of students sit together and talk about their school schedules, what AP classes they were planning on taking, funny things that happened at their schools, and college aspirations.

The following exchange between two students during a study break was representative and insightful:

Student 1: What’s your dream school?

Student 2: Georgetown.

Student 1: Why Georgetown?

Student 2: I don’t know I just like it.

Student 1: I don’t have a dream school, so I don’t get disappointed.

Although not articulated, it is evident that Student 2 picked Georgetown for no discernible reason other than a feeling, likely having to do with its reputation. There was no *real* insight or concrete knowledge being exchanged here. And even in the case of comparing test scores and test taking strategies, there was some deeper alignment happening in the classrooms and surrounding spaces. There was a coordination of test knowledge, sure, but also a tacit understanding that they both wanted to do well and

achieve some modicum of prestige—one that Student 1 would not dare presume—which is why they were bothering to ask about these things in the first place. Thus, I saw two disparate reactions to the same habitus.

Stress and Anxiety

“Happiness is banned in your class” (Student to hagwon teacher).

For all the camaraderie that hagwon may have fostered in my participants, an undeniable part of hagwon culture is the stress and anxiety these students felt as they strove to improve their SAT scores. The constant comparing of scores and where the other students stood in their college admissions process (e.g., number of AP classes, extracurriculars, GPA) was a source of anxiety and pressure to keep up. All my participants talked about comparing themselves to their friends and classmates (both at school and hagwon), which caused them to feel “depressed” (HyeJoon), “dumb” (Joyce), or have actual panic attacks (Grace). HyeJoon’s quote was representative:

As a sophomore there were friends around me that were getting 1400s as sophomores, and I’m here taking the test at 1100, like, that is NOT enough. That was my main motivation. And obviously I was, I don’t wanna say depressed, but I don’t know how else to describe it. I was kind depressed, like, am I not enough?

Emmie wondered if all this pressure was healthy. “It’s such like a small fraction of what you are and you should be, but it’s such a big part of where you’re going to go and how you’re going to be academically and socially,” Emmie said. Emmie felt herself comparing herself to others, too: “I had a friend who was like, “I can’t hang out,” and they broke their schedule Monday through Sunday. ‘I go to this and this Hagwon and I have this whole schedule lined up, and so I can’t do this, but I still have my practices after.’ I’m

like, dang, that sucks. That really sucks. I feel really bad for them. I'm like, why are you going through this?"

The test's high stakes nature affected performance on testing days, too. Joyce pointed out that the pressure would make her question even her most basic knowledge, e.g., "Two plus one is three, right?" She also struggled with charts, which she normally finds easy to interpret: "Honestly, it makes it gets me really frustrated because like it's such an easy problem if you just think about it, but under the stressful environment you skip over those little details that you wouldn't think about normally. So it's frustrating." This exchange between a teacher and student from an observation at Crown was representative of the uncertainty that comes from pressure played out in real time:

"I knew it was A but I put D."

"So why did you put D?"

"I doubted myself."

On the other hand, Grace, who struggled with anxiety, used the word "relieving" to describe shadow education. She admitted that when it comes to taking the test, it lowers her anxiety because "I've been through the process, so I know what to expect now." In fact, she even wondered if she was *too* reliant on her tutors to help her with schoolwork; she could find stress even in the stress relief. Emmie wondered the same thing. When comparing herself to her peers, who seemed to be able to tackle their classes and test prep on their own, she said, "I feel like I failed. I feel like I have to reassure myself in hagwon. Secure myself, yeah." In other words, hagwon was a crutch, but a necessary one.

Certainly, part of the discourse centered on hagwon is that it exacerbates stress and anxiety, and any attempt to normalize or perpetuate the benefits of shadow education is only feeding into a toxic system that does harm to young people's psyches. But in speaking to students, hagwon was also a place that helped them alleviate some of the anxiety that comes with uncertainty.

Joyce, who reported struggling with anxiety and depression, also reflected that test prep *reduced* the stress around the SAT. To start, the high-stakes nature of the test was a source of anxiety, so it felt strange that she was offered no feedback between attempts:

The questions I get wrong [at SAT prep] have more weight on it than school...

For school, it's like less pressure. Cause if I get like a question wrong, I can just do better the next time. For SAT, I can't really do that. And I can't even see what questions I got wrong, which makes me really mad ... because I don't know what I need to work on. And it's kind of like, here you got your score, deal with it.

In other words, each SAT question had on it the weight of success or failure. So it bothered her that higher stakes tests did not come with feedback, which, I have to agree, seems like a paradox—a cruel one, counter to the spirit of educating. The feedback she was looking for was provided at Queens Institute—the review sessions after practice tests provided her the opportunity to improve that the test makers did not afford her.

Furthermore, those prep classes gave her the structure to practice weekly, which she probably would not have done on her own:

My motivation to do this prep work is to not disappoint my parents or the teachers. I feel obligated to do the work. And that obligation helps me practice. Or

find the motivation to practice. So, without that authoritative figure to tell me what to do, I'd be more stressed.

In addition, she said it offloaded the need to gather the right materials for herself, to even know where to start, which is often the most difficult step (starting, that is):


If I didn't have like prep, it would make it even harder to start. Not only would I be worried about understanding the content, I would be worried about, is this the right content I'm studying? Is this the right amount of time? Is this the best way to do this problem? And there's so many different sources online, like, which one should I listen to? Should I listen to all of them? And do this 24-7 to actually get a good grade? Like if I have no guideline, it's all over the place.

In other words, part of hagwon's appeal was that it curated the right materials and sequenced them for students, so they didn't have to. It was this service as much as the expertise that students were paying for. And resources were not just limited to test content. Part of what made hagwon helpful was that it provided information and answered questions regarding the byzantine college admissions process. Test prep and the expanding number of peripheral services are indicative of a larger social fabric, especially for students who sense the imperative to achieve. The advertisements running in my school's student-run newspaper are touting not only test prep, but also a wide range of tutoring services, family orientation and liaising, or in one case, simply increasing an applicant's odds for "admissions to the best colleges in the U.S. than the general applicant" without further detail into what services they provide (Figure 22).

Figure 22

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Note. These advertisements, which ran in my school newspaper, indicate the expanding variety of shadow education services available.

Mentorship re: the College Application Process

An important thing to remember is that for the participants in this study, the SAT was not the end goal; it was part of a larger process that ends with admission into college. For the students in this study, who were still early in the process—i.e., had not started the application process yet—they were navigating a complex and nebulous process. So hagwon was a place where they could ask questions and get guidance. This is especially true, Noah said, for students who don't have access to this knowledge at home or at school:

The hagwon teachers there, they also have previous experiences of colleges. That's huge for kids that don't have older siblings who've gone into college already, or mentors that they're close with at school. And yeah, I just think that hagwon overall, it's for people that want to go to a good college and are ambitious about college.

For instance, a tip that was widespread was what's called a "superscore," where students were encouraged to send their best math score and their best ELA score from two different test dates. Students who were nervous about doing well on one section and not the other were told to focus on one section at a time. In the following exchange, a teacher explains this to a student, who is hearing it for the first time:

Teacher: At least get the verbal section done, then superscore with math later.

Student: This is the first I'm hearing of this.

Teacher: You write the best score on each, then when you get accepted, you send your score reports, but it's not until after you're accepted. Except Georgetown, who requires a whole score. But as long as they see an improvement, it's fine.

Students were given strategies to optimize their SAT score to the point where students studied intensely for one section, took the test, then studied for the other section, took it again, then combined the best scores from each sitting.

“Is superscore seen as less than if you do well on one test?” a student asked.

“9 out of 10 successful students superscore,” the teacher replied.

They went on to explain that the ACT superscore is “no good,” because the ACT is a composite score. By “composite score,” the teacher meant that the ACT score is one number, between 1 and 36, and is an average of all the sections (English, math, reading, and science). The ACT sends a full score report no matter what, so if you superscore, you just look like you couldn’t handle the test in one sitting. (How that is different from an SAT superscore was not explained.)

Then, there were test day tips. The following was representative of advice for what to do leading up to the test:

When you’re taking the test, the day before, don’t eat anything weird. Don’t do anything different. You may wanna get an energy drink. Preworkouts, not gonna advise that. You can try to cram but there’s no reason; you’ve studied this for a very long time. Cramming does not help on the SAT. Be natural and be confident.

Do not second guess your answers, OK? Don’t eat like fish, milk, anything that could be bad. Get a good night’s rest.

On the other hand, Rebecca advised her kids to scroll through her Instagram and give themselves a refresher on some of the tips on how to handle the passages. The test is something that is discussed in this community. They advise their kids on what they should and should not do, and it is not just limited to test day. With all the change and

uncertainty surrounding the impending changes to the SAT, students look to these professionals to guide them on what they should and should not prioritize. And they are sometimes brutally honest in ways that teachers are not allowed to be—ethically and, potentially, legally:

“If I have extra time on the math, can I just go back to other sections?”

“Depends on if your proctor is an idiot. I’m not here to be your moral compass. If you can cheat, go for it. But if you get caught you can get your scores cancelled.”

This teacher went on to say that there are proctors who are active and vigilant—they will walk around the room checking to make sure students are not cheating. But others will sit in front of the room barely awake, much less paying attention to what section the students are working on.

“Optional” Does Not Actually Mean Optional. Another question on students’ minds was about more schools adopting test-optional and test-blind policies post-pandemic (Camara & Mattern, 2022). In theory, making the SAT optional addresses the issue of equity and demonstrates a school’s willingness to consider the whole student (Frankel & Kartik, 2023; Furuta, 2017)—assuming, of course, that colleges are true to their word and students are not penalized for not submitting an SAT score. The students in this study were not convinced that that would be the case. Even the idea that those who *do* submit a high score are rewarded for it is enough of an incentive to continue to work towards optimizing their test scores. The assumption is, though, that it’s only human nature to assume that if a student does not submit an SAT score, it’s because they did not do well on it. Noah stated this sentiment clearly in his interview:

My parents incentivize me. They're like, oh, you said you wanted to go to a college like Babson or Villanova, do you think you can just get in without an SAT score? I mean, I know it's optional sometimes, like in other colleges, but realistically speaking, there are going to be other kids with perfect SAT scores and they're probably applying to the same colleges as you, and you're going to have to go against that. With an optional SAT score, that most likely seems like you never did good on it in the first place.

Put simply, the competition is such that not having an SAT score compared to someone with a high SAT score was seen as something that might compromise their application. HyeJoon talked about it similarly, and thought of the SAT as another extracurricular (EC):

I do hear a lot of people saying that a couple years in the future, there's already people saying it's test optional. But I strongly still believe that it's like having another EC [extracurricular], and like for scholarships, if your SATs are not at a certain rate, they'll only give this much or this much percentage. So, there is this direct cause and effect with the SAT score. Like, say everything else is the same, but my SAT is, say, 1550, and this person doesn't have it? I believe then that it's a strong point for me.

In other words, students look at a high SAT score as another credential to put on the application to separate themselves from the pack. The thinking is that all things being equal, the SAT score could be the difference—not just for admission, but for financial aid, which can impact where they can or cannot actually matriculate even once admitted.

It is all a part of the “rational evaluation of their chances for success” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 76).

The students took their cues from their teachers and parents, who contradicted the idea that a school would not be interested in a standardized test score.

Student: I heard certain schools are SAT optional.

Teacher: NO. Look it up. They still look at scores. That was a COVID thing. Only about 2-3% get in without SAT scores.

Student 2: I’ve heard that they change it sometimes.

Teacher: They do. MIT changed back.

It is difficult to keep track of all of these policy shifts, which is why a place like hagwon can serve as an information center that can guide students through the process and answer their more pressing questions. I don’t know where this teacher got that 2-3% statistic because a quick Google search proves it to be inaccurate; at the University of Virginia, 26% of admitted students did not submit SAT or ACT scores; at Boston College it was 10% (Visé, 2022). For what it’s worth, test optional policies have been associated with increasing applicant pool (Saboe & Terrizzi, 2019) and enrollment from Pell Grant recipients, women, and historically underrepresented minorities (Bennett, 2022).

College Life. Teachers also offered advice about what to do once students got to college. The following advice was given to a classroom full of students:

Get to college and get involved on campus. Interact with your professors, join clubs, be active with the faculty. If you treat college like four extra years of high school where you just go to class, do some work, and that’s it, you will get

nothing out of it. For you introverts who are quiet, I'm sorry. It's not enough to just go to class and that's it.

This struck me as good advice. But it also showed that students are curious about these things. Sometimes, it seems, hagwon was the only place where they could ask these questions comfortably without feeling like they are taking up too much of the class's time. In mainstream spaces like school, the old-world culture of deference, of trying not to take up too much space, and of feeling like a guest in this country made students like Joyce very conscious of how much of the teacher's time she was taking up. But at hagwon, those cultural anxieties did not exist, and my participants felt free to correct the teachers, to ask their questions, and get answers from people they trusted and felt connected to personally.

Social Media

As much as hagwon's habitus unfolded within the walls of a physical space, increasingly, it reinforced itself through a robust test prep social media ecosystem with which hagwon students engaged. Jane said that a moment of extreme disappointment was when she went on Reddit and found the SAT exams that Queens Institute was distributing to their students. When students find typos and answer choice errors in their test prep materials, this was the reason why. Their materials were not official College Board materials; they were pirated from sites like Reddit. This is to say, the culture of achievement was not just contained in the test prep classroom. It is part of an expanding social space. Beyond his immediate peers, HyeJoon talked about the influence of social media content creators who would discuss their SAT scores and what AP courses they were taking: "Basic platforms like Instagram and TikTok. I don't go on it too much, but

when I scroll, I see ‘freshman and sophomore year, I already got a 1500, and this many APs and this many extra curriculums,’ and I was like, ‘What am I doing?’”

Here again, the blending of youth culture and a culture of achievement was a major part of their unique habitus (Bourdieu, 1998). No longer was social media a frivolity, but—leveraged properly—an essential source of cultural capital.

Rebecca turned to Instagram to be able to reach her students *in absentia*, posting slides of her lessons and concepts. Emmie talked about scrolling through her social media and finding the occasional Ace Academy post and being reminded of the lessons from that week. Asked if it was helpful, she said that it was—though, when asked if it might help if her teachers at school started posting educational material on Instagram, she admitted she would probably either mute them or just scroll over them. “You’re kind of there to shut your brain down a little bit, you know, not to remind [yourself of school].” Asked if teacher presence on social media would discourage her from engaging with social media, she said no: “I’ll just avoid it. Yeah, I’ll just scroll over.” Not necessarily so for test prep material.

Then, there exists the online discourse about all these issues that prompt conversation among Emmie and her friends—namely, the affirmative action lawsuit and its attendant debate. Grace and Jane also noted that they read things and were still in the process of digesting them, and figuring out what it all meant.

The tension between the individual and the collectivity inherent to the idea of standardization played out in fascinating ways in the augmented reality of social media. It was a perfect simulacrum of the hagwon experience where individuality and standardization collide. It seems counterintuitive to say that a video published in a public

platform might be more tailored to an individual's needs than in-person instruction, but when it comes to systematized education—including test prep—that is the case. Students can scroll over videos that are not of interest to them but cannot do that while a teacher is answering a question they got right (though they can disengage).

On the other hand, a published TikTok cannot address individual questions or give individualized feedback, which is where hagwons have the advantage. Teachers could look at score reports individually before class, respond to questions in real time, and subsequently, the students could feel seen and cared for in this way at hagwon in a way that is only simulated by an algorithm online. Case in point, Grace talked about watching instructional videos to try to self-study, but ultimately found the personalized instruction of tutors and hagwon instructors to be more effective: “it's more personalized for me, like rather than a video. They know like specifically what my weaknesses are so it they just helped me improve on that. The teacher knows what I need.”

If we operate from the premise that social media itself is neutral and that the preferred tools and capital of a social space reflect a particular habitus, social media and its algorithms are a reflection of the tastes of the user. But then, so is hagwon. Put simply, hagwon is not an agent of social change; it serves the needs of its market consumer (Bray et al., 2018). The attendees (and, by proxy, their families) bring their existing proclivities and demands *to* the hagwon field, just as they bring their proclivities and tastes to the social media field. There, they are offered an array of capital—tools, tastes, symbols—that the agent can respond to in various ways, which subsequently shapes the field. Over the course of the interaction, a mutual inscription occurs in an infinite interplay of habitus, field, and capital.

Parental Influence

“My parents are putting so much money into this” (Joyce).

On the other hand, hagwon is an extension of a larger generative community habitus that can skew harshly reductive and dehumanizing, too. Grace described the nature of this habitus:

Bergen County (New Jersey) is especially competitive. I feel like there's a lot of Asians in this area so I feel like if you don't [succeed], if you go to like a state university, you're kind of looked down on, like, kind of like judged. Like not looked down on, more like it just doesn't seem impressive. I know my mom talks with other moms about where their kids got into college. Yeah, she tells me like, like pretty frequently like this kid got into this college, like not in a harmful kind of way just she just found it impressive.

Emmie said, “I think of like those moms talking about which hagwon their kids went to and how they benefited from it and which textbook they should buy and which teachers they have and things like that. A lot of like the gossip and stuff.” Jane talked about her mother's group chat where she acquired information about test prep and other school related matters. In short, hagwon culture is built on students *and* their parents, sharing information and coordinating their expectations and broader habitus around their children's achievements. The cultural influence of the old country permeates the center through the proxy of the adults. This, according to Emmie:

I feel like it all stems from people who are successful of these hagwons. People who went to Seoul National University or other great Korean universities obviously had to go through some hagwons, and because of such results they got

from hagwons, they spread the word around. If you do this, study like this, and if you go to this hagwon, you will also go to these grand universities who will open your whole new world to these jobs and experiences.

Joyce was explicit about living up to her parents' sacrifices: "Well, like, I have to go to college. That's what my parents want. They came all this way from China as immigrants and they want their children to be successful and go to college." In a reflection post in her journal, Grace gave full credit to her mother for her accomplishments: "Shadow education is orchestrated by my mom. She sets me up to succeed and I would not have made it anywhere without her. I am honestly so grateful to be in the place I am now, despite all of the anxiety and uneasiness of where I am headed. She made it that much more relieving." Indeed, Chao and Kaeochinda (2010) found that whereas Asian immigrant parents lacked verbal and physical expressions of love ("I love you" or hugging), children of Asian immigrant parents understand "instrumental support"—which includes "continually ensuring their daily needs are met, but also providing parental involvement and resources they need to succeed in school" (p. 64)—as expressions of *love* and acceptance. In short, hagwon really was a way for parents to express to their children that they care deeply about their well-being—a much more pragmatic and observable expression of love than words (Indurti, 2021).

The weight of this sacrifice was not lost on the participants. Grace's parents' financial standing made it so that Grace felt the need to *live up* to their standard of success, while Joyce felt that she had to *make good* on the sacrifices of her parents. A subtle difference, but one that I made note of—and arguably, operating under a larger framework. Noah's response about wanting to be the kind of son his parents would be

proud of, or “want,” I think, was moving, and representative of said framework: “for me, personally, I do and try to perform my best as possible for my parents because at a young age, and now, I was able to learn and be very thankful for my parents in terms of what they’ve done for me. So, I always try to improve myself for them so that later I could provide for them, or just generally just be a good son that they want, as like a way of showing respect and thanks.”

Inversely, for Troy, his mother’s lack of expectations was a motivating factor. Similarly, Jane said that her mother “did not trust” her to be able to tackle the SAT on her own, which is noteworthy because Jane attends one of the top test-in schools in New York City. The understood subtext, of course, is not that Jane would not be able to “tackle” the SAT, but that she would not be *perfect* on the SAT. She got close. Emmie’s parents were against hagwon because of cost and because they thought it would not make much of a difference. When it did, they capitulated, cost be damned, which Emmie was also conscious of living up to—similar to Joyce.

This was another, more subtle, way the presence of parental sacrifice and expectation played out. Any mention of the price of hagwon was a tacit acknowledgement that their parents were sacrificing whatever else that money could buy. All the participants at some point mentioned their parents’ financial investment in hagwon. Joyce thought of her parents’ investment as a source of anxiety—something she would think about that would compound one of her mental “spirals”—but something she had to do nonetheless: “Sometimes, I’m getting so many questions wrong and it’s like, ‘This is so not worth it. Like, all this work.’ And I feel bad. My parents are putting so much money into this, if I don’t do well, it’s like, ‘Oh, no, I feel so bad.’”

Jane said outright, “I just feel like the amount that you're paying for isn't worth what you're getting.” She estimated the cost to be in the thousands: “It usually ranges from like \$1,000 to \$3,000 or maybe even more if it's a well-known place. But what I received I feel like it's not worth it, especially because a lot of these test prep centers get their resources from free places.”

I heard teachers routinely say phrases like “get your money’s worth,” or, “your parents are paying a lot of money for you to be here.” At Ace, where free classes were offered, I heard a student say, “I think it’s a sign that I need to start coming on Thursday.”

The teacher replied, “Yes, it’s free, so...”

Hagwons would keep parents abreast of their children’s progress through emails. According to Joyce, “[The teachers] had our parents' emails and they would send our test scores to them. And my parents sometimes talked to me about it when they got the email.” I also heard a conversation about a student who did not show up to class, though his parents were paying for him to attend: “His parents are rich enough that he can just waste tuition,” a fellow student said, the implication being that the speaker’s parents were not rich enough and the speaker could not waste their parents’ tuition.

This cultural emphasis on sacrifice underscores the entire hagwon enterprise. Parental sacrifice in the form of the migration experience— i.e., leaving behind a family, a familiar home, one’s birthplace and community, better career prospects—is “a distinct facet of parental support that is reflective of the cultural features and cultural frames of reference of Asian immigrants” (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010, p. 62). In return, Asian American adolescents were found to have stronger feelings of filial obligation than their

European counterparts (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). While the participants in this study generally were not explicitly forced by their parents to attend hagwon, the weight of parental sacrifice and expectations were ever present.

The students internalize the mission statement at home (i.e., achieve and live up to parental sacrifice) then bring that cultural imperative to the hagwon to be mixed with the pressure from their peers and *their* parents' ambitions. The teachers, also mostly from Korea, perpetuate this narrative—in part because they also lived it and believe it—but also, must answer to the parents who are paying tuition. Thus creates a bricolage of cultural threads that collapse into one unified habitus, shaped by people who largely are not physically present in the building. Thus, the scene wherein the parent silently watches their child do Kumon homework as a way for immigrant parents to show love unfolds on a larger scale in the habitus of hagwon. The child feels the weight of their parents' watchful eye, but also the weight of the sacrifice, expectation, and yes, love at the heart of that tableau.

Pride and Shame

“Ok, so you're really good at this. What does that mean?” (Interviewer question)

Something I started to perceive in some of my participant interviews was that they were working hard at getting good at the SAT without really thinking about why. And for those who did do well, I started to perceive that they were ambivalent about thinking of their score as an achievement. In light of this ambivalence, and by way of unpacking it a bit, I asked my participants what a good score meant for them: I asked Noah, “What does it reveal about you if you do well on this?” I asked HyeJoon, “Ok, say I'm a college admissions officer. I see that you did well on it. This other person got a lower score than

you. What does it show about you versus that other person that you did better?" I asked Jane something similar, "Ok, so you're really good at this. What does that mean?"

Jane scored in the 99th+ percentile (The College Board, 2022)—which means that her score was better than over 99% of her peers, including all the other participants in this study. When asked if she was proud of her score, she said yes. But when asked if any of this was of any use, she said no:

No, not really. I don't think if I'm applying for a job that they're going to get me to take an English exam and try and see if I have good analytical or reading skills. Or suddenly hand me a paper full of math questions just so I can do them. I think the way society is structured makes it so that it's essential for you to be able to take these tests and score high because that's how colleges will compare you to others as a baseline.

Two terms struck me in this response: "the way society is structured" and "compare you to others as a baseline." Indeed, her achievement was really about doing something required of her by some nebulous entity as a way of measuring, separating, and stratifying. "It just reminds me a lot of like, what we've been doing like our entire lives, including like the New York state exams and then the SHSAT and then the SAT. They're like basically the same thing." And in the end, she concluded that being good at taking tests shows nothing more than "I'm just better at taking tests at like high pressure, I guess." For some reason this bothered me at the time (and still does). So, I pressed. She went on to talk about problem solving:

Being able to develop that problem solving skill, or like being able to read a text and know what it's trying to say. The Common Core is like what the DOE or

basically wants everyone to know. So, I guess it's just like being able to function as a person, and knowing how to think, even if it doesn't pertain specifically to English or math. It might help you in your other subjects.

When she zoomed out and thought about her test-taking ability, she ultimately did find something to the idea that all school-related tasks are, on some level, contrived by some authority figure and she is trying to figure out how to do well on them. Reading and understanding difficult texts and knowing who is handing down information and tailoring your responses to fit what they want? We all need to do that—according to Jane, that’s “being able to function as a person.”

At the same time, as Emmie pointed out, it is a part of the culture that she is ambivalent about. Emmie admitted to feeling guilty that her score had improved as quickly as it did. And while she was proud of how hard she worked to achieve that progress, she tempered her feelings of accomplishment by comparing herself to other students who did not have the same resources as she did: “I went to hagwon and they taught me, and they told me how to do this. That doesn't mean I'm trying harder than some other kids. They might do just as hard as me and not get the same result. I just learned the faster way to score.”

“I’m sensing a little bit of guilt,” I said.

“I kind of do [feel guilty]. Because hagwon is not... It should be supplementary. It should not be the main thing that controls whether you get a passing grade or failing grade. I get good scores mostly because of hagwon.”

In contrast, HyeJoon responded that he was proud of the progress he had made—to see that all his time and effort had actually produced results—and that he planned to

continue to “grind,” specifically on the reading section, in order to cross the 1500 plateau. In contrast to Jane, who laughed at an imaginary scenario wherein she would be handed a sheet of math questions at a job interview, HyeJoon acknowledged that pursuing a career in law *does* require him to sit for more standardized exams—both the LSAT and the Bar exam. I noted to him that my brother-in-law had to sit for a series of exams to become a financial advisor and trader—and his bank said they would fire him if he did not pass. For HyeJoon, being able to take tests is important for his future. Furthermore, his high SAT score indicates something more than just the ability to take tests; it says something about his ability to solve problems and work towards a goal. Knowing how to learn a specialized knowledge domain and then applying that knowledge in a pressure-packed setting with a time limit is something he will have to do in the future. And now he knows how to grind out a difficult task; break down a complex text even if it isn’t fun or innately interesting; and figure out how to solve a problem even if it isn’t immediately clear how. And it doesn’t just apply to tests or even academics: “What’s a job, really? Except having to learn your specialty, then having to use that knowledge to solve problems within a strict deadline? And perform under pressure?” Thus, when someone looks at that score, he said, he hopes that *that* is the takeaway—that he can learn quickly and perform difficult tasks well under pressure. “So, I am definitely, definitely proud of that,” he said.

The theme of pride also came up when I asked my participants if they thought that hagwon was an important part of Asian or Korean culture. All of them said yes, though, again, with shades of gray. The participants of this study could sense the cultural thread running from their old-world motherlands—the weight of the centuries of value (dating back to the first exam in 958 AD) placed on the results of an exam. And when I followed

up by asking whether that is a part of the culture that they are proud of, HyeJoon said yes, hagwon was unequivocally a part of Korean culture that he was proud of. Noah spoke, too, about how hagwon was something Korean Americans “do,” that separates them:

Students of other races, right, they don’t really care about hagwon, nor do they ever really try it. They think it’s weird! They’re just like, “Why would I wasted my time studying for this test? I could probably learn it on my own just going to school.” But the reality is you can’t. You can’t really just go through it just learning it at school. And it’s just so different because in Korea it’s seen as a necessity and something that most people do, but in America, it’s not. But for Korean Americans, it is. (Noah)

I think this is the part of the discourse that is being lost and the part that can feel problematic. As the progressive education community rails against the emphasis on testing, and as teachers harp on how irrelevant or even harmful standardized tests are—in other words, as the education community increasingly questions the importance and validity of the SAT score—students like Jane and HyeJoon who prepare and *do* score well on it are tacitly told that their achievement is meaningless or even indicative of a broken education system. The emphasis on academic achievement is a baked in part of Asian culture, but it’s being questioned, devalued, or seen as part of a White supremacist system by the very racial justice groups with whom we are told we must be in solidarity.

I suppose the question we have to ask is, does it compromise a student’s accomplishments if they had professional help along the way? When Grace lists her art awards and writing accolades, does it minimize or devalue the work it took for her to accomplish those things if we find out that she had people behind the scenes helping her

to submit her work to the right contests, and helped her tailor her work to their standards? Does it cheapen Jane's and HyeJoon's SAT scores to know that they attended test prep, even if I were to tell you that the bulk of the work it took to get past a certain plateau is studying independently? How this tension plays out in the on-the-ground experiences of the students in this study is that students feel guilty about their high test scores and their other achievements. Thus, the habitus of hagwon is also about reconciling conflicting messages that say that students should try to do well in school and strive to succeed, but that there are people who will resent them or think them strange—and, by proxy, their parents and ancestral heritage strange—for doing *too* well. It is no wonder, then, that students felt safer and more comfortable at hagwon than at school. The shared cultural heritage meant that there was nobody judging their ambitions, or their families, or the lengths they were going to achieve; there were teachers and staff who celebrated students' successes as their own. The names on the wall were proof of that.

What is Success?

“I think success is just for me, like living a comfortable life... I think that's the end goal for everyone” (Troy).

Something I was curious about as I was wrapping up my interviews was, “Why?” Why are these students subjecting themselves to this grueling process? Thinking about working toward long term goals as a skill was important, but I wanted know what those long term goals were. What is hagwon ultimately helping them achieve? So I asked.

For Emmie, she was not focused too far down the road. Success, to her, meant “at least to graduate high school a bit better—at least to know that I tried a bit more while I

still had the chance.” Test prep factored into her idea of success because, ultimately, she wanted to demonstrate that she tried:

[A high SAT score] kind of does reveal I'm going to try hard and like, if I want to achieve this, I will. Personally, I don't feel like the score is that important.

Numbers are important for others, my schools. For me, it kind of shows how I tried *this* hard.”

She also wanted to spend the rest of her time in high school exploring: “I also want to branch out a lot more to different experiences as a high schooler.” Taking up pole vaulting, to her, was a big success.

For Jane, for all her academic success, her definition of success in life was somewhat ordinary, by her own admission: “It's really generic, but just like happiness, just the feeling of being fulfilled, that you have done everything that you can possibly do, and that you want to do.” A fulfilling job was central to this, as she understood that a lot of an adult's life is spent at work, and being fulfilled there was a top priority for her. Then, once she secured financial security, she could pursue the little things in life that make her happy, like time with friends and indulging in her many hobbies.

The general consensus among my participants, though, was that their ideas of success only had to do with money insofar as they wanted to be able to not struggle. Troy's answer was representative: “I think success is just for me, like living a comfortable life. I think that's the end goal for everyone, just being able to live a comfortable life is success. And I think you have to do this for a job that pays enough so that you can live a comfortable life.” Indeed, having enough money to be financially independent and comfortable was the most commonly stated element of success.

Race

The overwhelming majority of the students I observed at hagwon were East Asian. Emmie said she overheard people talking about it openly: “I heard some students talk about it. They're non-Asian. [They'd say,] like, ‘There's no diversity here.’” Noah acknowledged that it might be difficult to be a non-Asian person in an environment like theirs:

Let's say they're White, Latino, or Black, and they go to [Crown]. If they don't make a friend in, like, the first two weeks, they're very, like, isolated. And they're very, like, alone. And a lot of the times they just leave because they feel uncomfortable, because they're like, ‘Oh, I have like no friends there anyways, like, what am I going to do? Just like, go there, take tests and whatever?’ And it's kind of just like that basic, like, conformity, where everyone just goes towards, like, what they relate to most, right?

However, Troy, who was of Chinese descent, did not feel he was treated any differently, but he was East Asian, and talked about the crossover between Asian cultures.

I observed one Black student during the observation period for this study. In one incident—involving that student—I saw the Black student argue with a Korean student because the Black student had heard the Korean student say that the new Spider-Man (i.e., Miles Morales) was not the real Spider-Man because he was Black. At first the Korean student denied saying it. The Black student did not relent, at which point the Korean student challenged the Black student to do something about it, which the Black student did not. It was a tense moment, and one that is likely indicative of a deeper race issue that underscores this phenomenon and this community—of unfavorable

conversations about race that I was not privy to because I only observed students in public spaces. Or it could have been an isolated incident. I suspect it wasn't, given the way affirmative action was spoken about in our interviews.

Affirmative Action and Legacy

This was a fascinating time to conduct this study. On June 29, 2023, the Supreme Court struck down race-based admissions policies at colleges and universities. The Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) lawsuit against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina gave the world an insight into minority admissions at top universities in the U.S. and alleged that Asian students were being discriminated against by giving them low ratings on subjective measures like "Personal Ratings" as compared to their White and non-Asian minority counterparts (Gersen, 2023).

The general sentiment among the students in this study fell into the following categories:

1. It's good that race is no longer a factor. This means that colleges will consider each individual student based on their own merits.
2. At first, we thought it would be good for us (i.e., Asians), but in reality, it probably won't change anything.
3. "I don't follow the news, so I don't know." Both Queens Institute students were unaware of Affirmative Action (they both needed me to explain what it was) and the related court case.

Notably absent was a participant who stood vehemently *for* affirmative action. However, it should also be pointed out that they found legacy admissions equally problematic.

Ironically, the Supreme Court case targeting affirmative action also revealed problematic truths about legacy admissions. An independent review of the lawsuit revealed that 43% of White admits to Harvard are ALDCs (athletes, legacies, dean's interest list, and children of faculty and staff) whereas less than 16% of Black, Latino, and Asian American admits were ALDCs; and roughly 75% of those admitted White ALDCs would not have been admitted to Harvard without their ALDC status (Arcidiacono et al., 2021). Hence why legacy admissions are becoming known as “affirmative action for the wealthy” (Ali, 2023). Further investigations showed that at some universities—Notre Dame, University of Southern California, Cornell and Dartmouth—legacy students outnumbered Black students (The Associated Press, 2023). Complicating the issue is that in 2023, Harvard admitted their highest number of Asian students (29.9%, up 2.1% from the previous year), and part of the reason was an increase in Asian legacy admissions (Venkatraman, 2023).

On July 25th, in the immediate fallout of the affirmative action decision, came news of a federal investigation into Harvard's legacy admissions (Shear & Hartocollis, 2023), which was in keeping with a growing trend toward ending legacy admissions. Universities like Amherst, Johns Hopkins, Wesleyan, and Carnegie Mellon had already ended legacy admissions for good, likely with more to follow (Patel, 2023).

The students in this study felt apprehensive about saying anything too controversial or definitive, given that they were admittedly uninformed about it. HyeJoon said outright, “Saying a stance is kind of, you know, these days hard.” Joyce grappled with both sides but admitted that her ultimate stance was in favor of striking down affirmative action, albeit based mostly on speculation: “I do know about some cases

where schools focus more on accepting the diverse based on race rather than merit, and I personally think merit's more important rather than race. I feel like, I'm not even sure if this is really accurate, but I feel like if you do it by merit, shouldn't there already be diversity? But I also know that between the different races, there's a big gap between what's accessible to them, so it's hard to get diversity in that case.”

I answered her question with another question: “I mean, you've been to test prep centers, you said, right? Besides Queens Institute. What were the demographics of those test prep centers?”

“They were all usually East Asian. There's a few [non-Asians but] it's mainly Asians. Mainly I would say 95% of it was East Asian,” she said.

“Right,” I said.

When it came to legacy, Joyce was equally unaware: “I didn't know that like these college institutions cared that much about their alumni. I thought it's like, we went to school here. That's it.”

When I explained that children of alumni are given priority in admissions, her mind turned immediately to upbringing: “I don't think it's really fair, but I understand why they would think that the children of their alumni would like have like a similar work structure or like motivation like their parents. So like, maybe their kids would do just as well as their parents. But I don't really think it's that fair.”

When I explained that it also had to do with schools hoping to boost donations, she asked, “I mean, what percentage of the parents are donors?” [For the record: “Studies are mixed on whether legacy admission helps universities raise funds. There may be higher rates of alumni giving at schools that consider legacy status, but schools that

abandoned legacy admissions have not suffered a negative effect on alumni giving, and some have experienced significant growth in their endowments” (Gersen, J.S., 2023).]

Joyce’s ultimate stance on it was conflicted: “I don't think it's right, but I guess it's, like, the college feels obligated to help out the parents when they donate so much. From the parents’ perspective, it's like, yeah, this is great. But from the people who don't have parents that go to that school, it's really unfair, but I guess that's human behavior.” Noah was equally disdainful of legacy, calling it unfair: “basically the college is helping the wealthy stay wealthy, in my opinion.” He went so far as to say that even if he were to go to his dream school (Boston College) and be able to hand legacy to his kids, he would prefer if they forged their own path and earned their spot on their own merits. [BC is a legacy school, with 14% of current students are children of alumni (Bohl, 2023)].

The students in this study seemed cynical that any of this—striking down affirmative action, ending legacy admissions—would effect much change. Emmie put it simply: “A lot of people are saying, like, [affirmative action being struck down] helps us [i.e., Asian students]. But does it really, really help? You know what I'm saying?” Her point was that the privileged would still go on being privileged and finding ways to polish their applications in ways that other students can’t, and colleges would continue to tailor their incoming classes to their desired demographic breakdowns in other ways. Ending affirmative action will likely just end up hurting the people who are most disadvantaged, a group that Emmie’s friend group coined “academic minorities.” She defined academic minorities as populations that have been historically “undervalued and underrepresented” in higher education and academia, e.g., Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnam, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Cambodia).

Grace summed up the discourse well, I think: “I'm not really sure what [affirmative action] is. I have a general idea, but there's been so many opinions on social media. I don't know. It's very divided, but some are saying the schools are going to look completely rich, White, and then others are saying that it's good now because it's better for certain races because it's equal. But not everyone has been equal through history. I'm not really sure. But Rebecca actually told me it wouldn't matter that much because the schools would still try to implement diversity. I don't really know. I don't know enough to talk about it.”

Then, later, she said about legacy, “This is no merit of your own. You know, the fact that your parents went to a particular school gives you a leg up—that’s like, I mean, if we're talking about really merit based, that's the one thing I think we've got to get rid of.”

Race and Regionalism

In interviews, students avoided controversial racial issues; in fact, broaching the topic of affirmative action made most participants visibly nervous and tread lightly when responding. Noah went so far as to say, “I definitely say it's not too good to be so alienated and associated with one specific race group. I feel like just as a human in general, you should outreach more into other diverse groups, right, and learn about their cultures. Because I feel like these are the type of things that like, it's like the beauty of life, right? Like in the United States, there's so much diversity.”

In other moments, I heard conversations that talked about White people in the South being racist, and it was assumed that they were less educated. In one participant interview, in discussing the merits of hagwon, the participant said, “In the south, there’s

some great colleges, like Rice University. But like Alabama, they're probably not learning too much or going too much in depth. So therefore, hagwon would be pretty useful to them."

I could not help but feel that some of the discourse around affirmative action was coded with the extant narratives and structures shaping race relations in this country that necessitated affirmative action in the first place. Part of the habitus, in other words, was at the mercy of the broader problematic discourse on race that exists in the world—and in a sense, is being perpetuated in spaces like hagwon. As we saw, the content on the SAT skews racially sensitive, but the test itself as an institution was and remains a gatekeeper for the language of dominant white America and have been perceived as barriers to diversity in college admissions (Zwick, 2019). The teacher acknowledged this history, but also said that the test is "no longer racist," as the students nodded—to which I wrote in my notes, "YIKES," because that is far from settled (Yilmaz et al., 2023). The teachers I observed presented the "political correctness," racial "neutrality," and "sensitivity" of the test because, effectively, it gave away the endings of all the passages, which served as an advantage to their students. Put simply, racial justice was taught as a way to get to a right answer, or a test clue. Whether students *believed* it to be right was irrelevant.

Generally, I would say that the students knew the stance that the test took. They knew that certain stances were considered to be racist, and they felt uncomfortable speaking on affirmative action because they knew their overall stance on it situated them against a measure that was meant to combat racism. But they could not help what they felt—the coded messaging they had internalized was too strong. Like the messaging around hard work and living up to parental sacrifice, the coded language around non-

Asian minority communities—i.e., that the Asian community works harder and sacrifices more than other communities—was omnipresent. In fact, I would go so far as to say they were *connected*, and will likely take some work to undo completely, though it was encouraging to hear them also speak aloud some anti-racist rhetoric, too. Indeed, my sense is that the Asian participant pool skewed anti-Affirmative Action *and* anti-legacy, but in the meantime, they could not focus too much about things they could not control. They can control what they get on the SAT, if they just do a little extra preparation, so that was their focus.

Based even on the small sample size of this study, with a focus on students of East Asian background, the moneyed among them (namely Grace) had ways to make an application shine without an SAT score, through art academies whose bottom line is winning awards and a professional consultant who found extracurricular activities and scholarly research opportunities that fit her interests. During our second interview, Grace acknowledged her privilege, to which I pointed out that she did the work. She painted the pictures and did the research and wrote the articles and went through the trouble of submitting them. But she pushed back again and said that she wouldn't be where she is without Rebecca. The guilt she felt at having been coached, and the privilege that that indicates, was real, too—palpable, even. And if I may interject my own personal feelings in the moment, writing about her in this context feels a little reductive, and like I am not representing fully the thoughtful person I spoke with. This is the real value of this type of research, isn't it?

Apocryphal, Legends, and Myths

I wanted to add a section that addressed something else that I noticed, which is that there exist apocrypha regarding the SAT that remain unchanged since the late-1990's when *I* was preparing for the test. The following exchange from my observations is reminiscent of a typical conversation I might have heard when I was applying to college:

“I know someone who got a D in one of her classes, and still got into Columbia.”

“Connections?”

“Probably.”

“That's crazy.”

Over the course of my study, I heard many stories—from students *and* teachers—about students who, based on their high SAT scores, stellar grades, and robust list of extracurriculars, seem like home run candidates for whatever schools they apply to. Then inevitably, in the story, this home run candidate does not get into their desired school, whereas another seemingly lesser candidate does. I have to think that there will always be stories like this because there are so many students applying, so many factors to consider, and so few seats.

When I spoke to Noah about his application essay, we had a discussion about fit. That is, is the candidate a fit for the school? I pointed out that Noah's dream school has in its mission statement an emphasis on service. If, of all the things he is involved in, his application touts his philosophy that finding a job is the only reason to go to college, the school might go with another candidate, all things being equal. On the other hand, a student who gears their application to the good works they've done in their community or spending their nights and weekends (not at hagwon, but rather) raising their siblings

because their single parent had to work or was sick, might be seen as a better fit by a service-oriented school, even if their test scores and grades are a tick lower. “Focus on your service,” I told him. Then again, I don’t know this for sure, either. The process is so shrouded in mystery that it confounds and frustrates all who attempt to understand it.

Another myth I heard when I was in high school, and still seems to be floating around, is the one that says that certain months’ tests were more difficult than others:

There's one in August, I think, but the Queens Institute guy said that there's less of a curve and it's harder because once like school ended and everyone has time to prepare. So, the one in August is harder. But the one in June is a little easier and there's a bigger curve because it's when there's a bunch of APs and Regents, so it's made easier for the people who are also taking those tests on top of the SAT, so I did that. (Joyce)

I told Joyce that these were things I had heard, too, back in the late 1990’s, which made her exhale in exasperation. What is more likely is that there is a confounding element: i.e., because the SAT is scored on a curve, and percentiles matter in determining this curve, the pool of students who sign up is likely different depending on when the test is administered. It is likely—just based on the data in this study—that August tests tend to be a second or even third try for students who took it in March, June, and/or July were not happy with their score, then studied up during the summer to take it again in August. This would make the test *seem* more difficult, but really, it’s more about the pool of students taking the test who are subsequently impacting the score curve and not the difficulty of the test itself, and certainly not the test makers showing mercy to the June test takers.

There is also speculation as to why the ACT is not as popular as the SAT. I heard a teacher tell his students that it was because the ACT has five answer choices per question versus the SAT, which has four answer choices per question, which makes the odds of guessing correctly on the SAT better. The other explanation was that the SAT “got here first,” and was therefore had legacy status as the more official, prestigious, and accepted test. There might be some truth to that. When I was growing up, there was the perception that the SAT was more popular on the East Coast, whereas the ACT is more popular in other parts of the country. So, there was a regional elitism about doing well on the SAT over the newer and less renowned ACT.

Another likely factor is that the SAT has always allowed students to “superscore”—i.e., they can send a math score from one sitting and an English score from another sitting without sending the full score from either. (I remember doing this when I was applying to college.) The ACT score has always been a composite score—one number averaging all the sections. The ACT website says that they are now facilitating superscores, presumably to try to close the gap with the SAT. However, while students can now superscore, according to the ACT website, “ACT will supply [colleges] at least one full composite score with each superscore, plus all the scores from the test events that are part of the superscore composite.” In other words, there is not as much benefit to superscoring on the ACT, since the full score is sent anyway—whereas on the SAT, students can study for one section at a time, a strategy that was encouraged by test prep teachers explicitly.

There is also a myth that hagwon is a place where all one must do is show up to do well on the SAT. There is the perception that test prep centers are *why* the Asian

community does well on tests. But I've found that this is a reductive narrative, too. There are students who looked wholly disinterested in the proceedings and actively did not pay attention (scrolling through social media on phones both illicit and not). What they got out of hagwon would be of interest to me, but, unsurprisingly, none volunteered to participate. There were also students who genuinely tried but did not improve, like Grace. There were students who went but did not need to, like Jane. I think the truth is that hagwon gets too much credit for academic success and is demonized too much for gaming the system. An honest assessment of hagwon's *raison d'être* is that it helps certain kids succeed to a certain point and, yes, finds expedient ways to optimize outcomes. And while some of the insider information may seem exclusive or even illicit, it is difficult, sometimes, to separate what is real and what is rumor. For the most part, hagwons promote their core values by encouraging, if not mandating, independent study and hard work.

The Digital SAT

As I have previously stated, this was a uniquely exciting time to perform this study, as it was during a period of great transition. In addition to sea changes in the college admissions process, the paper SAT was about to give way to a new all-digital adaptive version of the SAT; hagwon teachers referred to the transition often and encouraged students to take the paper SAT before the new version took over. There was a real sense of paranoia among the students to optimize their scores before having to try their luck with the newer version, which was shrouded in mystery, especially around how they would be scored. All their prior knowledge of the test and its scoring was seen as potentially obsolete.

Students like Emmie expressed her anxieties. The main source of anxiety was based on the one piece of information that everyone seemed to be fixated on, which was that the new digital test was going to be adaptive: “I really don't want to take it. Like, I'm really scared. Like, I'm scared. I don't want to do the online one. Everyone is freaking out about it. Because if you get it wrong, it gets easier, but if you get it right, it gets harder and harder. So how are you going to get a good grade?” The rumors I heard were that if a student got an easy question wrong, it would mean not even seeing the difficult questions, which put a cap on their score. The other rumor was that the adaptivity was by section, or “capsule”: based on whether they got specific questions right on a previous capsule, students would see, subsequently, an easier or more difficult capsule. Though the digital test was already being administered in Europe, nobody seemed to have definitive answers.

Other rumors I heard from students who took the digital PSAT (a precursor to the SAT): There was a timer on the screen, which was helpful. It allows the student to annotate or highlight the passages, but the student didn't because the passages were so short and there was only one question per passage. When they got to the next section, they realized that “more difficult” just meant that the passages were longer, but they felt good about the wordier passages because it meant that they did well on the previous reading capsule. The digital screen made their eyes tired in a way that paper did not.

The new test presented a challenge for Rebecca, who got to venture into a new frontier: “I am so excited to take it,” she told her class.

When I spoke to Rebecca about the new test, she said that she thought it was a move in the right direction overall, but she felt uncomfortable about the all-digital format.

The reading passages will be shorter, and will likely resemble the LSAT, she said—the exam that is part of the law school application process. The LSAT, according to Rebecca, is geared toward finding internal contradictions and problem solving, more so than reading a long passage and analyzing it in a literary way. It will reward people not for reading quickly, but rather, will reward those who read carefully and critically, she said, which is probably a good thing. It will also stop punishing those who read slowly, which is also probably a good thing. But in the end, she said, her teaching philosophy will remain largely the same: “[her commandments] RTFQ [read the freakin’ question] and RTFA [read the full answer] are timeless,” she said. In other words, requirements will change and rumors will swirl. But the habitus of hagwon is to leave as little to chance as possible. Time honored methods like reading carefully and working hard are the foundational values of this place and these people.

CHAPTER 8 DISCUSSION

Bourdieu (1998) argued that the idea of grouping people is itself a fluid and unstable enterprise:

The ‘real’ class, if it has ever ‘really’ existed, is nothing but the realized class, that is, the mobilized class, a result of the struggle of classifications, which is a properly symbolic (and political) struggle to impose a vision of the social world, or, better, a way to construct that world, in perception and in reality, and to construct classes in accordance with which this social world can be divided. (p. 11)

Bourdieu’s point was that “class” is an elusive signifier, which is consistent with his resistance to fixed definitions. Groupings based solely on economic measures, for instance, mitigate or even neglect more defining features—e.g., culture, taste, and values—that might make for more meaningful social groups, though any of these taken individually can also be limited. As Oliver and O’Reilly (2010) observed in their study of British migrants in Spain, for Bourdieu, “the structure of social space cannot be understood through economic position or culture alone” (p. 50). In this study, the two different geographical sites represent two different immigrant communities, though they are all situated in largely Korean immigrant communities.

Bourdieu (1998) and Oliver and O’Reilly (2010) can help us to explain and conceive of the Asian American social space as one that is differentiated from other (non-Asian American) social spaces, and one whose cultural positions reproduced themselves in the U.S. based on elements economic, material, and symbolic. Asian descendants in the U.S. have maintained and reproduced through the habitus of *hagwon* their distinct

tastes, practices, preferences, and values. Furthermore, hagwon is a physical place that imparts a concrete set of bricoleur's tools—in this case, mental skills and resources—but also a site of knowledge transmission and enactment in the cultural and political sense (Anagnostopoulos & Rutledge, 2006).

Put simply, shadow education functions as much more than simply a place of academic learning.

The discussion that follows is organized in the same four-point shadow education framework that structured my literature review and findings & cross-case analysis. The headings—Shadow Education (SE) is a Normal Part of Life; Instruction; School is Not Enough; and Hidden Curriculum and Culture—and their definitions (immediately underneath each heading) were drawn from the table that organized my literature review findings. These (the headings and definitions) can be found grouped together in a table in Appendix B.

SE is a Normal Part of Life

Shadow education is an accepted, unquestioned part of life for students and their families.

Cultural Homogeneity and Habitus

The symbolic centering of hagwon as a foundational institution in the community and its attendant old-world values has had predictable material consequences (Bourdieu, 1998). Namely, “It's like all Asian,” Emmie said, referring to the disproportionately Asian student body at Ace. The ethnic homogeneity at hagwon and its stoicism was really a manifestation of a cultural emphasis on testing, which dates back centuries. Hagwon's mission has evolved over time to where it is now: excel, by any means possible.

This mindset is inscribed into the walls of hagwon (in the case of Ace and Crown, quite literally). Hagwon was more than a “normal” part of life. Beyond the test preparation it offers, it teaches a way of life—so much so that attendees internalize its values *physiologically*. Participants invoked the language of conditioning or training—“a habit that fixes into your body and mind” (HyeJoon)—to *feel* what it means to study, physically, or even to develop an internal clock for the time constraints of the test, like a circadian rhythm. This way of life was passed down to me from my mother, just as it was passed down to HyeJoon from his father, and to the rest of the participants from their parents, who came from overcoming various struggles of their own—from living in basements with 12 other people to moving to a country alone, apart from their families, missing their children’s first words and steps. Somewhere along the line, it was calculated that financial stability was more important than these sentimentalities. Hagwon is an extension of that strand of stoicism and severity.

Hagwon represents something *culturally* significant—namely, a symbolic emphasis on academic excellence, which has been calculated collectively as the best possible odds to upper middle class financial stability and social mobility.

For Bourdieu (1998), there were reasons why people behave the way they do. There is a calculation that occurred in which a social agent must figure out if a particular activity or engagement was of “interest” to them. Bourdieu defined “interest”:

Interest is to "be there," to participate, to admit that the game is worth playing and that the stakes created in and through the fact of playing are worth pursuing; it is to recognize the game and to recognize its stakes. (p. 77)

In short, at a certain point, one must conclude that “playing is worth the effort” (p. 77). All the participants in this study said that they internalized the idea that they have to work hard to achieve their long-term goals—something that is touted on signs throughout Ace and repeated by teachers across the three sites. It is an adage that can be reductive, though, especially given the systemic barriers that some people face. The reality is that hard work does not guarantee success, but what attendees of hagwon internalize is that one must work hard to achieve their goals. Participants acknowledged the element of luck on a granular level (what reading passage topics appeared on their testing day; who their parents knew at which hagwon that determined which one they attended) and the institutional level (they were born into a family who was willing to sacrifice for them and a community that had an infrastructure to elevate them academically). Maybe this element is what critics of hagwon and the testing system resent about hagwon—that students who are born in a certain community benefit from a built-in infrastructure and that this should be taken out of the equation when quantifying merit.

In his book, Kang (2022a) argued that Asians are the loneliest Americans, desperately trying to find themselves “within the narrative of a country that would rather write [us] out of it” (p. 14). What he meant was that the Asian identity never melts into the White middle class fully, but at the same time, “mimicking the language of the Black struggle in America” (p. 14)—the oppressed minority identity—doesn’t feel quite right either. “The loneliness comes from the realization that nobody, white or Black, really cares if we succeed in creating any of these identities” (p. 15). On the one hand, the students in this study are trying to succeed according to accepted western capitalist values, but the hyperfixation on testing—where they sacrifice Saturdays and summers to

a single test score—others them and stigmatizes their accomplishments. The extra effort has somehow turned into a *negative*.

On the other hand, Kang pointed out that Asian complaints about oppression are generally cosmetic, trivial, even tacky, “when compared to police shootings, child detentions, and all the more pressing forms of racism” (p. 129). A lawsuit contending racial discrimination when they apply to top colleges like Harvard would likely fall in this category. However, I would point out that the lawsuit was not brought by the Asian community, but a White conservative named Edward Blum (Borger, 2023). That he targeted affirmative action but not legacy admissions is not representative of the stance of the Asian participants in this study: they were against both. The habitus of testing is reductive, as I have said. It offers the illusion that a high test score is purely based on hard work and merit, when there are many confounding elements at play.

The public discourse around these broader social issues *did* have an impact on some of the participants’ experiences—namely, that collectively, the hagwon students had to both downplay *and* defend their accomplishments. They perceived that they were seen as privileged by the historically disadvantaged, who do not have access to private shadow education, but also seen as other (at best) by those who have been historically advantaged by being the beneficiaries of having the test written in their particular language register. Maybe an essential element of this habitus is the loneliness the students feel—neither here nor there in education or even the race discourse. It could have been at the heart of the palpable self-reliance I felt from the ones who led with their bravado, but also the sadness and anxiety I felt from the quieter participants I spoke to. They know

what ought to be said or to be felt, but there is something—their own family’s struggles, maybe—that tugs at them inside but that they know better than to voice.

In the end, I think in elevating their own efforts and overcoming their own boundaries, those who oppose equity measures are misdirecting their resentment—that should be pointed at the culture of testing, their own culture—at people who, if anything, are working to make their lives easier. Then again, it is difficult when one’s historical advantage is in a particular domain, and the legitimacy of said domain is being questioned or delegitimized. What does that mean for the past successes of our community, then? What does it mean for our community moving forward?

In an interview with Kang (2022a), Young-Dae Kwon, founder of Elite Academy (one of the biggest test prep centers in Queens), said, “‘Academic fields are one of the places where we can do well, where we can specialize and put together our money and expertise.’ Looking over at his son, Dennis, who had grown up in the classrooms and administrative offices at Elite, Young-Dae said, ‘If he didn’t go to MIT, what opportunities would he have? How else could he show his value in America?’” (Kang, 2022a, p. 130) In other words, the average math score of 500 is just not enough for what type of social mobility, financial stability, and prestige that the family—and collectively, the community—is striving for. The participants in this study aspired to excellence—if for no other reason that their peers, with whom they were competing, would also be aspiring to excellence. Being part of the social space required them to attain a certain standard. School alone could only take them so far. Hagwon was their path to excellence.

Cultural Bricolage and Pedagogical Action

But another look at hagwon might reveal another story: one of cultural hybridity or bricolage. Hagwon was not always about testing; it only existed in the first place to teach Western values to an Eastern populace. Private learning centers have always existed to inscribe culture; teach cultural capital; and in so doing, blend cultures together. In a sense, Ace, Crown, and Queens are all fulfilling the original mission of the original centers, which was to instill in its students the values of the dominant social project through education—something Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) called “pedagogical action.” So, as much as it is an accepted part of life for the students, the hagwon system also functions to reinforce values: in this case a bricolage of old-world and new world conceptions of hard work, resilience, and deference to authority converging into one unassailable mission statement.

For most of the students in this study, this meant working toward the best possible SAT score to increase their odds of getting into their desired college, and internalizing the habits that helped them achieve that. For HyeJoon, for instance, it meant “grinding”—taking what he learned at hagwon and reviewing the questions he got wrong until he mastered them, so he never got them wrong again. For Grace, it meant not sending an SAT score, ultimately, and figuring out ways to work around that “gap” in her application by excelling in other ways. For her, the calculation was that preparing for the test presented too many problems and negative energy. She couldn’t focus on one particular type of question, since the things she got wrong were different every time. But she could write and paint in ways that demonstrated value in other ways. Emmie and Troy were likewise aware of the unfortunate reality that a good SAT score does not always translate

to a good college and that a good college does not always translate to a good job. The dropoff in the preliminary survey between needing hagwon for a good SAT score and needing hagwon for a good job indicated that the students were aware that nothing is guaranteed. They were well informed in the language of college and career. What they were doing was doing their due diligence—unfolding the value assessment part of habitus and doing their best at every stage of the college admissions process to give themselves the best *chance* at success. What is most difficult is when two priorities seem equally important, and a real source of anxiety, if not paralysis.

When the students did the calculation that studying for the SAT was worth giving up social activities or compromising their schoolwork, they were engaging in a “rational evaluation of their chances for success” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 76) that orient their actions within a particular habitus, and explains their behavior in no uncertain terms. These students attended willingly, just as I did, with a goal in mind. Some of the participants had to beg to attend; I leveraged personal relationships to gain access to these places. As Bourdieu theorized, the “rational calculation of chances was at the origin of the choices [we] made” (p. 76).

This is the type of calculation that Bourdieu (1998) theorized happened in a field where social agents considered the odds and calculated what gave themselves the best chance at a desired outcome. It was also the type of generic tools acquisition that Lévi-Strauss (1962) attributed to the *bricoleur*—forbearance being a tool useful in most fields. Thus, a major part of the habitus of hagwon was that suffering was an inextricable part of the achievement process—one calculated that the pain in the short term in the short term would pay off in the long term. This mantra was a presence all around them: it was

whispered by the former students from their colleges and test scores; or, it was literally written on the walls: “If you’re going through hell, keep going”; it was couched in the stories they told me about their parents moving to a new place and enduring the hardships of the immigrant experience for the sake of the future of their children.

Instruction

Shadow education teaching/coaching is adaptable to student/family needs.

The shared cultural heritage had even deeper implications. Hagwons are spaces primarily run by Korean people serving the Korean immigrant community with the objective of getting ahead in a world that had pit them against each other and other minority populations for a limited number of seats at desirable schools. There existed at the hagwons I observed for this study a dynamic that positioned the hagwon teachers and attendees on the same side of a battle, with the test and school as common opponents to be solved. Hagwons distributed pirated materials to help get attendees past the gatekeeping testing authorities. At school, the teachers *were* the gatekeeping authorities; on the test, the College Board were the gatekeeping authorities—they were the ones who were “out to get you.” Such is the nature of a zero-sum system that limits the number of seats at prestigious institutions. Put simply, to hagwon attendees, school and the SAT were part of the same gatekeeping infrastructure. Contrary to the narrative that hagwon adds pressure to student lives, participants viewed hagwon as a place where they could turn to for help.

There was a feeling that hagwon staff and the students were bound together by a common adversary that often manifested as a collective effort to figure out the test-makers’ riddles in order to cross the proverbial bridge. In other words, the hagwon

teachers and students were *on the same side* of a battle of attrition against the test makers, with the college admissions people the ultimate authority figures. In a traditional classroom, the teacher is seen as the authority figure and gatekeeper, assessing who is an A student and who is a B or C student, and putting that on record. Thus, an important part of the hagwon experience, as opposed to school, came from the sense that the hagwon teachers and students were insurgents, fighting on the same side against a common adversary. At school, the teachers were part of the establishment to be conquered. The Naviance system—the college planning tool used by many high school—displaying a student’s name, GPA, SAT score, and admitted college as the students’ summative points of reference reinforces this perception.

Whom does the school dynamic serve? One might conjecture: colleges trying to identify talent? The state or society at large needing to identify the best and the brightest to treat diseases and innovate the latest technology? In either case, it makes the teacher-student relationship at school different from at hagwon. A hagwon teacher does not grade the students in an official capacity; a third party does that. The hagwon teacher and student are in cahoots to conquer that challenge together. They are one degree closer than the schoolteacher and student are. Then, add that hagwon teachers come from not only the same cultural backgrounds, but often the same towns and communities as their students and it becomes clear why hagwon might be seen as a second home, where students feel a shared camaraderie in a social space that is different from what they experience at school.

Interestingly, the general absence of phones fostered an environment in which students interacted with each other, especially at Crown. At Queens Institute, where

phones were allowed at students' desks, students spent breaks scrolling on their phones. At Crown and Ace, where they confiscated phones at the door and then counted them to ensure all students had turned in their phones before starting instruction (), there was the general socializing that came from bringing together students from similar backgrounds. Students compared scores and answers and strategies with each other and asked about mutual social connections.

The phone policy may seem like a minor one, but it is indicative of many layers that speak to the habitus of hagwon. On the surface, it seems simple: the students are compliant and willing to sacrifice some individual liberty for their learning. It demonstrates the old-world virtues of discipline and deference to authority baked into their culture. But—especially at Crown and Queens—students were able to sneak their phones into class and would take surreptitious looks at them during instruction. The phones (and other devices) became shared capital within the social space (e.g., gathering around a computer to watch *South Park*). This tension was symbolic of a part of hagwon culture: given that they had to sacrifice social activities to be there, students found ways to sneak play into a culture of work. It was a modicum of agency and control in a setting that felt compulsory, a little like the test itself. To me, it serves as a microcosm for hagwon writ large: students are making important, deliberate choices about their learning and achievement in the context of a situation that seems, on the surface, to strip students of agency and control.

Market Setting

Bray et al. (2018) found that the transactional structure of hagwon—that the attendees' families are paying tuition—distinguished the dynamic between teachers and

students at hagwon as opposed to compulsory school. I think this market setting dynamic was at the heart of many of the operational realities I observed, especially in the classroom. On the one hand, the prospect of their parents spending private tuition money meant that students were under a heavy obligation, and therefore determined to get their parents' money's worth, lest they waste both their parents' hard-earned money (not to mention the opportunity to better oneself). Or it meant that students felt entitled—as in the case of the note that complained about the teacher who made a student change seats. In short, students were allowed to neglect instruction without consequence. For those students, the wasted tuition was the consequence, though this presented more of an issue for some than for others—I'm thinking of Emmie, who had to beg her parents to pay the tuition for her to attend Ace versus the unnamed student who did not bother to attend even though his parents had paid.

Though participants like Joyce stated that she respected their hagwon teachers and schoolteachers equally, I have to believe that part of the reason why, for the most part, hagwon attendees did not feel intimidated by the adults at hagwon was at least in part because they felt some level of entitlement, given that their tuition money was directly paying these teachers' salaries and keeping the hagwon's lights on. The exception, of course, was at Ace, where students (and staff, for that matter) felt intimidated by Rebecca's peremptoriness. But Rebecca made clear that the money was beside the point. She offered refunds to students who were not willing to do the work or were planning on being disruptive in any way. She eliminated that dynamic, and thus, she provided for me the exception that proved the rule. Money spoke in the hagwon world, though again, not exactly in the way that people might think. It was not that money allowed attendees

access—all the participating hagwon owners made it a point to say that they tried to look after those who could not pay by offering discounts and scholarships. Rather, once there, attendees were customers more so than students. They expected results. The hagwons provided materials and instruction that were focused on the immediate and long-term needs of the students and their families. And the teachers served at the pleasure of the attendees.

This speaks to the nimble and adaptive nature of what hagwon can offer. Though the introductory level classes had a structured curriculum dictated by the test the attendees were studying for, once students reached the advanced level, teachers covered what the students in front of them needed in real time. Charts with answer data informed instructional choices in the moment. This data-driven approach reflected the global thread in the cultural bricolage occurring at hagwon—a thread that has metastasized post-Sputnik (Bruner, 1996; Kliebard, 2004; Park, 2022), and resulted in reifying initiatives like No Child Left Behind and PISA (K. H. Kim, 2021; Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2021).

On a macro level, Rebecca moved into the consulting space and found Grace an art hagwon to optimize her interest in art into a college application credential. These small businesses can pivot according to what their market dictates. If a student walks in off a plane from Korea, a hagwon teacher can pivot and teach in both Korean and English to teach basic grammar. This adaptability, on some level, is a manifestation of the mutual inscription between field and agent that Bourdieu (2018) saw as part of his habitus theory. As much as hagwon has capital to offer, the habitee also acts on the field.

Reading

The Bourdieusian calculation that I mourned as an English teacher (if I may) was that reading longform fiction was optimized out of this habitus. For all their effort and ability to endure, it made me sad to think that reading longform print books was not mentioned during this study as something students did. The calculus is simple: books require too much time investment for too little return on that investment. Therefore, spending an afternoon (much less many afternoons) reading fiction is a wholly expendable activity. There is no box on a college application where a student can list something like “I read the latest Colson Whitehead and loved it.”

This literary credential would be equally meaningless to a Korean parent or community member unless it resulted in or might lead directly to a concrete outcome. But it is a major part of the calculations that go into forming the curricula for hagwon. When the reading teacher pointed to the amount of time it takes for a student to move up a grade level, he was tacitly endorsing the idea that taking the long way (that is, reading a lot) would reap low returns on investment—both of resources and time. It was more effective to learn the different types of questions (there were only a handful) and learn how to answer them. This felt subversive, in a way, against academic text registers gatekeeping students whose native language was not their preferred register of English.

Yet, for students who are not avid readers, hagwon—and the higher stakes of studying for the SAT—did force students to sit and read more difficult texts that they might not have approached on their own in exactly the amount of time they need to unlock the questions presented by the SAT—no more, no less. I did not hear from participants about long expansive afternoons curled up with a good book. But I did hear

that the more they were exposed to texts like the ones they saw on practice tests, the more comfortable they became with them. This had the *added* (read: not primary) benefit of making students more comfortable with texts that were assigned to them at school. Could Noah have read *Naked Economics* for his Economics class without the help of hagwon? Probably. But, according to Noah, he would not have elicited the depth of understanding or speed with which he could get through it without the training he had which conditioned him to sit for extended periods of time reading texts on this level.

This aligns with vocabulary and comprehension development research—i.e., reading more “classical” texts leads to more advanced vocabulary and increased comprehension, as opposed to online or social media, which can interfere, if not negate, positive effects of reading traditional print media (fiction, nonfiction books or newspapers) (Pfof et al., 2013). I have always taken issue with studies like this for being question begging. Given that standardized measures of literacy like the SAT are written in a particular academic register—and most of the passages on these assessments are drawn from traditional print media—it seems like a circular argument to say that the more one consumes media in that register, one will do better when assessed in said register. In the world of standardized testing, though, this is wholly the point: the more one reads language in the register of testing material, the better one will test in that language register. (This is to say nothing of the faulty and outdated binary between digital and print media, especially given that the College Board’s tests, including the SAT, go digital.)

A defender of the test might argue that elevated literacy or familiarity with the academic language register is a tacit purpose of the test, and that this was an example of

the test serving its proper function, which is to recognize and reward those who read a lot of well edited professional-level writing. But it can also be seen as an advantage to those who are spoken to in this language register at home. As all of the students in this study had parents whose native language was not English, hagwon served as a way to learn grammar that they would not have had otherwise. I witnessed one class in which a student who had just moved to the U.S. was taught in Korean the basic elements of a sentence (subject, verb, object). A critical theorist might see this as another pedagogical action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) in a line of pedagogical actions of the testing system—to impose existing values of the social project in which an education system is situated, in this case to center academic English as the “correct” one, elevating the discourses and dialect of the White mainstream. Hagwon can be seen as an extension of this systemic barrier. For those who were in hagwon, it was the only way for students to access what is behind the barrier—i.e., the lexicon of higher education and the attendant careers—and they were only so glad for the help.

In a way, then, hagwon served both as a subversive protest against the gatekeeping power of the academy but also a more efficient way into the warm embrace of power adjacency. It all seemed so fitting when I also considered that the restrictions put on reading interpretation by the SAT’s answer choices and that they preferred weaker answers was another pedagogical action (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) discouraging any thinking that might be too bold or radical. Encouraging students to pursue answers that were the *least wrong*, instead of ideas that sparkled or sparked the imagination, was the kind of safe thinking that led Joyce to submit an analytical essay that was mostly plot summary. For those who have no safety net, it is better to be safe than to be bold and

courageous only to be told their idea was wrong. In fact, those bold and courageous answer choices were there as a trap to punish any manner of overreach. Perhaps the line of thinking wherein safe is better than taking a risk and being wrong is a microcosm for the Bourdieusian (1998) calculation that compels attendees from immigrant families to seek out hagwon in the first place: stability within the system is preferable to taking a risk and going bust. Whatever tradeoffs come with that calculation these families are willing to make, even if it is their children's mental well-being. Odds are the punishment awaiting those who go rogue is worse.

Math

The same social capital exchange—solving difficult problems by learning every type of possible question, the subsequent repetition and practicing—applied to the math section. The math section was universally the section that participants conquered first, since it was the arena dictated by unchanging and learnable rules. The fixed, structured nature of math allowed students to learn a bound set of bricoleur's tools that was learnable solely through pure time and effort. But there are cultural and theoretical reasons for the participants' predilection for math conquest. To start, the cultural perception and emphasis on math as a marker of intelligence is brought over from the motherland (Yoon et al., 2021). Keeping up with the advanced math standard of South Korea was the reason for the hagwon boom in the 1980s, which persists today, according to the math teacher at Ace I spoke to.

To add another layer, Bourdieu (2019) wrote about how groups of people developed tastes by opposing the symbolic capital and cultural goods of other groups in order to assert superiority: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (p. 6). It

would make sense that this group, who weighs their value based on academic excellence, would value math, the subject that is perceived as boring and difficult. In other words, maybe it makes the Asian community feel better about themselves to look at the U.S.'s average SAT math score and think it "ridiculous." As one of the math teachers I observed said, it only takes "a little bit of preparation" to do well on the math section. The implication was that they (his students) were doing it; everyone else is not. After all, a little bit of memorization seems a small sacrifice compared to moving to another country and living in a basement with twelve other people like their parents did. Hsin and Xie (2014) found that Asian American students were more likely to believe that math was something one can learn to be good at as opposed to having to be naturally good at it. This is a habitus that is predicated on the idea that effort can overcome deficits in talent or even interest, which is then reinforced and reproduced at hagwon. Math is uniquely suited to measure effort, which makes it appealing.

School is Not Enough: School vs. Hagwon

Compulsory schooling is not enough to meet the academic needs and aspirations of students and their families.

As I have stated, I am torn whenever the topic of standardized testing comes up in conversation. I am prone to change my position depending on what company I happen to be keeping at the time. A baseline standard of literacy is, of course, important. I'm reminded of the enrichment class that taught the student who was newly arrived to America the basic elements of a sentence. But beyond basic literacy, the participants in this study reached levels of grit and perseverance (and literacies, if we include the critical readings of the test itself) they would not otherwise have achieved. These are the

bricoleur's tools that can transfer to any field. But they were also their own bits of capital to be compared, admired, and shared as students traded study strategies and secrets. Noah regurgitating his friend HyeJoon's independent studying strategy was an example of a peer-to-peer habitus reproduction that parents and staff did not plan for but features heavily into why parents (both Asian and non-Asian) want their children to attend: to be exposed to the rigorous culture of hagwon in the hopes that it will model hard work for their kids, and subsequently, their kids will internalize those social capital elements (Maxwell, 2005).

However, I also cannot help but think that the fixation on right or wrong fostered by a testing system that insists that there are right or wrong answers—even when it comes to subjective literary elements like tone or purpose—has contributed to a broader and expanding habitus wherein political discourse is likewise characterized by fixed right-or-wrong thinking (including on the very topic of this dissertation). Supporters of the hagwon system would likely focus on HyeJoon's grit and determination and the profound sense of accomplishment he felt when he hit his goal score. Therefore, hagwon is good and should serve as a model for anyone who wants to improve their lot in life. Detractors of hagwon would likely point to Joyce, whose mental health was compromised, and find the culture of hagwon to be toxic and a threat to the well-being of young people; not to mention a part of a broader system that fosters White supremacy.

I will admit that I see both and feel stuck. What I will say is that college applications focusing more on non-test related activities will hopefully pull kids out of the plight of rote achievement-chasing that is passion-less. I am reminded of when Joyce said that when it comes to the SAT, she tries not to think about why it's important—just

that she has to do well on it no matter what, and test prep is just something on her schedule, so she does it. For all my pushback against painting these students as robotic, there *is* something soulless about Joyce's response. To me, it does feel short of some platonic educative ideal—one that I as a teacher certainly envision when I plan and teach my courses. Maybe this is ultimately what people are most upset about when it comes to test prep culture: that SAT prep does not even pretend to bother with a higher order purpose. It openly and *unapologetically* helps students with a compulsory task that means little outside of itself.

Task vs. Task

But this is also precisely why students and families like hagwon. It saves them time and resources and gets directly to the point: it teaches attendees the most efficient way to increase their odds at being admitted to a prestigious college, which is always the goal. Why they choose certain schools over others, as I discovered in overhearing the students whose dream school was Georgetown, is arbitrary and points back to that singular goal: prestigious college. Relatedly, the other stark revelation for me during this study was that students see most of their school tasks as equally rote and arbitrary, and a means to that ever-present singular end: prestigious college. I told Joyce that I plan my courses thinking that they are going to have a profound impact on my students, but I am realizing that most of them are thinking of it as another obligation to survive. She did not dispute this. Rather, she said, "That's so sad."

Rebecca, owner of Ace Academy, *would* dispute all of this. She argued that she is doing a service to her community and feels a deep responsibility to continue to help kids reach their full potential. Kang (2022a) interviewed two hagwon owners in his book who

said the same, as did the Crown Academy and Queens Institute owners over the course of my interactions with them. They are helping their students achieve specific, targeted goals. In addition, Rebecca would argue that the skills Rebecca teaches in her classes *do* transfer over: e.g., annotating; note taking; reading carefully; enjoying every text put in front of you as if it's the most important thing in that moment; resilience; discipline; work ethic; not making excuses; sacrifice. These are all bricoleur's tools that lead to success in college and career—from both school and hagwon. I certainly would not dispute the importance of any of those capacities. Where Rebecca differed from her clients' schoolteachers is that she acknowledged the importance of the cultural mandate for admission into prestigious college, whereas participants perceived their compulsory schoolteachers downplaying it, or—as Kang (2022a) wrote about public perception of hagwon culture—thinking it “tacky.” Here again, though, the power of the market setting was a mitigating factor. Hagwon staff was paid for a specific purpose, and paying clients expected returns on their financial investment. School staff felt less direct fiduciary duty to their students.

Bricolage: School and Hagwon

Where Derrida's (1998) poststructuralist breakdown of Lévi-Strauss (1962) might be useful is in thinking not so much about how this binary (school versus hagwon) differentiates between school and hagwon, but rather how they (school and hagwon) *converge*, or bricolage together. For the hagwon student, they (school and hagwon) are seen as Western (school) and Eastern (hagwon) manifestations of the distinct cultural threads converging on the same pedagogical action. Akin to the convergence of cultural

imperatives, when cultural value messaging from their schoolteachers and hagwon teachers align, it creates another unassailable imperative that students internalize as truth.

The harshest critique of test prep that I read referred to it as “the junk food of education” (Marshall, 2003). In fairness, a closer read of Marshall’s critique shows a more nuanced (and, frankly, question begging) argument: specifically, that “junky” test prep needs to be excised for more engaging “*good teaching*” (emphasis hers) that subsequently leads to highly educated students who then produce high test scores. She conceded that “schools need to accept the reality of high-stakes tests.” Her argument sounded idyllic, but it was framed within a sobering reality. I will go a step further and say that as long as tests exist, hagwon will exist, and maybe it’s time we stop bemoaning this fact. School teachers think, in their solipsistic fantasy, that their classes are closer to some educative ideal—and maybe that is true ontologically. But based on the student responses in this study, an SAT prep course and an English class at school are *perceived* as the same *to them*—just another task. If anything, for students mired in the college application process, the SAT prep class has more of a concrete use case.

If we consider that the students universally perceived that getting good at the SAT is figuring out the answers that the test makers are looking for, the SAT is really testing a student’s ability to do just that: give those in authority what they want on their terms. In this way, the argument can be made, on a theoretical level, that hagwon is perpetuating a status quo couched in a history of exclusion and subordination. Reading hagwon through a critical race lens might be a fruitful exercise. But to the students in this study, the SAT and its arbitrary tasks were no different than the assignments they are given at school. When my participants said that preparing for the SAT is “another subject that I’m not

learning in school” (HyeJoon), they meant that mastering their school subjects and tasks is just as arbitrary *to them* as mastering the SAT. And lest we forget, our school system is just as couched in a history of exclusion and subordination (see Kliebard, 2004). Point being, as long as the fundamental framework of our schools remain the way they are, the SAT and shadow education will remain the way they are.

The simple critical read of the intersecting pieces of the testing system is that it reflects Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1990) pedagogical action: the test and those preparing students for it are inscribing in them an obeisance to a status quo that requires workers who are highly literate and capable of rapid calculations and problem-solving skills. Add the timed element, and you have someone who is capable of all of the above but on a deadline, under immense pressure.

In the meantime, what the hagwon attendees are thinking about as they go about this business is that they have to operate within the given system, and that delivering desired outcomes (i.e., figuring out what teachers, professors, employers, and clients want) *is* a skill they will need if they want to get through college and join the workforce. To our students, school and the SAT are different in content but not in spirit: both are taskmasters requiring students to learn a knowledge domain and apply it strategically under pressure—to be assigned a value at the end.

Contrary to my “sad” revelation, I have received letters, cards, and emails from students that say my class has had a deep profound impact on their lives—which is to say I would like to think that I do occasionally meet my platonic educative ideal. But hagwons have students like HyeJoon, too, who would say that hagwon has had a profound impact on his life, for all the reasons Rebecca listed. It will be something to

monitor, as kids figure out what colleges want, and shadow education caters more towards optimizing student interests, and public investment in public institutions declines, if enrichment classes don't start to outpace their school classes in terms of desirability and impact like it has in South Korea for decades.

The Hidden Curriculum & Culture: The Habitus of Hagwon

The need for shadow education signifies larger societal or structural issues (e.g., economy, equity, race, etc.).

The social space (Bourdieu, 1998)—the variety of individual habituses within the field—collectively made up a culture of mutual cultural capital transmission that made hagwon more than just about the test preparation. Students felt like this was somewhere that their particular backgrounds, interests, and concerns were shared and honored—essential elements of feeling *seen*, especially for members of an immigrant community who can feel isolated, invisible, or even forsaken in the mainstream world (Kang, 2022a, 2022b; Yoon, 2009).

In other words, the transmission of knowledge and capital was only *part* of what their hagwon experiences were imparting on these students. The exchange between the student who wanted to go to Georgetown for no discernible reason and another student who didn't dare name a dream school demonstrated that attending hagwon involved a coordination of test knowledge, sure, but also a tacit understanding that they both wanted to do well and achieve some modicum of prestige—one that the student who didn't name a dream school would not dare presume—which is why they were bothering to ask about these things in the first place. The posters on the wall promoting elite college admissions and test scores were part of this other transmission. The statistical element of Bourdieu's

(1998) habitus was at play here, and is a constant presence at hagwon: assessing and playing the odds of what score range with what combination of other credentials could get into what schools was a constant topic of conversation among the students at hagwon, both in and out of classes.

This shared ambition was a fixed regulating element of hagwon culture, made all the more fixed because those who did not buy in did not last long. According to Noah, “If they’re doing bad and not in the advanced class, it’s usually because they’re not trying. And I don’t blame them for that. But those that are in advanced, those are usually the ones that care a lot more about the actual test and doing well on it, they’re more ambitious towards the SAT, and it makes me more ambitious towards the SAT and gives me good habits as well.” In other words, students who *continue* to attend and ascend to the advanced class embody and consequently perpetuate the cultural emphasis on hard work and achievement, which is then handed down to the next class of hagwon attendees.

Thus, the part of hagwon that gets lost is that while they can teach tricks and tips, most of the improvements come while studying independently. Hagwon culture may have shown what it means to work hard and to improve and may provide a space where students could hone their test-taking skills in consistent controlled setting, but the real mandate was for students to hone the application of these tricks and tips on practice tests at home. Thus, as much as it may seem like test prep centers are draconian taskmasters, the truth is that the students who really excel in these places are self-motivated and quite independent. The other students see and hear about these successes—from the students themselves or from the teachers’ triumph-laden narratives about their former students—

and aim to replicate these successes. In a Bourdieusian (1998) twist, then, it is the students who are inscribing the field as much as the field is inscribing them.

Stress and Anxiety

Certainly, a part of the discourse I do not want to neglect is that hagwon exacerbates stress and anxiety, and any attempt to normalize or perpetuate the benefits of shadow education is only feeding into a toxic system that does harm to young people's psyches—not to mention the values and discourses of a dominant White mainstream. But in speaking to students, hagwon was also a place that helped them alleviate some of the anxiety that comes with uncertainty. The mentorship aspect of hagwon was something my participants pointed to as a benefit of hagwon; Noah compared it to having an older sibling for those without an older sibling, emphasizing yet another familial element in the habitus of hagwon. The consensus was that teachers at school derided standardized tests or did not address them at all, and bemoaned the overemphasis on college admissions outcomes, which created tension with what the students in this study were being told by their families, peers, and communities. Hagwon made time for students' real concerns instead of centering the teachers-chosen topics and fields of expertise that students may or may not see as useful in the long term. It is important to note here that students saw both hagwon and school equally as of questionable use. In other words, *both* were arbitrary tasks or means to an end: college, career, financial stability. But the habitus of hagwon allowed for a comfort level—both fostered by the market setting (Bray et al., 2018) and a feeling that this was a space where they and their concerns were *seen*. They were not treated as burdens, as immigrants can sometimes feel in mainstream spaces (Yoon, 2009).

The personal attention—or even the added attention—students received at hagwon motivated them in a way that they were not encouraged at school. To begin with, the hagwon staff’s encouragement aligned with the desires of the attendees’ parents, which created a powerful goal alignment that symbiotically supported the other. The students internalized the mission statement at home (i.e., achieve and live up to parental sacrifice) then brought that cultural imperative to the hagwon to be mixed with the pressure from their peers and *their* parents’ ambitions. The teachers, also mostly from Korea, perpetuated this narrative—in part because they also lived it and believe it—but also, must answer to the parents who were paying tuition. Thus creates a bricolage of cultural threads that collapse into one unified habitus, shaped by people who largely are not physically present in the building. Thus, the scene wherein the parent silently watches their child do Kumon homework as a way for immigrant parents to show love unfolds on a larger scale in the habitus of hagwon. The child feels the weight of their parents’ watchful eye, but also the weight of the sacrifice, expectation, and yes, love at the heart of that tableau.

The Weight of Sacrifice

This cultural emphasis on sacrifice underscores the entire hagwon enterprise. Parental sacrifice in the form of the migration experience— i.e., leaving behind a family, a familiar home, one’s birthplace and community, better career prospects—is “a distinct facet of parental support that is reflective of the cultural features and cultural frames of reference of Asian immigrants” (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010, p. 62). In return, Asian American adolescents were found to have stronger feelings of filial obligation than their European counterparts (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). While the participants in this study

generally were not explicitly forced by their parents to attend hagwon, the weight of parental sacrifice and expectations were ever present. This is the distinction Emmie made between “tiger” parenting and non-negligent parenting, wherein her parents were not the ones driving her to hagwon (she begged them, remember); but rather, she attended happily (“I’m happy”), with a deep understanding and appreciation of their sacrifice serving as a driving force for her to try her best.

All of the calculating, strategizing, and grinding was ultimately about being able to achieve financial stability and a little bit of prestige for the family—and when it comes to Asian families, children are often responsible for their parents, as recompense for their sacrifice (Chao & Kaeochinda, 2010; Dang, 2023). For students whose families have known real struggle, like Emmie, whose family lived apart for five years, or Joyce, whose parents lived in a basement with 12-15 other people while they saved money for an investment property, this motivation was pressing. Hardship is an inextricable part of the habitus of hagwon; these families have known struggle, so they will spare no expense in making sure their children have every opportunity to rise out of poverty. It also looms, distally, over the entire college admissions process for these participants.

This is a habitus that is “deeply enmeshed in histories of privation, of the difficult times of Japanese colonization and the Korean War, of extreme famine and hunger” (Kim, 2012, p. 706). I think when HyeJoon talked about his father’s immovable will to succeed or when Noah mentioned wanting to pay back his parents for their sacrifice, what I saw was a desire to succeed that was rooted in the culture of the past: they felt a responsibility to lift their families up and avoid suffering themselves. The Western influence is where students could set their sights on climbing—beyond just sustenance—

and embracing the idea of American as the land of opportunity. For some, their idea of luxury was simple: some free time to rest and see friends. Noah went so far as to say that he would consider himself successful if he could pay back and take care of everyone who helped him along the way. In fact, the first thing he would do, if he had all the money in the world, was to retire his parents and buy them a house. What I did not hear from these students was any field that posed much risk. They were fields that balanced prestige and security (e.g., law, counseling, computers). Swimming, art, and writing were seen as credentials rather than career prospects. The tension between the two sides of this habitus was securing a future for their family and dreaming big for themselves— aspiring while remaining risk averse. There is a humanizing (Paris & Winn, 2014) aspect to this research as well: The voices of the students—their hopes, aspirations, and real-life struggles—help to showcase their nuanced experiences while complicating the narrative of test prep centers as illicit or exclusively for the privileged.

Work Ethic

One of the practice SAT tests I observed featured a passage about voting behavior. As it turns out, *where* one votes has an influence on *how* one votes. Maybe my time at hagwon observing and my time speaking with students who attend hagwon have influenced me, but I've come to the conclusion that standardized testing, particularly the SAT, *is* valuable. I am comfortable saying that a high SAT score shows us something positive about that student, while also saying that a low or nonexistent SAT score is not necessarily a negative. Both can be true; I think this study showed that. I also feel comfortable saying that hagwons are a place where students feel like they are getting help

they really need—to circle back all the way to my opening vignette in Chapter One—where they feel *loved*, in a way (Indurti, 2021).

As a baseline, the SAT measures basic, fundamental academic skills like reading, grammar, and math (specifically, algebra, geometry, and trigonometry). If these subjects are no longer valuable, then the high school curriculum should no longer feature them. I've learned that these students would figure out whatever else the test or the college application process put in front of them. I know this because they figured out the SAT, which not everyone can do. “Cause it's hard,” as Joyce said. And this means that a high SAT score is not meretricious, spurious, or “dumb,” as Joyce's freshman year English teacher told her. It measures a student's ability to read meticulously, problem solve, identify traps, and avoid mistakes—in short, to do well on something difficult. It also demonstrates the ability to prepare, figure out what is being asked of them, and deliver the desired outcome under pressure. As the teacher at Queens Institute said, “It really tests how much you studied, how much you prepared; it's really a test of work ethic.”

In a purely ethical sense, the participants in this study embodied the existing values of their time. To “succeed,” for them, is to be highly educated and financially independent, so they can be productive contributing members of society. So why is there a stigma around shadow education and its participants? I think an education purist might argue that it's because they are not pursuing higher education in good faith—that is, they are not reading and thinking about the texts in a way that is true to the spirit of Classical education, which was to develop a sense of civic and moral duty. If this is the case, we are blaming the victims. These students are abiding by the existing civic and moral imperatives: figuring out their strengths, then optimizing them. To me, they all embody a

common trait: they are doing the best they can with the tools available to them. They are *bricoleurs* (Lévi-Strauss, 1962), as are we all (Derrida, 1988). They are trying to please their parents and make a life for themselves—and in some cases, their parents, too—by doing a “rational evaluation of their chances for success” (Bourdieu, 1998), though what success will look like exactly is nebulous. “Bare minimum” (HyeJoon’s phrase) is to make enough money to live comfortably. Ultimately, as Emmie said, they just want to be able to look back and know that they “tried a bit more” while they had the chance.

According to my findings, hagwon significantly helped students seeing the test for the first time, who needed the weekly structure to force them to practice weekly. These students saw immediate improvement, about 200-300 points, which is the equivalent of jumping from the 70th to the upper 90th percentile (The College Board, 2022). The students in this study who had the highest SAT scores learned some basic tips at hagwon (e.g., types of questions, types of passages, etc.) and then crossed the 1500 threshold on their own. This, to me, shows something, too—if nothing else, an acknowledgement that it takes time and personal effort to figure out a difficult thing. As Emmie said, “The score is important. It kind of shows how I tried *this* hard.” Unfortunately, the students perceived that having received professional coaching devalues these accomplishments. I am left to wonder how this might impact student self-perception as shadow education evolves to optimize their other interests.

Again, shadow education is protean: it moves as the body moves. It will help raise test scores if that is what is needed. If a student wants to shine in the art space or the research space, or is required to put a portfolio together—as has been proposed as a more equitable solution (New York Performance Standards Consortium, 2012; Nortvedt et al.,

2020; Yilmaz et al., 2023)—there are now people who can help them optimize those outcomes. If students have time to volunteer or gain work experience or join clubs, there are people who can advise them on that, too. Grace decided to focus on her other strengths because the SAT was causing her too much stress and anxiety. Under the guidance of a consultant, she figured out how to stand out in other ways. This is the future. Akin to the work that went into my participants' SAT scores, the effort Grace put into her art and writing portfolio are real, as are the accolades she received. It should be noted, though, that portfolio consulting is much more one-on-one, and therefore less accessible to most students. Of the seven participants, only Grace's well-to-do parents could afford consulting services, and she also happened to be the only one going test optional.

For the students in this study, hagwon was a haven where they were allowed to think their singular aspiration to be important and have that aspiration subsequently nurtured. In other words, hagwon is much more than test prep.

Hagwon's fixture as a rite of passage is that it is a field of convergence for a bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 1998) of cultural threads (i.e., East and West; families and peers; immediate community and larger cultural messaging) to create a distinct habitus (Bourdieu, 1998), characterized by a ubiquitous and inescapable imperative for the attendees focused on discipline and achievement at all costs. This achievement-centered habitus compels attendees and their families to engage in a series of calculations that will give them the best chance of success at every level of the college admissions process, which, for many families represented their safest path to social mobility. The central mandate—get to a good college—dictated how attendees made decisions about how to

spend their time—what texts to read, what to study, what activities to pursue or abandon. What students found comforting amid the pressure of navigating this process is that this cultural transmission occurs in concert with like-minded peers.

Competition

An interesting paradox exists in all this talk of cultural togetherness, which is that multiple participants mentioned that they felt in competition with other hagwon attendees. They were all vying for the same limited number of spots at the handful of desirable colleges they were aspiring to attend, which Noah pointed out. Emmie and Troy felt a “friendly” competition that compelled them to try harder and root for one another. For Grace, the competition element triggered her anxiety, though she admitted that she was unnecessarily self-conscious. I could not help but feel that this brand of competition was also handed down from their parents in some way, as I recall with some dread the times my parents compared me to their friends’ children.

Yet, it did not create a toxic environment in the classes I observed. On the contrary, overall, I saw friendly competition and students helping each other. The culture of hagwon may be predicated on an overall habitus of competition, but most of the competitive energy is directed outward. The people they are in competition with are faceless and abstract. Rather, the absence of cutthroat sabotage or even any sense of resentment toward each other from the students suggests that the real feeling of competition was not among direct classmates. No, they were in the struggle together, even though the underlying truth was that they were in competition with each other.

I think what overpowered any negative feelings towards their classmates came from a profound understanding that their shared habitus, that their lives, collectively,

were hard enough. Anyone who attends hagwon for any length of time to study for the SAT knows that the test is difficult, and that the college admissions process to which the test is attached is nebulous, and likely feel the pressure of their parents' expectations. There was no need to make each other's lives more difficult than they already were. When I saw that students compared answers and scores, I did see some teasing ("Tell that to your score"), but it was not malicious. When the students did interact with each other, mostly I saw smiles and laughter. I saw friendliness. They were acknowledging that they were together in a struggle and commiserating.

Public Perception and Guilt

The negative public perception of hagwon and its attendees added a layer of guilt to this already layered habitus. The participants in this study were bound by a single test—a reverence for which was carried over from the motherland. This cultural touchstone is now couched in a foreign host country that sees their fixation on excelling be grotesque, which is a perception that the students internalize themselves. While they don't necessarily think about their experiences in these terms, explicitly—they are just doing what they think they are supposed to be doing, after all—what they do feel is a tacit guilt. They feel *guilty* about doing well. But they also feel guilty when they do not do well. Their parents want them to be part of the old-world culture, but they moved here so they could be successful in this new culture, which requires some assimilation. When those cultures collide, students feel that tension.

Race, Merit, and Opposition

Unfortunately, the race issue was part of this conflicted cultural messaging, too. The habitus of hagwon included the feeling that the hagwon attendees were more

deserving than other minority groups of admission into the top schools because they were scoring better, sacrificing their Saturdays, and working so hard to do well. This was likely cultural capital handed down from parents and, on one occasion, I heard some of the age-old anti-Affirmative Action talking points (“What are *they* doing this Saturday?” and “You are working harder than *them*”) as a way to motivate the students who were there. In fairness, this same sentiment pointed to White students and the legacy policies that provided them an anti-meritocratic advantage in the college admissions process. The keyword participants used in their interviews when this issue came up was “merit,” which can be a loaded word. But their feeling was that their sacrifice and hard work and ultimately, their higher scores, was merit. And merit should be rewarded. Their cultures—both East and West—had told them so. Discipline and forbearance will pay off; it is the ancient Eastern adage. Industrialism and productivity will pay off; it is the American way. Thus, to hagwon attendees, Affirmative Action and legacy are an injustice to them and to these sacred cultural ideals that define their lives.

I will admit to being made uncomfortable at times when race was addressed or (in the case of the teacher who said the SAT is no longer racist) not acknowledged. But these sentiments were couched in that anxiety—this feeling that injustice was being done to their sacred cultural ideals. And this anxiety showed itself in different ways, some admittedly unpleasant. Case in point: I think it’s fair to say that the *Spider-Man* episode in which a Black student had to argue with another student about the authenticity of a Black Spider-Man was ugly. Seen through a Bourdieusian lens, this could be a case in which Bourdieu’s (2019) idea of opposition—wherein one group asserts their superiority by opposing the symbolic capital or cultural goods of another group—reveals a deep-

seated insecurity. This is pure speculation, but perhaps the Black student was outperforming the Asian student on practice tests; or perhaps the Black student's mere presence at hagwon posed a threat to the Asian student's very cultural identity, which was predicated on the idea that his group put in more effort than other groups (home, hagwon, and society had told him so); so the Asian student decided to assert his superiority by standing in opposition to a cultural good valued by the Black student. It would be insightful to speak with non-Asian, specifically Black, hagwon students and hear about their experiences in Asian-run (and non-Asian run, too) test prep centers, or design a study that examines hagwon and its participants specifically through a critical race lens.

I would also be interested in finding out more about public perception if we were to destabilize the perception of shadow education as an Asian institution—and investigate whether the negative stigma of test prep attendance attaches itself to non-Asian students. Alon (2010) wrote that Black students “demonstrated high levels of preparatory commitment, but they adjusted their preparation strategy to the structure of opportunity” (p. 9) to advocate for affirmative action. Specifically, Alon argued that making elite schools more accessible makes it more likely for Black students to take test prep and tutoring, even more so than their White SES counterparts. I am left wondering if those who think of shadow education as “parasitic” (Dawson, 2010) or gaming the test (Toldson & McGee, 2014) would say the same thing about a Black student or poor White student trying to “[adjust] their preparation strategy to the structure of opportunity” (Alon, 2010, p. 9)—and if not, why the perception is different.

Conclusion

There is a sense in which the Asian American hagwon student is a conundrum—not fully of their host country, but not fully of their country of origin, either. They are also unclaimed by both the progressive and conservative movements in education discourse—not oppressed enough to be considered an oppressed minority, but a minority nonetheless, subject to a quota. This is what Kang (2022a) meant when he said that Asian Americans were the “loneliest” Americans. Asian American hagwon students in particular are a bricolage of definitive American *and* Asian values but are made aware at every turn of their status as simulacra in both regards, defined as much by what they lack as by what they are: ambitious, but too much so, but should be more; a minority group, but not oppressed enough to warrant help, but seen as gaming the system when they help themselves; successful, but shadowy, but never successful enough; encouraged to embrace their cultural background, but also find ways to present as “less Asian” when applying to college (Qin, 2022). Lonely, indeed.

A defining feature of the habitus of hagwon is an opposition (Bourdieu, 2019) to the fixed narratives in education discourse that socioeconomic status, education level of the parents, and whether English is the primary language spoken at home, predict academic performance (Goldfarb, 2014; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010), including performance on the SAT, specifically (Miller, 2023). The data sample in this study is small, but the top scorers in this participant pool were Jane, whose parents did not attend college, primarily spoke Mandarin at home, and struggled financially; and HyeJoon, whose family was evicted from their apartments when he was growing up and whose father works multiple jobs to support the family.

The only student who spoke openly about their parents' financial privilege, Grace, is going test optional—relying instead on her art and writing decorations, which were professionally consulted on and coached, at much greater cost than an SAT prep class. This could be a portend for the picture of college admissions moving forward as more schools (both on the high school and college level) go test optional or test blind. For what it may be worth, it is this researcher's opinion that test blind is a step too far. It will exacerbate inequity. College consulting gives an advantage to people who can afford college consulting, which is much less accessible than test prep. Rebecca said she spends 90% of her time on her consulting clients versus her test prep classes, though she has many more test prep students. The Asian American community has historically relied on the testing system as a culturally accepted credential that aligned with and elevated their familiar old-world values and elevated their children to prestigious schools. Likewise, Anti-test sentiment and policies compromise an established and reliable pathway to social mobility (the standardized test score) for Asian immigrant families.

It is no wonder, then, that students and families feel safer and more comfortable at hagwon than at school. The shared cultural heritage meant that there was nobody judging their ambitions, or their families, or the lengths they were going to achieve; rather, there were teachers and staff who celebrated students' successes as their own. The names on the wall were proof of that. Ultimately, for the participants of this study, hagwon provided a field where they could be around people who understood this all; where the adults showed care for their concrete goals and answered pressing questions about them; where they could work towards something important to themselves and their families

both past and future; where they could celebrate their triumphs and laugh about their missteps; and where they could feel unapologetic about wanting and being more.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

“Come on guys, this is basic SAT prep.”

Implications for my Classroom

In June 2023, my seniors did presentations on some aspect of our shared class text that they found to be worthy of further exploration, and present on it, briefly, to their classmates. As an opening activity, one of my students asked their classmates to rank their sympathy for one of the characters in our book on a scale of 0-5. When a student said “three” because it was “right in the middle,” I corrected them, brimming with confidence from my weeks of watching explanations of SAT median questions. Normally, I said, the scale is 1-5, in which case, three would be the median. But I pointed out that because 0 was a choice in this case, there are actually *six* entries. An even number of data points means that the median will fall between the two middle ones. The formula, I said, is: $(n + 1) / 2$, so if you add 6 (the number of data points) + 1, then divide by two, you get 3.5. The median, then, is the average of the third and fourth entry, which is 2.5. (Don’t forget that last step; it trips up a lot of SAT takers. 3.5 would be the classic trap answer.) “Come on guys, this is basic SAT prep,” I said.

Throughout this study, my thoughts often turned to *my* students. I wondered if I was seeing vestiges of hagwon instruction in my own students’ behavior. In a memo after an observation on 1/14/23 (one of my first observations), I wrote: “Revelation: My students who test prep stick to the details of the book. They’re unwilling to be wrong, so it’s hard for them to take bold stances and chances in their class comments and essays.” Joyce pointed out something similar with her school English teacher, who pointed out that instead of an analytical essay with a literary argument, she had written a glorified

plot summary—something I also see from my students. I am thinking now that if I were to acknowledge the test and what it asks of my students, I could use it as a jumping off point to get them to take the next step in a way that brings in something my students care about, and work towards the type of thinking I as an English teacher care about. Perhaps these two types of instruction are not mutually exclusive, but rather a sequence.

Reading to Writing Sequence

Something the SAT teaches that I do think is important is that there are different ways to read different genres of text. Grace hinted at this: “the SAT split up into science and narrative, stuff like that. And I guess there's different ways of approaching each one.” This may seem like an obvious thing, but it’s not. This is something I learned as a PhD student—that getting used to the structure of a particular type of study can help mine texts for information more quickly and efficiently. Reading a narrative and reading argumentative rhetoric are different, as are historical documents and scientific studies. Schools divide classes by subject, which of course is necessary. But an unintended consequence of this type of silo-ing is that it can give off the impression that science and English are separate. A tacit understanding that is built into the SAT reading section is that science and English are built on a common foundation of literacy—academic literacy—that require the student to be able to read and comprehend at a certain level.

Then, there is the idea that test prep and English class are siloed—something my participants brought up often. But I see overlap. I understand that most seminar classes geared towards reading literature feels different from what the SAT is asking of students. But I don’t think the comprehension skills tested by the pedantic-seeming questions on the SAT and the idea-synthesis that an English class requires in analytic writing are

mutually exclusive. Joyce complained that her teachers ignored the SAT, “It’s just the subjects are different because I feel like schoolteachers never talk about the things that are on SAT. Like we never talk about grammar in school or like strategies for SAT and stuff like that. Like we don’t even go over reading and things like that. It’s just like you read and you write a paper.” There *is* something missing in most English classrooms, at least, that teaching to the close reading and grammar knowledge required by the SAT can fill. Assessing whether the students are understanding a character in a narrative or the conclusion of a scientific study is not necessarily a bad thing.

The SAT gets granular; they’ll ask for the meaning of a word or a single line. What the typical analytic essay in an English class is really asking for is a student-generated idea supported by evidence. In putting together an essay, the student is effectively asked to document the argument building process—the idea, then the moments that demonstrate that idea with explanations. Certainly, a single line, dialogue exchange, or an author’s word choice can be part of that evidence and analysis. Emmie acknowledged that the SAT does not ask students to generate their own ideas, but rather evaluate existing ideas for validity. Thus, she concluded, the skills required of the SAT and a traditional English class are ultimately different: “it requires a different type of skill. You could understand something, but to fully write upon it and expand upon it, I feel like that’s kind of different.” But I would argue that understanding and fully writing upon it are part of a larger unified process. There is no writing and expanding without understanding, which Emmie acknowledged, too: “When I have to write a certain essay, I have to, of course, read and understand [the text].” In other words, the SAT and English

class do not necessarily have to be siloed, though they may seem like it now. They could very well be presented as sequential steps of the same process.

Structured Direct (Grammar, Vocabulary) Instruction

A major curricular takeaway from my months of data collecting was that students benefit from structured lessons that have clear learning objectives. Hoping students will pick up test patterns on their own put too much on the student. Students liked having strategies and patterns taught *to* them that they could subsequently apply on their own (e.g., knowing what types of answers to look for in a science passage vs. a history passage). Jane, especially, bemoaned the lack of a curriculum or lessons of any kind. For the students at the other centers, they found the workbooks with structured content lessons to be helpful.

Emmie thought the lack of structure was okay, as long as she was getting in depth instruction about a particular topic. Grammar instruction at Ace Academy, she said, would teach based on question type, but would launch into lectures about grammar elements (see above). The same went for vocabulary. There is plenty of research available on the best method of vocabulary acquisition that is beyond the scope of this study. It is nice to imagine that our students read so much on their own and when they encounter a word they don't know, they look it up and internalize the meanings of words organically. But the data in this study suggests that this is not the reality. In fact, Joyce admitted that she had to look up summaries of her texts at school to understand them.

What does that mean for an English class? Subjects like English, especially, can rely heavily on seminar-style discussions and writing instruction that focuses on idea building—where one could get by with a cursory understanding of the characters and

plot. Which is not to say discussions are not still important—I think they are. But the students in this study lamented that they were not taught basic grammar in school, which hurt them on the writing section. The consensus was that learning grammar and vocabulary helped them with their writing at school, which should not come as a surprise. Emmie said, “In the writing section, I feel like just common English grammar terms that I learned helped my essays and writing. I think I improve upon learning from Ace Academy.”

I have to think that there is a place for explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction in a reading and writing curriculum. We can no longer assume that students will pick up grammar patterns on their own through sustained exposure to properly edited texts. This way of thinking also heavily privileges students whose language at home matches the “proper” academic English preferred at school. Hagwons are operating under the assumption that their students are not exposed to enough properly edited texts to absorb proper grammar and advanced vocabulary. Given that our students are increasingly being exposed to texts that have not been professionally edited (e.g., peer-generated texts through social media, personal blogs, message boards, chats) the onus is back on schools to be sure students are learning grammar and vocabulary.

Although there are fair critiques of the way the SAT approaches ELA—I have covered many—that does not preclude teachers from using its admittedly restrictive imperatives as a tool, even if it is motivational. Joyce expressed a desire for her teachers at school to acknowledge and address the reality of testing. So, the question we must ask ourselves as teachers is, whom are we serving? I am left wondering, speaking from the school side, how much content crossover there is and/or should be between standardized

tests and school. Troy mentioned that it was “cool” to see the same materials—topics and authors—on tests as he did in school. I have begun to use the language of the test and even some of the lessons I observed during this study (e.g., “If you see the word ‘meanness’ as a multiple-choice question, the SAT will definitely bait you to choose ‘not nice to others,’ but how is Thoreau using it here?”), and have seen an extra level of buy-in from students. Thus, there is room for instruction to include test preparation techniques without being overly reductive or compromising some educative ideal.

What’s Next? For Further Study

This study was focused on high schoolers preparing for the SAT. But part of my argument is also that shadow education is protean—it can meet individual needs and evolve over time—just as the original YMCAs in Korea evolved from teaching religion and language to serve the changing imperatives of a modernizing world. Today, hagwon is focused on testing. Tomorrow, it could be something else. A longitudinal study of test prep centers might reveal their evolution as the test goes digital, but more crucially, fewer students decide to take the SAT as colleges and universities go test optional (Goldstein, 2023). For this study, I spent most of my observation time in SAT prep courses, save for one SHSAT class at Queens Institute and the enrichment class at Crown that I mistakenly walked into. But the enrichment class only had five students in it. The beginner SAT prep classes at both Ace and Crown were so overcrowded that they had to be divided into two cohorts. This is all to say, the demand is overwhelmingly greater for test prep, as of now. It might be worth spending more time in enrichment classes for younger students like the one I saw at Crown and see if they have a long-term effect on the students’ performance both in school and on tests. Do they come alive in their writing more? Is there a path

forward for classes that truly *enrich* while filling in foundational gaps like grammar and vocabulary?

I also spent all my time in the norther New Jersey and Queens, NY, areas. There are many enclaves of Asian students elsewhere in the country: Virginia, San Francisco, Los Angeles to name a few. As Kang (2022a) pointed out, this test prep to test success phenomenon is not unique to just the NY/NJ area. Qualitative studies of hagwon in other areas of the country are needed, especially as the rules around test-in high schools (e.g., in San Francisco) continue to be challenged and changed.

Something else to monitor is how the new test impacts shadow education centers, especially when it comes to gathering practice materials that are all digital. The role of artificial intelligence (AI) in this regard might be something to monitor, too. As a part time job, Jane was doing quality control to help companies develop AI tools that would generate effective practice questions. What impact might this have on hagwons dealing with an all-digital test? Will AI weaken hagwons by allowing students to do more self-study? Or will AI make hagwons even stronger by providing them with tools to generate an infinite number of practice questions? I imagine that test prep centers—as adaptive as they have been already—will figure it out.

Shadow Moves as the Body Moves

The idea that shadow education would go away because the SAT becomes optional is silly. As Grace—who is a published authority on the topic—said, “From what I found, it's not shadow education that's the problem. It doesn't cause disparity. It's like the whole education system. Because people are going to use shadow education. Like, you can't stop people from doing it. So, if you look at the big picture and fix the general

education system, people will be less reliant on it.” HyeJoon’s categorization of hagwon might give us insight into the future of the SAT: “It’s another EC [extracurricular].” That is, in the same way that a student might list an athletic or artistic accomplishment, a high SAT score is another credential that demonstrates something important about the student: their willingness to work at something difficult.

Furthermore, as the college application process deemphasizes standardized testing (for now), I have to raise some concern about what is happening to activities that were once about recreation and leisure becoming part of the evaluative process. Competitive sports is already a major part of admissions, as it was found that that athletic scholarships increase the chances for admission more than any other designation (Arcidiacono et al., 2021). Now, it seems, pastimes like art and writing are also entering the arena of game-able activities, subject to professional coaching and advisement. As more is learned about the decline in mental health being attached to fewer opportunities for independent free play (Gray et al., 2023), I am concerned with the commodification of escapist independent free play activities and the impact it may have on student mental health.

When I went to structure the student narratives, I noticed that there was no subheading for “personal life.” It made me wonder: Are these kids *happy*? Emmie insisted that she was: “I am happy.” But what about the others? Are they making time to do things that bring them some joy, and not another credential? In chasing all these aspirations and goals, do they make time for themselves? Or have these check-boxes displaced or superseded any sense of personal agency, desire, play, or even time? In short, what happens when everything a student does becomes transactional, potential application fodder, or commodity? Admittedly, part of why my findings skewed

academic had to do with my line of questioning. As much as I wanted my interviews to be shared open-ended conversations, ultimately, I asked the questions and ran the interviews, and my focus was on test preparation and planning for college. But Grace noted that the singular pursuit of awards had a negative impact on her art hagwon experience. On the other hand, the recognitions she garnered increased her interest in writing. She had classmates at that art school, many of whom also won awards, according to Grace. It might be fruitful to talk to some of them and ask about their experiences regarding the commodification of free play and personal interests. Two top scorers, Noah and Jane, mentioned gaming as a hobby; thus, I wondered about a connection between hacking culture in gaming with some of the testing strategies as testing “hacks.”

Ultimately, I believe that hagwon will exist in some form or fashion, helping students get the help they need—to either catch up or get ahead—and parents will seek them out and continue to tell each other about which ones they would recommend. Recall Zhou and Kim’s (2006) call: “an examination of specific ethnic social structures, namely ethnic language schools and afterschool establishments that target children and youth, can provide insight into how community forces are sustained and how social capital is formed within an ethnic social structure, while illustrating how culture and structure interact to create a social environment conducive to educational achievement” (p. 5-6). This examination of afterschool establishments revealed that a core value in the habitus of hagwon is *to help*—to meet students at *their* level—and fill in the gaps between school and the test. Bourdieu’s (1998) model helped to conceive the ways habitus and its institutions inscribed the agent, but also the ways the agents continued to inscribe habitus and its institutions with a shared, cohesive central mission: educational achievement. The

nature of hagwon—that it operates in a market setting (Bray et al., 2018)—dictates that hagwons must evolve to meet the needs of their clients. Thus, as students’ needs evolve, so will hagwons.

In the interest of thinking about the future, I kept coming back to two moments from my observations: (1) The moment when the reading teacher told that student that getting better at reading comprehension means the student would have to read more, but still teaching ways to succeed under the assumption that the student did not and likely would not do that; (2) The enrichment class I stumbled into on my first day of observation. I am wondering if, in the evolution of the hagwon—as standardized testing continues to shift and move—these centers can be places that teach core skills with the intention of getting kids to a place where they cannot just *mimic* good readers and mathematicians, but actually *be* good readers and mathematicians. (This raises an existential question: At what point does mimicking good reading just become good reading?) These types of classes can and do exist. I think back at the few hours I spent in that Crown enrichment class and left to wonder what that might look like scaled.

Perhaps the type of enrichment class I glimpsed on my first day is a glimpse into a “test prep,” if we even continue to call it that—I’ve heard the phrase “enrichment center” starting to gain ground (Moss, 2022; Starr & Kapoor, 2021)—that can be part of Marshall’s hybrid realistic-idyllic vision. Is it possible that test makers could be part of this shift? As tests change—they are now digital and adaptive—I think it is fair to ask, what will tests even look like in ten, twenty years? Will it be possible to write assessments that will force shadow education centers to adopt better educative objectives and curricular models—given that they follow the lead of those writing these exams?

And as colleges continue to de-emphasize testing, will we see more shadow education centers that optimize pastimes like art and writing, or college consultants who help manage portfolios and garner other credentials? The protean nature is part of the habitus of hagwon. The shadow moves as the body moves, after all.

Final Thoughts

I think if I were a college admissions person shaping an incoming class, I could do a lot worse than the seven students in my participant pool. I would want someone like HyeJoon, who takes instruction and is willing to grind (his word); I would want someone like Noah, who is ambitious and charismatic; I would want someone like Troy, who is curious and finds answers; I would want someone like Emmie, who is fearless, upbeat, and will help out the stranger sitting next to her; I would want someone like Grace, who overcame adversity to ultimately pursue her true passions, acknowledges her advantages, and expresses gratitude; I would want someone like Joyce, who is resilient, and wants to help others who are struggling; and I would want someone like Jane, who figures things out on her own, identifies flaws, and then contributes to improving things for the next incoming class. Hagwon students all, but all so different.

The reason why anyone might look for flaws in students like these—much less ones that are universal to them as a whole—is if one were to have to compare them to other students, which places them immediately in an adversarial zero-sum relationship that reduces them to an inventory of pejoratives and deficits. But such is the nature of a system where certain schools are more coveted than others and seats in those coveted schools are limited. It is easy to say that we need a better testing system and a better college admissions system. Maybe what *is* disappointing about hagwon is that—as one of

my students once wrote about *The Great Gatsby*—it reflects the world that is, not the one we aspire to. Hagwon does not claim to be an agent of social change or justice; it is not fostering the hopes for a better world. Hagwon fosters the hopes of their paying clients. And maybe we hope for more from an institution that has such influence on our young people.

What staunch critics of hagwon miss, though, is the humanity that lay therein. Hagwon helps students excel under the existing system because that is what is required *now*, in the present. And, most importantly, the students are proud of their achievements. As I saw, hagwon has its limits; there is no “secret sauce,” as Rebecca admitted. Top scorers who attend hagwon do much of their work independently, especially when a top score is the goal. When educators assert that the tests are “meaningless” or “dumb” or even a blight on the education system (even if the critiques of the tests themselves are fair), I hope schoolteachers might be more aware that they are diminishing the accomplishments of students—accomplishments that are a source of pride not only for them, but also for their families. We in the education community are sensitive about the way we speak about many things; I wonder if we might be more sensitive about devaluing the accomplishments of a group whose culture has historically measured their value on that accomplishment.

These students’ familial and community structures have been built around a singular aspirational goal: education to financial stability. This is a one-issue community. Parents will live apart from their families for the sake of a satellite child’s schooling, as Emmie’s father did. They will take out loans (Bray et al., 2018) and move their families (Park & Lee, 2021) to have access to hagwon. Then, for their efforts, they suffer the

indignity of having those very efforts mark them as other, or worse, evidence of White supremacy and oppression—against minority groups that do not include them, at that. Or maybe the point is that it should not be so difficult, and I would not disagree. But wishing for a different system in theory does not make it a reality for these parents or their children. They know education gives their children the best chance to get ahead, so they are bestowing whatever resources they have to giving their kids whatever tools and resources they need.

When Indurti (2021) painted the tableau of parents watching their children do extra test prep homework, and said, “That’s what love is all about,” maybe the many layers of sacrifice that went into creating this scene is what she was really referring to. In fact, a deeper understanding of that tableau was, in a sense, the mission of this dissertation. The extra homework is seen by the student as a rote exercise in control with the only acceptable outcome—academic excellence and the attendant prestige—understood and tacitly agreed upon. The parental influence is unspoken but no less present. The history of the family and a suffering people weighs heavily as a contrastive, cautionary presence. This familial and cultural mandate forms a powerful thread in the habitus of hagwon. Maybe hagwon's culture of care and affection *and* demanding expectations feels so familiar to their attendees *because* it is an extension of this same culture that exists at home. Also part of the equation is the U.S. and its promise of opportunity, but also the structural boundaries in the way, which likewise mandate that the student fix themselves to the task of academic excellence. This thread in the habitus presents its own strategic calculation: that any path besides education and a professional career presents too much risk for a family that sacrificed so much to uproot their lives and

arrive on the shores of a place that was supposed present to them the best chance to escape further struggle.

At the center of it all is the student, doing their best to negotiate and navigate these cultural imperatives, the prosaic reality of their family's long-term welfare, while also struggling to find their own path and identity. There were those whose personalities were superseded by the cultural mandates—the pull of the formula for success was fixed and parents expected their children to live up to the sacrifices they made and avoid the struggles they had to overcome. For these families, hagwon is their only tried-and-true path to financial stability. Here again, my hope is that seeing these students as real people who are trying to do right by their parents and themselves will humanize (Paris & Winn, 2014) them and their experiences, and thus, complicate the reductive narratives and discourses around shadow education and those who participate in it.

Despite all the pressures and intersecting matrices of control, these students make choices. They subvert authority in little ways when they can. They enjoy each other's company when they can. Hagwon students manage to find their own little bits of joy in sanctioned activities as they aspire to reach their goals in life, just like we all do. They are adaptive, in other words. The bricoleur's tool that was the most profound—and that I will treasure most about this experience—was just how good-natured my participants were. They knew how to make the best of things. And I missed them when our time together was done. Granted, they likely presented the best versions of themselves to me. Be that as it may, for the students in this study, hagwon was a haven where they were allowed to think their aspirations (their families' and their own) to be important and then have those aspirations subsequently nurtured. Hagwon offered them capital—actions, practices, and

tools—with which to pursue their goals. Thus, despite its shortcomings, I was glad for them that hagwon existed.

APPENDIX A DECONSTRUCTING SHADOW EDUCATION NARRATIVES

Narrative	Counternarrative
Asian American achievement suggests that they are not subject to structural boundaries like other immigrant or oppressed populations	Asian American achievement indicates a concerted effort to navigate and overcome structural boundaries in education (e.g., poverty and lack of social capital); one such effort being the prevalence of shadow education (SE)—both as an institution and the cultural implications of its existence
Shadow education (SE) perpetuates class disparity/status quo	Shadow education (SE) disrupts status quo and provides access to social mobility for immigrant communities
SE students are passive/deferential to authority	SE students are dynamic agents of their own learning
SE is overly achievement oriented, testing factories	SE learning centers are cultural centers, i.e., sites of cultural and social capital reproduction and exchange
SE is gaming the system, illicit	SE is a natural extension of a colonialist, neoliberal shift towards data-driven achievement measures
Students feel pressure because of shadow education	Shadow education helps students cope with and navigate a pressurized admissions process

APPENDIX B LITERATURE REVIEW THEMES AND FINDINGS

Theme (Code)	South Korean SE	Korean American SE
SE is a normal part of life (N): shadow education is an accepted, unquestioned part of life for students and their families.	<p>Students attend from a young age</p> <p>Consider as academically essential as school, if not more</p> <p>Families make housing decisions based on availability of SE</p> <p>Students expect to spend long hours there</p> <p>Government officials are so aware of <i>hagwon</i> practices that they are forced to legislate/police it</p>	<p>Is a rite of passage</p> <p>SE is generally geared for preparation for exams related to various levels of school admissions</p> <p>Has other social uses, e.g., information on school admissions process, childcare</p> <p>Is a “secret weapon,” or capital that is shared in community-based “ethnic economy” (e.g., churches, newspapers, word of mouth)</p>
Instruction (I): shadow education teaching/coaching is adaptable to student/family needs (e.g., portfolio curation, psychological coaching, etc.).	<p>Extension of compulsory schooling</p> <p>Divided into subjects, based on need</p> <p>Serves as remedial intervention and accelerated learning</p> <p>Offers individuated, tailored instruction</p> <p>Informed by individual portfolios</p> <p>Elaborative rehearsal allows students repeated opportunity for exposure, practice, and demonstration of learning</p> <p>Instruction methods vary based on ownership (franchise vs. privately run)</p> <p>Psychological coaching provided</p> <p>Teacher and tutor roles blurred</p>	<p>Rote learning, memorization, math problem sets, weekly reading and writing assignments</p> <p>Math and reading instruction available</p> <p>Rewards competition and achievement</p> <p>Teacher and tutor differentiated/stratified</p>

<p>School is not enough (S): compulsory schooling is not enough to meet the academic needs and aspirations of students and their families.</p>	<p>Preview learning helps students get/stay ahead Help students negotiate standardized exams that test material beyond school curriculum</p>	<p>Help students negotiate standardized exams that test material beyond school curriculum Helps students familiarize themselves with exam</p>
<p>Hidden curriculum (H): the need for shadow education signifies larger societal or structural issues (e.g., economy, equity, race, etc.).</p>	<p>Stratified selective attitude towards school subjects: heavy emphasis on math Value system of education that equates learning with improving rote test-taking skills and gathering test-related information A devaluation of their public-school teachers' professionalism and opinion Students become aware of social inequities due to the family's obligation to pay tuition Reflective of a national/global culture of competition</p>	<p>Reflective of community-specific achievement-centered culture Perpetuates class disparity In select immigrant communities, a way of addressing class disparity Reflective of national/global culture of competition</p>

APPENDIX C EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH PROPRIETORS

Introductory email to hagwon proprietor (October 5, 2021):

Hey [redacted],

This is Minkyu Kim. [Redacted] passed along your contact information; I hope that's ok.

I wanted to reach out to see if you'd be open to speaking with me about your learning center. It is an area of interest and a potential topic for my dissertation. It can be informal or formal, depending on comfort level and availability.

I also wanted to gauge your willingness to let me use your center as a study site. This would mean weekly or biweekly observations, as well as interviews with willing teachers, students, and parents (all names, including the name of your learning center, would be changed obviously).

Sorry if this is a lot for a first email, but if you felt at all uncomfortable about any of this, I wanted to give you an easy out with no hard feelings. We can also discuss more before you make any decisions if you'd like.

Feel free to email me back with any questions, or you can reach out to me directly at [phone number redacted].

Thanks for your consideration,

Minkyu

Follow up email to hagwon proprietor (August 27, 2022):

Hi [redacted],

Thanks again for your patience as I develop my study. I wanted to provide an update since our last talk in

July:

So if it is ok with you, I would like to observe your hagwon location on Saturday mornings every other week starting in December 2022/January 2023, with a target end date in June, 2022-23 (~6 months total). In the interest of full transparency, I am observing another hagwon in NJ, and two hagwons in Queens. I will be observing the hagwons in Queens on the Saturdays I am not in NJ.

Ideally, I am hoping to interview to at least one student, a teacher, you, and a parent (though, I understand if this last one may not happen). Official release forms will be provided and will have to be signed when they have been IRB approved (Institutional Review Board). I will also require a letter from you granting me permission, but that is a form letter that I already have written that you can just copy/paste onto your organization's letterhead and sign.

As a form of reciprocity, I can offer the student(s) who sits for interviews some college essay consultation. When the time comes, I will look over their personal statement and provide two rounds of feedback. I am also happy to speak with you to work out how else I can be of service to you, your staff, and/or your students during the times I am there observing.

If you'd like to discuss any of this over the phone, please let me know and we can set up another call. If not, I'd ask that you please reply to confirm receipt and that you're ok to move forward. Thank you again for agreeing to be part of this study.

Min

Introductory email to staff, pre-informal visit (November 5, 2022):

Hi all,

My name is Minkyu Kim and I am visiting your hagwon as part of a research study I am conducting on hagwons in the Korean American community. My background: I am a high school English teacher at [redacted] High School in Manhattan, and a PhD candidate in the process of writing my dissertation at St. John's University.

I am there to observe—which means sitting in on classes, and observing common areas before/after/between classes and during breaks. During class, I will likely be sitting quietly in the back corner with a notebook taking notes. You are free to interact with me as much or as little as you'd like. I am fully prepared to not say one word while I am there.

That said, if you need me to help in any way, I'm happy to help! Move chairs, hand out papers, whatever. Please feel free to take advantage of my being there. I'll also gladly discuss or answer any questions anybody may have about what I'm doing, who I am, etc.

This first visit is just a preliminary visit, so it will probably be short and I may duck out without saying goodbye or thanking properly everyone who allows me access to their classes. So let this be a preemptive thank you for your help. If you have any immediate questions or concerns that you'd like me to answer before my visit, you can email me at ming921@gmail.com.

Thank you,

Minkyu Kim

APPENDIX D PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE

Student name:

Date of birth:

Grade level: 9 10 11 12

Please assess the truth of the following statements:

1. I find *hagwon* to be useful.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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2. *Hagwon* has improved my test scores.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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3. *Hagwon* has improved my grades in school.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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4. I have learned things at *hagwon* that have helped me in life.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
-------------------	----------	---------	-------	----------------

5. I come to *hagwon* because I have to.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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6. I come to *hagwon* because of my parents.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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7. I come to *hagwon* because I think it will help me get into a better college.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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8. I come to hagwon because I think it will help me get a better job.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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9. I would come to hagwon even if my parents didn't make me.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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10. I enjoy coming to *hagwon*.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
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11. I'm interested in participating in this study because...

12. When are you most available to interview (i.e., weekday evenings, weekend evenings, immediately before or after hagwon)?

APPENDIX E CONTACT SUMMARY SHEET

Contact Type: _____

Site: _____

Interview/Obs: _____

Contact Date: _____

With Whom: _____

Today's Date: _____

1. What was most memorable? Surprising? My feelings?

2. What were the main points that the participants made during this session?

3. What main concepts and/or categories arose during the session?

4. Comment on how the session informed each of the following practices (if applicable):

Tools/resources:

Behaviors:

Skills:

Literacies:

Relation of practices to hagwon culture:

5. What methodological issues arose? Problematic questions? Suggestions for change?
6. What ideas arose that can be used for a future interview?
7. Issues to explore more? Potential themes?
8. Ideas for future research?
9. How is the student/are the students behaving in class?
10. What signs of social interaction were there?
11. How does what I observed align/not align with my own experience with hagwon?

APPENDIX F PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM



Research Participant Consent Form

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more the student experience at hagwon (aka after school tutoring/learning centers, aka “shadow education”). This study will be conducted by Minkyu Kim, a PhD candidate in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education, St. John’s University, as part of his doctoral dissertation research, and will take place during the spring semester of the 2022-23 school year (January 2023—June 2023). Minkyu’s faculty sponsor is Dr. Sandra Abrams, in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education, St. John’s University. Her contact information can be found at the bottom of this form.

If you agree to be in this study, you may be asked to do the following, though you can opt out of any of the following at any time:

1. Take part in 2-5 interviews concerning your experience at hagwon, your perceptions of hagwon, and how hagwon connects to other parts of your lives, if at all.
2. Take part in a focus group with other hagwon students.
3. Be observed in hagwon and public spaces in the immediate vicinity during lunchtime and breaks.
4. Photograph, document, gather, and share self-selected academic records, written texts, artifacts, and social interactions that the student encounters that relate to your hagwon experience or perceptions around hagwon.

Our interviews will be conducted in-person, preferably, at the hagwon, but can be accommodated off-site or virtually. These interviews will be audio and video recorded. You may request to review these tapes at any time and request that all or any portion of the tapes that includes your participation not be used or destroyed. I will do my best to schedule our interviews so they do not interfere with your academic responsibilities.

Participation in this study will involve approximately three to five hours, not including whatever time you attend hagwon and the time it takes to gather artifacts or log literacy activities. One hour for the initial questionnaire and interview, one hour for the follow up interview, one hour for the focus group, and the time required for follow up interviews, as the need may arise. The focus groups will be held at the your and the other focus group members' convenience at some point after the formal interviews.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life.

This research may help the investigator better understand the student hagwon experience. As reciprocity, you will receive direct written feedback on your college application personal statement from the investigator. This will be provided at the completion of the study, provided you participate in all components of the study through the completion of the study.

Confidentiality of your research records will be strictly maintained by using aliases in any report or transcript of our interviews, if you so choose (by indicating below). The researcher will store all audio recordings and transcripts on a password protected phone and computer, to which only the researcher will have access.

Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. In addition, your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the focus group will do the same.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. For interviews, questionnaires, or surveys, you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer.

Nonparticipation or withdrawal will result in no loss of services to which you are otherwise entitled.

If there is anything about the study or your child's participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Minkyu Kim at 347-668-8822 or minkyu.kim19@my.stjohns.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Sandra Abrams at 516-319-1913, abramss@stjohns.edu.

For questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's Institutional Review Board, St. John's University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

Agreement to Participate

Yes, I give the investigator permission to use my name when quoting material from our interviews in his study.

No, I would prefer that my name not be used.

Student Name (Print)

Student Signature

Date

APPENDIX G PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM



Parental Permission Form

Your child has been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about the student experience at hagwon (aka after school tutoring/learning centers, aka “shadow education”). This study will be conducted by Minkyu Kim, a PhD candidate in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education, St. John’s University, as part of his doctoral dissertation research, and will take place during the spring semester of the 2022-23 school year (January 2023—June 2023). Minkyu’s faculty sponsor is Dr. Sandra Abrams, in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education, St. John’s University. Her contact information can be found at the bottom of this form.

If the student agrees to be in this study, the student may be asked to do the following, though the student can opt out of any of the following at any time:

1. Take part in 2-5 interviews concerning their experience at hagwon, their perceptions of hagwon, and how hagwon connects to other parts of their lives, if at all.
2. Take part in a focus group with other hagwon students.
3. Be observed in hagwon and public spaces in the immediate vicinity during lunchtime and breaks.
4. Photograph, document, gather, and share self-selected academic records, written texts, artifacts, and social interactions that the student encounters that relate to their hagwon experience or perceptions around hagwon.

Our interviews will be conducted in-person, preferably, but can be accommodated virtually. These interviews will be audio and video recorded. You or the student may request to review these tapes at any time and request that all or any portion of the tapes that includes your participation not be used or destroyed. I will do my best to schedule our interviews so they do not interfere with the student's academic responsibilities.

Participation in this study will involve approximately three to five hours, not including whatever time the student attends hagwon and the time it takes to gather artifacts or log literacy activities. One hour for the initial questionnaire and interview, one hour for the follow up interview, one hour for the focus group, and the time required for follow up interviews, as the need may arise. The focus groups will be held at the student's and the other focus group members' convenience at some point after the first round of formal interviews.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life.

This research may help the investigator better understand the student hagwon experience. As reciprocity, your child will receive direct written feedback on their college application personal statement from the investigator. This will be provided at the completion of the study, provided the student participate in all components of the study through the completion of the study.

Confidentiality of your child's research records will be strictly maintained by using aliases in any report or transcript of our interviews, if your child so chooses. The researcher will store all audio recordings and transcripts on a password protected phone and computer, to which only the researcher will have access.

Your child's responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to your child, or to others. Your child's responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the focus group will do the same.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. Your child also has the right to skip or not answer any questions he/she prefers not to answer.

Nonparticipation or withdrawal will not affect your child's grades or academic standing and will result in no loss of services to which your child is otherwise entitled.

If there is anything about the study or your child's participation that is unclear or that you do not understand, if you have questions or wish to report a research-related problem, you may contact Minkyu Kim at 347-668-8822 or minkyu.kim19@my.stjohns.edu, or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Sandra Abrams at 516-319-1913, abramss@stjohns.edu.

For questions about your child’s rights as a research participant, you may contact the University’s Institutional Review Board, St. John’s University, Dr. Raymond DiGiuseppe, Chair digiuser@stjohns.edu 718-990-1955 or Marie Nitopi, IRB Coordinator, nitopim@stjohns.edu 718-990-1440.

You have received a copy of this consent document to keep.

Permission to Participate

Name of child (Print)

Parent Name(s) (Print)

Parent Signature

Date

APPENDIX H INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Main Participant Interview 1

Disclaimer

Thank you for meeting me to talk about your hagwon experience, personal background, and overall thoughts on education. The interview is meant to be about one hour, and will be audio recorded, then transcribed. I will also take some notes while you speak, if that's ok. The transcript will be used as doctoral dissertation research at St. John's University. As I told you when you agreed to sit for this interview, you can choose to not be named in this report. In addition, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. I also want to respect your time, so if at any point you want to stop the interview, you can discontinue the interview for any reason.

Questions

You indicated that you found hagwon to be useful/not useful. How?

(Possible follow ups, if not addressed: In what ways has it been useful (or not useful)?

What specifically did you find to be useful (or not)?)

You indicated that hagwon has/has not helped you improve your test scores. Can you elaborate?

(Possible follow up: What specifically—if anything—did you learn or do at hagwon that helped you do well on tests, specifically?)

You indicated that hagwon has/has not helped you in school. Can you elaborate?

(Possible follow up: What specifically—if anything—did you learn or do at hagwon that helped you in school, specifically? What is your perspective on hagwon and school?)

You indicated that hagwon has/has not helped you in life. Can you elaborate?

(Possible follow up: Have you learned anything or improved anything at hagwon that applies in other parts of your life?)

Do you come to hagwon because you have to? Your response suggests yes/no/neutral.

Why do you come to hagwon?

(Follow up: Do you think hagwon is fulfilling its purpose? Is it what you expected? What did you think it would be like, and why?)

You indicated that college is important to you (or not). Why (or why not)?

(Follow up: what does college mean to you?)

You indicated that a good job is important (or not). Why?

(Follow up: How do you think hagwon might help you in your future career prospects?)

You indicated that your parents have (or don't have) influence on why you come to hagwon. Can you elaborate?

(Follow up: Can you describe your relationship with your parents?)

Besides your parents, why else do you come to hagwon?

(Follow up: What might you otherwise be doing with this time, in an ideal world?)

Do you enjoy coming to hagwon? Why or why not?

(Follow ups: Is there any part of hagwon that you enjoy, or find fun—however you define “fun”—in any way? What happens at breaks and lunchtime when you go offsite with people? What do you generally do/talk about?)

***I would also like the freedom to ask relevant follow up questions as they arise (e.g., say more, or unpack that.)

Main Participant Interviews 2 - 5

Disclaimer

Thank you for meeting me to talk about your experience at hagwon. The interview is meant to be about one hour, and will be recorded, then transcribed. I will also take some notes while you speak, if that's ok. The transcript will be used in a project for my doctoral dissertation research at St. John's University. As I told you when you agreed to sit for this interview, you can choose to not be named in this report. In addition, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. I also want to respect your time, so if at any point you want to stop the interview, you can discontinue the interview for any reason. We can also finish after an hour and continue this discussion another time, so we don't cut into your time too much in one day. If you'd prefer to get it all done this sitting, of course I am amenable to that as well. Also, please don't hesitate to let me know how you're feeling, like if you'd like to take a break.

Questions for Photo/Artifact Elicitation

Talk to me about each of the items that I pull up for you.

You chose this. Tell me about why you documented this. How does this item connect to your hagwon experience, or how does this represent or give us some insight into your experience at hagwon?

I chose this. Tell me about this thing. Does it remind you of hagwon? In what way?

Looking at the totality of these artifacts, and now that you've had a chance to reflect on them, what else do you have to say about your hagwon experience?

***I would also like the freedom to ask relevant follow up questions from their responses in Interview 1—after I have had an opportunity to transcribe them, pre-code, and write an analytic memo about them. I would also like to ask follow up questions, akin to but not limited to the following sample questions. This can be during interview 2 or during another planned interview, depending on the wishes of the participant:

In a previous interview, you mentioned [_____]. Can you say more about that?
Now that you've been at hagwon for a little while longer have your feelings or perception changed at all?

Do you talk or think about hagwon outside the days/times that you're here? (Follow up:
What do people say if/when you mention that you attend hagwon or test prep?)

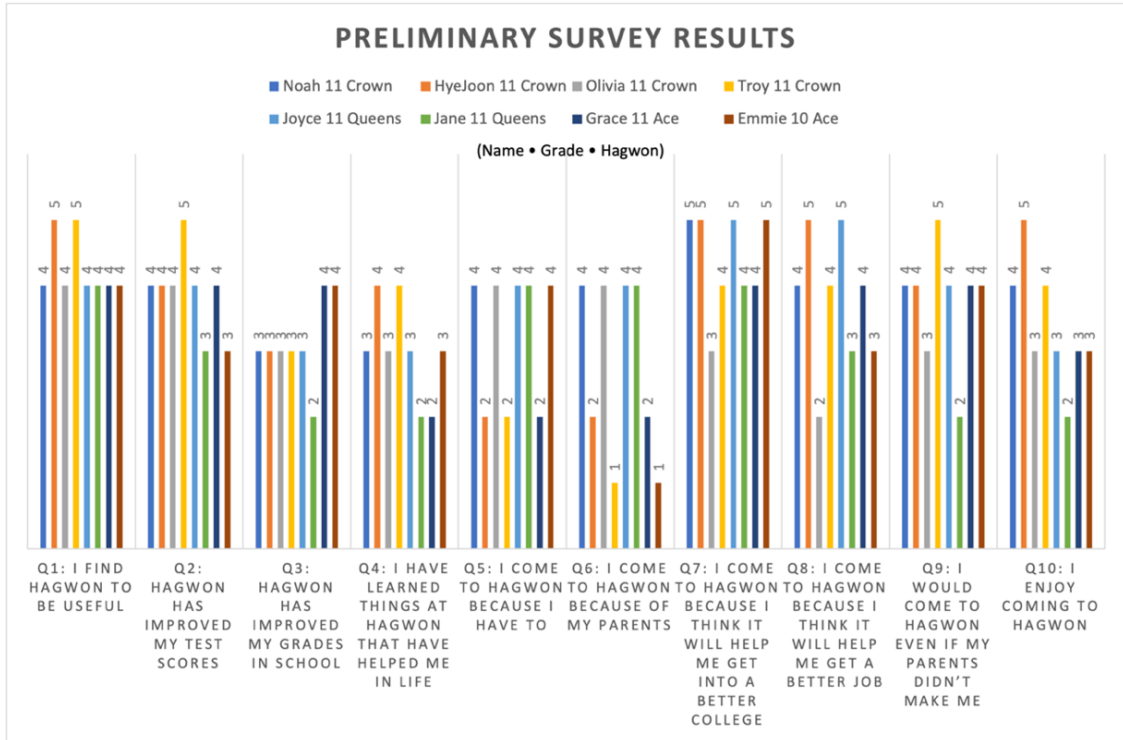
What do you think of your hagwon teachers? How, if at all, do you perceive them differently from your teachers at school?

If you had to describe hagwon to someone who had never heard of it, how would you describe it?

Is there such thing as hagwon culture? How would you describe it?

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?

APPENDIX I PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS



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