

Impostor Phenomenon in the Parenting of Mothers with Early Childhood Teacher Experience in South Korea: A Grounded Theory Study

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Abstract

This study explored how the impostor phenomenon emerges in the parenting practices of mothers with early childhood teaching experience and examined the strategies they use to cope with it. Using Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 South Korean mothers with professional backgrounds in early childhood education. Analysis yielded 76 concepts, 42 subcategories, and 23 categories, revealing that impostor experiences manifested across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Cognitively, the participants exhibited self-doubt, self-devaluation, and self-criticism; emotionally, they reported shame and emotional dissonance; and behaviorally, they demonstrated overworking and masking behaviors as adaptive responses to social expectations and perfectionistic tendencies. Seven coping strategies-self-reflection, communication with one's spouse, role distinction, self-compassion, adjusting one's standards, mindfulness, and self-confidence-were identified as effective in alleviating impostor-related distress. Three subtypes of impostor experience in parenting were also identified: perfectionist, soloist, and superwoman, each reflecting distinct challenges and coping mechanisms. These findings reveal how professional identity, maternal roles, and sociocultural factors interact to shape impostor feelings and offer practical implications for developing culturally responsive parenting support programs that enhance emotional well-being and role balance among mothers with early childhood teaching experience.

Keywords : *early childhood teachers, grounded theory, impostor phenomenon, mothers in South Korea*

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Introduction

Parents play a crucial role in their children's development and education until children become physically and mentally mature and independent (Meng et al., 2023; Paun, 2024). Especially during the early stages of child development, parents' interactions, guidance, and protection have long-term effects on children's physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional growth (Barreto et al., 2017; Gadaire et al., 2017). Moreover, parents' mental health and belief systems constitute essential foundations that shape their children's developmental trajectories and social adaptation (Lee & Lee, 2024; Park et al., 2023). Recent studies have emphasized that parental psychological well-being and values significantly influence children's social competence and resilience throughout life.

Despite the rise in women's social status and the increasing normalization of employment among mothers, women in South Korea continue to bear the primary responsibility for housework and childcare (Lee, 2024). Korean mothers assume broader childcare duties than fathers, and this perception of mothers as primary caregivers persists even after the COVID-19 pandemic (Peng & Jun, 2022). Socio-cultural expectations rooted in Confucian family values, coupled with structural gender inequality, continue to place disproportionate caregiving and educational responsibilities on mothers (Choi & Lee, 2025a). Moreover, the economic and psychological burdens of child-rearing have contributed to declining fertility rates and increased reluctance toward childbirth (Kim & Yi, 2024). These dynamics illustrate that the caregiving role of Korean mothers remains culturally and socially reinforced, despite societal modernization.

As children grow, mothers' anxiety about child-rearing and educational outcomes tends to intensify, leading to heightened stress and self-doubt regarding their competence as parents (Oh et al., 2020). As is often said, it is far easier to give birth to a child than to raise one—an observation that underscores the enduring complexity and emotional challenges of parenting. Parenting stress thus emerges from an intricate interplay of personal values, social expectations, and family context (Lee & Lee, 2024).

Early childhood educators who are also mothers often experience compounded psychological tension arising from their dual identities as both professional teachers and primary caregivers. They are expected to demonstrate pedagogical expertise at work while simultaneously embodying ideal motherhood at home, which can evoke persistent self-doubt

and emotional exhaustion. The impostor phenomenon (IP) refers to an individual's pervasive internalized belief of intellectual or professional fraudulence, attributing success to external factors such as luck or circumstance rather than to their own competence (Clance & Imes, 1978). Previous studies have shown that individuals experiencing IP internalize feelings of being a "fake," attributing achievements to chance while downplaying ability, which leads to anxiety, perfectionistic overcompensation, and diminished self-efficacy (Bravata et al., 2020). More recent research has noted that IP can also function as an adaptive, context-driven strategy—an impression-management response to societal expectations, particularly among high-achieving professionals seeking legitimacy within gendered or hierarchical contexts (Leonhardt et al., 2017; Neureiter & Traut-Mattausch, 2016). Meta-analytic evidence consistently demonstrates that women report higher impostor experiences than men across professions, reflecting gendered socialization patterns and performance pressures (Bravata et al., 2020).

Within the Korean socio-cultural context, mother-teachers occupy a uniquely paradoxical position. Confucian values that revere teacher authority coexist with societal expectations for maternal excellence, creating heightened scrutiny and internal tension. Moreover, rapid economic development and the resulting academic competition intensify this pressure. Mother-teachers often find themselves navigating between two educational paradigms—one advocating "child-centered, self-directed learning" and the other driven by early academic advancement and parental information networks. This conflict not only amplifies self-evaluation anxiety but also reinforces impostor-like self-perceptions, wherein these women feel they must constantly prove their competence both as educators and as mothers.

Literature Review

The impostor phenomenon (IP) is a psychological state in which individuals perceive their success as the result of luck or external circumstances rather than their own competence or effort (Clance & Imes, 1978). Although the concept originated in Western academic contexts, recent cross-disciplinary studies indicate that IP has pervasive psychological and social implications across diverse cultural and professional domains (Cheung & Cheng, 2024). In this study, IP is defined as a state in which individuals doubt their self-worth and internalize

feelings of inadequacy when their efforts and achievements are not acknowledged by external standards or social validation. Such feelings often manifest through self-criticism, chronic self-doubt, and anxiety about being perceived as a fraud (Breeze, 2018).

Empirical evidence indicates that IP is especially prevalent among high-achieving women who experience heightened societal expectations and internalized gender norms. Studies in medical and STEM fields consistently report higher impostor scores among women than men (Chakraverty & Rishi, 2022; Narayanamoorthy et al., 2024). Similarly, women often attribute their success to external factors such as luck or overestimation by others, which can trigger emotional distress, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Tao & Gloria, 2019). In contrast, men tend to exhibit fewer impostor-related symptoms, reinforcing the notion that sociocultural expectations contribute significantly to the gender gap in impostor experiences (Beesley et al., 2024).

Despite the growing attention to IP across disciplines, research focusing on teachers—particularly early childhood educators—remains limited. Teachers frequently operate under competing external pressures, balancing emotional labor, pedagogical expectations, and relational roles with students and parents, which can exacerbate impostor feelings (Nath & Pandey, 2025). This gap is especially salient in South Korea, where early childhood teachers are pulled between professional standards and maternal values rooted in care and devotion.

Furthermore, there is a striking absence of research on the impostor phenomenon among Korean mothers who are also early childhood educators, despite South Korea's unique intersection of Confucian values, gendered family norms, and high educational competitiveness (Choi & Lee, 2025a). Within this cultural landscape, mother-teachers may internalize role conflicts between professional expectations and parental ideals, experiencing self-doubt despite possessing advanced pedagogical knowledge and caregiving skills. This intersection of motherhood and teaching identity offers a distinct lens for understanding how sociocultural norms intensify IP experiences in non-Western contexts.

This study aims to explore the impostor phenomenon among mothers with early childhood teaching experience in South Korea and to identify strategies to mitigate its negative effects. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the manifestation processes of the impostor phenomenon in the child-rearing practices of mothers with experience as early childhood teachers?
2. What efforts do these mothers make to overcome the impostor phenomenon?

Method

This qualitative study employed a grounded theory approach, which provides a valuable framework for examining complex, culturally embedded psychological phenomena (Esmeraldo, 2024). Grounded theory enables an in-depth exploration of lived experiences, allowing researchers to identify both individual and contextual processes shaping impostor feelings among mother-teachers. Grounded theory was adopted to explicate the processes through which impostor feelings emerge and evolve at the intersection of professional identity and motherhood, and to generate a contextually grounded explanatory model rather than to test pre-specified hypotheses. It is particularly well suited to building mid-range theory from participants' lived experiences through constant comparison, iterative coding, and theoretical sampling, thereby illuminating actions, interactions, and meanings embedded in sociocultural contexts (Charmaz, 2014; Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Grounded approaches have been shown to reveal how impostor feelings are constructed and shaped by multilevel contextual forces, not merely by stable personality traits (Choi & Lee, 2025a).

Researcher Positionality and Participants

One of the researchers for this study held a degree in early childhood education, had 19 years of professional experience working in an early childhood education organization, and was the mother of a fifth-grade son. The researcher demonstrated perfectionist tendencies not only in her professional endeavors, but also in her parenting practices. However, as her children progressed to elementary school, she experienced a range of anxieties. In particular, as a teacher, she had considerable experience with toddlers but limited experience with elementary school children. This led to a significant increase in her anxiety regarding elementary school life, friendships, and private education. She began to question whether her experiences were unique or whether other mothers with similar backgrounds as early childhood teachers might share similar concerns. Considering these experiences, the researcher undertook this study to gain insight into the impostor phenomenon and provide support to mothers experiencing anxiety, doubt, and self-criticism in their role as parents.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

No.	Mother Code	Age (years)	Major	Working Organization	Total Teaching Experience (years)	Number Of children	Children Age (years)	Current Employment
1	A	38	Early childhood education	Daycare	9	2	6	Leave of absence
2	B	42	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	18	2	8	Active employment
3	C	44	Early childhood education	Kindergarten	12	2	10	Active employment
4	D	41	Early childhood education	Kindergarten	10	1	9	Leave of absence
5	E	42	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	10	1	6	Leave of absence
6	F	36	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	8	2	6	Leave of absence
7	G	38	Early childhood care and arts education	Daycare	13	1	5	Leave of absence
8	H	36	Child studies	Daycare	7	1	5	Leave of absence
9	I	37	Child development and education	Daycare	12	1	7	Active employment
10	J	34	Child care and education	Daycare	3	1	5	Leave of absence
11	K	39	Early childhood education	Kindergarten	9	2	6	Leave of absence
12	L	37	Early childhood education	Daycare	18	2	8	Active employment
13	M	41	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	12	2	10	Active employment
14	N	48	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	10	1	9	Leave of absence
15	O	40	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	10	1	6	Leave of absence
16	P	42	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	8	2	6	Leave of absence
17	Q	40	Early childhood education	Daycare	13	1	5	Leave of absence
18	R	41	Early childhood education	Kindergarten Daycare	7	1	5	Leave of absence

A total of 18 mothers participated in the study. All participants held degrees in early childhood education or closely related fields and had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 18 years. Each participant was raising one or two children aged 5-10 years, representing families with relatively homogeneous regional and socioeconomic backgrounds (Table 1). Most participants resided in the Seoul metropolitan area or other urban regions in South Korea. Participants were recruited through professional educator networks and parenting communities using purposeful and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in teaching tenure, current employment status, and family composition. Deliberate efforts were made to include mothers who were both actively employed and on leave, thereby capturing a range of lived experiences balancing professional and parental roles. We purposefully sought both employed and on-leave educators and achieved theoretical saturation with 18 participants, consistent with grounded theory guidance that privileges saturation and conceptual completeness over predetermined sample counts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guest et al., 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Data Collection and Procedures

Data were collected through one to two individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with each individual between December 11, 2023, and March 15, 2024. The date, time, and location of the interviews were arranged in advance with the participants, and the interviews were conducted in a quiet café during the morning and evening hours on weekdays or weekends. The interviews lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours. When in-person interviews were not feasible, interviews were conducted via telephone or video call. Participants' consent to be audio-recorded was obtained prior to the commencement of the interviews.

To enhance transparency in the data collection process, the semi-structured interviews included open-ended guiding questions designed to elicit participants' lived experiences related to parenting, professional identity, and impostor feelings. Example questions included: "Can you describe moments when you doubted your parenting competence despite your professional background as an educator?," "How do societal expectations about teachers or

mothers influence your self-perception in parenting?,” and “What personal strategies do you use to cope with feelings of inadequacy or anxiety when raising your child?”

The interview protocol also included questions addressing anxiety about parenting, parenting evaluations of others, self-perception, educational philosophy, feelings about parenting, comparison with others, and ways to overcome the impostor phenomenon.

Data Analysis

In accordance with Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory (1997), this study was designed to maintain an open mind during the initial data analysis to identify overarching categories. Concepts were formed and categorized through an iterative review process. Similar concepts were subcategorized through comparative analysis, and a comprehensive categorization was constructed through an ongoing process of comparative analysis. Specifically, the recorded in-depth interviews were transcribed and reviewed repeatedly by the researcher within one week of data collection. The collected data were then systematically analyzed through open, axial, and selective coding. To ensure the rigor and credibility of the study, member checking and triangulation were employed. The member-check method proved instrumental in preventing interpretive errors and enhancing the precision of the findings by presenting the analyzed data to the participants for their feedback. Finally, the findings were peer-reviewed by experts in early childhood education with extensive experience in grounded theory to further strengthen the study's reliability.

Results

Through the systematic analysis process described above, a total of 76 concepts, 42 subcategories, and 23 abstracted categories were derived regarding the participants’ experiences with the impostor phenomenon (Table 2).

Table 2. *Concepts, subcategories, and categories derived from the interviews*

Concepts	Subcategories	Categories	Paradigms
· Fear of being judged · Pressure to interact well from teacher identity	Social evaluation anxiety		
· Feeling inadequate despite professional background in early childhood education · Perceiving oneself as less competent than non-teacher mothers	Low self-esteem	Mental health	
· Emotionally exhausted from dual teacher–mother roles · Losing a sense of personal identity	Depression		
· Wanting the best education for one’s child · Belief that one’s parenting must be perfect	Perfectionist personality	Personality	
· Experiencing guilt and concern over an imbalance between work and parenting · Feeling frustrated when parenting performance falls short of personal expectations	Work–family conflict		Causal conditions
· Sense of urgency from comparing oneself to other parents · Stress from perceived inadequacy due to social assumptions about teacher-parenting skills	Comparative parenting stress	Parental role conflict	
· Appropriate self-expectations for the teacher role but high self-expectations for the parent role · Good emotion regulation in teaching but poor emotion regulation in parenting	Role expectation imbalance	Identity conflict	
· Perceiving limitations as an educator through self-reflection on previous teaching practices · Under-evaluating one’s parenting competence	Self-underestimation	Distorted self-beliefs	

Table 2. *Concepts, subcategories, and categories derived from the interviews* (continued 1)

Concepts	Subcategories	Categories	Paradigms
· Dissatisfaction with the rigidity of public primary education, emphasizing uniformity and limiting creativity, compared to early childhood education	Dissatisfaction with public primary education		
· Awareness of the widespread reliance on private education emerging only after personal experience with public primary schooling	Reality of private education		
· Feeling pressured to provide private education in a highly education-oriented community · Accepting the reality that one's child must receive private education · Experiencing inner conflict between the role-focused reality of public primary education and one's child-centered educational philosophy	Awareness of the need for private education	Social environment	
· Perceiving social overestimation of early childhood teachers' interaction competence · Perceiving social expectations for flawless and ideal parenting	Perceived overestimation of teacher and parent roles		Contextual conditions
· Spouse avoiding childcare, relying on the mother's expertise as an early childhood teacher · Shouldering childcare alone to avoid conflicts with one's spouse over differing parenting styles	Lack of support from one's spouse		
· Perceived isolation during parenting · Experiencing burnout as the primary caregiver due to limited family support	Lack of social support from one's family or relatives	Family environment	
· Parental styles in one's family of origin · Lack of praise, recognition, and support from parents during childhood	One's parents' parenting styles		
· Tension between the desire to fully meet one's child's needs and the inescapable responsibilities of being a working mother	Role conflict as a working mother		

Table 2. Concepts, subcategories, and categories derived from the interviews (continued 2)

Concepts	Subcategories	Categories	Paradigms	
· Lack of self-confidence due to failing to meet one's own high standards · Feeling disappointed in one's parenting performance · Doubts about one's abilities as a parent · Questioning one's parenting philosophy · Attributing work–family imbalance to one's personal inadequacy · Blaming oneself for perceived shortcomings in the child's social adjustment	Self-devaluation	Cognitive aspects	Core phenomena	
	Self-doubt			
	Self-criticism			
· Shame in revealing one's vulnerabilities · Occasional failure to regulate emotions · Chronic suppression of emotions accompanied by guilt	Shame	Emotional aspects		
· Exhaustion from continuously juggling teaching and parenting roles · Difficulty in managing energy between work and home	Emotional dissonance			
· Acting confident and competent to meet others' expectations despite inner doubt · Hiding vulnerabilities and maintaining a professional façade in front of others	Overworking	Behavioral aspects		
	Fake			
· Self-directed learning and practice in parenting · Seeking knowledge to reduce anxiety	Reflective growth	Individual effort		
	Active self-care			
· Spousal cooperation and support · Support from extended family members	Social support from spouse and family	Social support		
· Child's kind, gentle, and polite traits · Child who is caring and behaves according to social expectations	Child's positive traits	Child's personality		Intervening conditions
	Child's prosocial behaviors and social adjustment			
· Parenting that utilizes local educational infrastructure · Parenting that adapts to local community norms and lifestyle	Regional differences in educational infrastructure	Regional differences		
	Adjustment to community's life style			

Table 2. *Concepts, subcategories, and categories derived from the interviews* (continued 3)

Concepts	Subcategories	Categories	Paradigms
· Recognizing and writing one's feelings · Analyzing one's behaviors	Self-awareness and behavior modification	Self-reflection	Action/ interaction strategies
· Resolving conflicts and enhancing mutual communication with one's spouse · Receiving psychological support and building emotional collaboration within the marital relationship	Communication and psychological support with one's spouse	Communication with one's spouse	
· Recognizing the distinct responsibilities of parent and teacher roles · Acknowledging and accepting the inevitable gap between the two roles	Acceptance of role differences	Role distinction	
· Treating oneself with kindness · Recognizing and appreciating the positives in oneself and one's child	Considering the positives in oneself and one's child	Self-compassion	
· Identifying one's own temperament and emotional triggers · Developing emotional coping strategies through self-awareness	Self-regulation through awareness	Adjusting one's standards	
· Recognizing one's limitations and imperfections · Letting go of unrealistic expectations as a mother	Increasing flexibility in parenting attitudes		
· Taking rest when emotionally exhausted · Practicing self-care through small mindful adjustments in daily routine	Emotional self-care	Mindfulness	
· Relying on religious faith for emotional stability · Releasing emotions through prayer or sincere communication	Seeking spiritual support		
· Accepting situations and emotions as they are · Embracing oneself with a sense of positivity and self-acceptance	Being comfortable with oneself	Self-confidence	
· Accepting positive feedback and recognition from others · Cultivating gratitude as a mindful emotional practice	Embracing praise from others and feeling gratitude		
· Freedom from perfectionism and self-imposed standards · Achieving inner satisfaction and reclaiming personal autonomy · Demonstrating flexibility in balancing work-family conflicts	Psychological resilience	Impostor overcoming	Consequences
· Struggling with unresolved negative emotions · Withdrawing or isolating oneself under stress	Psychological avoidance	Impostor persistence	

Open coding

Axial coding

Categories, subcategories, and concepts derived from open coding were integrated into the axial coding process. Each case was reorganized into six axes: core phenomena, causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, action/interaction strategies, and consequences. This facilitated the analysis of relationships between the axes. The paradigm model of the manifestation of the impostor phenomenon and efforts to overcome it in the upbringing of children by mothers with experience as early childhood teachers is presented in Figure 1.

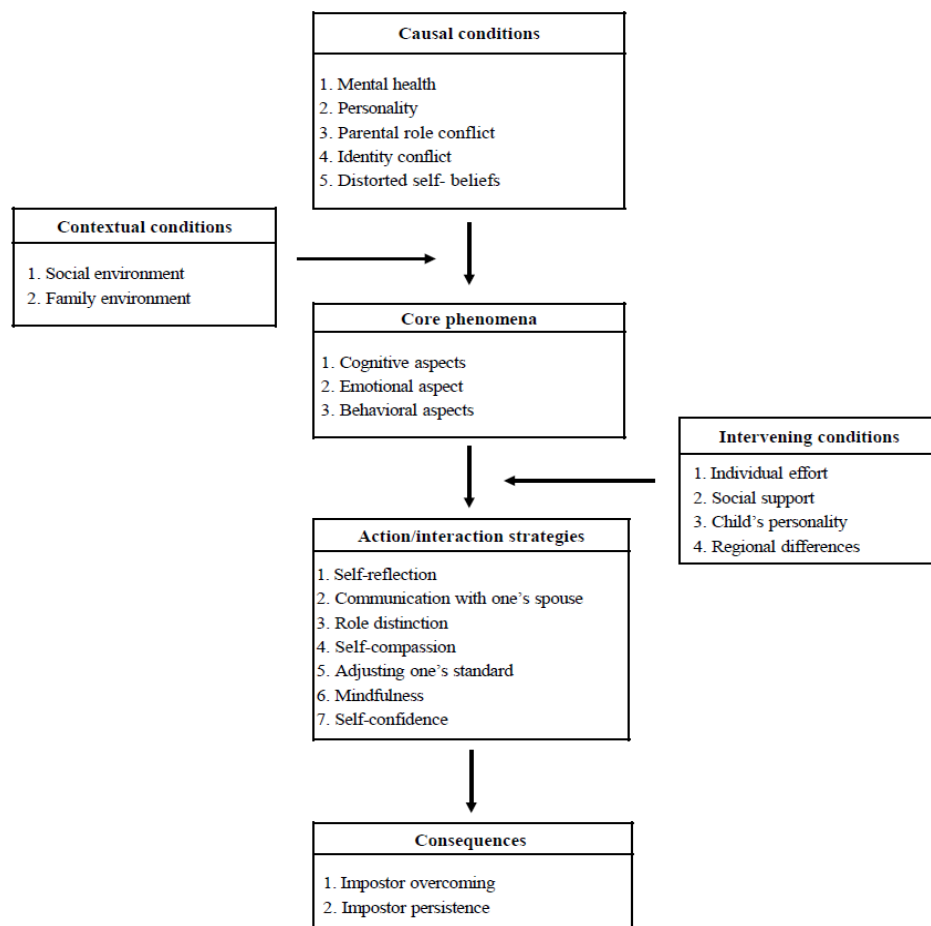


Figure 1. Impostor phenomenon paradigm model

Core phenomena

Core phenomena refer to the central concepts or themes that emerge in response to the research questions and objectives of the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, the impostor phenomenon experienced by mothers with early childhood teaching backgrounds manifested in three interrelated aspects: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. The cognitive aspects encompassed self-devaluation, self-doubt, and self-criticism, representing mothers' tendencies to underestimate their competence, question their parenting philosophies, and internalize blame for perceived shortcomings. The emotional aspects involved shame and emotional dissonance, reflecting the internal tension and guilt arising from their struggle to reconcile idealized parental expectations with authentic emotional experiences. The behavioral aspects included overworking and acting with a professional façade, illustrating how mothers overexerted themselves in both teaching and parenting roles while concealing their vulnerabilities. Collectively, these cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions constitute the core structure of impostor experiences in parenting among mothers with early childhood teacher backgrounds.

Causal conditions

Causal conditions refer to factors that directly contribute to the emergence of the impostor phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, these conditions were found to include mental health, personality, parental role conflict, identity conflict, and distorted self-beliefs. Within the domain of mental health, participants expressed social evaluation anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression, which fostered self-doubt, emotional exhaustion, and a diminished sense of personal identity. Personality traits, particularly perfectionist tendencies, further exacerbated these feelings of inadequacy as the participants imposed unattainably high standards on themselves. Parental role conflict emerged through the dual pressures of work–family conflict and comparative parenting stress, resulting in frustration and guilt when mothers felt unable to meet their own expectations. Identity conflict arose from a mismatch in role expectations, as participants managed their emotions effectively in teaching contexts but struggled to regulate their emotions in parenting contexts. Distorted self-beliefs, such as self-underestimation, led mothers to undervalue their competence despite their professional expertise. Collectively, these conditions created a psychological environment conducive to the development and persistence of impostor feelings throughout their parenting experiences.

Contextual conditions

Contextual conditions refer to the broader social and familial contexts that shape and influence the emergence of core phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, both social and family environments were identified as significant contextual influences. The social environment included dissatisfaction with the rigidity of public primary education, which emphasized uniformity and limited creativity compared to early childhood education. Many mothers became aware of the widespread reliance on private education only after their personal experience with public schooling, which intensified feelings of inadequacy and pressure to participate in the private education culture. They also felt compelled to provide private education in highly education-oriented communities, while simultaneously experiencing inner conflict between the rote-learning emphasis of public education and their own child-centered educational philosophies. Furthermore, the social overestimation of early childhood teachers' competence and the societal expectation for flawless parenting added layers of psychological pressure. The family environment also played a pivotal role. Participants reported a lack of support from their spouses, who often deferred childcare responsibilities, as well as limited assistance from extended family members, which led to burnout as primary caregivers. The parenting styles of participants' own parents, particularly a lack of praise or emotional recognition in childhood, influenced their sense of adequacy as mothers. Finally, the tension between the desire to fully meet their child's needs and the unavoidable responsibilities of being working mothers intensified their internal struggle. Together, these contextual conditions shaped the external environment that reinforced the persistence and intensity of impostor feelings in parenting.

Intervening conditions

Intervening conditions refer to factors that mediate or modify the effects of the core phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, the intervening conditions were categorized into individual effort, social support, child's personality, and regional differences. Individual effort included reflective growth, which encompassed self-directed learning and practice in parenting, and active self-care, such as seeking knowledge to reduce anxiety. Social support from spouses and extended family members emerged as a critical protective factor, offering both emotional and practical assistance. The personality of the child also influenced the mother's coping process, as children's kind, gentle, and polite traits, as well

as their prosocial behaviors and social adjustment, contributed to a sense of parental efficacy. In addition, regional differences in educational infrastructure and the ability to adjust to community norms affected how mothers navigated parenting challenges. Together, these intervening conditions provided resources and psychological buffers that mitigated impostor-related stress and facilitated emotional recovery.

Action/interaction strategies

Action/interaction strategies refer to the methods and behaviors employed by participants to manage and address the impostor phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, seven major strategies were identified: self-reflection, communication with one's spouse, role distinction, self-compassion, adjusting one's standards, mindfulness, and self-confidence. Through self-reflection, mothers developed self-awareness and modified their behavior by recognizing and documenting their emotions and analyzing their behavioral patterns. Communication with one's spouse involved resolving conflicts, enhancing mutual communication, and building psychological collaboration within the marital relationship. Role distinction was achieved through recognizing and accepting the differences between parent and teacher roles, thereby reducing cognitive dissonance. Self-compassion emerged as mothers treated themselves with kindness and began to appreciate positive aspects in themselves and their children. Adjusting one's standards involved self-regulation through awareness and the development of greater flexibility in parenting attitudes, allowing mothers to let go of unrealistic expectations and accept their limitations. Mindfulness encompassed emotional self-care and spiritual support, such as taking rest when emotionally exhausted, practicing small mindful changes in daily routines, relying on faith, and releasing emotions through prayer or sincere communication. Finally, self-confidence developed as mothers learned to accept situations and emotions as they were, embraced themselves with positivity, and cultivated gratitude and acceptance of praise. Collectively, these strategies represented a transformative process that enabled participants to reconstruct their sense of self-worth and redefine competence within both personal and parenting domains.

Consequences

Consequences refer to the outcomes that result from the implementation of action/interaction strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In this study, two distinct trajectories

emerged: impostor overcoming and impostor persistence. Mothers who overcame the impostor phenomenon demonstrated psychological resilience characterized by freedom from perfectionism and self-imposed standards, inner satisfaction, and flexibility in balancing work and family life. In contrast, those who continued to struggle exhibited psychological avoidance, marked by ongoing struggles with unresolved negative emotions and tendencies to withdraw under stress. These contrasting trajectories illustrate a continuum between adaptive growth and continued vulnerability, reflecting the extent to which individuals applied reflective and compassionate strategies to manage their impostor experiences.

Selective coding

Selective coding involved integrating and refining all categories derived from the grounded theory analysis to construct a coherent framework. The impostor phenomenon among mothers with early childhood teacher experience was driven by vulnerabilities in mental health, perfectionist personality traits, conflicts in parental and professional identities, and distorted self-beliefs, all of which operated within complex social and familial contexts. Coping and recovery were moderated by factors such as individual effort, social support, child characteristics, and regional context. Ultimately, participants either achieved impostor overcoming through reflective growth, communication, role distinction, compassion, mindfulness, and self-acceptance, or remained trapped in impostor persistence through psychological avoidance. This integrated model illustrates the dynamic interplay between internal cognition, emotional regulation, and relational adaptation that defines the impostor phenomenon in the parenting experiences of mothers with early childhood teacher backgrounds.

Three Subtypes of Impostor Phenomenon in Parenting: Perfectionist, Soloist, and Superwoman

Building upon the typology proposed by Chandra et al. (2019), who identified five impostor subtypes, this study found three dominant patterns among South Korean mothers with early childhood teaching experience-Perfectionist, Soloist, and Superwoman. These subtypes represent distinct ways in which impostor feelings are experienced and managed

within the dual roles of teacher and mother. Table 3 summarizes the main characteristics, participant codes, and mitigation strategies for each identified impostor subtype.

Table 3. *Subtypes of the impostor phenomenon in mothers with early childhood teaching experience and mitigation strategies*

Subtype	Characteristics of the Impostor Phenomenon	Participants' code	Solution strategy
Perfectionist	• Sets high expectations for herself and her child • Interprets her child's inability to meet those standards as evidence of her own parenting failure • Strives for complete control and flawless parenting, leading to heightened stress and burnout	A, E, I, K, M, R	• Adjusting unrealistic parenting standards to more attainable goals • Practicing gratitude journaling to cultivate self-acceptance and reduce perfectionistic pressure
Soloist	• Takes full responsibility for parenting without seeking help from spouse or family • Views reliance on others as a sign of personal inadequacy • Experiences emotional exhaustion and isolation due to lack of social support	C, D, F, G, J, N	• Initiating open communication with spouse to foster shared responsibility • Promoting cooperative co-parenting to distribute emotional and practical workload
Superwoman	• Feels compelled to devote herself completely to both work and family • Experiences guilt and self-blame when unable to give 100% in either role • Suffers from chronic fatigue and stress due to role overload and time pressure	B, H, L, O, P, Q	• Reprioritizing roles and establishing realistic boundaries between work and family • Engaging in active self-care to maintain emotional stability and prevent burnout

The Perfectionist subtype demonstrates heightened self-criticism and stress stemming from unrealistically high parenting standards, often leading to burnout. The Soloist subtype reflects mothers who shoulder childcare responsibilities alone, equating dependence on others with personal inadequacy and experiencing emotional exhaustion as a result. The Superwoman subtype embodies those who strive to meet excessive demands across both professional and family domains, frequently struggling with guilt and chronic fatigue due to role overload. Despite these variations, participants employed several adaptive strategies-

such as adjusting expectations, communicating more openly with spouses, redefining role priorities, and engaging in active self-care-that collectively illustrate how impostor feelings can be understood and mitigated within the sociocultural context of South Korean motherhood.

Discussion

This study examined the manifestation of the impostor phenomenon in the parenting experiences of mothers with early childhood teaching backgrounds, identifying three distinct subtypes-Perfectionist, Soloist, and Superwoman-and their corresponding coping strategies. These findings extend the impostor typology proposed by Chandra et al. (2019) by contextualizing it within the dual roles of educator and parent in South Korea, thereby illustrating how professional identity, maternal expectations, and sociocultural norms intersect to shape impostor experiences.

The results align with previous research by Choi and Lee (2025), which emphasized both the maladaptive and adaptive dimensions of the impostor phenomenon. In this study, the mothers' experiences reflected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral manifestations of impostorism. Emotionally, they reported shame and emotional dissonance-feeling compelled to suppress emotions at work while struggling to regulate them at home. Cognitively, they displayed self-doubt, self-devaluation, and self-criticism, questioning their competence and undervaluing their parenting abilities. Behaviorally, these internal conflicts often manifested as overworking and masking behaviors, as participants attempted to maintain an appearance of competence and composure. These patterns suggest that their impostor-like behaviors may represent adaptive responses to perfectionistic tendencies and socially imposed expectations rather than merely dysfunctional symptoms.

The Perfectionist subtype revealed the highest levels of self-criticism and burnout, as these mothers internalized their children's shortcomings as reflections of their own inadequacy. In contrast, Soloist mothers sought to maintain autonomy in parenting but experienced emotional exhaustion due to limited social support. Superwoman mothers struggled under the pressure to excel simultaneously in professional and domestic domains, often sacrificing self-care. While these subtypes differed in emphasis, all reflected a common struggle:

balancing the professional ideals of early childhood educators-centered on patience, empathy, and perfection-with the unpredictable realities of parenting. This dissonance triggered persistent self-evaluation and emotional strain, reinforcing impostor experiences.

Culturally, these findings should be understood within the context of South Korea's Confucian heritage and its highly competitive educational climate (Choi & Lee, 2025a). Face-saving norms in Korean society amplify the fear of social judgment and discourage open discussion of vulnerability, while competitive educational pressures reinforce perfectionistic striving and burnout among mothers with teaching experience (Choi & Lee, 2025a, 2025b). As a result, emotional suppression, perfectionism, and exhaustion commonly emerge as culturally reinforced and psychologically adaptive responses in this population, shaped by persistent external expectations and the realities of limited family support.

Although these mothers possess expert knowledge of child development, their professional competence did not always translate seamlessly into their parenting practices. Instead, they found themselves navigating a tension between their commitment to child-centered educational values and the societal pressures favoring competition and measurable academic performance. Consistent with Choi and Lee (2025a), this tension underscores the paradoxical coexistence of professional insight and personal insecurity-demonstrating how contextual pressures can distort the application of professional knowledge within family life. In a related study, Choi and Lee (2025b) demonstrated through quantitative analysis that impostor experiences significantly contribute to psychological burnout among early childhood educators. These empirical findings highlight the psychological risks associated with the impostor phenomenon in the profession. Building on the qualitative insights provided in the present study, future research should include more diverse and larger samples and apply quantitative or mixed-method approaches to further clarify these relationships and strengthen generalizability.

Recognizing these impostor feelings as contextually grounded psychological experiences, rather than individual flaws, allowed the participants to adopt coping strategies such as self-reflection, communication, role distinction, and self-compassion. These processes facilitated emotional balance and self-acceptance, promoting adaptive growth. However, the persistence of impostor experiences in some mothers highlights the need for systemic and cultural interventions rather than solely individual coping. Specifically, professional parenting education programs could integrate emotional regulation, self-compassion, and realistic goal-

setting to help educators-turned-mothers navigate conflicting role expectations. Moreover, peer support networks could offer shared spaces for dialogue, reducing isolation and normalizing imperfection within a collective framework of care.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the impostor phenomenon among mothers with early childhood teaching experience is not a static personal pathology but a relational and cultural process shaped by intersecting forces of gender, profession, and societal expectation. Addressing it requires both internal transformation through self-awareness and external change through cultural empathy, institutional support, and the development of networks among mothers with early childhood teaching experience. In future research, intervention-based or program development studies should be conducted to design and evaluate support programs that help mothers with early childhood teaching experience effectively manage impostor feelings and strengthen their emotional well-being.

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