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Rural children's work and school education in the context of rapid economic growth in South Korea

Introduction

What constitutes children's work has been one of the central concerns of sociologists and anthropologists working on childhood over the past two decades (see, for example, the special issue on this topic in volume 29 of this journal). It has been a much debated subject but one of the central themes that has emerged is that attempts to draw distinctions between harmful labour and benign forms of work invariably fail and that children's work needs to be seen on a continuum which encompasses both potentially positive and negative impacts. Furthermore, attempts to look at work in only its narrowest sense of paid labour miss many, if not the majority, of children's experiences of work, ignoring their domestic labour, their chores, their socialisation and most significantly their schooling.

This paper explores how children's work in its broadest sense and the related values and attitudes concerning childhood, have evolved in the context of rapid economic growth in South Korea. Using a small scale study of a rural community it discusses how ideas about children's activities and their status and relationships within the family have changed and how children's roles and responsibilities are seen by members of different generations. It aims to interrogate changing ideas of work in contemporary children's lives and present data from a relatively under-researched part of the world.

Work, labour and schooling

During the 1990s studies began to appear which challenged the idea that children's economic activities could be differentiated into harmful, risky labour and less damaging, or even positive, forms of work. This scholarship questioned the notion that labour was intrinsically damaging to children, that it was inevitably exploitative and that it occurred only outside the domestic context (for the best overviews of this see Nieuwenhuys 1996 and Boyden et al 1998). Gradually an orthodoxy began to emerge amongst academics (if not policy makers and practitioners) that children's work cannot be properly understood without looking at both its risks and the benefits (Woodhead 2004); without understanding children's agency (Liebel 2004) and without examining local conceptualisations of childhood and culturally defined beliefs about parent-child relationships and their relative roles and responsibilities (Reynolds 1991; Morrow 1996; Boyden et al 1998; White 1999; Bourdillon et al 2010; White 2012). Work was also done on children's

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time use and the amount of work children did at home or which freed up adults to take on paid work (Schildkrout 1978; Reynolds 1991; Punch 2001; White 2012) and on the many ways that children were active, economic agents, contributing to the household economy, even if they were not receiving a wage. Anthropologists also argued that categories such as work, play, learning and socialisation were highly unstable and indivisible in non-Western contexts where children learnt their adult roles through play, doing chores and watching and imitating adults so that learning was a form of work and vice versa (Lancy 2008).

Another important strand was the theorisation that, rather than being an alternative to work, schooling and education were in fact forms of productive, economic work and that schooling is the real work of childhood. Schooling is both compulsory and unpaid and it is where children transform themselves into the next working generation and the future educated workforce (Ennew 1986; Qvortup 2001; Close 2009). Children often work very hard at school and, just as women's economic activity was long dismissed as housework, so children's schooling has been seen as education rather than productive labour (Oakley 1994). A description of the early years curriculum in Japan captures this link well and is part of what the author calls the 'disappearance' of childhood in the country. Drawing explicit parallels between child labour and education, Norma Field writes: "There are no child labor laws to protect ordinary… Japanese two-year-olds from having to trace a path through countless mazes to acquire small-motor coordination, to match the same banal image - of strawberry, ball, shoe - in columns 1-4 with the one in column 5, from having to curb their sensibilities within the regime of the workbook before they can ride swings to wash their own faces - for of course, the point is neither merely to perfect small-motor coordination nor to increase vocabulary per se, but to produce adults tolerant of joyless, repetitive tasks-in other words, disciplined workers" (1995, p. 54).

When examining children's work in South Korea, and comparing the work today's children do with that undertaken by their parents and grandparents, all these issues are pertinent and this paper will look at how children's work in South Korea is, and has been, bound up with indigenous conceptualisations of childhood, with children's agency and also with education. South Korea has been chosen as a case study because of its uniquely fast economic and social development and its trajectory from being a state characterised by nationwide poverty to one which is highly industrialised. In 1953, the year of the armistice in the Korean War (which had started in 1950 between South and North Korea), South Korea's per capita income was 67 US$ (Statistics Korea 2008) and this increased only slightly to 87 US$ by 1962 (Lee 2010:51). Then, between the 1960s and the 1990s, the country experienced a period of rapid economic growth and, by 2015, was the world's 11th largest economy (World Bank 2017a) with a gross income per

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capita based on purchasing power parity of US$ 34,810 (World Bank 2017b). Against this economic backdrop, the paper examines how childhoods change within the life-time of people who once experienced abject poverty and looks at the impacts of some of these changes for people of differing ages, including contemporary children.

Studies of children and ideas about childhood in South Korea are very limited. One area where there has been research however is on the South Korean education system and the 'education fever' of parents who strive to provide as good an education as possible for their children, often at considerable costs to themselves and to their children, even though the education system has been critiqued for privileging and rewarding conformity and obedience (Kim-Renaud 1991; Jeong & Armer 1994; Sorensen 1994; Cho 1995; Lee & Larson 2000; Seth 2002; Jo 2013; Kim & Lee 2010; Ryu & Kang 2013; Choi & Park 2016).[1] Hae-joung Cho describes a system, similar to Japan, where children from their earliest years are encouraged to compete in an 'examination war' where good grades are the only criteria of success and where their mothers try to influence and sometimes bribe their teachers into giving such grades. Lee & Larson (2000) go even further, referring to the 'examination hell' that children go through in South Korea based on the length of the hours they are expected to study for and the impacts on their mental health and well being. What children think about this or how they spend their times outside of school has been given much less attention, particularly in relation to the other forms of work they might do in and outside their parents' households. Indeed given the emphasis that parents and children place on education and the many hours a day it takes up, it might be surprising to find any work at all still done by children not related to formal schooling and it is this which the paper seeks to explore. Do children continue to work outside school and if so why? Is the education fever so overwhelming that it has ended children's roles as productive economic contributors to the household? How does this changing conceptualisation of the role of children impact on their relationships within the family and on traditional domestic hierarchies?

Investigating the trajectories of children's work and schooling over changing times

The local context and research participants

Data was collected in an agricultural district (*myeon*) on the outskirts of a small city, a few hours by train from the capital Seoul. This city, one of the central sites of traditional Confucian values that stress filial duties, traditional gender roles and family lineage, seemed to be a good place to observe how experiences and views about childhood work and schooling have evolved under the influence of wider economic growth and 'modernisation'. The 'development' of the city has been relatively slow: local, rather conservative attitudes about urban development and the fact that

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surrounding districts are categorized as nature conservation areas containing many cultural treasure sites may also have prevented some of the more aggressive tides of industrialisation (Choi 2010).

The fieldwork site chosen was one of the farthest administrative districts from the city centre and seen by local people as being among the most deprived. However, while the development of the area may have been slow, one side effect of wider industrialisation was the district's population size and composition. Because of outward migrations to urban areas over the last few decades, especially among younger people, and the remaining households having fewer children than before (South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world), the total population in the district's 19 villages was just under 1900 (as of 2015) with those aged under 45 years accounting for just under 24 percent and children under age 15 for about four percent. While South Korea is a nation characterised by an aging population, the skewedness of the district's population towards older people emerges distinctly when it is compared to the age distribution of the national population as a whole where some 16 percent are children aged under 15 years (Statistics Korea 2017). Between the 1940s and 1970s, due to the increasing number of school age children, the district saw some new primary schools opening in its outlying villages. However, nearly all of them have since closed and the remaining one had only 15 children in total between Year 1 to Year 6 (usually between ages 6 to 11). The only middle (lower secondary) school had just eight children in total from Year 1 to Year 3 (usually between ages 12 to 14). The district never had a high (upper secondary) school, so young people of that age attend schools in the nearby city or elsewhere.

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 39 people of various ages, from those born in the 1930s and 1940s through to children who are currently in primary and middle school. The recruitment of the research participants started with the children. As the number of school age children lived in households scattered across the district, schools seemed to be a logical place to start seeking access to them. With the permission of the head teachers, seven primary school (two Year 3 girls, one Year 4 boy, one Year 5 boy, one Year 6 girl and two Year 6 boys) and four middle school children (one Year 2 boy, one Year 3 girl and two Year 3 boys) participated in the study. The children were selected by the teachers, focusing on those from farming households.[2] It was not possible to talk to children younger than Year 3 in the primary school because the teachers suggested that they were too young to respond adequately to interviews. High school students were not interviewed as there was no local high school although one high school girl who boarded at a school in the nearby city was at home on the day when her sister was

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interviewed and also agreed to participate. All children including this girl signed assent forms to take part in the study.

The adult participants who consisted of 15 women and 12 men were recruited in the village halls where they met and socialised, through teachers at the two schools and via the owners of the guest house where the first author stayed. Due to migration, younger people were rare and those born in the 1970s said that they were among the youngest in their villages, while all of the adult participants' grown-up children lived in cities. Some of the adult participants were the parents or grandparents of child participants – two primary and one middle school children lived with their grandparents as their parents worked and lived elsewhere.

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow the participants' experiences and views to be compared and also to obtain more in-depth responses. For the interviews, three sets of questions were prepared: one for adults who were old enough to have a grandchild; a second for younger adults; and a third for children. Each set of questions asked respondents about their own childhood work and schooling experiences but were differentiated, depending on their position in generational hierarchy and, where appropriate, they were asked about their children and/or grandchildren's experiences and also their views about those younger generations' experiences. The interviews with adults were conducted, depending on their preferences, in village halls, their homes or the guest house where the first author stayed, while those with the children were conducted in their schools, homes or village study room. The length of interviews with adults ranged from 23 to 56 minutes with a majority of them lasting between 40 to 50 minutes while that of those with children ranged from 18 to 36 minutes. No incentives for taking part in interviews were offered other than some refreshments. All the interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

In recent years when doing research with children, 'child-friendly' or 'child-centred' methods, such as using activity sheets, drawings, photographs and so on, which allow children to be more actively engaged in the process, have become commonplace.. For this study, however, semi-structured interviews were used instead, partly because the time permitted with the children was limited, and interviews allowed as much information as possible to be gathered from individual children and also allowed them to be compared with the responses from other children and adults. There was also some scepticism from teachers who claimed that questionnaires were a more efficient method to collect data and would take less time although this would have produced more superficial data. Nevertheless, when conducting the interviews, care was taken to make them as relaxed and informal as possible, while also making sure the questions were as

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simple as possible for younger children to understand. Also, during the interviews, as an attempt to incorporate an element of activity and to help understand the place of work in their daily lives, the children were given the choice of drawing their daily timetables or of explaining in words what they did from waking-up in the morning before going to bed on a weekday, the weekend and during school holidays. Interestingly all the children chose to do the latter, which suggests that a method which researchers consider child-friendly may not necessarily be one which children themselves prefer.

The adult interviews presented different challenges: a lack of existing empirical data and other secondary sources about the adults' childhood experiences of work and schooling meant that primary sources of evidence had to be recollections of past events. The time factor involved in this approach has some implications to consider in terms of the subjective interpretations of the past events that the adults narrated. In other words, their recollections of childhoods may be mediated by an 'adult' perspective (Hendrick 1997). In combination with such factors as age and position in generational hierarchy within a family, the present (what their life is currently like) can also determine the interpretive contexts through which they tell their stories and influence how they view the past (Brannen, et al 2004). In interpreting their interview responses therefore it was important to keep in mind the complexity of what counts as work and how this may have changed over the years. In particular, in a society such as South Korea where schooling and success are highly valued, it is possible that poverty and work are seen as forms of failure making contemporary children reluctant to admit to the work they do. Conversely, for the older generations who did not have the same educational opportunities, there is the risk that they may have exaggerated the importance of their work to underline that they had nevertheless been virtuous children, even if academically 'unsuccessful'. Therefore, when analysing their recollections, their personal characteristics (such as gender, position in a family, level of education and current living condition) were considered carefully and their responses were also compared with national and local contextual factors, where available, about the times that they referred to. Despite some limitations with the data, the stories and explanations by the participants can provide some useful insights when thinking about how social attitudes to children's work and childhoods can change over time, how children's roles and responsibilities are seen by members of different generations and how children's work is, and was, conceptualised.

Children's work and schooling: changing times and changing values

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Aspects of childhood work and schooling inevitably change in the context of economic growth, but ideas about poverty and the 'need' for children to work are complex and poverty at the household level is not always the driving factor behind children's work (Bourdillon, et al 2010; Canagarajah & Nielsen 2001). Studies from Cambodia, for example, have shown that the household poverty parents cite as reasons for their children's paid work is not always of such depth that it threatens a family's economic survival (Kim 2009). Therefore, any changes in the relationship between work and schooling must be seen in terms of the complex dynamics between household poverty, social attitudes to schooling and a child's place in a household and how these have shifted in the wider context of development.

For those participants born before the 1970s, poverty was a distinct feature of their childhoods with the hunger experienced by those born in the 1940s and earlier appearing to have been especially severe. Older adults mentioned the particularly hungry period of the 'barley hills' in the spring when the harvest of the previous autumn ran out before the new barley they had planted could be harvested. In the early summer many households had to live on porridges made with tree pulp or roots or by incurring debts and this poverty could also push children into forms of forced labour and debt bondage. Mr Hwang[3] born in 1937 recalled how his family could not repay the money they owed for the grain they needed and as a consequence he was taken by the brother-in-law of his father's sister to another household to work as a servant:

> He took me to a family named Park who lived in an area called '…' and, in return, took six bags of grains from them… The war broke out when I was 13, so I was then about 13 or 14…

Mr Hwang said he worked as a servant intermittently for several years after this - well into his twenties until the early 1960s.

Such hunger persisted until the 1960s: a woman born in 1942 remembered how her children who had come home for lunch returned to school weeping as there was nothing to eat; while a man born in 1961 recalled that, in his neighbourhood at about the time he entered primary school, few households ate two meals a day. This level of poverty had been broadly alleviated by the time those born in the 1970s were children so that, while some of them still mentioned 'poverty' when recollecting their childhoods, they appeared to be referring to relative rather than absolute poverty. For example, their families could eat three meals but they were unable to do anything else such as going to the cinema in the city. Another common recollection from the 'poor old' days was that most households in the neighbourhoods were similarly poor with few obvious differences between the lifestyles of the poorer and the better-off, while any differences

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appeared mainly in terms of whether a family could financially support their children to proceed to higher levels of education.

The extent to which the adults in this study reported that they had worked as a child varied and suggested that household poverty did not always mean that they had worked or started working early. Some recalled, in cases where they were the eldest son, or the first sons in the family line or the youngest boy or girl with older siblings, that they were largely spared from both outdoor and house work. Or, if the family owned little or no land, then adults worked as labourers for other people and their children recalled doing 'not very much', although several went on to qualify this saying that while they did little in the way of farming-related work, depending on their household's circumstances, they fetched firewood or drinking water, looked after siblings, cooked and/or washed clothes. They were therefore making a contribution to their household maintenance but did not recognise it as significant, suggesting it was seen as a normal part of a child's experience and responsibilities.[4] This also further suggests that they made a distinction between household chores which they saw as part of their non-productive daily activities and productive labour which they viewed unequivocally as something which made an economic contribution to the household.

Most adults reported starting work between the ages of six to ten but were often unsure about the extent of contribution that their work at such age made to their families. Mr Lee born in 1941, described the work he did at this age as helping and learning to work rather than 'proper work' and as not being essential to his family's agricultural production:

> Since about age 12, I helped my parents' farming. Before then, it was more like watching them work and helping them a little… there wasn't much that a small child could do.

When they reached middle school age, men reported doing more substantial farming work. In comparison, some women, including those who dropped out of primary school, recollected doing hardly any farming work even though their mothers worked in the fields. They explained this as being due to the traditional belief that unmarried women should stay at home.

Although the ages which they started work varied, as did the type and amount of work they did, none of the older participants claimed to have any choice in the matter, accepting it as normal that children worked as and when they could for the family and that they had responsibilities to their families. Both women and men recollected starting work when their parents told them and accepting it naturally as what they had to. With a few exceptions, they did not appear to have expressed any clear opinion or exercised any agency regarding the circumstances in which they worked and no older adults, especially those born in the 1930s to 1950s, spoke of actively

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evading or refusing to do work although there were some hints that they used schooling as a way of avoiding certain types of work. If they had a long distance to walk to school (and many participants recollected walking between 4 to 8 kilometres each way), this meant that they often returned home too late to do any outdoor work. However, this did not excuse them entirely from work and they were still expected to work around the house, including cultivating silk worms, preparing animal fodder or processing harvested vegetables. Studies from other countries have suggested that even when children accept the necessity to work they still have strategies to avoid work that they do not like and ways of taking on work they find more congenial or which gives them greater freedom (Kayongo-Male and Walji 1984). As Boyden et al (1998) note, some children identify only those things that they dislike doing as work – another reason why adult recollections need careful analysis.

The increasing significance of schooling in rural childhoods

South Korea is often cited as a nation where education has played a key role in national economic development. In 1945, following a 35-year period of Japanese colonisation, around 87 percent of Korean adults had never received any formal schooling (Lee 1997). However, educational participation rose rapidly: between 1945 and 1970, the number of children attending primary school rose from 1.4 million to 5.7 million (WENR 2013), with this level of education becoming virtually universal from around 1970. Middle school enrolment rates increased from 33 percent in 1960 to 95 percent in 1980 while, over the same period, high school enrolments rose from about 20 percent to 50 percent and the higher education participation rate increased from 6.4 percent to 16 percent. This process has since continued: the enrolment rates for middle schools was 99 per cent in 1995; that for high schools was 90 per cent in 2000; while the higher education participation rate was around 70 per cent in 2007 (Seth, 2002; MoEST, 2008; MoEST, 2016). These changes mean that, in the space of little more than a generation, enrolment rates in successive levels of education have reached, or exceeded, those in other industrialised countries.

The emphasis laid on school education in South Korean has particular social and cultural precedents (Sorensen, 1994; Seth, 2002). For many centuries, social mobility was restricted, with education, social status and public positions rigidly limited to the small, privileged gentry class (*yangban*). The first half of the 20th century saw tumultuous changes in Korean society, firstly the periods of Japanese colonisation in 1910-1945 followed by the Korean War in 1950-1953 which had significant and long lasting impacts on the social system. After the Korean War, for the first time, social mobility became achievable and status could be gained through education; both of these were enabled through economic growth from the 1960s onwards.. Seth (2002) has

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documented how in the post war years Korean people's pent-up educational aspirations led to a high demand for school education, even in rural villages. This has led to what many commentators have referred to as 'education fever' or 'education zeal' among South Koreans.

Several of the oldest participants in this study were born before this 'fever' was widespread and, as with Mr Kim born in 1943 below, recollected that their own parents were largely indifferent to their schooling.

> …I had to give a hand on the home front and, in those days, school education was not considered to be that important… I had to follow the reality, what else could I have done?

Equally importantly however was the cost of schooling. Those born in the 1940s were of school age before the period of rapid economic growth when the vast majority of the population were still engaged in agriculture and when farming was often insufficient even to meet the households' own consumption needs and produced little, if any, surplus to sell to pay the costs associated with schooling. This included both the authorised and unauthorised fees which schools and teachers charged to make up for the deficient public funding of education (Seth 2002). Mrs Choi, born in 1949, recollected her schooling:

> I had to stop at Year 2 in primary school. We didn't have money and when my parents told me to work at home, I couldn't attend the school. How could I continue schooling like that? One of my older sisters did not even see the gate of the school, while the other one attended it until Year 5.

Similarly, many of the older participants reported taking up farming or housework as a full-time activity after dropping out of school or finishing primary school around the age of 12. Factors which led them to stop schooling and to work as a 'default' activity included distance to school (this could also be related to financial destitution as attending a school elsewhere incurred substantial costs including that for accommodation); a low recognition of the value of schooling by children themselves as well as parents as above; sudden events such as having an illness or the death of a parent; or a combination of any of these factors. Participants' recollections about the experience of stopping school education were mixed: while they usually expressed acceptance, some remembered finding it difficult to stop schooling when they did not want to or envying those still attending school. In the majority of cases however decisions about schooling were made mainly by parents without reference to the children's wishes, as Mr Park, born in 1962, said:

> Fewer than half of the class could proceed to high school. As there were friends who couldn't either, it was not too difficult... I wanted to continue, but my parents told me to give up.

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Social distance from work in contemporary rural childhoods

As South Korea has changed from a largely agrarian society to an industrialised one, the opportunities for children to help with agricultural work have shifted. Subsistence farming has vanished and farm mechanisation has made much of the work children used to do redundant. The interviewees in this study reported the introduction of rotary cultivators and tractors in the late 1970s and advances in agricultural technologies reduced the amount of manual labour required to cultivate the same size of land and enabled the farming of wider areas. In particular, machines replacing oxen's work meant the elimination of one of children's previous major activities – grazing and preparing fodder.

Perhaps more important though is the change in attitudes both to education and to children's role in society and in the family. While the adult participants claimed that their own parents were not necessarily interested in their children becoming more educated, they were vocal about having wanted something different for their own children (and grandchildren) and their aspirations for their children's education appeared clearly across all the interviews. One of these differences was that not only did they want their children to be educated but they wanted them spared from the work that they had performed as children. Mr Lee born in 1941 said:

> They did not want to work and I didn't let them either. I wanted them to study instead… I thought, based on my own experience, my children did not need to work.

He doubted the value of children's work, especially if they were to find paid employment elsewhere. Furthermore, unlike himself, his children showed some resistance to it. Conscious attempts to distance children from work based on their own experiences also appeared among those as young as a man born in 1974 who shuddered at the memory of working after school every day and having been expected to work in the fields every weekend. Adults no longer thought that work should necessarily be part of childhood, or that children had responsibilities to their households, outside the expectation to do well as school.

Given the wealth of South Korea and the importance the society places on education, it might be expected that children's productive work within the country had been entirely transformed into education which they do in preparation for their future lives as paid workers. However, in rural districts, such as the one this study was carried out in, the children of agricultural households still remained physically close to potential sources of work and continued to accompany their parents to work where they both played and worked alongside them. Min-young a primary Year 6 schoolgirl described this:

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> I used to help my parents occasionally and now regularly do so… I was about five, I climbed up the trees for fun and picked apples. In those days, I just liked following them, so I got to play and work in the orchards.

Other children did so while younger but gradually spent less time on work as they became older and discovered other things to play with. A Year 6 boy from primary school said:

> When I was in the kindergarten, I just played in the fields. Entering primary school, I played and worked. I kept accompanying parents to the fields. Then, when I was in Year 3, auntie showed me interesting games to play on the computer and since then, I stopped going to the fields.

Indeed, as they got older, it appeared that children spent less and less time outdoors in any capacity, while the main activities in the children's daily routines outside of school hours included playing with computers or smart phones (especially playing games or watching video clips) and watching TV. Compared to these activities, the time that they spent in work or playing outside was both shorter and less frequent.

The extent to which the children reported helping their parents or grandparents varied. If they worked at all, they usually did so at weekends and occasionally on weekdays, especially if it was conducted around the home (e.g. selecting quality vegetables for sale). The work lasted between several minutes to a few hours. Five children, including one as young as Year 4, reported working a whole day (from morning until dark) alongside their parents several days a year but this usually happened in the planting and harvesting seasons or when day labourers were not hired. Of the 12 children interviewed, some appeared to help out their parents regularly but, six of them (two girls and four boys) either did no farming work or very little (e.g. once or twice a month for about an hour; or about an hour three times a year). These children also reported doing little housework although they occasionally cooked for themselves and washed up afterwards.

Almost all the adults said how 'very' different their childhoods were from those of contemporary children but this referred not only to the material security that the current generation enjoy but also to children's relative position in the households whose affairs are now often organised around them. For contemporary children doing little work was sometimes a result of direct resistance to their parents or grandparents' suggestions, something which was unthinkable to the adult interviewees during their childhoods and, as in the case of a primary Year 6 boy, children prioritised what they felt like doing over what they were asked to do:

> My parents ask me to help them in the fields. I turn it down several times and, once in a while when I don't have anything else to do, I go to help them.

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Among the adult participants, some of the children's parents or grandparents mentioned that they did not expect much from them in the first place and, where a child declined to help, they ended up telling them to study at home instead. Ironically, some participants commented that, these days, urban children can sometimes work better than rural ones because of their school activities and weekend family farming experiences. This observation was supported by the mother of a middle school child who said:

> My sister-in-law from Seoul told me to bring my son to the fields and ask him to help his father. Her children, when they visited us this year, helped us to plant tobacco seedlings. She grilled me about my child not doing any work…

Compared to previous generations, contemporary children exercised active choices regarding work and, if they did work, it was often something they chose to do. The disappearance of the extended families of three or more generations living in the same house has led to a shift in the households' focus of attention from older generations to younger ones. However, the adults, and especially those who had lived their own childhoods based on different parent-child relationships and different attitudes to work, adjusted their expectations about those relationships. To a question about whether he would expect a child from a farming household to help out their parents, a man born in 1943 said:

> It is up to them. In today's world, just like Americans do, when a child reaches a certain age, they should be let do as they like. Meddling with what they do is not good…

This may suggest that individual autonomy, which older people tend to associate with the 'American' way (due to the prominent influence of the USA in the country since 1945 and especially after the Korean War), has become internalised by parents into their child rearing practices, even in one of the most conservative parts of the country. In the process, some of the older adults may have had conflicts within themselves or with others, particularly their children, but their frequent saying of 'the times have changed' suggested that they thought these changes were inevitable and that they had to accept them, even if they did not like them.

Some older participants did lament that children no longer obeyed their parents and stressed the importance of character education – e.g. respect for elders, concern for others – but this did not mean that they expected children to do more work or take on more chores. For most participants, schooling, at least up to high school, if not beyond, was unquestionably a priority for children that could and should override work ('isn't studying their priority?' was mentioned repeatedly). They still hoped it would help the children to achieve a more 'comfortable' career than farming. In comparison, rural children's social distance from work, despite their physical proximity to it, meant the little work they did was sometimes viewed as a rare but positive,

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3 character-building 'experience' which would help enrich children's future lives but was not seen as an integral part of their current lives. Indeed, in a reversal of circumstances, it was now at school where children had to work hard, unpaid and compulsorily, whereas work in the fields or the home (and the choice whether to do it or not) allowed them the choice, flexibility and agency that they lacked at school.

Conclusion

Within a South Korean context it is possible to view wide changes in childhood practices, experiences and conceptualisations in a relatively short time frame. Many of these changes are most visible through the relative importance placed by parents both now and in the past on work and schooling. Routine work such as farming or housework, combined with limited schooling, featured distinctly in the childhoods of the majority of the older adults in this study, facilitated in part by a cultural norm of children's deference and obedience towards parents and sense of duty to their families. Alongside the fast national economic growth within just several decades, poverty and the necessity (perceived or otherwise) to work for the family have eased and children's relationships with the adults in their families have been transformed with contemporary children having both less opportunity to work outside school and fewer cultural reference points for doing so.

In decisions over work and schooling during their childhoods, most of the adults did not appear to have shown any apparent agency and this passivity was embedded in the cultural norms of the times. However, they certainly were not passive in terms of their efforts to make a different life possible for their own children, especially through schooling, and such agentic efforts have contributed to creating different childhoods in successive generations where, despite their proximity to potential work, rural children today can often choose not to work or contribute to the household economy. In comparison, while contemporary children certainly appeared to be more able to exercise agency in their relationships with their parents and grandparents regarding work, social expectations and conformity around schooling may work as constraints to its exercise in other aspects.

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[1] It is worth noting however that some of this work is now quite dated and while pressure on children to do well remains, school children in South Korea are less deferential to their teachers and elders and their classroom/school practices are less hierarchical and less emphasis is now placed on conformity.

[3] It is worth noting however that some of this work is now quite dated and while pressure on children to do well remains, school children in South Korea are less deferential to their teachers and elders and their classroom/school practices are less hierarchical and less emphasis is now placed on conformity.
[3] In this paper, pseudonyms are used to keep the participants' anonymity.
[4] Such a conceptualisation is a relatively common feature of research on children's work and both children and adults regularly under-value the work that they do. Pamela Reynolds, in her study of child labour in the Zambezi valley, watched a 14-year-old girl prepare a breakfast of porridge for herself and her younger brother, wash the plates from the previous night's meal and collect water twice from a source two kilometres away. Yet when questioned directly about what she had done that morning replied simply, 'Nothing' (Reynolds 1991).

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Rural children's work and school education in the context of rapid economic growth in South Korea

Introduction

What constitutes children's work has been one of the central concerns of sociologists and anthropologists working on childhood over the past two decades (see, for example, the special issue on this topic in volume 29 of this journal). It has been a much debated subject but one of the central themes that has emerged is that attempts to draw distinctions between harmful labour and benign forms of work often fail and that children's work needs to be seen on a continuum which encompasses both potentially positive and negative impacts. Furthermore, attempts to look at work in only its narrowest sense of paid labour miss many, if not the majority, of children's experiences of work, ignoring their domestic labour, their chores and most significantly their schooling.

This paper explores how children's work in its broad sense, and related values and attitudes concerning childhood, have evolved in the context of rapid economic growth in South Korea. Against the backdrop of wider economic and social development, and using a small scale study of a rural community, it discusses how ideas about children's activities and their status and relationships within the family have changed and also examines who and what determines decisions over children's work and school education. It aims to interrogate changing ideas about work in contemporary children's lives and present data from a relatively under-researched part of the world.

Overview of relevant literature

Debates on children's work and school education

During the 1990s studies began to appear which challenged the idea that children's economic activities could be differentiated into harmful, risky labour and less damaging, or even positive, forms of work. This scholarship questioned the notion that labour was intrinsically damaging to children, that it was inevitably exploitative and that it occurred only outside the domestic context (for the best overviews of this see Nieuwenhuys 1996 and Boyden et al 1998). Gradually an orthodoxy began to emerge amongst academics (if not policy makers and practitioners) that children's work cannot be properly understood without looking at both its risks and the benefits (Woodhead 2004); without understanding children's agency (Liebel 2004) and without examining local conceptualisations of childhood and culturally defined beliefs about parent-child relationships and their relative roles and responsibilities (Reynolds 1991; Morrow 1996; Boyden

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et al 1998; White 1999; Bourdillon et al 2010; White 2012). Work was also done on children's time use and the amount of work children did at home or which freed up adults to take on paid work (Reynolds 1991; Punch 2001; White 2012) and on the many ways that children were active, economic agents, contributing to the household economy, even if they were not receiving a wage. Anthropologists also argued that categories such as work, play, learning and socialisation were highly unstable and indivisible in non-Western contexts where children learnt their adult roles through play, doing chores and watching and imitating adults so that learning was a form of work and vice versa (Lancy 2008). Another important strand was the theorisation that, rather than being an alternative to work, schooling and education were in fact forms of productive, economic work and that schooling is the real work of childhood. Schooling is both compulsory and unpaid and it is where children transform themselves into the next working generation and the future educated workforce (Qvortup 2001; Close 2009). A description of the early years' curriculum in Japan captures this link well and is part of what Field (1995) calls the 'disappearance' of childhood in the country. Drawing explicit parallels between child labour and education, she writes: "There are no child labor laws to protect ordinary… Japanese two-year-olds from having to trace a path through countless mazes to acquire small-motor coordination, to match the same banal image – of strawberry, ball, shoe – in columns 1-4 with the one in column 5, from having to curb their sensibilities within the regime of the workbook before they can ride swings to wash their own faces - for of course, the point is neither merely to perfect small-motor coordination nor to increase vocabulary per se, but to produce adults tolerant of joyless, repetitive tasks – in other words, disciplined workers" (p. 54).

Many such discussions were linked to emerging ideas about children's rights, articulated in the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC confers special protection on children and affirms their rights to survival, protection and social and educational provision. Significantly the CRC also recognises children's evolving capacities to exercise agency by enshrining their rights to participate in making decisions on matters which affect their lives. This mixed view of children (as having rights to both protection and empowerment) is reflected in the debates on children's work and school education, discussed above, and whether the latter should always be privileged over the former. While compulsory education is the focus of many international development campaigns, academics have argued for a more nuanced approach which takes children's rights to participation seriously, values children's own agency and listens to children's views of what they may want and how they would choose to spend their time, whether at school, at work or undertaking a combination of the two. Indeed in the context of poverty, or where schooling beyond primary level is not the norm and there are few seemingly

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better alternatives to work, children very often choose to combine work and school rather than do one or the other (Woodhead 1999; Liebel 2004). However, how children's attitudes to work may change in the context of economic and social development is less researched. This study of South Korea attempts to examine this question in one particular community, by comparing today's children with their parents' and grandparents' generations in terms of the work that they do/did for their family, their relationships with their parents or other elders within the family and who and what determines/determined the decisions concerning their work and schooling.

South Korea as the context

South Korea has been chosen as a case study because of its uniquely fast economic and social development and its trajectory from being a state characterised by nationwide poverty to one which is highly industrialised. In 1953, the year of the armistice in the Korean War (which had started in 1950 between South and North Korea), South Korea's per capita income was 67 US$ (Statistics Korea 2008) and this increased only slightly to 87 US$ by 1962 (Lee 2010). Then, between the 1960s and the 1990s, the country experienced a period of rapid economic growth and, by 2015, was the world's 11th largest economy (World Bank 2017a) with a gross income per capita based on purchasing power parity of US$ 34,810 (World Bank 2017b). It is, of course, to be expected that as societies become richer and more industrialised, and agricultural labour declines, children's time and effort will shift from work to schooling, in both urban and rural areas (see White 2012 for a detailed account of this in Java). This has been the case in South Korea but rather than examining these macro-trends, this paper examines how ideas about childhood and children's roles and responsibilities have changed against the national economic backdrop and, in the context of such changes, to what extent children have been able to exercise their agency in decisions about where their effort shall lie between work and schooling.

Although South Korea ratified the CRC in 1991[1], there is very little internationally published research on how it has been understood and implemented on the ground or the impacts it has had on children's lives or on how (if at all) the CRC it has changed adult/child relationships in the country.[2] Fast economic and social changes in South Korea have led to changes in family structure and, as suggested later in this paper, to alterations in the dynamics of familial relationships. While it is difficult to tell how much the introduction of the concept of children's rights and related legislations has contributed to recent changes in children's status within the family, it is likely that the rapid transformation of the country has led to discourses concerning children's rights rising up the public agenda.

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However, one area where there has been research published internationally is on the South Korean education system and the 'education fever' of parents who strive to provide as much and as good an education as possible for their children, often at considerable costs to themselves and to their children, even though the education system has been critiqued for privileging and rewarding conformity and obedience (Kim-Renaud 1991; Sorensen 1994; Cho 1995; Lee & Larson 2000; Seth 2002; Kim & Lee 2010).[3] Hae-joung Cho (1995) described a system, similar to Japan, where children from their earliest years were encouraged to compete in an 'examination war' and where good grades were the only criteria of success: twenty years on this description is still largely valid. Lee & Larson (2000) go even further, referring to the 'examination hell' that children go through in South Korea, based on the length of the hours they are expected to study for and the impacts on their mental health and well being. What children think about this or how they spend their time outside of school has been given much less attention, particularly in relation to the other forms of work they might do in and outside their households. Indeed, given the emphasis that parents and children place on education, it might be surprising to find any work still being done by children which is unrelated to formal schooling. Therefore, this paper explores questions such as: do children continue to work outside school or is 'education fever' so overwhelming to have ended children's roles as productive economic contributors to the household? How, in the context of a shift from work to schooling, have children's status and roles within the family changed and how has this change affected the extent to which they take part in the decisions over work and schooling?

How the study was conducted: investigating the trajectories of children's work and schooling

The fieldwork site and research participants

The fieldwork for the study was conducted in August to September in 2016. It focused on an agricultural district (*myeon*) on the outskirts of a small city, a few hours by train from the capital Seoul. This city (and its surrounding areas) is one of the central sites of traditional Confucian values that stress filial duties, traditional gender roles and family lineage and was therefore a good place to observe how experiences and views about childhood work and schooling have evolved under the influence of wider economic growth and 'modernisation'. The 'development' of the city has been relatively slow: local, rather conservative attitudes about urban development and the fact that surrounding districts are categorized as nature conservation areas containing many cultural treasure sites may have prevented some of the more aggressive forms of industrialisation (Choi 2010).

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The fieldwork site chosen was one of the farthest administrative districts from the city centre and seen by local people as being among the most deprived. However, while the development of the area may have been slow, one side effect of wider industrialisation was the district's population size and composition. Because of outward migrations to urban areas over the last few decades, especially among younger people, and the remaining households having fewer children than before (South Korea has one of the lowest birth rates in the world), the total population in the district's 19 villages was just under 1900 (as of 2015) with those aged under 45 years accounting for just under 24 percent and children under age 15 for about four percent. While South Korea is a nation characterised by an aging population, the skewedness of the district's population towards older people emerges distinctly when it is compared to the age distribution of the national population as a whole where some 16 percent are children aged under 15 years (Statistics Korea 2017). Between the 1940s and 1970s, due to the increasing number of school age children, the district saw some new primary schools opening in its outlying villages. However, nearly all of them have since closed and the remaining one had only 15 children in total between Year 1 to Year 6 (usually between ages 6 to 11). The only middle (lower secondary) school had just eight children in total from Year 1 to Year 3 (usually between ages 12 to 14). The district never had a high (upper secondary) school, so young people of that age attend schools in the nearby city or elsewhere.

The study involved semi-structured interviews with 39 people of various ages, from those born in the 1930s and 1940s through to children who are currently in primary and middle school. The recruitment of the research participants started with the children. As the school age children lived in households scattered across the district, schools seemed to be a logical place to start seeking access to them. With the permission of the head teachers, seven primary school (two Year 3 girls, one Year 4 boy, one Year 5 boy, one Year 6 girl and two Year 6 boys) and four middle school children (one Year 2 boy, one Year 3 girl and two Year 3 boys) participated in the study. The children were selected by the teachers, focusing on those from farming households. It was not possible to talk to children younger than Year 3 in the primary school because the teachers suggested that they were too young to respond adequately to interviews. High school students were not interviewed as there was no local high school although one high school girl who boarded at a school in the nearby city was at home on the day when her sister was interviewed and also agreed to participate. All children including this girl signed assent forms to take part in the study.

The adult participants who consisted of 15 women and 12 men were recruited in the village halls where they met and socialised, through teachers at the two schools and via the owners of the

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guest house where the first author stayed. Due to migration, younger people were rare and those born in the 1970s said that they were among the youngest in their villages, while all of the adult participants' grown-up children lived in cities. Some of the adult participants were the parents or grandparents of child participants – two primary and one middle school children lived with their grandparents as their parents worked and lived elsewhere. The above sampling meant that children were in the minority in the study but this was inevitable in a three generation study where contemporary childhoods were compared with those of parents and grandparents. It also reflected the age demographics of the community where children were in a minority (see Table 1 for the composition of research participants).

Table 1 Composition of research participants

	Children (12)		Adults (27)				
	In primary school	In secondary school (middle & high school)	Born in the 1930s	Born in the 1940s	Born in the 1950s	Born in the 1960s	Born in the 1970s
Female	3	2	1	6	2	1	5
Male	4	3	1	3	4	2	2
Total	7	5	2	9	6	3	7

Data collection using semi-structured interviews and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to allow the participants' experiences and views to be compared and also to obtain more in-depth responses. For the interviews, three sets of questions were prepared: one for adults who were old enough to have a grandchild; a second for younger adults; and a third for children. Each set of questions asked respondents about their own childhood work and schooling experiences but were differentiated, depending on their position in generational hierarchy and, where appropriate, in whether they were asked about their children and/or grandchildren's experiences and also their views about those younger generations' experiences. The interviews with adults were conducted, depending on their preferences, in village halls, their homes or the guest house where the first author stayed, while those with the children were conducted in their schools, homes or village study room. The length of interviews with adults ranged from 23 to 56 minutes with a majority of them lasting between 40 to 50 minutes, while that of those with children ranged from 18 to 36 minutes. No incentives for

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taking part in interviews were offered other than some refreshments. All the interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically.

In recent years when doing research with children, 'child-friendly' or 'child-centred' methods, such as using activity sheets, drawings, photographs and so on, which allow children to be more actively engaged in the process, have become commonplace. For this study, however, semi-structured interviews were used instead, partly because the time permitted with the children was limited, and interviews allowed as much information as possible to be gathered from individual children and also allowed them to be compared with the responses from other children and adults. There was also some scepticism from teachers who claimed that questionnaires were a more efficient method to collect data and would take less time although this would have produced more superficial data. Nevertheless, when conducting the interviews, care was taken to make the sessions relaxed and informal, while also making sure the questions were as simple as possible for younger children to understand. Also, during the interviews, as an attempt to incorporate an element of activity and to help understand the place of work in their daily lives, the children were given the choice of drawing their daily timetables or of explaining in words what they did from waking-up in the morning before going to bed on a weekday, the weekend and during school holidays. Interestingly all the children chose to do the latter, which suggests that a method which researchers consider child-friendly may not necessarily be one which children themselves prefer.

The adult interviews presented different challenges: a lack of existing empirical data and other secondary sources about the adults' childhood experiences of work and schooling meant that primary sources of evidence had to be recollections of past events. The time factor involved in this approach has some implications to consider in terms of the subjective interpretations of the past events that the adults narrated. In other words, their recollections of childhoods may be mediated by an 'adult' perspective (Hendrick 1997). In combination with such factors as age and position in generational hierarchy within a family, the present (what their life is currently like) can also determine the interpretive contexts through which they tell their stories and influence how they view the past (Brannen et al 2004). Twherefore, in interpreting their interview responses it was important to keep in mind the complexity of what may count as work for them and how this may have changed over the years. In particular, in a society such as South Korea where schooling and success are highly valued, it is possible that poverty and work are seen as forms of failure making contemporary children reluctant to admit to the work they do. Conversely, for the older generations who did not have the same educational opportunities, there is the risk that they may have exaggerated the importance of their work to underline that they had nevertheless been

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virtuous children, even if academically 'unsuccessful'. Therefore, when analysing their recollections, their personal characteristics (such as gender, position in a family, level of education and current living condition) were considered carefully and their responses were also compared with national and local contextual factors, where available, about the times that they referred to. Despite some limitations with the data, however, the stories and explanations by the participants provided useful insights when thinking about how social attitudes to children's work and childhoods can change over time, how children's roles and responsibilities are seen by members of different generations and the extent to which children exercise their agency over work and schooling.

Children's work and schooling: changing times and changing values

Poverty and childhood work recollected

Aspects of childhood work and schooling inevitably change in the context of economic growth, but ideas about poverty and the 'need' for children to work are complex and poverty at the household level is not always the driving factor behind children's work (Bourdillon et al 2010; Kim 2009). Therefore any changes in the relationship between work and schooling must be seen in terms of the complex dynamics between household poverty, social attitudes to schooling and a child's place in a household and how these have shifted in the wider context of development.

For those participants born before the 1970s, poverty was a distinct feature of their childhoods with the hunger experienced by those born in the 1940s and earlier appearing to have been especially severe. Older adults mentioned the particularly hungry period of the 'barley hills' in the spring when the harvest of the previous autumn ran out before the new barley they had planted could be harvested. By the early summer many households had to live on porridges made with tree pulp or roots or by incurring debts and this poverty could also push children into forms of forced labour and debt bondage. Mr Hwang[4] born in 1937 recalled how his family could not repay the money they owed for the grain they needed and as a consequence he was taken by the brother-in-law of his father's sister to another household to work as a servant:

> He took me to a family named Park who lived in an area called '…' and, in return, took six bags of grains from them… The war broke out when I was 13, so I was then about 13 or 14…

Mr Hwang said he worked as a servant intermittently for several years after this - well into his twenties until the early 1960s.

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Such hunger persisted until the 1960s: a woman born in 1942 remembered how her children who had come home for lunch returned to school weeping as there was nothing to eat; while a man born in 1961 recalled that, in his neighbourhood at about the time he entered primary school, few households ate two meals a day. This level of poverty had been broadly alleviated by the time those born in the 1970s were children so that, while some of them still mentioned 'poverty' when recollecting their childhoods, they appeared to be referring to relative rather than absolute poverty. For example, their families could eat three meals but they were unable to do anything else such as going to the cinema in the city. Another common recollection from the 'poor old days' was that most households in the neighbourhoods were similarly poor with few obvious differences between the lifestyles of the poorer and the better-off, while any differences appeared mainly in terms of whether a family could financially support their children to proceed to higher levels of education.

The extent to which the adults in this study reported that they had worked as a child varied and suggested that household poverty did not always mean that they had worked or started working early. Some recalled, in cases where they were the eldest son in the family line, or the youngest boy or girl with older siblings, that they were largely spared from both outdoor and house work. Or, if the family owned little or no land, then adults worked as labourers for other people and their children recalled doing 'not very much', although several went on to qualify this saying that while they did little in the way of farming-related work, depending on their household's circumstances, they fetched firewood or drinking water, looked after siblings, cooked and/or washed clothes. They were therefore making a contribution to their household maintenance but did not recognise it as significant, suggesting it was seen as a normal part of a child's experience and responsibilities. This also further suggests that they made a distinction between household chores which they saw as part of their non-productive daily activities and productive labour which they viewed unequivocally as something which made an economic contribution to the household.[5]

Most adults reported starting work between the ages of six to ten but were often unsure about the extent of contribution that their work at such age made to their families. Mr Lee born in 1941, described the work he did at this age as helping and learning to work rather than 'proper work' and as not being essential to his family's agricultural production:

> Since about age 12, I helped my parents' farming. Before then, it was more like watching them work and helping them a little… there wasn't much that a small child could do.

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When they reached middle school age, men reported doing more substantial farming work. In comparison, some women, including those who dropped out of primary school, recollected doing hardly any farming work even though their mothers worked in the fields. They explained this as being due to the traditional belief that unmarried women should stay at home.

Although the ages which they started work varied, as did the type and amount of work they did, few of the older participants claimed to have any choice in the matter, accepting it as normal that children worked as and when they could for the family and that they had responsibilities to their families. Both women and men recollected starting work when their parents told them and accepting it naturally as what they had to. With a few exceptions, they did not appear to have expressed any clear opinion or exercised any agency regarding the circumstances in which they worked and no older adults, especially those born in the 1930s to 1950s, spoke of actively evading or refusing to do work although there were some hints that they used schooling as a way of avoiding certain types of work. If they had a long distance to walk to school (and many participants recollected walking between 4 to 8 kilometres each way), this meant that they often returned home too late to do any outdoor work. However, this did not excuse them entirely and they were still expected to work around the house, including cultivating silk worms, preparing animal fodder or processing harvested vegetables. Studies from other countries have suggested that even when children accept the necessity to work they still have strategies to avoid work that they do not like and ways of taking on work they find more congenial or which gives them greater freedom (Boyden et al 1998). As these authors go on to note, some children identify only those things that they dislike doing as work – another reason why adult recollections need careful analysis.

Recollections of curtailed schooling

South Korea is often cited as a nation where education has played a key role in national economic development. In 1945, following a 35-year period of Japanese colonisation, around 87 percent of Korean adults had never received any formal schooling (Lee 1997). However, educational participation rose rapidly: between 1945 and 1970, the number of children attending primary school rose from 1.4 million to 5.7 million (WENR 2013) and this level of education became virtually universal from around 1970. Middle school net enrolment rates increased from 33 percent in 1960 to 95 percent in 1980 while, over the same period, high school enrolments rose from about 20 percent to 50 percent and the higher education participation rate increased from 6.4 percent to 16 percent. This process has since continued: the enrolment rates for middle schools was 99 per cent in 1995; that for high schools was 90 per cent in 2000; while the higher

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education participation rate was around 70 per cent in 2007 (Seth 2002; MoEST 2008; MoEST 2016). These changes mean that, in the space of little more than a generation, enrolment rates in successive levels of education have reached, or exceeded, those in other industrialised countries.

The emphasis laid on school education in South Korea has particular social and cultural precedents (Sorensen 1994; Seth 2002). For many centuries, social mobility was restricted, with education, social status and public positions rigidly limited to the small, privileged gentry class (*yangban*). The first half of the 20th century saw tumultuous changes in Korean society, firstly the periods of Japanese colonisation in 1910-1945 followed by the Korean War in 1950-1953 which had significant and long lasting impacts on the social system. After the Korean War, social mobility became more widely achievable and status could be gained through education; both of these were facilitated through economic growth from the 1960s onwards. Seth (2002) has documented how, in the post war years, Korean people's pent-up educational aspirations led to a high demand for school education, even in rural villages. This has led to what many commentators have referred to as 'education fever' or 'education zeal' among South Koreans.

Several of the oldest participants in this study were born before this 'fever' was widespread and, as with Mr Kim, born in 1943, recollected that their own parents appeared largely indifferent to their schooling.

> …I had to give a hand on the home front and, in those days, school education was not considered to be that important… I had to follow the reality, what else could I have done?

Equally importantly however was the cost of schooling. Those born in the 1940s were of school age before the period of rapid industrialisation and economic growth when the vast majority of the population were still engaged in agriculture and when farming was often insufficient even to meet the households' own consumption needs and produced little, if any, surplus to sell to pay the costs associated with schooling. This included both the authorised and unauthorised fees which schools and teachers charged to make up for the deficient public funding of education (Seth 2002). Mrs Choi, born in 1949, recollected her schooling:

> I had to stop at Year 2 in primary school. We didn't have money and when my parents told me to work at home, I couldn't attend the school. How could I continue schooling like that? One of my older sisters did not even see the gate of the school, while the other one attended it until Year 5.

Similarly, many of the older participants reported taking up farming or housework as a full-time activity after dropping out of school or finishing primary school around the age of 12. Factors which led them to stop schooling and to work as a 'default' activity included distance to school (this could also be related to financial destitution as attending a school elsewhere incurred

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substantial costs including that for accommodation); a low recognition of the value of schooling by children themselves as well as parents; sudden events such as having an illness or the death of a parent; or a combination of any of these factors. Participants' recollections about the experience of stopping school education were mixed: while they usually expressed acceptance, some remembered finding it difficult to stop schooling when they did not want to or envying those still attending school. In the majority of cases however decisions about schooling were made mainly by parents without reference to the children's wishes, as Mr Park, born in 1962, said:

> Fewer than half of the class could proceed to high school. As there were friends who couldn't either, it was not too difficult... I wanted to continue, but my parents told me to give up.

Social distance from work in contemporary rural childhoods

As South Korea has changed from a largely agrarian society to an industrialised one, the opportunities for children to help with agricultural work have shifted. Subsistence farming has vanished and farm mechanisation has made much of the work children used to do redundant – the interviewees in this study reported the introduction of rotary cultivators and tractors from the late 1970s. Advances in agricultural technologies also reduced the amount of manual labour required to cultivate the same size of land and enabled the farming of wider areas. In particular, machines replacing oxen meant the elimination of one of children's previous major activities – grazing and preparing fodder.

Perhaps more important though is the change in attitudes both to education and to children's role in society and in the family. While the adult participants claimed that their own parents were not necessarily interested in their children becoming more educated, they were vocal about having wanted something different for their own children (and grandchildren) and their aspirations for their children's education appeared clearly across all the interviews. One of these differences was that not only did they want their children to be educated but they wanted them spared from the work that they had performed as children. Mr Lee born in 1941 said:

> They did not want to work and I didn't let them either. I wanted them to study instead… I thought, based on my own experience, my children did not need to work.

He doubted the value of children's work, especially if they were to find paid employment elsewhere. Furthermore, unlike himself, his children showed some resistance to it. Conscious attempts to distance children from work based on their own experiences also appeared among those as young as a man born in 1974 who shuddered at the memory of working after school

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every day and having been expected to work in the fields every weekend. Adults no longer thought that work should necessarily be part of childhood, or that children had responsibilities to their households, outside the expectation to do well as school.

Given the wealth of South Korea and the importance the society places on education, it might be expected that children's productive work within the country had been entirely transformed into education which they do in preparation for their future lives as paid workers. However, in rural districts, such as the one where this study was carried out, the children of agricultural households still remained physically close to potential sources of work and some of them continued to accompany their parents to work where they both played and worked alongside them. Min-young a primary Year 6 schoolgirl described this:

> I used to help my parents occasionally and now regularly do so… I was about five, I climbed up the trees for fun and picked apples. In those days, I just liked following them, so I got to play and work in the orchards.

Other children did so while younger but gradually spent less time on work as they became older and discovered other things to play with. A Year 6 boy from primary school said:

> When I was in the kindergarten, I just played in the fields. Entering primary school, I played and worked. I kept accompanying parents to the fields. Then, when I was in Year 3, auntie showed me interesting games to play on the computer and since then, I stopped going to the fields.

Indeed, as they got older, it appeared that some children spent less and less time outdoors in any capacity, while the main activities in the children's daily routines outside of school hours included playing with computers or smart phones (especially playing games or watching video clips) and watching TV. Compared to these activities, the time that they spent in work or playing outside was both shorter and less frequent.

The extent to which the children reported helping their parents or grandparents varied. If they worked at all, they usually did so at weekends and occasionally on weekdays, especially if it was conducted around the home (e.g. selecting quality vegetables for sale). The work lasted between several minutes to a few hours. Five children, including one as young as Year 4, reported working a whole day (from morning until dark) alongside their parents several days a year but this usually happened in the planting and harvesting seasons or when day labourers were not hired. Of the 12 children interviewed, some appeared to help out their parents regularly but, six of them (two girls and four boys) either did no farming work or very little (e.g. once or twice a month for about an hour; or about an hour three times a year). These children also reported

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doing little housework although they occasionally cooked for themselves and washed up afterwards.

Almost all the adults said how 'very' different their childhoods were from those of contemporary children but this referred not only to the material security that the current generation enjoys but also to children's relative position in the households whose affairs are now often organised around them. For contemporary children doing little work was sometimes a result of direct resistance to their parents or grandparents' suggestions, something which was unthinkable to the adult interviewees during their childhoods and, as in the case of a primary Year 6 boy, children prioritised what they felt like doing over what they were asked to do:

> My parents ask me to help them in the fields. I turn it down several times and, once in a while when I don't have anything else to do, I go to help them.

Among the adult participants, some of the children's parents or grandparents mentioned that they did not expect much from them in the first place and, where a child declined to help, they ended up telling them to study at home instead. Ironically, some participants commented that, these days, urban children can sometimes work better than rural ones because of their school activities and weekend family farming experiences. This observation was supported by the mother of a middle school child who said:

> My sister-in-law from Seoul told me to bring my son to the fields and ask him to help his father. Her children, when they visited us this year, helped us to plant tobacco seedlings. She grilled me about my child not doing any work…

Compared to previous generations, contemporary children could exercise active choices regarding work and, if they did work, it was often something they chose to do. The disappearance of the extended families of three or more generations living in the same house has led to a shift in the households' focus of attention from older generations to younger ones. However, the adults, and especially those who had lived their own childhoods based on different parent-child relationships and different attitudes to work, adjusted their expectations about those relationships. To a question about whether he would expect a child from a farming household to help out their parents, a man born in 1943 said:

> It is up to them. In today's world, just like Americans do, when a child reaches a certain age, they should be let do as they like. Meddling with what they do is not good…

This may suggest that individual autonomy, which older people tend to associate with the 'American' way (due to the prominent influence of the USA in the country since 1945, especially after the Korean War), has influenced parents' child rearing practices even in one of the most

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conservative parts of the country. In the process, some of the older adults may have had conflicts within themselves or with others, particularly their children, but their frequent saying of 'the times have changed' suggested that they thought these changes were inevitable and that they had to accept them, even if they did not like them.

Some older participants did lament that children no longer obeyed their parents but this did not mean that they expected children to do more work or take on more chores. For most participant schooling, at least up to high school, if not beyond, was unquestionably a priority for children that could and should override work ('isn't studying their priority?' was mentioned repeatedly). They still hoped it would help the children to achieve a more 'comfortable' career than farming. In comparison, rural children's social distance from work, despite their physical proximity to it, meant the little work they did was sometimes viewed as a rare but positive, character-building 'experience' which would help enrich children's future lives but was not seen as an integral part of their current lives. Indeed, in a reversal of circumstances, it was now at school where children had to work hard, unpaid and compulsorily, whereas work in the fields or the home allowed them the choice (whether to do it or not) or the expression of agency and flexibility that they lacked at school.

Conclusion

Within a South Korean context, it is possible to view changes in childhood practices, experiences and conceptualisations over a relatively short time frame. Many of these changes are most visible through the relative importance placed by parents both now and in the past on work and schooling. Routine work such as farming or housework, combined with limited schooling, featured distinctly in the childhoods of the majority of the older adults in this study, facilitated in part by a cultural norm of children's deference and obedience towards parents and sense of duty to their families. Alongside the fast national economic growth within just several decades, poverty and the necessity (perceived or otherwise) to work for the family have eased and children's relationships with the adults in their families have been transformed with contemporary children having both less opportunity to work outside school and fewer cultural reference points for doing so.

In decisions over work and schooling during their childhoods, most of the adults did not appear to have shown any apparent agency and this passivity was embedded in the cultural norms of the times. However, they certainly were not passive in terms of their efforts to make a different life possible for their own children, especially through schooling, and such agentic efforts have contributed to creating different childhoods in successive generations where, despite their

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proximity to potential work, rural children today can often choose not to work or contribute to the household economy. In comparison, while contemporary children certainly appeared to be more able to exercise agency in their relationships with their parents and grandparents regarding work, social expectations and conformity around schooling may work as constraints to its exercise in other aspects.

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[1] After ratifying the CRC in 1991, the government has introduced a number of measures designed to guarantee children's rights (CRIN, 2017). These include the Comprehensive Plan for Child Protection and Development (2002), the Comprehensive Plan for Child Safety (2003) and the Comprehensive Plan for Children and Youth in Poverty (2004).

[2] There are nationally published studies on children's rights in South Korea including those by the National Youth Policy Institute which conducted a series of studies on the state of children's rights in the country since 2006 (NYPI 2012).

[3] It is worth noting however that some of this work is now quite dated and while pressure on children to do well remains, school children in South Korea are less deferential to their teachers and elders and their classroom/school practices are less hierarchical and less emphasis is now placed on conformity. Whether this is related to the introduction of the UNCRC or to the perceived Westernisation of society would be well worth investigating further.

[4] In this paper pseudonyms are used to preserve the participants' anonymity.

[5] Such a conceptualisation is a relatively common feature of research on children's work and both children and adults regularly under-value the work that they do. Pamela Reynolds, in her study of child labour in the Zambezi valley, watched a 14-year-old girl prepare a breakfast of porridge for herself and her younger brother, wash the plates from the previous night's meal and collect water twice from a source two kilometres away. Yet when questioned directly about what she had done that morning replied simply, 'Nothing' (Reynolds 1991).

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