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## **To what extent do urban-rural educational disparities affect China's development?**

In recent years, China has witnessed a significant influx of internal migrants moving from the rural western regions to the growing urban east. Fuelled by the rapid economic development during the opening up and reform period, which ushered in a surge of lower-level job opportunities, the country has encountered an unprecedented migratory wave in which the phenomenon recorded of almost 225 million urban-rural migrants in 2010 (Zheng 224). Despite the increasing opportunities in urban areas, there remains a significant push factor from rural regions due to regional disparities, especially unequal educational opportunities. When addressing educational inequalities between urban and rural areas, some key areas of focus include differences in education quality, limited opportunities, insufficient funding in rural education, and the educational attainment levels of rural children. With China facing an ageing population, rising rural-urban migration, and a shrinking workforce, increased funding and commitment to ensuring equal education and opportunities for rural children are crucial for positively shaping China's development.

Educational struggles are a Common theme throughout 'Tough Out '(棒!少年). It is a documentary that follows a group of Chinese youths as they learn to play baseball in the suburbs of Beijing. The team, formed as a charity baseball school and coached by the renowned baseball mentor Zhang Jinxin, aims to empower orphaned and disadvantaged children, providing them with opportunities to pursue a professional career in baseball. The documentary covers the boys' training period, explores free time after practice, and delves into their relationships with each other and their coach.

The narrative begins with the boys gearing up for a baseball championship invitation in the United States, yet they encounter numerous challenges in their daily lives in Beijing. From the constant struggle to access education to the closure of their baseball pitch and the demolition of their living quarters, the boys and their coach face formidable obstacles. Two boys from the team are spotlighted: Ma Hu, who resides with his grandfather in the northwest of China, and Liang Zhenshuang, an orphan separated from his twin brother. Each faces distinct personal challenges in adapting to their new ways of life. The documentary captures their journey, showcasing life lessons and rigorous discipline as they strive for self-improvement.

I found the documentary to be profoundly impactful, especially in its portrayal of Ma Hu. His emotions, ranging from anger and confusion to distrust and vulnerability, vividly depict the profound challenges associated with urban migration. The statement from his father, asserting that "letting him stay in the village ruined him," evoked a deep sense of sadness. Seeing how rural residents themselves view their own hometown as detrimental to their own Childs future developments, raises poignant questions about the systemic challenges and clear disparities that shape the prospects of rural children. Upon meeting Ma Hu's grandmother, who has made significant sacrifices for him, including begging for clothes and food for him, it becomes evident that she cares deeply for him. And yet despite this, she encourages him to leave as well, emphasising the harsh reality of urban-rural inequality and the painful separation of families.

This documentary vividly highlights the formidable challenges children face, particularly in accessing quality education. Ma Hu's story emphasises not only the struggles during his

school days but also the hurdles in attaining adequate education in the first place. Repeatedly encouraged by his grandparents to work hard in the city for a chance at a better education, Ma Hu's narrative underscores the stark reality that, for rural children, leaving the countryside becomes imperative for a shot at a successful future, unveiling the urban-rural disparities in education. The film delves into Ma Hu's educational struggles, revealing that despite being of grade 6 age, he lags behind at a grade 3 level, showcasing the inadequacies of rural education compared to urban standards. This disparity is further exemplified when Ma Hu, entering a new class, is advised by his coach to sit still and be quiet, even if he doesn't grasp the content. The contrast between rural and urban education for children emerges as a significant factor influencing not only their learning abilities but also their capacity to assimilate into urban life, should they choose to make that transition.

With China's current ageing population, there's an imminent surge in the demand for a robust workforce, and the children of today are poised to become the backbone of tomorrow's labor force. Despite over half of China's children receiving education in rural areas in, these regions are often left underdeveloped (Chengfang 189). By the late 2000s, only a mere 20% of those enrolled in secondary school managed to complete this education (Golley 225). This educational disparity significantly diminishes the prospects of rural children attending university. Compared to children born in urban centres such as Shanghai and Beijing who are 35% more likely to pursue higher education (Golley 225). This educational contrast between rural and urban areas will undeniably shape China's future trajectory, especially considering the implications for the future workforce that will be the driving force behind China's economy.

The insufficient higher education attainment among rural children poses a significant challenge to China's future development. A substantial portion of children receive education in rural regions, but the quality is not on par with urban schooling. The lower entry rate of rural students into higher education can be attributed not only to the incomplete secondary schooling but also to the overall lower quality of primary and secondary education in rural areas. Issues such as poorly trained teachers and substandard facilities contribute to this educational disparity (luo 60). This emphasise the disadvantage rural children face from the outset, revealing a substantial performance gap between rural and urban children. More than 50% of primary-level children from impoverished rural regions are not adequately prepared to progress to the next stage of education (luo 59). Consequently, they enter secondary school already at a disadvantage, perpetuating the impact on their future prospects.

The level of college education in a population is closely tied to a country's productivity and economic growth (Wang 132). Therefore, there is a critical need to enhance the education of the rural population in China. The educational attainment of these workers will play a pivotal role in developing the labor force, which is essential if China aims to elevate itself from a middle-income economy. Dr. Wang emphasised in Module 2.4 that, for China to sustain economic growth, it must address not only the disparities within segmented labor markets but also the deep-seated inequality among its people. Tackling national inequalities, especially in education, becomes a fundamental step in ensuring sustainable economic progress.

Despite some rural children, like Ma Hu, having the chance to access education in urban areas, they still face significant disadvantages compared to their urban peers. One of the major barriers to their education is the lack of choice in schooling due to their Hukou status. The Hukou is a household registration system which places migrants in a position of inferiority compared to their urban counterparts. Without urban status, they find themselves

excluded from various social welfare benefits, secure job opportunities, and access to education (Lu 87). In most developing countries, internal migration from rural to urban areas is seen as a pathway to upward mobility. However, in China, the Hukou system complicates this movement. To address the issue, by 2007, Beijing had established over 300 migrant schools (Lu 88). Despite this effort, the overall education level remains lower due to inadequate funding, with many schools failing to meet national standards (Lu 88). This educational disparity not only segregates rural children from their urban peers but also hinders the formation of an inclusive community, making it challenging for these children to assimilate into urban life. Consequently, they often face discrimination and social challenges (Lu 86).

In conclusion, the pervasive educational inequalities between urban and rural China present a substantial threat to future development. Regardless of their location, rural children encounter a myriad of challenges, from stark disparities in education quality between rural and urban schools to the impact of insufficient funding and lower standards in migrant schools within urban settings. This issue extends beyond the current generation, directly affecting the future workforce. To establish a diverse and capable labor force capable of competing on a global scale, China must urgently address these educational inequalities. The success of future generations and the country's sustained development hinge on the creation of equitable educational opportunities for all.

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