

Title: Children's Movies in Agriculture Education

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Movies are a beloved pastime of our digital age. However, they are more than just entertainment; they are education in pixels. In an EDU.com article, Dr. Nadia Ray said, “as technology continues evolving, the line between entertainment and education becomes increasingly blurred.” Movies are filled with lessons and themes that impact our learning and perception of the world, especially for children. Children’s minds are young and impressionable. Movies model behaviors, both positively and negatively, influencing the way children may want to act. In addition, the media has been shown to affect viewers’ perceptions, again both positively and negatively, of subjects and character behaviors. “In today’s digital age, media plays an increasingly significant role in shaping how we learn through observation” (“Observational Learning”). Movies and media are becoming a key part of childhood development and education.



Just as they can discover about the rest of the world around them through media, children can also learn about agriculture through various media sources. Some research has shown that as more and more people are becoming removed from farming backgrounds, the majority of children learn about agriculture through books, television, and other media, therefore it is important to understand what children are learning

about agriculture from their movies and cartoons (Dietrich et al.). To better understand what children could learn about agriculture from media, this project was completed by watching three movies and taking notes during each movie (see Appendix A). This field work project focused on how agriculture is represented in children's movies, focusing on the specific agricultural messages, the character of farmers, the elements of realism and fiction, and educational potential for an age-appropriate audience.

Movie Summaries

The following movies were watched and analyzed for agricultural themes:

Charlotte's Web (1973): Wilbur, born the runt of the litter, is saved from death by Fern, the young daughter of a farmer. She cares for and raises Wilbur. Wilbur grows and is eventually sent off to live on another farm. There, he makes friends with the other animals and a spider named Charlotte. He learns the reality of his fate, slaughter for meat. Wilbur is shattered by this realization, but Charlotte promises to do whatever she can to save his life. The subsequent story is words appearing Charlotte's web, which turn the hearts and minds of the farmers to spare Wilbur's life. At the end of the movie, after Wilbur's life has been saved, Charlotte must say goodbye.

Chicken Run: Ginger and her friends are hens on an egg farm in England. Their life consists of chicken feed, egg-laying, and the plot to escape the farm forever. In their world, when a chicken stops laying eggs, the chicken is killed by the farmers Mrs. and Mr. Tweedy. In an effort to escape death, Ginger enlists the help of Rocky, a rooster from America. Under the false impression that Rocky can fly, she asks him to teach the rest of the chickens so they can fly to safety. The farmers decide to start producing chicken pies rather than eggs. After near scrapes with death, realization of the truth that Rocky cannot fly, and a ticking clock, Ginger and the rest of the chickens make one more

escape attempt. They build a plane from their hutches and other human objects to fly out. The chickens escape in their plane, but not without an intense pursuit scene with the farmers hot on their tail feathers.

Home on the Range: Three dairy cows go on a mission to save their farm, Patch of Heaven, from foreclosure. Their plan is to catch a cattle rustler, causing most cattle ranches in the west to go under. They go on a journey and meet lots of other characters along the way. They learn how the rustler has been able to steal so many cattle; he has the ability to hypnotize and control the cattle through yodeling. The cows have to work through their individual differences to save their home. In their final attempts to save the farm, they steal and crash a train into the very farm they are trying to save.

Agricultural Messages

The reviewed movies all have powerful and meaningful messages, though some messages could be tied to agriculture more than others. One of the common themes identified in the movies was death, particularly regarding the role of animals on the farm. The movies also present classic themes of the financial struggle of the farm in addition to adapting to the struggles.

Death, though not pleasant, is a natural part of the agriculture industry, and several of these movies incorporated themes of life and death. *Charlotte's Web* outlines that the purpose of raising pigs is to produce meat. When Wilbur learns his purpose in life, he is overcome with emotion concerning the concept of death. It makes him sad and fearful, but children have the opportunity to learn about the roles of animals on the farm, and that those roles are often to become food. *Chicken Run* makes the act of taking animals' lives much more villainous. The movie makes it clear that when the chickens stop laying eggs, they are taken to the chopping block, showing the shadows

and sounds of the farmer using the ax to kill the chicken. This rhetoric makes death in agriculture appear evil rather than natural from a child's perspective. Death is a natural part of agriculture because an organism, plant or animal, will have to die to become a part of a consumer's life. In an interview with Wendell Berry, a popular author and activist in agricultural literature, he admitted that we have to live at the expense of other creatures, however he noted we should use them at a minimum of violence. Death, though inevitable, in agriculture should be conducted with respect for the resources given in the life taken. Respect for life and death is important for children to learn. Through these movies, children can be introduced to a natural part of life and a natural part of agriculture while still enjoying a movie.

Agriculture literature, including some of these movies, commonly involve messages about the struggles agricultural families face and saving the family farm. *Home on the Range* exhibited this with Patch of Heaven. With the farm on the verge of foreclosure, the characters are spurred into the entire adventure that the film is focused on. This theme has been seen throughout agricultural literature, but that's because it's a real aspect of agricultural life. Money is a very important part of agriculture, controlling much of the agricultural industry. It takes money to stay in business. There are animals to feed, equipment to fix, crops to care for, and bills to pay. The documentary *Troublesome Creek* documented the real-life experience of losing the farm. The Jordan farm was deep in debt and only falling deeper. Just as Pearl did in *Home on the Range*, the Jordans tried to keep their hopes up, working hard to make ends meet. However, unlike Pearl, the Jordans had to sell off almost everything to raise enough money to pay off their debts. Their plan allowed their son to take over the farm, but they had to say goodbye to the land and life they loved ("Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern"). The

farming industry is a gamble, with a lot to lose. Though money is often not a worry for children, these movies can help children to recognize the work and hardship that farmers face in feeding the world.

While several of the movies presented the power and influence of money, one message potentially not perceived initially by children is the importance of adaptability in agriculture. In *Chicken Run*, the entire purpose of the chicken farm is to make money, however when the eggs only return “minuscule profits,” Mrs. Tweedy makes an altering business decision: to produce chicken pies instead of eggs. The business was losing money, so the farmer had to adapt to survive. However, the dark persona created by the movie made it difficult for the audience to feel bad for the farmer, unlike *Home on the Range* that caused viewers to feel sorry for the farmer losing money. Regardless of the audience’s opinion of the farmer, adaptability can be an important lesson for children to learn. These movies present this lesson through the business actions of the farmer, even if it is a little darker.

Together, these movies also presented a unique international message for children to learn. *Home on the Range* and *Charlotte’s Web* can safely be assumed to take place in America; however, *Chicken Run* clearly takes place in England. This new setting implies the presence and importance of agriculture in other parts of the world. These movies can teach children that the world is much bigger than them, and that agriculture comes to them from all over the world.

Representation of the Farmer

These movies exhibited anthropomorphic animals living life, giving the farmer a unique, almost outside role in the story. However, though the focus of these stories is the animals, the portrayal of the farmer still has power in the representation of

agriculture. Farmers in these movies were depicted in contrasting ways, ranging from harsh and practical to compassionate and nurturing. The characterization of the farmer in the media can influence how the viewer perceives the farmer and farming as an industry.

One of the ways farmers can be represented is loving and caring, making them relatable characters for children. In *Charlotte's Web*, Fern is depicted with a deep and emotional love for animals. Fern is a unique character on the farm because she is probably the most relatable to children. Being a child herself, Fern believes, says, and does many things that a child could relate to. Wanting to defend Wilbur as a piglet is the first example. Then, as she begins to care for Wilbur, she develops an attachment similar to a child's attachment to a pet or a toy. The attachment makes it very difficult to say goodbye, which Fern had to experience when Wilbur was sent off to Zuckerman's farm. Children can easily relate to Fern's growth and emotions, making her a key character in learning about agriculture through movies like this. In *Home on the Range*, Pearl is also portrayed with a love for her animals. For her, the animals are not a commodity, but family. Even with her entire farm on the auction block, and the only option is to sell her animals, she says, "They're family. You don't sell family." These characters can help children learn that farmers love things just as they do; that the farmers are passionate about their work and their animals.

On the other hand, farmers can be portrayed as villains in the media. *Chicken Run* is a good example of this characterization. The movie depicts a much darker version of the farmer. In this movie, the farmers are definitely portrayed as villains. Mrs. Tweedy is depicted with cruel and rude attitudes. She is money-minded, focused mainly on her profits rather than her chickens. She is the hand behind the axe of many chicken

deaths and is even deadlier in her pursuit of the chickens during their escape. The woman is represented as dark, menacing, and evil; even more so than the cruel light Fern's father was depicted in at the beginning of *Charlotte's Web* for wanting to kill Wilbur as the runt. Mrs. Tweedy's characterization as the villain is contrary to the plowman archetype presented by Chaucer, a popular author in old-English literature, whom many children have come to love. The plowman was seen as content, hardworking, loving, and even uninterested in money (Kinkead et al.). The contrary representation of farmers in the media could lead children to believe that farmers are cruel beings and that farming is a cruel practice.

Additionally, the media can represent farmers in the middle of the spectrum. Farmer Zucherman and his farm hand Lurvy are a balanced representation of farmers in *Charlotte's Web*. Though it is mentioned in the movie that farmers raise their animals to eat them, these two characters are not portrayed under a cruel light for killing and eating animals like the Tweedys in *Chicken Run*. They are painted as being honest workers and caring for the needs of their animals. They make sure the animals have food and give them medicine when they are sick. As Wilbur's popularity rises, Zucherman shows his pride for his animals. He wants others to come see his pig, and vows that Wilbur will live to a "ripe old age." Though it was Charlotte's web that gave Wilbur his fame, it was Zucherman's pride in his animals that saved Wilbur's life. Children have an opportunity to learn about different farmer mindsets from movies such as this. They can learn why farmers may make the decisions that they make. These movies can help them learn that no one farmer is the same, there is a balance to the lifestyle, and that the title farmer goes much deeper than the dictionary definition alone.

An emerging and unique farmer representation in these movies was that of the woman on the farm. *Home on the Range* is a powerful example. The story takes place in the West, probably around the time of homesteading. The farmer in this story is a single and older woman, Pearl, who is also portrayed as strong and independent, operating her “Patch of Heaven” all by herself. Even as she is on the brink of losing everything, she continues to stand her ground and may be too stubborn for her own good at times. This unique approach paints the power of women in the west. Pearl’s characterization is mindful of author Elinore Prewitt Stewart’s homesteading experience. As a single woman, Stewart homesteaded her own land out west. In her letters, Stewart proves herself capable, promoting homesteading especially for women. Though she does marry, her success is not dependent upon her husband (Kinkead et al.). Additionally, though Mrs. Tweedy is the villain of *Chicken Run*, she still represents the willpower of women to operate a farm. She operates the farm and makes decisions to procure profits, even her husband submits to her demands. Mrs. Tweedy’s chicken pie brand is even grounded in the slogan “It’s the woman’s touch.” Admittedly, Mrs. Tweedy may not be the best role model, yet she still represents a powerful woman figure in agriculture. Though representation of strong farming women is few and far between, these movies and literature such as Stewart’s can help children learn about the skill and success of women on the farm.

Realism vs Fantasy

Children can learn a lot about the way the world works by the media they watch, including their perceptions about the reality of agriculture. A research group that looked into the representation of agriculture in *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* episodes, found that though agriculture was presented in a constructive and cheerful framework, education

specific to practicality and to agriculture production and operation was lacking (Dietrich et al.). Movies can be educational about agriculture, but it can be difficult to balance the engaging creativity of a cartoon and the lessons to be learned. All these movies had creative elements such as talking animals and crazy adventures. Though these elements make the movies entertaining to watch, there was a range of realistic and fantastical representations of farm life. *Chicken Run*, for example, showed a world that was very intertwined with the human world. The chickens, though living in captivity, live in a way as if they were humans. The chickens wore glasses, did math and science, crocheted, and even built and flew a plane. Their hutches were riddled with elements of the human world. At the other end of the spectrum, while the animals in *Charlotte's Web* could speak, their lives as animals were pretty normal. They lived outside and in pens. They didn't interact with the world as if they were humans. *Home on the Range* fell in the middle. The characters did not interact with the human world as the chickens did, but the animals also did not act entirely like animals such as the animals in *Charlotte's Web*. They had the cognitive understanding that the farm was in trouble. They left the farm not by just wandering off as animals might have, but on a mission to catch a cattle rustler. The animals also outsmarted humans to steal and drive a train. A unique element of *Home on the Range* was the ability to hypnotize the cattle with yodeling. The fictional elements do help the movies to capture the attention of children, but children may also be limited in learning about some of the realities of farming. Children may have to learn through other means that yodeling does not control cattle, that animals are not planning a revolt against people, or that animals cannot speak in human language.

Children's Audience

Though each movie was directed and produced with a message in mind, they were not made with a child's learning objectives in mind. Other children's programs are typically made with development and learning driving its creation. These movies don't operate in the same way but can still be beneficial to a child's learning, therefore it was important to analyze the educational material and adaptation to a young audience.

Media can help children learn new vocabulary. For example, *Charlotte's Web* consistently uses vocabulary such as injustice, salutations, and articulate. These words are not found in the typical child's vocabulary, but they are used and even explained in the movie to help a child learn their meaning. Media creates fun and memorable moments, and at times songs, that can help a child have an enjoyable learning experience.

Though the movies were created with a young audience in mind, there are still elements that should be considered from the perspective of observational learning. For example, *Home on the Range* did well at creating a fun and unique world with plenty of characters children could relate to and enjoy. There are moments that are fun, such as the yodeling scene with all the singing and colorful cattle. The movie felt easy to watch and understand for a child, however there are certain parts of the movie that may require some more consideration. The Australian Council on Children and the Media gave a review concerning the appropriateness of the movie for a young age group. The organization believed that children under the age of 13 may need some parental guidance given the frequency occurrence of negative behaviors such as punching, kicking, biting, and choking. Although these actions are done with a comedic undertone, young children learning through observation may not be able to understand these are negative

actions, especially when the actions in the movie are rewarded with laughter (*Movie Review of Home on the Range*). Additionally, *Chicken Run* with its slightly darker themes can still be enjoyed by a child, but more questions and discussions may come from the themes presented in the movies. Death can be a hard concept for a child to grasp. The intention of attacking and killing the chickens could be difficult for very young children to watch, especially if they have no understanding of the farming industry. *Charlotte's Web* also has themes of death, but death is not painted in such a dark way, instead they are very sad moments, helping children to realize the sadness and emotion associated with death. It could spark discussions about death, but maybe not in the same way the darker scenes of *Chicken Run* might. These movies can promote powerful learning opportunities and discussions with children as they navigate their growth and place in the world around them.

Conclusion

These movies are packed full of messages and themes that children, and even adults, can learn from, both negative and positive. Media is a prominent and powerful tool in education, including agricultural education. Analyzing the representation of agriculture in media frequently seen by children can help us see what children are understanding through those observational learning moments. These movies conveyed multiple agricultural messages, such as death, hardship, adapting farming practices, and a love of the land and the work. The media provides various characterizations of farmers. Movies must balance levels of realism and creativity to effectively engage a young audience, however these movies showed that even when education is not the main goal, there is still a lot to be learned about agriculture from them. Though the majority of media is probably intended for entertainment only, they serve as powerful

tools for agricultural education, using engaging stories and character that shape how children perceive farming and the agricultural world.

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Appendix A: Movie Notes

Charlotte's Web

- “No place more wonderful than a farm in the spring”
- “On the farm, big families are a blessing”
- Doing what had to be done
 - *Animals vs people*
 - Perception of animals as pets rather than farm animals
 - “stop being a pet and start being a pig”
 - Wilbur has to be outside
- Kids can relate to Fern
- Learning to speak – kids can relate to Wilbur
- Took characters typically disliked and made them loveable
 - Spiders, rats
- Messages
 - Friendship
 - Power of words
 - Death – circle of life
- Farmers
 - Fern
 - Taking care of animals
 - Proud of their animals
 - Fern’s dad at the beginning is going to kill Wilbur because he is the runt – seems cruel
- Educational Potential for Children
 - Uses large words, but still allows children to learn what they mean – learn with Wilbur
 - Cartoony/Animated
 - Keep children’s attention
 - Lighthearted scenes

Home on the Range

- Homesteading in the West
 - Desert area
- Role of Banks
 - Financial stakes of a homestead
 - Save the farm
 - The pain it caused homesteaders
- Farmer
 - Single older woman
 - Women in homesteading
 - Caretaker of the lands
 - Loves her animals

- Animals are viewed as family
- Realism vs Fantasy
 - Not very realistic
 - Yodeling
 - Animals venturing on their own
- Lots of characters to connect to
 - 3 cows with different personalities
- Cattle Rustling
 - It could be detrimental to a business
- Messages
 - Power of money
 - Loss of property and land
- Children's Audience
 - Fun
 - Animation

Chicken Run

- Industrialized Farming
- Dark Imagery
 - Farmer's are painted as the villain
- Death
 - Production agriculture
 - Animals as a commodity
 - Eggs to keep lives
- Running a business and adaptation
 - New machine to make chicken pies
- Realism
 - Not realistic
 - Talking animals
 - Basically have human lives and homes within the farm
- International
 - America and England
- Innovation
 - Ways to escape
 - Save each other
- Messages of honesty
 - Not agricultural but very important
- Children's Audience
 - Dark themes – may scare children
 - The chickens are relatable characters