



10. Paper farms. A content analysis of sixty children's picturebooks on farming and the rural environment

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Abstract This chapter presents a study of 60 children's picturebooks on the topic of farming and the rural environment published over the last four decades. The books were analysed in relation to 12 indicators of content realism and assigned one of three realism ratings. We found that consciously faithful representations of real-life agricultural systems are rare. Nevertheless, if carefully mediated and related to real-world scenarios, this kind of picturebook may enhance children's awareness of their ties with rural areas.

Keywords farm-themed picturebooks, ecological identity, environmental education, book content analysis

RURAL ENVIRONMENTS, ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS, AND THE ROLE OF PICTUREBOOKS

In the contemporary era of globalisation, the agricultural sector across Europe has seen a gradual reduction in the dedicated land space it occupies and the number of people it employs. An ongoing pattern of urbanization has inevitably led to a physical and cultural distancing from the rural environment, which for the majority of the population has shifted from a place to live and work to a setting that is difficult to experience fully and directly. This said, the symbol par excellence of rural life – the farm – remains well rooted in the collective imagination of city dwellers. The farm setting is often perceived as somewhat backward and

rough or, on the contrary, as imbued with a bucolic, somewhat idyllic, atmosphere in contrast with the frenetic pace of life in the city (Falteri, 2005; Short, 2006; Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016). Paradoxically, growing ecological awareness and a new appreciation of human impact on the environment have generated an even deeper split in urban dwellers' perceptions of rural areas. The naive imaginary just described is now flanked by a negative image: intensive monocultures, pollution from fertilizers and pesticides, and effluent from livestock farms are understood to be as harmful to the environment as industrial processes (Bertolino & Perazzone, 2015).

All of this has key implications, especially if, as at present, policy choices are needed to guide society towards a model of greater environmental sustainability. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that many scholars have pointed up the current crisis of ecological literacy (Orr, 1992; Coyle, 2005). But clearly it is not only a question of knowledge. As numerous authors in the field of environmental education have observed in recent decades, we should ensure that children from the early years have the opportunity to immerse themselves in natural environments (Kellert & Wilson, 1994; Louv, 2005; Allen, 2013 with a view to fostering empathy and the development of an ecological identity (Thomashow, 1995). Alongside this, we ourselves believe that it is crucial not to overlook the equally rich and educationally meaningful potential of agricultural settings. Rural areas represent a sort of "bridge between forest and city", a "middle ground" (Bertolino & Perazzone, 2016a) that can help us to rediscover our crucial ties with the resources of soil, water, and air, as well as with the other living species that share our planet. More so than woodlands or other natural ecosystems, the rural environment is uniquely equipped to illustrate, not just the ways in which food is produced and the multiple connected processes, but also the timeframe and seasonality of these processes, the resources they draw on, and more generally our ongoing ties with ecologically productive ecosystems which extend far beyond our need for food (Bertolino & Perazzone, 2018). If our behaviours are shaped by how we conceptualize the environment and how we perceive ourselves as relating to it, directly experiencing a rural setting challenges the human being-nature dichotomy, allowing us to broaden the horizons of our world and regain ecological awareness (Orr, 2002).

Many authors encourage the use of children's literature to foster scientific learning in general and ecological learning in particular (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011; Williams, Podeschi, Palmer, Schwadel & Meyler, 2012; Hageman, Martín, Montgomery & Rule, 2019). Picturebooks are tools for introducing very

young children to ecological concepts and motivating them to learn about them. Although there is broad consensus in the literature concerning the efficacy of picturebooks as an educational resource, their limitations have also been pointed out, and especially the misconceptions that they can convey (Pringle & Lamme, 2005; Sackes, Trundle & Flevaris, 2009). This can become an issue in educational settings when the adult/educator lacks the competence to assess the contents of commercial publications that were not necessarily intended to meet standards of scientific accuracy (Hug, 2010). For this reason, many researchers propose book lists or criteria for developing them (Rule & Atkinson, 1994; Martín, Hageman, Montgomery & Rule, 2019), or suggest how such resources might be used for teaching-learning purposes, and especially how reading may be leveraged to foster discussion and a critical approach among children (Monhardt & Monhardt, 2006; Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011).

Turning specifically now to “farm”-themed picturebooks for children, at least 100 such works are published in Italy every year (a claim that may be verified by conducting a search on Amazon’s Italian website, using the keyword “farm” [“fattoria”], selecting the “children’s books” category, and filtering the results by date of publication). This statistic lends strength to our belief that books like these are often the first medium through which children encounter rural environments, informing their early mental representations, potentially followed later by browser games – many of which are also farm-themed (Bertolino, Piccinelli & Perazzone, 2012; Perazzone & Bertolino, 2016). We thus set out to investigate, via an ad hoc quali-quantitative analysis, whether picturebooks can be an appropriate resource for introducing children to a rural culture that we have unavoidably left behind, thereby jeopardizing our ecological identity.

Similarly to other authors who have explored this theme (Falteri, 2005; Kruse, 2001; Mick, 2019), we did not focus on whether/how specific ecological concepts are conveyed through images and narratives, but rather on the level of realism of the various models of farm that are represented to young readers in these books. Children’s literature can offer a form of “place-based” learning that can lay the ground for and supplement direct experience of settings such as open farms. While books certainly cannot replace first-hand experience, reading them can encourage exploration and consequently the development of a critical approach and awareness of the extent that our lives are bound up with both natural and man-made ecologically productive ecosystems.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample characteristics

With the help of the regional library system, Sistema Bibliotecario Valdostano (SBV), we constructed a sample of 60 picturebooks whose aim (at least as stated by the publishers) was to introduce young children to farm life (Table 10.1).¹

From a publishing perspective, the sample consisted of widely circulated, inexpensive books, that were printed in colour, featured more illustrations than text, and were very different in terms of size, shape, and materials. Two-thirds (n=42) of the sample offered the young reader some form of interaction, via touch and sound features, flaps to be lifted, stickers to be positioned, and tabs and wheels to be moved.

Table 10.1 Sample composition (N=60)

Period of first publication	1980–1989	5
	1990–1999	9
	2000–2009	30
	2010–2019	16
Country of first publication	United Kingdom	28
	Italy	19
	Germany	3
	France	5
	Belgium	3
	USA	2
Language	Italian	54
	French	6
Iconographic structure	Drawings	54
	Drawings and photographs	3
	Photographs	3
Age group	0–6 years	60
SBV: Dewey Decimal Classification	RN – children's fiction	43
	R – children's nonfiction	17

1 The details of the 60 children's picturebooks in the sample and a full breakdown of the scores assigned to them may be obtained from the authors on request.

Indicators and rating criteria

What is a farming business? A farm? Drawing on scientific-technical definitions (ISTAT, 2013) as well as more generalist descriptions, we might say that the farm is a system of interacting components that are coordinated by the farmer with a view to organizing them efficiently and producing goods of which only a small proportion will be consumed by the farming family itself, with the greater part intended for sale to third parties. In our view, this “minimum knowledge” about farms is an indispensable prerequisite for ecological awareness. Thus, in our analysis of the selected picturebooks’ written and pictorial content, we chose to focus on those variables that are key to maintaining the farm system. Quali-quantitative analysis was conducted on the 60 texts via a set of 12 indicators designed to assess how effectively this kind of material can potentially convey real-life aspects of agricultural settings.

Each text was assigned a score ranging from 0 to 2 for each indicator. In general, the scoring system was structured according to the following evaluation criteria:

- indicator is problematic, absent, or impossible to evaluate – score: 0
- indicator is present, but ill-defined and/or stereotyped – score: 1
- indicator is obviously present and clearly represented – score: 2

Table 10.2 makes it clear that we assigned higher ratings to books that represented mixed and diversified farming settings, despite the fact that intensive livestock

Table 10.2 Indicators, evaluation criteria and scores

Indicator of content realism	Evaluation criteria		
	Score 0	Score 1	Score 2
<p>1. Weather Agricultural work and production are strongly influenced by weather conditions that are generally both variable and shaped by seasonal patterns.</p>	The elements represented (animals, people, buildings, products, ...) mainly appear out of context and hence there are no references at all to weather.	Weather conditions are clearly featured, but it always appears to be sunny.	The pages of the text alternate diverse weather conditions, including cloud cover and sometimes rain/snow.
<p>2. Seasonality Farm work varies according to the time of year, in keeping with the seasonal cycle on which tillage and livestock farming practices are closely based.</p>	The elements represented appear out of context and hence there are no references to seasonality; or, although the broader setting is represented, there are no cues suggesting what season it might be.	Images and/or written text make it clear that the entire book is set in the same season, usually summer or spring.	Seasonality is a prominent feature, as illustrated by changes in the farm in the course of the year. More than one season is represented and sometimes the differences between seasons receive explicit mention.

Indicator of content realism	Evaluation criteria		
	Score 0	Score 1	Score 2
<p>3. Circadian rhythm The alternation of the day and night dictate the rhythm of life on the farm, for the people as well as for the animals and plants.</p>	There is no evidence of the alternation of day and night nor of the passing of time during the day.	Only daytime is represented, with few references to the passage of time in the course of the day.	Both daytime and night-time settings are featured or, at the very least, the passing of time is explicitly represented, for example via images of sunrise/sunset.
<p>4. Overall perspective A panoramic view of the farm, typically from an aerial, wide-angle perspective, can provide insight into the systemic links among the different aspects of tillage and livestock farming, as well as into the broader setting within which the farm is situated.</p>	No panoramic images provided.	One or more images offer broader perspectives but none that are comprehensive or taken up again elsewhere in the book.	Typically in the first pages, a panoramic illustration is provided that shows the entire farm and the neighbourhood surrounding it. The following pages explicitly home in on selected individual areas of the farm, providing close-up images of them.
<p>5. Areas that are dedicated to and suitable for livestock farming The availability of appropriate spaces for containing and sheltering animals (fencing, sheds, pens, poultry coops, ...) is a prerequisite for practicing livestock rearing.</p>	The animals in the book are represented out of context, or the context illustrated is not functional for livestock farming purposes.	Sheds, pens, poultry coops, ...are represented but are not functional or realistic.	The livestock settings shown are both realistic and functional.
<p>6. Areas that are dedicated to and suitable for the growing of crops The production of crops demands appropriate dedicated spaces (fields, vegetable gardens, orchards, vineyards).</p>	No tillage settings illustrated.	Only one type of dedicated space for crops is represented but often appears more decorative than functional.	Two or more different kinds of crop growing setting (field, vegetable garden, orchard, vineyard) are featured and represented as functional.
<p>7. Farmer Another key component of the farm system is the farmer him/herself, or – at the very least – a farm worker, who carries out all the work needed to grow crops, raise livestock, and manage the business aspects of farming.</p>	The farmer is neither graphically represented nor mentioned in the text or only features as a small figure in the background.	The farmer is represented as an anthropomorphized animal or a child rather than as an adult.	The farmer is present and is sometimes assisted in his work by others (family members, or actual farm workers).

Indicator of content realism	Evaluation criteria		
	Score 0	Score 1	Score 2
<p>8. Farmer's dwelling Other spaces on the farm are for the dedicated use of the farmer and his/her family (where present) and fulfil both personal and work-related functions.</p>	No farmhouse depicted even when some kind of setting is represented.	A house is shown but appears to serve a decorative function rather than to illustrate what it is like to live on a farm.	A house is featured and its role in the farm system is explicitly treated.
<p>9. Livestock farming tasks Raising livestock involves a set of tasks that spans caring for the animals and processing their produce.</p>	No reference to livestock farming practices.	The only livestock rearing practices represented involve caring for the animals (feeding and to a lesser extent cleaning out sheds etc.)	Looking after the animals is associated with obtaining and processing produce.
<p>10. Crop growing farming tasks Crops are grown in stages from preparing the soil, to sowing, planting and harvesting.</p>	No reference to crop growing practices.	Only one crop growing task is represented, typically picking fruit or making hay. Often the fact that work is involved is only implicitly suggested by the presence of a tractor.	The text represents and explicitly mentions different types of crop growing tasks (ploughing, sowing, irrigation, harvesting, ...) and the relative machinery.
<p>11. Produce The farm is a site of production whose outputs are animal and/or plant-based produce. It therefore seems crucial that farm produce should be explicitly presented to readers.</p>	There are no references to animal or plant-based produce.	Animal and plant-based produce is featured but excludes products that require the animal to be killed.	The produce represented includes products that imply that an animal was slaughtered.
<p>12. Sale and marketing of produce A key fact about farms is their relationship with the broader socio-economic system, implying that the sale and promotion of farm produce should also somehow be represented to readers.</p>	No reference to the sale of animal or plant-based produce.	While there are no clear references to the sale of produce, some products are presented in the packaged form (bottles of milk, cartons of eggs, ...) in which they are normally sold.	The sale of farm produce is clearly and explicitly evoked via the representation of dedicated spaces (market, shop) and/or hauliers who collect produce to transport it to processing plants (milk lorries, ...).

or tillage farming are far more usual in the primary sector. This choice was not exclusively informed by the recent growth in multifunctional agriculture and the call for less intensive exploitation of the soil and livestock. Although these aspects are key to encouraging innovation in the agricultural sector and to developing more sustainable land management practices than in the past, we also believe that it is legitimate for authors, illustrators, and publishers to consciously present a cross-section of the rural sphere rather than to focus on a single type of agricultural production.

We calculated a global score (ranging from 0 to 24) for each of the books by summing the scores it had obtained on the individual indicators. Based on this composite value, we assigned the books with one of three realism ratings: low (score 0–8), medium (score 9–16), or high (score 17–24).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We next discuss the outcomes obtained for the different indicators, which we have divided into similarly themed groups.

Weather, seasonality, and circadian rhythm (indicators 1, 2, and 3)

Twelve of the picturebooks in the sample featured animals or objects out of context in a sort of timeless spatial dimension. With regard to weather, in 42 books the sun was always shining and only six represented rainfall ($n=3$) or at least cloudy conditions ($n=3$).

In addition to the books that provided no context of any kind, a further 25 provided no cues to suggest what season it might be, while six others represented a season that was quite obviously spring or summer. The remaining 17 books made specific reference to the cycle of the seasons, signalling the changes from one season to the another by means of both images and written text.

Finally, only 10 books represented the passing of time within a given 24-hour period, featuring – after a number of pages set in the daytime – either sundown ($n=5$), dawn ($n=1$), or night time. In 38 books, only daytime was represented.

Both weather and seasonality are particularly salient to farm work, given the extent to which they condition it. Out of 27 picturebooks that presented one or more types of agricultural crop (indicator 6), 20 provided clear and explicit indications of changes of season; however, in all but five, the weather was represented as perennially sunny!

Overall perspective

Only a third ($n=20$) of the books in the sample provided panoramic views of the farm that, at least partially, illustrated large portions of the farm, thus providing readers with a sense of the interrelationships among the different components of the farm system and a feel for the overall setting. In 10 picturebooks, the introductory pages offered an aerial view of the entire farm and its immediate surroundings that encompassed specific structures (animal housing, farm dwelling, hayshed,...) and settings (field, orchard, vegetable garden, ...) that were presented close up and explored in greater depth in the remainder of the book (Fig. 10.1). This appears to be a particularly effective means of fostering a systemic perspective on the farm, because it illustrates how the various parts of the farm stand in relation to one another, but also how the farm as a whole is in turn connected (e.g., via paths and roads) to natural ecosystems and sometimes even to anthropized ecosystems that may be glimpsed in the background.



Figure 10.1 *La fattoria* (2009), by Simon Abel and Katie Daynes, Usborne. Reproduced with permission.

Areas dedicated to and suitable for livestock farming and crop growing (indicators 5 and 6)

Clearly, especially in our contemporary era, most farms specialize in either tillage or livestock, yet – as clarified above – we deem it to be legitimate (albeit unaligned with reality) to use picturebooks to represent mixed farms along with elements of more recent multifunctional farming models, including the sale of produce directly on the farm, offering hospitality to tourists, etc.

In any case, the titles of the books in the sample would alone suffice to prove that the farm is predominantly associated with animals, given their great affective appeal, especially when it comes to their young. On a paper farm, animals are the one element that can never be omitted. Cattle (present in all cases), pigs (n=53), sheep (n=53), horses (n=48), goats (n=30), and donkeys (n=21) featured in our sample alongside farmyard animals such as hens (n=57), ducks (n=37), geese (n=36), rabbits (n=33), turkeys (n=20) as well as dogs (n=45), cats (n=38), and a host of other more or less salient species: pigeons, hares, foxes, frogs, squirrels, hedgehogs, and lizards, to mention only the vertebrates.

An animal that played an unexpectedly frequent role was the mouse (n=37). Despite its reputation as a voracious pest and carrier of disease to be repelled using ultrasound devices or killed by means of traps, poison, glue (and cats of course), in 15 books, the mouse appeared not only to be accepted but to be actually welcomed!

Therefore, in our analysis we set out to assess, more so than the credibility of this high degree of biodiversity which was clearly the outcome of publishing decisions, whether the main categories of animal were represented in functional settings, that is to say, whether sheds, pens, coops, etc. were appropriately represented. In 12 books, such elements were entirely lacking (Fig. 10.2), while in a further 13 the dedicated spaces for livestock depicted were not realistically appropriate forms of animal housing. The emblematic example of this was a proliferation of fences that were more ornamental than suited to keeping animals in or dividing them from other livestock species. Indeed, in 17 books the spaces and structures illustrated were only partially appropriate (Fig. 10.3), while in the remaining 18 books were truly functional livestock rearing settings graphically represented (and sometimes described) (Fig. 10.4).

And what about areas of the farm dedicated to growing crops? Only 27 picturebooks, or under half the sample, represented such areas, which predominantly fell into the four categories: fields (n=22), vegetable gardens (n=14), orchards (n=16) and vineyards (n=8). More specifically, eleven books presented only one type of crop while nine presented all four types.

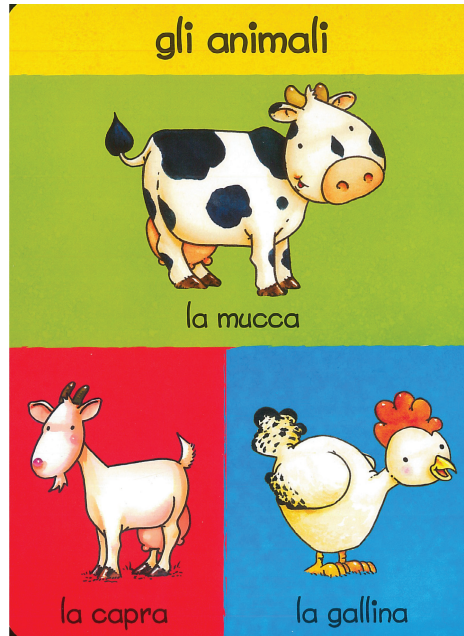


Figure 10.2 *In fattoria* (2009), by Yoyo Books.

Reproduced with permission.

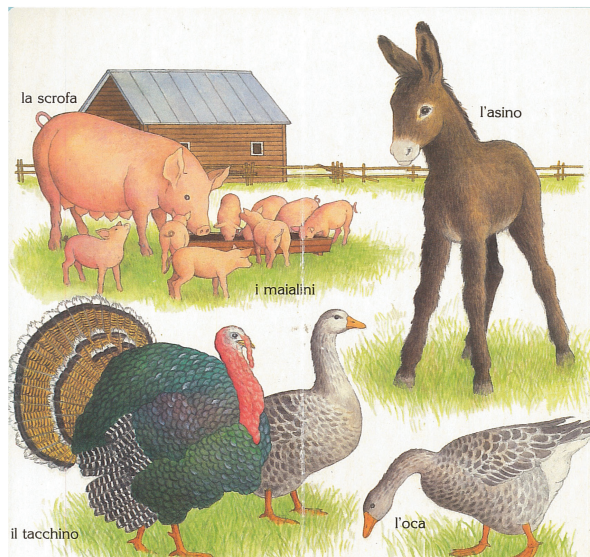


Figure 10.3 *Parole in fattoria* (1988), by Elisabeth Parmentelot, Piccoli.

Reproduced with permission.

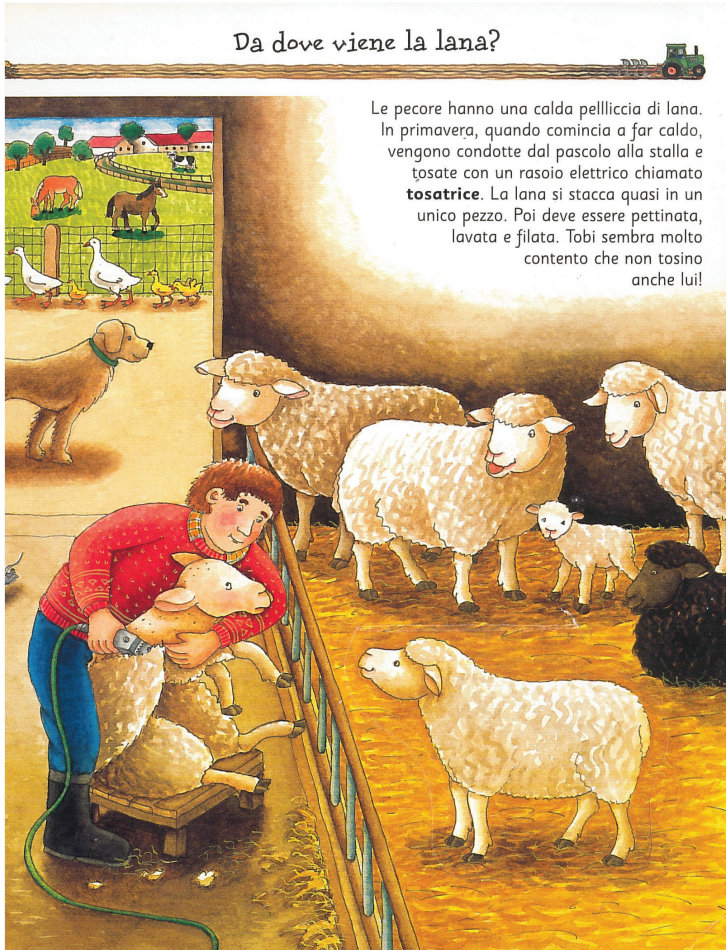


Figure 10.4 *Un anno in fattoria* (1998), by Constanza Droop, La Coccinella. Reproduced with permission.

Farmer and farmer's dwelling (indicators 7 and 8)

As we moved progressively closer to the very purpose of a farm, it was crucial to verify whether the picturebooks also represented people at work. Surprisingly, in 22 of the texts, the farmer was completely absent (or only featured as a small background figure). In a further 12 books, children ($n=4$) or animals with anthropomorphic features ($=8$) took the place of the farmer. In sum, less than half the sample ($n=26$) represented a credible adult human farmer. And even when the farmers shown were credible, they were not particularly realistic. As Kruse (2001) observed

in relation to picturebooks published in the USA, in our sample too, the farmer was often represented in a highly stereotypical manner: stocky build, moustache, straw hat, handkerchief tied at neck, sleeveless jacket, overalls, and check shirt (Bertolino & Perazzone, 2016b). With few exceptions, the female figures (Mick, 2019) that featured in 20 picturebooks out of 60 were equally stereotyped, often depicted as wearing aprons and a handkerchief tied around their heads ($n=12$). Interestingly, in the books that represented both figures (male and female), gender stereotyping was the norm (Chick, 2002; Filipović, 2018). In 12 texts out of 20, the woman was portrayed as looking after the children, feeding farmyard animals, collecting eggs, going to market, doing the laundry, or drawing water from the well; while the man drove the tractor and other farm machinery, sheared sheep, and shod horses. Even the vet, who featured in six picturebooks, was invariably represented as a man.

The personal worlds of the farmer and of the – under-represented – farming family was invoked in 13 texts by representing the farmstead, one of the few indications that farmers' lives cannot consist exclusively of farm work. Houses were also featured in six other books, but more as decorative elements than as dwellings actually lived in by farmers/farming families.

Farming tasks (indicators 9 and 10)

At this point, we introduced an even sharper focus by homing in on the farmer's working life. Although, as we have seen, animals were featured in all of the books, the farmer was portrayed in the role of livestock breeder in only 21 texts, and in five of these, he was only shown as feeding animals without any hint that he was raising stock for economic gain.

In contrast, almost all of the 27 books that featured crops, explicitly represented one ($n=6$) or more ($n=18$) types of agricultural task: ploughing, sowing, threshing, grape harvesting. Just as caring for the animals was the livestock farming task most frequently depicted, so for crop growers, harvesting was the phase of work most often represented in the picturebooks.

Produce and sale (indicators 11 and 12)

Products were explicitly mentioned in about half the sample ($n=31$), but only 10 books represented produce that necessitated the killing of an animal: an evident taboo. It is difficult to explain why then the books so frequently featured cattle and sheep, and especially pigs and rabbits, an expedient that avoids challenging the fictitious image of an idyllic coexistence between farmers and farm animals. Carrying on this pretence also means wasting opportunities to discuss animal welfare. The

main kinds of animal produce featured were eggs, milk, and wool, while the most popular plant-based products were fruit and hay.

Finally, we set out to establish whether the picturebooks explicitly represented or emphasized the paper farm's commercial ties with the outside world, whether in terms of food processing facilities or, even more explicitly, in terms of sales venues. The latter formula was only invoked in six books: market stalls ($n=4$) and on-farm sale of produce ($n=2$). Nine other books represented produce in conventional sales packaging, implying – albeit not making it sufficiently explicit – that it was destined for sale.

Content realism ratings

Based on the total scores each of the books in the sample was assigned one of three realism ratings (Table 10.3).

Two-thirds of the books in the sample obtained a total score of 8 or lower, reflecting the marked overall lack of realism in this category of children's literature.

It should be noted that there was no correlation (Pearson coefficient) between the scores obtained by a book and the number of pages in it ($r=0.09$), that is to say the picturebooks that obtained lower scores were not necessarily those with fewer pages. Similarly, scores were only weakly correlated ($r=0.43$) with the target age group, although this outcome may have been influenced by a lack of uniformity in the criteria used to defined target age.

Again, there was no significant correlation ($r=-0.14$) between date of first publication and score, suggesting that the average quality of this kind of picture book had not changed over time. The least assigned quality rating was the medium category ($n=8$); this suggests a clear divide between the majority of picturebooks ($n=39$) in which the model of “life on the farm” conveyed appears to reinforce stereotypes rather than representing authentic reality, and a small minority ($n=13$) whose authors and publishers seem to have invested in the content realism of their offerings. This last-mentioned group demonstrates that

Table 10.3 Realism ratings / scores (min 0 – max 24)

Realism ratings	Score	Picturebooks
Low	From 0 to 8	39
Medium	From 9 to 16	8
High	From 17 to 24	13

it is possible – even in the space of a few pages – to represent realistic rural settings to even the youngest of readers. Books of this quality clearly draw out the productive function of the farm and allow readers to infer the links between the farm and surrounding area. In these books, like Katja Reider’s *La fattoria* (2004, *Der Bauernhof*), the farm is a place to live and work, at a pace dictated by the circadian rhythm and the cycle of the seasons, where alongside children – whom young readers can readily identify with – there are men and women engaged in tasks that make sense of an environment that is crucial to all of our existences, even when we do not encounter it in the course of our everyday experiences.

CONCLUSION: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

In defining the set of indicators we used for our analysis, we focused on the real-life aspects of farming we hold to be particularly vital from an educational perspective and that together form a model of the farm as:

- a unitary whole
- a site of production, and therefore characterized by adults engaged in a range of work activities
- a place of non-gendered stereotyped “life” with clear dedicated living spaces and a family dimension
- restored to its circadian and seasonal rhythm
- connected with the surrounding area including the urban
- without taboos, where a cow supplies milk but also steaks and a hen supplies eggs but also chicken wings.

The present analysis of a representative set of picturebooks shows that they often showcase symbols and models of farming that are reductive and sometimes even in contradiction with reality; the care and financial investment that is put into producing attractive publications does not seem to be matched by efforts on the part of authors and publishers to ensure that the contents are realistic enough to meaningfully contribute to children’s ecological awareness.

Specifically, our analysis shows that in most cases picturebooks such as those in our sample are not exclusively informed by real-life input and information, but also by the collective imaginarity of a community that is increasingly far removed from the world of agriculture. Thus, stereotypes are reinforced, becoming even more rigid, and paradoxically even acquiring the power to influence the image

that farmers themselves decide to display when they host children on their farms. Farms that receive outside visitors, especially those that offer agritourism accommodation or are open farms, sometimes seek to meet their guests' expectations by denaturing themselves, becoming farm zoos (by putting on show a small number of specimens of many different animal species), mixed farms with a vegetable patch, a small orchard, and a little herb garden. The invoking of the stereotype succeeds, the visitors are satisfied, but from an educational perspective, what additional insight have they gained into the true significance of an environment that is distant from their everyday lives?

Clearly, from an educational perspective, rigorous realism is not always a gold standard; nevertheless, in the specific case of picturebooks, attempting to foster a more realistic image of farming should contribute to drawing children closer to a rural world that is highly dynamic and bears considerable social and environmental importance.

If we are to motivate children to learn about and directly experience the world of farming, it is crucial – today more than ever – that we as adults should encourage and help children to critically read picturebooks, designing educational settings with constant opportunities for engaging in dialogue and comparing representations with reality. If we do so, even the stereotyped and simplified image of farms presented by many picturebooks (which may initially serve a useful function by attracting children's attention) will be unmasked, such that – paradoxically – they will end up fulfilling an educational function. Sometimes imaginary and caricatural representations conceal aspects of real life that may be approached with a degree of humour and exploited with the educational aim of challenging a trivialized and simplified perspective.

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