

Citizen Toddler: Spreading the Message about Caring for Our Planet

Elizabeth Kenyon and Jennifer Lampe

The food court is bustling late on a Wednesday morning at Kent State University student center when a group of fourteen toddlers come in carrying signs and a bucket. They approach a pair of college students who are finishing their lunch and ask if they have any leftover food. One college student lifts her plate, and a toddler puts up his hand and says, “Stop! Don’t throw away!” Other toddlers nod or stand in agreement. Their teacher, Jennifer, asks them all what the college student should do instead, and there is a scattering of shouts, “Compost! Repack!” When Jennifer asks the college student to tell what’s on her plate, she reveals some leftover salad with chicken. Jennifer asks the children whether all of that can be composted, or just some of it. The toddlers decide that the lettuce and other vegetables can be composted, but not the chicken. They receive the leftover salad in their compost bucket and thank the student for talking with them.

This is one of many moving and empowering moments we have had with the toddlers at the Child Development Center (KSU-CDC) at Kent State University, where children learn to take ownership of their actions and practice observing how their actions impact the people around them. While we see action and ownership in many different capacities in the classroom (and outside of it), it is not something that happened overnight. Rather, it took time, trust, empowerment, and support from all members of the classroom community.

Taking Young Children and Their Learning Seriously

As you enter the KSU-CDC, which serves children ages 18 months through kindergarten, you will notice evidence of social studies learning everywhere. The main hallways have a yarn map representing students’ paths to get to school. A postal system with a mailbox for each classroom is visible, along with photographs and written dialogue highlighting how the children have engaged with this added form of communication. A set of self-portraits that show skin color and identity are proudly displayed in one area, and a small table of books and activities invites family and visitors to participate in various inquiries



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involving ideas of home and community. In Room One, an essential agreement,¹ created and defined by the children and teachers, is displayed in the middle of the classroom. This is a place where students’ rights, voices, and abilities are taken seriously, and where students respond with powerful actions and insights into their world and that of others.

The KSU-CDC is an International Baccalaureate (IB) World School, providing “innovative programs for toddler (18 months to three years old), preschool, and kindergarten age children,” and also serving “as a professional development and research center” for the College of Education, Health and Human Services at Kent State. Teachers at the KSU-CDC take inspiration from Reggio Emilia’s approach to teaching

and learning as well as Te Whariki’s description of shared and meaningful documentation.² As a university lab school, KSU-CDC encourages teachers to both use best practices and to explore further understandings of children and their learning. The students at the KSU-CDC are the children of university staff, faculty, students and community members. There is a sliding scale for tuition and every attempt is made to create a space and environment that is accessible to and inclusive of a diverse range of students across many identities including socio-economic class, race, language, nationality, and LGBTQ+ identities. The KSU-CDC is a progressive learning space where children, teachers, and families are all viewed as co-constructors³ of knowledge and experience which is represented in the work that takes place within the school (and outside of it).⁴

With this curricular perspective, the teachers in Room One begin each school year by focusing on “coming to know one another” and “becoming a community.” This involves expressing “who we are”⁵ and defining what we need to feel safe at school; an inquiry that takes time, trust, and a willingness to be vulnerable. It also necessitates an open line of communication between all stakeholders (children, teachers, and families) that

is established through home visits by the teacher,⁶ occasional gatherings that include students’ families, and daily communication (both in-person and electronic) between teachers and parents.⁷ With this communication network in place, all of the adults and children who are a part of Room One can begin the process of becoming a true community of learners.

This article is written by the Room One lead teacher (J.L.) and a Room One parent (E.K.) who is an early childhood education faculty member at Kent State University. We blend our perspectives as we describe how toddlers (ages 18 months to 3 years) were able to participate in civic actions that grew out of their own curiosities and concerns. Our hope is to share how even the very young can learn and enact social studies through a growing understanding of their own agency. While learning in the KSU-CDC and Room One touches on many of the Ten Themes of the *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*, this initiative in particular fostered students’ understanding of 10 **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**. The students also explored their conceptions of how people’s choices concerning food impacts the environment around them, which relates to 3 **PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS**.⁸ These activities also met the state early childhood standards for government.⁹

Sidebar 1. Activities for Learning about Composting

Components of the initiative and inquiry-based, emergent learning. We invite readers to consider similar activities that could take place in their classrooms, and could even be applied to a different topic.

| Activity or Event | Description | Curriculum Standards* |
|--|---|--|
| Discussion of Food Trucks | Student conversation initiates our exploration of food. | |
| What is Composting? | Inquiry topic that emerges from students’ concerns about leftover food. | 1 Individual Development and Identity |
| Composting Center | Classroom space that supports student inquiry and investigation. Revisit occasionally. | 3 People, Places, and Environments |
| Composting Practice | Students practice and explore what composting is and how they can participate in composting. | 5 Individuals, Groups, and Institutions OELDS: Economics pC38 |
| Spreading the Message (Initial Attempt) | Students confront the practical and emotional challenges of sharing knowledge with others. | OELDS: Social and Emotional Development Standards Sa4 |
| Spreading the Message (Further Attempts) | Students practice resiliency, revising their presentation, practice, and try again with teacher support. | 10 Civic Ideals and Practices OELDS: Government C34 |
| Making Connections with Families | Students connect their school experiences with home experiences, and share some of their new knowledge with family members. | 1 Individual Development and Identity |

* Standards: NCSS, National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards>.

Ohio Department of Education (OELDS), *Ohio’s Early Learning and Development Standards*, education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Early-Learning-Content-Standards/Birth-Through-Pre_K-Learning-and-Development-Stand/ELSD-Cognition-Standards.pdf.aspx.

In this article, we begin by sharing how these activities were developed from students' own interests and experiences at home. We then highlight how they took shape, incorporating literacy, family, and community connections. We also share some ideas for further extensions that could be used in a variety of grade levels and contexts. Finally, we share the challenges of doing this work from a teacher's perspective, as well as the strengths of working with young children through an emergent curriculum in regard to social studies education.

While many articles in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* share well-developed and detailed lesson plans, this story may appear messier to readers due to the emergent nature of this project and the ways that toddlers' minds work. For the purpose of this article (and due to limited page space), we are presenting this lesson in a more linear fashion (e.g., in **Sidebar 1**, p. 28) than it actually unfolded.

The Compost and Repack Initiative

The school year started with the whole class expressing an interest in the food trucks they'd seen over the summer. There is just something intriguing about selling food from a little kitchen on wheels. After researching food trucks through books and websites (as seen on the teacher's iPad), students made their own "Room One Food Truck," which they used to distribute food they prepared to other classrooms in the building.¹⁰ However, even with the many schoolmates to share their food with, there was often some left over. So, we asked the children, "What can we do with extra food?" To which they answered, "Give it to someone who needs it." "Save it for later." Or, as Amos offered, "Put it in the compost at my house."



"We have a 'post at school!" Stephanie exclaimed, "in the garden!"

"Post" was Stephanie's attempt to pronounce the word, "compost." The school garden is a place where students are invited to tend plants, play, and explore. Sometimes, classes are held in the garden. Although our students had asked about the "big pile" in the garden several times before, it was not until today that most of them had a meaningful connection to that pile of vegetable matter. The concept of composting had become more concrete.

"I have one at my house," Amos explained. "I put my food in it with my Dad."

"We can put our food truck food in it too." Hailey said, nodding to those around her, who reciprocated her nod.

"But, I wonder," Jennifer inquired, "Can we put any food in the compost?"

"Noooooo!" Amos and Chris exclaimed, smiling at the prospect of such a thought.

"I see," Jennifer nodded, "Then, I wonder ... what foods can be composted, and what foods cannot?"

While some students suggested that "pizza cannot [be composted], but beans can," others seemed perplexed, and so Jennifer asked whether this was a topic we should do some research about.

"YES!" said the class.

We explored a list of student-generated questions (**Sidebar 2**, p. 30) through the use of children's literature (**Sidebar 3**, p. 31), websites as seen on the teacher's iPad, and responses provided by the classroom Alexa.¹¹

The question—Does everybody compost?—inspired a discussion.

"No. Everyone does not compost," said Jenny.

"Why?" The children inquired.

That was, and is, a very good question. To answer it, however, we would need to learn about and experience composting for ourselves.

Don't Throw Away. Compost or Re-Pack

Excited at the prospect of rethinking what it means to discard food, the children began what would become a semester-long inquiry and movement known as "Don't throw away. Compost or Re-Pack." As the children ate their lunches, they discussed these questions: "Do you want to compost or re-pack?" as well as "What can you compost?" and "What can you repack?" We used the findings from our classroom research and from the children's literature to answer these questions. We created a composting center in the classroom where we provided informational texts. We set up two small, clear containers of compost so that we could watch the process of decomposition and soil making over weeks and months. Paper and markers were provided for students to document their observations of the process occurring in these containers.

Spreading the Message

With these discussions, practices, and emerging understanding of what composting is and how to do it, the children then revisited the query, "Does everyone compost?" To which Jennifer responded, "No."

"Why not?" Sam asked.

"I'm not sure, Sam," Jennifer responded. "Maybe they don't know about composting? (Pause.) What do you think?"¹²

"I think we should tell them," Sam said.

“Yeah, we should tell the college students,” Hailey followed, “like my Mamas do,” recalling conversations that she had had with her family who were instructors at the University.

“I hear you,” Jennifer responded. “I wonder, how could we share this message with the college students?”

“We can tell them!” Chris exclaimed, a sentiment that was echoed by his classmates. Thus, our weekly trips to the Student Center, a place that was both familiar and accessible by bus, to share our message—“Don’t throw away! Compost or Re-Pack”—began.

Bumps in the Road

Teaching others about composting was easier said than done, as we found on our first journey to the Student Center. On the way, teacher and children discussed how we would share this message with the college students. “Don’t yell. We will scare them,” Stephanie explained, recalling our trips to the Meadow where we refrained from yelling, so as not to scare the animals. The children agreed to this guideline, and everyone felt prepared until we got to our first table in the cafeteria and ... the children fell silent.

Jennifer: Classmates, I noticed that this college student has some leftovers. Should he throw them away?

Silence.

Or should he compost?

Silence.

I see he has chicken. Can we compost chicken?

A few heads shake no, but otherwise...silence. “Well, sir, I don’t think we can compost that for you, but perhaps you might want to save it for later? Maybe you could....repack?” ... (a few nods, Yes, from the students ... but still silence). And so it went for much of our first trip.

Although the children were excited and ready with their message all the way to the Student Center, once we arrived, the students seemed unable to speak. Perhaps the students were a bit fearful in the presence of strangers, or perhaps they needed more practice. Not sure about the reason for the silence, the teaching team decided to raise this query with the students at the next classroom morning meeting. The students were clear on the concepts at this point, based on their practice of composting and repacking and their discussions around the topic. They were also quite accustomed to young adults as many of the people who work at the CDC are college students. However, meeting new young adults can be challenging for this age group.

“Classmates,” Jennifer asked, “I noticed that when we got to the Student Center, many of you did not want to tell the College Students our message. I wonder, did you feel nervous?”¹³

(Nods.)

“I see. It’s okay to feel nervous. Sometimes I feel nervous when I talk to someone new as well. I wonder ... is there another way we could share our message?”¹⁴

“We could show them?” Sam whispered.

“Show them?” Jennifer echoed.

“Yes.” Sam answered.

“Hmmm. I wonder, is this something you think we could draw or paint?”

“YES!”¹⁵

We painted two signs, “STOP! Don’t throw away! Compost or Re-Pack. Keep our earth safe,” that we let dry and brought on our next Student Center adventure with our message, scraps bucket, and restored confidence. This time, our adult chaperones on the trip knelt down beside the children to support them and their signs as Jennifer approached the first table. “Excuse me, I wonder if we might be able to share our message with you? We brought some signs to help.” To which the college students smiled and nodded.

“Classmates, these college students would like to hear our message. Would anyone like to tell them or show them our message?”

“STOP!” Chris exclaimed.

“Don’t throw away! Compost or Re-Pack.” he said. Then smiled.

“Compost!” Amos exclaimed.

“Re-Pack!” Stephanie said.

And so it continued, as the signs gave children the confidence and option to share their message in multiple ways (both voiced and unvoiced). It was a powerful moment for the toddlers as they saw their actions being noticed and acknowledged around them.¹⁶

Following the Children’s Lead

As teachers of young children, it is easy to fill in the silence and speak for the children, or even decide to move on when our original plans don’t pan out as we hope. The first time we went to the Student Center, we were so confident. The teachers, the students, all of us. So much so, that we didn’t think about what would happen if the children got nervous. I look back now with my 20/20 hindsight and think, how could I not have seen this coming? But I didn’t. And that’s okay. Just like it is okay for the children to get nervous in the moment, it is okay when our plans don’t work out.

I knew how important this work was to the children, but I didn’t know how to help, so I did what I thought was best. I

Sidebar 2.

Students’ Questions about Composting

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| What is composting? | Can animals eat compost? |
| How do you compost? | Is composting safe? |
| What can you compost? | Why is it important to compost? |
| What can’t you compost? | Does everybody compost? |
| Can humans eat compost? | |



asked them, and they told me. It was as simple as that. I didn't get frustrated, I didn't give up. I was honest, I was open, and I was vulnerable. I needed their help in order to help them, and when I asked them, they told me. They told me that they wanted to show their message, and I heard them. We made our signs, we regained our confidence and we told our message. We told it over and over. We spread our message to the college students, to our families, to our school. We carried our signs with pride as we marched out of our classroom, down the hall, and onto campus each week, ready to share our message and collect any materials for composting to bring back and put in our "post pile," just as we did with our own lunch leftovers every day.

Connecting with Others Across Time and Space

As the semester was winding down, the connections to home, families, and others (both near and far) returned. Amos and Chris had both shared knowledge from their experience with composting at home as our compost and repack initiative had begun. Now, at the semester's end, two students brought important things to share that again connected back to their work with composting. Madison shared some photos from her family trip to San Francisco. "Trash, no litter, recycle, and COMPOST!" she explained as she shared a picture of three bins lined up on a sidewalk. Students were able to see how the people in San Francisco share in our message of sustainability. In keeping with this idea of spreading our message, Sam shared his book from home about young activists at the 2017 Women's March

Sidebar 3.

Children's Literature and Websites about Composting

Books

Linda Glaser, Photographs by Shelley Rotner. *Garbage Helps Our Garden Grow*. New York: Millbrook Press (2010).

Robin Koontz, Illustrated by Matthew Harrad. *Composting: Nature's Recyclers*. New York: Picture Window Books (2006).

Esther Porter. *What's Sprouting in My Trash? A Book about Composting*. New York: Capstone Press (2013).

Mary McKenna Siddals, Illustrated by Ashley Wolff. *Compost Stew: An A to Z Recipe for the Earth*. New York: Tricycle Press (2010).

Websites

"A Science Notebook Story: Investigating Compost" (California Academy of Sciences), <https://www.calacademy.org/educators/science-notebook-story-investigating-compost>.

While not specifically for preschool, this website provides great ideas for inquiry-based learning about compost.

"Composting for Kids" (Texas AgriLife Extension Services), <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kindergarten/kidscompost/CompostingForKids.pdf>.

This PowerPoint provides lots of ideas about different ways to compost.

"Composting," (KidsGardening.org), <https://kidsgardening.org/gardening-basics-composting/>.

This website is written for teachers, and this webpage links to a three-page PDF on the details of teaching and doing composting.



in Washington, DC.¹⁷ Sam showed us an image depicting a young child “wearing Jessica’s [a classmate’s] cupcake hat” and “holding a sign like we do when we go to Campus!” Thus Sam connected the actions of our class this year with activists in other times and places.

This is emergent curriculum in action, moving from Food Trucks to Compost, to taking Action, and finally, to making connections back to home and family. This natural emergence and evolution allowed us to move past “end-of-a-unit” limitations and into a semester-long (and, we hope, life-long) inquiry into agency, power, and action. Rather than ending a “unit” because it was the end of the month, we supported the children’s authentic interests and listened, truly listened, to what was important to them. In the process, our state standards were met, our curriculum was intact, and, most importantly, the children felt empowered as they learned, which is something they will have for many years to come. 🌍

Notes

1. Essential agreements come from the International Baccalaureate Curriculum and serve as a class contract or set of rules and guidelines highlighting what is important to students and what they need for a safe and powerful learning environment.
2. C. Edwards, L. Gandini, and G. Forman, *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993); A description of the type of assessment the school uses can be found at “Te Whariki Online, Assessment for Learning,” <https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/en/assessment-for-learning>.
3. Vivian Paley, *A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).
4. John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938).
5. International Baccalaureate, *Primary Years Program: Learning and Teaching* (Cardiff, Wales: Peterson House, 2018)
6. Debbie Pushor, “Tracing My Research on Parent Engagement: Working to Interrupt the Story of School as Protectorate,” *Action in Teacher Education* 34, no. 5–6, (2012): 464–479.
7. Chiara Bacigalupa, “Partnering with Families Through Photo Collages,” *Early Childhood Education Journal* 44, (2016): 317–323.
8. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. (Silver Spring, MD: NCS, 2010).

9. Ohio Department of Education, Ohio’s Early Learning and Development Standards, education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Early-Learning-Content-Standards/Birth-Through-Pre_K-Learning-and-Development-Stand/ELSD-Cognition-Standards.pdf.aspx
10. Consult school rules and state regulations before planning any classroom activity in which food is served.
11. Benjamin Herold, “Teacher’s Aid or Surveillance? Alexa Hits the Classroom,” *Education Week* (February 13, 2020), blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2018/06/alexa_in_the_classroom_teachers_surveillance.html; Mark Lieberman, “Using Amazon Echo, Google Home to Learn: Skill of the Future or Bad Idea?” *Education Week* 39, no. 20 (February 4, 2020).
12. There are many potential reasons that people may choose not to compost, e.g., not knowing about composting; not knowing how to compost; and lack of space or access to fresh/healthy foods that provide vegetable clippings.
13. In a toddler classroom, one way that we help children learn to identify or granularize their emotions, is to discuss what emotions look and feel like. In this instance, the teacher recalled the demeanor of the children in the Student Center (which appeared to be nervous) and offered that as a starting point for conversation. Other emotions could also be discussed in an extended conversation, should the need/opportunity arise.
14. Vivian Paley, *A Child’s Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004)
15. This discussion helped foster student self-awareness, helping students with broad understanding of their emotions and supporting them in labeling those emotions. This connects with Ohio’s Early Learning and Development Standards social emotional development learning domain found at education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Early-Learning/Early-Learning-Content-Standards/Birth-Through-Pre_K-Learning-and-Development-Stand/ELDS-Social-Emotional.pdf.aspx pg. Sa4
16. By both taking responsibility themselves for composting and repacking and then decided they should and could spread their message, students were showing an understanding of their rights and responsibilities as outlined in Ohio’s Early Learning and Development standards for social studies government found on pg. C34.
17. Penguin Young Readers, *The Little Book of Little Activists* (New York: Viking Books for Young Readers, 2017)

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