Educator’s Spotlight – January
Tara Ward

Tara Ward is the lead education evaluator for SEEDS, a local nonprofit organization that brings a holistic perspective to make connections between ecology and social justice. Her team provides unique after school enrichment programs for students by emphasizing collaboration and relationship building. Environmental education often frames classroom activities. Many themes in nature have an innate ability to create a connection between students and their own community. The benefits of collaboration, combined with positive mentoring, ensure a fun and valuable opportunity for students to confidently learn and grow.
While developing and teaching curriculum Tara finds it increasingly valuable to incorporating “a child’s natural affinity for seeing detail” into daily lessons. Her favorite thing about teaching is “helping kids notice and make detailed observations,” encouraging them to take an appropriate amount of time to develop their “natural super observance.” Tara always had an eye for detail as she recalls one of her earliest memories of nature to be when she was six and saw a wood duck for the first time. She remembers its ornate head plumage, an iridescent mix of chestnut and green, and says “it was one of my first times noticing the beauty of nature.” Tara works hard to provide students in the SEEDS after school program this opportunity to engage with nature by finding resources that compel students to search for details. She continually uses the Nature Exploration Boxes available at the Boardman River Nature Center to enhance lessons on wildlife and ecology.

Tara advises all educators to “get kids outside,” and while it’s valuable to “bring the outdoors in,” she reminds that exploration time in the schoolyard can have a profound impact on the students’ connection to nature. “Working within your constraints” is key and while teachers may have a limited amount of “field trips” they can schedule, utilizing the schoolyard for outdoor activities has a number of benefits that directly contribute to learning within the traditional classroom.
Tara’s knack for observation translates into her hobbies as well. Having received a field guide for birds at a young age, she has always enjoyed bird watching and taking walks in the woods (especially around Piatt Lake!) to listen for their calls. Quoting a favorite mentor of hers, she says “once you recognize bird calls, your friends are in the woods with you.” A wonderful sentiment to think about, building a relationship with nature through personal observation and exploration inspires a friendship that everyone should have the opportunity to make. As Tara continues her work with SEEDS, her commitment to providing an engaging after school program ensures that students are receiving an additional level of social and cognitive support while building a relationship with nature, contributing to an inquisitive mind and a confident community steward.