The Wicked Witch of the Waste tries to steal the milk bottle to place in one of her landfills in Burlington High School's compost education play, CompOZtable (Photo: P. McConville)

Service-Learning: A quest, not a destination.
By Peter McConville

Last September, History teacher Jessica Little-Hayes and I embarked on a year-long classroom journey centered on sustainability and sense-of-place. We marched off, along with 12 unwitting students, into uncharted, interdisciplinary territory armed with little more than our respective History and English endorsements and a vague idea of where we were headed. Our class didn’t even have a name. What we had were bold notions of shattering paradigms, reinvigorating our practice, and forging meaningful relationships with our community. We met both failures and success, and even lost a student or two along the way. We discovered (and don’t worry, I’m going to ditch this colonialist metaphor at the end of this paragraph) that our destination could be realized, but that the journey would be hard. Real hard.

As a staunch believer in constructivist education (that we learn by doing), I often feel restricted by the traditional classroom. Working in a conventional high school, compartmentalized into its various subjects, it’s easy to lose track of the big picture of education as teachers and administrators struggle to complete our sundry assigned roles. So every year I assign my five paragraph essays, teach SAT vocabulary, and administer reading quizzes on Jane Eyre. And to what end? The active participants in my class end up being able to communicate more effectively and understand some of the finer points of Victorian literature, sure, but at the end of the year I have to recognize that the tasks they’ve - hopefully - completed are mine:

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Dear Friends,

This issue is dedicated to Service-Learning and Education for Sustainability. We’re so pleased to share articles from teachers near and far as well as from community partners who make all of this work possible. As we continue to support educators in using sustainability as a lens for their curriculum, we have found that service-learning (and its associated best practices) is a great strategy—just like literacy integration or science inquiry. In our work with schools we help teachers integrate service-learning into their curriculum in a meaningful way to afford students the chance to solve real-world problems, to connect with community partners, to celebrate and reflect, and to deepen learning that transfers to new contexts.

A key piece of the Sustainable Schools Project’s Education for Sustainability Framework emphasizes the need for students to “know that one can make a difference” (self-efficacy). We know that this is an essential skill for being an active citizen, a life-long learner, and someone who has the capacity to create sustainable communities. And we know that schools are the perfect place to practice and refine these skills.

We hope you enjoy this issue of our newsletter and we hope you’ll join us at one of our summer workshops soon!

Happy Spring,

Jen
Jen Cirillo
Sustainable Schools Project

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Sustainable School Project’s Education for Sustainability Framework

- knowledge of human and natural communities
- understanding that the world is interconnected
- citizens engaged in creating sustainable communities
- knowledge that one can make a difference
Building the Future: An Interview with Colleen Kent of YouthBuild/ReSOURCE VT

Interview by Emily Hoyler

Colleen Kent is the Community Partnership Coordinator for YouthBuild, an education and job skills training program of Burlington, Vermont’s ReSOURCE, a non-profit community enterprise that seeks to change lives, to provide relief, to retrain, rebuild, repair, and restore. YouthBuild is part of ReSOURCE’s ReTRAIN program, serving a diverse range of individuals who need new skills and an opportunity to succeed.

Emily: Colleen, tell me about YouthBuild and a little about what you do?
Colleen: YouthBuild is a national organization that provides education and job skills training in construction for 16-24 year olds who have previously been unsuccessful in high school. Our program in Burlington specializes in carpentry, weatherization, and woodworking, and the weatherization piece is unique to the Burlington, and Barre, Vermont programs, but there are YouthBuild groups in almost every major city in the nation. While working with YouthBuild, students will earn GEDs or High School diplomas and receive job skills training.

How do you integrate sustainability and service-learning into the work that you’re doing?
ReSOURCE has a three part mission. We meet community and individual needs through education and job skills training, environmental stewardship, and economic opportunities. YouthBuild supports all parts of this mission. Students gain job skills as they work on the environmental and economic aspects in two ways. ReSOURCE operates ReBUILD, deconstruction service, which breaks down homes and takes back all the materials which we then resell. YouthBuild students help out with the deconstruction. But our students are more directly involved in our Waste-Not-Products, a product line at ReSOURCE that takes salvaged construction material and creates new products. Students gain carpentry and woodworking skills as they use the reclaimed materials to create things like cutting boards, chicken coops, and rain barrels—basically any type of material that can be used and made into a new product can be part of the Waste-Not-Products line. These products bring in revenue for the organization, and it’s great that the students can be part of the profit side of our non-profit organization.

Describe your students and what this work means to them?
Our students have all dropped out of high school, but instead of calling them high school dropouts we say they’re in YouthBuild to transform that term. All YouthBuild students are part-time Americorps members. One of the hidden gems of this program is the service piece—every Friday our students go out in the community, communities that they may have gotten into trouble in the past, and they’re getting out and doing direct service to these communities. Previously these students haven’t been highly looked upon by their community, and now they’re out there shoveling driveways, working in community gardens, volunteering at local schools, and really changing the way the community perceives them. At the same time, they’re working to earn high school diplomas, which is something that for a lot of them didn’t seem attainable in their previous academic settings.

Can you describe some of the service projects that your students have worked on?
Usually people (community partners) come to us with a project idea, and then the students orchestrate the work since they have the carpentry skills. Last winter, a man who was organizing a teen center at the mall came to visit the students and talked to them about what he was trying to create.

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It was for these reasons that Ms. Little-Hayes and I invited Jessica Sankey from Chittenden Solid Waste District (CSWD) for an in-class presentation with an eye toward creating a mutually beneficial project between our students and the local waste management concern. Jessica presented our students with a dilemma: one of our local elementary schools was interested in starting a composting program, but staff was worried that the students wouldn’t be able to grasp the fundamentals of composting. “There will be chaos at the waste station!” the staff cried, and so our students agreed to work with CSWD to educate the students at Burlington’s Integrated Arts Academy (IAA) on the particulars, and joys, of composting. Less than two months later, the eleven remaining members of our class took the stage to perform CompOZtable at IAA (formally H.O. Wheeler Elementary). It was a ten-minute production, entirely written, produced, and directed by the students enrolled in what we’ve come to call the “Seminar on the Culture of Place”.

As a teacher, the benefits of working on a project like our play were immediately visible. The students learned how to solve a problem from concept to execution, they had to work together as a team, they encountered snafus, both unexpected and of their own design, and they reaped the rewards of hard work. The greatest testimony to service learning, however, will always belong to the voices of our students. As one student recently wrote in a classroom reflection, “I believe that the quest to get there teaches us more about ourselves than the lesson or the experiment does.”

“I believe that the quest to get there teaches us more about ourselves than the lesson or the experiment does.” - Student

Both affectionately and disdainfully referred to as “The Play” in our class, CompOZtable stands as a symbol of all that is wonderful and difficult about service learning. True service-learning needs to be an organic process – something difficult for our students to get their heads around at times. We’ve spent ten plus years teaching students to think in a predictably linear way, and breaking down the walls of clearly defined expectations felt to many like we removed the training wheels too fast. The play was conceived in fits and starts of creative activity. Students argued about plot-points, characters, and dialogue. Rehearsals extended the class day and pushed the limits of many students’ patience. As I mentioned, one student quit, not just the play, but the class. Through it all, however, the class coalesced in a way that I had never seen before. Students came out of previously impervious shells, leaders emerged from the back of the pack, and the entire group was showered with positive feedback from the community. To this day our Compost Fairy still finds herself being sighted by eight year olds at the supermarket.

The play follows the lunchtime adventures of Elenasaurus, dinosaur and cafeteria patron, as she tries to figure out the complexities of the cafeteria’s rubbish station. “Where does all this trash go?” she asks after her lunch, only to be incom-
Go Strawless! Milo Sets out to Change the World
Interview by Sarah Kadden

Nine-year-old Milo Cress is a fourth grade student at the Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes School in Burlington. He’s also the founder of a non-profit organization committed to a sustainable future, Be Straw Free, which has “set out on a mission to reduce the use and waste of disposable plastic straws in our communities,” has Milo steeping out of Ms. Smith’s classroom on a fairly frequent basis. You may have seen him on the CBS evening news, in the Boston Globe, or perhaps at a restaurant in your neighborhood speaking with the manager. Milo estimates he’s been interviewed at least 7 times since launching his project earlier this year, and has met with Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin, Shelburne Farms President Alec Webb, and a group of Fulbright Japan Fellows, among others.

Milo’s always quick to point out that he isn’t the straw police, and he isn’t out to shut down the straw industry or keep people from using straws if they want them. He’s really hoping to eliminate needless waste. Demonstrating his understanding of interdependence, he knows that making all the straws Americans use means jobs for many people. And he doesn’t want to put anyone out of a job. So, he is working with the straw industry to support a transition to alternatives to disposable straws. He’s also working with the restaurant industry to encourage an “ask first” policy, and he’s hoping all of us will consider going strawless.

Keep your eyes open: he’s got an NPR interview coming up and he’s working on a new design for an alternative disposable drink lid, which would eliminate the need for a straw. SSP’s Sarah caught up with Milo at school and was able to ask this headline-making activist a few questions.

Sarah: How did your project get started, Milo?

Milo: Well, we [my mother and I] were writing a food column for Kids Vermont and we noticed that if we didn’t ask, we got a straw. When you order a drink, it just comes with a straw. And we looked around and saw people taking their straws out of their drinks and not even using them. So, we did the research, and found out that five hundred million straws are used in the United States everyday. We contacted environmental groups and straw companies and added it up. It just seemed like such a waste.

Sarah: So, what are you trying to do?

Milo: Well, really what we’re trying to do is raise awareness. Every time you get a straw, whether you use it or not, it goes into the landfill. The average person, between the ages of 5-65, uses 40,000 plastic straws. They all go in the landfill.

Sarah: Who has signed on so far?

Milo: We’ve got individuals from 30 countries, 800 individuals. Schools in Canada and Malaysia and a school teacher in Australia who would like to start a similar program, so we’re going to try and help her with that. Leunig’s (a bistro in Burlington) has an offer policy, where the server will offer a straw, which is different than an ask first policy, where the customer has to ask for a straw. That’s the beauty of the project! The customers don’t even really notice!
Educating for Gross National Happiness
by Katherine Riley, writing from Paro, Bhutan

Katherine Riley is a teacher at Champlain Valley Union High School in Hinesburg, VT and is currently on a work study in Bhutan. Among other professional affiliations, Katherine is a Fellow of the K-12 and Teacher Education Sector of the US Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development.

I’m taking a week long break from living and teaching in a hillside monastery in eastern Bhutan to attend a 4-day teacher training on the other side of the country. Hot showers, soft pillows and a drastic reduction in my consumption of rice are some of the perks for having made the 4-day trip through the winding, bumpy roads of the lateral route. What brings me to Paro is the kick-off to a three-year program entitled "Transformative Education for GNH: A Teacher Action Research Project." It’s a joint venture between the Oulun Lyseon Lukio in Finland and Bhutan’s own Royal Education Council. For those of you unfamiliar with the Bhutanese concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH), it’s a government policy very much aligned with the ideals of sustainable development. GNH is a concept articulated by the fourth King Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1972 which seeks to measure the well-being of the country by looking beyond the purely financial. Instead, GNH considers what are termed the four pillars of wellness: environmental conservation, sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance. While these aren’t new concepts, what is different about this small Himalayan country is that these are the ideals that form the basis of government policy. These are the ideals that are in the forefront of discussions about the manner and pace of development. And while there is much debate and discussion about what GNH means and what it looks like within the framework of a rapidly modernizing Bhutan, the simple fact that these sustainability concepts are in the discussion on equal terms with economic considerations offers a hopeful alternative to a solely Gross Domestic Product approach to development.

In December of 2009, Bhutan hosted an international educational conference entitled "Educating for Gross National Happiness." According to the Ministry of Education’s website, the outcome of that conference was the agreement that Bhutan’s educational system "will effectively cultivate GNH principles and values, including deep critical and creative thinking, ecological literacy, practice of the country’s profound, ancient wisdom and culture, contemplative learning, a holistic understanding of the world, genuine care for nature and for others, competency to deal effectively with the modern world, preparation for right livelihood, and informed civic engagement.” To this end, the government is working to develop a country-wide rich and rigorous curriculum founded on GNH principles, making learning more relevant, thoughtful and aligned with sustainable practices.

This week’s teacher training is designed "to develop the capacity of teachers to develop and implement actions to promote GNH schools" and to meet the vision of the "Educating for GNH" project. The educators come from seven GNH Beacon Schools which are working to model GNH values on their school campuses as well as creating curriculum which will embed the lofty values and principles of GNH into the cultural consciousness of their students. In this way, the schools will become the vehicles of social transformation within Bhutanese society. And as the Minister of Education, Lyonpo Thakur S. Powdyel has stated, "the teachers hold the key to the success of our mission." And the group here in Paro certainly take this responsibility seriously. They take to heart the sentiment expressed by the Minister of Education at the opening of the 2009 Educating for GNH conference: "Today we attempt to link the present with the future and the living with the unborn. And the kind of...educational experience...that we provide to our younger generation will determine our success with our national vision. Today we are, in effect, affirming and asserting the claims of a nation’s dream on its educational system." Bhutan faces many challenges in this drive to ensure high student learning and achievement based on Bhutanese values. The education system is fraught with overcrowded classrooms,
electricity and water supply issues, a shortage of textbooks and highly trained teachers. Listening to this local group of twenty teachers and administrators, they are concerned about, among other things, building safety, quality and quantity of resource materials, and preparing their students for the national high stakes testing. In the rural east where I’ve been teaching, there are additional problems with adequate transportation to and from school and the costs associated with mandatory uniforms, notebooks and pencils.

Not ignoring the serious challenges faced by many Bhutanese schools, the "Transformative Education for GNH" training asks educators to focus on those areas in which they can directly affect change. They will leave this training ready to implement their action plans in their schools. And they’ll have ongoing support and direction from the Royal Education Council and their Finnish partners. Ultimately, the goal is for these trainings to take place in each of Bhutan’s twenty dzongkhags (administrative districts). And in this way, real nationwide educational transformation will take place.

"Transformative Education for GNH" is still a relatively new project. In Paro this week the impact of the project is very tangible. Many schools have incorporated meditation or mindfulness practices into the school day. I was particularly impressed by a group of pre-primary to 3rd graders standing silently in rows for sixty seconds on their first day of class in Thimphu. A number of elementary schools in the capital, led by the Early Learning Center, have joined the international "Design for Change" competition and have brought plastic free and/or no trash policies to their schools.

There are student-led clean drinking water campaigns and movements to stop doma spitting at holy sites and around school campuses. Paro’s own Khangkhu Middle Secondary School has implemented a GNH seventh period during which students take part in activities aligned with the goal of increasing awareness and understanding of the national policy. The Druk School has quarterly reports assessing GNH Social Traits such as whether a student is "responsible, humorous, compassionate, confident." These are filled out not only by teachers, but by parents and students as well. Such reports certainly create the potential for rich and meaningful conversations and deeper understandings of GNH.

Yesterday I had dinner with Sonam Wangdu, a nineteen year veteran teacher. She’s a busy wife and mother of three teenagers, teaching full time and working on a two year Master Teacher program. I asked her why she was interested in the GNH curriculum project on top of this other time consuming teacher training. She said that all of the work towards becoming a better teacher is aligned with GNH. She wants her students to hold onto the deeply held values that have served this unique, Buddhist kingdom so well. And she wants to help prepare them to confidently and thoughtfully participate as active players in the twenty-first century. As citizens of Bhutan and as citizens of the world.

The Royal Education Council, in collaboration with teachers and administrators, has compiled a long list of "Qualities of a GNH Graduate." Sonam’s vision seems very much aligned with the quality that caught my attention. A GNH graduate will be "conscious about our nature of interdependence and impermanence." As Bhutan works toward developing schools and national curriculum to meet such goals, I am hopeful that they are embarking on a course that will lead to the creation of a generation of even more mindful, far-sighted and compassionate citizens.

Photos courtesy Katherine Riley
Reflections on a Day of Service
By Sue Blair

On Tuesday, May 10, students at the Sustainability Academy, along with teachers, parents, neighbors, and community members participated in our Second Annual Day of Service. It was powerful to see every student in a school participating in meaningful service-learning projects: painting murals, building compost piles, cleaning up the campus, planting an ABC garden, building bat houses, painting rain barrels, replanting peace gardens, and so much more. Everywhere you looked children were busy making a difference.

Students decided it was important for our neighborhood and schoolyard to have animals and plants, to be clean, and to have safe places for kids to play. Students were interested in assessing and improving these aspects of our neighborhood and school community. Students then went on neighborhood walks to evaluate if the neighborhood and schoolyard were clean, had animals and plants, and safe places to play. Following the walks, students brainstormed projects the class could do on the Day of Service to meet the needs that they had uncovered on their walks. Students planned to create a shade garden that would provide a habitat for animals, to build two sandboxes for kids to play in (our school didn’t have any), and organized a neighborhood clean-up. The projects were completed on our Day of Service and the students were thrilled at the difference they made in our community.

“The sandboxes and gardens will make our schoolyard a better place for humans and animals, but the most important transformation is the students’ emerging awareness that they can make a difference.”

Instead of just learning about community helpers, students learned that “We All Can Be Community Helpers!” Students are excited to play in their new sandboxes, to water and take care of the garden they planted, and to keep our schoolyard clean. They shared their ideas, worked hard, and made a big difference. Their pride in their work is evident. The sandboxes and gardens will make our schoolyard a better place for humans and animals, but the most important transformation is the students’ emerging awareness that they can make a difference.

Sue Blair teaches Kindergarten at Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes Elementary School in Burlington, VT.
Photo Gallery—Day of Service at Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes Elementary School

On May 10, the students at Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes Elementary School participated in a school-wide Day of Service. Projects included gardening (ABC, Shade, and Peace Gardens), a campus clean-up, building of bat houses, creation of a Food Forest, painting of murals and rain barrels, and filming for a community-based documentary for new residents of the neighborhood. Read Sue Blair’s reflection (facing page) for more of the story. Photographer Andy Duback captured these images.
(Colleen Kent, continued from page 3)

He offered ideas about what the students could do, and the students were really excited about helping him out. They built a stage for the space on a Friday work day. The students are also involved in community gardens here in Burlington. Right now we’re doing a project with Grow Team ONE, which is a volunteer-run organization in (Burlington’s) Old North End. At their Riverside garden plot we’re helping to build a pavilion, shed, and rain catchment system. We’re using materials that were reclaimed from the site. It’s a great project because we’re working with a designer who is teaching us things as we’re going, and the sustainable building practices are integrated right into the work. The students understand the principle behind it, and that environmental stewardship is part of the mission of RESOURCE. They work directly with all the recycled materials coming in to the yard and then see a really beautiful final product, and can think back and see the transformation of the materials. They’re doing work, but they’re making pretty cool connections about living sustainably as well.

You used to work at Shelburne Farms as an apprentice with our Education Programs. How has your work with Shelburne Farms influenced your work with YouthBuild?

I think that my Shelburne Farms experience has led me to try to make my students more aware of food issues, environmental issues, and their connection to this place. One way that’s happened is that the Burlington School District Food Services, which is part of the Farm 2 School network, whose mission is to provide healthier local food products in school lunches, is providing our lunches. I’m using this relationship to help the students become more aware of where their food is coming from, and the people who are providing it—lunch is not just something that shows up here. We go and help out with the Farm 2 School Network’s Junior Iron Chef Competition to give back to the people that are providing us with food.

How did you get into this kind of work? Why do you do this work?

I have always been interested in working in an education setting. When I started working for Shelburne Farms I really enjoyed the agricultural education, working with young kids, and being constantly outdoors. But when I finished up my apprenticeship at the Farm, I was looking for an opportunity to work with less advantaged youth. I feel like my work with YouthBuild has expanded my view of education, and deepened my connection to how alternate education and public schooling works. The idea of being able to go out and do community service every Friday, to get deeply involved in the Burlington community and make connections with new people, and to do good things all around Burlington is so exciting. This work is really rewarding!