GVSU Community: Gifting the Love of Reading: One Classroom Library at a Time

Sheryl Vlietstra  
*Grand Valley State University, vlietssh@gvsu.edu*

Megan Freudigmann  
*Grand Valley State University, freudigm@gvsu.edu*

Forrest Clift  
*Grand Valley State University, cliftf@gvsu.edu*

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They say charity begins at home. And sometimes, a great idea for creating a charity or program begins in the same way. Such was the beginning of the Grand Valley State University College of Education Michigan Literacy Project.

Sheryl Vlietstra, Affiliate Professor in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University had a unique vision to support GVSU College of Education Alumni just starting out in the classroom. She had witnessed an outpouring of generosity that her own daughter, Kacy, received as she entered the world of teaching.

"[Kacy] went off to teach 4th grade in inner-city Chicago, [and] it became very apparent that she was given a big, empty classroom with no books and no financial resources to begin her own classroom library. Every cent she made went to rent, food and classroom expenses. Our hometown newspaper picked up on the story of 'small town girl making a difference in the big city' and before we could bat an eye, my garage was full of all kinds of used book donations from the small town community of Grand Haven, Michigan. We packed a trailer and loaded her classroom with over 1,500 books. That changed everything for her 4th graders! Reading attitudes and scores rose measurably and she had a little extra cash for her own life."
“Once they started getting the books in their hands, their faces started to light up and they became excited about all the new books they were going to be able to read.”
It was from this experience that The Grand Valley State University College of Education Michigan Literacy Project (MLP) was born. Vlietstra, along with her colleagues Megan Freudigmann, Affiliate Professor, and Forrest Clift, Associate Director of the Center for Educational Partnerships developed the mission and direction of the program designed to support GVSU COE Alumni. In 2013, the Michigan Literacy Project pilot program received a $2,500 grant from The Meemic Foundation, a non-profit organization of Meemic Insurance Company committed to supporting education excellence through funding programs and other partnership initiatives. This initial grant provided classroom libraries to six new teachers in six different underserved Michigan public school districts. Based on this initial pilot funding, former College of Education Dean Elaine Collins committed $1,000 per year for ten years to help offset the cost of purchasing quality libraries.

The mission of MLP is to “provide quality, multi-genre classroom libraries to recent Grand Valley State University College of Education graduates teaching in K-5 public school classrooms in underserved districts across the State of Michigan”.

Often when new teachers begin their careers, they are thrilled to be landing a first teaching job. They arrive with fresh ideas and new energy. Sadly, despite their idealistic outlooks and unstoppable drive, their jobs come with ill-equipped classrooms and little or no funding available—even for some of the basic tools necessary to provide a quality education to students. A beginning teacher career can be daunting, but when that new teacher is faced with paying for classroom basics, it can be downright overwhelming. This has never been more evident than in the acquisition of that most vital classroom resource—a diverse, grade-appropriate, multi-genre classroom library.

The Michigan Literacy Project team recognizes that quality children’s literature is essential to the successful implementation of classroom curriculum. Students can use their classroom’s library not only to reinforce their understanding of academic content, but in other ways, too. They can pursue their curiosities and gain access to a world beyond their circumstances and they can build the foundation for lifelong learning and better global understanding. Exposure to books in all genres can help foster a healthy love and respect for learning. Plus, MLP team members agree that exposure to these classroom libraries lays a critical groundwork. Curious and well-read students become Michigan’s next generation of socially responsible, forward-thinking, creative and skilled, workers and entrepreneurs. Research shows students need to spend a large amount of time reading in order to improve and hone their reading skills (Allington, 2001), what better place for children to have access to books than in their own classroom (Neuman, 1999; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002; Routman, 2003)?

What impact has the MLP classroom library had in your classroom?

The impact was enormous! My students were so excited to see the books delivered and couldn’t wait to get their hands on them to read. We had many books with waiting lists because they were in such high demand. Students this year have also become amazing readers this year because of the library. Without access to books it is hard to build literacy, but with the support of the MLP grant we have taken huge strides.

-Christina Brown—5th Grade-Coloma Public Schools
Despite the pivotal role classroom literature plays in supporting academic learning, it often takes new teachers several years of personal spending to develop a functional and varied classroom library. Additionally, given the barrage of administrative, instructional, and assessment demands placed on new teachers, the procurement of classroom texts most often falls by the wayside. This frustration knows no bounds since teachers in both urban and rural communities find these obstacles to be especially challenging.

Literature resources are shockingly sparse in underserved districts. That is why these districts became a target of focus for the Michigan Literacy Project. MLP provides new teachers in such districts with classroom libraries filled with quality children’s literature crucial to student learning and achievement.

The Project’s mission is supported by the simple fact that children learn to read by reading. What does this look like in a standard classroom? Teachers can promote students’ involvement with books by reading to their classes on a daily basis and by having students connect with books through the extensive use of classroom libraries. With hundreds of good books to read and time to read them, children will get on the right road to reading achievement (Neuman, 2001).

Since the initial pilot, the MLP program has slowly progressed and in 2014-2015 the team was able to use limited funds to purchase classroom libraries for four K-5 classrooms in the West Michigan area.

The goal of building on the successful first two years and expanding across the state by providing classroom library...
collections to 15 classrooms each year for the next 3 years became a reality this past summer. Beginning with the 2015/16 academic year, the MLP has secured a $20,000 grant gifted to the program by the Ronald McDonald House Charities of Outstate Michigan. “We look for grants that promote the health and wellbeing of children. Because this grant provides a tangible necessity, i.e. books, to help educate children through reading, it fit all of RMHC’s guidelines for awarding funds” says Lesa Dion, Executive Director-Ronald McDonald House Charities of Outstate Michigan.

How has the grant helped you?

The grant has allowed me to expand my classroom library so students will always have high interest books at their fingertips. These books allow me to successfully run my Reader’s Workshop program where students have high quality books that interest them. I cannot thank enough all those that have worked to make this grant possible. What they have done will have a positive impact on my students for years to come.

~Timothy Zinger—5th Grade-Mona Shores Public Schools

As the next three years pass, the MLP team will continue to seek GVSU COE alumni who are new teachers (teaching 3 years or less) in underserved Michigan public school districts all over the state. MLP applications will be available to qualified candidates and recipients will be chosen based on a scoring rubric designed to identify significant need within each school population. High priority will be given to schools with elevated poverty rates, limited district resources and poor academic achievement. Similarly, high

References


priority will be given to those teachers who exhibit a clear plan for implementing their classroom libraries.

Interviews:
We wanted to find out what the reaction and impact of the new classroom libraries made. Here are some responses from the recipient teachers.

Christina Brown—5th Grade Coloma Public Schools

What was your STUDENTS’ reaction to receiving all of the new titles for your classroom library?

My students were beyond excited, seeing the amount of the books and the titles they were excited to see. When I asked them to help me make the wish list, it was like nothing I had ever seen before. They couldn’t believe they were asked for input and that their input was actually meaningful! They were really excited to help sort and level the books – and they were really excited to brag to other kids about the awesome new books we had!!

Jamie Sanborn—2nd Grade-Fremont Public Schools

What IMPACT has it had in your classroom?

With more choices in the library, students were better able to find something they WANT to read about that was at their reading level.

Did any ONE comment or student reaction stand out from the others?

I had one student comment (the day we received the books): “This is the best day of my life!” I loved that!

Any other COMMENTS about the grant?

This is such a wonderful thing that you’ve begun. I was very blessed to be chosen as a library recipient and continue to be grateful for the generosity shown. I hope that you can continue to bless others in the same way!

Jean Estevez—1st Grade-Southwest Community Campus-Grand Rapids Public Schools

What was YOUR reaction to receiving the Classroom Library grant through the COE MI Literacy project?

Once I got over the initial shock, I was so grateful. I have put so much of my own money into my classroom, but it was never enough. As a first year teacher, the pay checks are small but the amount of money needed for books and supplies is outrageous. Books are the best gift that I could have received for my classroom. I am constantly trying to grow my classroom library and with Grand Valley’s help, my students have access to so much more quality literature than I could have provided them on my own.

What IMPACT has it had in your classroom?

My students have been able to read a wider variety of literature. They have also been able to find more books that are at their level, especially with the set of Bruce Larkin books. My students are excited to switch their books in their book boxes...they always want to be reading new stories! The library has also helped me promote the love of reading in my students.

Katie Lett—1st Grade ELL-Kentwood Public Schools

What was your STUDENTS’ reaction to receiving all of the new titles for your classroom library?

My students are immigrant/refugee students from all over the world. Their reaction to receiving hundreds of NEW books chosen just for them was breathtaking. They have the most beautiful hearts I have ever been blessed to know, and the cool thing is, they love to share the books with others.

Did any ONE comment or student reaction stand out from the others?

Upon receiving the books, one of my students exclaimed, “I wish the kids in the [refugee] camp could see this!”

Any other COMMENTS about the grant?

I just want to highlight again how amazing this grant is, not just for new teachers, but for generations of students. It just proves, yet again, how amazing Grand Valley is. Grand Valley isn’t just a University, but a family that truly cares about all of its members, even after they’ve moved on. I could not be more proud to have attended a University willing to go above and beyond to give back to the community. My students and I sincerely thank you all from the bottom of our hearts! May you all be blessed this year and always!
Applying for an MLP Classroom Library

1. Are you a Grand Valley COE graduate?
2. Have you been teaching 3 years or less in a non-chartered public school in Michigan?
3. Are you teaching in a general education elementary classroom (K-5)?
4. Are you teaching in an underserved district with limited resources?
5. Are you in need of quality children’s literature for your classroom?
6. Do you have a clear vision for how these books could be utilized to foster a love of literature in your own classroom?

If you answered, “YES” to all six questions, you are eligible to apply for a classroom library book grant provided by the Grand Valley State University College of Education Michigan Literacy Project. These grants recognize the importance of quality children’s literature being available in K-5 classrooms.

To apply, simply follow the link https://www.gvsu.edu/coe/MLP and complete the short application which asks for: your personal information; your teaching/school information; your need for classroom literature; and supporting rationale. All applications will be reviewed by a team of GVSU faculty/staff. Qualified candidates will be chosen based on specific criteria. Those selected as grant recipients will be contacted and will be asked for input regarding titles needed for their individual classrooms. Good luck!

Timothy Zinger—5th Grade-Mona Shores Public Schools

What was YOUR reaction to receiving the Classroom Library grant through the COE MI Literacy project?
I was amazed with not only the amount of books I received but also the variety of topics and genres. The books are high quality and many are hardcover, which will last for years to come. It has taken a lot of the pressure off of me having to always buy books for my classroom library, which is much appreciated.

What was your STUDENTS’ reaction to receiving all of the new titles for your classroom library?
They were ecstatic! When the books were unveiled from their bins and distributed for students to see, students erupted in smiles and chatter about what they wanted read and what books they have already read. The books brought new life to our classroom library.

Beth Ruhlman—1st Grade, West Godwin Elementary, Godwin Public Schools

What was YOUR reaction to receiving the Classroom Library grant through the COE MI Literacy project?
I was absolutely blown away when I received the Classroom Library grant! GVSU professors surprised me in the middle of teaching and delivered an amazing amount of books! I was speechless.

What IMPACT has it had in your classroom?
I can definitely see the love of books growing in my classroom. The students did not have a lot of non-fiction books and those are the ones I see them most interested in. I love that these books have really sparked their interest!

Did any ONE comment or student reaction stand out from the others?
I remember a student looking at me and saying, “Miss Ruhlman, we get to keep these in our classroom?!” Pretty cool feeling.

List of 2014-15 MLP Recipients

Allison Orth
2nd Grade Buchanan Elementary, Grand Rapids Public Schools

Anna Ball
Kindergarten West Godwin Elementary, Godwin Heights Public Schools

Brent Miller
2nd Grade Godfrey Lee ECC, Godfrey-Lee Public Schools

Erin Doughty
5th Grade Stocking Elementary, Grand Rapids Public Schools