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Jake Todd
William & Mary

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Reflections from a Preservice Teacher: Lessons on Collaboration

Jake Todd
William & Mary

If I were to update the classic John Donne quote according to my experience then I would declare, “No teacher is an island.” This was a truism that I seriously considered every day as I shut the door and the bell rang because it is easy to feel this way. *Here I am. It’s just me. Me and this ocean of students before me. How this class will go depends on my performance. If a problem develops, I must find a solution.* This is a trap. This was my trap.

However, this theory of my own isolation broke down at one critical barrier: the life of the individual student. I found out very quickly students did not step into my classroom from a vacuum; therefore, it was foolish of me to begin to address their issues in a vacuum. A boy enters my class sobbing because of his parents’ divorce; an A student begins to fail my class for no apparent reason; I find out a student in my

AP class has the reading level of an elementary schooler; two brothers tell me that they can’t do online assignments because their internet bill hasn’t been paid for months. These are all examples of issues that did not begin in my class, and their solutions had to be found outside of my class; yet, they all drastically affected my class.

My first lesson is to not be afraid to ask, but do ask. It was not long before I realized that I needed help from my colleagues and my community, not because I was a novice teacher, but simply because I was a teacher. I must admit I was incredibly nervous to ask at first. Everyone in the school building appeared to be busy all of the time, and I knew they were because I was busy all of the time and I wasn’t even a full-time employee. All it took was asking one person to realize that my fears were misguided. Yes, everybody in your school building will be incredibly busy, but if you ask for help about a student most people will drop what they are doing and provide you with the resources and support you may need. Almost everyone in that school building is there because they genuinely love and care about students. However, if you do not make an effort to ask, then everyone will continue to make their copies, plan their lessons, attend their meetings, all the

while you are struggling with what to do about a student's needs.

My second lesson is to find out who to ask, fast! Even when I mustered up the courage to ask for assistance, knowing what resources were available in my school and in my community took some investigating. I had to ask my colleagues in the Social Studies Department and search the school website, but I was almost always able to find an answer. Establishing a relationship with the right resource or person can completely change a situation in which you find yourself struggling. At the beginning of the year, many of my behavioral and/or academic issues came from my football players. Once I obtained the name and number of the football coach, those problems disappeared almost overnight; when playing time is threatened, a football player will shape up quickly! I got to know the reading specialist who was able to direct me to resources about content literacy that I had not been able to find before, and she was also willing to pull out some of my students for individual practice. It took some humility on my part, but I finally realized that I was not always the best person to "reach" a particular student.

Collaboration was not always easy or effective in every situation, but it was almost always necessary.

Once my island began to sink, all it took was me reaching out my hand to find one reaching right back.