[Positive Youth Development at the Center of the High School Experience](#)

Education Disruption Podcast

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Rachel: [00:00:00] We left traditional public school-

Josh: -where too many kids were dropping out-

Rachel: -or graduating unprepared for life.

Josh: We founded a school that puts students at the center.

Rachel: We knew these students and families didn't want to give up.

Josh: Too many students were being failed by the system.

Rachel: So we designed our own system-

Josh: -and created a school, our students deserve.

Rachel: My name is Rachel.

Josh: My name is Josh and this-

Rachel: -is *Education Disruption*.

Josh: Hello, and welcome to another episode of *Education Disruption*, I'm Josh.

Rachel: I'm Rachel.

Josh: We're here talking about positive youth development.

Rachel: [00:00:30] Positive youth development is one of those things that sounds like it's complicated because it has that feel of jargon, but in the end, positive youth development often shortened into PYD or just youth development often is the theory around which most of Map Academy honestly rotates.

That is that as for all students, but in **[00:01:00]** particular youth who have had difficulties in other contexts benefit first and foremost, from a consistent approach from the adults in their lives, especially at school, and that that consistent approach needs to put them at the center. It

essentially has four components to it. Positive youth development is a theory that says that students benefit when we hold them to high expectations, **[00:01:30]** when we support them in developing, caring, and trusting relationships, when we provide them with a range of engaging learning experiences, and when we give them lots of opportunities to have input and to contribute into their education.

Josh: Like Rachel mentioned with the idea that it's consistent and in the context of Map Academy, that consistency is oftentimes Map Academy for our students. A lot of times outside of **[00:02:00]** school, their personal situations lead themselves to very inconsistent lives outside of school. Their one consistent is their experience at Map Academy.

As we really focus as a whole staff on bringing positive youth development to the forefront in a consistent manner, that is really important to our student population, that they know when they can expect every day that we are going to try our **[00:02:30]** hardest to hold those key tenets of positive youth development.

Rachel: It can be hard because PYD calls for us to see each student as an individual, but at the same time, hold them to standards that are common in the sense that in that is in some ways the tension, because as we've talked about before Map Academy is specifically designed to serve students who have an array of **[00:03:00]** complications in both their school and outside lives.

The biggest single thing that they need from us as **[unintelligible 00:03:07]** is consistency, but they also need us to hold them to high standards because it is those high standards that are going to change the trajectory for them, from where they are now to where they're trying to go. That is really hard because when you're working with students that are struggling and you are an empathetic person, which if we've done our hiring right, every person that crosses, every **[00:03:30]** adult that crosses through the threshold of Map Academy as a staff member is by nature empathetic.

It is tricky sometimes when you are an empathetic human to not have sympathy on students who are struggling. Then that sympathy, which is a good thing very often is a slippery slope to lowered expectations. That is the real place in which traditional alternative high school **[00:04:00]** programming and much of education in general, I would argue is where we fail students because if we lower our expectations, even a little, we are saying that they're not capable of more. In the end, we are not going to have the desired effect of changing the path for the student beyond their time with us.

Josh: Those high expectations are individualized down to the student level because as we mentioned in a previous **[00:04:30]** episode, that we are an asynchronous, competency-based, and blended instructional model, which allows us the flexibility to really individualize a student's experience, so that if a student really is having a difficult time outside of school, that we can really focus on that particular student's social, emotional needs, but where the rest of the class isn't moving forward at a pace in which, so now this student **[00:05:00]** has this difficult experience going on outside of school and they know that, "Okay, well, the whole class is moving on without me," which is causing even more anxiety.

Rachel: Or that we're feeling sorry for a student and pushing them along when they've missed that. Here it is a question of being able to be flexible enough to hold the student accountable while also supporting them. That's the sweet spot of PYD--to be able to hold this unit accountable for

growth, **[00:05:30]** and at the same time, wrap them with the supports that they need to be able to continue to grow. Those supports have to be scaffolding that are intended to meet them where they are, wrap them in bubble wrap sort of, and ensure that they keep going on the road to progress without crossing that line to say, "This is all the student is capable of because X, Y, and Z that's happening in their lives," because **[00:06:00]** if we do that, and we can do that in the moment, we can say, "Let's pause on that important thing, that geometry or that writing assignment or that science lab report."

We can push pause on that and say, "Not right this minute, that's not the right time for that," and that's where the blended asynchronous platform comes in because the student can re-engage with that academic work where they left off when they're ready. We're not going to just say, "You do this packet of **[00:06:30]** make-up work or do this worksheet, and you're going to get a D-, and we're going to move you on." Because that leads to a culture of caring on the surface, but that caring is actually a curse because that caring is essentially meaning that students are moving forward with the skills that they need.

Josh: That ability to press pause, and that ability for a student to seek the support they need to make progress and eventually graduate from high school, prepared for life **[00:07:00]** after high school, we believe is a model in which is preparing students for life after high school, much better than a traditional model in which a whole class is moving at the same pace based on their birthday.

Rachel: It honestly has so many ripple effects because if you take it from all the different lenses that from an academic lens, but you could also take it from an engaging experiences lens. A lot of times in an American education, students who are struggling with whatever, low math scores, bad **[00:07:30]** attendance, behavior issues, the first thing to go is the engaging experiences--like the kid who's an elementary school, who's acting up, loses recess. The kid who is failing too many classes gets kicked off the soccer team, or can't participate in the field trip.

Again, we talk a lot about well-meaning systems and structures and well-meaning policies. The intent there is obviously from an adult perspective to try to teach the kid **[00:08:00]** to stop misbehaving, do their work and show up to school. The reality is that engaging experiences from a youth development lens, engaging experiences need to be part of the fabric. The more the kid is struggling, the more they need the engaging experiences, because the engaging experiences are part of that stable system that allows the foundation to be built upon which the kid can actually grow.

Josh: It's during those engaging experiences where the caring and trusting **[00:08:30]** relationships have really come to life, when they have a chance to see the teachers step back from the everyday teaching and from the content, and really just have a chance to get to know the kid. The kid has a chance to get to know the adults so that they can form a relationship with one another.

Rachel: Which is another foundation that leads to the ability to re-engage with the academics at the high standards that are necessary for post-secondary success. It really is like the lines between of these things are dotted, if you picture a web. They have **[00:09:00]** to all happen, but they can't. They in a way have to all happen at the same time, which is the really nuanced part of this is that there isn't a script that says, you're going to do this number of things and then you're going to get

this, and then that's going to lead to this other thing. Then you're going to be on this like straight-line pathway. It's much messier than that.

Josh: While allowing the student to have input into all of these things, because it's really, at the end of the day, what is going to prepare a high school student for life after high **[00:09:30]** school is having the student have the ability to make decisions and provide input into their own education. That's the whole point of high school, we think that students need to get the skills for life after high school.

Rachel: That student input, obviously it's great, when that student input is positive input, like they're expressing an interest in something, and we are providing that opportunity or they're advocating for themselves and asking for help. Teachers are responding to that, but student input honestly can also be negative. **[00:10:00]** That is to say that if a student is not interested, or isn't disengaging, or refusing to participate, or refusing to complete work, that to some extent the learning comes from the natural consequences of that negative input and that is hard because that means **[unintelligible 00:10:18]**. We talked about patience on our previous episode, that right there is incredibly challenging.

It is also nuanced because if we talk a lot here about this, **[00:10:30]** that effort leads to progress, which is obviously again, not rocket science, that if you work hard, there will be pay off. At Map Academy, that's really true because students can move through academics at their own pace and they can earn credits when they finish things. They learn that correlation between, "I worked really hard and I saw a positive result," but conversely, for students who are not working really hard and they're not seeing positive results, that is a lesson too. It also requires a lot of effort from adults **[00:11:00]** to work on shoring up those relationships and the engagement that will ultimately turn the tide so the kids see the value.

Josh: Some people may see that as given in to the student, but here at Map Academy, we really view that as, "No, the student voted with their feet and with their actions," they're giving their input. They may not know how to express it in a way that we as adults would really like the student to express it, but they expressed it **[00:11:30]** by not doing what we asked them to do. If you just take a step back and realize that student is really trying to say that this particular teacher and this particular group of students just is not working.

Rachel: With this situation or this task or this, whatever it is. Yet at the same time, we're talking about adolescents and they need boundaries from us, and that's why there's always that like flip side to this work, because at the same time, as that's true, they need us to say, "No, you're going to do that and you're going to do it right now," and there are moments for that. **[00:12:00]**

I had one earlier today where like, no, actually I said, "I want you to do that. I meant it and you're going to do it and you want to do it now because you've wasted all day, and it's time to do it," but that is very selectively applied here because if that's the norm in other places, is that that's always the case. It's sort of like that constantly. It's knowing students so deeply that we know when to push and when not to push. Then, when we know when the student needs us more than anything to give them a boundary.

That is work **[00:12:30]** that takes a lot of time, which is why we spend so much of our staff development time on PYD. We always will. It's not the kind of thing you can cover in an in-service and then not have to deal with anymore because it's constantly coming up with new examples in

practice because those examples of like you can't--there's no script. I can't say, "Okay, well, push this--" The reality becomes it's in this situation with this student, we're going to push and in this situation with that student, we're not going to push and then in this situation with a different student. **[00:13:00]** It really comes back round to understanding and having a core set of values that say that we believe that all students can achieve at high levels, and having a core value that says that it's on us to be patient and flexible enough to make that happen.

Then it's on us as adults to check our egos at the door and recognize that we're putting the student at the center of the work, which means that as much as it's incredibly frustrating sometimes to let adolescents wander their way, **[00:13:30]** we have to do it sometimes because that's the only thing that keeps them around long enough for us to continue to do the work we need to do to make them better.

Josh: To us. If you're listening to this, you probably have some interest in disrupting the status quo of traditional education. To us that all sounds like common sense. We believe that is the way that every high school should be while at the same time, because we do have experience working in traditional high schools as well, knowing that **[00:14:00]** those well-meaning systems can't adapt the way that we can here at Map Academy A, because we had the really fortunate opportunity to start from scratch and open a school in 2018 meant for 2018, not follow century-old systems and approaches, but also we're a small school.

We will always be a small school because, in order to really bring PYD to life and create that flexible learning experience that we believe is preparing students for life after high school more **[00:14:30]** meaningfully, it has to be small. We need to be able to know every kid's name. We need to be able to know every kid's situation. We need to--

Rachel: The back story, the current story, the academic skill weaknesses, like the complete profile that goes into understanding why we're doing what we're doing when we're doing it, which is why most schools don't do it this way. Most schools don't do it this way because to have that shared knowledge base, to have the time for, and the other thing that the biggest **[00:15:00]** foundational piece that allows us to continue to hold high expectations is the fact that we use an asynchronous academic platform.

We keep coming back around to that, but the idea that the kid can re-engage with high-quality academics at any time, essentially year-round, essentially any time of the day, and from any place that they have internet access. They can re-engage or continue to engage with their academics. I don't have to worry here like I used to that if I'm having **[00:15:30]** a conversation with a student about something important, or I'm letting them take a break or where we're letting them go next door to the Boys and Girls Club to do some community service or to play basketball for a while, or that I don't have to worry that while they're doing that, they're missing a really important lesson in US history.

That means that they're not going to be able to move forward without the teacher reteaching that lesson, because that lesson is waiting for them when they're done with whatever else it is. From a youth development perspective on linking all components **[00:16:00]** from time is the most powerful thing that we have going for us here.

Josh: Which in 2019, with all the technology we have available, it is ridiculous to think that a student's learning has to occur in one classroom with one adult, with one group of students based

on the year that they were born. We can leverage technology in a way that allows for that learning to **[00:16:30]** take place anytime and anywhere.

Rachel: I think it comes back around always to the vision that every student can do it and every student deserves for us to figure out how to help them get there because one of the biggest misconceptions about PYD and one of the biggest danger zones **[00:17:00]** is in training adults to really be in tune with what's going on with a student.

We talk a lot about trauma here. We're completely or try to be a trauma-informed environment from all lenses, but that doesn't mean we talk about trauma all the time. It doesn't mean that at every lens that's always about the trauma or that, or it doesn't mean that, because in the end if we're saying, "This kid's been through a lot," **[00:17:30]** the story's crazy, or these horrible things have happened to a student.

Then our response to that is to expect less of them, that culture of low expectations is exactly what the student doesn't need because it makes it hopeless and the kid senses that. It's the same with over modifying the work like there are students--We have a huge percentage of our students close to 60% of our students have special education plans, IEPs. **[00:18:00]**

A lot of accommodations need to happen based on students' learning differences and based on diagnoses. There's lots of reasons in very nuanced ways that we need to modify academic content, but over modifying academic content, the point of modifications is to allow students to access the curriculum, not to make it easier for them, because if we're making it easier or we're exempting them from things or making excuses in our mind or feeling bad for them, that is that that's the worst possible thing that we could do. **[00:18:30]** It's hard when you train adults to care and notice all these things and be an environment in which we are paying attention to students. We're asking them to develop these caring relationships. Then at the same time, we're saying, "Yes, it's caring, but I still expect you to do what you need to do. I still expect you to do that hard math to work through that hard science problem."

Josh: But knowing the kids as closely as we know the kids through those caring and trusting **[00:19:00]** relationships, gives us a little bit more insight into, "You know what, maybe this student isn't doing this particular assignment because their reading level is currently way below what the assignment is calling for." Yes, you can expect that student to not want to do that assignment.

You can expect that student to probably pretty loudly refuse to do that assignment because they feel embarrassed that they can't read the assignment, but being a small school **[00:19:30]** and having that knowledge and being able to actually know, "Okay, you know what, now I realize why that student isn't doing this particular assignment," but instead of just feeling bad for the student that they're reading behind grade level while pushing them on because they might be a little bit of a pain. We're saying, "You know what, we're going to help fill those gaps in an asynchronous manner. The rest of the class is not going to move on. You're going to move at your own pace so that we can help you fill those gaps."

Rachel: The rest of the elements of youth development are the things that give the kids the foundation to do that hard work of getting better at their academic skill deficits. When kids have complicated lives, they often have interrupted school histories. The vast majority of our students have had or currently have issues with school attendance. The more time we all have the research shows that the more time students miss, the more likely they are to have skill gaps.

The only way to attack those skill gaps is for students to feel **[00:20:30]** confident and engaged and the only way for them to be confident and engaged is to develop those relationships and give them voice and all of those things. That's the cool thing about youth development, once you internalize it, is that it, at every turn, those four components of youth development inform the decision-making because at every turn they lead you right back to where you started, which is with the student.

That's the beautiful thing about it because those are all things that if you've talked to**--[00:21:00]** I think that the crazy and really helpful part about PYD is that in isolation, they're pretty much, everyone's going to agree. You're not going to find educators who say, "No, students shouldn't have caring and trusting relationships," or "No, we shouldn't have high expectations," or "No, we shouldn't provide engaging experiences," or "No, we shouldn't allow students to have input into their learning," and yet at so many levels, those four things do not exist in traditional education systems.

Josh: Or they do but it's for everyone.

Rachel: There is a light bulb or for some. Right, they exist for some, in some cases with some parameters or under some circumstances. That's the part that's so beautiful, once the light bulb goes off, is that you're taking the mindset that's generally prevalent in anyone who goes into education, but you're tightening it up to say that, yes, these things all have to exist, but you have to do it in a way that's consistent that you're doing it every day for every kid.

Then the flip side to that and the hard part is that even though the consistency doesn't equal equality or policy, it equals the consistency of those four things happening, which is very different than the consistency as in, this is what we do every day because this is what we do every day, which is definitely not.

Josh: How do you train **[00:22:30]** staff to really deliver an asynchronous, blended, PYD driven-

Rachel: Trauma-informed.

Josh: -trauma-informed, not-time-bound model of education, which is a lot to do to train a staff to do that. It's really around that. We do a lot of talking as a whole staff **[00:23:00]** on the mindset of the staff member that is yet to work at Map Academy.

Rachel: I think that comes back to previous conversations around how we staff, and who we bring here, and so you can start to see the threads of all of this. I think the really cool thing about what we've been able to do is because we've built the **[00:23:30]** flexibility in two things. It can all take root and people, adults can also grow asynchronously and they can also grow in ways that--and that's really important actually, in terms of how you help adults do this work is that you have to approach staff development and coaching of staff in an individualized way too.

You have to expect just like students, we just that, that idea of like one step forward, just two steps back, and then **[00:24:00]** you slide. It's the same with staff, because they think they know they figured it out. Then in that moment, because you have to understand that when you're doing all this work, and then the adult is a human too. As much as we want adults to check their ego at the door, at the same time, they're human. Things will bother on different times or different days, and you don't always see the immediate results that you're hoping for.

Sometimes you think you figured it out and then all of a sudden something happens and you're like, "Oh, I thought I had that kid figured out and then this thing happened and **[00:24:30]** it made me question everything." As leaders, PYD involves us having those same flexible mindsets around how our staff develop. That can be hard because there isn't really a lot of room for error. Yet at the same time, I say that a lot, it is always, if it's a work in progress, then it can always get better.

I think not only are the students works in progress but so are the adults. As hard as it is **[00:25:00]** to be patient, and sometimes it's harder to be patient with adults than it is with students, but if it's a work in progress, then it can get better.

Josh: All right. That's been another episode of *Education Disruption*. If you enjoyed the show, or have feedback, please go ahead and leave us a rating.

Rachel: We'd love for you to share this podcast with friends or colleagues in education that you think might be interested in our show.

Josh: We're both on Twitter, we can be reached @CharpentierJosh.

Rachel: @RachelBabcock.

Josh: We've also put the **[00:25:30]** handles in the description and we'd love to connect over there.

Rachel: To learn more about our school, you can visit our website at themapacademy.org, or you can check us out on Facebook or Instagram.

Josh: Thanks for listening. We'll be back next week with another episode of *Education Disruption*.

[00:25:50] [END OF AUDIO]