



MAP ACADEMY

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[Episode 26: Trauma-Informed Practice is Key to Student Growth](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*. In this season, we'll be continuing hearing stories from Map Academy, an alternative high school in Massachusetts that reengages students in their education. We'll hear stories directly from students about how their journey towards a high school diploma was affected by issues like substance use, housing insecurity, or just the pitfalls of our current education system. We'll also be hearing from Map Academy's staff about how they work to help students overcome these issues and how their approach to high school **[00:00:30]** education is different.

Today, we're going to talk to Mike Balaschi, wraparound co-lead and social worker at Map Academy, and Jade, a student at Map. Jade had struggled at her previous school and came to Map for something different. Mike talks about the first time meeting Jade at Map Academy.

Mike: When we first met Jade, she was really just putting up a massive wall, a front if you will, and she was comfortable with that front and that person she was pretending to be. A lot of kids **[00:01:00]** come in, in a place where they feel like they can't be vulnerable, but I think she came in and had a mask on, if you will. It took a lot of time for her to let that guard down and let the wall down.

Nick: Jade knew she needed a change, but starting at Map, she realized there were bigger issues she needed to deal with, other than just her academics.

Jade: When I came to Map, I didn't do anything for like two years. I did nothing, and I didn't want to do anything. I didn't want to **[00:01:30]** succeed. I didn't feel the need that I needed my diploma until it just clicked in my head that you can't do anything... you can, but you can't do a lot of things without your diploma. I needed to work towards helping myself and bettering myself, so I had to work on my anxiety first before anything. Otherwise, my anxiety was probably the one thing that ruined school **[00:02:00]** for the whole 13 years of my life.

Nick: For students that are new to Map Academy, it can sometimes be a slow process in understanding that the staff are actually willing and well-equipped to work on these issues. But, as Mike explains, breaking down the walls can take some time.

Mike: The tough part about a wall like that is finding the balance between getting them to trust us, as staff, enough to be emotionally vulnerable, as well as academically vulnerable. For Jade, in particular, I think it was **[00:02:30]** getting her to buy into taking a couple steps back in order to

take many more steps forward. Once you get kids to buy into that, you see some of the serious demons that they're struggling with, some of the trauma that they've experienced that they open up to a select few.

Nick: Jade's past trauma and her resulting anxiety all contributed to her rocky relationship with school.

Jade: It was like anxiety caused from [00:03:00] past stuff. It would build up, and then I would get angry at teachers, and now it's like to a point where I don't like being mad at a teacher. I feel like it's disrespectful. Otherwise, when I was always disrespecting teachers, I didn't care for how they felt. I didn't care at all. Now, I generally know you're not supposed to. They're trying to help you. They're not here to attack you, so I can't just come [00:03:30] at their neck all the time, and that's another thing I had to learn, too.

Mike: She would just come to my doorway and saying to my door, "I'm going to drop out." That was her way of being like, "I'm not feeling good, this is not the way I pictured it, I don't want to be here, I don't want to do all this." Whereas like another school might have been like, "No, no, no, don't drop out." Sometimes I was like, "All right, let me get the paperwork started." It can lighten up the situation. She's like, "You know that I don't want to do that." I'm like, "Obviously, I know that you don't want to do that." Then we move right onto [00:04:00] whatever it is that... that real issue that she was dealing with was academically, at home, it's all different.

Jade: I needed time to realize by myself that I needed to do things for me and not for the people around me. Then I just came to the conclusion that I need to get up, I needed to get a job, I need to make money, I need to save up for college, and I need to save up for a car, and I need to work towards my license in [00:04:30] order to get where I need in life, especially if I want to be a vet tech. I can't do that if I don't accomplish my goals.

Nick: Dealing with these deeper issues is how Map Academy re-engages students, and actually helps them move forward with their academic goals.

Mike: Nobody can learn, you can't retain information if you're not in a good enough place emotionally to stay focused and be engaged. I think specifically for someone like Jade, at a typical high school, [00:05:00] she might've dropped out. At Map Academy, the competency-based approach allows us to say, "Let's put academics aside for a little bit to be able to work on you as a person."

Jade: That's one thing people don't realize, because if I'm anxious, I can't do work. I won't be able to do it, I'll get overwhelmed, I'll get very stressed out. They know that, and they worked on that. So every time they noticed that I'm anxious, mad, or upset, they don't force me to do work. They [00:05:30] pretty much just let me sit there for however long I want to or need to, and just get back to it on my own. Sometimes it takes me five minutes. It used to take me at least three hours to go back to do my work, but it takes me probably at least five minutes, and then I'm just like, "All right, I'm just going to do my work and get it done and over with," instead of ripping it up like I used to, which was pretty funny. [chuckles]

Mike: Behind the scenes especially with Jade, I think she really connected to myself and Rachel and a couple of specific teachers. [00:06:00] She eventually got to a point where it was so tough for her outside of school that she broke down and trusted us, and because we were able to be

there for her emotionally through her mental health struggles, there were a lot of mostly anxiety for her, social anxiety, we caught her when she fell and started from a new slate.

Nick: Building trusting relationships with school staff is key to a student's success. And for Jade, she talks about [00:06:30] how having a person like Mike at school directly contributed to her growth.

Jade: I think just talking to Mike and working on my anxiety and working on my anger – but mostly my anxiety, because that's what triggered a lot of it. Then finally, when we just kept working towards it... it's just the more I matured, and it's just the more better I became at expressing myself and [00:07:00] not being out of control anymore. I never trusted him like that before. I thought he was just this counselor who was just like another person who was going to give up on me in my life, until he really understood how I felt through every situation. He was able to really understand why I was having anxiety and why I acted the way I did, because of my past trauma, and he was the first person to ever [00:07:30] really get that ever. That's when we began to work on it. At first, it was a lot of disagreements because I was immature. Otherwise, now I'm just... different – matured, I guess.

Mike: Jade, yes, did not believe that teachers were truly invested in her as a person and viewed her that way. [00:08:00] She did not believe that she could graduate. She did not believe that she was going to be able to move forward and have her own life. She did not believe that she was going to be able to be in control of her anxiety. All these things that we helped her do really on her own, because we sit back and, like I said, redirect and give ideas and suggestions and let her make the decisions. Her view was that no one [00:08:30] truly cared about her. Coming from a background of the environment that she grew up in, that's understandable.

Jade: My mom, obviously, she left us. She didn't care about anything but drugs and literally alcohol. She just didn't want her kids anymore, so it just came to a point where we all had to grow up ourselves. We had to teach ourselves pretty much [00:09:00] everything, we had to cook for ourselves. Even though my dad was around, he was an alcoholic at the time too, so it didn't take him probably till about I was 9 years old to get better until I went to a foster home, and then he realized that he needs to do what's good for his kids. Then he finally got himself together, and he did what was best for his kids, but it just sucks because growing up in that timeline of having a toxic mom, [00:09:30] especially when they were together, they made each other so toxic. That's like pretty much what I grew up to. Now that me my dad grew up to have no bond, we don't get along. There's a lot of differences in the family, and there could have been so many things that could have been fixed if things just didn't happen the way they did.

Nick: Trauma awareness is an important part of Map Academy's approach. To have students be able to open up and tell their stories, [00:10:00] actively work on their mental health, and deal with some of the serious issues they may be facing in their lives outside of school – it directly affects a student's ability to succeed.

Mike: We're not a therapeutic school, but we do have a very trauma-focused approach. I think for someone like Jade to be able to work on that now and then do some work in that new mindset, it's going to allow her to be successful in life. Because she was able to develop [00:10:30] those skills and that patience and figure out a bit of who she was – it sets them up for success in the long term

well beyond Map Academy. I think that really allowed her to start to assume good things, start to proactively predict that people were acting for their own selfishness, not to tear her down.

When she's able to make that separation, then she can really look inward and focus on herself and feel like she did have a chance, **[00:11:00]** meet people that actually cared about her and wanted her to do well and not get dragged down by people that were maybe bringing some drama and negativity into her life. It's really empowering them to make the right decisions to create an environment outside of school that is much like school in the way that you're surrounding yourself with people that are saying, "Yes, you can," to the point where they believe that they can.

Nick: [00:11:30] And Jade's work paid off. She's graduating high school. We asked how she's feeling about graduation.

Jade: It's so overwhelming to me because it's such a big step in my life, getting a diploma.

Mike: Jade, in particular, like her resilience skyrocketed. One small thing could set her back for a long time where she would not engage, and it got to the point where something that would maybe **[00:12:00]** cause us to not see her for weeks at all at school was now — she was bouncing back within a 10-minute conversation before she left. That was all on her own, rather than us talking her out of it. That's where you see that investment of time pay off over a three-year period, because we found that balance between time and emotional growth and academics. It lasted three years, and it's so much more sustainable than it would've been if we didn't take that time.

Jade: [00:12:30] I feel like a lot of people doubted me to ever become a better person in my life. It's going to be weird, but it's going to be a good feeling proving them all wrong — that I could do it regardless, no matter what.

Mike: Back in the day when she would come in and say, "I don't know what to do," she didn't want to take any chances or have to talk to people or be told no. She's going out there and getting jobs and looking for apartments and making phone calls and doing all these things on herself, on her own by herself.

Nick: [00:13:00] Jade told us one of the most important lessons she learned along the way on this journey.

Jade: It took me till I was probably about 18 to realize that you need to love yourself, Jade. You need to love yourself, and you need to not care what anyone else thinks. Regardless of anyone's feelings or anything, you got to do what's best for yourself. At the end of the day, it's coming down to you. That's one really, really big thing that I've learned **[00:13:30]** and very proud that I learned because I used to hate myself. Otherwise, if I didn't learn that, I'd probably still hate myself to this day and wouldn't even be sitting on this chair, pretty much.

Nick: Thank you for listening to another episode of *Education Disruption*. We also want to thank Jade for taking the time to talk to us, tell us her story, and being so **[00:14:00]** open with us. We wish her all the success, and congratulations on your graduation, Jade.

If you want to find out more about Map Academy, you can head to themapacademy.org, to see videos from the students and hear more about the Map Model. My name is Nick Tetrault, our editor is Susie Blair, our executive producer is Kristen Hughes, and this is Hairpin production.

[00:14:25] [END OF AUDIO]