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[Episode 37: When Creativity is Encouraged, Learners Reconnect With Their Passions & Goals](#)

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Nick: Welcome back to *Education Disruption*. In this season, we're talking to students of Map Academy just before they become official high school graduates. As a graduation requirement, students were tasked with reflecting on their journey towards graduation, their struggles, lessons they've learned, and their accomplishments. Today we'll hear from Jayden.

Jayden: Hi, I'm Jayden, I'm 18, and I'm a graduate at Map Academy.

Nick: Before we talk to Jayden about his high school experience, let's hear his written reflection on how art became a powerful tool for his mental health. **[00:00:30]**

Jayden: When I was in 4th grade, I had a teacher that I really liked. I wanted to make her something, so I worked really hard on a drawing for her. I don't remember what it was, but I remember that she really liked it, and the class liked it too. Everyone complimented it and told me it looked really good. My teacher hung it on the wall, even, and it made me feel honored. This moment matters because it's where my confidence in drawing started to grow.

I started drawing when I was four years old and I became really serious with my drawing in freshman year of high school so I was probably about 14. I started to take drawings seriously. In middle school, **[00:01:00]** I would mostly draw in my basement in the house. The basement was a nice place. It had a lot of rocks, concrete, and it was in New Bedford. The cold concrete ground always smelled like mildew and the room smelled like incense with posters everywhere. I liked drawing down there because it was very private compared to what I have now.

I started drawing for fun, then in the long run, it helped me with my mental health. Sometimes I would get in my own head by saying it's not good enough. One day I came home from school and I was upset and ended up ripping up my old artwork. I wish I didn't do that so I can look back on the progress on how far I've come.

[00:01:30] This is a coping mechanism for me when I feel anxious or depressed. I draw art to relief stress. There are other coping skills out there and I hope there's one for everyone else.

Art really makes me happy and it takes my mind to a place that I can't go anywhere unless I'm actually drawing because I'm so focused. I am horrible with concentrating. Even when it comes to schoolwork or just talking to people, I zone out, but when it comes to art, I'm always having my head in the game and I'm always working. I do struggle with depression **[00:02:00]** and anxiety and

found it as an outlet to really help me and get... I don't know how to describe it. It just makes me feel so good. Especially after I create a piece, especially if it took days or even a month. I'll look at it and be like, "Wow, I actually did that."

Nick: Before finding Map Academy, there were a number of things that led Jayden to thinking he might not even graduate high school.

Jayden: I used to go to high school in Fall River. Terrible school. Teachers don't care, the students don't care, I had people throwing trash at me in the hallway, I had people swearing at me [00:02:30] and bullying me, so I was like, "I got to get out of here because I may end up dropping out if I stay in that school." It wasn't because I didn't want to do the work. It was how I was treated. That's why I had such a hard time focusing and even wanting to go to school.

I'd fight with my grandmother every morning in going to school. I've lived with my grandma since I was four months old. I basically count her as my mother. Obviously, I still connect with my mom, but my grandma is a really important person to me because she raised me, my brother, and my sister, and my nephew so she's been through a lot. We bicker here and there, [00:03:00] we argue but I always apologize after because I would hate to see something happen and to live with that regretful feeling because I said the wrong thing. I try to do that with everyone else because I say the wrong thing to a lot of people but I don't mean it. I hope people understand that.

Nick: It's pretty clear that from how Jayden talked about being treated in his old school, to how he even talks about talking to his own grandmother, that he believes words matter and how we treat each other matters. Knowing this, [00:03:30] we wanted to know what made Map Academy different and what led Jayden to success at Map Academy?

Jayden: Definitely the teachers and the way I was spoken to. When I asked for help, I wouldn't get attitude because they helped some other person instead of me. The school benefits me and I see that benefits other kids.

First of all, it's way less students here, which is good for me because I'm very anxious in crowds. My old school, probably about 3,000 kids and here there's, what, like 250, 300 so that's a big difference. [00:04:00] I just feel really good coming here because I don't got to worry about what I look like. I don't know, just so much more pressure was taken off my shoulders and it's such a good feeling that I can actually get stuff done.

Now that I come here, it's so much more open and I can be myself. I think it's amazing that the teachers support my artwork here because, yes, the teachers said, "Oh, your art's good," and all that in the other school, but I didn't expect anyone to even hang it up like they did here and go around the school and talking about me. [00:04:30]

Nick: In addition to creating a supportive environment in the actual school, Map also is able to connect students with resources they need to succeed outside of school. One organization that Map connects students to is Youth Villages. They serve youth who have emotional, mental, and behavioral challenges. Map helped to connect Jayden to Youth Villages.

Jayden: It's like a group of people who help kids who struggle with trying to get on top of things like trying to find jobs, and start driving and all that. [00:05:00] It just pushes you in the right direction. I definitely feel good about that. A lot of kids here actually have Youth Villages workers, so that's pretty cool. My Youth Villages worker helps me starting to get my license and helped me

set up driving lessons and doing all this. I feel like I wouldn't have had that support if I wasn't guided towards it.

Nick: We asked Jayden how it feels to be graduating from high school.

Jayden: Certainly, I'm proud. For years and years, even when I was in middle school, I said I was going to drop out because I was just so [00:05:30] sick and tired of how I was being treated. When I came to Map, it's like they pushed me in the right direction to go do whatever – obviously, the right choices. I just really appreciate that. I feel very grateful for sure.

Nick: We also wanted to know what are Jayden's plans for life after graduation.

Jayden: After I graduate, I'm going to start looking for a job. It's been hard for me to find a job because the area I live in, either it's too far in walking distance or I don't have a ride. I'm definitely going to work hard to try to make that happen by getting [00:06:00] a car. My goal after I graduate is to get a car, get a job and just live life. What I really want to do is I want to be a mentor or a tattoo artist, either of those. Probably both actually.

I want to get to know people and I want people to get to know me. I'm not going to say I'm going to be the best counselor out there, but I'm definitely going to provide a lot of support because I've been through a lot of stuff myself. People have just been trying to lead me on this direction to be a counselor. I'm just really doing it because [00:06:30] I want to help people. That's the funny part is I'm not even a people person. I really have a hard time getting along with people but I want to help people so it's a different change for me.

I've definitely changed over the years. I just used to be so negative and angry and depressed all the time. Don't get me wrong, I do have my moments but I'm more grateful for things now for sure. I treated people poorly in the past and I wish I could go back and just make up for it because I'm not that person anymore and I really don't want to be. Even to this day, I'm still progressing to be a better [00:07:00] person. I think we all are as individuals. I know I'm not the only one out there, that's why I don't feel super, super, hard on myself about it.

Nick: With that amazing reflection about progression, we wanted to know – if Jayden could talk to himself five years ago, what advice would he give to his younger self?

Jayden: Just be kinder, be nicer, stop being so upset about the little things and being ungrateful and angry and destroying things. I'm very disappointed with the past me, but I'm really proud of [00:07:30] where I'm at now. People have seen I've progressed and I think that's a really good feeling to know that I'm actually doing something right. I wish I took school more seriously back then because I feel like I actually would've learned more instead of sleeping all the time and just lollygagging.

That was another reason why I wasn't able to get work done. It was because me mentally, but it was also the crowd I was hanging out with in school, too. I was hanging out with a bunch of punks and I shouldn't have. I was definitely a follower. That's the thing I can say about myself now: I'm a leader. I make my own choices. I don't follow others. [00:08:00]

Nick: We want to thank Jayden for taking the time to share his story with us and wish him the best of luck in his journey after high school. If you want to find out more about Map Academy, head to themapacademy.org. For more stories about how doing high school differently impacts students, make sure you subscribe to this podcast, but also check out more resources at

educationdisruption.org. My name is Nick Tetrault, our editor is Susie Blair, our executive producer is Kristen Hughes and this **[00:08:30]** is a Hairpin production.