



Laura Grundler: Hello, everyone. This is Laura and Matt Grundler, and welcome to another episode of the Creatively Connected Classroom. Tonight, we're talking with Jason Blair. We're real excited to have Jason. Jason has been a longtime contributor to K12ArtChat. He is an educator out in Ohio, and he has an amazing Twitter feed and lots to offer us and recently hosted the chat on Twitter around taking care of your own mental well-being. I think a lot of times we talk about SEL and kids, but sometimes we need to talk about SEL and staff, too.

Matt Grundler: Absolutely.

Laura Grundler: Jason, welcome to the podcast tonight.

Jason Blair: Thank you. Thanks for having me. I look forward to it.

Laura Grundler: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? I know we know you from Twitter, but I would love the audience to hear a little bit about your teaching background and what your thoughts are around education and art education.

Jason Blair: Sure. My name's Jason Blair, and this is my 17th year teaching elementary art in Dublin, Ohio, which is a suburb outside of Columbus. This year, I'm part of the teacher and residence program at the Columbus Museum of Art. They have a Center for Creativity and this amazing educational department, and they wanted to have a teaching residence, so they asked if I would be the inaugural one. I'm really looking forward to that work, and it goes right to what you're talking about, about connecting creativity and connecting across disciplines. It's exciting to embark upon that journey.

Jason Blair: But as far as my philosophy, I guess, my philosophy has changed over the 17 years, as I'm sure we all have. I started off very traditional, copy the masters, and elements and principles drove everything I did, and then kind of had an epiphany about halfway through that there wasn't a lot of creativity happening. There was a lot of copying, and there was a lot of regurgitating, but there wasn't a lot of student-driven creative creation, and there wasn't a lot of focus on process.

Jason Blair: So, probably 10 years or so ago, I just revamped the art curriculum and centered it around these big ideas and big issues and tried to bridge the



gap and connect between ... I almost looked at it as this three-pronged triangle of school, life, and the child. I wanted to make sure experiences are at the center of that and try to figure out how everything that I did somehow was rooted in the child, was making connections between school, life, and the child as well. That's kind of where I am today, and I'm branching out more to classroom teachers or anybody else who's passionate about those things and just realizes that getting as many people on the conversation as you can is the key of creativity, letting these hunches collide, that whole philosophy with Steven Johnson. I guess, in a short, rich version, that's kind of where I am today, is making more agency for the kids and letting the kids drive learning.

Jason Blair: I'm still along there to help them, and what I've realized in this past year, too, that I'm trying to focus a little bit more on, even talking to the kids about how to YouTube certain skills and things like that, because I've started to realize that if I'm trying to prove my worth as an educator by teaching how to do one or another, I can do that, but I might as well have them YouTube it. Then they can find out from maybe other experts how to do it. But then where my expertise would come in, or the facilitation that I would do, is how to apply that skill into some sort of conceptual problem.

Jason Blair: I look at my role as trying to harness creative thinking. Whereas, the creative skill building, I can show them, and I will show them certain things along the way, but I also want to encourage them that I'm not the only one who knows this. I'm not the gatekeeper for skills and techniques. There's many people out there that do it way better than I do, but I do want to help them apply those skills in relevant, meaningful, deeper ways.

Matt Grundler: Awesome. Cool. I mean, I remember I had the privilege to get to hear you talk. I was trying to remember. I was talking with Laura about when I saw you. I know it was NEA, but I don't remember if it was New York or if it was New Orleans.

Jason Blair: It was Chicago, and I only know that because that's the last time I was at NEA.

Matt Grundler: Oh, okay. Well, then, there you go.



Jason Blair: There you go.

Matt Grundler: Because I-

Laura Grundler: [crosstalk 00:04:23]

Matt Grundler: ... came out of your workshop, and I was so blown away. I think that that was when the chat really started taking off, and I know that my own personal philosophy really ... how I was looking at what the kids were doing, how their experience should be. Yeah, I just went on and on. I'm like, "I need you to meet this guy," and I'm like, "We've got to talk to him, and we've got to get him to host."

Laura Grundler: There was a little bit of a fanboy moment.

Jason Blair: No, it was on both parts too, because I started looking at ... because I didn't know anything about the K12ArtChat, too.

Matt Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: When I got home and got on there and looked at that, I mean, that was just amazing resource I was really out of the loop on, and so I appreciated that, for sure, as well.

Matt Grundler: Yeah. It was mutual.

Laura Grundler: It was.

Matt Grundler: For sure.

Laura Grundler: Well, you know what? That kind of brings us to this conversation about self-care, in a way, because going to conferences, to me, are invigorating and re-energizing for what I do in my own profession. Being an administrator, there's not a lot of people that have jobs like mine, so it's a way for me to connect with other people and peers. I guess all of that to say is that I really liked your line of questioning about taking care of yourself as an educator, and I was curious where you got that idea for our chat, like where that came from.

Jason Blair: I mean, it just was born out of just a lot of things, just a collision of things in life in general, because I know, for me, as a parent, putting on my



parent hat, there's a lot of things I looked at, things that I could improve on, things that I needed to better. I realized that a lot of it was stemming from stress from work, stress from life, things like that, and so things were coming out sideways for me, whether they were shorter fuse, whatever else, the patient's tank was on empty. I just realized that I couldn't continue to operate that way. So I realized that there are certain things that I need to think about.

Jason Blair: Then I started thinking about just the kids in general. The kids in our classrooms go through those same things as well, but as a teacher, it's just such a ... Nobody understands the role of being a teacher better than a teacher does. I mean, the stresses that come and the fact that you have ... whereas, in the past, you might have had one or two kids in your classroom that you were kind of like, "I'm really having a hard time figuring these kids out. I've got to figure out what makes them tick." Well, all of a sudden, now it's like five, six, seven, eight kids in the classroom. It's just adding to that stress level.

Jason Blair: I think we all don't take that time to slow down and realize, "How do I need to take care of myself in this situation?" because if I'm coming at it with my best self, I'm going to get the best out of others also. If I'm coming on that tank on E already, it's probably not going to be a good day. I've realized that, too, is that when there's days when things aren't working out in the classroom, I can trace it back almost 100% of the time to something that's happening with me. The kids are feeding off or reacting to the environment that I'm creating. If I'm stressed from something that happened the night before or whatever else, they're going to pick up on that.

Jason Blair: I think that's kind of where it came from, is just this idea of slowing down and just realizing ... I had, unfortunately, some ... Well, my dad passed away a year and a half ago. One of the things I talk about whenever I present anywhere is that his favorite poem was ... or his favorite music was from Leonard Cohen. One of the lines was, "There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." I really took that to heart in the fact that my dad was my creativity advocate. He was always there in my corner, and it made me realize that everybody needs that creative advocate, but we have to realize that when there are cracks that appear, that it's not a negative thing. I think too often we try to patch over those



cracks, and we try to cover them up and make sure nobody sees them. Whether it's in ourselves, in our own weaknesses or challenges, or whether it's in kids or our classroom, we just hurry to patch it up.

Jason Blair: I think what we need to do is start looking at those cracks as signs of brightness and potential and realize that that means there's a restructure that we need to tear down and rebuild. I realized, for myself, when my dad passed away, that I needed to rebuild myself. I think that that's twofold. I think when we see kids in the classroom that are having issues going on and we see it and we want to patch over it and fix it, there's something else there. I was just listening to a podcast of some sort that was talking about strength-based parenting and, as a result, strength-based education.

Jason Blair: One of the things that they talked about was ... What truly made me stop and think was when you see a kid that's having a hard day or acting out or he's pushing all your buttons, you should stop and think that there's some strength in that child that's not being able to be used right now, and what can I do to bring that strength up? Because that's why they're acting like that. It's one of those things where normally my initial response would be like, "Hey, stop doing that. Stop crab walking on the floor. Stop doing those things."

Jason Blair: What I'm trying to do now is start to realize that there's something in there that he's screaming for that he needs to be met, and I need to do something about it. I think that's the same with us as teachers, as adults, that when we have these moments, there's something within us that needs to come out, and we are so quick to patch over, to have this façade that looks pristine. That's not life. That's not realistic. I mean, we're full of cracks. There's a Japanese art, Kintsukuroi, that talks about repairing with gold, and they, instead of ... When they take the Japanese ceramics-

Laura Grundler: I love that one.

Jason Blair: Yeah. They fill it with gold to highlight the cracks. That's the thing, is we should all be walking around proud of the cracks that make our façade. I mean, we're not perfect creatures, by any means, and we need to stop looking at kids that way and stop portraying ourselves as that also.



Laura Grundler: Yeah. That just made me think about Brené Brown when she talks about creativity, and the opposite of creativity is really anger, in a way. It's because you're not letting out all of those needs, and it reminds me ... When I think about kids that are struggling, there's something in there that they have to release, and they're not able to do that. I worry a lot of the times about ... This is me having been a school administrator. I worry that a lot of times, when we see kids that are struggling in academic courses that are tested, we pull them out of their arts or their music or their P.E. and we have them double up on whatever it is that they need that remediation in. Then I feel like that's where I saw a lot of kids bust out even more, is that they had nowhere to release any of that energy during the day, because then now they're in two math classes and no fine art or no P.E. Just having to have that place is so important and-

Matt Grundler: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: I think it's really great, also, that you mentioned your father being your creative advocate. How do we ensure that kids have a creative advocate in their lives?

Jason Blair: Yeah. I think that's a great question. When I was thinking about how you approach teaching stuff, I think there's three different mindsets that everybody has. It's a logical mindset. You're kind of a logical thinker, you're a creative thinker, and you're an emotional thinker. Sadly, I think the emotional and creative thinker get shelved to the side. I mean, most of the days are geared towards logical thinking, and I think that's such a disservice, because if we could start shifting the conversation to stop talking about disciplines and start talking about thinking, everybody then would see the kind of value that the arts bring, because you would never take a kid out of a class that's promoting creative, emotional well-being, but because it's art, you still seem to have this baggage where, "Oh, well, it's okay. They're just doing X, Y, and Z. They're painting today. It's not a big deal."

Jason Blair: But when you have kids, when you have the highest stress generation we've ever seen, ever, and you have stress for a number of reasons, whether it's on the news, in the school classrooms, bullying, whatever it is, cyberbullying ... The arts are so much more important now, because not only are they creating an environment for students to practice and



develop creative thinking, but they're also an outlet for emotional stress that's going on throughout the day. There's so much research and everything. You guys well know that, that the arts are ... Courses that are being cut across the country are always the arts, but yet you can have schools where you'll hear stories of kids sneaking into those schools just to go to their arts classes, but the rest of the day they're skipping out on.

Jason Blair: I think there's such power in the fact that everybody should look at themselves as a creativity advocate, from a classroom teacher to an art teacher to a ... because like I've said before in the past, our kids come to us with creative minds, and slowly they atrophy.

Laura Grundler: Yes.

Jason Blair: A creative mind is on 24/7, 365, and it can't be something that we say, "In the classroom, I really want this creative poster," and then when they go and they're starting to put ... skipping down the halls or whatever, and we're like, "You've got to get back in line. You can't do that," well, the kid's like, "Well, I was just skipping down the hall, kind of doing my creative thing. You said you liked my creativity on the poster but that you don't like my behavior that's creative."

Jason Blair: I think that's the hard part, is that we assume that creativity is a product, not a process, from an outsider's perspective. How do we create creative advocates? I think once we start to realize that it's a thinking habit, that it's an approach to seeing the world, will we then create more creative advocates. When we still see it as just a discipline, then we won't. I think that's what the conversation has to shift to, and every subject is let's stop focusing on math, science. Let's start focusing on the style of the thinker, like a mathematical thinker or a scientific thinker, creative thinker, and emotional thinker. When we do that, I feel like then we have a true chance to reimagine what education can be.

Laura Grundler: Yay.

Matt Grundler: Warm and fuzzies.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.



Matt Grundler: That kind of makes me think a little bit about one of your questions that you're asking about defeat. At the professional level, or even the personal level, life knocks you down. How and when do you find the courage to get back up again? What do you do when you've realized that ... You were just sharing with us about some things that are happening in your life. How do you find yourself? How do you re-energize yourself and get yourself ready to do it all over again?

Jason Blair: It's hard. I mean, I think there's a couple things that play into effect for me. A lot of it's just, for one, some of the work ... We were discussing Brené Brown and the idea of this arena that she talks about and that there's people that come into the arena that watch you, that come and go, but then there's people that are down there fighting with you in the arena. I think that's what you tend to focus on, is I've started to realize, when my father passed, that I realized that there's a handful of people that are always with me every day in the arena, fighting with me, and those are the people that are with me no matter what. If I stop focusing on the crowd that's around me and start focusing on those that are in there with me, it becomes much more empowering to be able to face each day.

Jason Blair: The other thing is having somebody to be there with you, whether it's a significant other or a friend or a colleague, somebody that you really can lock arms with and be vulnerable with and say, "Look, these things didn't go right. These things did." I think it goes back to that idea of this façade. I think if we try to appear perfect, it makes our jobs much more difficult. If we can let our guard down and be like, "That really didn't work out well today," or, "This failed miserably," or, "As a parent, I let things down ..." I talk with my kids about this idea of the strengths and strengths-based, and one of the things that I was listening to said that we all have these strengths, and sometimes you need to ask somebody to bring it forward.

Jason Blair: I told my kids, I said, "Look. What would you say are my strengths?" They said, "Well, understanding, listening, things like that," and I said, "Well, do you think there's times when I don't do that?" They said, "Yes," and I said, "Well, here's what I need you to do. I need you, when you think that I'm not doing that, to tell me that. 'Dad, one of your strengths is listening and being understanding, and you're not using that





right now. Can you find that strength within you?" Just even doing that, just naming it and having them try to call me out on things has been really powerful because it's then creating a communication. It's not creating fighting. It's not creating, "Dad, you're always yelling at me to do this or that." Instead it's like, "Dad, you have an understanding strength. Can you bring it out right now?" So that's been helpful for me.

Jason Blair:

When I feel defeated, having just that ... I mean, it's just kind of a process, but having more conversations and realizing that moving from judgment, I guess, a place of judgment to a place of, again, I guess, process, for lack of a better word. We're all humans in a process. We're not finished products. We never will be finished products, but instead of it coming from a place of judgment like, "How dare you do that?" or you are a label, like a failure, "You are this and that," to realize that, "You know what? It's just a bump in the road. You've got some strengths. Let's pull them out right now because you're kind of going down that path," and just naming things to be real and not trying to be fake or not trying to be something you're not.

Jason Blair:

I think that's one of the things that's helped me back up recently, is just realizing that, "You know what? All this is just a part of life, and I can't get hung up on the highs or the lows," just realize there's another moment coming right after that one, and all I can do in that moment is just recognize it, name it, and learn from it.

Laura Grundler:

There's such authenticity in what you're saying. I went to pick up our son from a choir event earlier this evening, and he said, "Mom, why are teachers like ..." He said, "They're always saying I'm bad at drawing, or I'm not a good musician, or I'm not this," but the way he was saying it was so interesting because he goes, "In school, we're always talking about growth mindset, but they don't have a growth mindset." It was just a really profound, little conversation that I had with him, and I said, "Well, what could you say to them to get them to think differently?" I guess all of that to say is that what I hear from you is that we're always growing, and we're always learning. It's what I hope we're teaching our children, Matt and I, but how can teachers be more authentic in the classroom instead of being judgmental of themselves being authentic?



Jason Blair: Yeah. I think that one of the things is ... Part of it is going more to those kind of life-centered issues, embarking upon that journey with the kids. I mean, any time that we're doing anything in my classroom that has to deal with processing and being vulnerable, I'll do it along with them, and I'll share that, because I think that's one way, is that if you're talking about life-centered issues, it brings everybody in the same playing field. If the goal of your project, what you're doing, is a specific skill or a specific content statement, then I don't feel like we're all on the same playing field because somebody might know more about that than the other, but if we're talking about identity related to certain things, then we're all on the same playing field.

Jason Blair: I think one of the things is trying to make content support, I guess, a larger issue, a more relevant issue. In my classroom, if I'm doing something with ... One of the things we're talking about in second grade are these ideas of microaggressions and how these little things can really have a big impact. We started off by having a list of I am statements and then I am not statements just to be vulnerable with each other. I did it right along with them, and I read mine too, because I was like, "Here are the things I am, and here are the things I'm not." The first list that I said for I am not, I am not always a good teacher, and some of the kids were like, "Well, what do you mean by that?" I told them flat out. It's just one of those things of just slowly, bit by bit, whenever you have the opportunity to be real with the kids, to do it. You will generate more conversations that way, too, because kids, no matter what their age is, respond to narratives. They respond to stories.

Laura Grundler: Stories.

Jason Blair: From first grade through fifth grade, that's how they ... You can hear a pen drop when you're telling a story. If you're giving directions on how to do something, maybe not so much, but if it's a story, you can hear anything. I've started to realize those stories help and talking with the kids a year and a half later about sometimes things about my dad that I couldn't have done right when it happened, but just being real and being vulnerable. I guess it's just little things like that, just trying to find those opportunities that when you're asking something of the kids, when you're creating a classroom where you want to have trust and vulnerability, you've got to be front and center modeling that. I don't



think it comes across as real if you're trying to ask for somebody to be trustworthy and honest and vulnerable and then you don't do the same.

Laura Grundler: I agree. When I was a kid, my mother was a teacher at my high school, and when I was younger, I didn't realize she did this. I probably should have caught onto it because her academic team students would always act like they knew us. I always thought it was a little weird that they acted like they knew us so well, but then when I got into high school, I realized why everybody acted like they knew us. It's because she told a lot of stories about all of us ...

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: ... in her classroom, but kids connected with her in a way that I never saw other teachers on campus have those same connections with. It was like she opened them up and opened our family up to them. At the time, I know being an angsty 16, 17-year-old, I hated it, but now that I have perspective in life and I've been a teacher, I totally get it. I find myself telling stories about our own family and our kids all the time now, and I think, "Well, how interesting is that?"

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: That full circle kind of thing. Speaking of family, one of the questions I know that Matt and I ... it struck both of us was ... I'll let Matt tell you.

Matt Grundler: You had mentioned it earlier, at the very beginning, about patience as a teacher, and you're worn thin about being at school. It was an amazing thing, and also a frustrating thing, for me last year when I was teaching elementary. I had all three of my children with me at school. It was like teaching all day, they came into my room, and then it was being a parent and teaching at the same time. Then it was like, "Okay. Let's get in the car. Let's go home," and then it was still a parent-teacher ... still kind of just end. Laura was constantly just going, "Why are you snipping at them? Why are you so short with them? Why are you so hard on them?"

Laura Grundler: Take a deep breath.



Matt Grundler: My son even made a comment to me this year already ... actually, to you, about ... Laura gets to drop them all off in the morning and was like, "You know, dad seems a lot less stressful now."

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Now that the kids aren't at school and then after school, so he's like-

Laura Grundler: Yeah. When we both read your questions about having more patience at school than you maybe have at home, we were like, "Oh, been there."

Matt Grundler: I don't get that.

Laura Grundler: Totally understand that.

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: How do you manage?

Matt Grundler: How do you manage?

Jason Blair: Well, I think it kind of goes to that idea of just self-awareness and becoming aware of that, because that was the same thing for me. It was like an epiphany that happened, and I was getting short and whatnot, and then I started realizing that there were a couple things playing factor. One was I was like, "Why am I so caught up in how the house is? Putting things away and this and that?" Then I had the epiphany of, "Well, because for eight hours during my day, I'm living in a chaotic, creative storm," and so when I came home, I wanted to have this zen-like feeling, and I wasn't getting it, and then I was snipping.

Jason Blair: Then I realized, too, that the double edge of that was I was creating the conditions for creativity to thrive at school, but I was letting it wilt in my own house. That was really eye-opening, sad, one of those things that I recognized. I think, because of that, I realized that I needed to make some changes, and those little things like if I took a walk or I went to the gym or something where I could have that time to decompress so I wasn't going right into another mode. My wife's an educator as well, and I think a double educator house, that's something, because you're both ...



Matt Grundler: Something.

Jason Blair: You're both tapped on E when you get home, and I just don't want to have-

Laura Grundler: How do you choose names?

Jason Blair: Do what?

Matt Grundler: Naming your children. Naming your own children. When that time happens, you come with your list of names that you're like, "Nope."

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Then you're like, "But that would ..." Nope.

Laura Grundler: No.

Jason Blair: Yeah, exactly.

Matt Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: Yeah. I definitely relate to that. I mean, having that patience and feeling like you have more patience for, for all intents and purposes, strangers versus your own children and just realizing that I didn't like that, and I wanted to make a change with that. I think the big thing is just, again, recognizing that that was a crack that I had. That was a crack, and there was an opportunity for beauty to come from that. That's what I'm trying to find, is that beauty that came from that, because I don't want to repair that because it wasn't working.

Laura Grundler: Right.

Jason Blair: So, I need to tear down the structure that was there and rethink it, and that's what I'm going to do.

Susan Riley: Hi, there. It's Susan Riley from EducationCloset. As you can hear from this episode, taking care of your well-being is incredibly important. One great way to do that is through cultivating positive relationships. If you're looking for a great group of people to connect and learn with, I hope



you'll pop into our next K12ArtChat on Thursday night, at 8:30 PM Central. We'd love to connect with you.

Matt Grundler:

I like how you were talking about with your second graders. You were saying that you ... Sitting down, working through the process, I found myself really doing that even more than I already was with a lot of my classes last year, and even sitting down and getting the opportunity to really be able to ... We're doing contour drawings right now, and so I'm doing contour drawings, and I'm finding just by the time I'm sitting down working that contour by the afternoon, then all of a sudden, I'm finding such improvements just in my own. I mean, I used to be really hard on myself and what I was making and how it was going, and just being able to sit down and work through it and see the improvement over that period, and it's been like a week.

Laura Grundler:

Well, I think it's so impactful for kids to see that. I think when they see us as human beings and artists that are working through process, they realize that the process is where that learning really happens. It can be really powerful, and then you get that shoulder-to-shoulder time with those kiddos, and you start talking about how their day is going, and you have these conversations that open up to a whole different playing field for-

Matt Grundler:

Well, and then you get that understanding of them, and you get a better understanding of, "Okay. So now I know what's going on in this kid's life, or this kid's head." When that starts to flare up, I know a better way to handle it.

Jason Blair:

That's a great point because that's one of those things that ... I was talking to somebody today, actually, at school, is when you have an environment of trust and vulnerability and whatnot, then truly some amazing thinking will happen, because you can't better yourself as a critical, creative thinker if you don't feel safe in that environment. I think, like you said, if you're sitting down next to somebody and you're creating with them or talking with them about those things, it does. It creates a more holistic view of that child, too, and they don't become an art student. They become who they are, who their name is, and that's kind of the premise behind that second grade I am, I am not, because we are



many things. We are not just a second grade child. I am not just the teacher. I'm much more than that.

Jason Blair: I think those ability to sit down and ... My goal in the class is to become invisible. If I become invisible, then I feel like it's been a good class. Sometimes a kid will walk in and be like, "Where is Mr. Blair? I can't find him." It's because I'm sitting amongst the kids. We're doing whatever else.

Laura Grundler: Right.

Jason Blair: That's the ultimate goal, is to become invisible where the kids are truly independent, have a sense of agency, are really working through something, and you've set them up to go on their way. Whereas then you, as the teacher, can facilitate how to help them probe deeper with their thinking and how you can help them apply their skills in different ways. If you need to have that one kid to show him, "You know what? I think this would really help you right now. Let me show you this skill that might help you take that to the next level," rather than having everybody say, "I'm expecting you all to do this at the same time, in the exact same way," kind of break away from that and try to get more of that in-depth, complex thinking.

Laura Grundler: Totally. I know we spend a lot of time on social media, and I've seen you on the social media as well, just a little bit. One of your questions for our chat was how do you block that out, or how do you quiet the noise of the social media, or even just the stuff-

Matt Grundler: The news.

Laura Grundler: ... the news, all the stuff that's constant? I mean, if I'm wearing my-

Jason Blair: That can be overwhelming.

Laura Grundler: ... Apple watch, I'm getting notifications the whole time. What do you do to tune it out, and how do you know when you need to tune it out?

Jason Blair: Right. That's a good question. I mean, just things that I'm trying to do now is I'm trying to pull back on certain things. This might sound silly or whatever, but my kids totally call me out if I'm on the phone looking at



news or whatever else. The 24/7 connectivity is a real thing. When I talk to kids at school about it, it's a real thing for everybody. I think the research says that we try to think of millennials as being constant whatever, but I think the people who are on the phone the most might be our demographic, with clicking and checking news and everything else.

Jason Blair:

It got to the point where I was finding myself hiding my phone if they were to come in when I was on the news or something because I didn't want them to see me constantly on a device. That's one of those things that made me realize, "Pick up a book." I could do other things. I think just being ... again, that whole idea of aware that when you're engaged with something like that and where else your energy could go. There is a balance, though. Like I said, I still try to make time to check Twitter and things like that because I think there's a connectivity with a tribe that you guys have started. There's benefits to some of these things as well. It's just finding that balance. We don't want to tip the scale one way or the other.

Jason Blair:

I think if you start ... For me, I guess, when I start realizing that my negativity is creeping up or my anxiety's creeping up, I know that it's because I'm probably around too many things that are ticking all those boxes on my anxiety scales, and so I've got to start pulling away from those things, because otherwise, I'll just go down this rabbit hole, and that's not going to be helpful for anybody. Just little things like going for walks and trying to get outside more and trying to do those things and create that environment here at my house that's going to be conducive for creative thinking, but also for mental health and social well-being as well.

Jason Blair:

I don't know. It's a tricky thing. I'm still wrestling with that, and with the ideas of Fortnite and everything else, it's a real thing. I'm not somebody who says, "Get rid of everything." I don't think we should ever do that, but I think we just have to find the balance. We have to try to find a way ... and I think the way is to make it more enticing for kids, is to make sure it's rooted in the child, to make sure that the learning is rooted in them, because they have stories to tell. They want to tell ... I think one of the things that we see a lot from kids is, at the end of the day, they're lonely.





Laura Grundler: Yes.

Jason Blair: The irony of all this is that they're lonely.

Laura Grundler: Yes.

Matt Grundler: Oh, they're lonely.

Jason Blair: They're lonely from us because when they come home, we've got ... I'm sure it's the same at your house. We come home. We've got to think about dinner. We've got to get-

Laura Grundler: Yep.

Jason Blair: ... the house picked up. We've got to get home ... We have to do-

Laura Grundler: Homework.

Jason Blair: ... those things that might be a ... Yeah.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: There's all these things-

Laura Grundler: Get this person at that place and all activities and everything.

Matt Grundler: Activities after school.

Jason Blair: Yeah. That's what I kind of think of now, is that I just think that out of all the connectivity we have, this is the generation that's lonely. I think that's the thing that makes me sad, is that I want to create opportunities for us to get together in meaningful ways, because I think when kids are together, as a collective, in the classroom ... I don't know if you guys have seen this too, but collective is hard for kids.

Laura Grundler: Yes.

Matt Grundler: Oh, yeah.

Jason Blair: More so than I think in the past, when we were kids. I think when we were kids, we had the other things of biking together, getting together at people's houses and whatnot. So, it's not like it has to stop.



Laura Grundler: Well, I was just thinking that, though, Jason, is that kids don't-

Matt Grundler: That's interesting. Yeah.

Laura Grundler: ... go over-

Jason Blair: Right.

Laura Grundler: They don't run around the neighborhood like we did, you know?

Jason Blair: Right.

Laura Grundler: They don't just go run down the street to somebody's house. They don't have that close-

Matt Grundler: Network.

Laura Grundler: ... network that we had growing up. I don't know what that is. We talk about this all the time because we have a 12-year-old, and it's just so different. We worry about does he have ... well, all of them. Do they have good friends? Are these people ... We want them to spend time at our house so we can get to know them. It is. It's very true to see that kids don't seem to relate as well to each other as they used to.

Jason Blair: Right. Well, and we talk about just getting out when we were kids. If I was getting on my bike and go, I could look down a driveway and I could see if there were 13 bikes there, that's where everybody was.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: You don't see that. But my wife and I have also started to realize that there are certain things that we need to let go of. My daughter was like, "Can I go walk up to the store?" The store is not very far away. There might be one busy road or whatever, but in the past, we said no. We were like, "You know what? Yes, you can do that." It's this whole idea of trust and this whole idea of-

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: ... you can't overprotect everything.



Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: You've got to let there be more opportunities for a kid ... The idea of letting kids ... There's a book I read that said it's okay to go up the slide and the idea that it's like at recess. Everybody says, "You can't go up the slide," or whatever else, but the reason why kids do it is because they look for challenges. They look for risks to take. When they solve something, they want to find another risk to take. When they solve the playground ... The playground's novel for about a week, and then they want to find ways to alter their playing experience. Well, when they come and they want to alter their playing experience and use that creative thinking, that's usually when we come in and say, "No. You can't do that. You can't do that. You can't do that."

Jason Blair: I think there's just this idea of letting these kids ... realizing that they are lonely and realizing that we've got to do something about that to create these meaningful opportunities for relationships to blossom and to grow. I don't know the answers to that, but I just know that that's an issue we need to all tackle, because I think loneliness is at the root of a lot of things that are going on today with our kids.

Laura Grundler: Theater.

Matt Grundler: Yeah. Theater? Maybe. Yeah.

Jason Blair: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: I mean, our son's involved in theater, and the connections that-

Laura Grundler: Well, all three of our kids are. Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Well, yeah, but our middle schooler, the people that he has come in contact with and the friendships he's made ... I mean, yes, he talks with them via text when they're not at rehearsal, but I mean, just-

Laura Grundler: The rehearsal really teaches them to be collaborative, and they're not allowed to have their phones in that space. They're not allowed ... They're just better at it. It's so-



Matt Grundler: I'm able to go work out in the hallway and go work through a scene or to go get some feedback from each other on, "Well, what if I do this, or what if I do that?" I think it's just-

Jason Blair: Is your son more of an extroverted kid?

Laura Grundler: Somewhat.

Matt Grundler: Yeah. When he's on stage, he is full on ...

Laura Grundler: Our eight-year-old is not extroverted at all. Yet, she can get on the stage and do things that just blow me away. I would have never thought she can be so shy, and then when she's at theater camp and she's doing things that I'm just like, "Wow," it's so great to see. I didn't have the opportunity to be in theater. It actually was just kind of a random thing. I work in a fine arts department.

Matt Grundler: We were just trying a bunch of different activities out.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: All three of our kids just happen to just latch onto it.

Laura Grundler: Really love it, but I do feel like some of it has to do with the community feeling behind it, is that they have a family at theater. I think that that's what it's all about, really, for them, is that they feel a belonging.

Jason Blair: I think what you've said, too, that's right on. I think that's the separate ... I'm thinking about classrooms in general, and there's definitely this hard aspect of the collectiveness, but I think when it doesn't become hard is when you have this tribe that you share something with, this vulnerability or this passion and everything else. I think, in classrooms, when we're so focused at speed and making sure we cover everything, the one thing that usually gets knocked to the side is the social-emotional relationship building. That's just kind of a byproduct, but we just hope that takes care of itself.

Jason Blair: I think if we worked hard to create meaningful relationships and did enough to build the culture of relationships in our classrooms, then I think you would have that collective PLN of students. They would find



their tribes in there, but I think now, too often, they're sitting alongside their peers in their classrooms as co-habitators of that space, not necessarily co-creators, not necessarily co-thinkers, so I don't know. I think there's something ... That's one of the things I've been trying to do in my classroom, which is hard, as you guys know, because it's once a week for-

Laura Grundler: Once a week, yeah.

Jason Blair: ... whatever amount of time. You do what you can in that amount of time, but I do think that, like you said, if your kids ... when they're in those play atmospheres, that is a tribe. I mean, they all come there sharing the same thing. They all enjoy it. How do we create that type of atmosphere in a classroom where the kids feel trusted, they feel ... because, I mean, think about theater. You have to be extremely vulnerable for that.

Laura Grundler: Yes.

Jason Blair: I mean, you're going to mess up your lines. You're going to do this or that. You do it not only in front of yourself or in front of the mirror, but in front of all your peers, whoever else, and then on the time that you have to do the actual performance, if you mess up then, you still have that tribe there that's still going to back you up. I think there's ... Laura, I'm sure you know this with the fine arts. I mean, there's so much power in drama.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: And that is its own field. That's just another example of the benefits of the arts and how they're not something that's just kind of a fluff thing, but it's just another example of how they create social-emotional well-being on top of create and turn out amazing, creative thinkers.

Laura Grundler: Kind of on that note, having been, again, a campus administrator, I was always the person that seemed to work with the most at-risk kids. I'd have parents come in and just fall apart with me and, "What do I do for my kiddo? How do I ..." They want answers. There are no firm answers when you're dealing with things like that, but I would always tell parents that every child needs to find their niche. They need to find their place where they belong, whether that's soccer or volleyball or art or theater or



music. They have to find a spot. They can't just go to school and go home. They have to have a group, and you have to know their group. I think that that's a big part of it too, is that I think it's harder in this time period ... Even Matt and I have talked about it. It's harder to know the parents of our kids' friends because everything's text-

Matt Grundler: Guarded.

Laura Grundler: ... and-

Matt Grundler: Well, everything's so guarded, too.

Laura Grundler: And everything's so guarded. People are afraid to-

Matt Grundler: We can't share this information, can't share that information, can't do this, can't do that.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: Right.

Matt Grundler: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: I just think that that sense of belonging ... Ultimately, it all comes back to community. You know?

Jason Blair: It does. I haven't started it yet, but there's a book from ... You know who Shawn Achor is? He's the guy that does The Happiness Advantage.

Laura Grundler: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I've seen it.

Jason Blair: Yeah. He does a lot with positive psychology and everything, but his newest book is basically about this idea of, as a collective, we rise or fall based on the community we surround ourselves with, no matter what it is, whether it's at school or whatever else. He said there's research to back it up, and I truly believe that. I mean, I think that's the case, and I like what you're saying about the niche because I think that kind of circle the wagons back to your idea about when kids have to miss tests or whatever and they get pulled out of a related arts course. If the tribe and the niche for that child is the creative thinking and they only get it once a week, then to miss that once a week, imagine how devastating that is.



Laura Grundler: Oh, yeah.

Jason Blair: By the way, most likely, if they miss that, maybe there's a reason why, but also it might be because that's a stressful thing for them. I think having the kids come after they've been sitting for three hours taking a test and be able to come to our classes or whatever, it's such an emotional relief for them and such an outlet. But I just think it goes back to this idea of we've got to change the conversation.

Jason Blair: I was talking at the museum with some people. We were talking really about this idea of creativity and art, because at the museum, obviously, art is at the forefront, but you also don't want to pigeonhole and leave people out, because a lot of people bring baggage when they hear the word art. But what we talked about was what ... I think creativity is solving problems, applying ... but I think what art does is art brings that emotion into it that I think creativity can be devoid of. I mean, you can have creativity without having emotion.

Laura Grundler: Sure.

Jason Blair: But what art does is art provides the emotional impact. I think that's the other reason why people could say, "Oh, well, we've got to make her space. We've got this or that, so we've got the creativity aspect of it," but you don't get the expression and the emotion that comes out of the arts and how you make connections, because I do think the art room is where you make connections to life. It's plain and simple. It's how you make connections between your emotional well-being, your issues going on in your own life, how you're making sense of the content, how you're doing. It's like your emotional barometer. I think that's the value of the arts that we can't lose touch of, is that we do grow creative thinkers in our classrooms, in our art rooms, but we also grow emotional thinkers as well.

Matt Grundler: Awesome, because that makes me think about a project I used to do to help build empathy. It was that first two weeks of school, especially with my fifth graders, where they had to create a welcome video, welcome banner, welcome pamphlet, welcome whatever, posters, for the new kids that were coming into our campus. Basically, I took the first two days of the kids just doing a whole design thinking process of, "Okay. Can you



imagine yourself as this person who's coming into a school, who doesn't know anybody, and have nowhere to fit in? How would you feel?" So, they kind of use that as their launch pad ... other words for it ... to create these things. Some of the things that I saw these kids ... and then they got into small groups, and so they were in groups of three and four, and they were using those small groups to create their end result. It was pretty amazing to watch.

Jason Blair: Yeah. I saw when you shared that. I thought that was amazing, because I think that's so powerful that this is putting over to the kids, and the kids can relate to that. I mean, they've been that new person in some experience in their lives. I think that's the key, is when you do something like that ... That project, in and of itself, creates a level playing field. We can all have a voice at that table, whereas opposed if you were saying, "Let's focus just on this aspect of art, or just this aspect of math," some people are going to feel like they're ahead of other people. I think that's the idea, is creating these experiences for kids. That's what I'm thinking about, is that we need to just create learning experiences. We need to create the conditions for these amazing learning experiences to happen, and they're only going to happen when we truly approach the whole child, the creative thinker, the emotional thinker, and the logical thinker. So, I loved that idea. I was copying [inaudible 00:41:22] that I hope you don't mind that, because it's just-

Matt Grundler: No.

Jason Blair: I like the idea of perspective taking and-

Matt Grundler: Yeah.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: It was a great project.

Matt Grundler: Well, and it was funny to see some of the groups because we would have some of those new kids in their groups. It was like, "You've got a perfect person to-"

Laura Grundler: Interview.





- Matt Grundler: "... to interview and build that empathy with. Look, you've got this brand new person in your classroom," and they were just like, "Oh, yeah."
- Jason Blair: Right. I don't know if you look at, too ... I started looking at the ... not started looking at, but I'm trying to apply in real ways is the agency-by-design stuff.
- Laura Grundler: Yeah.
- Jason Blair: The offshoot. They've got like four or five routines on there that are really all about perspective taking. They're really interesting, and systems, looking at systems from different perspectives.
- Matt Grundler: Okay.
- Jason Blair: There's a lot of good stuff in there, so I'm trying to figure out how to adapt the language and everything to meet first through fifth grade, but that's a good source, too, because it reminded me a lot of what you're talking about. It's kind of design thinking, but also those thinking routines as well.
- Matt Grundler: Well, I mean, just last summer, I finished doing one of the IDEO online courses. It was about five weeks, I think.
- Laura Grundler: Yeah.
- Matt Grundler: That was amazing-
- Laura Grundler: A good five.
- Matt Grundler: ... and intense for five weeks.
- Laura Grundler: Well, I know Allison Tilly from Boston went to the Agency By Design workshop last summer, and it looks amazing. I definitely would like to talk more about that at another time and find out ... I kind of want to go.
- Jason Blair: I know.
- Laura Grundler: It just looks awesome.



Matt Grundler: If we could take a sabbatical and just go to all these conferences, that'd be great.

Laura Grundler: That would be awesome. How can we get that paid for?

Matt Grundler: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. Next on ...

Laura Grundler: Next podcast chat, how to pay for ... yeah.

Matt Grundler: Sabbaticals.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Okay.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: I mean-

Laura Grundler: We've gone all over the place.

Matt Grundler: We've gone all over the place, but it's been good. Is there any last-minute gems, jewels, tricks, and tips that you might share that we might not have already talked about?

Jason Blair: Geez, I don't know. I could talk to you guys forever. I just think that the stuff that you guys are doing and trying to get that out there is great, because I think we do definitely have ... I mean, we're at a crossroads, and we need to make sure that we do what we can to amplify the voice of arts educators, because they might not have all the answers, but they have a lot of good questions too.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Jason Blair: I think that if we can start looking to them to help create conditions in our districts, in our buildings, and in our classrooms, we would see an education re-imagined. I think too often they're just marginalized, I guess, so to speak. In my building, my administrator's so supportive and always been supportive ever since day one, since I met him. I feel really fortunate to be there, to be supported by him, but I know in other buildings across the country, I know it's a different experience in every



building, but I do think that that's the mission. I think we need to get out there, and I think we need to be vulnerable with each other and say, "Look. If we want to try to rethink this educational system, let's start thinking about how we can grow these creative thinkers, because they're in our classrooms, and they're dying to get that creative mind used. We've got to figure out ways to do that."

Jason Blair: I don't know. It's just something I feel passionate about, and I know you guys feel passionate about it. I know that all the people on K12ArtChat feel passionate about it, so it's been great to be a part of that group because I feel like it's growing. I mean, you guys have seen firsthand, obviously. How long ago did you guys start it?

Laura Grundler: We're almost at four years.

Matt Grundler: Almost four years, yeah.

Laura Grundler: We're almost at our four-year mark.

Jason Blair: That's awesome.

Laura Grundler: Yeah, but it has been ... I really think that you're absolutely right, that we're at a crossroads right now. I love that, just thinking about the idea of re-imagining education. One of the things I talk to ... I say this all the time, but I feel so privileged to lead 100 art teachers in a really amazing school district, like the one we work in. I say this all the time, is that we have so much ability to impact so many things. If our 47 elementary teachers teach every single elementary child in the school district, think about the leadership and the power in that. So, I'm right there with you, Jason, in that we hope that arts educators really take the lead in their buildings and break outside of the disciplines and start bringing people to the table to have conversations about creativity.

Jason Blair: Well, and I think that's a powerful thing, because that's, in my district, the same thing. I work with ... not quite as big ... 12 other elementary art teachers, but we've worked hard to talk with people at the central office and everything to talk about, "Here's some things we can offer."

Laura Grundler: Yeah.



- Jason Blair: As a result, they heard it and they listened. They said, "Hey. Can you guys put on these PDs? Can you guys help us out at this professional development opportunity?" It was powerful because it was kind of like saying we've got some people who are experts within our district that can talk and help us through this creative aspect. Let's use-
- Laura Grundler: Absolutely.
- Jason Blair: But we have to be willing to ... and I think the power of it was that we all locked arm together. There was 12 elementary art teachers who'd say, "We can do this. It's out of our comfort zone, but we can still do it." We can put our best foot forward, and we can say, "Look. We're here. We're passionate about it, and let's take this step together." I do think there's power in getting in your building and talking to an administrator, talking to whoever you can about some of the things that are going on and showing some examples of some of the amazing thinking and creating, and even if it's just an aha moment that you had with a child, because I think the one thing is, is that the other gift that our teachers have is that ability to maintain relationships.
- Jason Blair: I think it comes from that empathic, creative mind that you have when you approach art education, that you do have these moments with kids, these real moments, these moments that maybe aren't seen in other settings because maybe the style of thinking or the strength isn't being able to utilize as much in those settings, just by the nature of what's going on. Yeah, I think there's power in trying to get that community of art teachers together and say, "Look. We can all rise together, and we can all help put our best foot forward and try to grow these creative thinkers across the entire district."
- Laura Grundler: It goes back to that-
- Matt Grundler: Wow.
- Laura Grundler: ... community.
- Matt Grundler: Yep.
- Jason Blair: Yeah.



Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: Awesome. Well ...

Laura Grundler: That was a jewel.

Matt Grundler: That was.

Laura Grundler: Thanks for sharing that.

Matt Grundler: That was great.

Laura Grundler: Yeah.

Matt Grundler: We just want to thank you, Jason, for being with us. I know you've hosted some really amazing topics in K12ArtChat, and so-

Laura Grundler: Tonight was stellar.

Matt Grundler: ... it's just another awesome thing. I'm glad I had the opportunity to get to meet you when we were in Chicago, and I'm glad it's just built from there.

Jason Blair: Yeah, no. I'm grateful, too, and I love seeing all the chats. You guys always get amazing hosts, and it's always such a rich experience, so thanks for providing that.

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