

Why We Drop Out: Understanding and Disrupting Pathways to Leaving School

Jack's Story

Jack is Caucasian and from a rural high school with a high dropout rate. He is a wiry, intense young man sporting a ragged untrimmed beard and torn shirt. Jack is a voracious reader, loves intellectual argument, and is passionate about music. By the time Jack reached middle school, there were no longer any stable caretakers at home. From the age of 14 onward he essentially raised himself and his younger brother on his own. He worried constantly about his ability to carry out the adult responsibilities that had been thrust upon him. By the tenth grade his academic performance had begun to slip, and what had been sporadic bullying intensified; these factors, in addition to challenges at home, pushed Jack toward dropping out of school.

Early School Years

When I was in first grade probably up until fifth grade I'd say I really looked forward to going to school. Because, to me, it was just a time to hang out with my friends and, you know, do whatever little class work there was, then go out to lunch, recess. Fifth grade was before, you know, being too nerdy made you unpopular. And it was also before everybody was worried about, you know, what everybody looked like or how you dressed -- because we were kids enjoying having time with our friends. And to me that was a treasurable time in my life.

I actually learned how to read before I entered kindergarten. I read *The Matrix* in the third grade. And it took me months because there were words in there, I didn't know what they were. I had to go by what the context was, to try to figure out the definition. I'd just read the sentence over and over again and think, "Okay, that word means something -- what does it mean in this context?" And just based on what they're writing about -- what the characters are saying--this helped me to figure out what the word meant.

My favorite classroom activity, besides reading, was writing. We'd start off every day in third grade with writing. We'd just write about how our day is going or do a free write on something. And just to be able to sit there and write everything out and not feel like I was gonna get in trouble for something I wrote about--that's what I liked. I still am very much into writing.

When I was younger I wanted to be the best at everything because I thought that's how I was supposed to be. It was actually kind of frustrating because I wanted -- at that point in time -- I wanted to learn more. I was just a sponge ready to soak up all this information, and it felt like I was up front everyone else was behind me, and I felt like I had to wait for them to catch up instead of someone helping them out more to catch up to me. So as far as, you know, being born smart and then working hard to learn, I think it's really a mixture of both. You're born with the ability to attain so much knowledge, and then you surpass that level by working harder to gain more knowledge.

Mrs. Miller was my favorite teacher. Because she knew how I was such a bookworm. In the classroom she kept her own personal collection. And she would let me take a book home over the weekend. I'd finish the entire book, bring it back, and get another one. And I did that for my entire first grade year. She was very loving, very caring, very nurturing with everybody and really, you know, encouraged creativity in everybody. And she was by far one of my biggest influences on my creativity. She taught me about music.

Middle School Challenges

Seventh grade was my first year with my band teacher, Mr. Sanchez. He really kind of pointed me in the right direction with music and taught me so much stuff. I really respect him. And our

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band was really good. He seemed like one of the only teachers at that school that really cared about me. Yeah, we just developed a really close relationship.

I was still a good student in middle school. The only class I struggled with was science. For some reason I could never wrap my mind around the concepts of science. Eighth grade was when I first was introduced to the Periodic Table of Elements; everything went right over the top of my head, and I would work and work to try and understand it, but I just never could.

At the time all the classes in middle school were over full. They didn't have enough teachers for all the students. So in my science class there were 34 students for one teacher. And that situation was just out of hand. You could never get one-on-one time with the teacher. Because when you go to raise your hand and ask a question, you're followed by 11 other people. My science teacher was pretty good. There were just not enough hours in the day for him to be able to get to everybody who needed help.

My eighth grade year was actually simple because at that point I knew I was going to get picked on at school because I was a nerd. Kids always try to pick fights with other people. I don't know if it was to show dominance or something. I don't know, but they always started stuff with somebody. There was always drama with somebody. So I avoided everyone, and I just stuck to my class work. And then after school I went straight home, took care of everything there, came back, and did the same thing all over again. But I almost became robotic. My life was just all a schedule. I just did what I had to do and moved on.

Navigating High School

I went from junior high to actual high school in 10th grade. My chances to read were very few and far between, but sophomore year was good in some ways. I had a teacher by the name of Mr. Brown, who was by far the best teacher I had at that high school. And he introduced me to a lot of Shakespearian stuff. I absolutely fell in love with the writing and just the way it was all, you know, phrased. And the subtle, inappropriate things that are in a play just made me chuckle. And that really brought back my love for writing – because that's when I started writing, reading a lot more, writing more poetry and song lyrics and stuff.

Being able to do the work wasn't an issue as long as I was in the classroom. But once I got to like homework and things I had to bring home to do, at that point everything was so crazy there was never any time for it. I'd be rushing last minute –riding the school bus trying to get everything done, and it never worked out. I couldn't work at home, so really the only work I got done was while I was in class.

My older sister had moved out by then, and my mom started drinking. My dad wasn't around much by then. So while she was a mess – I was the oldest person in the house – the oldest kid in the house and I had to – I would get up early to wake my little brother up, make sure he got a shower and after he was done with the shower, I'd take my shower. Feed him breakfast, eat my breakfast, get us off to school. And then I'd have days where I'd come home and then I'd have to take care of my mother, wait for my little brother to get home from school, take care of him – and it pretty much became me raising my mother.

Mr. Brown was the only teacher I ever talked to about what was going on at home. And when I talked originally about dropping out, he actually pulled me aside after class. He sat me down and refused to let me leave the room until I promised him I'd finish my sophomore year.

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I felt, like, “Okay, my home life is a bit hectic, but I can use school as my getaway.” But once I got to high school and found that even there everything was so terrible, I had no getaway. And at that point I turned to drinking. And that just made everything fall to pieces right in front of me.

I didn’t start to skip classes until after winter break. That was the point at which everything was just unbearable, and I started skipping on a regular basis. I would ditch school with my skateboard and go to the mall. At school I couldn’t find any release, couldn’t find any release at home. At the time skateboarding with my headphones on that was the most freedom I ever felt. Because I didn’t have to kick and push, or anything, just cruise around. So at that point, skipping was my release.

At one point I skipped almost two weeks straight and they’d called my dad. He chewed me out and said they were going to possibly take me to truancy court. So for about a month I went to school every day and then I would skip one day out of the week and the next time I’d skip two days out of the week – next week, you know – one day out of the week. I just kept alternating like that. But at the time school was not anymore pleasant for me than home was.

They never brought truancy court up again. I missed up to 40 percent of my classes that second semester. I’m sure the school called home again, but I don’t know if they ever reached anybody. My dad was gone by then, and my mother was drinking so heavily at the time I’d be surprised if she could hear the sound of her own voice.

Early high school I was on the nerdy side. I was a bookworm, and I got picked on a lot. That’s what caused me to leave high school. Like I’d be walking to go to my locker and someone would just put their foot out and trip me. I always thought that only happened in the movies. And it was like everybody tried to fight everybody. When I was in high school, there was a fight every day between somebody, and I got tired of it.

People picking on me continued until I’d say three-quarters of the way through tenth grade, which was when everything that had built up exploded. The wrong group of people decided to mess with me on the wrong day, and I just snapped. I completely lost it. And I’m very much a pacifist. I don’t believe that fighting is necessary in any situation. And the fact that I put hands on another individual shocked me more than it shocked anybody else.

The school was totally aware of what had been happening. I’d been going and telling the principal, telling my counselor – all these people – telling so many people that I was constantly being picked on. The principal and vice principal, they’re very non-active players in the school, I’d have to say. They prefer to just sit in their office and leave it to everybody else to handle. Nobody did anything. I didn’t see what else I could do. I got suspended for two weeks because I stood up for myself after three-quarters of a year of being picked on. Since I threw the first punch, the school just said I had assaulted the others. They threatened to throw me in juvie, but then suspended me instead.

It was like the last month of school and I had been skipping a lot. I came back on the last day of school only to have someone try to pick on me. And I snapped once again and at that point I just knew I couldn’t go back to that school.

I didn’t get into trouble because school had officially ended and I was at the mall right afterwards and then those kids came over and that whole altercation started. So they couldn’t –

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the school was technically out, it wasn't the school year, so I couldn't get in trouble there. But I knew I couldn't be at that school for two more years. So I just never went back.

My teacher, Mr. Brown, had told me about online school before I left. And he said, "... I know you have troubles in a regular school environment, but this is a school, fully accredited and you can get your high school diploma here." This stuck with me because at that time he was the only one whose word I could trust.

I managed to get enrolled at the online school a while later. There you met once a week with the teacher and class through video conferencing, so instead of having to sit through a full day of classes, the rest of the time you did it on your own. It was self-study at your own pace, and they offered a lot more extensive classes than the regular high school did. I just motored through everything so I could get all the credits I needed for my full junior year in just one semester. I completed my senior year, as well, and got my diploma that way.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Originally I had no intention of ever going back to school. But now that I have my diploma I want to go to college. I'm currently applying to schools. I was going to go to community college here near town, but the classes they offer are so limited, and I didn't feel it was enough for me to be able to dedicate myself to going there. I haven't decided whether I want to do literature or psychology as my major. But either way, I want to study both.

I wish someone could have listened to me and done something about what was happening to me. My grandmother tried once to help. She caught me skipping one day and she took me back to her house, and we sat down and talked about everything for a few hours. She offered me a place to live with her, but she didn't have room for both me and my little sister. And she wanted to call and have us both put in foster care, and I wouldn't let her do that. At that point I pretty much just stopped trying to go to people for help.

Someone could have done something about my getting picked on at school, instead of just saying "Well, it happens, it's high school." That was always their excuse. "This is how high school is, it's not easy for everybody. It's high school, deal with it." And to me that wasn't good enough. I had people I was friends with who tried to kill themselves because of stuff that happened in high school – all the bullying. And to me seeing all this happen and the fact that even after – I mean attempted suicide, that's about the biggest cry for help there is in this world. And even after that they don't do anything about it? They don't step up and try to make a change? It's horrible, it's sad, and it seems to be the way of the world anymore. And it's a world I don't understand.