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FURSCA

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End of Summer Report

With my research project “Autistic People’s Experiences with Teacher-Student Emotional Abuse in Public School,” me and my research partner Laura K. Anderson, a PhD student at the University of Northern Colorado, set out to interview autistic survivors (ages 18-26) of emotional abuse from teachers when they were in K-12 public school. As I did research for my literature review, it became clear that no research had been done on it specifically, and no similar research involved interviewing or surveying autistic people. So my study sets out to fill the gap in research. Because me and Laura are both autistic researchers, we knew that this would help potential participants feel more comfortable speaking to us. My goals for this research are for it to capture a better understanding of autistic survivors’ experiences and to center autistic people’s perspectives in research. I want to thank the Robert M. Teeter Research Fellowship Endowment for supporting my research project.

I believe that my research does have a better understanding of autistic survivors’ experiences after interviewing six people so far (and will interview one more person after I send this). So far, I have learned that teachers who emotionally abused autistic students often did it by not only making negative comments of their own, but also by letting other students in class bully the autistic student. All of the participants I interviewed described amplified bullying from other students when the teacher was emotionally abusing them while many participants said that the teacher’s actions encouraged bullying from other students. From this, emotional abuse from teachers can influence how other students view and treat autistic students. Participants shared how part of the emotional abuse from teachers was mistreatment related to their disability. For instance, a participant was called the r word more than once by her teacher and another was often publicly called out for swinging her arms. Furthermore, participants described how the teachers that emotionally abused them would frequently criticize them as lacking femininity in their appearance. Based on these two issues, emotional abuse from teachers frequently involves increased scrutiny of autistic students’ presentation of self. Most participants didn’t report the abuse because they felt they didn’t have power. Those who did report weren’t believed and were told by other teachers and admin that they were making it up or being “dramatic.” Many of them said that school culture was a factor in whether they reported and whether they were believed. Finally, participants attributed developing mental health issues and worsening grades to those experiences and many said that those experiences impacted their decisions about going to college.

My research project is the beginning of what I can do as a disability rights activist after I graduate. Because my research is the first of its kind, I am creating a path for potential future research that autistic researchers can potentially draw upon and explore further in the future, so it may lead to me interacting with more autistic researchers. I will explore giving presentations about the research to disabled audiences in disability rights activism. I will write my honors thesis on this research and plan to present it at the Elkin Isaac Symposium. Laura K. Anderson and I plan to work together on writing up our research findings for academic journals and create a plain language document or presentation that explains our research in accessible language that a wide range of autistic people can read and share within the autistic community and the wider public. This experience has made a difference in my life by connecting me with autistic participants who wanted to share their experiences, which let me know that autistic people trusted me in my work. I have learned that I am good at interviewing people and have improved my skills as an interviewer over the course of the project. Most importantly, I know that I have the skills to see this research project all the way through.