**What Bullied Disabled College Students Experienced**

*A Qualitative Case Study*

Submitted by

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**ABSTRACT**

This case study examines life lived experiences of twelve bullied disabled students at two NJ colleges, Seton Hall and Rutgers University. It is a qualitative descriptive single case study method that was conducted over a semester using open-ended questions. The students interviewed in this case study were expected to share their bullying experiences as disabled students for the purpose of improving the school climate and educational experiences of disabled students. According to the national Center for Disease Control (CDC), bullying is a major public health issue. Their *Bullying Surveillance Among Youth’s report* (2014) states that it is critically important to not only know the magnitude of bullying but to examine the cause, which can lead to the development of strategies to change the risk of being bullied. According to Mortberg (2009) disabled students are vulnerable populations. This case study result depicts the bullying of students because of their disability, and that greater awareness of long-term effects of bullying and disabilities are needed on college campuses.

*Keywords; bullying, students with disabilities, case study.*

**Chapter 1: Introduction**

This case study examines life lived experiences of twelve bullied disabled students at two NJ colleges, Seton Hall and Rutgers University. It is a qualitative descriptive single case study method that was conducted over six months using questionnaires with open-ended questions. The students interviewed were expected to share their bullying experiences as disabled students for the purpose of improving the school climate and educational experience of disabled students. According to the national Center for Disease Control (CDC), bullying is a major public health issue. As per Vivolo-Kantor’s *Bullying Surveillance Among Youth’s,* the 2013 report states that it is crucial to not only know the magnitude of bullying but to examine the cause, which can lead to the development of strategies to change the risk of being bullied. According to Bejerot (2009) disabled students are vulnerable populations. Both colleges we reviewed (Seton Hall and Rutgers University) both have looked at bullying at some point in their histories.

In 2013, Seton Hall, a private college conducted a Colloquium on Bullying which focused on the discrimination of those who are different. This event opened a real conversation in real life situations on bullying.

Rutgers, a public college had increased focus on bullying since 2010 when a bullying situation that led to a suicide of one of their students, the late Tyler Clementi. Clementi was bullied by his peers due to his sexual orientation, and the responsible students faced federal charges for their actions. As a result, New Jersey’s Senators proposed an enhanced federal anti-bullying legislation. To eliminate bullying and harassment of students New Jersey schools including colleges should adopt a policy or issue a code of conduct to deal with complaints and incidents of harassment (N.J.STAT. ANN.18A:37-13.2(West 2013)).

As Michaelis (2015) demonstrated bullying of anyone is never a harmless crime. Examples of students with disabilities bullied that have received national attention including the bullying of a high school student from Frontier High School in Bakersfield California)

Other examples on the college level which are more local include a freshman Iowa State student named Brittni Wendling who has Larsen Syndrome. She was videotaped using a Triad scooter to class and was mocked openly by a peer. She wrote an open letter on bullying to make people more aware of college bullying which was published in 2016..

***Statement of the Problem***

One of the problems being focused on more and more colleges is how academic achievements and behaviors affect college campuses in particular for those who are disabled and bullied. This study can help give a better insight on how bullying is experienced in a public and private college setting. This is why selecting a public and private college made the most sense as part of our research to cover the spectrum.

***Purpose***

The case study is to understand, identify, and analyze the cause/effects of bullying of disabled students. Also, develop a strategy to curb bullying and provide a safe support system.

By seeking answers from subjects can be applied to other students to make a more positive school climate and improve the academic experiences of disabled students. Keeping that idea in mind the researcher has identified the following three central research questions:

* *How are disabled students bullied on college campuses in New Jersey?*
* *What are the differences in experiences at public or private colleges?*
* *What strategies and support systems are needed to curb bullying for disabled students?*

***Limitation***

Areas that may be out of the researcher’s control that may impact the study include Truthful responses from the subjects. Some disabilities like Autism Spectrum Disorders make awareness of being bullied limited which may result in underreporting. Replication of results

***Delimitation***

Areas that were considered that may impact the study are sample size: decision to conduct semi structured interviews with twelve students. The researcher chose not to do a quantitative study using surveys because the research wanted to get a more in-depth insight of the experiences of bullied disabled students. The researcher chose only Disabled individuals registered with school's disability services – there may be other disabled students on campus who have not self-identified. The researcher chose not to limit the disabled student pool to students with invisible disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder diagnoses, but to use all disabled students visible, wheelchair, blind, hearing aids, etc. The researcher did not review the specific literature to other identified victimized groups of students LGBT, and minorities which are mentioned along with disabled as vulnerable groups unless the literature combined. The researcher chose not to use focus groups although more subjects would be sampled because the nature of the effects of bullying may be difficult to discuss in open forums

***Assumptions***

As Creswell (2012) states disability theories, assumes disabled students are a separate group to be considered. A Worldview Transformative research will lead to improvement of lives of disabled studies in a post-secondary setting. (Creswell P.10) discusses an oppressed group, being disabled and being bullied both can be applied. Students with disabilities are bullied because of their disability.

***Audience***

The researcher believes the results of the study will be of interest to a broad group of persons, students, parents, disability support service staffs, college administrations, student groups and counseling services at colleges.

**Chapter 2: *Literature Review***

Numerous dissertations, scholarly articles, journals, and websites exist covering the issues of disability, bullying in society particularly in grammar and high schools. The phenomenon of disabled students who attend college being bullied reveals much less. A search of Proquest Dissertations, Proquest Central, Google Scholar and other scholarly databases showed there is little research available to disabled students being bullied on college campuses. Many general articles are referenced about Tyler Clementi, Rutgers University’s student suicide in 2010 after he was bullied for his sexual orientation.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention CDC issued a significant research effort *Bullying Surveillance among Youth: Definitions for Public Health and Data Elements* in 2014.The researchers. Vivolo-Kantor, R M, Hamburger M.E.& Lumpkin, C.D approach bullying by scientific methods to understand it and find strategies to prevent it before it starts. They indicate that a standard definition of bullying must be arrived at to distinguish it from other forms of aggression. Particularly they focus on the power imbalance and expand the types of bullying. Their definition says Bullying is the unwanted aggressive behaviors by people who are not siblings that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times. Modes include direct and indirect; types verbal physical and property who were bullied. They discuss the work of Carter and Spencer (2006) which researched and concluded that youths with disabilities are bullied more than their peers most useful they developed a disability coding system for fourteen types of disabilities (p35) after defining bullying and collecting data on who is impacted. The third part of their research which they believe is equally important is to understand the why of it. The previous research by Olweus (2003) who developed the bullying survey is presented andthey conclude by recommending more studies which would fit into qualitative case study approach.

# Gellar,Shefcyk,and Reichow (2014) provided research literature on college students with autism spectrum disorder summarized in poster sessions by Voices of College Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, on experiences at the University of Connecticut. Gellar did a systematic review of articles describing experiences of college and university students and supported required. These researchers found twenty pieces of which only two met the criteria for case studies and eighteen additional studies examined disabled students issues from anxiety to depression both of which may be factors in this research. Only sixty -nine students were included in these studies again supporting the need for more research with more participants.

# Looking to peer reviewed articles by Van Hees, Valerie; Moyson, Tinneke; Roeyers, Herbert (June 2015) discussed 23 students with ASD who participated in a grounded theory semi structured interview study that researched their Higher Education Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Challenges, Benefits and Support Needs and concluded while this article did not discuss bullying it did examine transitions, difficulties experienced by students and supported needed. Based on grounded theory the results and recommendation align with what supports are needed for students who are bullied.

# Due to the lack of literature the researcher reviewed conference proceedings based on research. Bullying was the focus by national groups such as the American Education al research association who in 2013 issued a report on Bullying in Schools, Colleges and Universities which was presented at its 94th conference and included a Case Brief on Bullying and Peer Victimization among Vulnerable Populations. The task force that developed these findings included eight colleges and universities nationwide among which was Rutgers University. AERA is the largest professional organization devoted to scholarly research to education. There intent was also to develop strategies to prevent bullying. The Conference Proceedings Presentation of Bullying in College and Universities Brief had two findings related to this case study:

# (Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011; Rose & Espelage, 2012). “Students with disabilities are twice as likely to be identified as perpetrators and victims as are students without disabilities and (Wallace, Anderson, Bartholomay, & Hupp, 2002; White & Loeber, 2008).”

# This is consistent for example that students with autism may be victimized more (Bejerot & Mörtberg, 2009), and students with learning disabilities may be victimized less, than other subgroups of students with disabilities.

# Another issue in the literature review was the legal and practice considerations. Already mentioned was the Rutgers situation which sparked the 2010 Federal Anti-Bullying Legislation. Kramer, Alex 2015 examines NJ Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. Maag, J. W., & Katsiyannis, A. (2012). Examined Bullying and students with disabilities: Legal and practice considerations. This study examines the legal issues surrounding incidences of bullying of disabled students as anti-discriminatory based on their disability. Title 2 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 prohibited discrimination based on disability and goes on to examine evidence-based practice employed by schools and colleges to increase teachers understanding of bullying Smith et al (2004). The response by colleges and universities to these mandates lends itself to the researcher's investigation of how bullying is handled at private and public institutions.

# *Summary*

# The Literature review supports students with disabilities are more likely to be bullied. There is not sufficient research to date on the experience of disabled college students who are bullied. An examination of the why of bullying within schools and the legal responses required to the incidents as well as supports required dealing with and respond to the bullying incidents will lend itself to identifying strategies to stop the bullying on campuses.

**Chapter 3: The Methodology**

As noted in the literature stated above disabled students are more vulnerable to being bullied. The researcher wanted to understand this issue better. What was the life lived experiences of college students with disabilities being bullied? Also, how they cope and reach out for help after being a victim?

***Research design***

The design chosen by the researcher is a Case Study. It describes a case study as "An in-depth exploration of a bounded by time and activity based on data collection” Creswell (2014) p14 (Stake 1995: Yin, 2009, 2012).

***Rationale for Method***

Creswell (2014) discusses the qualitative approach that lends itself to the researcher's study. The philosophical framework is the transformative worldview, using a narrative design accomplished by open-ended questions. This type of research lends itself to the examination of oppression of individuals which fits both the disabled and bullied student. Through the use of interviewing and gathering information on the life experiences of these students an in-depth insight and themes can emerge on their oppression as bullied individuals Creswell (2014).

***Instrument***

An open-ended questionnaire was administered to the twelve students at the two (multi) sites campuses. According to Barriball and While (1994), semi-structured interviews are suitable for the exploration of respondent’s perceptions and opinions regarding complex and sensitive issues. The subject of bullying is both complex and sensitive.

**Population & Setting**

Seton Hall is a Catholic suburban campus located in South Orange NJ. It has 5000 full-time students. 1% of its students are registered with Disability Services. It has a Student-led organization Student Disability Awareness founded in 2008. Rutgers, the State University, is located in New Brunswick NJ. It has an on-campus population more than 50,000 students and a Disability Service Department. Tyler Clementi, a freshman student in 2010 committed suicide after being bullied. Federal legislation has been adopted because of this incident

**Study Sample**

Students on both campuses were selected using a purposefully sampling method Creswell p.189 describes this as being the best participants to help the researcher understand the research question. To do this, the researcher chose two college campuses where bullied disabled students were enrolled.

***Researchers Role, Position in the Study, and Biases***

The hypothesis for this research stemmed from the researcher’s personal experiences. The researcher has experience in the field. The researcher has a diagnosed disability, attended an NJ college where he witnessed bullying of disabled students. Further, the researcher has spoken on the experience of being bullied as a disabled student in grade school to college students in NJ, Ohio, California, and Pennsylvania. The Researcher has also presented at Conferences in Dubai and Florida on this topic. As a result of these presentations, disabled college students have shared their experiences on their campuses with the researcher which adds to the investigator's field of knowledge. To remove any bias that the researcher has because of this prior knowledge to validate the study findings, a second researcher was asked to review the study's findings. The students were not told that the researcher was disabled or that he had been bullied.

***Procedures***

Resources for this study will be primary sources. After approval by NJCU's Institutional Review Board, the Disability Support Services DSS departments at both colleges were approached for participation. A study invitation was sent electronically to all registered disabled students by them. The student must have a recognized diagnosed disability. The letter stated that participants must have been bullied at some time in their college experiences. Students who responded were screened by telephone. 12 students responded from two schools. After hearing the purpose of the study all agreed to be interviewed and participate. The researcher conducted field visits to both campuses and reviewed Qualitative documents from Student newspapers for incidents of bullying. Researcher spoke briefly with the Director of Disability Services about requirements to report incidents to comply with the federal legislation of the NJ *Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights* (2010) targeting public schools, and colleges reported incidents of bullying by disabled students and efforts by the schools to raise awareness of disabilities among the general student population. Rooms for test taking at the office of Disability Services offices were arranged for the interviews. Each interview was administered and lasted one to two hours. The interview was audio taped to be transcribed later. Since the researcher has a writing disability dysgraphia, limited notes were taken by hand but notes were taken on an Ipad, and a note taker was present. When concluded the results of the interview were sent to be transcribed and a transcript was returned to the students for verification before coding. NVIVO software programs were utilized for axial deductive coding. Responses that were inconsistent with the questions asked were eliminated.

The list below is the questions asked to answer the central phenomena.

***Research Questions:***

1. How did the bullying start for you?
2. What are some of the situations where you were bullied in college?
3. How are disabled college students bullied?
4. What was the student’s perception on being bullied due to their disability?
5. What differences in experiences of being bullied at public or private colleges?
6. What were the impacts and side effects on their academic and / or emotional state of mind?
7. Whom or Where did they reach out for support?
8. How were you bullied since becoming a college student?
9. What are the most common forms of bullying on a college setting?
10. Do you consider yourself as having a visible or invisible disability
11. Do you believe you were bullied due to your disability?
12. Are there awareness programs for bullying at each college?
13. Are students with disabilities more likely to report bullying at each college?
14. How would you think the bullying would differ for you if you were living off campus if you live on campus?
15. What is a time where you were bullied strictly because of your disability?
16. What support do you believe should be offered to stop bullying on campuses or assist students in dealing with the incidents?

***Data Organization***

The researcher organized all data concerning the study into a file before beginning the interviews. An interview protocol was developed for consistency. Qualitative descriptive interviews are unstructured and open ended questions that are few and intended to elicit views and opinions from participants. The researcher noted the time and place of the interview and any interaction with the subjects. Any Qualitative documents, personal journals, diaries, letters and emails sent to him were included. Field notes were cataloged Creswell (2014).

***Data analysis***

Since the study took place over a series of months, some steps were happening simultaneously as interviews were still ongoing while data collection and analysis was conducted. The researcher's study results were segmented, and bracketing took place. A computer coding program NVIVO was used Coding of themes in conversations.

Step1 Organize and prepare the data

Step2 Review all the data

Step3 Coding the data- labeling (emerge during the data analysis) (qualitative codebook)

Step4 Use codes to determine themes for analysis

Step5 Describe themes using narratives

Step6 Interpretation of the findings, call for further study or action in transformative worldview.

As listed above labeling of data was dependent on emerging themes that come out of the analysis (Creswell 2014 p. 194-200). Creswell identified the steps in coding on Table 9.4 which Tesch (1990) developed. Among them are three categories of codes on topics that are expected, surprising or unusual. Reading and re-reading of the transcripts provided the best approach. The more familiar the researcher becomes with the transcripts, the easier it was to determine if new categories or themes emerge. The researcher used a qualitative preliminary codebook and allowed additional categories to be added from which tables can be developed with information on each subject. Interpretation of the data the research findings and analysis in this study as stated in Creswell (2014) used Wolcott's (1994) approach by stating further questions consistent with the transformative approach to create findings that can be utilized for an action agenda to help disabled bullied students.

***Ethical Considerations***

Data was not stored in any linked database that would compromise the privacy of students or violate student rights under FERPA. Immediately after the interview, researcher secured the audio tapes. All of the research was done in an Open and honest, confidential manner. The researcher obtained informed consent and employed principal that no harm would come to the participants. The researcher expected accurate responses from students and was fair and accurate in his observations**.**

***Standards of quality***

Myburgh, and Poggenpoel (2008) published in the South African Psychiatry Review ed a comprehensive guide for standards of quality in Qualitative methods from which the quality standards are drawn.

***Truth Value***

Apart from the questionnaire presented by the researcher, he has also spent ample of time in the field to gather a sense of the campuses. To validate and verify the conditions in which the bullying occurs the researcher kept a journal. Triangulation of data from different sources was applied after the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, the transcripts were submitted for member checking and student verification. Applicable information is provided that another researcher can utilize a similar process this is accomplished by providing a full description method with quotes from the studied participants.

***Applicability***

To allow another researcher to conduct a similar study a clear description of the demographics of the participants should be provided. There should be direct quotations from the participants.

***Consistency***

It allows the methodology to be used to reach similar conclusions using dense descriptions. This allows the study to be replicated.

***Dependability***

The strategy used here is conformability, which is a form of auditing of the evidence.

***Neutrality***  refers to the research being free from researcher bias.

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**Appendix A**

Adapted Introduction Letter

Source: Study Introduction Letter Template For Participants. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.seattlechildrens.org/doc/study-introduction-letter-template-for-part

April 4, 2017

Jane Smith

Seton Hall University  
Rutgers University

Dear Ms. Smith

My name is Kerry Magro. I am a doctoral candidate at New Jersey City University located in Jersey City, New Jersey. I am currently conducting a research study on bullying of disabled students at two New Jersey colleges, Rutgers and Seton Hall University.

I am contacting you because you responded to an email sent by your Disability Support Services to be part of this study.Our research centers on bullying that occurs on college campuses. The question we are asking is how your experience of being bullied affected you as a disabled student. . Your experiences can help us understand this issue better and contribute to making a difference in the lives of other college students.

More and more disabled students are attending colleges, and we want to examine the university climate on two schools public and private in New Jersey to help students succeed and eliminate barriers. You are under no obligation to participate. We are looking for students:

* 18 years old
* Classified as a disabled student
* Self-identify that you were the victim of bullying while a college student
* Registered with Disability Services on your campus
* If applicable, the researcher will conduct an interview that will take one to two hours
* The interview may be audio recorded
* You may bring any journals, diaries that would help you answer the interview questions
* Your individual participation (name) will be kept confidential;

The interviews would take place on campus at a time convenient for you. The study will answer the question of how you were bullied by an open-ended questionnaire. After the interview,the researcher will send you a copy of a transcript for you to verify that the researcher caught what you said accurately. Your information will be kept confidential. There will be no names in the findings.There is no cost to participate in the study. If you are still interested you may reach me by email at kerrymagro@gmail.com. Please let me know if you have any questions. You can also call me at 201-360-7819. Taking part in research is voluntary. You will not be compensated monetarily. However, your participation can help make a difference in your life and the lives of other disabled students on your campus.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kerry Magro, MA

New Jersey City University

Doctoral Candidate

[kerrymagro@gmail.com](mailto:kerrymagro@gmail.com)

Study Introduction Letter Template For Participants. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.seattlechildrens.org/doc/study-introduction-letter-template-for-parttps://www.seattlechildrens.org/doc/study-introduction-letter-template-for-part

**Appendix B**

A sample table of findings from Experiences of Disabled Students on College Campuses

https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/7027122/file/7027143.pdf www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25448918

**Higher Education Experiences of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Challenges, Benefits and Support Needs**

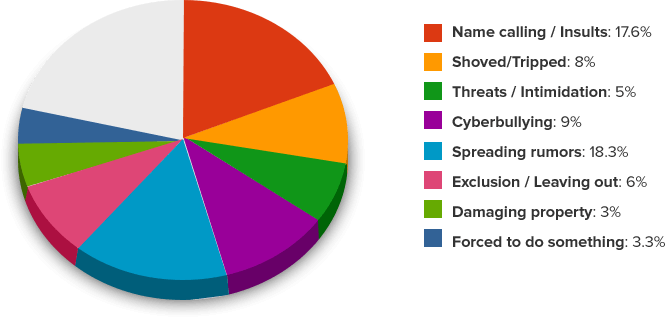
|  |
| --- |
| **Recommendations for those with autism and other disabilities to succeed in college** |
| **A personalized approach** |
| **A safe and transparent environment with sufficient planning and clear communication** |
| **Academic accommodations** |
| **Coaching in education, student life, and daily living** |
| **Adequate psychosocial support** |
| **Leisure activities and a sufficient amount of rest** |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Benefits** | **Mental health issues** | **Challenges** |
| **Active memory** | **Stress** | **Struggle with new situations and unexpected changes** |
| **Focus precision/dedication** | **Anxiety** | **Exhausting but necessary social contacts** |
| **Analytical/observation skills** | **Depression** | **Time manangement in fits and starts** |
| **Sincere** | **Fatigue** | **Doubts about disclosure** |
| **Willingness to listen to others** | **Feeling overwhelmed** |  |
|  | **Loneliness** |  |

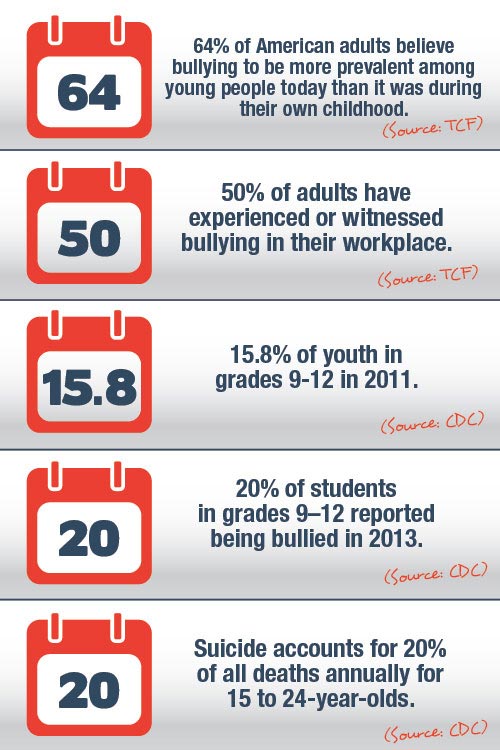
**Appendix C**

Bullying Awareness Guidebook of School-Aged Children

http://www.accreditedschoolsonline.org/bullying-awareness-guidebook/



Tyler Clementi Bullying Foundation Statistics



<http://tylerclementi.org/bullying-stats/>