

**Grace R.**

Saint Cloud, Minnesota

Untitled

Textiles, Printmaking

My final project is more than a tapestry; it is a tribute to the beauty and uniqueness of each individual. As viewers engage with the details and varied elements within the artwork, I hope they find inspiration to embrace themselves and appreciate the beauty that emerges when we make space for authenticity and neurodiversity in a world that often demands conformity.

The foundation of my final project began with the organic process of natural dyeing. I used pomegranates, onion skins, avocado skins, and sunflower seeds. These materials helped me create a rich and earthy palette for my canvas. I incorporated printmaking into my tapestry as well. My prints are of tree stumps, flowers, hummingbirds, and abstract lines. The rings within the tree stumps represent continuous growth, capturing the essence of life in all its varied shapes and forms. The prints of the woman, covered in vines, symbolize the healing and growing stages of the human body and mind. The vines depict the strength and resilience inherent to overcoming challenges. The hummingbirds, with their delicate yet enduring nature, embody perseverance. These prints come together to form a collection of visual stories and serve as an introduction to who I am outside of the societal expectations to be “normal.”

# The Kaleidoscope of Neurodiversity Surviving a Normal World



Grace R.

The Oxbow School

OS49

*Author's Note: For a moment, I ask you to imagine yourself in a society. Now imagine everyone, except for you, is handed a handbook explaining to them how that society operates. You, on the other hand, were given a different handbook. One laced with its own sets of instructions for how to go about thriving in society, but you are still expected to follow all of the instructions in the other handbook. How do you do that without access to the other handbook?*

*For most of us, we don't. Most of the world we know today is made for a typical type of brain and the way that it operates. Many aspects of society are in fact set up specifically so visual thinkers and neurodiverse people fail. Especially within our education system. Schools force students to learn a "one size fits all" curriculum that focuses heavily on G.P.As and test scores to assess a student's worth.*

*All throughout high school, I struggled with each of my classes. Especially math and English. Whereas everyone else could pass the algebra II quizzes my teacher gave each week, I often could not. Not without the help of a tutor and spending countless hours outside of class to learn the material. Math was always too abstract for me. My brain did not learn as quickly as everyone else, stress affected my ability to retain the information I needed to pass, and I could never focus while in class.*

*At the beginning of my junior year, my algebra II teacher told the class that there is always one student that ends up dropping the class. My heart sank to the floor as everyone else erupted in laughter as they joked about who it would be. But I already knew the answer. A month in, I could not keep up. I was the junior in a class full of sophomores unable to complete the in-class homework because I could not focus and the questions on the board seemed entirely different from the problems we learned yesterday. Every step I took towards learning the material, the class took three more forward and I was always behind.*

*My tutor, mentor, friend, and honorary grandmother, Mrs. Benson, taught me how to learn math visually. She drew diagrams, went over questions twice if not three times so I could really understand, and she prioritized helping me understand the material rather than just ace a test. In fact, despite my efforts outside of school to understand what I was learning, I still often failed. But she didn't care. She saw that I was learning despite my grades. She taught me that the true measure of education isn't what grades a student gets today: it's the lessons and passions you take with you into the real world.*

*English class was a similar experience. Other students often made fun of me because I struggled to spell. Even now when I am asked to spell something or write a word down almost always the letters are never in the right place. Each assignment I completed was handed back to me covered in red marker, and I often refused to read in class because the letters and words bounced across the page in colorful whispers only I could hear. Making it difficult to read with ease. The words on the page weren't just symbols; they were vibrant hues and emotional landscapes that made the stories come alive in my mind. Sometimes it was overstimulating, other times it was a superpower. Despite my struggles, I learned to appreciate the beauty of language in a way that transcended a conventional learning experience. Yet my teachers and schoolmates still struggled to understand.*

*All throughout primary school I faced many more moments where I felt like I was constantly being knocked down over and over again. I could not seem to stay afloat. No matter what I did I was always on the verge of drowning and I often found myself thinking, is this the moment I fully go under? Education shouldn't make anyone feel this way and it doesn't have to.*

*Students are the future. Students make up a variety of people who all think, operate, learn, and achieve differently. The current education system is failing the future by excluding*

*diverse students, expecting them to change the way their brain works in order to conform to a specific learning style, and prioritizing grades over recognizing individual potential. I found individualized support, more time to reinforce learning and less distractions helpful while learning in school. However, I sought out the support I needed outside of where it should have always been. It is the responsibility of the education system and teachers to meet the needs of neurodiverse students in order to help them thrive in school. In addition to general education, having educators trained in teaching students with learning differences would allow for a more inclusive educational experience for all students.*

*I invite others to contemplate the richness and importance of the neurodiverse spectrum. My poem below is an objection to education that fails to nurture me and a protest against societal expectations to be “normal.” My final project serves as an introduction to who I am, a window into my mind, a visual language and a tapestry of the neurodiverse experience.*

## Everything “Normal” Says Not To Be

I started running towards "Normal" when my lungs first filled with air.

It did not take long for my feet to become heavy,

Weighing me down as I trip,

Over and over again trying to "fit in."

With each step, Normal remains where it has always been,

Far away, out of reach, a distant expectation, dozens of feet ahead.

The path “Normal” walks is uneven and unkind.

Yet, I am yanked along, my hands bound;

I become the puppet, “Normal” is the master.

Once again, my mind is not my own;

Instead, it is far from my soul.

The path I am forced to rise to belongs to "Normal."

I can't catch up. Not because I am behind; I am not.

I just don't stand where “Normal” stands.

I just don't think how “Normal” thinks.

And I just don't learn how “Normal” learns.

In society's eyes, “Normal” will always be ahead of me,

And I will always be behind.

We didn't start at the same beginning;

the ending will be no different.

But I still chase forward.

I do not know Normal; I know me.

I am me in a world that puts Normal first.

The pain I feel is what remains of my path I try to forge.

At the finish line, what falls by the wayside

Is a child that is sensitive to everything.

A child that can't wear certain clothes,

Always the ones that bother my toes.

A child that is afraid of loud noises

Labeled too "sensitive"

And forced to hide her emotions.

Behind Normal, beyond being enough,

Is a child who learns in color

Who wears her sensitivity as a badge of honor

A child who is everything Normal says not to be

Yet, a child I dream to be, free and authentically me.

I am a child that was taught to run from her mind.

But I no longer hide;

I forge my own path far, far away from Normal's.

While normalcy escapes my grasp,

I embrace the whispers of my vibrant path.

In the kaleidoscope of neurodiversity,

I embrace the colorful tapestry of my mind

Refusing to conform to the grayscale expectations of a "Normal" world.

In the colorful tapestry of my mind, Normal asks, "When will you become like me?"

"Not today, Normal," I reply.

"Why not?" Normal questions.

"Because Normal, I live in a world with magenta Wednesdays, labyrinths of colorful numbers,  
and a vibrant mind that refuses to be confined,"

"Let me introduce you to me," I reply.



## Works Cited

Mooney, Jonathan. *Normal Sucks: How to Live, Learn, and Thrive Outside the Lines*. St. Martin's Griffin, 2020.

“Normal Sucks” by Jonathan Mooney challenges societal norms and perceptions of normalcy particularly within the context of education and neurodiversity. Mooney shares a well written inside perspective of what it is like to learn differently in our current education system. He discusses his personal experience with a learning disability and advocates for embracing diversity by redefining what is considered normal. I found certain chapters from this novel helpful for researching neurodiversity in education because it addresses the limitations of the standardized education system and the repercussions students face as a result of the societal construct of “normal.”

Grandin, Temple, and Betsy Lerner. *Visual Thinking: The Hidden Gifts of People Who Think in Pictures, Patterns, and Abstractions*. Riverhead Books, 2023.

“Visual Thinking” by Temple Grandin discusses the experience of living with autism and the importance of sensory processing. Throughout her writing she refers to research she conducted about the brain and how it communicates. The book overall discusses reframing the narrative around autism, animals, emotion, and thought. When searching for sources to use for research, I was drawn to reading Visual Thinking because it advocates and celebrates the special minds of visual thinkers. I think of myself as a visual thinker so reading through parts of the book helped me better understand what it means which I think is important to understanding and writing about neurodiversity.

Wexler, Natalie. *The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System--and How to Fix It*. Avery, 2020.

“The Knowledge Gap” by Natalie Wexler is a book that shows the way to creating a more inclusive and fair education system. Wexler delves into the critical issue of the knowledge gap in elementary education, offering insightful strategies to bridge the divide between mere learning and genuine comprehension. By advocating for a more inclusive approach, the book becomes a guide for seeking transformative changes within elementary schools. Wexler's exploration highlights the urgency of addressing this gap to foster a system that nurtures true understanding and empowers every student.

Sousa, David A. *How the Special Needs Brain Learns*. Corwin Press, 2007.

“How the Special Needs Brain Learns” by David Sousa is a resource providing an overview of learning disabilities and ways to adapt simple and complex learning strategies for students with learning differences. Sousa's writing discusses the latest developments in neuroscience and explores understanding and how to support individuals with special needs. The book delves into the diverse spectrum of learning disabilities, shedding light on the challenges students face and offering insights for educators and parents. From cognitive differences to effective teaching methods, I found “How the Special Needs Brain Learns” to be a valuable guide for creating inclusive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of every learner.

Jerome Schultz, Ph.D. “Why School Stress Is Devastating for Children.” *ADDitude*, ADDitude, 13 Sep. 2021, [www.additudemag.com/why-school-stress-is-harmful-to-kids/](http://www.additudemag.com/why-school-stress-is-harmful-to-kids/).

“Why School Stress Is Devastating for Children” is an article by Jerome Schultz discussing the effects of stress in early childhood and education. The author informs the reader about its impact on brain function and how the school system caters to a particular learner excluding the varying needs and differences of neurodiverse students. Schultz addresses how stress adds another level of difficulty to the many challenges neurodiverse children face as students. Just when they need their brain for learning, stress causes them to shut down. Schultz advocates for more learning environments that focus on success rather than risk of failure to prevent stressful learning environments which hinder diverse students' ability to succeed in the classroom.