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## **Equality and Difference: Discrimination Against Diverse Individuals and Groups**

### Food for Thought

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.”

*Audre Lorde*

Humans, by nature, react to difference with distrust and fear, especially when the difference is not well understood. Their defensive response to this fear is to try to assert superiority and to oppress. This can be seen throughout human history. In our advanced, highly diverse nation where this natural reaction is now extremely maladaptive and destructive to the functioning of individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole, it is critical that we work against it and actively seek to correct it.

In that effort, we have made tremendous progress over the past 60 years in recognizing individuals according to their ethnicity; promoting gender equality; supporting second language acquisition in schools; helping individuals with cultural differences acculturate and integrate into the education system, communities, and workforce; establishing policies and procedures to ensure equal opportunity in education and the work force; working to eliminate harassment, bullying, and abuse based on diversity or minority status; accommodating and providing services for individuals with disabilities; barring segregation; promoting social justice for those with nonstandard sexual identities and orientations; etc. Unfortunately, in our strong push towards tolerance, acceptance, and equal opportunity, we have created another equally oppressive and even farther reaching form of discrimination as we narrowly seek to define “equal” as “same.”

As we outwardly work to tolerate diversity and promote equality, we continue to fail to appreciate diversity and support differences. Many diverse people are now receiving the message, “You can be different, that’s great, but you have to act like us, meet our expectations, and fit in according to our standards.” In the name of equality our expectations and standards are becoming increasingly narrow, and more and more people are left out or rejected because of their true differences.

This phenomenon can be seen most clearly in the education system where it begins and becomes established, where different behaviors are becoming more and more unacceptable regardless of cause, and all children are expected to fit into and achieve according to an increasingly narrow range of abilities and standards regardless of their individual differences and sometimes even without due consideration of their

developmental levels. Recent federal Civil Rights Collections Data from the Education Department indicated that black preschool students are 3.6 times more likely to be suspended from school than their white peers (National Education Association, *The Opening Bell*, 6/8/16). These and other students of color are three- and four-year-old children whose behavior reflects the minority culture of their family and community. They have not yet been acculturated into the dominant-culture education system, and even as they progress through school they will always maintain cultural and individual differences. Students who are unable to meet the dominant-culture standards and adults who are unable to meet society's expectations due to diverse characteristics and abilities are receiving the message that they are of less value or inadequate, that something is wrong with them, that their behavior or performance is unacceptable, and that they do not belong. The abilities they have are not recognized or developed, and their potential for success according to their unique characteristics is degraded and downtrodden.

The same national data report indicated that black and Latino students also have significantly less access to advanced coursework and are more likely to attend schools with larger concentrations of inexperienced teachers than their white counterparts. In general, the data clearly showed that students of color, students whose first language is not English, and students with disabilities do not receive opportunity equal to their white peers for a quality education in this nation, yet it is within the education system and the schools that lifetime attitudes, expectations, standards, and opportunities are established across all settings. A recent study by Vanderbilt University (January 2016) indicated that white teachers recommend gifted programming for black students who demonstrate high academic performance at about 50% the rate of recommendations for gifted programming for white students, while black teachers demonstrate no differentiation in referral rates.

Children of all forms of diversity demonstrate all levels of abilities in addition to their cultural differences, and within their diverse groups are able to achieve at the same levels as children of the dominant culture – the normal distribution of abilities applies to all minority and majority groups regardless of other diverse characteristics. Unfortunately, even the equal opportunity in which we take such pride and tout as a star for our nation is not really carried out in actual practice; instead, it is assumed that diverse people are less capable and less worthy, and the limited opportunities relegated to them serve only to support, enforce, and perpetuate this diminutive expectation. Then we degrade and marginalize them for not being able to achieve according to our standards, and the vicious cycle continues.

When it comes down to it, being different is normal. We all have our differences, both subculture differences and individual strengths and weaknesses. Our diversity is what make societies work, and what has allowed our nation to be so successful. This author is a woman, not a man, and in that she is very different from a man and maintains a different role within her family and community, doing things her husband does not do well at all – in his different role he does things she could not, both are critical for the success of the family, and they work very well together. The same can be said of the respective roles of men and women in our society when our differences are recognized, appreciated, and upheld, with both neither less than nor greater than the other.

Jose and D'Onte are not white. Their cultural differences allow them to fill roles, contribute to organizational and team processes, and add to the richness of our communities and society in ways that white men alone cannot. Jim is an excellent auto mechanic, but would never have made it through medical school, and everyone knows the school custodian and secretary are the most influential people on campus. Kathleen's quadriplegic husband, Ken, was not able-bodied at all, yet he was highly intelligent and performed very well in his managerial career with accommodations. Kathleen chose to make caring for Ken and raising her daughter her top priorities and did not complete college. Ken maintained the best quality of life possible under his circumstances, and her daughter is now a healthy, productive, well-adjusted young adult. Kathleen has also been very well respected and appreciated in the various support staff and case management positions she has held in state agencies, positions that are as important for the successful functioning of the agencies as any others.

We all have critical roles and make important contributions to the functioning of our society, but in very different ways. Why do all of us have to be like white, male, able-bodied engineers and doctors to be considered equal? As important as all of our roles and contributions are, in whatever manner or capacity, why are we not all considered of equal value and treated accordingly?

The structure, functioning, and success of our society depends on the active participation of members with an extremely wide range of characteristics and abilities. Every role is critical, from the simplest to the most advanced; the rote, the creative, and the technical; the artistic and the empirical; the social and nurturing as well as the logical and analytic. We are all diverse – no one is the same. We all have unique patterns of strengths and weaknesses that enable us to succeed in our own ways, filling roles and contributing to our communities and society according to our own characteristics and abilities, when our uniqueness in whatever form it manifests is recognized, appreciated, supported, and valued.

“Equality” must be redefined as “equal value” rather than “same.” All forms, levels, and types of diversity must be fully understood, appreciated, fostered, and incorporated into the intricately woven fabric of our society. In doing this all roles will be optimally fulfilled and their importance and contributions recognized, all people will be accepted and valued, all will achieve and contribute to their full potential, and our nation will reach the levels of equality, performance, and achievement towards which it is striving.