# Can You See Me?: Navigating Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging in the Classroom

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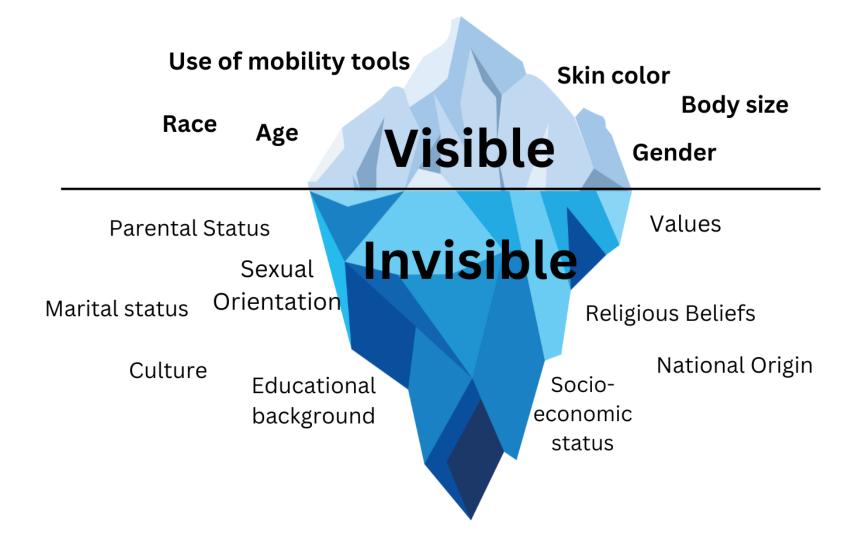
## ABSTRACT

This session challenges common perceptions of diversity, exploring both visible and invisible aspects of personal identity often overlooked in discussions. It emphasizes understanding the complex intersections of personal characteristics and experiences that shape individual identities. Addressing the challenge of safe disclosure, it highlights the educator's role in supporting diverse students and advocates for a belonging-focused approach in classrooms. By embracing diverse personal identities, inclusivity is fostered, aligning with the universal human need to belong. Participants gain insights into redefining diversity, addressing challenges in disclosure, and fostering belonging in educational settings.

## INTRODUCTION

Diversity refers differences within a group, organization, or society. These differences can include things like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, and more (Servaes et al., 2022) Some degrees of diversity are visible, meaning they are readily apparent and easily identifiable, such as skin tone or use of a mobility device. Other traits are assumed based on visual cues, like race, gender and age. Some degrees of diversity, however, are not immediately visible and may require more in-depth exploration or disclosure by individuals. Examples include sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, and cognitive diversity. Intersectionality acknowledges that our visible and invisible traits intersect and intertwine to shape our unique experiences and identities within systems of power and privilege.

## PROBLEM

Assumptions about people's identities often lead to tokenism and stereotyping, perpetuating misunderstandings and barriers to inclusion.

- **Safe Disclosure:** Invisible identities can be shared, but not all environments foster safety. How can educators cultivate safe spaces where students feel empowered to authentically express themselves?
- **Synonym Challenge:** Finding an adequate synonym for "identity" proves difficult, reflecting the complexity and uniqueness of each individual's experience.
- **Statistics:** Data reveals the prevalence and intersectionality of invisible disabilities and diverse identities within the LGBTQIA2A+ community (Engelbrecht & de Beer, 2022).



## GOALS

- **Embracing Belonging:** Cultivate an inclusive classroom where every student feels they belong.
- **Maslow's Hierarchy:** Recognizing belonging as a fundamental human need, we aim to prioritize this aspect of student well-being (Jiang, 2022).
- **From Safe to Welcoming Space:** Create an environment where students feel comfortable sharing their identities without judgment.
- **Expand Awareness:** Foster understanding of both self-identity and the diversity of others.
- **Unity in Diversity:** Celebrate diversity and create opportunities for bonding over shared similarities, fostering unity amidst our varied experiences.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Educate Yourself:** Continuously learn about diverse cultures and avoid assuming homogeneity within any group. Recognize that no single individual can represent an entire group.
- **Combat Stereotyping:** Avoid stereotyping, tokenism, and microaggressions by actively challenging preconceived notions and embracing diversity.
- **Engage Directly:** Initiate conversations with people from different backgrounds and welcome their experiences into your life.
- **Practice Non-Judgment:** Ask respectful questions and be prepared to accept "no" as an answer, fostering an environment of understanding and acceptance.

## REFERENCES

Engelbrecht, L., & de Beer, J. J. (2022). The subjective experiences of students with invisible disabilities at a historically disadvantaged university. African Journal of Disability, 6(0),  a359. https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v6i0.359

Jiang, A. (2022, April 27). What is Maslow's hierarchy of needs Verywell Mind. https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-4136760

Servaes, S., Choudhury, P., & Parikh, A. K. (2022). What is diversity? Pediatric Radiology, 52(6), 1011–1015. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00247-022-05349-y

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