

Supporting Diversity & Inclusion at the READ Center

by *Beatrice Lele*



Can you imagine what “your world [would] be like if you could not read? It would be very small, very stressful, and very sad,” writes Jean Proffitt, READ Center founder and board member. The READ Center is a Richmond area community-based nonprofit organization providing educational opportunities to adults with low-level reading and communication skills. Most of the students at the center are native speakers who need literacy assistance, and the teachers and tutors are volunteers. The organization’s mission is to help adults with low-level literacy develop basic reading and communication skills, so they can fulfill their roles as citizens, workers, and family members.

The READ Center provides professional development to its staff, teachers, and tutors in several ways. Recently, they partnered with the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities

(VCIC) to provide a two-hour diversity and inclusion training that was attended by more than twenty tutors, teachers, and staff. **PROGRESS** interviewed Nausha Brown Chavez, who has worked with the READ Center for more than eight years and serves as education program manager, to find out more about the diversity training and how the center incorporates student voices into their professional development planning and delivery.

Diversity and Inclusion

“The concept to participate in the training was brought up by a previous volunteer coordinator, who worked really hands-on with volunteers and pairing them ... with students one to one,” Nausha explained. “These interactions with the students and tutors” led her

to identify diversity training as a need. "Also," Nausha continued, "because most of our students are African American and a majority of our tutors are Caucasian women, there is a big difference in what they understand about each other since they all grew up in different environments and cultures."

Sometimes we fail to acknowledge our own biases. "We thought the training would give us an opportunity to just look at our own unconscious biases that we may have and ... be sensitive and mindful to other individuals who may not fit that lens that we see things through," said Nausha. "The training was very insightful. The scenarios used in the training were real; it really touched home with individuals and made the trainee possibly think 'did I do that'? After the session, a lot of the tutors came up to the volunteer coordinator and said, "'I hope that was not me ... I just hope that was not me.'"

While most staff would never intentionally say something hurtful or harmful, "we sometimes speak without thinking about the things we say." Nausha felt that "the training created an environment where people were able to honestly sit and talk about [their] biases without judging." This free environment was possible because a framework was developed at the beginning of the training that addressed how participants would be open to the information and what they would do or not do in order to make it a good session. Due to the impact of the training, the READ Center has decided to offer it on a yearly basis so that those who had not taken it can take it. Nausha expects the training will contribute to greater mindfulness among all members of the READ Center community. "[W]hile the training was meant for the teachers and tutors," she said, "it is also something that could be good for students."

The challenges in selecting and preparing professional development will be different for different organizations. Presenters "will come with a lot of ideas. You want to make

sure that it is impactful because [if there's] too much information, at some point, people can stop listening. You want to make sure that the information is concise and useful." In preparing for the diversity and inclusion training, "the biggest challenge was timeframe ... Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities provides vast knowledge about the topic, so we had to choose what was relevant to our Center." Nausha encourages other programs who are considering a diversity and inclusion training workshop, to "have it!" "It made a big difference for us," she said, because "it takes you out of your little bubble."

- It makes you more aware and more conscious in your thinking.
- It gives tutors, teachers, and staff an opportunity to interact with each other in ways they could not have otherwise and gives them helpful information through the interaction.
- Through the training, Nausha said, "we get a better understanding of who we are as teachers and as tutors; when we understand who we are, then it helps us to guide other people. ... A lot of our students, when they were in school, may have received negative comments, and we want to make sure that we do not continue those cycles."

Student Voices and Incorporating Feedback

The READ Center also aims to incorporate student voices and perspectives more directly in their program improvement efforts through collecting student evaluations at the end of each trimester. Students are asked whether the teachers and tutors are effective in helping them reach their goals. The evaluation forms:

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- give the teachers some idea of how the students feel about aspects of the class.
- give READ Center staff who are not out in the field daily a better sense of how the students think those classes are going.
- allow students to comment on how classes could be made better (in addition to responding to some yes-or-no evaluation questions).


Overall, the evaluations can be an eye opener for teachers. “Sometimes as humans, we just go along with the flow, but when given an opportunity to express ourselves on how we truly felt about something, we can express more,” said Nausha. “When students know that such information will be valued, then they can be a lot more open in what they share with us.”

The READ Center recently began using students’ feedback systematically to restructure their lesson plans. There are three semesters within a fiscal year. At the end of every semester, said Nausha, “I sit down with the teachers and we go over the feedback ... The teachers share with me what they have discovered based on what the students have said ... The teachers then can go back and adjust their lessons to follow more in line with what is best for the students. The goal is to make sure that what the center offers is what is best for the students. ... We want to make sure that [students’] voices are heard, and it is not just something that is coming top down. We want them to know that they are important to the process because without them, The READ Center would not exist.”

When planning further training based on feedback, the READ Center also incorporates teachers’ and tutors’ self-reflection. After reflection, the teachers tell Nausha what they think could have been done better; as the education program manager, she then decides what professional development to offer. This could include:

- providing teachers with strategies for teaching comprehension or providing them with various workbooks, books, or websites that will help them to increase their students’ knowledge as well as their own.
- sending them to a professional development training or course.
- sending them to tutor training to get a broader picture of how students learn as adults and how adult basic education classes are taught.

The teachers at the READ Center are all from different backgrounds; some have a teaching background and some do not. Nausha emphasizes that “teaching a kid is different from teaching an adult, because children have no prior knowledge while adults have a lot of prior knowledge that just has some gaps that needs to be filled in. ... During our meetings, I ask teachers to bring in some comprehension strategies that they use in their classes to help students who are struggling. Each teacher shares their strategies and other teachers can hear strategies that they are not aware of and they can use these strategies in their classes.”

“I love being given the opportunity to help people reach their goals,” said Nausha. “Everyone deserves the same opportunity to take care of their families, to be a good advocate in their community, to work, and to have a voice – the READ Center give[s] an opportunity to have a voice.” The READ Center supports this crucial mission by offering professional development that values diversity and inclusion and responds meaningfully to student feedback and instructor self-reflection. 

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