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Inclusive Change in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines: A Collaborative Autoethnography

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Abstract

In many countries, including those in the Caribbean, there has recently been an increasing demand for professional development on inclusive educational practices This need for high-quality professional development is in line with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (2016) call for inclusion of all children by 2030. Recently, our team was asked to provide professional development to educators in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines that focused on evidence-based practices for students with special education needs. Over the course of 3 years, this service work evolved into a multi-faceted pilot of inclusive education, whereby students with special education needs transitioned from a segregated school into mainstream schools. In this article, we present a collaborative autoethnography that highlights our collective experiences. Our self-reflections chronicle our experiences and accompanying perceptions gained through providing support and education to educators, students, schools, community, and families in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines over a 3-year period, as they prepared for this transition to inclusion. In collectively reviewing our self-reflections, we discovered three major themes at the heart of our service work: (a) "barriers to inclusion," (b) "the importance of relationships," and (c) "transformation." In discussing these three themes, we explore the successes and challenges we experienced throughout these service projects. What follows is a discussion of our

reflective musings related to these experiences as shared critical knowledge for sustainable inclusion work within the Caribbean and beyond.

Contextualizing Inclusive Education

According to the World Health Organization (WHO; 2023), people with disabilities make up about 16% of the world's population. There are an estimated 240 million school-aged children with disabilities in the world, many of whom continue to face barriers to inclusive education (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], n.d.). *Disability*, in this context, refers to identified or non-identified conditions that impact a person's physical, cognitive, or social ability to engage fully in school and society (WHO, 2023). An equitable, inclusive education system is fundamental to achieving educational priorities and is recognized internationally as critical to delivering a high-quality education for all learners (International Bureau of Education, 2008). As inclusive education continues to emerge as one of the most dominant issues globally, we are seeing a shift in focus for special education from segregation to inclusion (Mitchell, 2010). According to UNICEF (2017),

> [inclusive education is] an education system that includes all students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements. This means making sure that teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport and toilets are appropriate for all children at all levels. Inclusive education means all children learn together in the same schools. (p. 1)

Across the globe, children with disabilities continue to be excluded from educational opportunities, despite the overwhelming evidence that inclusive education results in net positives for everyone involved (Hehir et al., 2016; Sermier Dessemontet et al., 2012). Many countries continue to lag behind the vision for inclusive education that was articulated in the Salamanca Statement 30 years ago (UNICEF & Spain Ministry of Education and Science, 1994). This framework for action called for governments around the world to take action in shaping their education systems with inclusivity for all students in mind, with a particular emphasis on students with disabilities and diverse needs. Despite the commitment of 92 governments, inclusive education continues to be a struggle in many places, including Canada and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG).

Currently SVG employs a school system in which children with various disabilities attend separate publicly funded schools called "Schools for Children with Special Needs" or do not attend school at all. Although there are children with learning difficulties at community schools, the system struggles to meet student needs in mainstream classrooms. Charran and Seetahal (2018) pointed out that "the priority for the governments of Caribbean countries is not special education. This is so, even in light of the mandates from international agreements" (p. 112). Additionally, Charran and Seetahal noted that limited research has been done on inclusive and special education in the Caribbean despite the potential for successful inclusive policies and practices. Countries in the Caribbean that are beginning to explore inclusive education have a great deal of work ahead of them, but they can draw on the expertise of scholars and educators in countries that have navigated similar experiences. Although Canada is still working toward a fully inclusive education system, lessons learned from the past 50 years can be utilized to help support many countries in the Caribbean, which are just beginning their journey toward inclusion.

Canada is well poised to offer support, given their strong networks of expertise on inclusive education (e.g., Inclusive Education Canada and Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education) and their evolution from segregated models to more inclusive ones over time (Freer, 2023b). Canada has achieved some provincial inclusive education. For example, New Brunswick has a provincial policy on inclusive education and has been pioneering province-wide inclusion for several decades (Porter & Towell, 2017). Even in other provinces without inclusive education policy, or prior to inclusive policies being implemented, several school districts made commitments to inclusive education. In some school districts in the province of Ontario, students with disabilities have been attending inclusive settings for decades. In 1980, the government of Ontario passed Bill 82, an amendment to the Education Act that mandated that school districts enrol and provide education for children with disabilities (Bill 82, 1980). After the approval of Bill 82, school districts developed educational programs for children with disabilities that included inclusive education; however, at the time, education was more commonly offered as segregated, specialized classrooms within schools for children with various disabilities (Elkin, 1982). Over the past few decades, many school districts have changed their service-delivery models to be more inclusive, oftentimes eliminating these segregated classrooms and placing children in grade-appropriate classrooms with their same-age peers (Bennett et al., 2021). Despite this work toward inclusion, practices are inconsistent across Ontario and Canada, and there is still work to be done (e.g., particularly with students who have intellectual disabilities; Reid et al., 2018).

In this article, we explore and describe our team's collective experiences working with educators in SVG between 2020 and 2023, supporting their journey to inclusive education, and relate them to our experiences within a Canadian context. Our team consists of four scholars who all began their careers as educators in the kindergarten– Grade 12 (K–12) education system and have all moved into academia at three different post-secondary institutions in Ontario. Having from 15 to 40 years' experience in education, we have spent numerous years educating teachers and researching inclusive education. We were invited to create an inclusive education initiative for teacher education in SVG funded by the World Bank (n.d.) through the Human Development Service Delivery Project. Our team supported various professional development initiatives that included more than 100 teachers and tutors, with the ultimate goal of creating capacity for access to public school for children with special education needs. This article provides some insight into the work that was done, information about the current education system in SVG, a collection of reflections on our experiences, as well as the implications of these experiences for our pedagogy as teacher educators.

The Caribbean Context: Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

SVG is a small English-speaking country in the West Indies that consists of a main island, Saint Vincent, and several smaller islands and cays, collectively referred to as the Grenadines. Only a handful of these smaller islands are inhabited. SVG collectively has a population of roughly 110,000 people (Statistical Office, 2023). According to the most recent census report, "the majority of the population is of *African Descent*, the population is also comprised of Caribs/Amerindians, who are an [I]ndigenous group to the country, along with other minority ethnic groups" (Statistical Office, Central Planning Division, 2012, p. 27).

The Educational Revolution in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

SVG obtained its independence in 1979 after over two centuries of British and French rule (DaSouza, 2015). A British education model is employed, and there is a strong emphasis on standardized assessments and on streaming based on academic performance. In 2001, a shift in political power saw the beginning of a self-proclaimed "educational revolution" in SVG, which included more spending on public education and investment in human capital (DaSouza, 2015).

The key focus of the educational revolution has been centred on universal access at all levels of the education system (Education Research and Information Communication Technology Department, 2015). It has been claimed that this revolution has seen "the achievement of universal access to primary and secondary education, [which] … ensures that all persons of primary and secondary school age have equal educational opportunities, regardless of social class, gender, ethnicity or physical or mental *disability* [emphasis added] (Statistical Office, Central Planning Division, 2012, p. 58). Marks (2009) pointed out, however, that while universal access to education

> had strong political support and the policy was sound philosophically, planning for implementation and instituting the change saw the surfacing of many unanticipated challenges.… [This resulted in educators needing] to be provided with the time to meet and opportunities for sustained professional development. (pp. 66–67)

UNESCO's (2016) *Framework for Action for the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4* further called for a commitment from countries, including SVG, to ensure "inclusive and equitable quality education … for all" (p. 3). Sustainable Development Goal 4 has been a foundational driver for current and future work in education in SVG.

Special/Inclusive Education in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Despite SVG's goals for universal access to education, many students with disabilities are not granted equitable educational opportunities. There are no clear definitions of inclusion nor special education in the current Education Act (2006) for SVG (UNESCO, 2021). The Act does, however, state that special education services should be provided in the least restrictive / most enabling environment based on the available resources (UNESCO, 2021). Due to limited resources, opportunities for quality special education services have been scarce. A draft of a new Disability Act for SVG is currently being reviewed, which could have substantial impacts on the Education Act (2006) and other pertinent legislation ("Disability Act will force amendments," 2022). The Disability Act will enshrine disability rights into SVG law and be a major step in the right direction for the country, particularly as they seek to pilot inclusive education.

During the project we learned that SVG has three major special education schools, including two on the mainland (one in Georgetown and one in Kingstown) and one on the island of Bequia. Children are admitted to these schools by recommendation from the local primary school or the local health nurse practitioner, or by the choice of the parents. Oftentimes, there are no diagnoses for these children as the medical specialists required to do this are not available (UNICEF Office of the Eastern Caribbean Area & Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, 2017). From our observations, children attending these

schools presented with various learning and communications challenges, some with identifiable disabilities (e.g., Down syndrome, autism spectrum disorders, or visual and/or hearing impairments). The learning challenges we observed were invisible and only evident in academic learning, which could include a variety of learning or developmental disabilities. A situational analysis done by the UNICEF Office of the Eastern Caribbean Area & Government of SVG (2017) pointed out that "children [in these special schools] have little access to specialized support (e.g. teachers, curriculum, diagnosis, therapeutic intervention services and clinical psychology) and no options for advancement into the mainstream educational system" (pp.10–11). An additional unknown number of school-aged children with more significant needs (e.g., physical disabilities) resided and were presumably educated in the country's orphanages. We also learned that many children stayed home without formal education due to the challenges they themselves and/or their parents had experienced with the education system, or because their parents had been told that their child's needs were too severe to be met in a school. There was one school in SVG that had been piloting inclusion for a few years. With some success, children who would have been recommended for a special needs school have been admitted, enrolled in a classroom with their peers, and provided with additional support to access the curriculum. This school, however, indicated challenges, including high numbers of children with learning needs and uncertainty about how to promote children to secondary school.

Our Service Projects with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Between 2020 and 2023, we engaged in supporting educators in SVG by providing professional development, mentoring, and coaching to build capacity for inclusive education in primary and secondary schools across the country. The work has involved three projects focusing on a similar goal: improving outcomes for students by training the educators that work with them. (See Table 1.)

All of these outputs required ongoing adaptations based on the identified needs of the educators we were working with. As we learned about the needs of the educators and the challenges, innovation was required to develop tools to best meet these needs.

A Collaborative Autoethnographic Approach

In order to capture, express, and make meaning from our collective experiences, we employed a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) method. Chang et al. (2016) described the value of CAE as a unique qualitative method. Unlike a traditional autoethnography, CAE allows multiple people to look inward through self-reflection on their shared experience and then combine those reflections in an effort to create rich data from multiple perspectives. In their seminal text, Chang et al. began by offering the following example of a CAE: "a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences and then wrestling with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts" (p. 17). This example perfectly encapsulates how our team has utilized this method, as we have considered the socio-cultural contexts of Canada and SVG through our past and current experiences with inclusive education training, practice, and research.

Table 1
Service Project Outline

Service project	What we did	Content covered
Project 1 Large-scale educator professional development and a train-the-trainer model	Five days of professional development to 100 educators and 20 trainers from across SVG Delivered online (September 2021) and in person (April 2023)	21st-century learning Student engagement Formative assessment Differentiated instruction Inclusive education
Project 2 Professional development for teachers at three "schools for children with special needs"	Three days of online training (September 2021) In-person training (May 2022) Online training (September 2022)	Disability-specific content Inclusive education Differentiated instruction Structured teaching Individual education planning Behavioural intervention
Project 3 Supporting Inclusive Education: administrators, educators, and teaching assistants at one primary school and one high school, one "school for children with special needs," and parents in the community	In-person training (February, April, August, and October 2023) Online support and training (December 2022 – November 2023)	Disability-specific content Inclusive education Differentiated instruction Structured teaching Individual education planning Behavioural intervention Universal design for learning Educational technology Educational assessment Transition planning

In order to establish a framework for CAE, we collectively developed reflection prompts based on our experiences supporting educators in SVG over the previous 3 years. Each author considered their experiences by responding to the following prompts:

- What were some of the strategies used to support teachers, students, parents, and community members?
- What worked and what did not? Why do you think this might be?
- What were some of the differences or similarities between strategies used to promote inclusive education in Canada and SVG?
- Identify the most significant success from the work. Explain why it is successful.
- Identify the most significant challenge. Explain why it was most challenging.
- How has this experience shifted the way you consider teacher education for inclusion?
- What was your greatest learning? About yourself as an educator? About teacher education in general? About inclusive education?

Each member of the team individually wrote self-reflections in response to these prompts. These reflections drew from our service work in SVG with the government and with educators, including conversations, observations, and first-hand experiences. Once the individual self-reflections were complete, we took turns reviewing each other's self-reflections. Philosophically, our team approached this through a constructivist/interpretivist lens. As a result, data were coded inductively to develop preliminary categories. Together as a group via rich collaborative discussions, we later consolidated these categories into themes. When examining one's own experiences, it is important to acknowledge your positionality. Despite our use of inductive strategies, we were undoubtedly influenced theoretically by critical disability studies theory, particularly by the social model of disability, which views disability experiences as a social construction due to barriers in society.

As discussed earlier, there is very little research done on special/inclusive education in the Caribbean context (Charran & Seetahal, 2018), so we are hopeful that sharing our collective experiences will offer new insights into international work of this nature. Roy and Uekusa (2020) pointed out that CAE can be a useful qualitative method when voices other than your own are difficult to access (e.g., during the COVID-19 pandemic). Presently, at the time of writing, we do not have research data from stakeholders in SVG due to a variety of factors (e.g., COVID-19 restrictions and the ongoing nature of the service work). Through this CAE, we aim to offer a unique and collaborative perspective from Canadian scholars who have been supporting inclusive education internationally, specifically in the Caribbean.

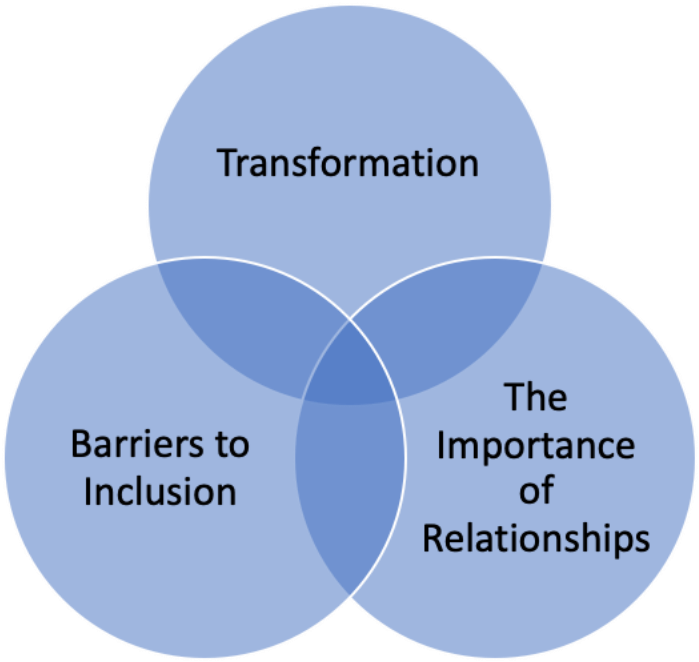
Conceptualizing Our Experiences: Barriers, Relationships, and Transformation

Our shared experiences with this work have been bound by a complete commitment to each other that has intertwined our collective narratives. From our previous work, we understood the challenges that come with inclusive educational change and recognized the importance of a strong collaborative team. Throughout this section, our stories are encapsulated together in a collective voice based on our individual reflections. As a result of examining the reflections and in line with the CAE method, we identified three interrelated themes as overarching throughout the journal responses: (a) "barriers to inclusion," (b) "the importance of relationships," and (c) "transformation." These three themes were deemed essential to understanding our learning journey fully, and what follows is a deconstruction of these concepts through our lens and experience. (See Figure 1.)

Among the three concepts, we found commonalities with our prior experiences with Ontario schools, teacher education, administrators, families, and community. Barriers are always at the forefront of discussion related to education in all contexts around the world (Berry, 2011; Mazurek & Winzer, 2011) and were not unique to this context. Barriers were evident at multiple levels and were identified by systems and structures in place that created additional challenges to the successful implementation of inclusive practice. We identified relationships as the foundation of all the interactions we had in SVG and also in any inclusion work we had done (Bennett et al., 2020). When positive relationships were developed, the initiatives flourished. When relationships were tainted or not permitted to develop, the initiative suffered. Transformation has been a central artery of this work

and other inclusion work we have completed (Bennett et al., 2021; Somma & Bennett, 2020). Each of the projects in SVG was designed to elicit change within the various participants' attitudes toward and beliefs about inclusion, as well as school- and system-level alterations to special education. Even though the focus of the projects primarily involved those working directly with children (e.g., educators, tutors, and principals), barriers to inclusion did not solely exist in schools, and so the families and communities, along with the senior leaders, were also intentionally included in the work.

Figure 1: ***Interrelated Themes From Our Collaborative Autoethnography***



Barriers to Inclusion

According to the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005 (2005), a *barrier* means anything that prevents a person with a disability from fully participating in all aspects of society because of their disability, including a physical obstacle, an architectural obstacle, an information or communications obstacle, an attitudinal obstacle, a technological obstacle, and/or a policy or a practice obstacle. Barriers to inclusion exist in both Canada and SVG. As one author put it, "both SVG and Canada have this sense of eagerness for the quick fix." Based on our experiences, organizational, attitudinal, and technological barriers emerged from our self-reflections as the most profound for inclusive education in SVG.

Organizational

Organizational barriers include those factors that are imposed by the system (in this case the education system), including policies and embedded practices (e.g., special education delivery models). These barriers are systemic in nature, making it difficult for those who are most impacted by these policies and practices to change them (e.g., educators, parents, and students; Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005, 2005).

Organizational barriers can be observed in different contexts (e.g., in Canada and in SVG). We recognized how organizational barriers, including resources and support personnel, impacted the work of the educators. While this issue came up in many reflections, one author explained,

> In Ontario and Canada, we still have the same barriers to inclusion. In Canada in most areas, we just have more resources. When we think about what the teachers in SVG are doing with what they have regarding supporting children to be included, it really is extraordinary. Teachers in Canada complain about supporting children in their classrooms where they have access to lots of various materials and often some sort of expertise and human support. Teachers in SVG do not have these luxuries, and must be creative and committed to support the children.

Another stated that "it is interesting to think of the state of 'readiness' that classrooms (and schools) are in to successfully include all students." Schools also did not have resource personnel,[1] "so there is not a teacher assigned to support teachers and students with learning needs in the schools, like we have in Ontario."

It was clear to us that most of the educators wanted to see their students be successful: "Many of the educators are working with students after school to support them with their work, doing extra lessons or reviewing things that the students may have missed during class time." Unfortunately, for many of these types of sessions, the teachers charged a dollar amount to the parents. We learned that, through grants, schools have been able to implement tutors to support children, but this role was not permanent or well-paid, and there was a great turnover in the individuals doing the job: One author noted, "So tutors who were trained last year lost their jobs and need to reapply this year again if and when positions come up, which are all dependent on the funding."

These organizational challenges evident in SVG created barriers to promoting and sustaining inclusive education for students with special education needs, despite the professional development and training that was provided. This became obvious early on when we were having discussions with teachers during the first site visit. As we continued to learn about their teacher training and the structure of their education system, we were able to pivot our methods for training: "So when we are promoting inclusive education in SVG, they are looking at us thinking, 'How will we do this?' So the strategy is a lot of education and discussion about rights." We quickly learned that we needed to make adaptations to our teaching methods in order to best meet the needs of the learners we had. One author wrote,

> It was quickly learned that adaptations were needed. Teaching assistants often had little to no training, teachers were paid poorly, and some were not wanting to engage in training regardless if it was considered mandatory or not, and this was compounded with the lack of support from higher up the chain of command. As the Ministry of Education had not clearly outlined policy expectations, there was lack of direction for staff to be accountable for.

Despite Canada being a "leader" in inclusive education, the obstacles and barriers are similar in nature. Teachers still have the same reasons for resistance to change (lack of

[1] Resource personnel refers to teacher assistants or educational assistants; specialized teachers, including special education teachers; teachers for the deaf and/or low vision; resource teachers; etc.

resources, knowledge base, time); however, it was interesting to look at the "needs." One author noted,

> There was clearly a deficit in access to resources. And when resources were provided, there was then the issue of securely keeping them for use. These are pieces that we take for granted coming from an education system where there is more access to even the most basic of needs. And when the Ministry of Education was not putting their money where their mouth was, this was difficult for the teachers who wanted to do it [inclusion].

Despite our training and support efforts, as well as the hard work of the educators, the top-down organizational barriers imposed by the country (e.g., academic testing measures and lack of funding to support children with disabilities) have continued to perpetuate a school system that is exclusive and fundamentally not designed for students with special education needs. Over time, it became difficult for us to come to terms with the limitations of our work: "It became very frustrating in the beginning because I struggled as an educator and a parent to see how this was holding so many children back from experiencing success at school." Furthermore, one author reflected,

> It was sometimes difficult for me to wrap my head around some of the procedures that perpetuated exclusion: even when the teachers or parents recognized the challenges, they could not foresee another way forward. This was profound in relation to two major factors: the Caribbean standardized assessment practices and the practice of repeating students (basically failing them and requiring them to repeat a grade on the premise that they were not "ready" to take on the next year's curriculum)

Teachers were bound by these assessments, and parents and teachers saw these tests as a gateway for their children. Even though Ontario has similar types of assessments, such as those administered by the Education, Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), our collective experiences as teachers and parents told us that the perceived weight of these assessments is not the same. Consistent messaging from the Ministry of Education in SVG has positioned the examinations as the most important component of student learning and assessment. One author reflected,

> I do not feel as an educator and a parent that there is even a fraction of the same importance placed on these assessments. I had to really learn about and understand why there is so much importance placed on these so that I could plan how to best support the teachers to work within these confinements (as I saw them). It was not until my most recent visit and interaction with the educators that I felt that I could really speak to how inclusion can still work within a testing structure such as this. And how children who cannot read or write can still demonstrate their knowledge in a different way in order to be successful with the test.

In Ontario, it is much more acceptable for teachers to provide accommodations[2] for a student on a standardized test (EQAO, 2022). Additionally, one author commented further:

> At first, I thought this was an attitude thing, but I learned that, although perhaps attitude has something to do with it, even the teachers who were the greatest advocates for inclusion, still kept circling back to the tests. I learned that this way of promoting children is so embedded

[2] Accommodations are strategies and resources added to support a student in accessing the curriculum. There are no changes made to the curriculum; rather, strategies are provided to support learning and assessment. For example, extra time to complete a test, oral assessment instead of written, use of technology for reading/writing, notes provided, chunking information, additional breaks.

> within their culture that suggesting children be promoted without meeting these criteria was very difficult, even impossible.

Attitudinal

Attitudinal barriers are obstacles that are related to ableism. These barriers are often invisible and based on preconceived notions of ability and disability. It has been recognized globally through inclusive education work that educators' attitudes toward inclusion is a key tenet for success (Berry, 2011; Male, 2011; Mazurek & Winzer, 2011; Somma & Bennett, 2020). Many educators hold favourable attitudes toward the idea of inclusion as equitable and right; however, they see inclusion as extra work and often doubt their skill set to carry out inclusive practices (Gallagher et al., 2024; Leyser et al., 2011; Somma & Bennett, 2020). Research has also told us that support from senior staff, including administrators, policymakers, and ministry officials, is instrumental in supporting positive attitudes about inclusive education (Bennett et al, 2021). It was not surprising for us to find similar attitudes among the educators in SVG compared to data and experiences from Canada. One author wrote,

> It comes back to that unconscious bias that exists within us all. People need to be ready and willing to adjust their mindset, their practice and be open to take risks. This is more successful if all levels of a system are part of the solution.

Our experiences interacting with the educators in SVG helped us to learn about some of the attitudinal barriers that existed within themselves, their schools, and their system. For example, educators expressed concerns about students being able to complete and pass the standardized assessments they were required to take. The educators felt that it was their responsibility to ensure their students could pass, and they were fearful of promoting children to the next grade if they "were not ready. We noted that "this caused them to be stuck in a loop, especially for the children who are deemed as having disabilities that impact their ability to complete the assessments in a standardized way." Many teachers had a 'teach to the test' approach and faced parental expectations that this "almighty test" was the sole assessment of their children's learning. This mindset needed to be challenged and the idea of accommodations for the test needed to be explored. In our original visit there was mention that accommodations could/would not be provided, however on follow up visits this was disputed. It has been challenging to get the educators to consider how accommodations could support children in being more successful on the tests. It was also important for them to recognize that, although some children would not be successful in the testing environment, it did not mean that they should not access school with their same-age peers with modified learning goals.

It was still common practice in SVG to have students "repeat" a year of school if they had not gained the skills deemed necessary to move on. This is a contrast to current practice in Ontario, where children generally move classes each year according to their age and schools are responsible for adapting their program to individual learning needs as required. In our experience, the practice of repeating supports exclusion from age-appropriate curriculum and social opportunities. Many students who had special education needs in SVG continued to repeat grades. Placement was based on academic skill level, which is a barrier to inclusion. Attitudinally, if educators did not believe a child should be in their classroom due to learning challenges or limitations, they engaged in the practice of

repeating. What we observed were "children in classes with other children who were 2 to 3 years younger than they were, relearning the entire curriculum for that grade level." Despite training and discussions about learning disabilities and best practices for supporting student-specific needs, this practice continued.

In the last two in-person visits, we felt that limited progress was being made by the educators, based on their learning and discussions. The secondary school had piloted providing accommodations, including scribes and readers for students to complete their exams. Since educators in SVG had become somewhat comfortable implementing accommodations for reading and writing in their classrooms, they were beginning to see the possibilities for assessment, and their attitudes are changing.

Research has told us that attitudes toward inclusion change when educators have positive experiences with it (Bennett, 2020; Somma & Bennett, 2020). One author noted,

> I have observed resistance in both Canada and SVG, so in some sense this can be similar. The progress we have made in Canada, however, does help to quell some of the concerns and disbelief. In SVG and other similar contexts, it is a leap of faith in a sense because they have yet to see the success stories of inclusion. It can be much easier to dismiss ideas of inclusion or simply have a fear of the unknown or to change in general.

Another attitudinal barrier to inclusion involves parent and community attitudes. Since the successful inclusion of children is the ultimate goal, parent advocacy and empowerment are key both in Canada and SVG. Parent involvement is integral to supporting inclusive education (Bennett et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2018) and can support shifts in the structure of the school and system:

> Getting the parents on board as advocates is a very large contributor to the shifting of practice for children who are experiencing challenges at school or who would be recommended to enroll in the school for children with special needs. Parents have a lot of fear for their children in a society that has not been accepting of them going to school with the rest of the children.

Technological

Due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the distance and cost of travel, about half of the professional development and support was provided virtually. Although this was not unchartered territory for us as we each had had experience teaching courses and presenting content virtually to various audiences, we learned quickly that this method was less than ideal for the educators in SVG. Although we each expressed some challenges with virtual teaching with our Canadian college and university students, including technology problems, connectivity issues, and participation challenges, these were exacerbated with our SVG educators:

> From my perspective, the largest challenge with this was engagement. The reasons there [was] initially poor engagement are complicated. With the online training, there were sometimes technical difficulties impacting internet connections, audio, etc.

During our online sessions, it was so important to actively engage our partners to ensure that the messaging and information was engaging and inviting. There were several pieces to this approach that provided positive support, including having a facilitator present to support activities, sending activities and handouts ahead of time, and having interactive activities. Additionally, we as a team continually reflected and built upon these teaching

techniques. Teachers really struggled to engage in virtual learning. When we were in the country delivering workshops, teachers were more active participants. One of the challenges that made the virtual learning difficult was "It is very hot there, and most workshops took place at the end of the school day (even if the children were dismissed early). They [the participants] were exhausted!" Also, on the days of the professional development, students were dismissed early, or it was a school holiday, and so "many [teachers] did not demonstrate that they were motivated to learn, or perhaps felt they did not need to learn." And finally, "since all teachers were in the same room, it was difficult to hear their discussions." We found that even though there were some keen educators, even in a virtual format, instruction and engagement was challenging if there was not a person on the ground supporting the facilitation of the session and promoting active engagement.

In virtual sessions in our Canadian context, usually, all participants are using their own devices, which supports greater opportunity for participation (Chen et al., 2022). However, many participants are still reluctant to participate and do not turn on their cameras. Also, similarly with any school-directed professional development, educators in Canada may also not be very interested or keen on the topics of choice and become disengaged online or in person. We did not find that the virtual platform was a deal breaker for the learning; however, when we considered various learning needs and experienced the response we received when delivering the sessions in person, it became difficult to imagine our impact was as great when engaging virtually with the educators:

> I think one of the most significant challenges is the distance that exists when we are not on the ground. Although we make ourselves available online, it does not have the same impact as being able to be there to support teachers, EAs [educational assistants], families and students in finding ways forward. Modelling the use of accommodations and support strategies to engage students effectively in the classroom.

While online training was certainly more cost-effective, being on the ground for in-person training was critical to the success of this project, and the barriers imposed by travel restrictions and cost were significant for connections with the individuals we were supporting.

Understanding the context and barriers in SVG was of critical importance in terms of cultivating relationships with the stakeholders there. These relationships were instrumental in supporting the transition toward inclusion and are discussed in more detail next.

The Importance of Relationships

"It Takes a Village": A Holistic Approach to Inclusion

Inclusive education requires strong relationships between the various members of the special education team. In Ontario, this includes (but is not limited to) teachers, educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, principals, parents, and students. Inclusion cannot be achieved in silos and requires interprofessional collaboration (Bennett et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2018). Similarly, our work in SVG was predicated on strong relationships with various stakeholders within (and beyond) the education system (e.g., teachers, parents, students, community members, and politicians). We took a holistic approach to our work in SVG because we fundamentally believe that inclusivity initiatives require support at all levels, particularly if educational inclusion was to be sustainable moving forward. As one

author put it, "we recognize that it is not just the educators but also the students, principals, community members, parents, and political figures that make inclusion successful."

Although our focus was on the educators in SVG, some of the most influential elements of this service work came from the relationships we developed with other important stakeholders such as community members, parents, and students. We hosted a community event to promote the inclusion pilot project, we met with students to see what their perspectives were, and we engaged in conversations with political figures in SVG. One author recalled, "We had a lot of community engagement on the island. Our numbers for the student participation was astounding." Most noteworthy perhaps was that our team helped parents of students who would be participating in the pilot project for inclusion to develop a parent-support group. We know from our work in Canada that parent and self-advocacy are very powerful (Bennett et al., 2020; Reid et al., 2018) and wanted to provide parents with a space where they could support one another. One author reflected that "the creation of the parent support group felt like a big win because we know that parent advocacy can be so powerful with regard to change toward inclusion." Another similarly wrote,

> Parents felt empowered and recognized the power they had as a group. There was a grassroots swell from parents in recognizing their power in working with elected officials. There was discussion in these groups of how to lobby to ensure accommodations for students was explored and advocated for. There were key champions within this group that were able to take the messaging forward; however, as the distance between our team and the on the ground workings of the project encountered some challenges, it was difficult to ensure that the impact matched the intent.

The Role of Outside Experts

Over the 3 years working with Vincentian educators, there were several phases to our relationships. In the beginning, we were presented as "experts" on inclusive education, a title that felt a bit uncomfortable to all of us because of our constructivist leanings. As one of us wrote in our reflections, "It is not a 'banking model,' to use a Freirean phrase, where we have the answers and simply make deposits of knowledge." In the beginning, it seemed very important to our partners from SVG that we were presented as authorities on inclusive education. While we understood that this may have helped with the initial buy-in, we also were mindful that we wanted to cultivate deeper and more meaningful relationships, certainly relationships that went beyond this dichotomy of knowledge-giver and knowledge-receiver. Cobb (2013) pointed out that "special education is brimming with individuals who are often called experts" (p. 47) and that "voices of experts are privileged" (p. 49). Cobb also discussed some of the challenges with so-called expertise (e.g., excluding parents). Similarly, we were reluctant to be perceived as experts because we were outsiders and acknowledged the importance of this movement toward inclusion coming from within SVG, so it could be sustained over time.

Building a Trusting Relationship

It was important to acknowledge our positionality as outsiders to SVG. SVG has a long history of colonization, and we certainly did not want to assume that our ideals would translate into their context and culture. For this reason, it was essential to develop trust and foster a more reciprocal relationship. One author reflected, "In the beginning the SVG

educators did not know us well yet. There were legitimate questions of whether Canadians could understand the Caribbean context. Some educators were sceptical over whether what works for us could be applied in SVG."

Additionally, we did not fully understand the context in SVG. One author wrote,

> After the first in-person visit, I more so realized the complexity of the situation, but am still growing to understand how multifaceted their [SVG's] context is. Due to this complexity, the situation often shifted. We would have to change our plans on the fly to meet the needs of SVG.

The key components for developing reciprocal relationships with educators in SVG were trust and humility. Reflecting on these elements, one author wrote, "Over time … we built trust with the participants." Another author wrote, "You need to trust your partners in the implementation and recognize the limits of being an outsider looking in."

After some time engaging with the educators in SVG, we were able to shift from outsider to what Milligan (2016) called "inbetweeners." Milligan explained that "researchers take on different positionings depending on the situation that we may be in, the people we are interacting with and familiarity of the linguistic and socio-cultural norms." (pp. 239–240). By virtue of our vocational background as K–12 educators, we were able to connect as insiders on a professional level, but we were still outsiders in terms of the SVG (and broader Caribbean) culture. Over time, the relationship evolved as we became more culturally competent. While uniquely positioned in international work, this is not dissimilar to teaching pre-service teachers and educational assistants or presenting professional development. Similar to pre-service teaching, in the beginning, there is an implicit power dynamic between professor and student. We have learned that, over time, trust can be built, and reciprocal relationships based on mutual respect can be developed. Ongoing opportunity for interaction, notably in-person interactions, can allow for relationships to foster between the "teacher" and the "learner."

Having 3 years to build trust was a great privilege, but those 3 years were also filled with challenges. For example, in the beginning, COVID-19 and the eruption of a volcano in Saint Vincent prevented us from in-person visits. Much like the rest of the world did, we turned to virtual platforms to deliver professional development. This was difficult for a variety of reasons (as discussed in the Barriers to Inclusion section). Once we were able to visit St. Vincent, our relationships began to evolve. One author recalls their experience with the in-person visits: "This experience gave us an authentic opportunity to connect with educators, students, principals, parents, and community members. We found it ideal to have several visits, each with different focuses that ultimately built toward the transition toward inclusion." The in-person visits were so important, in part because they gave us a better understanding of the contexts (e.g., culture, classrooms, and resources), but also because there is no replacement for physical human interactions. We were able to bond in ways that the virtual environment did not allow.

This is a sentiment that many of us shared when the courses we were teaching at our institutions went online due to the pandemic after years of in-person teaching. That being said, online learning is also a gift because it is more accessible and less expensive, and it is better than having to cancel classes or professional development altogether. Practically, it was nice to be able to keep in touch with our participants in SVG after our visits concluded, but again we discovered virtual disconnects (both literally and figuratively).

We knew that, to develop a stronger relationship, we needed to have more consistent physical contact with the educators in SVG. One author reflected on this by writing, "One of the pieces that helped to offset this difficulty was to have an on-the-ground facilitator from within the school community." They further explained,

> While we were on the ground in SVG we saw the need for an on-the-ground "internal person" to ensure the messaging [was consistent]. This allowed us to build a relationship that was familiar and encouraged trust from the teachers in seeing how our work could be beneficial to their practice.

The importance and complexity of building strong relationships in international work such as these service projects was evident in our notes and discussions. We discussed the importance of not only building relationships with the different stakeholders but helping them to cultivate relationships of their own. Trust came out as a key factor in the evolution of our relationships with the educators in SVG. We were able to build these virtually and in person but more so through our physical visits to SVG. We found that trust was built by listening and responding to the needs on the ground. As one author put it in their journal reflection, "one of the most important things was to listen to their experiences and provide a space where their voices could be heard." Another emphasized the importance of "personal connection, conversation, active listening, and friendliness" when interacting with our participants. Indeed, our goal in cultivating these relationships was to help support educators in changing their mindset and practices, which brings us to our third and final theme—transformation.

Transformation

Ultimately, the purpose of our work was to help SVG shift educational practice and in turn create a system of education that was more inclusive of diverse learners. We knew from our work with Ontario school districts that change of this magnitude requires time and a deep commitment from multiple stakeholders (Bennett et al., 2021). We have seen important shifts in thinking and in practice. Our reflections have discussed key moments during the project that provide indicators for the larger goal of sustainability and evolution. As one author put it, "By the time we had wrapped up the project, I feel that we had good momentum from many different stakeholders and that is the best we can hope for in terms of SVG taking that momentum and continuing forward." It is important to recognize that challenging ableism in any context requires ongoing actionable responsibility to change. In order to contribute to lasting change, there needs to be a commitment beyond any training or professional development. Support to create more inclusive and equitable classrooms and schools will in turn enable a society that is accepting of difference (Bennett et al., 2021).

Although there is a recognition of the important role that the training played in shifting practice, it has also been recognized that educator attitudes toward inclusion were a key tenet in success (as noted in the Barriers to Inclusion section; e.g., see Male, 2011). One author specifically reflected, "People can be resistant to change. In SVG, there is a school culture that has developed and become the norm. Change is difficult, and you have settled into a way of doing things."

Stories of the Journey to Inclusion

We reflected on the moments that showed the beginnings of change in SVG and selected two distinct stories that stand out. The first describes an experience one of the authors had with a teacher during a discussion in a professional development session. This took place during the fourth visit, after 9 months of working with the educators in this group. They recalled,

> On the last day after 6 days of meeting with parents and teachers and supporting transitions, we had a debrief with the secondary school principal and teachers. One teacher who has been quite a strong supporter and advocate for inclusion all along really surprised me in his growth. We were discussing the practice of the secondary school testing structure and the practice of having students repeat, and I was challenging the group to consider an alternative to having students repeat entire years of school, just to see them drop out a couple years in. I could see he was really thinking about what I was asking them, and he was going over in his head what could be different. He did not have an answer just yet, but I could really see he was stuck on it and became open to consider alternate ways to keep the students in school.

As described in the Barriers to Inclusion section, there were policies and practices that fundamentally conflicted with initiatives for inclusion. This story describes the culmination of several days of professional development with a particularly engaged teacher in SVG who had reached the point of considering challenging the status quo of students being held back grades and how this served to exclude some students.

The second story came from some of the in-class observations during the third visit. Another author reminisced,

> The most significant success seen was from the time that [we were] "assessing" students at the various schools. The student engagement was wonderful, and the validation they felt for the success they felt in achieving was a reward within itself. Comments such as "No one has ever told me I was good at something" would leave that empty feeling in your stomach but, as they left the room with feelings of success and validation, it built our team up in supporting the notion that these students could both survive and thrive in the mainstream environment. Working alongside the staff in these assessment endeavors also allowed those opportunities for them to see the changes that could take place to help empower students to succeed and opportunities to provide accommodation that may help more than those students identified as having challenges.

This story showcases a critical evolution from inclusive theory to real inclusive practice in schools. There were many phases to our work in SVG (described in some detail above). This change certainly did not happen overnight, and it is currently not perfect, but it represents an important stepping stone toward inclusion.

We find this change in mindset and practice (for both students and teachers) to be encouraging. First and perhaps most importantly, we were starting to see students who had been excluded being included in mainstream education. This had the potential to be life-changing for these students and was a monumental achievement for SVG, as they became the first country in the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States to implement inclusive education practices (Editorial Staff, 2023). It was also promising to see teachers applying what they had learned over the previous 3 years because mindset and subsequent behaviour are very difficult to change (Bennett & Somma, 2020; Berry, 2011), particularly when these ideas were new and counter to many of the existing norms in SVG.

By building strong relationships we were able to, as one author put it "[be] disruptive in a positive way, [to] empower teachers and parents. Empowering the parents [students, and teachers] to be advocates … has been key to shift practice." We hope that the changes observed as a result of this service work will positively contribute to the generativity of inclusion in the nation and perhaps in the broader Caribbean:

> We will never know the full impact of our work with the teachers and how it will play out with this current and future generations of teachers. The feeling is similar to that when our teacher candidates graduate, and we send them off and trust them to be great inclusive teachers based on what we have taught them over the past 2 years.

Another author similarly reflected, "While change may take a long time, I am comforted by the fact that a new generation of students will see inclusion as the norm, and someday these students will shift the way disability is viewed at the community level."

Personal Transformations: Our Major Learnings From This Experience

Like many rich teaching experiences, we found ourselves learning a great deal from this process as well. Next, we discuss some of the personal transformations we made as scholars of inclusive education.

Our Evolving View of Inclusion

In our self-reflections, we discussed how our own views of inclusion had evolved throughout the life of these projects. One author wrote, "[These service projects] have helped me to refine my own nuanced beliefs about inclusion, whether it was from big moments like the work trips to SVG or small moments like debriefing after an online PD [professional development] session." This author's self-reflection continued,

> I have personally grown in terms of how I think about inclusion. I now feel that I have more of a global perspective to share with my students. My world was very small before this experience. While I knew that being born in Canada was a privilege, I did not fully realize how the rest of the world lives until I was presented with it. This has helped me appreciate the small changes in Ontario, even though there is work to continue doing. This experience has broadened my understanding of how disability and inclusion are thought about. It is much more complex than I had once considered, deeply embedded in the history and other contexts (e.g., politics, economics, etc.). I find it extraordinary how people with disabilities have faced oppression across time and in different geographic spaces.

As scholars of inclusive education, we have had the privilege of consuming and contributing to the literature that outlines the extensive benefits of inclusive education (e.g., see Hehir et al., 2016; Sermier Dessemontet et al., 2012). We all hold very strong beliefs about inclusion as a best practice and frame inclusion as a social-justice issue. From this vantage point, it can be easy to become discouraged by the fact that Canada has still not achieved fully inclusive education. This last reflection, however, has helped us to see just how far we have come and a clearer direction forward (Freer, 2023b).

During these service projects, sometimes our expectations and reality were not in alignment. Our team had come to these service projects with varying degrees of international and transformative work. One of the more novice scholars in this arena reflected,

> When we started this project, I was a bit naïve and didn't realize how much funding, resources, and energy would be necessary to make even incremental change/progress. I had initially thought we could switch from segregated to inclusive and everyone would be excited to do so. I had hoped that this work would be making the world a better place and, while I think that goal was accomplished, it ended up looking very different than I had expected. I have learned that incremental changes amount to potential big changes over time.

As one author put it, the reality was that "the journey is fraught with a combination of leaps forward and many steps back." This author further explained that setbacks were disappointing, stating that "small steps are valuable but frustrating when the goals are so high." It is clear that we had high hopes for inclusion but, unfortunately, there were some unanticipated challenges along the way, particularly as we began to unravel the similarities and differences in culture and context between Canada and SVG. For example, when considering the readiness for the transition to an inclusive model, one author wrote,

> I understand better the importance of readiness [for inclusion]. I did consider that before but was always working with teachers who were in a progressive system of change that involved them to see inclusion around them. I did not imagine that it would be so difficult to get the educators and admins [administrators] to buy into the idea of inclusion. It was the most challenging for me to constantly feel as though I was trying to convince people that this was the way to go to ensure education is equitable for all children.

Speaking to this readiness for inclusion, another author wrote, "My greatest learning is probably the need for all parts of the system to be on board and support movement forward." Another author concluded,

> In our team discussions, we talk about how we may do this work differently in the future, and it does involve having a solid baseline of the appetite for inclusion not only in the schools but in the community. I also feel that this type of deep learning cannot happen online when you do not have context for their culture and ed [education] system. We visited a total of 5 times in 3 years for about 1week at a time. I think if we could go for one month for the first time, do online work and support throughout, and then return for 2 weeks toward the end, we may have gotten further.

We have come to learn that, in an international context, transitioning segregated models into an inclusive model has unique challenges. Some of these challenges are similar to ones some of our team members had observed when helping to support a transition to inclusion with Canadian school districts (Bennett et al., 2021; Somma & Bennett 2020). That said, the importance of understanding and becoming embedded in the specific international context cannot be overstated.

Moving Forward With This Learning in Mind

Our collective experiences meet at the intersection of the three themes that emerged from the CAE: barriers to inclusion, the importance of relationships, and transformation. Our experiences were typified by encountering barriers to inclusion, building relationships to attempt to overcome or eliminate those barriers, and creating a pathway for transformation. Over a period of 3 years, we learned intimately about an education system that differed from what was familiar to us but also offered parallel challenges and successes. We have learned about ourselves as educators and inclusion advocates. We have

also learned better ways to support and encourage educators for inclusion. We are changed for the better and have more tools at our disposal to support educators in a variety of contexts. As much as our Canadian experiences have influenced our work in SVG, so too have our SVG experiences influenced how we look at our continued work toward inclusion in Canada.

Change, like any learning more broadly, requires active engagement from authentic change agents within its context (i.e., insiders). We initially viewed our role as Canadian scholars of inclusive education to teach the Vincentians how to be more inclusive in their classrooms, schools, and community through best practices and research-based approaches. What we collectively learned was that our role was much greater than that and relied on learning alongside the educators in their specific contexts, with their needs at the forefront of that learning. Collectively, we had an end goal of helping educators and others "see" the value of inclusion (and the pathway to it) for themselves. This realization was noted as a key learning moment as it helped us to see the importance of ownership and sustainability when it comes to inclusion or any other significant change.

We acknowledge that SVG (similarly to Canada) has a lot of work ahead of them to actualize genuine inclusion, which will include change in school structure, classroom practice and, most importantly, mindset. Freer (2023a) discussed that genuine inclusion (as contrasted with segregation, special education, and pseudo-inclusion) requires systems of ableism to be challenged. These systems of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping manifest themselves not only within the educational system but also within the mindsets of the educators and policymakers. These service projects have offered Vincentians an opportunity to take a small but important step toward genuine inclusion by reconceptualizing some of their ideas around student ability within a context for inclusion as defined by UNICEF (2017) to include "teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport and toilets [that] are appropriate for all children at all levels. Inclusive education means all children learn together in the same schools" (p. 1).

While in theory inclusion is simple, in practice it can be incredibly complex and deeply entrenched in established systems. Many times, these systems were created without disability experiences in mind (Freer 2023a). This experience has challenged our notions of education for inclusion, opened our minds to be compassionate scholars and observers of change, and affirmed our beliefs that inclusion is for all. Engaging in reflective, collaborative data collection and analysis such as CAE would be a good exercise for any scholar to examine attitudes and beliefs regarding critical topics such as inclusive education. Every child on the planet deserves an equitable education with their peers to learn, grow, and be productive together. It is our hope that our learnings from this experience might be useful to others doing international work on inclusion. We know that system change is not easy in any context but, when people can unlearn and relearn based on inclusive principles, grassroots change can occur, even if for a few children at a time. It must begin somewhere.

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