Chapter 8
School and Inclusive Practices

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Abstract Over the past 20 years, there has been an imperative in most Western countries to accommodate students with special learning needs in regular education settings. Inclusion has become the catchword that epitomizes the notion of equality and opportunity in social and scholarly domains. It would seem logical that the adoption of inclusion as a systemic policy would lead to significant changes in classroom teaching and learning practices but this does not appear to be the case. The implementation of new teaching-learning technologies to support inclusive education practices, including peer-mediation, has not kept pace with the acceptance of the rhetoric. In this chapter, I draw a parallel between the evidence supporting the benefits of inclusive education and the data that confirm the value of peer-mediation with students with diverse learning needs.

8.1 Overview

It has been more than 50 years since the focus of attention in education broadened to include students who have problems learning in regular school classrooms. Before that, many of those students attended separate – or special – classes or special schools with peers who had an intellectual disability or one or more other cognitive, physical, or sense impairments. Many of the most impaired students who resided in institutions for people with mental retardation received very little
education, if any. In the 1960s, as a reaction to the lack of education apparently being provided in special education settings, there evolved a movement toward providing at least some students with special education needs access to regular education settings (see Dunn 1968).

Mainstreaming, as this movement was called, became an administrative policy that took many students with mild and moderate intellectual disability and many with physical and sense impairments into regular education classes. At that time, mainstreaming involved not much more than the formation of classes (see e.g., Warnock, 1978) that contained students with and without disabilities but there were few adaptations made to either the curriculum or teaching practices that might have produced educational benefits to mainstreamed students. Many teachers and parents were quick to recognise that mainstreaming was little more than maindumping (Chapman 1988; Elkins 1994; Mitler 1988) and there were cynical views expressed that the primary motivation for mainstreaming was simply a cost-saving measure through the reduction in government funding to the special education sector.

Over time, political pressures – largely from parents of students with special learning needs – led to an increase in resources and professional development for teachers aimed at enabling students to take advantage of both the social and scholastic opportunities available in regular classes (see Darling-Hammond 1996). With this development came the demise of the term, mainstreaming, and its replacement by integration and later, by inclusion.

Along with political and administrative directions and mandates came many recommendations for ways in which teaching and learning might occur across education settings to benefit the largest number of students. Curriculum content and classroom practices were scrutinised with a view toward accommodating diverse student learning needs. Teachers were offered professional development opportunities designed to improve their knowledge and skills of disabling conditions and introduce them to inclusive education practices although the requirement for such professional development was voluntary. This meant that there were few significant changes made to the nature of classroom teaching and learning or administrative changes in the host school. Positive exemplars of integration came primarily from highly committed teachers often working in isolation and without much support from either school administration or the school system.

A 40-year history of research on inclusive education should be punctuated with examples of innovative teaching strategies and approaches, such as peer-mediated learning, that enhance the learning experiences of students regardless of ability or impairment. And while any wide-ranging review of inclusive education literature using “inclusive education” or “inclusion” in (for example) the ERIC database will shows a huge range of such initiatives, the conclusion that one might reach is that inclusive education generally has fallen well short of the target. At this point I will make some general observations about the success of inclusion and then move to consider the role of peer-mediated learning in education settings that contain students with diverse learning needs.

In this chapter, I wish to draw a parallel between the histories of inclusive education and peer-mediated learning. The ideals and initiatives associated with