

Chapter 4

The Power of Peers: Setting a Course for 21st Century Skills in Inclusive Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

General education classrooms are growing increasingly diverse and include students with wide-ranging abilities, including children with disabilities, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children from poverty. Coupled with the need to implement 21st Century Skills, teachers need the knowledge and skills to implement research-supported interventions in a flexible and student-centered manner. Based on these needs, the purpose of this chapter is to profile two strategies that have been exemplified in the content area of reading (i.e., class-wide peer tutoring, repeated reading). Both strategies are supported by research, are particularly suited for differentiation of instruction in classrooms that include diverse learners, and can incorporate various aspects of 21st century skills. It is hoped that teachers will gain the skills to implement effective interventions that support both the practice of reading and 21st century skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive schools likely have made us rethink our mindset about what schools, as a whole, encompass. The rights of students with disabilities to be taught in general education environments means that a broader understanding of how inclusive education in practice happens and how inclusive education can be delivered successfully by teachers is necessary. Additionally, enrollment changes in America's schools necessitate the urgent and creative implementation of effective practices that can deliver instruction that is tailored to the needs of individual students and also prepares them for success in life and work in the 21st Century's more inclusive environments. Demographic shifts, and subsequent enrollment changes, have an impact on the outcomes for students and the funding opportunities provided by both the states (as providers of education) and the federal government (by way of entitlement programs). On a daily basis, teachers are tasked with educating an increasingly diverse student body and ensuring that students meet the accountability standards set by the various states and the nation. A shift to more inclusive schools means that more students with disabilities are taught in general education environments. Consequently, general education teachers need a broader capacity to include students with disabilities and to help them realize more successful outcomes. Couple that with changes in the skillsets necessary for employment in the 21st Century economy and the need expands not only to ensuring that educators in inclusive classrooms work differently but also that students in inclusive classrooms have the opportunity to learn a more targeted set of skills. Supporting the power of peers to support each other is proposed as a key solution for inclusive schools.

Research has provided a variety of solutions that can be combined by innovative teachers in inclusive classrooms. The purpose of this chapter is to provide evidence-based practical interventions that map out the instruction cycle for two student-centered solutions. The chapter begins by identifying school enrollment trends and describing the increased diversity that is noted in schools. Next, recent changes in federal policy and the implications for teachers of the focus on 21st Century Schools are introduced. When the demographic shifts and the policy changes are combined, it is clear that different instructional solutions must occur in inclusive classrooms. New skills for students require a broader capacity for their teachers and a focus on different types of instructional delivery. Specifically, instructional delivery that is differentiated to meet the unique needs of students. The tenets of differentiation, assessment, and the use of data from formative assessment are introduced next. This groundwork has been laid since it's important for educators to understand the various features of the instructional cycle that are essential to the success of the solutions that are subsequently presented. If teachers miss out any part of the

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