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| [Shanahan on Literacy](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/%22%20%5Co%20%22%28http%3A//www.shanahanonliteracy.com/%29)  |  |

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| **[To Group or Not to Group-- That is the question](http://feedproxy.google.com/~r/shanahanonliteracy/mQPL/~3/dqGy2OMZxgo/to-group-or-not-to-group-that-is.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email)** Posted: 02 Jun 2015 02:22 PM PDT**A teacher’s (thoughtful) questions:** We’re being told to spend about 30 minutes delivering whole group instruction and then spend the next 60 minutes meeting with small groups of students while the other students work in literacy stations to practice skills previously taught either independently or in partners/groups.  This framework seemed helpful because when I had a class of 27 students, I needed a structure for how to be able to meet with more than one small group per day and by sending students to independently practice skills in stations, I was then freed up to meet with 2 -3 small groups throughout the day.  In the past, I had time to meet only with one group per day and it was always my strugglers, which meant my higher students never got a piece of me. Since then and when we went to 60 minutes of either SG or literacy stations, I’ve been able to actually meet with my higher ability students a couple of times per week and in general I meet with about 15 students in that 60 minute frame versus 5 as in the past.  But, after reading your posts, I’m not really sure what the structure of my 90 min. reading block should look like.  And, I still have issues and don’t know if what I’m doing is best because I have questions such as…1.  Is it really fair that on some days students in my class spend 60 minutes during the reading block without a teacher?  This is what literacy stations did to some of my students and I’m not sure I felt it was best.2. How do I meet the demands of needing to work with several students in smaller groups throughout the day if I don’t have literacy stations going for a big chunk of the time?3.  When I send students to literacy stations, do they work with text that is at their level if they are by themselves?  Do I chose more complex texts if they are working with a partner?  Any good teacher knows that not everything fits into a nice and pretty box, and that we are constantly adjusting the structure of our classroom depending on the progress towards our learning goals and the feedback from our students.  Yet…as teachers we still want to know what does this really look like…what does a typical 90-minute reading block look like?**Shanahan’s (clever) response:** *To group or not to group, that is the question.**Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the**slings and arrows of whole class instruction,**or to take arms against a sea of troubles**and by small group teaching, end them?*There must be something in the water. This is the third time in a week that folks have asked me about whole class/small group instruction. My first response is that I fully appreciate your situation. I definitely agree that teachers need some kind of general plan to follow when it comes to planning and implementing instruction. You simply cannot make everything up every day, so having some set time allotments makes sense (David Letterman always had his Top Ten List—and probably for the same reasons you have whole class and small group instruction—though I assume your teaching isn’t as funny). Teaching (like doctoring, engineering, lawyering, presidenting and other work verbs) is difficult and the Nobel Prize winner, Herb Simon, showed why, when engaged in challenging tasks, it is beneficial to routinize. So, I’ll give you an A+ in trying to develop a schema to work within day to day.But then I balk. As much as I like the idea of a somewhat consistent daily routine, I’m not so comfortable in building such a routine around activities and organizational structures. It makes me uncomfortable. I could imagine you meeting the structure, but not improving students’ literacy performance. I suspect that you are being told to maximize small group teaching because (whoever is promoting that) believes that students make the greatest learning progress in small groups and so wants the majority of the time there. However, I think that is a misinterpretation. I would argue for organizing your time around your goals rather than around grouping plans (within the times that you establish, you can use a variety of grouping plans—again, selected on the basis of what would promote your goals).The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) reported that phonological awareness and phonics instruction were effective, but that small group instruction of these skills was associated with higher effect sizes than those obtained either with whole class or individual lesson delivery. Other studies support the conclusion that small group reading instruction leads to relatively more learning than whole class teaching (Slavin, 1993; Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2010). When the comparison is of the effectiveness of small group versus whole class reading lessons, the choice is clear: small group teaching is better. However, that is a false comparison and isn’t the actual choice facing most classroom teachers. Instructional planning requires a consideration of the efficiency of instruction and the learning benefits from the overall instructional program. Sorenson and Hallinan (1986), in a longitudinal study of 47 classes, found the superiority of small group teaching over whole class teaching, but they also found this advantage to be dissipated by the relatively low amounts of learning obtained during the independent seat work activities that students were obliged to engage in while their classmates received small group instruction. Similarly, in a “beat the odds” study, it was found that small group teaching was superior only when the lessons were taught by multiple teachers, not when individual teachers were delivering the lessons while the other children did seat work (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2002). Big learning benefits were evident from the small group teaching, but so little growth occurs when students are working on their own that the overall comparison of whole class and small group teaching is a wash. Given that learning is so much better in small groups than large groups, it is no wonder that your principal, reading coach, or curriculum director may promote it. However, there is a reason why you feel guilty about the groups you can’t get to—those children are at a clear disadvantage not only when compared with small group instruction, but with whole class teaching. I would organize my day around what I need to accomplish with the students: they need to learn to decode and encode text accurately, they need to learn to read text fluently, they need to learn to comprehend and learn from text, and they need to learn to compose text. Devote time to each of those goals and try to figure out the most powerful way to reach each one. With decoding that might be whole class introduction of skills, with small group and individual follow up to ensure that they get it (the small group work could be practice, but it could be reteaching). Fluency might best be organized in pairs with the teacher moving among these pairs. Reading comprehension may be a mix of whole class and small group teaching depending on what you are dealing with. Writing might be whole class with some individual follow up, and so on. The point is moving towards your goals, not getting kids into particular instructional configurations. That approach requires that you focus heavily on whole class teaching, with small group and individual instruction aimed at reinforcing, extending, and ensuring that the whole class lessons stick. That should give you a good mix of efficiency and effectiveness. The better you are at delivering those whole class lessons, the less small group teaching that you’ll need. But that means you have to figure out how to make it possible for more students to respond in the whole class (as they do in small group) and for you to observe better, so that you can see problems (as you can in small groups). I think you need a judicious mix of whole class, small group, and individual teaching, but your organization should focus on what is being taught rather than how it is being taught.*.*Slavin, R. E. (1993). Ability grouping in the middle grades: Achievement effects and alternatives.*The Elementary School Journal, 93*, 535-552.Slavin, R. E., Lake, C., Chambers, B., Cheung, A., & Davis, S. (2010). *Effective reading programs for the elementary grades: A best-evidence synthesis.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.Sørenson, A.A.B. (1970). Organizational differentiation of students and educational opportunity. Sociology of Education, 43, 355-376.Sørenson, A. B., & Hallinan, M. T. (1986). 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