



What is Phonics?



Children see Mom and Dad absorbed in books and sit eagerly at their elbows, listening to those alphabet letters spring to life - they want to read, too.

by Nancy Nicholson

HAVE YOU EVER approached the sink in an airport restroom, only to freeze in confusion as you searched high and low for the water faucet? Perhaps, to the amusement of fellow travelers, you artfully waved your hands around, above and below the sink in vain hope of locating the latest technological advance in triggering mechanisms. It was only when you stepped back in consternation, accidentally stumbling over a button located on the floor, that water finally gushed forth — if only for a few seconds. Now imagine that, worldwide, each water-dispensing device in sink, tub and shower is unique. Think of the time and frustration involved in learning and memorizing the operation of each individual device that one might encounter over a lifetime. How much time and frustration is saved by familiarity with a few variations of a standardized faucet!

Perhaps this seems an odd way to introduce a comparison between whole-language and phonics approaches to reading. However, the parallel is not so stretched as it might seem. 'Whole-language,' or the 'look-and-guess' system of reading, requires the reader to

memorize thousands of individual words before he can begin to approach literacy. Lacking the decoding tools that phonics provides, each word he might chance upon is a frustrating unknown. On the other hand, the student of phonics learns word-attack skills that will enable him quickly to decipher virtually any word he may encounter.

What is phonics? Simply, phonics is an approach to reading that begins by teaching letter sounds, then progresses to the blending of those letter sounds to form syllables and words. The English language is comprised of forty-five sounds, twenty-one of which are vowel sounds. Consonant and short vowel sounds are taught first, and can be learned by most children with about three month's instruction. A child who can identify and blend only these sounds already has the word attack skills to read well in excess of 1,200 words.

In contrast, employing the 'look-and-guess,' or 'whole language' approach, the average child memorizes about 300-400 words per year. Since minimal or no instructional time is given to

teaching letter sounds or sound blending, the child lacks the skills to decode any word outside his memorized list. By the time the 'whole language' student reaches fourth grade, he will be able to identify approximately 1,500 words. Meanwhile, the phonics student will long since have mastered the remaining consonant and vowel blends, gaining the capability of reading more than 24,000 words.

Not only does a phonics approach to reading benefit the average student, but recent studies demonstrate the superiority of this method of instruction for those students who may have potential learning disabilities. Independent studies from the University of Oregon and the University of Houston indicate that reading disabilities can be avoided or minimized by learning phonics. University of Houston researchers studied groups of 'poor-achievers'; after one year of teaching with the 'look-and-guess' method, *33% of the students failed to recognize more than three words from a fifty-word list.* Of those taught phonics, 94% achieved above the fore-mentioned level. Studies like these are prompting states like California to abandon the failed 'whole language' system and return to phonics instruction.

Further, the failure of 'whole language' extends beyond reading to encompass spelling and nearly every other subject, for virtually all academics are based in some way upon reading. The child who has learned letter sounds and blends has a head start not only in spelling, but also in writing, history, mathematics and religion.

Finally, phonics instruction is desirable not only because it produces less frustrated and more able readers, but for reasons infinitely greater; the eager and fluent reader can delve into the treasures of the Catechism, the lives of the saints and Holy Scripture. Phonics not only opens young minds to all that love of reading can offer in the secular realm — its study can prepare your child to know, defend and extend the teachings of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.