



The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten Learning System Early Reading First Grants: Alignment and Support

Robert-Leslie Publishing, developer of The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten Learning System, offers an innovative and engaging program that aligns with and supports the goals of Early Reading First; Head Start Child Outcomes; state standards; National Association for the Education of Young Children, International Reading Association, and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics joint position statements; as well as National Science Education Standards. The InvestiGator Club is a comprehensive program based on research that directly reflects the 2009 National Early Literacy Report. The guiding framework is based on “evidence-based practices” which are described as “the adoption of interventions and practices that are informed by research” (Dunst, Trivette, and Cutspec, 2002). Evidence-based practices are specific ways to put into action those approaches that scientific studies have shown to be most effective.

The InvestiGator Club enhances the early language literacy and pre-reading development of preschool-age children. Storytelling sets the stage as an essential part of any preschool curriculum. “Stories present us not only with memorable pictures, but with drama. Through the power of the imagination we become vicarious participants in the story, sharing the heroes or heroine’s choices and challenges. We literally ‘identify’ ourselves with our favorite characters, and thus their actions become our actions” (Kilpatrick, 1994). The InvestiGator Club responds to this need for strong characters with Dilly Gator and her friends, who love investigating and finding out about their world. They pool their talents and interests to create a club to find out about themselves and the world around them. This “big story” forms the shared context in which the entire program unfolds.

The InvestiGator Club provides systematic, scaffolded instruction using the evidence-based practices of modeling, explicit instruction, assessment and intervention, and multiple exposures to objectives through a variety of modalities. The varied instructional methods allow for lesson modifications for children with special needs, as well as for advanced, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners.

Program Organization

The InvestiGator Club is organized into seven inquiry-based Investigations. As children navigate their way through each Investigation, integrated content-area skills are seamlessly woven together. Content-area skills are taught in the following learning domains:

- Language Development
- Literacy
- Mathematics
- Science
- Creative Arts
- Social and Emotional Development
- Approaches to Learning
- Physical Health and Development
- Social Studies
- Technology

This fully integrated curriculum balances active, child-centered learning with teacher-directed instruction. The program provides preschoolers with research-based cognitive learning opportunities through a language-rich classroom that encourages meaningful conversation and verbal problem solving. Vocabulary is intentionally taught and stressed in each InvestiGator Club lesson. Useful, everyday words, as well as content-related vocabulary, are woven into the program through discussion and conversation, explorative play, songs, stories, and purposeful inquiry. The foundation of the program's prekindergarten instruction is composed of opportunities for developmentally appropriate instruction of:

- oral language.
- phonological awareness.
- writing (shared, language experience, and independent).
- alphabet knowledge.
- concepts of print.

Each Investigation begins with a content-related, vocabulary-rich, interactive Flapboard™ (PATENT PENDING) story.

Flapboards are a new, innovative product unique to The InvestiGator Club. Each story is revealed through four lift-the-flap magnetic Flapboards, which help children:

- make predictions.
- build background.
- access prior knowledge.
- become curious.
- use problem-solving skills.

Daily Structure

Flexibility and choice are built into the program's daily structure, thus accommodating the unique and diverse prekindergarten classroom schedule, as well as individual teaching styles.

Opening Circle Time allows for discussions that tap prior knowledge, introduce new vocabulary words, and cover critical skills and concepts.

Every day is literacy day. Phonological Awareness and Alphabet Knowledge have their own special place in the daily schedule. Small Group and Whole Group lessons are based on the latest research in child development and "best practices." Questions help the teacher quickly assess children's understanding of a lesson, reinforce skills, or extend skills and concepts. Literature is revisited many times for a variety of purposes. Closing Circle Time helps children connect the day's new learning to what they already know. Children learn print concepts and "share the pen," working with a variety of writing forms, including charts, letters, and stories.

Instructional Strategy for Early Literacy

Based on Early Reading First guidelines, The InvestiGator Club Prekindergarten Learning System serves as a solid foundation for the development and application of important early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, conventions of print, and oral language. The table below shows where The InvestiGator Club provides instruction in the four Early Reading First Areas of Competency.

Early Reading First Areas of Competency	Robert-Leslie Publishing's The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten Learning System Provides:
Phonological Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• comprehensive instruction of phonological awareness and an understanding that spoken words are made up of smaller units of sound.• explicit daily instruction to support the ability to hear and work with sounds of spoken language, including the ability to distinguish environmental and speech sounds.• explicit daily instruction in the development of listening, rhymes, word awareness, syllable awareness, and phonemic awareness.• reinforced, explicit instruction in the development of phonological skills that increase in difficulty throughout the school year.• explicit lessons that incorporate a sense of playfulness and fun and discourage drill and rote memorization.• small group settings that encourage interaction among children and maintain a fun and informal tone.• activities that encourage children's curiosity and experimentation.• inclusion of daily instructional teaching plan labeled Everyday Literacy.• phonological awareness skills taught in conjunction with the Spanish alphabet during interactive lessons.• assessment of phonological awareness built into the instructional teaching plan to support the teacher.• point-of-use suggestions for the teacher that provide specific modifications, research, and differentiation of instruction.• use of a musical CD for practice with difficult speech sounds.

Early Reading First Areas of Competency	Robert-Leslie Publishing's The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten Learning System Provides:
Alphabet Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • inclusion of a daily alphabet knowledge instructional plan labeled Everyday Literacy. • explicit instruction of letter recognition. • explicit instruction in recognizing and writing letters with frequent exposure to all forms of print. • daily writing activities, including shared writing. • explicit lessons that demonstrate the relationship between letters and sounds in a systematic way. • use of storytelling as a tool for providing shared context for each letter. • whole-class and flexible small-group activities to differentiate instructions for individual needs. • consideration of characteristics of letters and their associated sounds in the instructional sequence. • specific interactive activities to introduce children to the Spanish alphabet. • systematically and explicitly taught skills that progress logically with no assumptions made about students' prior knowledge. • reinforcement and cumulative review integrated in meaningful content areas. • assessment of alphabet knowledge built into the instructional teaching plan to support the teacher.
Conventions of Print	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicit daily shared writing lessons that connect to that day's experiences and activities. • charts and stories incorporated daily with pictures and dictation. • real world photographs that introduce children to vocabulary and concepts. • instruction of how to hold and read books. • recognition of the connection between words written on a page and the words read by the reader. • lessons that help children understand that print has meaning and a variety of purposes. • instruction in the conventions of the printed word, including the use of capital letters and punctuation. • explanation of the terms <i>letter</i>, <i>word</i>, and <i>sentence</i>. • activities that teach children that print moves from back to front, left to right, top to bottom, and beginning to end.

Early Reading First Areas of Competency	Robert-Leslie Publishing's The InvestiGator Club® Prekindergarten Learning System Provides:
Conventions of Print (continued)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assessment of conventions of print skills built into the instructional teaching plan to support the teacher. • daily demonstration of where print begins and how to progress. • active involvement of students to make connections between concepts and words. • a print-rich environment including books and magazines that children can handle and use, labels, posters, display areas showcasing examples of children's print, teacher created instructional and functional print, and more.
Oral Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • daily encouragement and opportunities for discussion and conversation. • specific questioning to tap prior knowledge. • practice using words children already know. • consistent addition of new words in all learning activities. • natural settings for language development with dramatic and other play activities. • teacher participation in play time to model interactions. • teacher demonstration of how to resolve conflicts, listen attentively, and act appropriately in a variety of settings. • instruction on how to recognize facial expressions, incorporate context clues, and verbalize emotions. • repetition of stories to reinforce the sounds and meanings of words. • meaningful discussion of read-alouds to help children make connections between the written and spoken word. • activities that build connections between English words and words in other languages. • ideas for daily routine and transition activities that incorporate oral language for extra practice and reinforcement. • use of whole-class and flexible small groups to differentiate instruction for individual needs. • assessment of oral language skills built into the instructional teaching plan to support the teacher.

Research Support

The following research correlation provides consistent evidence that The InvestiGator Club is a research-based curriculum grounded in systematic, explicit instruction of Phonological Awareness, Alphabet Knowledge, Conventions of Print, and Oral Language.

Phonological Awareness

Research shows that phonological awareness is the single most reliable predictor of future reading success (Blachman, 2000; Juel, 1991; Wagner, Torgesen, and Rashotte, 1994). Performance on phonological awareness tasks also is predictive of later reading difficulties (Lundberg, Olofsson, and Wall, 1980). The best phonological awareness activities also develop phonemic awareness. Children who have phonemic awareness skills can count the number of sounds in a word and execute segmentation, blending, and substitution. Phonological awareness activities are presented in each week of the yearlong program. Explicit instruction is provided for:

Listening: Children close their eyes and repeat spoken sounds or identify environmental sounds, including those found on the Listen to Your World CD.

Rhyme: Children recognize and generate rhymes in games, songs, stories, and poems, including the use of Dilly and Friends Lapbook stories, the Music and Movement CD, and the traditional Spanish "Too Much Fun" CD.

Word awareness: Children discriminate between different spoken words and repeat words heard orally, including the use of Oral Language Cards as a starting point.

Syllable awareness: Children repeat and clap or use counters to show the syllables heard in words.

Phonemic awareness: Children develop an understanding of alliteration, initial and final sound identification, counting, segmentation, blending, and substitution. The Singing Sounds CD gives children practice with difficult speech sounds and language patterns.

Alphabet Knowledge

According to researchers Neuman and Roskos (1998), when teachers of preschool children discuss the importance of children acquiring alphabet knowledge, they often discuss different skills. Some might mean that children will learn to recognize and name the letters of the alphabet. Others will include writing letters. Still others will include matching sounds to letters. The InvestiGator Club encompasses all three. Alphabet knowledge, specifically letter naming, has historically been among the reading readiness skills used for the prediction of reading achievement (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Research also suggests that a child with automatic and accurate letter-recognition skills will have an easier time learning about letter sounds and word spellings than a child who does not know the alphabet (Adams, 1990; Honig, 1996; Riley, 1996).

There is strong agreement that effective alphabet training includes explicit instruction in recognizing and writing letters with frequent exposure to all kinds of print. Writing letters is another effective way to promote children's letter knowledge; children get a sense of letters, letter sounds, and the purpose of print as they engage in daily writing activities (Wagstaff, 1998).

To support the development of alphabet recognition skills, The InvestiGator Club provides explicit instruction that helps teachers:

- provide daily opportunities for letter recognition.
- demonstrate the association of letters with their shapes using Daily Routine Posters in English and Spanish, the interactive Alphabet Flapboard and Flap Fillers, magnetic foam letters in English and Spanish, as well as other curriculum materials.
- teach the name of letters and the sounds they make.
- demonstrate how letters are formed when writing using the models on Dilly's Alphabet Cards.
- encourage children to finger-trace or attempt to write letters.
- encourage children to notice beginning letters in their names and familiar words on Daily Routine Posters and other environmental print.

There are many characteristics to consider when determining the sequence of letter instruction. For example, visually confusing letters should be taught separately; letters with "continuous sounds" should generally be taught before letters with "stop sounds."

Keeping in mind the importance of these characteristics, The InvestiGator Club has organized the teaching of alphabet knowledge using the following sequence:

Alphabet Sequence by Investigation

Let's Investigate!: alphabet introduction

Under Construction: *Mm, Ff, Ss, Pp*

Healthy You: *Nn, Aa, Dd, Vv*

Finny, Feathery, Furry Friends: *Ee, Cc, Hh, Yy*

Splash and Dig: *Ll, Oo, Rr, Zz*

Watch It Grow: *Ii, Tt, Bb, Jj, Qq*

Weather Watchers: *Ww, Uu, Gg, Kk, Xx*

Conventions of Print

Researchers have found that a print-rich environment prepares children to read and write (National Research Council, 1999). Research also shows that children rely heavily on context to “read” environmental print. Although children do not learn to read from environmental print, their experiences with it help them understand that print has meaning and that groups of letters are meaningful (Vukelich and Christie, 2004). According to Strickland and Schickedanz (2004), shared writing is a strategy that addresses conventions of print within an activity framework. In shared writing, the teacher models the writing process while guiding children from thinking and talking to writing. Children observe the way letters, sounds, and words are linked to ideas in written form as the teacher thinks aloud and “shares the pen” with children to record. As the teacher writes, conventions of print can be pointed out.

Conventions of print, print awareness, and book knowledge are fostered in The InvestiGator Club through explicit reading and writing lessons that include the following principles and sample activities:

- Print is different from pictures. Daily Routine Posters in English and Spanish and other environmental print help children learn to make the distinction.
- Print has meaning. Lapbooks, trade books, and Bruno’s Buzz Nonfiction Readers, all available in English and Spanish, convey the meaning of print in a variety of settings and subject areas.
- Print has practical uses. Shared writing and literacy activities explore uses of print.
- Print has many purposes. From lists and letters to graphs and charts, activities stretch children’s understanding of print.
- Words are made up of letters. In combination with alphabet knowledge activities, literacy and writing activities expand children’s word recognition abilities.
- There is an association between spoken and written words. Children follow print as it is read aloud on Daily Routine Posters and other materials around the classroom.

Oral Language

Research repeatedly has shown that a child's oral language skills can greatly influence overall school performance and are directly linked to later reading and writing success. The obvious conclusion is that by promoting oral language skills at the prekindergarten level, teachers lay a strong foundation for children's educational futures (IRA and NAEYC, 1998). The 2009 National Early Literacy Report states the best early predictors of literacy include alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, rapid naming skills, writing (such as writing one's own name), and short-term memory for words said aloud. Instruction on these skills may be especially helpful for children at risk for developing reading difficulties.

With The InvestiGator Club curriculum, children are provided with the practice they need to develop a rich and varied listening and speaking vocabulary through the following types of lessons:

- Flapboard lessons, which invite children to interact with and respond to stories in unique ways.
- Daily Routines that spark meaningful discussions and conversations.
- Opening Circle Time lessons that use rhymes, songs, finger plays, and chants.
- Small Group and Whole Group lessons that utilize Oral Language Cards, puppet play, dramatic play, picture books, and storytelling.
- Closing Circle Time lessons that invite children to practice new language skills.

Assessment

The evaluation of progress is an integral part of the program. The Assessment and Intervention System components aim to help each teacher:

- execute and document authentic and performance assessment as a means to support children's learning and development.
- plan differentiated instruction for each child.
- utilize intervention strategies to further develop skills.
- include families in the assessment process.
- assess his or her own program in order to make adjustments and improvements.
- maintain virtual and/or classroom portfolios with assessment forms for recording anecdotal notes, as well as observational and narrative assessment.

Assessment components include:

- benchmarks (called objectives) that identify learning goals in the ten key domains.
- clearly labeled Teacher Guide features that provide opportunities and suggestions for observing, questioning, recording anecdotal notes, and collecting representations of children's learning in Small Group, Whole Group, and individual settings.
- ideas for creating and maintaining portfolios.
- 100 assessment cards to aid teachers in measuring a child's development across ten learning domains. Each card includes activity directions, a scoring rubric, intervention strategies, and a list of assessment records to record results.
- Anecdotal Notes Form.
- Narrative Progress Form.
- At-Enrollment Family Survey.
- End-of-year Family Survey.
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP) form to help create an individualized plan for instruction.
- Assessment of Emerging Competencies, which is a broad-based assessment to be administered to each child at the beginning and end of the school year to identify strengths and challenges and to guide instruction.
- Investigation Assessment Checklists, found at the back of each Teacher Guide to record each child's progress during each Investigation.

Professional Development

Robert-Leslie Publishing is committed to providing critical professional development by offering information that emphasizes new teaching techniques and current research. The program's web site, www.investigatorclub.com, utilizes a variety of professional development techniques and resources, including online training bulletins, current early childhood research, and information on educational reforms and best practices.

A Teacher Resource Guide provides a multitude of information, research, and ideas for using the program.

Trained consultants deliver implementation training, as well as ongoing support. An Implementation DVD, Facilitator Guide, and Participant Workbook are all designed to support teachers who will be using the program in the classroom. The workbooks help plan for the entire first year of implementation.

Robert-Leslie Publishing also provides comprehensive professional development institutes in a wide range of topics including:

- Developing effective approaches to teaching and learning
- Developing social and emotional skills through language and learning
- Center-based learning for the preschooler
- Importance of building family and community relationships
- Assessment tools that work
- Literacy and language for the English learner
- The well-managed preschool day
- Inquiry-based learning for the preschooler: The 5 I's
- Implementing current research in language development and literacy

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