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## IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY TEACHERS IN DEALING WITH INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

LINUS is an abbreviation of Literacy and Numeracy Screening. The program has been implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) under the National Key Result Area (NKRA) mandate since 2010 to ensure students master literacy and numeracy. In discovering the implementation of the LINUS Program, this article highlights understanding of the challenges encountered by teachers in dealing with Indigenous students. Using in-depth interviews, document analysis and observation approach, this study explores the relationship and interaction between teachers and Indigenous parents in schools under the administration of Hulu Langat District Education Office (PPD). The analysis from this study shows the variety of challenges encountered by teachers in dealing with Indigenous students. Hence this article provides a multi-lensed overview in order to solve the problem ideally through collaboration between teachers and Indigenous parents. Moreover recommendations can be conveyed to the Ministry of Education (MOE) for instance providing experienced teachers especially in schools with Indigenous students, appropriate modules, and financial allocation specifically for the LINUS Program to benefit teachers and Indigenous parents.

**Keyword:** Literacy, Indigenous Students, LINUS Program, Challenges.



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## INTRODUCTION

The present scenario indicates that the failure of literacy among Indigenous students is a global issue (Dennis, Lynch, & Stockall, 2012; Cumming-Potvin, Renshaw & Van Kraayenoord, 2003; Guzel & Berberoglu, 2005) and all countries in the world have focused on literacy in their education agenda (The 10th Malaysia Plan, 2010).

Previous study had highlighted extra concern on the factors that lead to the failure of Indigenous students in mastering literacy; for instance students, family, culture and teacher factors (Abdull & Kalaidevi, 2012; Daniel, 2012; Haak, Downer, & Reeve, 2012; Wright, 2012). Nevertheless, only a small number of studies have been done on bridging the education gap among Indigenous students through identifying the challenges encountered by both the teachers and Indigenous parents.

Even in Malaysia, the government, specifically the Ministry of Education (MOE) is aware of the literacy issue and it has been highlighted in the National Key Result Area (NKRA) and First Wave Education Development Plan (PPP) 2013 – 2015. In Chapter 4 of the PPP, the fundamental focus is based on students' learning process in the Malaysian education system, and searching for essential solutions to implement changes in order to achieve the educational aspirations. The focus areas are curriculum and assessment, language skill enhancement, intervention for improving school performance, special education, the education of Indigenous and other minorities, and education for smart students. In pursuance of MOE concerns and the NKRA mandate, the LINUS Program has been formulated and launched since 2010.

This study illustrates that indigenous students are able to master literacy if teachers and Indigenous parents bridge the gaps between them in order to overcome the barriers. Thus, a study on literacy issue among Indigenous students shall be conducted to identify the challenges faced and what the teachers and indigenous parents can do to overcome them. The qualitative method used in this research has made it unique where the researcher becomes an instrument to discover the phenomena through in-depth interviews, document analysis and observation approach.

## LINUS PROGRAM

LINUS is an abbreviation of Literacy and Numeracy Screening. The program began in 2010 for students in Standard 1 under the mandate of the Education NKRA national agenda aimed at broadening access to quality education. According to this program, each student must master the basic literacy and numeracy skills after three years of primary education by the end of 2012.

The implementation of the LINUS Program has gained schools' awareness in providing more attention to the Indigenous students to master literacy skills. In addition, teachers will benefit through LINUS modules and courses where they can derive new experiences and strategies especially in dealing with students who have learning difficulties.



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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The LINUS Program was designed and implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) to ensure Standard 3 students in National Schools (SK) master literacy and numeracy by 2012 (Education NKRA, 2012).

Previous studies have found five (5) factors that contribute to the failure of literacy among students. First are self-learning problems, for instance, development problems (Bunn, 2006; Rasinski, 2013), psychology (Macfarlane, Macfarlane, Savage, & Macfarlane, 2012), Individual (Geske & Ozola, 2008; Willingham & Daniel, 2012), weak cognitive skills (Hassan, 1981; Kranzler & Floyd, 2013) and lack of motivation (Fagan, 1998; Wright, 2012). Second, teaching and learning (T&L) strategy (Mercer & Mercer, 1998; Morris, Lloyd, Millenky, Leacock, Raver, & Bangser, 2013). Third, curriculum materials for students with learning problems (Hassan, 1981; Willingham & Daniel, 2012), fourth, the students and their family background (Haak, Downer, & Reeve, 2012) and fifth, the remuneration education (Wright, 2012).

In Malaysia, according to the Murad Dropout Report (1972), the Terengganu Education Department Curriculum Committee in 1979 found that 6.9% of students from Standard 3 to 6 were still illiterate (Hassan, 1981). A few studies also show this phenomenon exists among students (Wan Muda, 1985.) A total of 138,271 Standard 1 students did not master basic literacy in 2006 (Abd. Lateh, 2007).

Statistics for 2009 show that this phenomenon has shown little improvement, since the percentage of Standard 5 students who failed to master literacy skills stood at 15.9% in Johor, 15.4% in Selangor, 11.4% in Sarawak, 9.6% in Kedah, 9.2% in Sabah, 8.4% in Kelantan, 6.7% in Perak, 5.8% in Penang and 5.7% in Pahang (Education NKRA, 2010).

These studies and statistics indicate that failure to master literacy and numeracy still overwhelmed students in primary and secondary school. Hence, various programs have been implemented by the Ministry of Education (MOE) such as PROTIM, PROBIM, KIA2M and LINUS to address the problem (Curriculum Development Division, 2009). Nevertheless, the statistics still show the literacy and numeracy proficiency rate remains unsettled.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges faced by teachers and Indigenous parents in order to ensure Indigenous students master literacy and numeracy skills. Thus, the objective of this study is to describe the challenges encountered by teachers in dealing with Indigenous students in ensuring all the students are able to read and write. Therefore, a research question that drives the researcher to gather the information is:

1. What are the challenges encountered by teachers in order to ensure Indigenous students are able to read and write?



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## **IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

The importance of this study is to provide information to the Ministry of Education (MOE) concerning the challenges encountered by teachers, at the same time educating the Indigenous students. In addition, these findings are essential as justifications in making recommendations for MOE consideration.

## **STUDY LIMITATIONS**

The limitations of this study are to clarify on the challenges encountered by literacy teachers in schools under the Hulu Langat District Education (PPD). Furthermore, respondents of this research only consist of literacy teachers and Indigenous parents. The purpose of the selected schools under the Hulu Langat PPD is because the implementation of LINUS Program in those schools recorded the lowest performance (based on Ministry of Education data). Moreover, this research was restricted to the literacy pedagogy in a primary school with majority of Indigenous students.

Data were collected using three (3) approaches; in-depth interviews, document analysis and observation. The limitation of the study also considers five (5) categories that contribute to the failure of Indigenous students to master literacy and numeracy.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

The conceptual framework is based on four (4) theories; Learning Theory, Behavioral/Behaviorism Theory, Cognitive Theory and Affective Theory. Taking the core research question as a starting point, the conceptual framework emphasizes the challenges encountered by teachers and Indigenous parents from the standpoint of Indigenous students.

### **Behavioral / Behaviorism Theory**

Bandura's theory is chosen as a Behavioral Theory. The theory was founded by Albert Bandura. It emphasizes human behavior and holds that learning begins when the students act upon a stimulus. In addition, this theory states that the teaching and learning process will not run smoothly if the student is not interested.

According to Bandura, students' interest is important to accelerate the learning process. Previous studies have found that most students are not interested in the LINUS teaching and learning teacher (Jamian, 2011). Therefore in the analysis of the LINUS implementation at the school involved, the researcher will identify how teachers overcome this problem and attract the interest of Indigenous students resulting in a smooth learning process.



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## **Cognitive Theory**

Pioneered by Piaget, this theory emphasizes internal mental processes; it involves the reception of information, comprehension and application of knowledge. Knowledge can be increased by sensory observation of the students.

Based on Cognitive Theory, the researcher explains how LINUS teachers stimulate LINUS Indigenous students' cognitive process so that they will be able to understand the concepts that have been taught. With the application of cognitive theory, LINUS teachers can come up with appropriate learning materials and activities in each stage of the individual's development.

## **Affective Theory**

Affective theory focuses on the behavior of pupils' character. Characterization exists when an individual receives responses and applies what one has learned (Ahmad & Moadon, 2003). One of the affective learning theories is humanistic theory.

## **Humanistic Theory**

Pioneered by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, this theory emphasizes moral readiness and students' potential, individual-centric, the individual's uniqueness and the human interest towards individual. One element in humanistic theory mentioned that humans have basic needs. If basic needs are met, people can motivate themselves to achieve self-actualization.

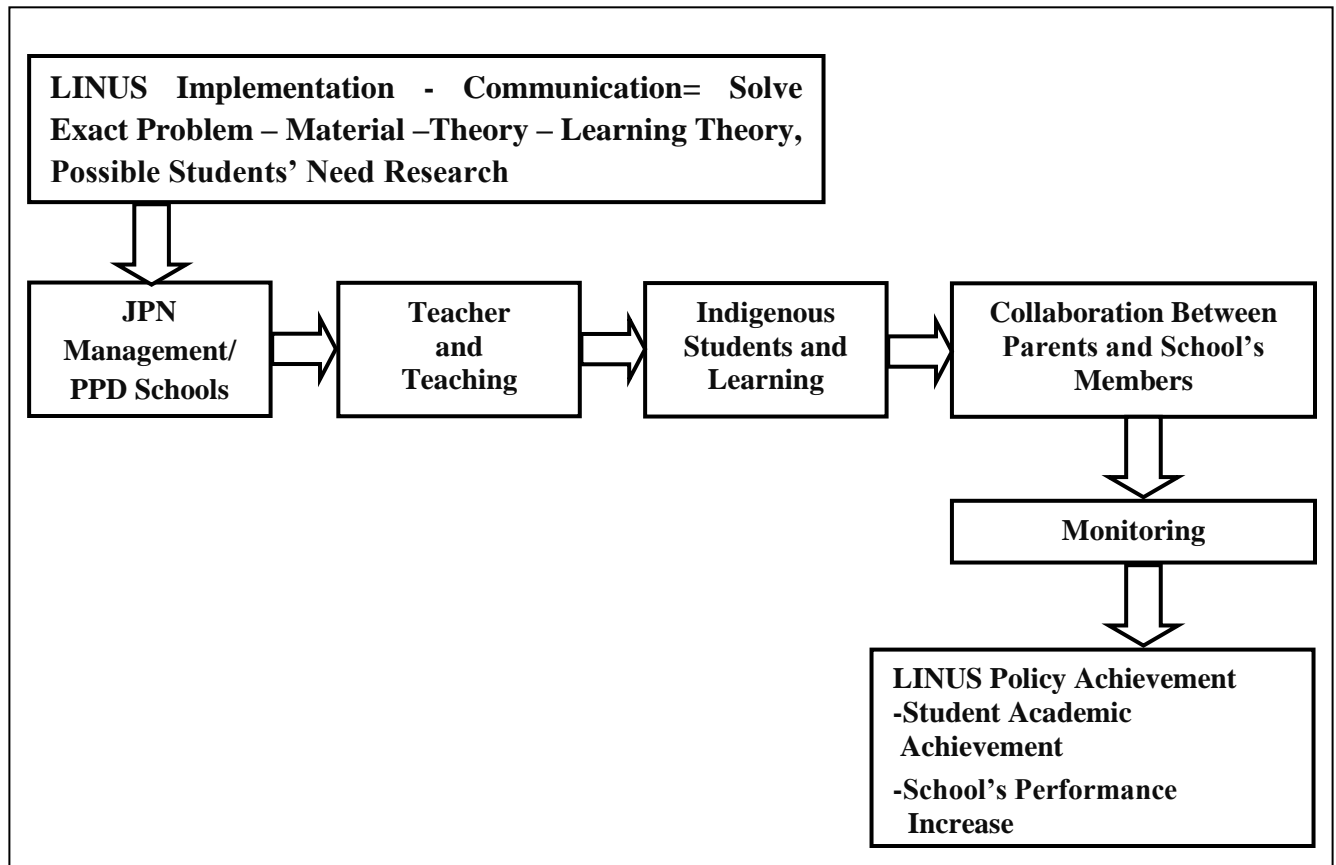
This is supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1984). It states that if the psychological needs are not met by an individual, it soul is disrupted. The elements of this theory help researchers to identify during implementation LINUS program at school, things such as potential students, moral readiness, the uniqueness of the student, human interests of the students, the basic needs of students, psychological needs to be addressed by teachers and administrators. It is important to ensure the outcomes of the LINUS program meet the program objectives.

When the researcher collects data through observation during the LINUS Teaching and Learning session, the researchers perceived the implications of Learning Theory on LINUS students. Here the researcher will investigate whether LINUS teachers guide their students so that they are able to construct knowledge on their own such that cooperative learning ensues eventually.

Learning Theory is to identify the problems that lead to the failure of Indigenous students to master literacy. Besides, how do teachers apply the theory to ensure students are able to master literacy and numeracy is being monitored. By studying these aspects in the implementation of Teaching and Learning in the LINUS program, the



challenges encountered by teachers to ensure Indigenous students become proficient in literacy will be revealed. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework for the study

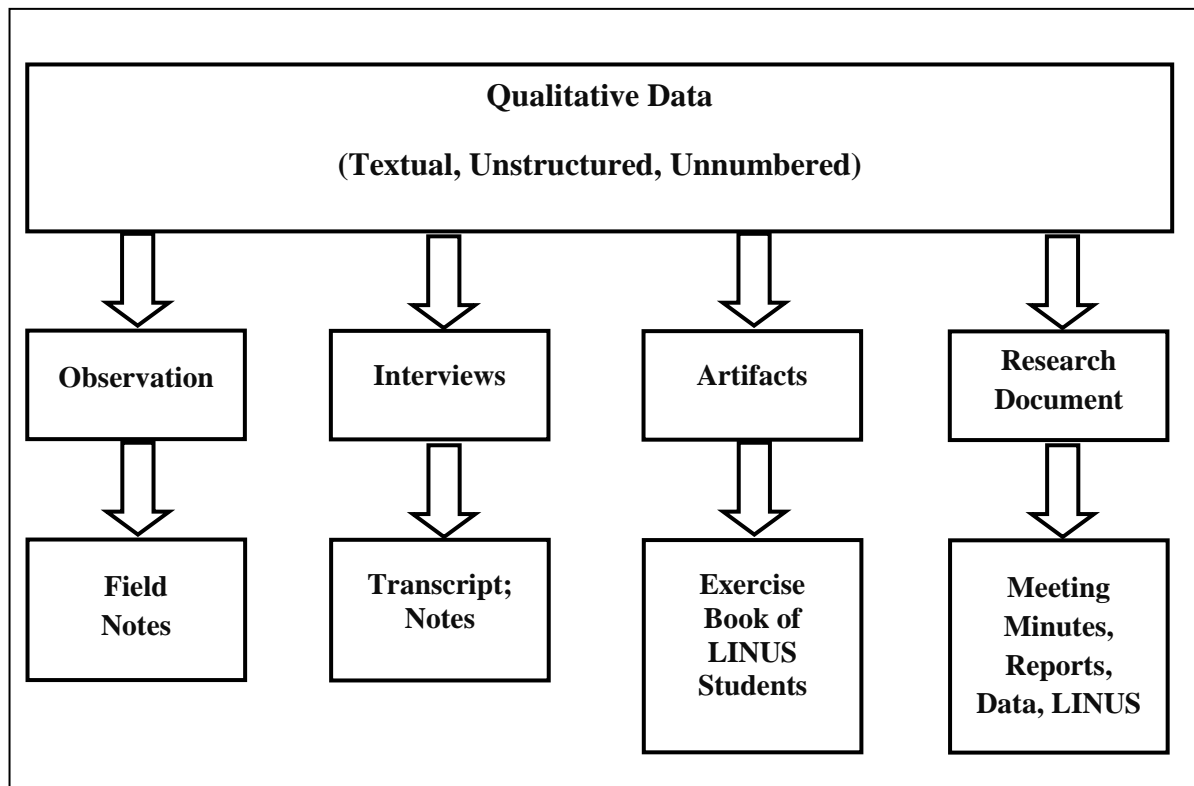
## METHODOLOGY

To address the aims of this study, the researcher chose to use the qualitative method in order to discover, discuss the reality, and expose the real challenges (Cresswell, 1994) encountered by teachers in dealing with Indigenous students particularly in implementing the LINUS Program. Moreover, the researcher believes that teachers' challenges are key to the phenomenon under investigation (Van Maanen, 1983). The reality and real situation developed by the teachers was defined as teachers' challenges in dealing with Indigenous students mainly in T&L of the LINUS Program (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).



### **QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION**

The qualitative data of this research were collected from a various sources using multiple strategies as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Types and sources of qualitative data

Generally, five (5) steps of qualitative data collection process were applied in this research. First, identifying the study participants (the sample) and the study location. The participants of this study are literacy teachers and Indigenous parents while the study location was schools where there were numerous of Indigenous students. The identified study participants had been chosen in order to answer the research question. Second, is to obtain permission to access the study location. Third, is to determine the process of data collection either through in-depth interviews, document analysis, or observation to answer the research question. Fourth, the data collection is done through in depth-interviews, document analysis and observation. Fifth, ethical issues will be emphasized (Cresswell, 2012).



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## **In-depth Interview**

The first method of data collection is using the in-depth interview approach. In-depth interview approach was chosen because Hall and Hord (1987) proposed to interview the key individuals who are directly involved in a program. Based on this study, the in-depth interview is necessary because the researcher is unable to observe the behavior, feelings, and how the study participants interpret the LINUS Program (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, the interview questions are formulated based on the theory of learning difficulties, conceptual framework and the research questions.

## **Classroom Observation of Teaching and Learning (T&L)**

One of the important techniques in this qualitative study is classroom observation. During LINUS T&L sessions, this type of observation provides researchers the opportunity to see the challenges faced by literacy teachers directly. According to Merriam (1988), through observation, the researcher can directly observe participants' behaviors especially challenges encountered by literacy teachers in carrying out T&L sessions.

Using video recording, triangulation can be done. Teaching materials that teachers used are also collected and examined. The observations are focused on T&L of the literacy teacher. Should any of the observation require further clarification, questions will be brought forward during the interview session.

## **Analysis of documents**

In this study, several documents have been identified to be analyzed in order to obtain information related to the research questions. Among the documents reviewed are relevant documents of the LINUS program such as LINUS Management Handbook: Literacy & Numeracy, LINUS Operating Handbook, LINUS Basic Literacy Module, Teaching Module-Basic 3, Students' Basic Literacy Module-Basic 3, and Data and Statistics: LINUS Screening Program. Documents studied include LINUS minutes of meetings, LINUS strategic planning documents, magazines, school annual reports, LINUS room infrastructure, staff development programs and teachers' preparation.

## **FINDINGS**

Following findings from the analysis of interviews, document analysis and observations, the following themes emerged through the limitations of the conceptual framework of this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These data were analyzed systematically. The themes that emerged are displayed using the following matrix table:





Table 1  
*Matrix of Analyzed Data of Semi Structure Interviews*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Literacy Teacher</b>	<b>Parents of Indigenous Students</b>
<b>Principle Context</b> Understanding LINUS Program Objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why LINUS is enacted</li> <li>• Objective of Enactment</li> <li>• LINUS Beneficiary</li> </ul>	Least Understood	Do Not Understand at All
<b>LINUS Policy</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Issues behind the policy</li> </ul>	Least Understood	
<b>Problems of LINUS Policy</b>	Least Understood	
<b>LINUS Implementation Process</b>	Unclear in the beginning, understanding only through own effort	
<b>LINUS Implementation Strategy</b>	Least Understood	
<b>LINUS Policy Achievement</b>	Understood	

The findings from the interviews, document analysis and observation on participants with regard to the confronted challenges are discussed through the following themes:

**Awareness**

The main theme emerging from this study is the lack of awareness from parents and students of Indigenous people regarding the importance of mastering literacy. Through this theme several sub themes are discussed: Awareness of Students and Parents.



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## **Students' Awareness**

This study has identified that teachers encountered a variety of challenges in ensuring the Indigenous students master literacy and one of it is the lack of self-awareness in the following categories:

### **Attitude Among Indigenous Students**

Research found that the main challenge is the behavior of Indigenous students. Nonchalant attitude, refusing to attend classes affect the T&L process and leads to the failure to master literacy and numeracy that have been taught by teachers. As mentioned before, both attitude and behavior have a very strong connection.

'Most of Indigenous students will not attend to school at certain seasons for instance fruit season as they want to help their parents. Therefore, the absenteeism are higher'

(PL/SKPP/1/139-141)

Indigenous students who are unable to master literacy and numeracy tend to have negative attitude such as reckless, undisciplined and have behavioral problems. They tend to be negligent toward their belonging. For example, stationery supplied by the school are not properly cared for and easily lost.

'If these students are forced so much, they will lose their interest to attend school. During fruit harvest, he would not attend too as his father is unable to send him to school. Otherwise he might join his father during the fruit harvest.'

(GL/SKPP/1/84-87)

'... In terms of the students' attitude, stationeries [sic] need to be provided by school since they are unable to take care of their belongings. Moreover sometime the stationeries [sic] are lost'

(K/SKPP/1/57-59)

### **Environment**

The next challenge identified is the surrounding environments by Indigenous students. Environmental factors act upon the students and affect their ability to master literacy by influencing their personality and self-formation.

'... the environmental factors leads the weakness in their academic ...'

(PL/SKPP/1/81-83)

'Their way of living is different; some live inside the forest and some live nearby the hills together with 2 or 3 families. The children depend on their parents to send them to school; otherwise they will not go to school...'

(GP/SKPP/1/87-90)



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Indigenous students are exposed to the traditional environment such as minimal subsistence economic activities (especially hunting and collecting forest products). The indigenous community is still hunting animals, catching fish, picking fruit, collecting honey, and digging potatoes as a source of subsistence.

'They could not provide a special place for them to study at home because I have been to their house, the environment is so discouraging as they are using same area to do all the stuff at home....Therefore, this condition really does not help them to learn'

(GP/SKKP/1/145-149)

## **Nutrition**

Teaching the Indigenous students to consume healthy food is another challenge encountered by the teachers. The study found that Indigenous students tend to ignore nutritious food. The teacher has recognized that the right dietary habits influence the proficiency of literacy among students. This is because nutrition affects personality development. Balanced meals prepared by the family are essential to the overall development of students.

Therefore, some children are having imbalanced eating habits due to a low family income. This will affect the students' cognitive development as it will hinder brain development. Consequently, they are unable to master what their language teachers teach at school.

'I found out that dietary factor affects the brain development of the students, nevertheless these students would just eat almost anything.'

(PL/SKKP/1/83-85)

## **Preschool education**

Moreover lack of preschool education is one of the challenges that need to be overcome by the teachers. Research indicates that preschool education could also contribute as a factor to master literacy.

'...Mostly Indigenous students never go to school. Some of them have not even attended pre-school education so this is why they are shocked.'

(PL/SKKP/1/72-74)

## **Interest**

The next challenge encountered by teachers is the lack of interest in learning shown by Indigenous students. Interests and attitudes had influenced their willingness to learn. Therefore, it will affect their learning readiness.



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Students who have passion and positive attitude toward learning will give full concentration on the T & L activities organized by teachers.

'He seems to have lack of interest in difficult things such as learning Malay language...'

(PL/SKKP/1/85-86)

'He does not know how to read. Does not even know alphabets, therefore he is not interested in anything. Besides he is still a child, and prefer to be playful, therefore he cannot focus on anything.'

(GB/SKKP/1/146-148)

'... He is more to entertainment. Whatever involves with entertainment he loves it...'

(PL/SKKP/1/86-87)

### **Parents' Awareness**

Research discovered that parents mentioned the failure of mastering basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic among students is because of late school admission. However, parent's educational background also influences the awareness of the importance of education among students themselves.

'I've grown. The environment does not suit me. It is better for me to quit.'

(P/SKKP/1/154-155)

'Parents even have least cooperation and nonchalant attitude... Let say their children gave laziness as an excuse they don't even care and push for it'

(K/SKKP/1/84-85)

### **Parents' Level of Academic Achievement**

Furthermore, teachers have to confront parents of Indigenous students who do not have any proper education at all. Lack of education among the parents could contribute to failure of their children in mastering literacy. Previous research has proven that environmental factors --such as family background, parents' academic level, school environment, friends, communities and experiences--could affect personality development.

Family institution is the primary influence on human development. These elements influence individual development such as parents' academic level. Parents who are lacking in education could not be a role model to their children. They could not show any good example towards the children, such as reading books. Consequently



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these Indigenous children lost their interest to read and resulting in their lack of proficiency in literacy. Besides, parents also do not motivate and support their own children.

'... Because of uneducated and unsupported parents is the cause why they are not able to guide their children at home.'

(PL/SKKP/1/87-89)

### **Socioeconomic Status of the Family**

In addition to the challenges encountered by the teachers, this research has also found that socioeconomic status contributes to the LINUS students' development. Most of the LINUS Indigenous students have an inferiority complex, since their families have low socioeconomic status compared to the others.

Financial status of a family determines the types of facilities provided to the students. Apart from a balanced diet, the rich families are able to provide additional education materials such as computers, tuition, and Internet access. Therefore these students are exposed greatly. The wide range of access to study at home could improve their academic record and boost their confidence level.

'... For the family that have economic problem they just live with what they have. Some of them came to school just only on directive, just to avoid punishment...'

(GP/SKKP/1/123-125)

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, lack of understanding of the LINUS Program among teachers and Indigenous parents is one of the major issues contributing to lack of success of the program. Therefore, this study recommends an initiative to be taken through collaboration between the teachers and the Indigenous parents. The recommended collaboration can be done through various programs involving parents' participation for instance parent-teacher meetings, workshops and so forth. We believe that this collaboration will educate both parties, the teachers as well as the parents, regarding the importance of the LINUS Program and indirectly emphasize awareness of LINUS Program among themselves.

Nevertheless, the study also found that the provided modules for LINUS students are less effective because the syllabus was way too advanced for the Indigenous students and Indigenous parents to understand; thus this study recommends the Ministry of Education to take an initiative to construct a particular syllabus for Indigenous students with reference to their environment.

The LINUS Program shows the initiatives taken by the Ministry of Education in handling illiterate students should be lauded but lack of experienced teachers to teach Indigenous students is affecting outcomes; hence this study



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recommends that the Ministry of Education organize workshops for teachers and parents besides providing experienced teachers to teach Indigenous students to ensure success of the LINUS Program.

## CONCLUSION

On a final note, this study has highlighted a variety of challenges encountered by literacy teachers in dealing with Indigenous students during the LINUS Program implementation; the most crucial part is the responsibility of teachers as well as the Indigenous parents and the Ministry of Education. A good teacher is not defined by one's characteristics, but the ability to manage and adapt learning techniques to overcome the challenges. Therefore, these challenges should not be overstated and attention is required from all parties including teachers, Indigenous parents and government as recommended by the researchers in order to achieve the LINUS Program objectives.

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