

# INTEGRATING LITERATURE AND MUSIC FOR CLASSROOM TEACHING WITH AN INTERACTIVE STORY BOOK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the development of an interactive story book based on a Rungus children's folk song (*longoi tanganak*). The book was developed to encourage children to express their ideas through storytelling, music and movement. This study aims to explore how an interactive book can be used in the music classroom and outlines ways in which music and movement can be integrated while reading a story. Field trips were conducted in Kudat and Pitas, Sabah to collect *longoi tanganak* from elderly Rungus singers recommended by village heads. Following that, a Sabah-based story was written and a song containing musical characteristics suitable for children's singing activities were incorporated into the story. Finally, a survey was sent to 12 selected music teachers to answer the following questions: (1) What age group could use this storybook? (2) What genres of children's literature do you use in your lessons? (3) How would you use this storybook in your music classroom? and (4) Why do you use children's literature in your music lessons? In addition to that, two music teachers were selected from the pool of respondents and were video recorded teaching a music lesson that incorporated this story book. The results of this study revealed that children were highly engaged in the lesson, responding and actively participating in the reading of the story. This included vocal, movement and instrument exploration. Young children also learned extra skills in sign language and memorising words through the composed song, adapted from a Rungus *longoi tanganak* (children's song). This product is an innovation that is suitable to be used as a teaching aid among preschool, kindergarten, and primary school children.

**Keywords:** Children's music, children's literature, interactive story book, Rungus children's songs, elementary music classroom.

## INTRODUCTION

Known as the “Land Below the Wind,” Sabah is Malaysia’s most northern state on the northern part of Borneo and is home to more than 58 different ethnic groups with over 100 local dialects (King & King 1984 [1997]; Pugh-Kitingan *et al.*, 2018). Sabah’s Mt. Kinabalu (4,095 metres) is the highest mountain in insular Southeast Asia, while Mt. Trusmadi (2,642 metres) and Mt. Tombuyukon (2,579 metres) are Malaysia’s second and third highest respectively. Banggi Island, in the north of Kudat, is Malaysia’s largest island, and the Kinabatangan River is Malaysia’s second longest river after the Rejang in Sarawak. Formerly, Sabah was largely covered by lower montane forests and rainforests (Boutin, 1990; Hutton, 2004:1; Singh & Tongkul, 2004). Its fertile alluvial plains support the large sedentary populations who mostly speak languages from the ancient indigenous Dusunic, Murutic and Paitanic families of Austronesian languages. They traditionally practice sophisticated rice cultivation with wet rice on the plains and dry rice on the hills, sometimes supplemented with riverine fishing and occasional game hunting from the forests. Coastal communities include the formerly maritime Iranun and the Sama Bajau, ethnic Brunei and others who practice sea fishing.

Despite many publications produced by local scholars and cultural associations on Sabah’s rich cultural and environmental diversity, there are limited books linked to music teaching for children save for *Bangau Oh Bangau* by Elly Nor Suria M. Zainudin (2018) and *Menjadi Bintang* by Mazni Md Ramly (2018). Moreover, there is still a lack of interactive teaching materials for young children that draws from Sabah’s unique culture and natural environment. Hence, this story book project was developed to address this need. It utilises a selected song from a collection of Rungus children’s songs that are currently being researched.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A literature review shows how integrating children’s literature in the music classroom can support the learning of musical concepts. Thus, children’s books based on songs can serve as an important teaching material in the general music classroom.

Many children’s song-based books have been developed in other countries. Children learn to read and sing through books with attractive illustrations. Children’s books that are music based can provide enjoyment while educating them. Educators and parents seek teaching aids to develop the musical abilities

of their young children. Calogero (2002), Eppink (2009), and Brown (2019) compiled a list of children's books that integrated musical concepts into classroom teaching and learning. According to Eppink (2009), learning music through literature is a form of creative and engaged learning that children can experience. When teachers and children explore sounds, instruments, and rhythms to enhance a story, their musical ability naturally develops as singing is often integrated into children's literature. According to Gauthier (2005), literature has the power to capture one's attention and imagination. Brown (2019) states that singing, expressive reading, instruments, rhythm and ostinati can make a book come alive. Addo (2003) also stated that learning about culture through children's books can help us better understand how and why people from other cultures make and value music. In Miller's study (2008), there were four identified ways in which children's literature could support music:

- a) Literature that focuses on music and musicians,
- b) Literature that supports general academic goals through music,
- c) Literature that assists students to understand music concepts, and
- d) Literature that provides scaffolding for composition.

By using the rhythmic reading model, Miller (2008) found that it could help encourage one's sound improvisations and explore various dynamic levels. On the other hand, Eppink (2009) proposed that a music teacher experiences three phases when integrating music into children's literature: selecting, planning, and preparing. The first phase involves selection, and consists of three categories: a) general music connections, b) connections with specific music objectives, and c) literature considerations. Following this is the planning phase, where the teacher will determine the music objectives and activities that relate to children's literature. The third phase introduces the literature itself to students.

A song within a picture book "is uniquely well suited for supporting children's growth in art, music, literature and language. These illustrated versions of song lyrics help to forge connections between singing and reading and between composing lyrics and writing stories" (Jalongo & Ribblett, 1997).

## METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative approach and included a small survey using a Google form of questions based on Brown (2019) that was given to music teachers, as well as classroom observations. The children's book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* (Simeon, 2020)

was used, based on a story about two children and their pet monkey travelling around Sabah. The book incorporates a story, a board game, puppets and a song. The following survey questions in Figure 1 reflect some of the issues that were considered for the design, development and adaptation of *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* for the classroom.

1. Who would this book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* be suitable for?
  - a) Babies and toddlers
  - b) Ages 3-4
  - c) Ages 5-8
  - d) Ages 9 and above
  - e) Others (please specify):
  
2. Take a look at the books you have purchased for your child(ren). Which theme is most prominent?
  - a) Animals
  - b) Nature
  - c) Transport
  - d) Fairies
  - e) Sport
  - f) Others (please specify):
  
3. How would you use this book in your classroom?
  - a) As a sound story or musical performance with instruments
  - b) As supplementary material to the theme of a lesson or song
  - c) To address a specific musical skill or concept or provide information on a composer or musician
  - d) As a song tale that would be sung for or with students
  - e) As a basis for music composition
  - f) For movement exploration
  
4. Why do you use children's literature in your music lessons?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
5. When you use children's literature in your lessons, are you:
  - a) Reinforcing or introducing musical skills or concepts
  - b) Reinforcing or introducing pre-reading or reading skills
  - c) Reinforcing or introducing both musical and reading skills

6. How many years have you been teaching in music?
  - a) 1-5 years
  - b) 6-10 years
  - c) More than 10 years
  
7. Have you taken courses or workshops on the use of children's literature in the music classroom? If so, which workshop did you attend?  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
8. Please state any additional comments you may have about adapting the book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* for the primary music classrooms/ private music lessons.  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
9. Would you be willing to participate in an interview about the adaptation of children's literature in the primary music classroom/ private music lesson and possibly be observed teaching a lesson (online) that incorporates children's literature?
  - Yes
  - NoIf yes, please state the name of your school and district below:  
\_\_\_\_\_

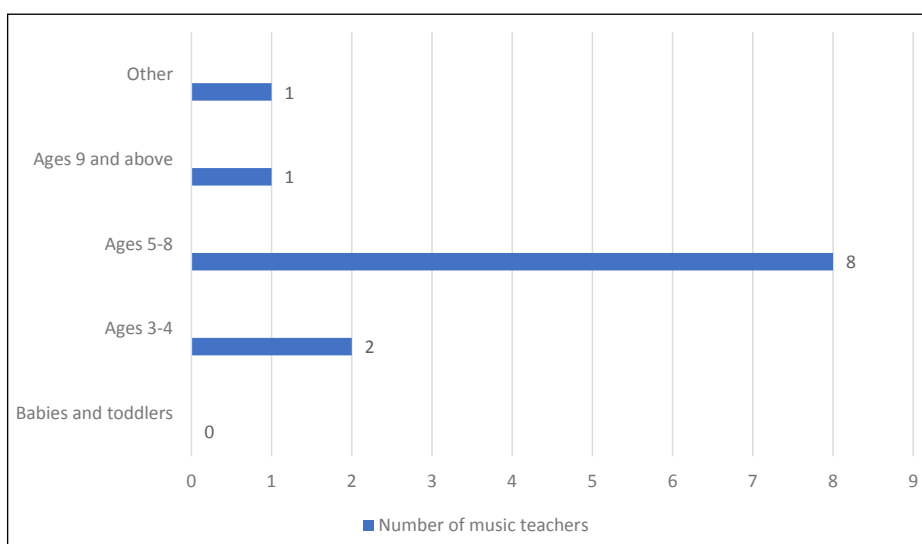
**Figure 1**

Source: Adapted from Brown (2019)

The Google form pertaining to the survey and a PDF format of *Lolo, Nini, and the little Monkey Kiki: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* was sent to 20 music teachers who are musically trained and are currently teaching early childhood music in places across Malaysia and China. Of these, 12 music teachers completed the form. The purpose of the survey was to gather feedback about the story book and its use in the music classrooms of these music teachers. Music teachers who participated in this survey included those who taught in special needs schools, private music studios, kindergarten, and primary schools. As shown above, the form included 12 open-ended questions, short answers, and multiple-choice questions.

## SURVEY RESULTS

The first question of the survey form asked respondents to indicate suitable age groups for the book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival*. All of the 12 teachers responded to this question. Eight music teachers indicated that they would use this book for children ages 5 to 8. Two teachers indicated that they would use the book for teaching children between the ages of 3- 4. One teacher indicated that it would be suitable for children ages 9 and above. None would use this book for babies and toddlers. One teacher wrote: “I think it depend [sic.] on the goals; I’ll give to 3-9 for different goals.”



**Figure 2** Age group suitability for *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival*

In order to find out about music teachers’ preference of themes, multiple-choice questions were asked. Respondents favoured the following themes: 1) animals (nine teachers) and 2) nature (three teachers). None selected transport, fairies, sports or other themes.

The survey was conducted to understand how music teachers would use this story book for their classroom teaching. The most common ways music teachers would use this book were: 1) a sound story or musical performance with instruments (seven teachers), 2) supplementary material to the theme of a lesson or song (three teachers), 3) as a song tale that would be sung for or with students (one teacher), and for movement exploration (one teacher).

In order to understand the purpose behind music teachers' use of children's literature in their music lessons, an open-ended question was asked. All music teachers responded with a variety of answers on why they used children's literature in their music lessons. One wrote, "to improve their speaking, thinking skills, and sound exploration". Two music teachers provided single responses, "It's more enchanting", and "Is fun". Another responded, "1) children like; 2) children's literature will [be] conducive to edutainment. One music teacher wrote, "more attractive, can capture [a] kid's attention". Yet another wrote, "to make music session more comprehensive".

Next, to gain more information on the motivation behind the teachers' music lesson plan, a multiple-choice question was used. Teachers had to choose between: 1) reinforcing or introducing musical skills or concepts, 2) reinforcing or introducing pre-reading or reading skills, or 3) reinforcing or introducing both musical and reading skills. Most music teachers (11 teachers) said that they were reinforcing both musical and reading skills. One teacher responded that she was reinforcing or introducing musical skills or concepts. None indicated that they were reinforcing or introducing pre-reading or reading skills.

Music teaching experience could factor into a teacher's decision to use children's literature in their music classrooms. Hence, teachers were asked about how long they had been teaching music. 42 per cent of the music teachers had one to five years of teaching experience, 33 per cent had more than ten years of teaching experience, and 25 per cent had six to ten years of teaching experience.

Where did music teachers train or learn about children's literature in the music classroom? Two music teachers reported that they had not attended any courses or workshops on the use of children's literature in the music classroom. Seven music teachers pointed to specific workshops including Early Childhood Music Levels Courses and the International Rhythm and Melody Adventure (three teachers) conducted by Professor Dr. Loong Chet Yeng from the University of Hawaii.

All the music teachers were given the opportunity to write additional comments about adapting the book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* for their primary music classrooms or private music lessons. Five music teachers stated that they liked the storybook, with one music teacher writing, "The character's name is easy to pronounce and very useful when I'm trying to use it as a teaching tool in my music class". Another teacher wrote, "Good, easy to understand. Clear illustrations. Nothing to comment." Yet another wrote, "It is also a good one for children to remember the sequence of events".

Two music teachers made suggestions, including: 1) to create sounds using percussion instruments for the animals, and 2) adding audio into the story, so that whoever reads the book can pronounce the words correctly. Three music teachers did not comment on the story book.

### **SPECIFIC MUSICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Although the book is written in English, the song contained within it is adapted from a traditional Rungus children's song. The Rungus number around 150,000 people and speak a language from the indigenous Dusunic Family of Languages. They traditionally inhabit the Kudat Peninsula and part of the Bengkoka Peninsula of northern Sabah, as well as some mixed villages in the Kota Marudu District. The Rungus are the second largest Dusunic group in Sabah, after the Kadazan Dusun (Porodong, 2012:110-111). In selecting and adapting a Rungus children's song for this story book, the following considerations were made:

- Is there a repeating melody, recurring rhythmic phrase or a refrain?
- How can this song be used in the music classroom to support musical concepts?
- Can a song be added while reading the book?
- Can a new rhythm be added?
- Can a new melody be added?
- Can sounds or instruments be added for various characters, and how?
- Does the song contain repeated musical phrases, which could provide children the opportunity to compose or improvise?

### **SPECIFIC LITERATURE CONSIDERATIONS**

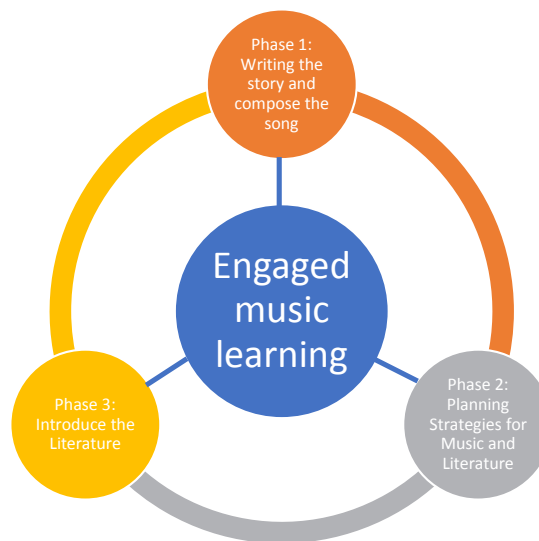
As mentioned, the book is written in English and is designed to be read and enjoyed by children from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While the storyline of two children and a pet going off on an adventure is a theme found in many traditional Sabahan folk tales, the creation of a contemporary storyline in English for the classroom or home utilised the following considerations adapted from Eppink (2009):

- Is the book enjoyable to read?
- What is the age group represented in the story and will the story appeal to playschool, kindergarten and primary school children?
- Are there illustrations that are engaging?
- Will the children be able to clearly see the pictures as it is read?



- Will the children be able understand the story as it is read?
- Can the book be read with expressive speech?
- How much time will it take to read?

Figure 3 shows the three-phase process of engaged music learning (Eppink, 2009) that was utilised in developing this interactive story book while Figure 4 below shows the front cover of the book. The first phase involved writing the story and adapting the song. The second phase consisted of planning strategies for the interaction between the music, story and a game, while the third phase introduced the book for testing within a classroom setting.



**Figure 3** Engaged music learning  
Source: Adapted from Eppink (2009)

## FROM A RUNGUS CHILDREN’S SONG TO AN INTERACTIVE STORY BOOK AND GAME

### Song Choice

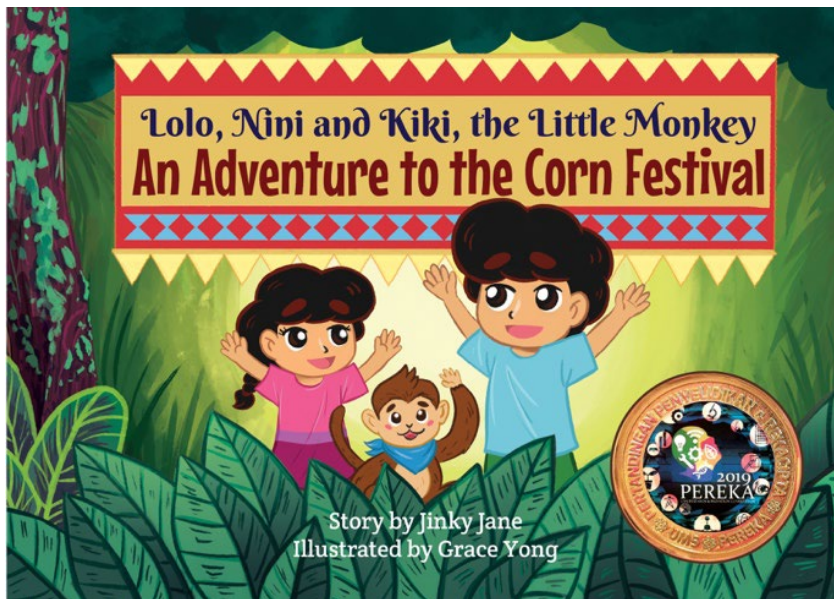
The idea behind this story book project was derived from a Rungus children’s song entitled *Ongkul Paara* (“The monkey is bouncing around”). The simple text of the song describes a monkey that is excited after seeing a tall maize plant with ripe grain on the cob. The monkey bounces around on its feet. The song *Ongkul Paara* was adapted and written into a simple story reflecting traditional cultural knowledge of native fauna from Sabah, East Malaysia. The range of the

song and repeating melody was important in the development of the story book project. The main objective of incorporating the selected song into the book was to make the reading interesting and interactive.

The storyline was derived from the first author's field trips on Rungus children's songs. Some of these songs revolved around Sabah's endangered animals such as the pangolin, bear, and orangutan. The storyline was also created after a series of music training courses attended by the first author such as Orff Levels, Kodaly Levels at the University of Hawaii, as well as Early Childhood Music Levels at Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The Orff and Kodaly instructors had constantly used children's books for singing, playing instruments and in movement activities.

The storyline centres around the journey of three main characters – Lolo, Nini and Kiki, a little monkey, who journey to find the corn festival. As the story was created to suit children, no complex literary language styles were used including metaphors and personifications. The story was written in such a way that it would integrate reading skills and singing accompanied by movements. This would make it an interesting interactive story book. In addition, by including the endangered animals of Sabah, the book would also educate children about knowing and loving these animals.

The book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* features animals, including ten endangered species from the Borneo islands. The ten featured animals include an orangutan, a sun bear, a proboscis monkey, a hornbill, a pygmy elephant, a Sunda clouded leopard, a tarsier, a Bornean rhinoceros, a pangolin and a banteng. These animals, especially the pygmy elephant, the Sunda clouded leopard, the Bornean rhinoceros, and the banteng, are now critically endangered due to massive environmental damage (Bernama, 2019). Thus, the story is designed to teach children about Sabah's rich fauna and the importance of protecting the natural habitat of native animals. The book is illustrated with bright and colourful pictures. According to Eppink (2009), attractive illustrations that engage children's interest will lead to the successful use of the children's literature in teaching. It is hoped that this story book project will not only develop children's musical abilities but also teach them about Sabah's natural heritage that needs to be conserved.



**Figure 4** Cover of *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival*

### **The Board Game**

The book is accompanied by a board game where participants representing the main characters of the story use small icons to journey around Sabah. The journey ends in Kota Marudu District, home of the Kimaragang Dusun and other northern Dusunic peoples. It is also where an annual corn festival is held as a tourist attraction. Along the way, the characters meet endangered animals as mentioned above and they are represented by flash cards and puppets. Children playing this board game are also introduced to the sounds of these different animals and are encouraged to imitate them. They are also encouraged to say the names of the characters in a high-low (*so-mi*) melodic motif and to use sign language indicating the word “sweet corn”.

### **THE ADAPTED SONG**

The composed song, adapted from an original Rungus *longoi tanganak* (children’s song), is in a call-and-response format (Figure 5). Teachers sing the call part and the students respond with “sweet corn”. Children can perform this in a call-and-response with hand gestures. Teachers can also use a ukulele as an accompaniment, helping children keep to the beat (Figure 6). Repetitive rhythms such as poetic texts also provide a steady foundation for children to build upon once they are comfortable with singing and moving (Orff, 1989).



Figure 5 *We're Looking for Sweet Corn* song



Figure 6 Performance of the song through a YouTube link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLf7gTfLJCg>

## USING THE STORY BOOK AND GAME IN A CLASSROOM SETTING

The story book game was recently utilised in a classroom setting at the Tuaran Special Education National School in Putatan, Sabah by Mr. Stefanus Lucas, a special needs music teacher, on 24 September 2020 (Figure 7). Mr. Lucas is also Head of the Music Education Committee (*Ketua Panitia Pendidikan Muzik*).



**Figure 7** Teacher Stefanus Lucas using the interactive story at the Tuaran Special Education National School in Putatan, Sabah

Source: Jinky Jane C. Simeon, 24 September 2020

In his lesson, Mr. Lucas began by introducing the word *pounsikou* (“thank you”) in the Kadazandusun language. The Kadazandusun, one of Sabah’s many Dusunic peoples, are the largest ethnic group in Sabah, and the term *pounsikou* is widely understood even among non-Kadazan Dusun such as the Rungus (who do not normally use such a term in their language and culture) and Kimaragang. Following the greeting Mr. Lucas then highlighted the location of Sabah on a world map, pointing to Sabah’s various districts including Kota Marudu where the corn festival is held every year. After, he described the moral significance of the story and the endangered animals.

Next, he introduced the story song *We’re Looking for Sweet Corn* with actions. He played the ukulele and sang the call part while the children responded with a simple phrase as an echo. This was repeated at least four times as follows:

Call: We’re looking for sweet corn,  
Response: sweet corn,  
Call: sweet corn,  
Response: sweet corn,  
Call: sweet corn.  
Response: sweet corn.

Call: We're looking for sweet corn,

Response: sweet corn,

Call: sweet corn,

Response: sweet corn,

Call: sweet corn.

Response: sweet corn.

Mr. Lucas then read part of the book to enable the class to identify the many endangered animals in the story book. He also showed flash cards and asked the children to see if they could identify the animals. Throughout, he used an expressive voice and vocal sounds when reading the story and singing the song. He also utilised vocal exploration by singing high and low sounds to the repeated line "I'm Lolo, she is Nini, and the little monkey is Kiki", with the words "Lolo", "Nini" and Kiki" sung using the "*so-mi*" pattern throughout the story. A high, expressive long voice was used for "There---". As the book introduces children to the endangered animals of Sabah, children engaged with interesting illustrations of animals as well as the song.

On the other hand, for older children, a teacher may give children a variety of musical instruments and ask them to choose which instrument's timbre best suited the character. When the story is read, children can then play their instrument in groups when their assigned character or part comes up.

In the story book, the font colour gives visual cues for the main characters. For example, Lolo (wearing a blue shirt) is indicated in blue; Nini (wearing a pink shirt) is indicated in pink while Kiki, the little monkey, is indicated in brown.



**Figure 8** Use of font colours for visual cues to the main characters

Mr. Lucas also used props and puppets and encouraged the children to respond by singing at relevant points of the story. He read the story until the characters met the third and fourth animals. In the subsequent lesson, Mr. Lucas reviewed the sequence of the animals they had met and continued to read the story. He led the children in a discussion about the characters through actions and voice exploration. For example, he discussed what an orangutan sounded like or how the sun bear would climb up a tree. This encouraged the children to give examples of the animals' actions. He also discussed the moral message of the story when it ended.

### **Suggested Activities**

The following activities are suggested for a class of students aged around 6 years. The objective of these activities is to encourage children to explore their voices, according to characters from the story book. The teacher can use the flash cards with the names and pictures of animals from the book.

1. Read the story while children practice making sounds or movements of each animal as it appears in the text.
2. Teach the call-and-response song with the repeated text and rhythmic patterns (sweet corn) with the melody *la-so, mi-re, mi-so* (first phrase) patterns; *la-so, mi-re, mi-do* (last phrase) patterns.

3. Read the story again until the characters meet the third animal (proboscis monkey). Ask the children to figure out the order of the animals presented in the story book by using flash cards. Practice making the sounds or actions of each animal, for example how an orangutan swings their arms and how a sun bear growls.
4. On another day, review the animals the characters met by using flash cards. Then continue the story, beginning at the point where the children meet the hornbill until the characters meet the eighth animal (tarsier). Have the children sing the call-and-response song. Ask the children about the sequence of the story and what animals the characters met. Explore the sounds and actions of the animals by using flash cards.
5. During the third lesson, review the sequence of animals the characters met by using flash cards. Then, continue the story and have the children sing the call-and-response. At this point, the characters meet the last two animals and finally reach the corn festival. Explore the actions or sounds of the last two animals the characters meet.

### **DISCUSSION**

The results of the study reveal that children's literature can be used in a variety of engaging ways including vocal, movement and instrument exploration to enhance a story. Music educators need to decide how story books can fit into their curriculum. The story book and board game *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* that is based on a Rungus children's song is an example of such source. Teachers will need to consider the objectives and musical concepts for different age groups, deciding how this book may help children better understand these concepts.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper introduced the story book *Lolo, Nini and Kiki, the Little Monkey: An Adventure to the Corn Festival* that is to be incorporated with a song, suggested musical activities as well as a board game. The book is designed to create awareness of teaching and learning about the natural and cultural history of Sabah. The use of children's literature promotes cross-curricular studies and is part of a strategy to implement the learning of fauna and Malaysia's many cultures. Children's literature is an important component in the music curricula, which can help develop children's musical understanding, language development and cognitive skills. The essence of music teaching is creativity and finding different ways to explore sound. In this case study, this is achieved through using



children's singing and literature. Children will appreciate and better understand when they are actively involved in music making as they are able to respond to visual, auditory and kinaesthetic stimuli. This interactive story book is thus suitable for use in preschool, kindergartens, primary schools as well as private music schools. Data has indicated that music teachers have used this interactive story book to create sound stories. Music teachers have found that sound stories are a good way to explore different sounds or musical timbres.

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