



Child Study and Family Engagement: A Case Study of a Kindergarten Two (KG2) Child of Choggu Yapalsi M/A KG and Primary School

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Abstract:

This study uses non-participant observation and qualitative interviews to examine the life of Mutawakilu a KG2 child of Choggu Yapalsi M/A KG and Primary School as a single case within the social and academic context of the home and the school to ascertain the gaps in his academic and socioemotional development. The findings of this study reveal that Mutawakilu's life at home and in school is that of an ordinary child who is playful, happy, unconcerned, and very active. The difference between him and most of his peers is that he is a slow learner and as such, he has difficulties handling academic tasks successfully. His situation is worsened by his family's poor socioeconomic and educational status resulting in neglect and poor family engagement. The study recommends that Mutawakilu's parents should defy the odds and get more engaged in their child's education by visiting his school occasionally, attending PTA meetings, and encouraging their older son to engage him in learning activities at home on daily basis. The study also entreats Mutawakilu's class teacher to consider using individualised instruction, peer-teaching, activity-oriented learning to support Mutawakilu to overcome his learning challenges and perform satisfactorily.

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The United Nations (UN) convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as a person who is less than 18 years of age. The child is born into a family which is "a group of people related by blood, marriage, or by law (in the case of adoption)" who may live together. The family has the legal,

biological, or natural and primary responsibility for the child's safety, care, holistic development, and general well-being. In Ghana, most children grow up in extended families with their father, mother, siblings (if any), and other closed relatives such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nieces, and nephews. Notwithstanding, in urban areas, the number of children living in nuclear families is high. That is a family consisting of only a father, a mother, and siblings (if any) (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2015, p.viii).

Child upbringing is a collaborative endeavour that brings to bear the importance of family-school engagement. Family engagement denotes an ongoing relationship or a lifetime partnership between two key stakeholders: the school (teachers) and the family (parents). It is based on mutual respect and trust and geared towards supporting the child to grow, learn and succeed in life. The school must provide families with opportunities to participate in their children's education by constantly providing them with resources and information to do so. That is resources and information about what is going on with the child in school (Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 2014). In a traditional Ghanaian community, the child is seen as everybody's child. All members of the extended family get actively involved in the child's upbringing. Support systems are put in place by families to ensure that the child is constantly supported to grow holistically even in the absence of one or both biological parents. Notwithstanding, in recent times, modernization, poverty, and broken homes have fragilised the traditional family system and weakened the family support systems. Individualism has overtaken collectivism, and so, the upbringing of the child has become the sole responsibility of a few family members and the school (Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, 2015).

Child study also known as experimental pedagogy, employs scientific methods to provide stakeholders with detailed information about the child's life at home, and in school as well as the factors influencing the child's development in both settings. Teachers rely on this information to adjust their instructional strategies, give accurate feedback to parents on the child's behaviour, and team up with them to address the child's learning needs (Daniel, Wassell, & Gilligan, 2010).

Child study is an old practice in academia that gained a lot of popularity in the 20th century with the child study movement in Europe and America as many scholars at that time saw the need to advocate for more child-friendly educational reforms that focus on the child's welfare. Child study uses observational methods to find out what is going on with the child at home and in school. It helps the school and the family to identify children's learning and developmental challenges as well as their varied educational and psychosocial needs (Jones & Cossentino, 2017).

Again, child study helps adults (teachers and parents) to identify children with varying degrees of behavioural, emotional, and learning problems and support them to overcome them. It informs the school and the family on the need to work together to design and implement a comprehensive educational programme that can help children develop their thinking capacity, skills acquisition, and problem-solving abilities as well as improve their social and academic lives (Greene, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Mohammed Mutawakilu is a kindergarten two (KG2) child at Choggu Yapalsi M/A KG and Primary School in the Sagnarigu District of the Northern Region of Ghana. He has shown some traits similar to those of a slow learner: He spends more time completing learning tasks as compared to his classmates and constantly performs poorly in almost all subjects in class. Parveen, Reba, & Khan (2014) explain that slow learners are children who look quite healthy and active but are slow in learning and their performance in school is always unsatisfactory. They have difficulties working with

numbers, understanding abstract and figurative concepts, and reason poorly. Their constant low performances in class activities cause them to be frustrated, somehow withdrawn, unconcerned, and sometimes awkward. Borah (2013) also observes that a slow learner is a child whose intellectual ability is below his/her grade level. Such a child struggles to learn virtually everything and is never his/her teachers' favourite. In severe cases, slow learners' educational needs are not met in the regular classroom, and they may require special educational provisions to cope with classroom learning. Thus, this child study examined Mohammed Mutawakilu as a single case within the context of his home and school to ascertain his behaviour at home and in school and the possible relationship between his daily study routine and his constant poor academic performance.

Objectives of the Study

The study strived to achieve the following specific objectives:

- (1) To examine Mutawakilu's life at home and in school;
- (2) To identify Mutawakilu's strengths and weaknesses; and
- (3) To make recommendations towards improving Mutawakilu's academic and social life.

Methods

This study examines a child (Mohammed Mutawakilu) as a single case within the context of the home and the school to gather comprehensive information on the child's physical, cognitive, and socioemotional development. Understanding how a child develops and learns will help the school (teachers) and the family (parents) to discover his strengths and weaknesses, nurture his talents, and support him to overcome his weaknesses so that he grows to become useful to society (Miller & Pound, 2010). Thus, non-participant observation was used to closely monitor Mohammed Mutawakilu's life in school; that is his behaviour in and outside the classroom. Also, a semi-structured interview was used to gather additional data from the child's mother about his life at home and family engagement in his schooling. The data obtained were analysed using a thematic approach to data analysis. This was done by identifying themes in the data set and organising them around the study objectives to produce a detailed and accurate account of the child's experiences in the real-life settings of the home and the school (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Results

Mutawakilu's Life at Home and in School

The study found that Mohammed Mutawakilu was born on the 30th of September 2016 at Tindag in the Savelgu-Nanton district of the Northern region of Ghana into a Muslim family. His parents are from Dagbomba tribal group. He was named after his late maternal grandfather. He currently lives with family at Choggu Yapalsi a suburb of Tamale in the Northern region of Ghana. They live in a modest cement-block house with aluminum roofing and enjoy some basic facilities including electricity, pipe-borne water, television, fan, and radio. Mutawakilu's parents are both uneducated. His father is a farmer and his mother sells foodstuffs such as yam, maize, and groundnut in front of their house. They barely have enough income to take care of him and his four (4) siblings. Mutawakilu attends Choggu Yapalsi M/A Kindergarten (KG) and Primary School. He is in KG2. He enjoys going to school. However, his frequent abysmal performances in class seem to influence his mood, self-esteem, and behaviour among his peers in school.

This study examined Mutawakilu's social and academic life.

Mutawakilu's Life at Home

The study sought to find out the activities Mutawakilu engages in at home on daily basis in terms of play, study, resting time, house chores, and his relationship with family members.

Play Habit. Mutawakilu's mother confides that her boy enjoys playing football with his friends and his brothers outside their compound. Also, sometimes they are found walking or running around the area with their toy cars or old motor tires. He usually starts his games immediately when he turns from school and does not stop playing until his mother calls him in together with his siblings.

Study Habit. The child does not usually study at home. His mother said, she would have loved to assist him to study at home but unfortunately, she does not have any formal education to do so but her older son sometimes help him to do his homework.

Period of Rest. According to Mutawakilu's mommy, he does not have time for siesta and rather prefers to play and walk around with his peers. He does not also have a specific time he goes to bed. However, he sleeps before 10:00 PM and wakes up usually before 6:00 AM.

Relationship. Mutawakilu enjoys a cordial relationship with his parents and siblings. His mother disclosed that he is however closer to her than his father. Likewise, he relates very well with other members of the extended family as well as children in the neighbourhood.

Household Responsibilities. The boy does not do any household chores. His mother stresses that she has three (3) daughters to help her take care of the household responsibilities; and so, none of her two (2) sons is allowed to take part in any domestic work.

Mutawakilu's Life in School

In school, the study examined Mutawakilu's school life under the following themes: (1) behaviour during, (2) Behaviour in the absence of the Teacher, (3) Specific interest in the various subjects, (4) Participation in group activities, (5) Leadership role; (6) Academic performance; (7) Emotions; (8) Time consciousness; (9) Relationship with peers; (10) Appearance; and (11) family engagement. Table 1 shows Mutawakilu's academic performance for the second term of the 2021-2022 academic year.

Table 1: Mutawakilu's second term 2021-2022 academic Performance

Subject	Score (%)	Subject	Score (%)
Creative Art	49	Language and Literacy	37
Music and Dance	52	Numeracy	38
Storytelling	50	Our World and Our People	39

Behaviour During Lessons: Mutawakilu is usually timid and dull in class. As such, he does engage in any distractive activity during lessons and he does not also actively participate in learning activities as compared to his peers. For instance, when a lesson is ongoing and other children are attempting questions or putting up their hands to come out and perform a task, Mutawakilu will rather sit back and watch passively. Even when he is called upon, hardly will he talk. However, he appears more active during group activities, especially play-like activities like music and dance, creative art and storytelling.

Behaviour in the Absence of the Teacher. The boy plays and interacts with his colleagues usually in the absence of the teacher. Also, during break time, he is very active with his friends running after one another while screaming and laughing.

Specific Interest in the Various Subjects. I have observed that Mutawakilu has an interest in Storytelling, Creative Art, as well as Music and Dance more than any other subject. For example, during Storytelling lessons, Mutawakilu is always eager to come out and tell the class a story in Dagbani. Also, whenever it is time for Music and Dance, the boy is always excited to display his dancing skills.

Participation in Group Activities. Mutawakilu enjoys working with his peers in a group. Actually, he feels more comfortable and takes an active part in the group activity. For example during Creative Art activities, he is always excited because he gets to work with friends in a group.

Leadership Role. Mutawakilu is not interested in any leadership role in class. This is because he is usually shy and dull in class. He has never volunteered to be a class captain or a group leader. Even when he is assigned to take up such a role, he feels reluctant and will not act.

Academic Performance. Academically, Mutawakilu is a very weak pupil. He has a lot of learning challenges. He has difficulties in reading, writing, and speaking the English language. Unlike most of his peers, he continuously scores below average in almost all subjects. He is usually found wanting for not doing his homework. However, his performance is relatively better in storytelling which is often done in the Ghanaian language (Dagbani), Creative Art and Music and Dance.

Emotions. Mutawakilu is quiet, respectful, and friendly in school. Even though he is not outspoken in class, he is emotionally stable. He is not withdrawn and looks somehow happy among his friends. He plays, runs around, and laughs with his peers.

Time Consciousness. Mutawakilu is usually punctual at school. It is rare for him to be late or absent from school. Surprisingly, he walks a considerable distance to school together with his senior brother.

Relationship with Peers. Mutawakilu entertains a cordial relationship with his classmates. He enjoys their company. He usually reacts peacefully towards his peers' provocations. He is never known for causing trouble.

Appearance. Mutawakilu baths every morning before coming to school. However, his school uniform and shoes do not look good. His mother's attention has been severally drawn to get her boy's torn dress and shoes repaired but in vain.

Family Engagement. Mutawakilu's parents are uneducated. They are not able to assist him to learn at home. He sometimes relies on his elder brother to help him complete his homework. His mother revealed that they always struggle to buy him books and other learning materials because of financial constraints. Except for the few books he brings from school, he does not have any books at home to learn with. They have severally been invited by Mutawakilu's class teachers to come discussion but they have always ignored the invitation because they will not be able to satisfy the teacher's demands with regards to the provision of their child's learning materials. She admitted that it is their responsibility as parents to provide their children with all the needed learning materials. However, the sad reality is that they cannot afford most of these materials, and cannot also rely on extended family members for support. Mutawakilu's mother further revealed that they have never attended PTA

(Parent-Teacher Association) meetings for similar reasons.

Mutawakilu's Strengths and Weaknesses

The second objective of this study was to identify Mutawakilu's strengths and weaknesses. Table 1 shows Mutawakilu's academic performance during the second term of the 2021-2022 academic year. This allowed the study to identify the subject areas where the child had some difficulties and other areas where he was making headway in terms of learning. This could help in identifying the child's strengths and weaknesses as far as his social and academic life is concerned.

Strengths. Mutawakilu has more interest in Creative Art, Storytelling, Music, and Dancing. Even though he does not perform exceptionally well in these areas, his performances are relatively better than they are in other core subjects like Numeracy, language, and literacy. His enthusiasm for creative art, storytelling, music, and dancing sessions explains his relatively average performances in these areas. With guidance and support, he could channel this positive energy into other learning areas.

Weaknesses. Mutawakilu has difficulties doing basic mathematical operations, reading, writing, and speaking the English language. He works slowly on almost every single task and his scores are consistently low in almost of subjects. Also, his family's poor educational and socioeconomic background negatively affects his social and academic life quite significantly. He does not get the needed care and support from his family to achieve optimal growth and development.

Discussion

Mutawakilu's life both at home and in school is that of an ordinary child. Nothing borders him much. He tries to enjoy his childhood as much as he can; spending time with his siblings and other children in the neighbourhood, running, screaming, laughing, and playing all sorts of local games. Like other children in the neighbourhood, he goes to school as early as possible. He enjoys being in school to learn a little and play more. Obviously, as a KG2 child, Mutawakilu enjoys the playful part of school life. Creative Art, Storytelling, Music and Dance sessions and break times are his favourite moments. These periods are always full of fun. This explains his relatively average performances in those subject areas as shown in Table 1. Children of all ages, abilities, and sexes adore playing. Play is part of children's nature and they engage in it anytime and anywhere they find themselves. When playing, children engage in all kinds of activities that make them feel creative, curious, pained, funny, crazy, unsafe, sad, happy, lost, free, dull, and lively at the same. Adults sometimes get worried, especially when play gets crazier, somehow unsafe, and things seem to get out of hand; with someone angered and another crying. Nonetheless, children have the right to play and must be allowed to do so with or without adults' supervision. Mutawakilu has it all. Nothing stops him from enjoying that right, not even his poor socioeconomic and academic status. Shree & Shukla (2016) stressed that "play is nature's training for life". It gives children the opportunities to explore the "social, material, and imaginary worlds" and experience the diverse feelings, connections, and reactions that make up these worlds. These are the many experiences that form the memories of our childhood and shape our adult personalities. Through play, children develop the right behavioural pattern and acquire language and a variety of intellectual, societal, and socioemotional skills.

The only difference between Mutawakilu and most of his peers is that he is a slow learner. Practically, he spends much more time completing simple assignments. For instance, when given pebbles to solve an addition operation like $3 + 5$ under Numeracy, Mutawakilu can spend closed ten (10) minutes on this, and eventually, he gets the answer wrong. The class teacher always has a difficult time getting

him to understand this basic principle of addition and to count three (3) pebbles plus five (5) other pebbles to find the answer. This is one of the many examples of basic concepts repeatedly demonstrated in the class that Mutawakilu still struggles to internalise. It takes him a long time to master some of these skills and others are never mastered. The study revealed that he has consistently recorded poor performances, especially in the core subjects (see Table 1). This is because, he finds it difficult transferring, and generalising information. Korikana (2020) explained that teaching slow learners is such a cumbersome task. This is because, they have low thinking capacity, poor memory, and difficulties in dealing with numbers, language, non-concrete and emblematic concepts. Their intellectual ability is lower than most of their peers such that, they always need to be supported and stimulated to execute even the simplest assignment, and more often than not, they perform poorly in class. Naturally, Mutawakilu is among the few children in his class who cannot read, write and speak the English language which is one of the important languages of instruction in Ghanaian basic schools. Meanwhile, language and literacy skills affect the learning of other competencies positively and negatively depending on the child's master level. For instance, children's success in Numeracy and Science depends largely on their abilities to read and comprehend instructions in whatever language is used for teaching and learning in school (Akbaşlı, Şahin, & Yaykiran, 2016).

His poor academic status is not only due to the fact that he is a slow learner but also because of his family background. Firstly, his parents are not educated; so, they cannot assist him to learn at home. Van Voorhis, Maier, Epstein, & Lloyd (2013) observed that family involvement plays a crucial role in early learners' numeracy, language, and literacy skills development. When parents become more involved with their children's schooling, it results in better academic achievements. Secondly, Mutawakilu's parents are financially handicapped and can neither afford books nor a teacher to assist him to learn at home. He usually comes to school in a dilapidated uniform and without food. During break time, when other children are enjoying their meals, he and some of his friends wait patiently for the teacher to gather the leftover food for them to eat. Naven, Sosu, Spencer, & Egan (2019) asserted that many children go through a lot of frustration, humiliation, stigma, and have difficult times learning at home and in school because their parents cannot afford their basic needs in terms of feeding, clothing, and learning material. They miss out important school activities such as games, educational excursions, and other events because their parents cannot pay the fees associated with such programmes.

Conclusion

In sum, studying children is an important academic exercise that helps teachers and parents to identify individual children's abilities, strengths, weaknesses, academic and socioemotional challenges as well as their diverse educational and socioemotional needs. The findings of child study can help teachers make informed strategic, instructional, and counseling decisions geared towards supporting the child's holistic development and academic success.

The case study of Mutawakilu, a KG 2 child of Choggu Yapalsi M/A KG and Primary School in the Sagnarigu District of the Northern Region of Ghana, reveals that he is a slow learner who suffers more academic and socioemotional challenges because his parents are uneducated and financial handicapped. Despite his poor socioeconomic and academic status, Mutawakilu's life at home and in school is that of a playful, happy and unconcerned child who is very active during Music and Dance, Creative Art, and Storytelling lessons.

Recommendations

The study recommended the following:

- (1) Mutawakilu's parents and other parents in a similar situation should encourage their slow-learning child to have a more positive attitude towards learning. They should encourage their older siblings to constantly engage such a child in a variety of learning activities at home including reading, writing, Numeracy, and doing homework. This will go a long way to improve his/her learning ability and his academic performance in various subjects.
- (2) Also, like in Mutawakilu's case, parents should not hide behind poverty to forsake their responsibility as parents or neglect their children. If they cannot afford a new school uniform and a pair of shoes, they should at least get the old ones repaired to save their children from daily embarrassment in school. They must make it a point to visit their children's schools occasionally and to attend PTA meetings. These are stimulating family engagement practices that are likely to reecho parents' expectations and aspirations in the child's mind and improve his attitude towards learning alongside his performance.
- (3) Additionally, in handling slow learners like Mutawakilu, teachers should adopt individualised instruction, activity-based, and participatory instructional approaches that allow them to interact individually or in groups with concrete teaching and learning materials (TLMs) and experience authentic and lifelong learning.
- (4) Again, teachers should consider using peer teaching as an alternative method, especially in Numeracy, and Language & Literacy. This implies pairing a slow learner with one of the fast learners in class so that he/she can assist the slow one to catch up with learning.
- (5) Moreover, teachers should move slow learners like Mutawakilu closer to their desks so that they can keep an eye on them and give them all the needed attention. This will make such slow-learning children feel more confident and involved. It will also improve their attitudes toward learning alongside their academic performances.
- (6) Furthermore, teachers should use English as much as they use Ghanaian languages in teaching. This means that, sometimes, they should encourage storytelling in the English language. Also, when teaching, whatever they say in Ghanaian language should be repeated in English to help the slow learners learn the English language.

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