

Audit report The Swallow

AUDIT TRAVEL FROM
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REPORT
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introduction

The Swallow is an educational centre with a basic school, an integrated health project, a youth program and a particular focus on life skills. There are about 200 children. The school is situated in a popular neighbourhood close to Serrekunda, the biggest city of the country. In its report the Gambian school inspection states: "The Swallow should be used as a model, to be visited by other schools". Afrodidact takes a step further: "We can help other schools by teaching them our method .Proving that it works, showing how it can be put into practice and thus give so many more children the opportunity of receiving high-quality education". Afrodidact is organized in Belgium in close cooperation with the board and the collaborators of The Swallow in The Gambia.

This report is the result of a visit to The Gambia. Afrodidact set up this visit in the framework of an exchange about education. About ten experts participated in this journey, coming from various scientific fields: science, pedagogy, didactics and culture. The participants with educational background represent a diversity of approaches (special education, inspectorate, scientific research...) and educational levels (nursery, basic and secondary school, university).

The artists that are part of the team represent several countries (Belgium, Senegal, The Gambia) and of music styles (from traditional West African



through reggae to Western pop) Also, two youngsters with an artistic background are part of the public relations team.

The intention was to screen the pedagogical approach of The Swallow by means of an analysis of documents, observation and interviews. This journey at the same time offered a unique opportunity for an extended Belgian and Senegalese team and for the local Gambian team to have an exchange about education. This report was compiled on the basis of these diverse inputs. In addition, the idea is that the public relations team also produces other forms of reporting about the school and about the promotion of quality education in Africa in



team

There were about ten experts taking part in this audit travel, experienced in the field of science, pedagogies, didactics and/or culture. The educational experts are from various work fields (special education, inspection, scientific research...) and from various levels (nursery, primary, secondary education, university). The public relations team has a variety of nationalities (Belgian, Senegalese, Gambian) and music styles (from traditional West African to reggae and Western pop). Two youth representatives as well are part of this team.

Educational experts:

Prof. Dr. Ides Nicaise, HIVA Leuven
Bart De Wilde, VSKO Gent
Pascal Lagaet, VSKO Gent
Carine Van Overtveldt, kleuterschool Melsele
Marleen Clissen, VVKBuO
Jan Devos, Onderwijsinspectie Vlaanderen

P.R. members:

Coco Jr., musician
Abou Thiam, musician
Bao Sissoko, musician
Maimouna Badjie, Youth representative
Lotte De Wilde, Youth representative

Organisation:

Els Salembier

With special thanks to André Benoît for support with translation!



The expert team took the CIPO model as basic model and looked into The Swallow in this way context, input, proces en output.



Programme of audit travel

August-October 2014	<p>-Study of a list of documents -preparation of travel approach</p>
	Audit travel to The Gambia:
Saturday 25/10/2014	<p>Arrival of most people Settle down at guesthouse</p>
Sunday 26/10	<p>Practical matters Afternoon: excursion, visit to Senegambia site Evening: introduction with chairman, board members & coordination members of The Swallow</p>
Monday 27/10	<p>-morning: Introduction of the team at The Swallow: What are we here for? Who are we? interviews with coordination team Principal and vice-principal: general policies, with J.D and C.V.O. Accountant: financial/material management, with I.N. and P.L. Health worker: welfare policy and special needs policy, with M.C. and B.D.W. Public relations team: observing/ filming. Tour around the school in 3 or 4 groups. -afternoon: Group conversation: about general approach of pedagogical and didactical processes, class functioning, subjects, time tables, priorities, with principal and vice-principal, health worker and all team members, moderated by E.S. -Evening: reflection discussion with team members</p>
Tuesday 28/10	<p>-morning: observation in classes (2 times 3 classes by 3 teams = 6 classes) -afternoon: concert about education at The Swallow with the PR team -Evening: reflection discussion with team members</p>
Wednesday 29/10	<p>-morning: observation in classes (3 classes: Nursery 3, Primary 1 and 6, by 3 teams) -afternoon: interviews with parents, ex-students/ visit to parents -late afternoon: interviews with parents, ex-students -Evening: reflection discussion with team members, cultural event</p>
Thursday 30/10	<p>-morning: meeting with representative of Ministry of Education; visit to SOS (secondary), Bakoteh Primary School -late afternoon: reflection discussion with team members -Evening: cultural event</p>
Friday 31/10	<p>-morning: visit to Nyodema Nursery School; interview with coordination team: extra questions, clarifications, ... Closing ceremony. -afternoon: preparation debriefing Debriefing: detailed report for the coordination and board members, general debriefing for staff, with focus on encouragement -Evening: farewell dinner for team members, The Swallow board members and staff</p>
Saturday 1/11	<p>-Offer of excursion to Serrekunda -evening: return flight</p>

context

The Gambia is a small country (10,000 km², 1.9 million inhabitants) enclosed within Senegal. It is one of the poorest countries of the world,



ranking 155th out of 177 on the human development index; a former British colony with a heritage of slavery and very low investment of the colonizer in local industry as well as education. For example, not a single higher education institution existed at the independence in 1965. The Gambian economy depends mainly on fishing, farming and tourism. One-third of the population



live below the absolute poverty line of \$1.25 a day. Despite substantial efforts by the present government to boost educational standards, The Gambia has a long way to go: 20% of the government budget is spent on education, but in conjunction with a low

overall government budget, this results in a rather modest share of education in GDP (4%). The share of private schools (including NGO schools and madrassas - Islamic schools teaching also some literacy and numeracy) in the overall school landscape amounts to 27%. From a religious point of view, the country is relatively homogeneous, with 80% of the population being Muslim. From an ethnic and linguistic perspective, however, there is huge diversity: therefore, education is provided in English, which is obviously a challenge with children speaking various languages at home. Poverty, associated with malnutrition, poor health and overburdened parents even more important obstacles.

Officially, compulsory education extends until the end of primary school, but in practice 20-35% of all young people do not complete it and half of the adult population is illiterate. Recent progress has been slow and the Millennium Development Goals relating to education have not been met. The quality of education also remains low and is very uneven: depending on the region, the proportion of qualified teachers ranges between 48% and 80%.

On the positive side, the (official) abolition of tuition fees at primary level in 1998 has boosted participation, and positive discrimination in favour of girls has contributed to gender parity at primary and lower secondary level. Since 2006, The Gambia also receives

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gambia#Education; <https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/mdg-3-education-for-all-in-the-gambia> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002256/225660e.pdf>

assistance from the World Bank in the framework of the 'Fast Track Initiative' (an intensive support program aimed to boost progress in achieving the Education for All objectives). The key objectives of this assistance program include (1) more equal access to education, with a focus on disadvantaged rural areas; (2) enhanced quality of education; and (3) capacity building in the national and regional administration. The interim evaluation published in the Spring of 2014 was moderately positive. Apart from the World Bank, international donors are virtually absent in the Gambian education sector.

The school 'The Swallow' was created in 2002 in Manjai, a deprived village located close to Serrekunda, by a Belgian educationalist. It comprises a nursery and primary school with 240 pupils (2014-15), and focuses on emancipatory education, with a strong emphasis on integrated child development (life skills, health, food security, etc.). The school is completely run by Gambian citizens (including the school coordinator of German origin who settled in Gambia). It is fair to say that The Swallow also operates as an educational research centre, experimenting with innovative practice and investing in the professional development of teachers and school leaders. The outstanding performance of the school resulted in its nomination as a 'centre of excellence' and 'model school' by the Ministry of Education. This audit therefore aims to identify its strengths as well as points of attention for improvement. The excellence of The Swallow was confirmed to the audit team in interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Education, parents, teachers, members of the school board, students and alumni. They pointed to the students' proficiency

in English, limited class size, quality of the teaching, the absence of violence, free meals and health care as the most striking differences with the average Gambian school. These features obviously come at a cost. The Swallow benefits from an extremely competent school board and school management, excellent and dedicated teachers, a maximum class size of 24 (half of the national norm) – and is until now fully funded by European NGOs.

Yet, the unique position of The Swallow is due in the first place to the combination of excellent and emancipatory education on the one hand, and a radical priority for the poor children of the urban surroundings. Parents are for the most part illiterate and unable to supervise their children's homework; they are either unemployed or work as day labourers or small vendors in the informal sector, often at extremely low earnings. Some women end up in prostitution. Due to the depressing social environment, some put their lives at risk and try to migrate illegally to Europe. Families are rather large. Children drop out from school as early as age 8-9 to work as 'apprentices', earning virtually nothing (no one seems to bother about mandatory schooling). Hunger, malnutrition, malaria and other diseases are always around. The Swallow recruits from this neighbourhood only, giving priority to brothers and sisters of pupils, girls and families facing serious problems (financial problems, violence, single-parent families, orphans etc.).



input

Most pupils are from Manjai, the neighbourhood where the school is located. This neighbourhood has a high concentration of children who do not go to school. The families live in poverty and have to struggle to meet their basic needs. Since parents cannot read and write themselves, they are unable to supervise homework and lessons. Moreover, the parents are often absorbed themselves by elaborating strategies to survive. The school's recruitment policy aims for a sound mix of boys and girls and of pupils with specific problems and needs. Girls are allotted 60% of the available places. No other educational provision is available in this neighbourhood.

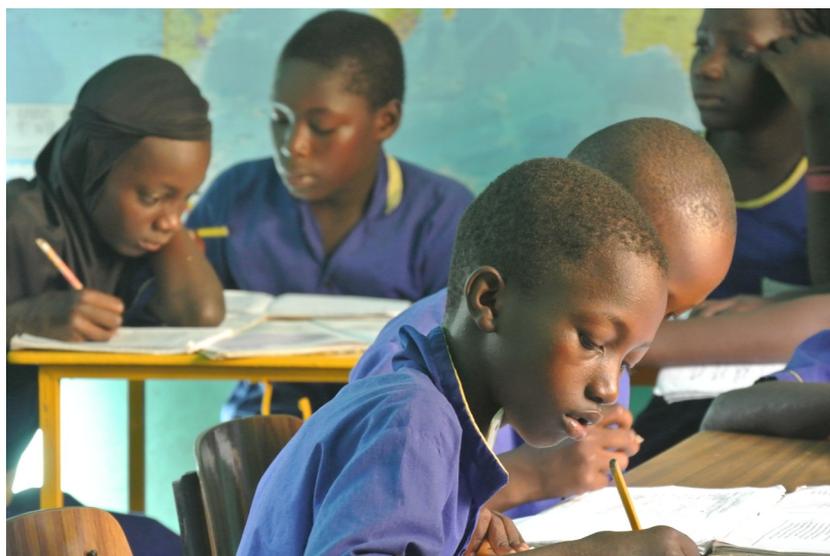
Teachers ensure that the children receive optimal development opportunities. The crea-

tion of a scouts group and organisation of other activities during the holidays show that the teachers are particularly concerned with the wellbeing of their children.

The school team (teachers and other staff) shows a balanced composition. Eight members of the personnel work in The Swallow since a year; nine members between 2 and 5 years; and another 9 staff members for more than 5 years. Out of the 26 members of the personnel, 9 have been working in another school before. The stability within the team and a sound balance between newly recruited and experienced members ensures that the pedagogical project can be well preserved and transmitted.

This neighbourhood has a high concentration of children who do not go to school.

The families live in poverty and have to struggle to meet their basic needs.



General management

3.1 Leadership

Formally, leadership rests with the board. It is composed of external volunteers who possess specific competences. From the interviews with them it soon becomes apparent that the individual members are very engaged people who are passionate about the action and the further extension of The Swallow. They have a vision on the future of the school, have experience in related areas and even have some international experience about education.

Except for the coordinator and the accountant, no representatives of the school team, nor of the parents take part in the board. This may mean that the input from the side of the team and the parents is limited. On the other hand, the board

sees 'independence' as a benefit of this way of working. In practice, the board assumes a lot of tasks. For instance, they also visit classes and comment upon them with the director. The board attaches great importance to high scores on the national examinations. Director Annette Jaiteh is 'coordinator' and assumes the daily management. She is a team-player and finds that 'more heads are seeing more'. Despite her different socio-cultural background she endeavours to live fully within the Gambian society. A better understanding of society is necessary to make more adequate decisions for the school. She is an inspired and inspiring director who fosters energy in the children and in the team.

The director is assisted by a deputy director (Suwaibatou Bah) who assumes a

number of important tasks such as class observations and the supervision of agendas. The deputy director shows a strong engagement within the school but also in the surrounding community, e.g. by even temporarily housing herself children with problems relating to illness, learning difficulties, intra-family violence or gender. The school also shows its commitment by accepting these children. The deputy director also visits parents at their homes and accompanies them in difficult situations: making appointments for a visit to the doctor, trying to find the necessary financial means for medical interventions for children who need this.

Teachers enjoy a certain autonomy but they are also expected to attend workshops. In addition, class observations are followed by feedback and follow-up. The deputy director and an external expert (Kristien Samson) carry out class observations, the results of which are compared so that they are well attuned. This is an instrument of quality control: convince us by your practice. New teachers also have to pass a test period.

The director clearly invests in two things: the performance of the school and the monitoring of the pedagogical project of the school. High scores on the national exams are highly appreciated in The Gambia. The director, however, also takes the matter of children's rights and of emancipatory education very seriously. For her, democracy is a necessity and has to be worked out on the level of the team as well as the children. Practical examples will be discussed below in a specific subsection on emancipation.

The Swallow team is an extended team: teachers but also caregivers, kitchen personnel, guard, tailor, maintenance personnel. It is worth noting that when somebody is no longer able to do his job, he is being re-orientated to another job and that also disabled people are explicitly welcome in the team, in conditions that are as natural as possible. This fits perfectly with the vision of The Swallow: respect others and care for everybody.



Up: Annette Jaiteh, general coördinator; Suwaibatou Bah, vice-coordinator. Right Lamin Gibba, chairman of the board of The Swallow; Els Salembier, initiator of The Swallow and chairman of the supporting non-profit organisation in Belgium.



3.2 Decision-making

The school has elaborated a structure of deliberation that ensures participation of different stakeholders. Apart from the board there also is a weekly meeting of the coordination team, a weekly team council, a quarterly parents’ council, a general assembly (an advisory body including parents, teachers and members of the board) and a committee of alumni

who meet each other monthly. Pupils have their input through a pupils’ council. Decisions are taken in a democratic way and can be referred by the coordination meeting to the school team and vice versa. Team spirit and a respectful approach of the team members are given permanent attention in the course of decision-making processes.

3.3 Vision

The Swallow Centre for Emancipating Education aims to develop children who are able to think beyond borderlines with a critical mind and high self-esteem.

Our goal is that all students achieve their maximum potential in academic, social and physical endeavours to be able to contribute to our local and national communities.

To achieve those targets we created an enjoyable, safe and healthy environment, where the students can feel like at home.

The pedagogical project stresses some elements that diverge from other schools in The Gambia. From the beginning, the choice was made to go for quality education despite the scarce resources, and for emancipatory education. There are many references to these two pillars, such as *“Solidarity and success for all are the highest values in The Swallow”*. The school does not target the elite but explicitly aims to offer opportunities to disadvantaged groups (children with a handicap, from lower social classes, girls...). It is precisely the provision of quality education combined with the choice for an emancipatory approach, which makes the project so strong. The school offers equal opportunities to all children, regardless of sex, social and cultural background, religion... The school also aims to invest in critical analyses of societal topics, emphasising the acquisition and transmission of knowledge in this field and giving the children ownership of their own learning through active participation.

The text of ‘the vision’ was prepared by the coordination team and submitted to the staff council. The vision is known and the team is convinced of its importance. Yet it is not a straightjacket (see

e.g. the stopping of the multi-grade classes because of the conviction that they were not the best device for the development of children). The visualization of elements of the vision in the school and classroom environment produces a strong impact within the school as well as to the outside world.

The school is ambitious and wants to share its knowledge and capacity with other schools in The Gambia. *“The Swallow wants to be a meeting place and a source of inspiration for the renewal of education in The Gambia”*. As a consequence, it also aims to be a centre of research and experimentation that promotes emancipatory education, and an engine for educational renewal in the whole country.

3.4 Internal quality care

As the school thus far does not work with priorities that are process-oriented, a systematic and targeted approach for school development is lacking.

The pressure for performance with regard to the achievement of ‘results’ is high and so is the dependence on the schoolbooks and methods that are imposed by the authorities.

This is highlighted by the fact that the board attaches great importance to obtaining high scores in the national tests.



The school as a learning organisation

The school offers - and makes use of - opportunities for professionalization. In this perspective, the 'teacher meetings' and the 'workshops' are important elements. The team meetings are characterized by a positive team spirit and a good atmosphere. Teachers come together to think of new solutions for the problems they meet, and in this way, they learn from each other.

Teachers sometimes visit each other and demonstration moments are provided for. There also prevails a cooperative attitude by which teachers help each other with pedagogical-didactic issues. Every Tuesday?, colleagues jointly prepare projects: what materials are needed, how to build up the project...

External workshops are attended according to what is offered. The knowledge obtained in this way is shared with the other members of the team.

The preparation and organization of "teachers' theatre" and 'micado' are also functional moments of learning. Teacher theatre is a meeting on the level of the school at the beginning of the week; it deals with themes relating to social and behavioural skills. 'Micado' is the collective closing of the week, focusing on the community, giving awards to a pupil of each class for outstanding academic or behavioural achievements and where participants sing and celebrate together.

The observations, feedback and follow-up by the director, deputy director and the external expert (Kristien Samson) provide for impulses to improve the teaching practice. Each teacher is visited at

least twice per year. Teachers regard this visit more as an opportunity for development than as an account of perfection. Moreover, such a small-scale school with its actual atmosphere (windows are always open) has the advantage that the educational approach is known by everybody. Self-evaluation is often achieved through a specific input in the agenda.

Starting teachers get a test period of 6 months and have to stop if their approach is not compatible with the vision of the school. Yet they are not left alone. We could witness how a new teacher was assisted by a colleague, so the



transfer of know-how could be made in the most concrete way. This kind of transfer is extremely valuable. In addition, the newcomer will have a more frequent observation during the probation period with the aim to assist and introduce The Swallow method.

Another praiseworthy practice is the school-internal week (camp) during which teachers are working on their school planning, the organization of the class and the materials.

The school also disposes of a school library with materials about development and learning, apart from more general didactic, pedagogical and psychological refer-

ence materials. However, these materials are not yet consulted very often. The school disposes of a lot of (donated) materials part of which are stored in a depository for safety reasons. It is worth recommending the teachers to screen all these materials and to use them more intensively. Furthermore, classes have 'library' in their timetable. The teacher will choose suitable books for the class (in consultation with the children) and they will read in class, as the library is at the same time the office of the secretary and the assistant director. A better solution for the library - with a less congestive atmosphere for children to read - needs to be found in the future. Besides the school library, there is also the internet (whenever it works) as a learning resource.

Members of the team also learn beyond the school boundaries. Besides workshops by externals (e.g. Red Cross The Gambia for first aid training) the directors also are regularly convened by the Ministry around specific items (e.g. Ebola). On the initiative of the authorities, workshops and meetings between directors are organized. The Swallow participates in them.

The Gambia disposes of a well reputed 'Teachers Union' where teachers who fall out (after class observations) can take 'summer classes' free of charge as far as all Swallow teachers are members of the Union.

A 'cluster monitor' offers support for the elaboration of themes. Kristien Samson, external expert, comes every year from Belgium from January to April. Her ideas and advice are appreciated by the team. She also coaches the Belgian students (teacher education and related studies) during their internship at The Swallow.

Material management



On entering the school one gets a pleasant, warm and dynamic impression. The gate of the school is painted in an attractive way, the buildings look refreshing, the rooms are light and well aired. The capacity of a classroom is limited to 24 pupils. The team pays much attention to hygiene, order and cleanness.

It is important to make a planning over years for the maintenance of the buildings so as to be able to keep the school in good conditions. It would also be good to plant a few additional trees on the playground (shadow is valuable for the well-being of the children during playtime).

Compared to the other neighbouring schools, this school has a basis of necessary material facilities for the implementation of its core tasks. The **material and infrastructural facilities** are very good for a Gambian school. The resources come mainly from Flemish funds and donations.

For its administration the school disposes of a computer with a digital book-keeping program and a printer.

For mathematics, English and French the students use a handbook. The same edition of this handbook is also used by other schools. But contrary to the



situation in other schools, in this school a handbook is available for each child. The schoolbooks are used for several years. Parents do not have to pay for them. The didactic structure of the lessons in the handbook is not always very logically classified. Teachers deviate little from what the handbook offers.

In the secretariat a school library is installed. Children can borrow books here and take them home. It would be good if the library were completed by more books in English or in Wolof and with more up-to-date documentation.

The school also has arranged a room for health education. This room is equipped with sufficient didactical materials that are interesting and recognizable for children.

The school has produced inclusive materials and made infrastructural adaptations (inclined plane) for pupils using a wheel chair.

The school also disposes of a media-class with an audio-installation, a large television and a number of laptops. This is surprising, given the limited financial margin of the school. This media-class can be an open window on the world. A stable internet connection could be the next improvement. In our interviews with the teachers, we got the impression that (except for the



nursery school) the media facilities are still under-utilised. Pupils should be able to work actively with audio-visual equipment with adequate software that allows children to produce, edit and display audio and visual recordings.

At the internal level of a class we still see many opportunities for using media in favour of a stimulating class-organization in which the pedagogical-didactical practice is enriched with easily accessible and challenging reference-materials such as books, musical recordings, film, digital reference-materials, reviews, geographical maps, posters, photographs.

The structure of the buildings (square construction with an inside patio and open windows on a rather limited area) inevitably causes some noise discomfort. In the short term the only solution seems to be a sensitization of the teachers to make them moderate their voice themselves and to limit joint recitation by the pupils.

Ideally, funding of the basic school by the Ministry (while respecting its autonomy as a pilot school) would allow to disengage (European) funding for the organization of the lower secondary school which parents, teachers and the board are apparently unanimously striving for.

Nursery school



There are 3 nursery classes in the school, with 26 toddlers each. On entering the nursery classes one can observe that the children are not really grouped by age in a class. Depending on their school maturity or language development, some children are older than the age-group they are allocated to. In group 1 the children are 4 to 5 years old, with the exception of one child who - because of his migration background - does not speak any of the local languages. There are also some children of 7-8 years in group 3.

At first sight, the arrangement of the class-room in group 2 and 3 looks rather 'schoolish': 3 large tables, with ca. 15 chairs around them. At a side-wall of the class-room lies a carpet, used during corner work or active play, when children are engaged in different activities. Actually the school year starts with 4 instead of 3 years in order to prepare children adequately for primary one - mainly for English (with level 3 already blending 2 and 3 lettered words, handwriting skills, phonics) but also maths. Home support, which normally is very important for children to be able to follow the beginning of primary school, is lacking in most cases. Yet, nursery children already start with some of the primary school skills ... and children are able to do so, as many Belgian students in nursery educa-

tion have noticed to their surprise. It is not always easy for children, but the underprivileged background makes it necessary to equip them for their future. Still wellbeing is the focus number one of the school. In group 1, the class-room has been arranged in corners and as we visit them the children are sitting all together on the carpet. During the class-conversation (during which they are sitting in a circle), they are invited, one after the other, to go and sit in 'the red seat'. The activity is alternated by a song and some rhythmic movement.

In the past, there did not really exist a training for nursery teachers in The Gambia. Meanwhile the Early Childhood Education has made great progress - even some basic phonics is trained (though not the advanced one used in The Swallow). In most cases the school appoints itself someone who can accompany such toddlers in the school. One can see immediately that the teachers who were assigned this task are looking for a method, working-modalities, structure... to shape a good infant education. In The Swallow you can observe a strong effort to establish a clear structure for the whole. During the activities, the repetitive character and the principle of repeating give the toddlers a safe feeling. The nurses create opportunities and make room to 'fix' experiences, to integrate and to assimilate them.

Nursery school: Didactic approach

In the nursery section already, a strong emphasis is put on cognitive performance. In group 1, for example, the recognition of figures and letters is being trained. Themes such as security, children's rights, health, senses, colours... are dealt with. They partly reflect the themes of the curriculum that the Ministry proposes in a working document. Besides this, great attention is paid to life-skills. It is remarkable how alertly the teachers follow up on elements from the group conversation where children tell what they have been doing at home during the weekend. Helping with dish-washing or cleaning e.g. is encouraged but are also an occasion to distinguish between 'helping' and 'child labour'. Helping with cooking is strongly discouraged, because fire is dangerous. The case of a little boy who went alone to the market gives rise to a conversation about the risks involved. A reference to a breakfast is taken up to confirm the importance of breakfast for the children's health.

The pupils do many things together, especially in the afternoon and in this way collect many experiences. The children are invited to listen to each other.

Teachers draw up schedules which are regularly checked by the principal, and corrected if necessary. On request from the teachers, workshops can be started; there is room for additional team-oriented training. Teachers reflect on the learning contents and try to strike a good balance between objectives. In this vein e.g., they pay attention to ways of dealing with feelings, to a listening attitude, to the independence and entrepreneurship of toddlers... there is a wide offer of knowledge and skills. What is striking, in a positive way, is the open, receptive style of the teachers.

Besides the curriculum there also exists a 'work plan' that was elaborated with the help of an external teacher. This plan is also used by nursery school student teachers who come from Belgium for their internship. This year the focus is on mathematics. One tries to look at toddlers from a development-oriented per-

spective and to develop methods to teach the manipulation of materials. This phase is not self-evident but with the help of the interns, one tries to implement it and integrate it into daily practice.

After dealing with a particular theme, the teacher makes an assessment of each toddler. The teacher disposes of a specific tool to monitor the competences of the children. It is not always very clear whether the observations are taken into account and used to remedy the children's perceived deficits. Our impression is that more could be done with the monitoring data.

Language and mathematics are given much attention in the class. Hence, it is a real advantage that these subjects are the focus of the process of professionalization. This year, special attention is devoted to development-oriented teaching.

The school clearly has a **language policy**. Each class has a poster on the wall with the alphabet and every letter is followed by words starting with this letter. As the legal instruction language is English, learning English is a key objective from the youngest age already. Yet, the use of the mother tongue by the children is tolerated and indeed encouraged at nursery level, whereas it almost completely disappears in the highest grades of the primary school.

In the morning, children are mainly involved in the cognitive part of learning. The afternoon is playing time. In a rotating system, children can play freely with the dress-up trunk, in the sand, with music instruments, the swing. There is room for encounter and phantasy. All children are involved because enough materials are available. There are also periods of physical exercise, and games in which **the social skills** of the toddlers are trained.

Pedagogical approach

In general, there is an orderly and focussed learning climate. In group 1 much room is made for self-expression and assertiveness of the children, but they also learn to ask for permission to speak by raising their hand (in silence) until the teachers give them permission. In groups 2 and 3 it is mostly the teacher who is speaking, the children are listening and only participate in the action when they are asked for. In this case also, the challenge might be to extend the provision of materials, allowing the children to participate more actively, so as to boost their involvement and effective learning.

Class rules and agreements are elaborated together with the children. They are written on posters on the wall. This is of little use for young children who are not able to read yet. It would be better to introduce pictograms in the class. Pictograms are very important in a nursery school. Even very young children are thus able 'to read' and a lot of instructions, activities, agreements... can be linked to pictograms. This promotes the self-reliance as well as the autonomous thinking of children.

Children are always called by their first name. When they have successfully completed a task, applause follows from the whole class. Children visibly enjoy this. A safe, encouraging class atmosphere and a good child-teacher relation are indeed very important.

Another striking feature is the strong attention for gender-equality. Already in group 1, boys and girls are called upon to speak in turn.



Primary school

Learning contents and didactical approach

Most Gambian schools tend to put much emphasis on 'scholarly' performance and a rather schoolish, technical approach in which memorizing and reproducing still predominate. Authoritarian intercourse and a strict discipline - including corporal punishment - are characteristic although the latter is legally forbidden. Children who are lucky enough to be able to attend education, are confronted with overcrowded classes, a poor arrangement of classrooms and scarce materials and development tools. This contextualisation is important for a full appraisal of the contrast with The Swallow, which has adopted a non-authoritarian, emancipatory style and is strongly focused on high achievement as regards the measurable outcomes of education.

As to contents, the school works on the different aspects of **comprehensive child development**. This is apparent e.g. from the weekly time-tables and the outer appearance of the class. It goes without saying that 'reading, writing and arithmetic' are amply represented. In this context, much attention is paid to learning performance and the cognitive development. Correct and clean writing, reading, orthography/dictation are given much attention along with mathematics. Besides English lessons, children are offered French and Arabic lessons. Students also get 'integrated studies', a kind of world-orientation. In addition, room is made for creative expression (arts, djembe drumming, dancing and singing, drawing and painting, sketches...) and for physical development (writing motor skills as well as foot-ball). Health, moral development, self-image, self-confidence are not ignored thanks to activities such as the 'teachers theatre', 'micado' and gardening.

Reference was already made above to the school's **language policy**, with a gradual transition from mother-tongue to English. The director shows her respect for the mother tongue of the chil-

dren by holding parts of her speeches in Wolof.

The school language is English and from the fourth grade on, French is introduced too. Most pupils master English surprisingly well. This is quite an achievement considering that children speak another mother tongue at home and are confronted with Arabic in the Islam lessons quite early. Concerning Arabic the children are visibly somewhat confused: the direction of writing is different, the figure 'three' in mirror-writing appears to be the figure 'four' in Arabic... The question is whether it is feasible for children to acquire four totally different languages in such a short time...

Our class observations reveal several positive aspects. In general, a quiet and disciplined learning and working climate reigns in the classes. Prior knowledge is activated at the beginning of the class and it happens that teachers start with the formulation of objectives for their lesson. Excursions are made in order to build on the children's experience. A positive point is that the teachers monitor and support the children systematically during the individual exercises. Afternoons are used for differentiation, e.g. in flexible ability groups or individual study time. Providing for 'movement-intervals' has a positive effect on the concentration of the children. One also uses forms of group-work, e.g. for discussion. Time is invested in the design of rules, with participation of the children.

Despite the impressive efforts of the teachers, some points for improvement are worth mentioning. The use of visualization to support learning occurs rather rarely. More concrete materials can be used to accompany mathematical operations, along with more explicit wording of arguments or the exchange of solution algorithms, in which case the objective is not a matter of right or wrong but





strengthening the process of learning from and with each other.

Stimulating questions and exchanges (Who found a different solution and why is it different? How did you come to this solution? Why do you think so? Do you find this a better strategy to find a solution?) that make the thinking process explicit and deepen it, may further enrich the learning process. Sometimes the increase in complexity is too large with insufficient instruction to match the level of insight with the concrete level. In classes, it still happens too often that other children are passive while one child is carrying out an assignment at the blackboard. Different simultaneous assignments and a more intensive use of concrete materials can be of great help to avoid such situations. 'Waiting moments' during class-time, while the teacher corrects each exercise-booklet individually, may imply a loss of time for instruction. Forms of self- or peer-evaluation can offer a solution. Now and then symptoms of boredom or weariness were observed because of long, rather monotonous instruction or collective reproduction: heads on the desk, yawning, looking away.

Confusion is created when the Islam teacher is instructing while the titular is making corrections: whom should the children listen to?

Generally speaking, quite a lot of learning activities are set up on the basis of correct reproduction of 'verbal truths' as worded by the teacher or the paper. The learning process can be enhanced by means of peer learning and forms of coop-



erative learning which allow pupils to reach a deeper understanding of the learning contents and to develop skills that are important for lifelong learning. By the same token, social, communicative and self-reflexive skills can be boosted. Making pupils work together regularly allows them to develop a range of learning-strategies. Pupils will learn most when the teacher opts for active modes of interaction with other pupils. The best teachers spice their lessons also with energy, passion, enthusiasm, fun and humour. Joy of learning is an important determinant of high-performing classes. Searching, investigating and discovering a truth oneself, has a stronger emancipatory effect than reproduction of truths of others and fosters the self-efficacy of the pupils.

The link with the real-life environment as a motivating trigger or an area for application can be further strengthened. In some groups, the realistic, living and functional learning (e.g. of mathematics) has so far been elaborated to a limited extent. Differentiation, e.g. through prolonged instruction, could be used more, also during regular classes. Systematic use of the same methodology (such as teacher-centred interaction) sometimes takes too much time.

Planning happens in a structured way, and the agenda plays an important role as a planning document. Planning not only involves goals but also other items such as evaluation methods, sources, roadmaps, remarks, on the basis of which the whole process has been concretely elaborated.

In the classrooms, many representations and reference frames are hanging on the walls to support learning, but



also other messages such as codes of conduct (e.g. "don't steal from others"). Moreover, various wall-paintings can be seen on the premises of the school, including a map of The Gambia, messages relating to a health campaign, as well as inspiring texts showing that this is a school without discrimination, where fun is made (learn play happy), where a community is built up (laughing people in a circle with 'TEAM'), or motivating statements ("knowledge is the way to success. We are eager to learn. Give us a chance") etc. The premises of the school allow for sufficient space to move, with shadow and play-tools, with a school garden and chicken... 'Active' supervision during play-time is sometimes lacking.

Pedagogical approach

A non-authoritarian coaching style of the teachers is characteristic for The Swallow. Generally, teachers show a gentle, respectful attitude towards the children, which generates a feeling of security. Teachers encourage positive behaviour and outcomes, whereas corporal punishment is strictly forbidden. They like 'their' school and are motivated. The school considers the style of the teachers as a very important element because they function as role-models.

Positive behaviour is encouraged, for example with applause of the class for a good answer. And yet further progress can be made in this area of emancipation. For example, we saw a child noticing that the teacher had made a mistake in an assignment, but not having the courage to signal this and preferring conformity with the group instead. From the interviews also it also appeared that for some teachers the concept of emancipation is not very clear and more or less coincides with 'being nice'.

Emancipation

In accordance with the pedagogical project of the school, the team invests heavily in emancipatory education: this is the process to reach an ideal situation in which individuals or groups are able to make autonomous judgments about the sense of their actions and to give a sense to their lives. In this process, emotional development, a strong drive for exploration and a committed disposition towards the society are important points of departure. During our visit to The Swallow we could observe that this school indeed invests in such emancipation.

It was noticeable that the school is working on children's rights and democracy on the level of the children. As noted above, the class rules are elaborated by teacher and children which strengthens the sense of ownership as well as compliance with the rules. Elections are organized for a 'head-boy' and 'head-girl' of the school, with candidates presenting themselves with photographs and speeches, followed by voting. Candidates who seem to be less suited also get their chances. Slavery has been deliberately selected as a theme for discussion, following an excursion to a monument commemorating the victims of slave trafficking. During the school year, children experience other similar subjects. Children are assigned various tasks at school such as helping with cooking, washing their uniform, *"Chores for children are fine, but this should never turn into exploitation."*

The board of the school would be well advised to explain once again thoroughly the basic principles of emancipatory education. Not all teachers seem to understand the principles of the school's pedagogical project in the same way.

For many children in The Gambia, growing up is not self-evident: diversity, social inequality, multilingual-

ism and poverty have a strong impact on the life and learning of these children. Manjai, the neighbourhood where The Swallow is located, has one of the highest concentrations of out-of-school children. That is why collaboration with external partners is important. It is very positive that the school is organizing youth activities on Saturdays and during the holidays. These



education activities for the children of the neighbourhood (not just pupils from the school) allow the participants to make progress in their life-skills. The activities (relating to social skills, sports, theatre, arts, health, civic education, early marriage, selective garbage collection, action against deforestation...) are connected as much as possible with the daily life and interests of the children. In this way, the team aims to strengthen the competences of children in real-life situations. Accessible projects with a durable character prioritise deprived groups in Manjai. Intense collaboration with the parents of those children and with other actors who can contribute to social change, results in independent young adults and citizens with social and societal concerns. There also is an intense collaboration with the existing youth movements. For example, activities with 'peace ambassadors' were organized in the past and a local section of scouts has been created with its operational basis in The Swallow.

A key condition for effective education is that the children's basic needs and well-being are guaranteed. We have seen genuine commitment to this on the part of teachers (e.g. good nutrition, hygiene, non-violence). Most

teachers also show great respect for their children.

Emancipatory education also involves equal educational opportunities for all children to fully develop their personality. Teachers can further encourage pupils to speak up for themselves and make their own choices more consciously, by confronting children with challenges for which they can develop their own strategies, by making children reflect on their own solutions, work together, and learn how to use different sources of information in a systematic way and independently. This can be done even at a fairly young age. In this way, they develop an open, critical attitude towards themselves and others. If we succeed in fostering these basic capabilities of youngsters, they will be willing and able as adults to contribute to a better society and to develop an own identity therein.

In their lessons, some teachers use examples taken from the living environment of the children, which contributes to the development of the students' life skills (e.g. bargaining on the market; 'you don't sell at a loss'; 'shops are important in the neighbourhood'). The link with everyday life as a trigger for motivation or simply as an illustration of the relevance of learning contents can be further strengthened. A more realistic, lively, functional (mathematics) education can be achieved in some classes.

From the nursery school onwards, the language skills and assertiveness of the children are being promoted through group conversation, often on important themes (household chores, safety, quarrels, hygiene, intra-family violence...). In the 5th and 6th grade, debates are often organized. The pupils prepare their arguments 'for' as well as 'against' specific issues within the class, and then defend them in plenary sessions before a jury of teachers who ask questions and thereafter assess the contributions of the different teams. A 17-years-old alumna who intends to study journalism after secondary school, refers to these debates and testifies that those were one of the elements that influenced her study and professional career choice.

Basic care for all



Basic

Basic needs are a key concern of the school, all the more so because the school targets disadvantaged children. It is a fact that girls and children at risk are given priority in the school's enrolment policy. It is impossible to foster those children's development and learning unless their basic needs are fulfilled.

The food programme, with free hot meals every day, is well organized. The food pyramid is visualized on several places and there are posters about health topics (e.g. malaria and ebola). Health, safety, hygiene and wellbeing of the children are given much attention (monthly monitoring of height and weight, food supplements if necessary, deworming...). Health care at The Swallow will be discussed in detail in section 10. Physical violence is completely banned from the school.

The school deliberately chooses to **limit the number** of children both at the school- and class-level: 240 children in nine classes with an average of about 25 children. The small scale fosters a sense of community where everybody knows each other and the size of the classes facilitates a tailored approach to each individual child.

The school disposes of a large and attractive playground, where children can play foot-ball, swing etc., having a pleasant time; hence, the number of conflicts is minimised.

Grade repetition is reduced to a minimum. To this end, 'holiday classes' (among other things) are being organized one month before the start of the school-year. The school also provides for free supervised study time in the afternoon. The school plainly invests in various types of **cooperation**. The 'teachers

theatre' can be considered as a kind of forum, a community-building activity between children and teachers, focused on welcoming, celebrating,, role-playing, behavioural education... The school-uniform also contributes to this sense of belonging. This emphasis on cooperation is also found in the classes and in the chores assigned to children for the maintenance of the school. For example, classes are being cleaned by teams of mixed ages. There are 12 teams working in a rotating scheme and assuming their tasks in a responsible way.

Diversity and unity are symbolized on the gate of the school.

Additional efforts

The school succeeds in creating more flexible forms of grouping so that **differentiation** becomes possible. So children of grades 3 and 4 receive their English lessons at the same time. Children who do not master the basics can join a starters' group. After being tested they can be re-integrated in their own class group. Synchronised timetables for reading and arithmetics allow for grouping by skill level. An evolution towards class-internal differentiation is ongoing. This certainly yields an added value since the classical approach has predominated until now. Class-internal differentiation can be further improved. The 'activity table' is aiming at this, but in some groups its use can be improved.

The school has engaged a new **special needs teacher**. After an observation period, the intention is to engage this teacher flexibly in classes with the highest needs. The role of the SEN teacher will be discussed in section 10.

We also mentioned earlier the **commitment of the school to the development of the neighbourhood**. This is reflected in the employment of a handyman, a guard for the school area, a tailor, a secretary, a book-keeper, a shop-keeper and staff for

Health and well being

the kitchen. In the latter case, there is also a deliberate choice for people with a handicap. Employees who can no longer assume their task, e.g. due to illness, are employed in a different role whenever possible. This shows the concern for the personnel.

The school manages to welcome children and adults with 'special needs' and to integrate them in a holistic way. Deficit thinking (in which a person coincides with his shortcomings) is avoided as much as possible. Society is diverse, and so be the school.

The reception of all children takes place on the playground, which gives a nice feeling of the cohesion between all children and teachers. It is the same space where the "teachers' theatre" takes place. Children also get some responsibilities, such as cleaning the class, the playground and the rest of the school-environment. There are dust-bins in the class-rooms and on the playground. Everybody does his bit, there is a system of rotation so that all tasks are executed by everybody. The elder children take care of the younger ones in the execution of these tasks.

Children make arrangements and rules they want to apply in the school and in the class. Everybody is responsible for the atmosphere in the school.



Health and hygiene

A very strong emphasis is put on nutrition. To begin with, we already mentioned in section 9 the provision of free hot lunches to all children and teachers every day. Moreover, the food pyramid is visible throughout the school. This is a valuable reminder of the importance of healthy food and contributes to a sustainable effect, even beyond the school boundaries. The school aims at children taking this message home.

Every child is carefully monitored for weight and growth. Measures are taken whenever signals are seen of malnutrition and/or slow growth. Some children can have a small breakfast at school.

At the school gate already, the hands of each visitor are disinfected. Washing hands on a regular basis is strongly encouraged. The school works on hygiene and safety at toilets with clear house rules on washing hands with soap after toilet use and provides separate toilets for boys and girls. In general the school puts high value on a clean environment and encourages the children to raise awareness on clean compounds. The children have different cleaning tasks in school and the teachers provide a good role model.

Children do motor activities in between and during the lessons. This keeps concentration levels high.

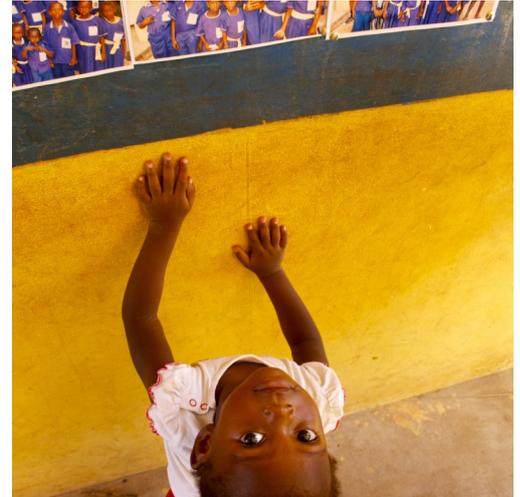
Well-being

In each classroom, written class rules are visible on the wall and the teachers point to them regularly. Emotions have an important place in the curriculum of the nursery classes: the method of "the box filled with feelings" is used with the corresponding visual representations. Children learn to recognize emotions with the help of these representations, have to "act" the feeling and the class exercises in recognizing the feelings that are acted. Real-life examples are being used, for example: when a sick child enters the classroom, the teacher points out to the class that 'this girl is sad, because she is sick'. In this way, a sense of

compassion and empathy and an urge to help (life-skills!) is developed.

While reading aloud in an illustrated story book, the teacher challenges traditional gender role models by stressing that boys can also have fear and show their feelings. Citizenship and life-skills are also addressed by pointing out the importance of respect for parents and helping them at home.

Different aspects of learning are addressed: children learn at an early age to come to the blackboard and present their work and exercises with a loud and clear voice, children learn to debate at the Micado on Friday. This provides strategies for children to use in learning and refers to the UDL principle of *Action & Expression*. Teachers put the lesson topic on the blackboard in the beginning, (for example addition with regrouping), give explanations about the topic, make connection to previous knowledge (for example prepositions and pronouns), review what was learned before and sometimes point out why it is important to learn this topic (as was the case in the importance of conjunctions to clarify sentences and why certain prepositions can change the meaning of a sentence). Teachers announce what will happen next. This provides a safe learning environment. Motivation is kept high during classes, and the importance of education is stressed when children are not paying attention. Teachers use challenging and interesting sentences (e.g. about gender issues in the Olympics) to understand and use what has been taught. Children are focussed. Teachers work on a positive class climate: children are rewarded with applause and/or with tokens (stickers).



Special Educational Needs

The Swallow has invested in the appointment of a health and special needs teacher. This teacher plays a very important role, as he can provide support on 3 levels: the teachers, the children and their parents, the school. Nevertheless, it is obvious that individualised care is a concern for all teachers.

Teachers repeat an instruction if needed, especially for those who did not understand. Differentiation is offered by means of an activity table in the classroom: children who have finished their tasks can go there and choose an activity (reading, making additional exercises, ...). Children are placed in groups for the whole day. They are reminded by the teacher to “work as one”. This opens up suggestions for peer-learning and tutoring.

Mother tongue issues are addressed: if the child does not understand an English word or sentence, the teacher translates it into Wolof, Mandinka and other languages. This gradually fades in later years.

In nursery school, a day schedule is used. Teachers build up the schedule together with the chil-

dren by putting different pictograms on the group tables and include the children by taking the correct picto for the schedule. Teachers make clear blackboard visuals and some teachers have a very nice and clear handwriting on the blackboard. This is a good role model for the children and provides additional information about the verbally presented lesson. This is an example of the UDL principle *representation*.

Next to health and well-being the development of each child is monitored with a visual reporting system (with smileys). As a result the teachers have a clear view of the total development (not just academic) of the child. Even the presence of the child in school is closely monitored with follow up. The information is passed on to the next class. Communication skills, arts, sport and social behaviour are part of the curriculum.

Teachers acknowledge the importance of positive feedback.

Evaluation & reporting

Looking at the contents of the curriculum we can observe there is a strong investment in the overall development of children. As regards the evaluation of the proposed targets, it is striking that the evaluation of mathematics and reading that receives much attention. In the nursery school these scholarly skills are being exercised intensively, and repetition and direct evaluation are given a central place.

The transition to grade 1 and the transfer into secondary education are key transitions in the school career. The corresponding evaluation processes determine to a large extent the children's school careers.

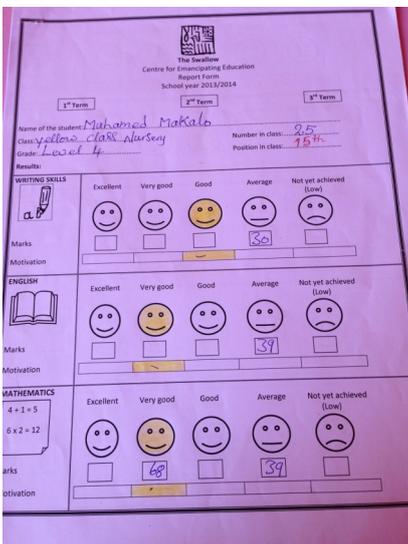
Pupils transferring from other schools to The Swallow are being tested on their knowledge and skills. This evaluation does

not serve the purpose of 'labelling' children, but is used as a basis to determine the optimal guidance which can/must be offered to the children.

The (external) admission test to secondary education determines to a large extent the action of the teachers from The Swallow. Reaching these standards and measuring the targets of a lower order occupy a central place in their evaluation policy.

In the field of reporting we see that all aspects of the development of the children are covered. Attention is paid to English, mathematics and writing skills as well as to speaking skills, artistic skills and sports. Attention is even given to the evaluation of the project, social and health behaviour.

As regards the evaluation of the proposed targets, it is striking that the evaluation of mathematics and reading that receives much attention.



Output

The output of a primary school can be defined and measured in different ways: performance of students in particular skills; school career indicators such as primary school completion, grade repetition and – most importantly – transfer into (lower) secondary education; and satisfaction of parents and students.

Performance

From various interviews with parents, teachers, the cluster monitor, the Ministry and students, there appears to be a strong consensus about the excellent performance of The Swallow in cognitive performance (the most striking indicator being fluency of children in English). One objective proof of this is the fact that, out of the 18 basic schools in the cluster (sub-region), The Swallow achieved the second best overall average score (93/100) on the national exam (which covers English, Maths, Socio-economic sciences, Reading and Science). Note however that the national exam does not cover the most important characteristics of The Swallow's educational project such as health, life skills and emancipation.

School career indicators

Data on grade repetition are non-existent in The Swallow. According to the dates of birth of 6th grade students in the student list in 2013-14, 6 out of 16 students have one or two years delay. However, delays may also be due to other causes, such as delayed entrance into 1st grade.

According to the teachers, grade retention is exceptional in The Swallow. This is attributed to various methods of differentiation (the Summer holiday class of four weeks for slow learners before the start of the school year – mentioned above –, within-class differentiation and individualised support during the afternoon study time). Yet, some students entering the school in the course of primary school are allocated to a lower grade because of gaps in the skills acquired in their previous school.

The most convincing indicator is transfer into lower secondary (= upper basic, i.e. grades 7-8-9) education. As The Swallow does not offer grades 7-9, students have to compete for

places in other schools through admission exams. In 2014, all 16 sixth-graders passed the admission tests at a secondary school with higher level of entrance exams.

Student and parent satisfaction

During the audit, two young students interviewed alumni from The Swallow and asked for feedback based on their personal experience. The following excerpts are taken from an interview with a 17-years old girl who was among the first pupils of The Swallow: *In the Swallow, when I was young, we used to have interviews. The teachers gave us the chance to interview them, we had drama activities and debates... I became used to those things. (...) Since then I want to be a journalist.*

-What is your nicest remembrance of The Swallow? *Oh I have many of them! I can't even count them. Like: being with your friends, growing up with them and with the teachers. You learn a lot, like these debates we do, and the drama. The food they provide us with, the books and pencils. I really love The Swallow.*

- What would you like to say about the teachers in The Swallow? *They are very kind. They are like my second parents. They take good care of us. They make sure we eat good food, that we are healthy. A lot of things. They don't hit us, don't beat, they don't use vulgar language towards us. They are always polite. They give us respect and in return we give them respect too.*

- What would you like to do in the future? *I want to be a journalist. I am planning to go to England for my further education. (...) I want my mind to be free like I have ideas about other countries and many experiences.*

- Do you know what became of your classmates in The Swallow? *I only know about one not going to school any more (...) She is having financial difficulties. But for the rest, they are going to very good schools here.*

- What would you wish for The Swallow in the future? *Let them grow more successful every year and let them continue to support more children and give them that inspiration that they gave me. They really inspired me! It's very hard when you are leaving The Swallow. Because when you are used to all*

the good things that they are doing to you, and then you have to leave to a school that is stricter and more difficult, that's hard. I am thankful for the confidence they built in me. (...) They make me stand in front of people to express myself, not to fear anything and express what I have in mind.

The youngsters from the audit team also interviewed the present sixth-graders of The Swallow about their dreams for the future. The replies reflect a good deal of self-confidence and relatively high aspirations:

- I want to be a doctor.*
- I want to be a teacher.*
- I want to be an accountant.*
- I want to be an air hostess.*
- I want to be a soldier.*

It goes without saying that these aspirations reach far beyond the present occupations of their own parents. In this sense, one may conclude that The Swallow has triggered high hopes for a better future among children from the poorest backgrounds in The Gambia.

The audit team also visited two parents, accompanied by one of the teachers. One of them is a very poor widower who collects scrap. To our surprise, the main wish of this parent was for The Swallow to organise upper basic school as he thought that no other school could offer the same quality. The other parent is percussionist in a music band during the tourist season; for the rest of the year, he works as a day labourer in the building industry. This man is currently chairing the parents' committee. He testified about very high parents' expectations, nearly 100% participation in parent evenings organised by the school, and the general request that The Swallow should organise upper basic education. From the student registers, we could also verify that the rate of absenteeism is very low.

Follow-up in secondary education

Whereas the founders of The Swallow initially expected that all children would drop out after primary school (like all poor children in The Gambia), the current reality is that all of them transfer into secondary education. The

Swallow sponsors their tuition fees and other school-related expenses, at relatively high cost. The audit team therefore also visited one of the (private) schools which receives most of the alumni from The Swallow and is known for being a very good school.

Generally speaking, the school principal and teachers see no difference in performance between the Swallow alumni and other students (most of whom come from better-off families). They see individual sponsoring, rather than social background, as a key factor determining the educational opportunities of the students. Yet, our visit raised two key issues in this regard: the mismatch between the pedagogical approaches in primary and secondary school, and the labour market outcomes of secondary school graduates.

The 'follow-up school' is a rather traditional one, where life skills are no longer seen as the cornerstone of the pedagogical project. This means that The Swallow's initial investment is not pursued at secondary level, and that maybe part of this investment gets lost. The secondary school also applies permanent ability grouping, a method that is criticised in the scientific literature for exacerbating (social) inequality in outcomes as it tends to discriminate against students whose families benefit from less economic, social and cultural capital. It is therefore no surprise that all stakeholders of The Swallow would prefer to organise (lower) secondary education according to their own pedagogical principles.

The second issue relates to the curriculum of secondary education. Until now, almost all Swallow alumni drop out after lower secondary education. Whereas most parties would agree that further education increases the life chances of young people, the benefits of a secondary school curriculum that is too narrowly focussed on preparation for higher education are compromised for early school leavers. Secondary school in The Gambia, like in many



Meeting of the alumni association of The Swallow

developing countries, is rather academic and does not prepare students adequately for the labour market, particularly if they leave school after lower secondary. Nor does it equip them with the necessary social and life skills for a good life. At upper secondary level, students can transfer into 'vocational training centres' which could provide them with relevant vocational skills. However, for early school leavers this would 'come too late'; it would be more appropriate if the lower secondary curriculum would also include a more substantial component relating to vocational and life skills.

conclusions

The audit team found convincing evidence about the high quality of the education offered by The Swallow. It is the combination of three elements that makes this project unique:

- an explicit priority for children from a very disadvantaged neighbourhood;
 - high cognitive performance (as reflected in the outstanding scores of sixth-graders on the national exams); and
- the pedagogical approach focussed on comprehensive development of the children's personality.

It is hard to summarise this pedagogy in a single term – such as 'life skills' or 'emancipatory education' – as several dimensions of the 'Swallow approach' are particularly noteworthy. The first pillar is made up by a substantial investment in the children's basic needs: balanced nutrition, extensive preventative health care, and social assistance to free the children's minds from hardship and guarantee the psychological security that is needed to benefit fully from their education. All this is offered a zero tuition fee, otherwise the children from Manjai would never be able to afford this education.

The second pillar is a radical choice for social justice values. In addition the priority given to a disadvantaged neighbourhood, the school's recruitment policy prioritises girls (with a quatum of 60%), children with special needs and children growing up in difficult circumstances (victims of domestic violence, orphans, etc.). The commitment to gender equality transpires in all interaction between the teachers and the children, as illustrated by the alternation between

boys and girls taking the floor and answering questions in the class. The social commitment of teachers is reflected by their voluntary work in the local community beyond school hours and during holidays. Moreover, this sense of social justice (or collective emancipation) is inculcated into children's minds through an open, democratic organisation of the school as well as a well-designed social education strategy.

As regards 'life skills' (the third pillar), the most visible outcomes are undoubtedly the pupils' healthy life style, their excellent (English) language skills, but also their maturity and ability to speak up for themselves. Other aspects include their strong social skills, sense of citizenship and democracy; their physical, sports and artistic skills. Emancipatory education can be defined at the individual level as the pedagogical strategy that aims to produce this optimal balance of life skills, over and above the cognitive skills that make up the focus of mainstream education systems. In the longer term, such emancipatory education should translate into a strong upward social mobility, with poor children accessing leading positions in society and behaving as responsible, generous and democratic citizens. Although another decade will be needed to show such outcomes, the children themselves are clearly nurturing this dream.

Admittedly, although The Swallow stands out as an example for other schools in many ways, there is substantial room for further improvement. This audit report pointed out a range of opportunities to boost the excellence of the school (more active learning methods, more effective use of the learning time, further professional development of nursery



teachers, introduction of modern learning methods and tools, fuller use of media and internet, development of a SEN strategy, etc.). The audit team is aware that all its suggestions and recommendations cannot be implemented overnight: this partly depends on external conditions and resources to invest in the school's human resources. Nevertheless, we are confident that The Swallow disposes of an extremely dedicated and capable board and staff, who are willing to learn and take up new challenges.

The biggest challenge for the future is undoubtedly the demand for upper basic education. All stakeholders of The Swallow seem to be unanimous on this point. Whereas the initial challenge for the school, back in 2002, was to keep children in school until 6th grade, all sixth-graders from the 2013-2014 cohort passed the admission test to upper basic school and all of them made the transition. This is obviously a major victory. Yet it is sad for The Swallow to have to sponsor its students' further careers in schools with a different educational practice. Parents, teachers, board members and students alike share the ambition of extending The Swallow's own educational project up to grade 9. This would undoubtedly boost the outcomes for the next generations of students further. Sharing The Swallow's emancipatory vision with collaborating secondary schools may be an alternative strategy as long as the resources are lacking to develop its own upper basic classes.

The main obstacle for the extension to upper basic level is obviously the lack of resources. Until now, The Swallow is almost completely dependent on donations from Europe. Apart from putting a constraint on the school's development, this is also illogical and highly undesirable. Schools are

pivotal institutions in their local communities and should ideally be 'owned' by the latter. Social, emotional and financial links should ideally be intertwined. The time is now ripe for The Swallow to be subsidised by the Gambian Ministry of Education. Given the explicit recognition as a centre of excellence, awarded in 2013, the odds of obtaining subsidies are now better than ever. It is however essential that the key principles of The Swallow's pedagogical project (including its material conditions) remain intact.

Another major challenge is the Ministry's expectation that The Swallow should share its expert knowledge with other schools in the region. Indeed, since the beginning, the founders and the team have continuously researched and innovated, adopting a reflexive capacity that can now be valorised for the benefit of many other schools, within and beyond The Gambia. The management is enthusiastic about this challenge: the first steps are already being taken. It will however necessitate further investment in networking and capacity building for the in-service training of colleagues from other schools.

We hope that this audit report will also be used as a resource for joint reflection on the strengths and opportunities for further specialisation, not just in The Swallow but also in the rest of the country and – why not ? – other African countries.

In the longer term, such emancipatory education should translate into a strong upward social mobility, with poor children accessing leading positions in society and behaving as responsible, generous and democratic citizens.



The Swallow

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