

Audit report : The Swallow

EXPERTS JOURNEY
OCTOBER 2014

VERSION
22 JUNE 2015



The Swallow is an educational centre with a basic school, an integrated health project, a youth program and a particular focus on life skills.

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 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 brochure is a summary of the screening report made by ten experts after their stay at The Swallow.



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results

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 and to investigate the quality of The Swallow.

On the basis of these diverse inputs the audit team wrote a report. This brochure is a summary of this report. In addition, the public relations team also produces

other forms of reporting about the school and about the promotion of quality education in Africa in general: videos, film, photo exhibition, music. We also want to set up a program to spread the method.



The results of this review will serve as a source of information about the operation and the method of The Swallow .

team



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 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.

Expert team:

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

P.R. team:

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

Organisation:

Els Salembier

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

Research approach

The intention was to screen the pedagogical approach of The Swallow by means of **an analysis of documents, observation and interviews.**

After we had collected all of the Swallow's documents and had looked into a great deal of official Gambian documents, a survey and an observation

were established. We worked at the field level for a week, making observations in every classroom and conducting interviews with the managing board, the teachers, the alumni, the parents and the Ministry of Education. We also visited other schools (pre-schools, primary and secondary schools and special schools for students with

disabilities). We provided feedback by exchanging thoughts and ideas with the managing board and by holding a comprehensive meeting with the teachers. Finally, we organised a concert for both the children and the entire team.



context

The Gambia is a small country (10,000 km², 1.9 million inhabitants) enclosed within Senegal.



One-third of the population live below the absolute poverty line of \$1.25 a day. It is one of the poorest countries of the world. Despite substantial efforts by the present government to boost educational standards, The Gambia has a long way to go.



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.

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.

The quality of education also remains low and is very uneven: depending on the region. 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 assistance from the World Bank. 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 Swallow also operates as an educational research centre, experimenting with innovative practice and investing in the professional development of teachers and school leaders.

The unique position of The Swallow is a combination of excellent emancipating education and a radical choice for the poor people of the region.

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.

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.

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.

The school team (teachers and other staff) shows a balanced composition. 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.



General management



Above: Annette Jaiteh, general coordinator.

Right: Lamin Gibba, chairman of the school board; Suwaibatou Bah, assistant director; Els Salembier, initiator of The Swallow and chairman of the supporting non profit organisation in Belgium



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.

Director Annette Jaiteh is 'coordinator' and assumes the daily management.

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.

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.

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 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.

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. Team spirit and a respectful approach of the team members are given permanent attention in the course of decision-making processes.

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 .

Vision:

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

Mathematics training for the whole team by some teachers who followed an external workshop.



The school as a learning organisation

The school offers - and makes use of - opportunities for professionalization.

The team meetings are characterized by a positive team spirit and a good atmosphere.

External workshops are attended.

Starting teachers are assisted by a colleague.

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

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 capaci-

ty of a classroom is limited to 24 pupils. The team pays much attention to hygiene, order and cleanness. The **material and infrastructural facilities** are very good for a Gambian school. There are enough classrooms, a sanitary

facility, a kitchen, a room for health education... The school has produced inclusive materials and made infrastructural adaptations (inclined plane) for pupils using a wheel chair.

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.

The school is not aimed at an elite audience but works with the local environment (a poor working class neighbourhood). It seeks to provide opportunities to disadvantaged groups (children with disabilities, lower social class, girls ...). Children themselves are learning to be stronger and



to stand up for others. It is exactly this work on quality education, focusing on an emancipatory approach that makes the project so powerful.

The school chooses emancipation through education to give all students equal opportunities for development in accordance with their capabilities.

output

Pupils enjoy coming to school: there are few absences. From varied interviews with parents, teachers, cluster monitor, ministry and (former) students there is a broad consensus on the strong performance of The Swallow at the level of cognitive performance. The most convincing indica-

tor is transfer into lower secondary. In 2014 all 16 sixth-graders passed the admission tests at a secondary school with higher level of entrance exams. During the first three years of their secondary's, financial and substantive support is given to the former students. The current chairman of the committee of parents testified about the high participation of the parents and the general question of parents to orga-

nize a secondary education. Statements of former students: -'In The Swallow we did interviews, we played drama and had debates. I learned all these things. Since that time, I would like to be a journalist! ' -'The Teachers are my second parents. They respect us and we respect them.'



Meeting with the alumni of The Swallow

Nursery school



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. 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. Besides this, great attention is paid to life-skills. 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 addi-

onal 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. One tries to look at toddlers from a development-oriented perspective and to develop methods to teach the manipulation of materials.

In general, there is an orderly and focussed learning climate.

Striking is the strong focus on gender equality.



Basic care for all

Basic needs are a key concern of the school, all the more so because the school targets disadvantaged children.

Health and safety, hygiene, welfare of the children receive great attention, as well as many other activities related to health care. There is much attention for all children who need extra care: extra activities for fast learners, additional instruction for disadvantaged, children sit in small groups in the classroom, mother tongue is used when necessary, etc.

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.

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 the kitchen.

Primary school

Most Gambian schools tend to put much emphasis on ‘scholarly’ performance and a rather schoolish, technical approach in which memorizing and reproducing (‘chalk and talk’) still predominate.

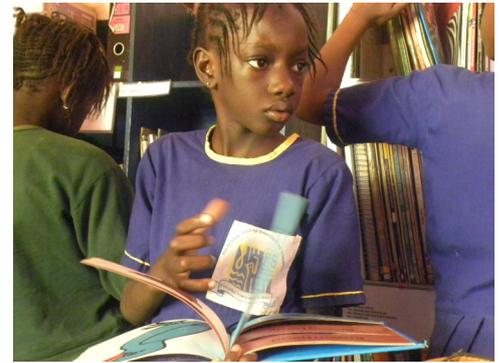
Children who are lucky enough to be able to attend education, are confronted with overcrowded classes, a poor arrangement of classrooms and scarce materials and development tools.

This contextualisation is important for a full appraisal of the great importance of The Swallow project. As to contents, the school works on the different aspects of comprehensive child development.

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.

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.



Health and well being

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.

Every child is carefully monitored for weight and growth.

Measures are taken whenever signals are seen of malnutrition and/or slow growth.

There are sport activities, health classes and many other activities on health.

The school aims at children taking this message home.

A lot of attention goes to well-being of the children at school: box full of feelings in the nursery school, cooperative activities, positive approach, clearly structured approach, classroom rules in consultation with the children, etc.

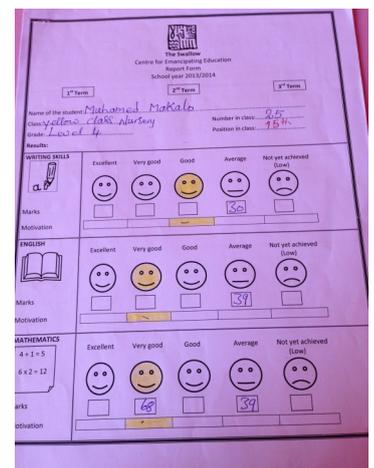
Evaluation & reporting

The transition to grade 1 and the transfer into secondary education are key transitions in the school career. 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.

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.





The Swallow

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This brochure contains some highlights from the audit report.
The full text includes strengths
and improvement of the method of The Swallow.
Would you like to get the full report from this audit?
Let us know and we'll send it to you!



Your kind support is welcome at:
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vermelding 'Afodidact' of 'The Swallow'



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