



# The Swallow, Centre for Emancipating Education

Best practice example of emancipating education in The Gambia

by Els Salembier (version January 2015)



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Hello!

Can we introduce ourselves?

We are the girls and boys from **The Swallow!** This is an educational centre in **The Gambia**, West-Africa. Our country is one of the **poorest countries** in the world. But in The Swallow we are lucky. We like to come to school every day, because the lessons are active, the whole school is one team and we are

taken care of: we even get a **healthy lunch** every day!

In class we learn **reading** and **mathematics**. In our smaller teams we learn to execute tasks and to take care of ourselves and others. Sometimes there is **choice of activities** on health, food, sport, art, drama, gardening... That is the most nice time at school!

Our teachers are not only

occupied with us. They also work with other schools, so our friends there can have better education as well. Sometimes people from other schools are coming to visit us. And you? Will you come along to visit us?

With best greetings from all girls and boys of The Swallow!

PS Before we could come to school here, a lot has been done...

The Gambia is somewhere at the end of the list according poverty, mainly depending on farming and fishery





## How it started

“Why you don’t start this type of school as example? Because I don’t know what you are talking about...” Teacher Mariama Secka is interested in the new ideas, “But how is it going to be in reality? And what will parents say?”

I, Els Salembier, am a qualified primary teacher, I have a master degree in psychology and educational sciences. My thesis was a historical research about racism in schoolbooks. In 1997 I decided to transfer to The Gambia. I was representative for the NGO Bevrijde Wereld for not only The Gambia, but as well for Senegal, Burkina Faso and Mali.

Having all this background, being part of a Gambian family, seeing schools, NGO’s and other educational organizations in all those countries, made me thinking a lot. In general I saw very poor education. I had to agree with “Education for all”: *Recent findings on the theme of pedagogical renewal and teacher development in sub-Saharan Africa conclude that undesirable teaching practices persist. They can be described as following: a rigid, chalk-and-talk, teacher centred / dominated, lecture – driven pedagogy or note learning. Such pedagogy places students in a passive role, limiting their activity to memorizing facts and reciting them to the teacher. It is also reflected in classroom assessment practices. Such teaching practices are the norm in the vast majority of classrooms in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, even in the most affluent countries.*<sup>1</sup>

Every discussion on quality education with teachers and school heads however turns out into the same opinion: We cannot change our education because we have lack of materials! Sometimes this is even said by schools that have at least a minimum: blackboard, exercise books, pencils, playground or even toys, paint... I know schools where the store is full of materials, until they don’t even know anymore what is available. I know schools where the paint is

drying without being used; I know various schools in The Gambia receiving full containers of materials from all kind of European supporters. But still they keep on saying they can not give more quality education because of lack of materials.

Of course you need a minimum of teaching aids. But a lot of those can be locally available materials, self-made materials or simply the adequate use of the environment. The discussions are leading nowhere, except to the idea that most of the teachers seem to be interested to discuss, but have no clue at all about the possibilities for changes.

Student teachers from Belgium started coming on practical in 1998. They are working towards changes mainly in nursery education. But most of the time they don’t know where to start. They are young and inexperienced themselves, they have no developed concept on how education in The Gambia could be.

Teacher Mariama was not the only one who pushed to start our own project. From the very beginning we had some interested parents and supporters. We found teachers who wanted to collaborate from our very first school day. And from the beginning there was strong support from some teachers and others in Belgium: they were ready to search for funding and to come over and join as volunteers. Klaar Vergult stayed the whole first year, and kept on following The Swallow afterwards as well. Others however think in a different way: they say Gambian children are different, we will not be able to educate them without strict discipline and corporal punishment. Or they say working for changes in education or in schools has no use.

Ideas and concepts were growing. In October 2002 The Swallow started. Our main objective is huge: show that quality education can be organized with not too much of materials, show that education in The Gambia can be organized in an emancipating way. We started

with about ten children, during this first year some more came. We started without any rules or regulations, we did not have a fixed time table, neither did we have a fixed model for our school. We intended to open eyes and ears and create our own system gradually, as a constant reflexion between theoretical ideas, experiences from others and our own experience.



Teacher Mariama in Nyodema Nursery School

Mariama is one of our first special need children. She doesn’t talk, the eyes are not functioning well and her motorical skills are not well developed. She seems to be neglected at home because of her disability. We are convinced the neglect might be cause of not talking. We are setting up a well being program for her: food, motivation... It takes us months of patience. The day she says her first word to me, I’m crying. The changes of the child are changing the mother as well. We are encouraging her: it is not too late yet; Mariama starts learning, so she might develop a long way. But only a few weeks after this Mariama gets sick. On Saturday she still joined a special excursion, the following Wednesday she died.

The mother blames herself for not taking care all those years, we are in shock and the other children are very confused: when is Mariama coming back? But life goes on... We are organizing a ceremony at The Swallow, with all the children, and are planting a tree with nice flowers as remembrance.

Rest in peace, little Mariama

(2003)



## The development of an approach through practical experience, research and literature

It was growing indeed. We took a little bit of the Freinet-system, added some methods for special need children. We looked at youth clubs and summer camps to know about attractive play-fields. We were reading very old books and dig up college and university manuals. We followed new publications, tried to find the emancipating people in The Gambia, were searching for qualified educationalists, and at the same time we had class every day with our nursery children: playing, talking, painting...

From the very beginning as well, we wanted to focus on the very basic needs of the children. Sick or hungry people cannot learn a lot. So all education even seems useless if children aren't at least more or less healthy. The Gambia is a very poor country, with more than half of its people living under the international level of poverty. As far as we are organizing education for all, and mainly for the poor, lot of children's needs are not fulfilled at home. We decide to contribute towards these needs: install a first aid post, provide some basic health services, give daily lunch... But we also incorporate it in our education: if the children can learn to take care of their own health, they will become stronger humans, and will be able to contribute to the development of the society. We are confronted with quiet some problems too: malnourished children, kids with special needs like autism, sick children.

The development of the society... We think we need active people, who can stand up for themselves, who can take responsibility and can work to survive. A lot of youths are graduating secondary and don't know what to do. They did not learn a job, don't want to become dirty or sweaty from working: they want a job in a nice office or they just sit at home waiting for a chance to go to 'Babylon'. Because there is paradise... The government and lot of NGO's are sensitizing people on health and on food security.

We are developing The Swallow as an organization step by step. At the official side we received permission to operate as "charity organization", as "nursery school" and as "primary school". At the institutional side, we are able to set up a small but committed board, with Lamin K.S. Gibba as chairman. He is good in encouraging people, he can be strict if people misbehave, cheerful if people are sad, encouraging if people lose hope, and happy if progress is made. We are also establishing a parents-committee, due to the commitment of Lize Peers and Fatou Ceesay, in 2005-2006. Parents are taking responsibilities and are exchanging ideas on education.

Practicals are growing in number. Where there was one brave student in 1998, we count 40 in 2006-2007! They are coming from more than 10 colleges



The very first class at The Swallow

and universities. So far more than 300 people came on practical in The Gambia, at The Swallow or one of our partner schools.

All these years is a time of hard work. There is no free time for me: no weekends, no holidays, no free evenings. Everything I do is for the purpose of The Swallow: we organize a school, design and build a complete new infrastructure, write a vision, guide practical students, train teachers in the new method... all at the same time. With an overdose of stubbornness we only know one direction: straight forward. Not easy going, as most of the activities in The Gambia, but in full speed! The children who are enjoying the school, keep on giving us the necessary energy!

## General objectives of The Swallow

The specific objective for the program of The Swallow (2008-2015) is: *improving quality of education in The Gambia, through an emancipatory approach.*

The Swallow will:

- advocate emancipating education in The Gambia;
- show a model school, execute research and develop learning and teaching methods;
- support nursery and primary schools towards a more emancipating approach;
- establish links between South and North to

strengthen the dissemination of emancipating education.

As the learner is at the heart of the learning process, so the school is at the centre of the education system. Reforms to improve quality should give appropriate weight to enabling schools to improve their own performance. Schools however, cannot effect meaningful change without sufficient capacity and considerable ongoing support.

With this program we are in line with the Dakar framework for Action (2000), which established an agenda for achieving good education quality, by the United Nations: EFA Dakar goals.

The program of The Swallow has its main focus on AFA goal 6:

'Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and life skills'.





## Framework for emancipating education

‘Which methods are you applying at The Swallow? Are you following Freinet or another system?’ visiting educationalists used to ask. We never knew what to answer, as the answer is a complex mix of various ideas and people, where we studied them, adapted them and assembled them.

The practical work in classes, in youth work and with sensitization programs on health and food security, are going hand in hand with study, international exchange and research. There was in this way an organic growth of the vision

and methods of The Swallow. This framework is a result of this practical research.

Meanwhile, the full pedagogical program is established and written. We ‘ld like it to be reachable for everybody and are trying to promote our system. The system is based on basic needs of each human, small or big: physical needs, need for safety, belonging, respect, etc. These needs are not only used to design the final objectives for our education, but as well the pedagogical and didactical approach.



## Basic needs of people are the guidelines

Because we think education should be for the benefit of the people and their needs, our pedagogical model starts from these needs.

The basic needs of people we are referring to are those as described by Abraham Maslow: physiological needs, safety needs, belonging needs, esteem needs, cognitive needs, aesthetical needs and self-actualization needs. However originally all the needs were placed in a hierarchy, there has been a lot of discussion on this matter. We are

convinced that something like nutrition is a more basic need than the aesthetical need. But we are not choosing to work on basic needs first and higher needs after. We therefore assembled all the needs at the same level: all of them will have attention in the educational approach at the same time.

The fulfilment of these needs are important for the children: a malnourished child will not be able to concentrate on cognitive skills. We need healthy, well being and involved children in class be-

fore any deep level learning can be established.

According to Maslow and the humanist psychologists however, people are merely moved towards actions to fulfil their basic needs. People only learn truly what is important for maintaining or improving their own conditions. If we can adapt education towards more links with human basic needs, children will be more motivated to act and therefore to learn.

## Needs, life skills and children's' rights

Human needs are basic needs for every body, whether child or adult. From an emancipating point of view, we need to develop a society which is focusing on the needs of the people (and not on the profit of multinationals i.e.). Emancipating education is focused on the general well being of children and youths: as well at present, during their schooling as for the future, when adults.<sup>1</sup> If the educational sector wants to contribute towards emancipation of the society, teaching cognitive knowledge only will not be enough. Diran Adebayo, a Nigerian writer and TV-producer, claims we need to reach critical thinking people, an amount of new generation people who are not respectful, not obedient,

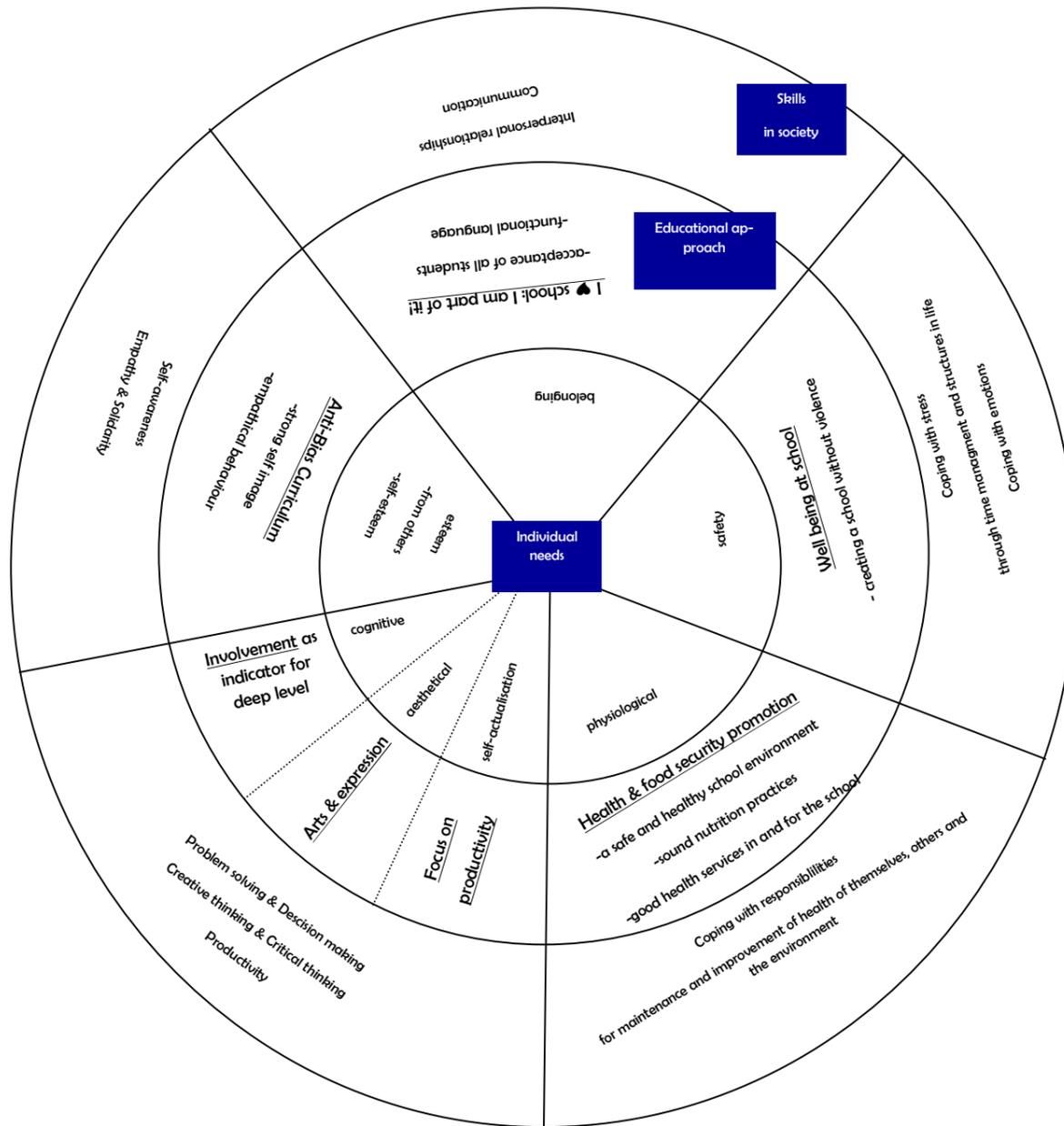
who have more self awareness and stand up for their rights. (Diran Adebayo, We hebben meer bezieling nodig en minder gehoorzaamheid, in: Eutopia, internationaal venster op politiek, cultuur en kunst, nr. 12, december 2005, Africa calling, page 22) At this level in the frame work, there are life skills and attitudes, which youths have to learn in order to establish not only this self awareness and fulfilment of own individual needs, but as well to take up responsibilities towards emancipation of the society.

Emancipating education should be education that gives equal opportunities to all. Before the start of any educational approach admission of students should

therefore be considered. The individual human needs at one side are the motivation for people and will make an active participation by learners in the design of their own learning experience possible. The other side are the needs of the society, the skills we need to contribute towards a new society.

We translate this towards ‘life skills’: achieving those skills makes youths to be able to care for themselves and others. Comparing these skills with children’s rights, there are a lot of similarities, because there too, they started from basic needs of children. In The Swallow, we chose to work with life skills as formulated by WHO (World Health Organisation).





### Pedagogical and didactical approach

In order to be able to reach the life skills (most outside circle) from the basic needs (inner circle) we have a long way to go. The programs we set up at The Swallow are mentioned in the circle in between. Those programs are not separated from each other, as you can't teach life skills in separate lessons.

We had a lot of ideas from others for all

these programs, because there is lot of valuable research and expertise. This is made our general framework.

Every proposal for change is compared to the framework: does it fit in this vision or not? Programs can be adapted, changed or abolished, but the basic framework stays.

In this way we are convinced the frame-

work is useful as well for other schools in The Gambia and abroad. Because the framework is based on universal basic needs, the pedagogical and didactical programs are based on a broad diversity of emancipating ideas, we hope to contribute towards a more emancipating education, not only in The Gambia but where ever they are interested in renewing education in this direction.





### Physical needs

These are the most necessary needs as to breath, to drink water, to eat, to visit a toilet,... When those needs are not fulfilled, we can get ill, we can feel pain, irritation, hungry, uncomfortable, etc.

These bad experiences are motivating us to temper the needs as soon as possible and keep in balance.

Once the physical needs are satisfied, we can start thinking about other

things. Precisely because of this reason we are forced to pay lot of attention to the physical needs. For example a hungry child cannot learn, he is only thinking about his empty stomach...

### 5 components for a program on health and sustainable development

The Swallow created a program based on publications of World Health Organization, Unicef and Child-to-Child Trust. School health promotion includes all the means the school is using to become healthier and to spread health to those who attend and work in it and to their families and communities.



The program contains five components, as described in *Health Promotion in Our School*:

1. A safe and healthy school environment
2. Sound nutrition practices
3. Good health services in and for the school (including mental and emotional support)
4. Effective health education for children and teachers
5. Joint health action between the school and the community

### General objectives of the program

General objectives for all learners in this program are based on those agreed for the School Health Action Program developed from Kenyatta University in Kenya.

By the end of the first cycle of basic education all children should be able to:

1. Accept responsibilities within the limits of age, ability and place in the family and community for: the maintenance and improvement of their own health; the maintenance and improvement of the health of others, especially other children to whom they can communicate health knowledge, skills and attitudes.
2. Realize what they are able to do in the school and home and also when and how they need to refer problems to adult members of their families, to their teachers and to health workers.

3. Acquire an understanding of the meaning of 'good health', realizing that it includes minds, emotions and relationships in addition to healthy bodies.

4. Realize that the health of the individual is closely linked with the maintenance of a clean, safe and well-managed environment.

Develop attitudes to conserve and improve environments.

5. Appreciate that there is a minimum of health knowledge and skills which every citizen, including every child, has a right to know and a duty to pass on to others. Develop a desire to acquire such knowledge and skills and the ability to communicate them to others.

6. Appreciate that the ability to help others depends on a capacity to listen and understand them. This in turn is based on attitudes of respect for others

and their points of view.

7. Appreciate that many conditions which cause ill health can be prevented by good health practices and that ill health is often not a matter of ill luck and seldom the result of ill will of others.

8. Appreciate that good health for self and others depends not only on acquiring knowledge and learning good practices but also depends on the ability and confidence to take sensible decisions in new situations. Develop the capacity to make such decisions and to resist pressures to do what they know to be wrong.

9. Examine traditional customs and beliefs as they relate to health practices and issues, and form judgments as to which may be beneficial and which harmful.

### Component 1: a safe, healthy and sustainable school environment

To keep a school safe and healthy doesn't cost money, only some energy and the co-operation of all. Any school, how poor or simple, can at least be clean and unsafe materials can be removed. The objective is double: the children and staff are spending a lot of their time in the school, so the condition of the premises will be of direct influence to

the health of all coming there. But even more important than this is the role model of the school: the condition and actions of the school will influence the behaviour and learning processes of all children. What about the elders: teachers, directors and others? They too have to join, as far as they are the most important role model. In The Swallow

there are teams with mixed ages doing 1 task every day. They switch the tasks now and then. Each week the team that was best in working together gets the cup!





### Component 2: sound nutrition practices

In The Swallow we decided from the beginning to cook (free) daily lunch for all children: With specific attention to:

- using as much as possible local products. In reality they are usually more expensive, so we can't be very strict on this.
- Promotion of beans and peanuts, as they are good substitutes for more expensive meat and fish. At least once a week there is a vegetarian dish at the menu.

- Promotion of variety in grains. In The Gambia we usually eat white rice. We like to teach the children to eat other cereals as well.
- Promotion of vegetables in order to have a balanced diet.
- Limitation of sugar. Local dishes are adapted at their sugar content.
- As much variation as possible. There is a menu of 8 weeks, with different dishes.
- Menu should not be too expensive. We

have to keep our budget in balance. And we want to be an example for the families at home as well, on how to eat healthy with just a small budget.



### Component 3: good health services in and for the school



In The Swallow this is the job for the health and special needs teacher, but it can be done by any

teacher. It does not require specialized skills: follow up of growing of each child, first aid, follow up of health problems,... In case of health problems the child is informed, extra nutrition can be given and of course parents are invited to see how best we can work together.

Kebba Omar fell down from his bicycle during choosing hour. He hurt the leg, although the wound was not that big. Every day it was cleaned and dressed. It didn't cure, so the parents took him to the doctor: Kebba Omar got an injection against tetanus and antibiotic pills. But still the wound did not cure. We started to study on curing of wounds and found the simple solution: Kebba Omar had lack of vitamins, so the body was not strong enough to heal. We gave him extra vitamins and within 2 weeks the wound was healing! From this time onwards, extra vitamins are always given to children with slow healing wounds.

### Component 4: effective health education for children, teachers & staff

When children experience the health services at school, when they are involved in keeping the school environment clean and when they are getting a healthy lunch daily, they will learn already a lot on health, out of experience. But this is not enough. There are a lot of important topics they have to learn, before they can take care of their own health. In The Swallow health education

is first given to the teachers and other people of the staff. So they can take up most of the education towards the children either by being correct role model or by actually teaching on health. This For the children there is health education through various activities in class, in school and in special projects. The curriculum followed is developed by the WHO.



Promotion of moving the body is an important aspect of the health program!

### Component 5: joint health action between school & community

The Swallow wants to be an open school with a clear established link with the community. Health actions are a very direct and useful way to establish this link, as it is one of the focus points in Gambian society.

There is an integration in the larger governmental campaigns like "back to the land" and "operation clean the nation". These campaigns are discussed and promoted with the children. Through various activities we are en-

couraging the kids to bring out health topics. Some examples:

- At the end of a camp on first aid, all participants are going home with the booklet made, and the task to explain it to their peers at home.
- During a project on preservation of trees, kids made posters and hang them at various community places, to encourage people not to destroy the trees.
- Movies made by the youths on gen-

der, were shown in the community youth centre, to the general public. ➤A healthy-food-parade was organized through Kotu and Manjai. We had music to attract public; promotions on healthy food and leaflets to give out.



Volunteers from The Swallow at work for Nyodema, one of our partner schools.



## Safety needs lead to a program on well being

Safety needs for people include physical security, need for protection, order, limits, stability. They incorporate emotional needs. The degree of well being shows how much the educational environment succeeds in helping the child to feel at home, to remain in contact with himself and have his emotional needs fulfilled. Well being is important, but does not guaranty development. With a good atmosphere within a group or school, where everybody will feel home, we aren't there yet. But if we succeed to give the children a safe feeling, a feeling of well being, we are pushing them in a positive direction: well being gives them energy, courage to go ahead, to develop more self-esteem, to

encounter ill luck, to function fully... The Swallow had to conclude, after several interviews and observations in various schools in The Gambia and elsewhere, that the safety need is not fulfilled in those schools. Children are afraid to come to school, afraid to be beaten by the teacher or elder children, afraid to be physical or emotional harassed. Children have no right themselves to show feelings in class, and do not learn to cope with their own feeling, i.e. in case

of anger, they only learn to beat, out of practical examples. Another way to create a safe environment, is by organising structures. In this way, people will know what to expect so they will feel more calm. The 3 components within this program are focusing all on these various aspects of safety:

1. Creating a school without violence
2. Dealing with feelings
3. Improving structures in school life.

An interview with the students of The Swallow showed out the two first reasons why they like to come to The Swallow: first reason is that they have food every day; second reason is they are not beaten by the teachers. This shows that for the children basic physical and safety needs are indeed priorities, even at school.



## Violence and emotions

*But children need to be beaten before they want to understand, we used to hear. Or parents are telling us: of course my child isn't listening in class, as far as you are not beating it. Or even worse: Our African children here are different, they need to be beaten.* The Swallow has some experience, and we observed most of the children are behaving very well, without being beaten, they are convinced not to expose bad behaviour: they have 'internal motivation.' The teacher as a role model is most important. When an adult is saying you

should not beat, but he is beating the child if done something wrong: the child will forget the words, but remember the actions. If we want a society without violence, we need schools without violence. Neither teachers or other staff are allowed to show any corporal or emotional violence towards the children. This is very important. In this way, the children do not have to fear the school or the class in particular. They have a more open mind to learn about behaviour and any other thing they have to learn.

To deal with feelings is part of well being. If you cannot express sadness, you might get depressed. If you cannot handle you anger, you might start fighting and disturb others' well being as well... In a safe place, you can express your feelings and deal with it. You are allowed to show sadness or anger without negative impact. You can share happiness or other feelings with others. In The Swallow we want to create such an environment.

## Structures in school life

To create a safe environment, organizing structures can help. When people know where to find things, what is coming to happen and what they are supposed to do, it will give them stability. The Swallow choose to work on 3 aspects of structures:  
Structure of time: We are trying in The Swallow to follow a strict time table, in order not to miss too much of activities and not to mix up the children: they need to have this time-structure. To make them to understand the program of the day, there is a day-line in the

nursery classes. Various pictures are showing the activities to come: talking round, reading, break, corner work, lunch, choosing hour...  
Structure of space: Still to improve the safety needs, the main building in The Swallow is not build at one side of the plot. It is at the middle! This gave a lot more opportunities to create various corners and playfields. Now all children can find the place where they feel safe: safe to play football without disturbing the others, safe from the one coming to tease (I just go and sit at another side)



safe to sit and eat my bread under the tree in the shadow...

Structure of activities: As much as possible, at The Swallow we are creating activities children can handle themselves: exercise books are reachable, files with exercises are made in an understandable structure,...



## Need for belonging and affection

Belonging needs involve emotionally-based relationships in general, such as: friendship, intimacy, having a supportive and communicative family or group. Children have to be loved and accepted, they have to belong to the groups where they are. But important for the children too is to find their place in this big world, and to feel that they are part of it. For a lot of youths in The Gambia, this is a sensitive topic. Europe and America are considered as "better" and the only place where there is a future. They are not even allowed to talk their own language in their own schools. Their own language is being put down by the ordinary name of "local" languages even if spoken in several countries. Black people are surely not fully accepted in the world, and 90% of the Gambians is Muslim: their religion is suffering of a lot of critics. *This concludes*, is the opinion of lot of youths, *that we are "less" here. It's better to be someone else, somewhere else.*

It is important to encounter this. No matter which gender, ethnicity, religion... they belong to: everybody is accepted in The Swallow. We are teaching the kids that they are someone special, and part of The Swallow; that everybody, every country, every culture has his part in the world, and has to be accepted as equal.

To be able to create relationships and to exchange ideas with others you need ways of communication. Language and expression are therefore seen in a more functional way: they are means of communication, not an abstract matter to be learned as such.

The Swallow created a program based on 3 components.

1. Acceptance of all students
2. Class-crossed action on team spirit
3. Functional language as part of the curriculum

### Component 1: acceptance of all students

The priority activities organised so far within this program are:

- Registration policy for new intakes
- Promotion of local languages at school
- Policy on religion & religious education

There are 25 students allowed in every class. We don't want to choose quality above quantity: we are convinced all children have the right to go to school. A lot more schools should be established in The Gambia: every village should have its own. Research worldwide has been proving that smaller schools, within the environment, are much better for the children. They are able to know all teachers and most of the children, they recognize their neighbour children, they can feel at home. We therefore like to encourage all smaller schools in their efforts!

The Swallow is build up for working class and poor people. To avoid becoming a *special* school for higher class, the infrastructure is build at Manjai, a popular environment. Manjai was, together with neighbours Dippakunda and Kololi, named by the Department of Education as the places with highest concentration of children not going to school. Registration of new children at The Swallow is focused on the direct envi-

ronment. Younger sisters and brothers are given priority access. 60% of places are reserved for girls. In The Gambia girls education needs more attention. By registering more girls than boys, The Swallow is taking part in the national campaign.

Some of our children were refused in other schools, due to special needs: mental disability, difficult behaviour, etc. We choose to register all children, whatever problem or need they might have. This requires, however, special care.

Students are mainly Muslim, some Christian and few from non-religious parents. Gambians are proud all these religions can join together in society. The Swallow likes this! We learn about each others' ceremonies, ideas, prayers... and accept all in their dignity.

There is a nice mix at The Swallow: various languages, colours, styles,... We like to encourage this and do not accept any discrimination on language, population group, hairstyle, social class, religion or whatever background.

Everybody coming in, is first of all accepted the way she/he is. Starting from the needs of the child, we start searching for the best approach:



### Component 2: class-crossed action on team spirit

To fulfil belonging needs, team spirit is essential. The feeling really to belong to a team is not coming automatically. You have to put efforts there. Not just once, or during an assembly speech, but in an active way, day after day after day. The priority activities organised within this program are:

- Class-crossed student teams
- Micado and teachers’ theatre, an alternative school assembly
- Goorgoorlu and other team games

Learning and working in groups is stimulated: classes by age are the most known. We like children to help each other in class. Next to this we developed class-crosses teamwork. In these teams children are taking care of each other, carrying out community tasks and learn how to be a good leader.

Children should get the feeling they are part of school. There is teachers’ theatre on Monday for the whole school, Micado with everybody to close at the end of the week: a school assembly where we are really gathering: singing, giving out awards, performing...

On Saturday we try to work with other youth movements so children and youths can spend free time in community life as well. During holidays we organise camps, twice a year. ‘Goorgoorlu,’ a theatre personality, is part of it. She is giving challenges to the children. They have to join together: or the whole team wins, or Goorgoorlu wins!



Micado, a fantastic way of closing school at the end of the week!

### Component 3: functional language as part of the curriculum

We focus on the importance of accepting all languages in school, due to the belonging needs of the children. Language exists in the first place because of communication. People need to communicate with each other in order to make agreements, to join together, to express their minds to their community... The language spoken with the community of a child is therefore the most important one for that particular child. Best is to receive education, in-

cluding literacy, in someone’s own mother tongue.

The priority activities organised so far within this program are:

- Children should be allowed to talk and be taught in their own language as much as possible, especially the younger once.
- Literacy & writings skills through the reading system based on key words and

phonics.

- Spoken expression: Welcoming & talking rounds, Presentation time.
- Written expression: Free text corner, exchange with other schools, writing dance.
- New languages are most interesting to learn them from native speakers, visitors... Because they don’t speak our own languages, we are motivated to try speaking other languages like English or French.



During a teachers’ meeting we are deciding about the compilation of the teams and thinking about Bubacarr. We are worried about him because of daily aggressive behaviour. Which team leader among the children can handle this? A strong one? Finally we choose for a team leader who doesn’t like fighting at all, and is always the First one to come and report to the teacher. He is explicitly asked to do so. Even he will not be able to stop the aggressive behaviour of Bubacarr, his team will not be victim either.

At the playground a white wall is transformed into ‘The Swallow News Wall’. With just some paint it becomes a special place! Every class has a place here to expose texts and drawings. During break time all children can come and watch. Writers are motivated because their texts are really read. In class some texts can be chosen, or children can be given time to write ‘free text’ for the news wall. Break time has an extra quiet activity. And passing by parents or visitors have something they can observe from the children. And it doesn’t cost much!

During interviews with teachers I am asking for strong points of the school. Teacher Suwaibatou is promoting the Red Chair for the youngest nursery class. This is the chair where you can sit when you are talking during talking round. It is in this way very clear who is supposed to talk, and who is supposed to listen. It is encouraging the children to talk as well: the chair is beautiful, so they feel very special when they sit there.



### Need for esteem and appreciation

There are 2 aspect connected with these needs. First there is the need for esteem towards yourself: self-respect. The other aspect is esteem and appreciation for others and from others. Imbalance at this level can lead to a low self-esteem, inferiority feelings or a too high self esteem, high assertive. These needs lead to be wanting to achieve independence, prestige, acknowledgment, social status.

In The Swallow we made this into an anti-bias curriculum. General objectives for all learners of the anti-bias curriculum are:

By the end of the first cycle of basic education all children should be able to:

- 1.construct a knowledgeable, confident self-identity;
- 2.have comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds;
- 3.be critical thinking about bias;
- 4.stand up for herself or himself, and for others, in the face of bias.



Listening with respect to all who want to talk during talking round

### Respect for all people at The Swallow and outside



A puppet theatre about women, men and learning how to cook!

#### Acting and thinking as equals

In The Swallow, we like everybody to be equal, whether pupil, teacher, student-teacher, ancillary staff, coordinator or parent. We are not showing that one is better or higher than another. We are eating out of one bowl if possible, joining all the work together. And nobody is above the law. Everybody with positive ideas is wel-

come to make a contribution at The Swallow.

#### Casual participation of ancillary staff

Ancillary staff used to be a bit at the side of school activities, although they as well, have an important role to play. In The Swallow, we are observing the capacities of the people and integrating them in the whole educational progress going on. In this way, they are more accepted in the whole group.

#### Gender

Special attention in The Swallow goes to gender equality. The Gambia has mainly traditional cultures, where there is no equality between men and women. The start of this attention is already at registration of new intakes, with extra places for girls. The coordinator is a woman, important as a role model for all girls and boys! A male teacher can be teaching cooking and a female the sports. Children are encouraged to choose what they are interested in, not what is

traditionally meant for them. Community jobs are to be done at The Swallow: everybody has to help! Boys and girls are joining together in watering flowers, cleaning dishes, sweeping floors,... it is a daily struggle with children and staff, as all of them are used to do different. Girls are extra stimulated to take up roles in community life. We teach them to be leaders (from their class-crossed teams), to hold meetings (with team leaders), to speak in public (during presentation time).

We like curious children in The Swallow. We like them to ask questions, to find out information, to be interested in other people, cultures, behaviours... That is why we are bringing in as much information as possible. We show the children that everybody has capacities. It doesn't matter whether you have been to school or not, whether you are young or old, whether you are a Gambian or a foreigner... Everybody willing to respect himself and others, can make the best out of his life.

### Positive motivation is helping the self-respect

Positive messages are helping towards self-respect. Negative remarks, specially in front of the whole class, can bring the self-respect down. Teachers always have to keep this in mind and try to talk to the students in as much as possible positive messages.

Next to this there are structural activities to promote positive behaviour:

-school gathering Micado at the end of the week: the best team and outstanding students can be awarded. Everybody should have his turn here, everybody should be outstanding in something. Maybe a child had the best joke of the week, or succeeded not fighting the whole week,... At the teachers' meeting there is a record of this, so we

make sure all get their turn. Those who are awarded step forward all together. Their award is explained and they get a big applause. For the shy children it's important they don't have to say or do something in front of the whole school, as this is very difficult for them. They should be happy with the award, not embarrassed.



## Need for knowledge

The cognitive needs are the expression of the human need to learn, explore and discover. We focus here on the more traditional role of the school. Whenever we can use the natural need for knowledge, children will be much more motivated for learning. We translated this in The Swallow to attention for 'involvement': it has a positive effect on learning when they are involved, so when they are personally interested in knowing, in understanding. The program on involvement of The Swallow is based on research and parameters as developed in CEGO Leuven, Belgium. The two criteria that have been identified are 'emotional well-being' and 'involvement'. The Swallow adapts those two parameters as important,

where the first one, belongs more to the safety needs. Involvement has a more direct impact on deep level learning, and is therefore the first parameter for fulfilment of cognitive needs.

The Centre for Experiential Education names 5 components to improve involvement in class.<sup>2</sup> The first one is mainly on well being, and therefore discussed earlier in this text. Left 4, which we are including in The Swallow. Teachers can, for any sequence of their lessons, focus on each of these factors and check:

1. Adaptation to the abilities of the child: Is the offer challenging enough and not too

easy or too difficult?

2. Enrichment of the content: Can the content be enriched by more documentation, more lively presented information, or concrete material?

3. Organisation that allows enough action: Does the organization allows enough action for the children?

4. Opportunity for the children to make personal choices: How much opportunity is given to the children to make personal choices?

**Involvement is a quality of human activity that can be recognized by concentration and persistence and is characterised by:**

- motivation, interest and fascination
- openness to stimuli and intensity of experience both at the sensory and cognitive level
- deep satisfaction and a strong flow of energy at the bodily and mental level

**which are determined by:**

- the exploratory drive and the individual pattern of developmental needs
- the fundamental schemes reflecting the actual developmental level

**as a result of which development occurs.** (F. Laevers, The quality of Early Childhood Education. What we can learn from practice and research in Flanders, 1998, p7.)

## Actions for involvement: corners in class

In The Swallow the tables are not always arranged in lines. Children are not all just facing the blackboard. The classes are arranged in corners time to time.

As part of fulfilment of cognitive needs, this way of working is focusing on the various components of involvements:

1. Adaptation to the abilities of the child: As far as children are working independently in the corners, they can work on a level just fit for them.

2. Enrichment of the content: The various corners are filled with books, docu-

mentation and objects. In the world corner, as example, you will find the world map and pictures and books from all over the world.

3. Organisation that allows enough action: All children are working in the various corners. Nobody has to wait for the teacher, or for slow learners. Some of the corners are more focused on cognitive action: maths, language; others are on technical handlings: fine-motorical corner, etc. 4. Opportunity for the children to make personal choices: Children

have to choose in which corner they are going to work. However there are limits. The children are not always in corners. There it a timetable with the various activities. The corner work gives an extra opportunity: while some children can be working in the corners, others can be following a lesson by the teacher, in a small group.

## Projects about topics interesting for children

Subjects as geography, social studies... can be integrated in projects. In these projects should be a lot of language, expression... At least 2 or 3 projects a year should be about a health topic. The whole school can work on the same broad topic, but choosing various levels and objectives by class. Teachers are helping each other in the preparation of these projects. If possible, we can work with some ideas that are coming from the children. If possible, we can work

towards a special result in the project, that can be presented to each other, parents, the community.

During the past we have been organising a project 'radio', where we made a real radio broadcast, a project 'weaving', we played theatre about 'money', we organised an exposition about '3D art', etc.



## Active workshops on Friday

Friday in The Gambia is a half day school, with usually a lot of absence, especially with the younger children. Not in the Swallow: the children like to come on Friday because of Workshop day! We start with a song and an introduction, the children are divided, ages mixed. Not only teachers, but other staff can lead workshops as well, so we can work with some smaller groups. Special talents or capacities are having a place here: technical worker Momodou has a black belt taekwondo, secretary Jojo knows a lot about computers and the library, ...



## Youth work on Saturday

Manjai, the environment where The Swallow is based, is one of the places with the highest concentration of children not going to school, according the department of Education in The Gambia. And even for those who are going to school, they don't receive lot of training on necessary life skills. At weekends and during holidays there is nothing to do in this environment: boys are hanging around or playing football on the street; girls are at home helping with domestic work or chatting. The Swallow therefore decided the

weekend and holidays are giving a good opportunity to organize some extra education for kids and youths.

We are working together with youth movements to organise their activities at our school: scouts, red cross, peace ambassadors... All children and youths are welcome!

## Daily choosing hour in nursery classes

A next way to organise opportunities for the children to make personal choices is "choosing hour" for the nursery classes. Every day after lunch children are only waiting for this and discussing with each other which offer they will like. It is the most popular activity of the day.

The offer is a bit opportunistic, rather than educational, chosen: the children can play with the materials available. We try to have materials children can recognize out of daily life: dresses, bicycles, drums... and are adding there the available toys. We are not buying ex-

pensive materials for choosing hour: we are lucky to get some free toys, we are creating our own toys (dolls for example) and are using old and natural materials like old dresses, sand,...

During the first years, choosing hour was the last activity of the day. After cleaning up children were going home. It did not give a good atmosphere as far as children were despised all over the playground.

It was confusing for some of them. Now there is a closing moment after choosing hour with a story, a puppet theatre or songs & rhymes. Children



Playing Music is a favorite choice !

realize that the school day is over, they can say goodbye to their friends and return home.

### Examples of workshops organized at The Swallow:

- Cooking chief:
  - ↳ Preparing mashed potatoes or bread and fish salad
  - ↳ Preparing bissap juice
  - ↳ Preparing fruit salad
- Sporting girl/boy:
  - ↳ Athletics or gymnastics
  - ↳ Basket or volley ball
  - ↳ Various taekwondo actions
- Health worker:
  - ↳ Brush teeth and cut nails
  - ↳ Clean up school premises
  - ↳ Draw posters on hygiene
  - ↳ Interview with expert on malaria
- Gardener:
  - ↳ Start compost
  - ↳ Prepare garden and seeds and other garden work
  - ↳ Draw posters on gardening
  - ↳ Harvest and eat vegetables
- Artist:
  - ↳ Paint a tree with water paint
  - ↳ Make papier-mâché objects
  - ↳ Crayon drawings free style
- Musician:
  - ↳ Dance on various style cassettes
  - ↳ Play drums or sing songs
  - ↳ Make simple music instruments
- Engineer:
  - ↳ Drilling cupboards in classes
  - ↳ Repair broken chairs
  - ↳ Scientific test with electricity
  - ↳ Building a huge house with all the blocks



### Need for beauty

Aesthetical needs for people are the needs for beautiful imagery or something aesthetically pleasing: presence and beauty of nature, balance, form, etc. The capacity of people to express themselves in this way is very important. Not only to be able to free emotions, but as well to develop cognitive development through communication, through language. There are a lot of possibilities in school for expression: drawing, painting, claying, handy crafting, drama, dance, music... There is however the danger to narrow these opportunities to only a demonstration of the teacher, instead of activities done

by the children; to only an 'art' activity where pupils are to copy the example, instead of making their own creations; to only a repeat of what has been done so many times, instead of exploring new ways of expression.

The Swallow wants the children to develop the capacity of enjoying beauty, arts & expressions and the capacity of expressing themselves through words or symbols in a wide variety of media.

The priority activities organized so far within this program are:

- Organising an appealing infrastructure
- Promoting arts & individual expression



Speelruimten kunnen eenvoudig en toch mooi zijn!

### Organising an appealing infrastructure and promoting arts & individual expression

Beautiful means "clean" in the first place. There is no need to put all types of art objects in a dirty compound: it will never look nice.

At The Swallow we like to grow trees and flowers for natural beauty. At the same time we are happy with their shadow and their fruits. We like colours, so we are painting classes, buildings, tables and even toilets in various colours. Artistic creations too can be seen everywhere: paintings at the walls, creative toys, expositions from objects, etc. Some of those are made by professionals, by staffs, other by the children...

People, children included, should be allowed to express themselves in the style they like. In The Swallow, we like to give them permission on free-style expression: you dance the way you feel it, you paint the way you feel it, you play drama the way you feel it. Freedom of expression will have more impact in the long run than guided "artistic" lessons. Those lessons are not really on arts: they teach tricks to the children in order to have an acceptable result, but they don't stimulate the expression and they don't fulfil the aesthetical needs.



### Need for self-actualisation

Self-actualization need is the need of humans to make the most of their abilities and to strive to the best they can: realizing personal potential, self-fulfilment, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. Educationalists working towards emancipation do focus on productivity as important part of self-actualization. In society in general as well, there is strong need for people taking up labour. In The Gambia in particular lot of efforts have been done i.e. in the national 'Back to the land' cam-

aign to encourage people to take up agricultural labour. We observe lot of youths not taking up any productivity at all, no paid job, no agriculture, no domestic tasks. Lot of those youths are hoping for a better future abroad, and find it therefore not useful to undertake any job 'while waiting'...

To encourage productivity and motiva-



tion for labour, The Swallow is working with 3 components:

1. Active reducing of waiting times
2. Promotion of technical skills in basic
3. General participation to community work at the school premises





## Technical skills

A society needs people with technical skills. In a lot of countries however there is only low respect for people with technical professions. The Swallow is joining those who want to promote technical skills. People should not go to school for primary and secondary education, to be refusing technical work after. All people need to learn basic technical skills, so they can develop interest and respect for those professions. All people need to learn basic technical skills, so they will not be techno-illiterate as adults. All people need to learn basic technical skills available: carpenter work, needle work, crochet work, etc. There is an 'engineer' workshop during Friday program, where children can do

electricity tests, learning to handle a drilling machine, making objects out of wood of nylon... During the projects there are various possibilities to link with technical skills: professions, instruments, clay, clothes, buildings, ... Not only during school time, but in the youth work as well technical skills are promoted. In both occasions no difference is made between boys and girls: boys can be joining the needle work, while girls are learning how to hold a drilling machine. There are some people in the staff of The Swallow with technical tasks. They are fully respected and have an equal place in the staff. They are a role model for the children in this matter. The work from this staff and from exter-

nal technical people is done as much as possible during school time. In this way children are lively confronted with a carpenter repairing chairs, with builders adding a new classroom, with painters decorating the office, etc.



### Productivity for sale

At a 5-days camp for the Mboolo club, the kids are learning various skills: clay work, printing on textiles, hair styles, pom-pom making, weaving, crochet work... Every kid is choosing a skill at the beginning of the camp, and continues in that group the rest of the week. For the last day, we organize a spectacular sale at the Senegambia hotel! Children are demonstrating their learned skills and selling the finished products to the tourists. The profit of the sale is going back to the youth club, and we organize some nice programs with it!

## Food security and sustainable development

The Gambia is historically an agricultural country. Lot of its people are surviving on farming. There is no big industry, there are few valuable natural resources, there are only small alternatives like tourism industry, not sufficient for the economy to rely on. There is too much of import on food, this is creating a negative balance in the trade. While the country is perfectly capable of producing its own food, people are eating more and more imported rice, eggs, meat onions, oil, butter, mayonnaise, tomato paste... It is however not easy for local farmers to survive: the imported items used to be cheaper as

their own products. For most of the families with very small budgets, the choice is easy to make... It is therefore important that the government, in cooperation with society, with education and others, are focusing on food security. In The Swallow we are encouraging the children:

- To be critical thinking on imported and local products
- To care for the preservation of natural resources
- But most of all: to be active in agriculture, and respect farmers & their work. We would like to see every Gambian as a farmer, and taking his part in the pro-

ductivity towards food security. Lot of people have the chance to go farming to their village during the summer, other's compound is big enough to grow at least some fruit trees and even in the middle of the city people can grow their own parsley, mint or bissap leaves in a pot on the terrace!



## When there are still special needs left...

Even all these passed programs on basic needs might not be enough for some children. They have "special needs". It can be due to a disability, a disorder, home conditions, illness, medication, different cultural background, figure, shape of body, age or developmental stage, etc. Quiet a lot of those children are not accepted in schools. In The Swallow we like to support the system of 'inclusive' education, where children with special needs are not separated in special schools, but included in 'normal'

education. Some experiments are going on in The Gambia on this type of education. We had the opportunity of visiting some of those schools. So we registered some children with special needs, preferably not more than 1 or 2 in a class. Because special needs require special care. We try to find out the problems, the causes, the behaviours, etc. The teacher is aware and incorporated in the progress. From there we try to make a plan of action for the child: what are we going to do to help? We

are lucky when we have a special needs teacher, or students on practical. In those times we can do more, of course. When there is no special needs teacher available, we are to reduce the program for that time. But still we are following those special needs, a lot can be done already by giving special attention in class.



## The Swallow

Centre for Emancipating Education

### The Gambia

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### **We need your help!**

There is no Financial support from the Gambia government for this type of educational projects. Although the government has named education as one of the highest priorities, the national budget is even to small to organise even only the government schools in a qualitative way. Parents and partners schools from The Swallow as well, don't have the capacities to keep the school going. Since 2008 we are working on private budgets. Art for Africa is our biggest sponsor.

But we still have a lot of dreams and plans! We count on you to keep The Swallow going on. Those are not only our 'own' classes and children, but as well the program towards other schools and organisations: with these activities we can reach a lot more teachers and children.

### **You can help us...**

...through your dedicated work you are doing as a student, as a teacher, as a school staff member any where in the world, working towards quality education for all!

...through your moral support and promotional talk towards others!

...through financial support!  
We appreciate any gift, big are small. With all Gifts together we manage to run the school and more!

[www.theswallow.org](http://www.theswallow.org)

## A step forward: Afrodidact

The Swallow wants to be a meeting place and a source of inspiration for the renewal of education in The Gambia: nursery and primary school, health education, youth work and research about a different pedagogical approach. All those activities are not fully developed yet. Will they ever be? The Swallow is always experimenting with new ideas. However, the results and the interested reactions of parents and external educational workers, are calling for the next step of action: the dissemination of positive experiences. The ministry of education of The Gambia gave a total score of 92.99% and wrote in their report: *(this) school should be used as a model centre for other schools to visit.* In addition to the daily educational work of The Swallow, an international and a more scientific level would be very interesting. This program would not only give more possibilities to execute the program of The Swallow, as described here, but would also give a broader dimension through exchange possibilities with



other countries and educational centres. This is what 'Afrodidact' is about: proving and promoting the 'best practice' example of The Swallow towards other schools and educational organisations.

With this program we are in line with the Dakar framework for Action (2000), in particular: 'Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of all so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all, especially in literacy, numeracy and life skills.' The specific aim for Afrodidact is: *Promoting a practical framework for basic schools in developing countries, for improvement of quality education.*

We are organising an audit trip with a group of Belgian educational experts. Objective of this research is not only theoretical studies. The practical approach aims to assist basic schools in their improvement of educational processes. The case study will be published as a script, a practice guide for schools searching for inspiration on improvement: with the details of the pedagogical approach, including the advises of the audit (in accessible English, with easy and practical information).