Alice

I first heard about School Gambia at one of their fundraising concerts that my mother was singing in. I saw that they regularly take out a group of students so I cheekily approached Tony and asked if they’d consider taking another! From there ideas started to flow, and particularly after meeting Mariama, a previous student of Yalding School Farato, I started to put together a plan for what I would like to achieve whilst out in the Gambia.

Tony and Karen very generously welcomed us into their home and school, and after some time growing accustomed to life in Farato I got started with some projects.

My main focus was planning and running a programme for the teenage girls in the school to help them address the various issues they face during puberty. Menstruation, female health and emotional issues are problems that women experience worldwide, but specific cultural, climatic and religious elements of the Gambian lifestyle can cause concerns for the girls. The women who make up the school’s Mothers Club along with some of the female teachers were incredibly supportive of the programme, and Michelle Demba provided wonderful guidance and expertise. The programme took the form of weekly after school discussion groups, where the girls were provided with a safe space to ask questions and discuss issues together. In the final session with the Grade 9 girls we gave them each a reusable sanitary pad that I had bought using money fundraised before the trip. They will use them over the next few months and report back to Karen on her next visit how useful they are. If they are beneficial, it may be that I can fundraise more to provide more girls with such sanitary materials. The Mothers Club along with Abbibatou will continue to run monthly sessions to provide the girls with much needed reassurance and information. These will also serve to improve relationships between the girls and their mothers, who their daughters often view as frightening and unapproachable.

Additionally, Karen helped me set up an ‘ILP’ or Independent Learner’s Programme which aimed to bring those children who had been deemed ‘slow’ back up to speed with the rest of their class. We put together checklists of what they should be aiming for, put together a crate full of resources and led short sessions with these children to help them with their literacy and maths. This programme has now been handed over to Aminatta who will continue this in the new term.

I spent a week sorting the library books which had been donated to the charity and produced a library system so that the fiction and non-fiction will be available to students and teachers in the new year. I spent time training Aminatta to use the system and discussing which books would be suitable for different age groups and interests. I am very hopeful that this system will be used effectively to improve the literacy and enjoyment of reading for the whole school.

During the school days, I also spent time taking reading groups, assisting in lessons and also running some arts and crafts projects. Because the school is fully staffed it left us free to be flexible and help wherever we saw fit as well as running additional projects alongside the students’ usual lessons.

Outside of school life, we spent a lot of time visiting the homes of various members of staff whom we had befriended and visiting the nearby towns. Many of the villagers were aware that we were working in the school, and this meant that everywhere we went in Farato we were treated with great respect and friendliness. The location of the school and the house meant that we were wholly integrated into the community and were able to experience local customs such that we never would have experienced if we had been staying in a hotel. We were invited to naming ceremonies, visited the local market, used local transport, watched a hotly contested football match surrounded by hardcore fans, and bought street food from the chicken man at the top of the road! I often found myself in deep conversations with the friends we made about culture, traditions opposing modern developments, religion, education, climate change and much, much more. The people we met were so open, so honest and so eager to share their world and their views with us that it was impossible not to be drawn in to their enthusiasm for their jobs and their lives. It was the perfect introduction to travel and a wonderful experience for all involved. I hope that the school continues to flourish and to provide the children of Farato with an upbringing to provide them with the skills for a wonderful future.