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BODY:

In a village in Israel, Jewish and Arab families have found a way to share a community while learning about each others' lives, cultures and viewpoints. Reva Klein finds out how ideas central to the village's school of reconciliation are transferring to British classrooms as part of projects on conflict resolution.

It's a long way from leafy West Sussex to the strife-torn Middle East. But when religious studies teacher Susan Denton-Brown made her first trip to the village of **Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam**, midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, she knew she was a long way from the realities of the region, while at the same time in the very thick of it.

Jews know the village as **Neve Shalom** and Arabs as **Wahat al Salam**. In both languages, the name means "oasis of peace". While it's debatable whether this unusual mix of some 50 families lives up to its image of tranquillity, NS/WaS is an island of sanity and dialogue in a sea of mutual suspicion and resentment. It has achieved that distinction by existing for nearly 40 years as a place where Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens continue to live together in a unique social experiment.

In a country with virtually no mixed neighbourhoods, this is a village in which children are educated together in schools where they are taught in Hebrew and Arabic by Jewish and Arab teachers. As well as learning each others' languages, children of the two communities learn about each others'

cultures and, most importantly, they learn how to listen to and understand another point of view without succumbing to the recrimination and violence that has typified the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the past 58 years.

It's a rare example that can teach other riven communities how to co-exist.

Which is why Susan Denton-Brown made the trip. She was invited in 2000 and again in 2001 to participate in workshops run by NS/WaS's School for Peace, an independently run educational institution in the village, which offers workshops for young people and training to professionals all over the world on mediation and conciliation. She wanted to experience the methodology herself and to assess whether it could be translated to the British classroom. She believes that the current escalation of violence in the Middle East will give a

higher profile to discussing war and peace and to understanding the roots of conflict.

In the School for Peace learning process, participants are trained to listen to each other, no matter how difficult it is to do so. They learn the power of empathy and about communicating their thoughts and emotions clearly and working together in a spirit of mutual respect. If the end result is not a resolution of conflict, it is at the very least a transformation of the problem into something they can live with peacefully.

Ms Denton-Brown was struck by how illuminating the process was in unexpected ways. "It helps you see how you relate to people in the ways that you do. In that sense among others, it can be a powerful force for good in ordinary, everyday situations as well as when dealing with the bigger issues. All teachers can apply this approach to any scheme of work to help their students develop personal skills, emotional literacy and strategies for dealing with life's conflicts."

The School for Peace programme also equips them with the basic but untaught tools teachers need in order to manage behaviour in the classroom: how to interact with students; defusing conflicts; taking control without being autocratic.

Ms Denton-Brown incorporated some of the School for Peace ideas into her classroom at Tanbridge House school in Horsham, West Sussex. She also used them in a variety of strife-torn settings in this country to positive effect. In 2001, after the race riots, she was invited to run workshops for teachers and other professionals at Bradford's Peace Museum. After presenting the programme, two RE teachers took up the challenge to try it in their own schools. One was an Asian teacher working in a predominately Muslim school, the other a white teacher in a white school. After some preliminary work, the two groups were brought together for a series of joint workshops.

"The students were very surprised that the other group had a sense of humour and that they were concerned about similar things. Among other things, they talked about arranged marriages and the Asian students were genuinely surprised that the white students had such strong ethics," says Ms Denton-Brown.

Based on her experiences at the NS/WaS School for Peace and in Bradford and Forest Gate, east London (site of the recent major anti-terrorism action which aroused upset and hostility among Muslims in that neighbourhood) as well as in her own school, she has developed an education resource that can be used across the curriculum. It focuses on identity, non violent protest, conflict transformation, equity and community, environmental issues and exploring spirituality. She has also developed, in conjunction with the Gandhi Foundation, a Schools for Peace pack that will be distributed to every school in the London borough of Tower Hamlets this autumn.

So, what is the point of transplanting an approach created thousands of miles away in a bedevilled part of the world to Britain? Ms Denton-Brown is unequivocal about the transferable skills and understanding that the School for Peace approach brings with it.

"Based on School for Peace methodology, children will bring conflicts from home into the workshops and then we'll role-play the scenario and explore different ways of resolving them. The student will then take their new understanding of the situation back into the family. The process is largely about putting students into the shoes of someone else and understanding that person's position, rather than looking at a situation from a single

prejudicial perspective."

Like all learning experiences, School for Peace can be painful. But if Jews and Palestinians in Israel can do it while all hell breaks loose around them, and maintain their mutual respect, there is something to be said for enduring that pain.

To find out more about **Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam** and the School for Peace and resources available in the UK, contact British Friends of NS/WaS at british.friends@nswas.com

Co-operation and understanding

This is a scenario observed by Susan Denton-Brown during her last visit to **Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam** in 2003 that typifies the way conflict is worked through in School for Peace and in the village generally. A four-year-old in the nursery built a sandcastle in the sandpit. Another came running up and destroyed it. A fight broke out. Their teacher intervened and asked "why did that happen?" The first child said: "He ran into it and broke it up so I hit him." The second child said: "I didn't see it was there. I just crashed into it." The teacher then asked them "how might it have been avoided?" The first said "I should have looked after it better." The second said "I could've looked at where I was going." Then the teacher asked "what do we do about it now?" The second child said, "I could help rebuild it."

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