

# Why Nuclear Education?

Children are more frightened by the specter of nuclear holocaust than most adults realize.

TONY WAGNER

Most of us acknowledge, at some level, the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, but we try to push it out of our minds. In our work as educators, we numb ourselves to the contradiction of preparing students for a future that may not be. Yet the evidence is growing that children do not have this kind of defense mechanism.

Recent research projects by Roberta Snow, John Mack, William Beardslee, and others<sup>1</sup> suggest that children deeply fear nuclear war. In the May 1982 issue of *McCall's Magazine*, Mack summarized the implications of his research: "We may be raising a generation without hope, without promise of a future, cynical about the adult world and helpless to change it."<sup>2</sup>

A recent conversation with a fourth-grade boy made clear to me the nature of the problem to which Mack was referring. I asked this nine-year-old if he believed anything about nuclear "issues" should be taught in school. I did not mention the word "war."

"Yeah, for sure," he replied.

"What would you want to know?" I asked.

"I want to know what the danger of nuclear war is," he said. "And I want to know what would happen if there is a nuclear war."

Why do you want to know those things?"

He turned away and mumbled, "You really don't want to hear my answer." When I assured him that I did, he stared at me and said, "So that when we all get blown up, I'll know why it happened."

## How Students Feel

More and more frequently, teachers are finding that students want help dealing with these feelings. Younger children are asking questions about what nuclear bombs really do, or expressing their deepest fears about the end of the world through fantasy play. They crave reassurance from adults. Older students are not immune to these concerns and are sometimes heard to say such things as, "What's the use of learning this when we could all be blown away tomorrow?" Their repressed anger at the adult world sometimes flares up unexpectedly. They demand to be taught the facts about the nuclear arms race and the possible consequences of nuclear war. In the following letter, sent to the office of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR), a 13-year-old girl from Evanston, Illinois, expressed her concern:

Dear ESR,

*I am an eighth grader and I'm very scared about nuclear war. When I'm older I would like to be a psychiatrist or a pet store owner. But how can you expect kids to live normal lives when we could be blown up to smithereens in a minute?*

*My teachers say we cannot study about nuclear weapons or what to do because it is not part of American history or biology, math or English. Anyway, the principal decides what kids learn. I asked the principal and he said that I should ask my parents or learn about it in church. My mom thinks we should have a course in school because it affects us so much. But my father thinks teachers should not be interested in politics and I should learn more enjoyable subjects.*

Tony Wagner is Executive Director, Educators for Social Responsibility, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

*Do you have information that could teach me and my friends about nuclear war? My teachers might listen to you. But please help us quick. Next year we'll be in high school, and it's about time we got educated.*

Sincerely,  
Karen

Students are much more aware of the threat of nuclear war than we realize. The essential question now is, how do we respond?

## What Educators Can Do

There are no easy answers, no nuclear education curricula that can simply be pulled off the shelf and taught tomorrow. We must begin trying to answer such questions as these: What nuclear issues should be taught in schools, when, and by whom? What materials and questions are appropriate for students of different ages? How do teachers deal with their own biases in presenting the issues? What kinds of support and special training do educators need to teach courses like *Decisionmaking in a Nuclear Age*,<sup>3</sup> a curriculum primarily concerned with creating an informed democracy? How can teachers be given opportunities to develop new units about the history of nuclear weapons or the biological consequences of their use, to be included in required high school classes such as American history and science? Finally, what is the role of parents and school boards in educating themselves and helping decide what approaches to nuclear education are appropriate for their local communities?

Educators for Social Responsibility, a national organization of teachers, parents, and school administrators, is orga-

nizing chapters around the country to actively explore possible answers to these questions. On October 25, 1982, ESR initiated a national Day of Dialogue to discuss students' concerns about nuclear war and to consider how educators and parents can respond. Programs were held in at least 500 schools on that day, and many more communities have organized their own local "day of dialogue" in 1983. These discussions have been aided by the *ESR Planning & Curriculum Resource Guide*.<sup>4</sup> This book, written by 60 Boston area teachers and parents, helps educators consider ways of approaching issues related to nuclear war and peace education in the classroom, and identifies useful resources for developing curricula.

The issues related to nuclear education are very complex. A great deal more work needs to be done to find the best ways to teach about them, to develop new materials, and to research the effect of new curricula on students.

Those of us who have begun to grapple with these questions have already made several discoveries. One is that if we listen carefully to students and explore their questions and concerns without trying to impose a particular point of view, students respond with a great deal of openness and depth of feeling. They no longer feel alone and powerless in a solitary world of unshared fears. They are glad for the chance to talk, and they begin to find some basis for hope in the recognition that their concerns about the future are shared by others—adults as well as peers.

In taking action as adults, some of us have discovered another truth as well: we, too, begin to wake up, feel hope, and have a sense that we can make a difference. By working actively for a more caring and cooperative world, we transcend the awful contradiction of preparing students for a future that may never exist, and we begin to feel more whole ourselves. □

<sup>1</sup>William Beardslee and John Mack, "The Impact on Children and Adolescents of Nuclear Developments," in *Psychosocial Aspects of Nuclear Developments, Task Force Report 20* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, December 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Natalie Gittelson, "The Fear That Haunts Our Children," *McCall's Magazine*, May 1982, p. 114.

<sup>3</sup>Roberta Snow, *Decisionmaking in a Nuclear Age*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1983). \$12.50 postpaid.

<sup>4</sup>*Planning & Curriculum Resource Guide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility, 1982). \$12 postpaid.

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