Canadian Adolescents' Concerns in the Nuclear Age: Implications for Counsellors and Teachers

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Résumé

On a demandé à des adolescents (de 10 a 16 ans) de remplir un questionnaire et on les a entretenu de leurs préoccupations concernant la vie à l'ère nucléaire. Les données, utilisées pour des études faites aux Etats-Unis et en Union Soviétique, suggèrent que premièrement, au Canada, les adolescents sont touchés par la menace nucléaire et que deuxièmement, préparer l'avenir, une occupation connue pour sa difficulté au stage de l'adolescence, devient alors une contrainte. De même, les résultats suggèrent des conséquences pour les experts en matière d'éducation. Ce groupe de personnes ne semble pas jouer un rôle important en tant qu'agent social ou agent de communication quant à la manière de traiter l'angoisse et le désespoir des adolescents concernant la menace nucléaire. On a offert des suggestions qui, avec un peu de chance, mettront en valeur à la fois le conseiller et l'enseignant quant à la façon de traiter l'angoisse des adolescents et le désespoir qui vont de pair avec l'époque nucléaire.

Abstract

Early and middle adolescents were asked to complete a questionnaire and to be interviewed regarding their concerns about living in the Nuclear Age. The data, which support studies in the United States and the Soviet Union, suggest both that adolescents in Canada are affected by the nuclear threat and that planning for the future, a notoriously difficult activity in adolescence, is further constrained. As well, the results suggest that there are implications for educational professionals, a group which, in terms of dealing with the fear and despair adolescents experience regarding the nuclear threat, does not appear to serve a major role as either a socializing or communicating agent. Some suggestions are offered which, hopefully, will enhance both the counsellor and the teacher in dealing with the adolescents' fear and despair that accompany living in the Nuclear Age.

> Take a second to say goodbye,
> Push the button, pull the plug, say goodbye
> (from *Seconds* by U2, 1983).

That the adolescent's perception of the future is cognitively constrained (Piaget, 1972) and that a portion of adolescent imaginative thinking is preoccupied with fantasy and fable (Elkind, 1970) are well-known, stage-expected characteristics of this stage of human development. They are characteristics which have led children and adolescents to be unsure, generally, about their future and the world of the adult (Schwebel, 1965). Recently, however, a sharper focus centring on specific concerns has appeared regarding both the adolescent's perception of the future and the adolescent's concerns about the future. For example, in British

Columbia, where "structured" unemployment is in the 25% range, there is some preliminary evidence that adolescents are concerned about and unsure of a future career (Harvey & Schaufele, 1983). In the United States and the Soviet Union, recent data (Yudkin, 1984; Blackwell & Gessner, 1983) suggest both that the "fear and trembling" attached to living in a Nuclear Age has trickled down from the adult world to the world of youth and that it now affects the thinking of both children and adolescents. It is this latter "future focus," the adolescent's concerns about living in the Nuclear Age, that is the essence of this current research.

In 1982, Schwebel asserted both that children's nervousness, tension, and anxiety are influenced by the fear of the nuclear threat and that false hope and denial are mechanisms used by children to deal with living in the Nuclear Age. Lifton (1982) has offered the rather provocative idea that, in order to symbolize our own mortality, we vicariously seek a "sense of living" in our progeny; possible nuclear destruction and the concomitant feelings about the abstruseness of behaving and conceiving "into" the future make planning for the future a rather fractured activity for children and adolescents who are already developmentally constrained. Based on a survey in Boston, Beardslee and Mack (1982) report that children are aware of and concerned about nuclear power and nuclear weapons, that nuclear war is possible, that the United States would be destroyed in a nuclear war, and, particularly interesting, that children's planning for the future was adversely affected.

Blackwell and Gessner (1983) recently surveyed middle adolescents (Mean Age = 15.1 years) in the deep south. After an introductory two-paragraph description of the increasing concerns about the Nuclear Age, they asked a series of questions about nuclear power, nuclear war, and concerns about the future. The data were quite startling! Significant numbers of middle adolescents indicated that "humankind possessed the power to destroy civilization" (p. 243), that nuclear war is a distinct possibility, that they worried about nuclear war, and that their future planning was coloured by the possibility of a nuclear war. In a *Psychology Today* article, Yudkin (1984) summarized data from the United States and the Soviet Union, concluding both that the concerns in children and adolescents are growing and that planning for the future is shaded by the fear of a nuclear war.

It was the purpose of our study both to examine in Canadian adolescents the fears and concerns associated with the Nuclear Age and, after collating the data and protocols from interviews with adolescents, to offer some suggestions to teachers and counsellors about exactly what education professionals on the front-line can do to cope with and, perhaps, to assuage the concerns.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sample

The subjects were 133 Grade 6 to 11 students (Male = 64; Female = 69) from the lower Vancouver Island, British Columbia area. The mean overall age was 14.8, and the mean ages for boys and girls, respectively, were 15.2 and 14.7. The subjects were from Canadian middle-class homes, the intelligence range was estimated as average to superior, and there were no apparent learning disabilities.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was developed based on the Blackwell and Gessner (1983) study (see Table 1). Briefly, it asked students to respond to a series of questions about:

- nuclear arms
- the threat of nuclear war
- nuclear and alternative energy
- communication of fears and concerns

Unlike the Blackwell and Gessner study, there was no preamble regarding nuclear power and nuclear war. After completing the questionnaire, selected students were interviewed regarding their specific fears, their bases of information, their concerns about and planning for the future, and their particular views on exactly what the school system could do for them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

> I was downright
> despondent,
> disturbed,
> and depressed (Dr. Seuss, 1984).

The results of the questionnaire and interviews indicated generally that Canadian adolescents share both the sense of worry, anxiety, and foreboding and the concern for their future that U.S. and Soviet children and adolescents experience. The specific items and responses are illustrated in Table 1; as well, for purposes of comparison, the Blackwell and Gessner (1983) data are included in parentheses.

Considering the total sample, 78% suggest that there is the power to destroy humankind, 89% consider that the probability of destruction is moderate to great, but, interestingly, 66% consider the probability "little" or "not at all" when making plans for the future. Supporting these latter data, Haas' study (cited in Yudkin, 1984) reported that adolescents in Connecticut and Massachusetts from a working class background are more concerned about unemployment and the economy,

Table 1
General Profile of Items: Percentages

Question	*1984*	*(1983)*
1. Do you agree that humankind possesses the power to destroy civilization as we know it?		
a. Yes	78	(72)
b. Don't know	9	(11)
c. No	12	(16)
2. What is the probability of this happening in your lifetime?		
a. Great	12	(33)
b. Moderate	67	(48)
c. Little	19	(17)
3. Does a consideration of this enter into your plans for the future?		
a. A great deal	12	(19)
b. Moderately	21	(23)
c. Little	36	(33)
d. Not at all	30	(22)
4. Do you fear this *threat* of nuclear war?		
a. Greatly	24	(40)
b. Moderately	57	(42)
c. Not at all	16	(16)
5. Do you regret living in a generation which holds the possibility of a nuclear holocaust?		
a. Yes	21	(30)
b. Sometimes	58	(47)
c. Never	20	(21)
6. If there were a war between the U.S. and Russia, do you believe that nuclear weapons would *necessarily* be used?		
a. Yes	53	(57)
b. Undecided	28	(27)
c. No	18	(14)
7. Is it likely that another world war will end in widespread nuclear destruction?		
a. Yes	60	(59)
b. Undecided	30	(31)
c. No	9	(8)
8. Are your parents concerned about nuclear war?		
a. Yes	42	(30)
b. Don't know	45	(50)
c. No	10	(18)

Question	*1984*	*(1983)*
9. Do you feel your parents' concerns are as intense (deeply felt) as yours?		
a. I don't have intense concern	15	(24)
b. Yes	19	(29)
c. They are more concerned	11	(22)
d. No	11	(21)
e. Don't know	42	(1)
10. What are your feelings about nuclear energy?		
a. I'm in favour	9	(21)
b. Undecided	12	(19)
c. Don't know enough	43	(38)
d. I'm opposed	33	(20)
11. Do you feel that nuclear energy should be developed to meet our country's future energy needs?		
a. Yes	28	(42)
b. Not sure	46	(41)
c. No	24	(15)
12. Do you feel that more effort should go into forms of energy other than nuclear?		
a. Yes	82	(67)
b. Not sure	15	(25)
c. No	2	(7)
13. If you have any fears about the use of either controlled or uncontrolled nuclear energy, would more information on the subject help reduce those fears?		
a. I don't have these fears	12	(14)
b. Not sure	40	(40)
c. No	14	(13)
d. Yes	27	(32)
14. If you have such fears who could you express them to?		
a. Parents/guardian	53	(44)
b. Teacher(s)	1	(16)
c. Friends my age	38	(39)
d. Other adults	3	(17)
e. Romantic friends	6	(.9)
f. Siblings	8	(.7)
g. Other	2	(.7)

whereas adolescents from middle- and upper-class families are more concerned about nuclear threats.

In a sense contradicting the data from Question 4, where 81% feared the threat of a nuclear war, are the responses to Question 5, where 79% suggested regretting living in a generation when the war was possible.

That nuclear weapons could be used in a war was suggested by 53% of the subjects, while 60% felt that widespread destruction would follow another war. Interestingly, there was almost a split response regarding the subjects' knowledge of their parents' concerns (42% said "yes" and 45% "did not know") about nuclear war. Of more surprise was the overall response given Question 9; 42% of Canadian adolescents did not know about the depth of feelings their parents felt, whereas but 1% of the American subjects did not know! Fully 33% responded in opposition to nuclear energy, and 43% did not know enough about it; 46% were "not sure" and 24% stated "no" when asked about developing nuclear energy for our future needs. A substantial percentage of subjects, 82%, suggested that Canada should pursue forms of energy other than nuclear energy. Although 12% asserted that they had "no fears" about nuclear energy, 40% were "not sure" and 27% wanted more information. The majority of subjects could express their fears to their parents (53%) and friends (38%), while fewer than 1% would approach their teachers. These final data support the work of Harvey and Schaufele (1983) on concerns and help-seeking in adolescents; in Canada, adolescents turn to parents and peers about their concerns first, approaching teachers and counsellors a distant last! The data from American students are similar regarding parents and peers but very different when it comes to approaching teachers, as over 16% of American students went to their teacher or counsellor with their concerns and fears.

A series of x^2 revealed some interesting results. Although there were no differences between the two age levels (below and above 14) and the various grade levels, there were some gender differences. Nine percent of females versus 0% of males responded "no" to whether or not we have the power to destroy civilization, and the probability of destruction occurring was ranked higher by females (49% overall) than by males (31%). As well, more females (47%) than males (31%) regretted living in the Nuclear Age, and more females (38%) than males (22%) considered that destruction would follow a war. In the questions about nuclear power, there were also striking differences with females generally showing more concern and fear than the males, and wanting more information than did the males. Parents and friends, however, remained the key communication agents for both males and females, with fewer than 1% approaching teachers and counsellors.

The gender differences are supported by the Blackwell and Gessner (1983) data, indicating that different segments of the adolescent population are differentially affected by living in the Nuclear Age. Blackwell and Gessner (1983) suggest that this is to be expected as females are traditionally excluded from major decision-making in our culture. This suggestion may or may not be true, but the fact is that there are differences which need further explanation and which, perhaps require differential intervention strategies by the various socializing agents.

Individual interviews further substantiated the questionnaire data. The only difference appeared to be the adolescents' preoccupation with the issue of planning for the future. After initially elaborating the fears expressed in the questionnaire, the adolescents dwelt on their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness about the future. Exactly how to plan for the future and, more importantly, exactly why to plan for the future were not imminently clear to many of those interviewed.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the data on Canadian adolescents are consistent with the American and Soviet data, affirming the notions that children and adolescents are generally aware of the essential views in the Nuclear Age, that adolescents experience anxiety and fear about the possibility of a nuclear holocaust, that adolescents feel they know little and want to know more about the implications of living in the Nuclear Age, and that planning for the future is further constrained by the sense of helplessness evoked by the idea of a nuclear war. To be expected in adolescence are experiences of turmoil, feelings of stress, struggles for autonomy, and ambiguities regarding future planning. But the artifacts of living in a Nuclear Age apparently add to the burden, and, in a sense, they create an edge of tension in an already tumultuous developmental period. The parents and peers remain key socializing agents and, in a way unfortunate, teachers and counsellors play a minor role. Exactly what, then, can professional educators do to enhance their roles as socializing agents, to effect better information transmission, and to serve as anchor points for these concerns?

Of paramount importance is deciding whether or not to deal with the issue at all. In a recent article in the Canadian Association of University Teachers, Ringler (1984) asserts that we in Canada are just now waking up to our responsibilities; to carry the metaphor further, Ringler suggests our prior sleep was "deep and undisturbed." The recent response has been swift and widespread; national symposia have been held, curriculum packages have been prepared, and courses of an interdisciplinary nature have been offered. It appears to be time for educational professionals to consider systematically introducing the topic into the educational system. In order to summarize various strategies (however at risk of providing a "Joy of Cooking" approach to the issues), following are some points to consider regarding implementation of a program:

1 Given that there is no global agreement about implementation of a program in either a counselling or classroom situation and that there is virtually no consensus about content and technology, the first thing is to avoid "lopsided propaganda" and "political indoctrination" and to provide a balanced viewpoint. Even if you have a bias, the complexity

of the issues and the pluralistic nature of our culture demand an evaluative approach.

2 Given both that the children and adolescents do know something about the issues and that fear and despair are the general responses, the counselling or educational approach must increase the students' understandings of the issues and implications surrounding nuclear war and nuclear power.

3 The teacher or counsellor must admit his or her concerns and, perhaps, fears about nuclear war in order to facilitate the students to relate their fears and concerns. Mutual self-disclosure may, in fact, be a fine starting point for discussion—the "learn from them—learn from you" philosophy may be a first step procedure.

4 Thinking the unthinkable and discussing it in an educational setting may evoke conflict and pain, so an extended period of time must be set up for conflict resolution. This alone may make it requisite that educational professionals seek and obtain the permission of administrators and parents to broach such controversial issues.

5 The potential formats for content presentation are, today, exhaustive. They include excellent documentary and fictional films, curriculum packages, papers, and books. Divoky (1983) provides a neat outline of curriculum resources, and Professor Dick Ringler at the University of Wisconsin—Madison has implemented and evaluated a course at the university level; he will respond to inquiries.

6 Given that the fear and despair are surrounded by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, the children and adolescents must be given a sense of personal control and hope. That there is an opportunity for a full life and a rich future must be articulated clearly, and the sense of personal control of outcome must be nurtured. As Lifton (1982) suggests, we must both go "beyond nuclear numbing" and seriously teach students about living in the Nuclear Age. This can be done by:

a developing specialized courses or, more reasonable perhaps, interweaving the topic in other content areas, thus creating a "multidisciplinary" approach;

b having guest lectures with a "multiple-speaker format" in order to maximize balance in the various political, economic, and religious perspectives;

c providing readings and films (e.g., the BBC production "Threads") concerning the topic;

d asking the students to prepare a traditional expository paper on the various aspects of the topic; and

e having students work on group projects as an assignment in any related content area.

The key, of course, is to design the teaching both to fit the capacity and to evoke the interest of the student. A side-effect of the teaching, employing any methodology, may just be that the teacher or counsellor becomes viewed as an agent to whom the adolescent can turn.

In summary, the facts are that Canadian adolescents exhibit a fear and concern about the Nuclear Age and that, as educators in a human institution dealing with human beings, there is an essential responsibility to educate and to counsel our students regarding the "altered circumstances" surrounding the Nuclear Age. Of particular poignancy are the final words of Dr. Seuss in *The Butter Battle Book* (1984):

> Who is going to drop it?
> Will *you*...? Or will *he*?

It is this potential and this ambiguity which must be addressed.

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