

## **Nuclear disarmament education is needed now more than ever**

[Ellis Brooks](#) and [Hans Svennevig](#)

When is a good time to teach nuclear disarmament in the classroom? You might be surprised to see it phrased like that, rather than something more anodyne like ‘explore the topic of nuclear weapons’. But disarmament is not a controversial topic. It is an agreed international goal. [The Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1968](#) committed nuclear armed states, including the UK, to disarmament in good faith. The more exigent [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) came into force in 2021. There is political disagreement about the pace: should UK disarmament align with the 92 signatory states of the nuclear ban, stay in the disarmament slow lane, or the forever lane? But disagreement and debate are at home in the classroom. Given the humanitarian consequences of nuclear war, it is not surprising that [68% of people in Britain believe the use of nuclear weapons in any circumstances is unacceptable](#), and [79% think the UK should at least commit to a no-first strike policy](#). We have to be obstinate to leave disarmament out of the conversation. Just as climate change means talking about the human impact of climate breakdown and the steps the world is taking towards global justice, we need to talk about nuclear disarmament education.

### **We’re on the clock**

As to when is a good time to start teaching? Well, the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists assesses that the world is now 90 seconds to Midnight on their famous [Doomsday clock](#). Closer than ever before, this estimate has been given in 2023.

In recent years, ever more teachers may have found themselves scrambling for content on nuclear weapons, after this president, that prime minister or perhaps a supreme leader rattled their nuclear sabre. “Is World War III coming?” is a terrible question to be asked by young people, much more so from a standing start.

Physics students will graze the topic of nuclear weapons at GCSE. Some students may take a deeper dive via an A-Level History study of the Cold War, or a thematic Religious Education look at war and conflict; but this is haphazard. Some schools will even devote dedicated time to peace education from providers such as [CND Peace Education](#), which takes a scrupulously critical thinking approach. For most young people, though, we may be leaving a lot of nuclear weapons debate to popular culture via film and TV, even social media.

A new survey from the [Nuclear Education Trust](#) has shed light on the state of nuclear disarmament education (NDE). Both teachers and the public at large are in favour of more information, debate and education. 93% of these teachers disagree or strongly disagree that NDE is too political to be taught in schools. An event in parliament to launch the report saw consensus between the politicians and educators in attendance that NDE should be in more classrooms.

### **What do we teach?**

There are powerful stories to tell. The work of atomic scientists like Albert Einstein, Lise Meitner or Joseph Rotblat, who resisted nuclear weapons. Hibakusha, like Setsuko Thurlow, who survived the flames and lingering radiation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some becoming passionate campaigners for a nuclear ban. The women of Greenham Common. These are just a few examples.

As with many topics, students will need a mixture of intellectual rigour, emotional engagement and ethical reflection. We can unpack both the physical, biological and humanitarian results if nuclear bombs were used. Teachers can also draw on a wealth of resources, including from [The Peace](#)

[Education Network](#) and organisations like [Scientists for Global Responsibility](#), [Pax Christi](#) and the aforementioned CND Peace Education. Such material can be taught through subjects like [Citizenship Education](#) and specialist teachers to bring a range of viewpoints to a sensitive issue – or better still it can be developed thematically throughout the school curriculum. [The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals](#) give this more weight, as peace education is included. Much of this is further explored in work from the [Quakers](#) and their [Peace at the Heart report](#) or the [Association for Citizenship Teaching](#) recent Teaching Citizenship journal on [Conflict and Peace: Theory and Practice](#). Alongside, bodies like [UCL's Peace Education Special Interest Group](#) can amplify this work and study best-practice.

### **Why education?**

Nuclear disarmament is the responsibility of us all, which means we all need to be educated – not just scientists or a few politicians. Just as a democratic movement has had to press continually for climate justice to be integrated into education, we need an active and informed population to engage. Of course, the curriculum is tight and saturated and teachers have ever more duties, and nuclear disarmament may seem far away from the roles of young people today, but very soon they will be the decision makers in a challenging world. Either we resolve the problem before handing it over, or we handover the solutions so they can do it for us.