

# **Consulting the UK ESD community on an ESD indicator to recommend to Government: an insight into the micro-politics of ESD**

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In 2006 the author was contracted to research possible approaches to a UK indicator of education for sustainable development (ESD). This article describes and seeks to explain the response of government advisers and influential members of the UK ESD community to the approaches he proposed. While the UK strategy for sustainable development called for a result indicator to show the impact of ESD on learners' knowledge and awareness of sustainable development, the indicator that was recommended to government by its advisers, after consulting the ESD community, was essentially a facilitative indicator showing the percentage of schools that rated themselves good or outstanding using a self-evaluation instrument linked to the emerging sustainable schools framework. An opportunity to monitor the impact of ESD on learners' sustainability literacy and encourage more socially critical approaches was lost as the micro-politics of ESD (the preferences of advisers and those consulted) failed to challenge the macro-politics examined in my previous article.

**Key words:** sustainable development, indicators, policy, critical education, sustainability literacy, political literacy, citizenship

## **Introduction**

In an earlier article (Huckle, 2008) in this journal, I linked the prospects of sustainable development to democratic socialism and those forms of knowledge and learning developed by the global anti-capitalist movement. While socially critical approaches to education for sustainable development (ESD) can accommodate such learning, I argued that they have continued to be marginalised in the UK over the past decade, largely due to New Labour's policies on sustainable development and education. Contradictions between neo-liberalism and social democracy in these policies explain why ESD has made limited progress and account for the limitations of the initiatives that the Government has taken.

While the focus of that article was on the macro-politics of ESD, this article explores the micro-politics by examining the response of government advisers and members of the UK ESD community to the author's report on possible approaches to an ESD indicator (Huckle, 2006a). Commissioned by the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), the government's independent advisory body on sustainable development, it presented six possible approaches to monitoring whether learners are acquiring the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society. ESD 'experts' consulted by the Commission seemed ambivalent at best, and negative at worst, about approaches that can best accommodate socially critical content and pedagogy. More generally, they appeared reluctant to apply ESD theory to evaluation; hostile towards attempts to prescribe core knowledge, skills and values; and suspicious of anything that could be perceived as testing attainment or monitoring attitude and behaviour change.

This article seeks to explain these responses after first exploring the background to my indicator proposals, the content of those proposals, and the nature and results of the consultation.

## **The UK Strategy for Sustainable Development and related indicators**

The UK Government launched its new strategy for sustainable development, *Securing the Future*, in March 2005 (Defra, 2005a). It sets out the goal of sustainable development as *enabling all people throughout the world to satisfy their basic needs and enjoy a better quality of life, without compromising the quality of life of future generations*. The strategy identifies indicators through which to review progress and, along with other evidence, determine whether the Government is succeeding in this goal. In all, 68 indicators are outlined in Chapter 7 of the strategy together with related Public Service Agreements and relevant policy statements. These include 20 UK framework indicators, outlined in *One future – different paths: The UK's shared framework for sustainable development* (Defra, 2005b). This framework is shared by the UK Government and the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Government provides information on indicators and reports annually on progress via its sustainable development website.

Within the UK framework and strategy there are several indicators where 'it is not yet possible for us to be precise about how they will be measured. For some of these there is already work underway which should enable us to define the indicator, and start reporting progress within a short period. . . . In particular, the Departments for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and for Education and Skills (DfES) are actively seeking to develop an indicator to show the impact of formal learning on knowledge and awareness of sustainable development. Further work is needed on this, but the Government hopes that a suitable indicator will be agreed later in 2005' (*Securing the Future*, page 22). This indicator of sustainable development education is number 48 in the table (pages 168 – 175).

At the same time as the UK was seeking an ESD indicator the forthcoming UN Decade of ESD and the UNECE ESD strategy were prompting interest in indicators around the world. Tilbury and Janousek (2006) summarize a number of regional and national developments, including those in the UK; offer a classification of indicators; examine issues arising; and make recommendations to those faced with the task of proposing or designing indicators. These include the need to 'recognise the potential of innovative indicators which can assist to assess quality of learning and degree of social change' (p. 26).

## **Education for Sustainable Development**

*Securing the Future* states that 'government must promote a clear understanding of and commitment to sustainable development so that all people can contribute to the overall goal through their individual decisions' (page 16). Chapter 2 (*Helping people make better choices*) states that behaviour changes will be needed to deliver sustainable development but recognises that attitude and behaviour change is a complex subject ('Information alone does not lead to behaviour change or close the so-called attitude-behaviour gap.' (page 25)). It goes on to propose a new active approach to changing habits based on research, an approach that is light on regulation and focuses on the need to enable, encourage and engage people and communities in the move toward sustainability, while recognising that Government should lead by example.

Education is seen as an enabler of attitude and behaviour change and to have a similar role in relation to sustainable development to that it has in promoting healthy lifestyles or civic renewal. The title for section 5 of Chapter 2 sums up the role of education as 'forming habits early'. Here we learn that the DfES' Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2004) seeks to make every school an environmentally sustainable school that teaches about sustainable development through the curriculum and by example. The section also

mentions the Department's Sustainable Development Action Plan; the development of a Sustainable Development Framework for Schools; rewards for pupils and schools who take part in community projects; a school rebuilding programme (Building Schools for the Future); ESD strategies for the further and higher education sectors; and a Global Gateway to increase awareness and use of resources on the global dimension.

The DfES published its original Sustainable Development Action Plan (SDAP) in 2003 (DfES, 2003). In his foreword, the then Secretary of State set out his vision which includes *making sure that children, young people and adult learners are aware that what they do in their day to day lives has huge implications for everyone in this country and in the world at large . . . ensuring that people engaged in learning are given the inspiration to think about and really appreciate their role as world citizens* (SDAP, pp. 2–3)

The action plan is organised around four key objectives that seek to develop learning; the educational estate; local and global partnerships, and the Department itself as vehicles for sustainable development. The first objective relates to ESD and states that 'all learners will develop the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society' (SDAP, p. 7).

A later version of the plan (DfES, 2005) does not repeat the specific wording of this objective and while it makes several references to citizenship, it seeks to raise awareness and commitment in the context of achieving the long-term aims of *Securing the Future*. ESD is to be a vehicle of policy, rather than one of critical learning, and to this end the plan now proposes a national framework for sustainable schools that brings together the environmental management and ESD agendas, sets overall goals, but emphasises the importance of partnerships and new thinking at the local level. In 2005 an advisor (Jake Reynolds) was seconded from the SDC to the DfES with the responsibility to progress the plan and make recommendations regarding an ESD indicator.

### **The initial consultation.**

In February 2004, a meeting of the Council for Environmental Education's (CEE's) policy forum identified potential indicators of formal ESD learning. These included the proportion of pupils involved in developing their class's indicators of sustainable development, and the proportion of schools meeting an ESD standard linked to a national framework and a possible self-assessment tool. In late 2005 Jake Reynolds circulated a number of key people and organisations in the ESD community with a proposal to base an ESD indicator on existing and proposed new items in the questionnaire, used with year 9 pupils (14–15 year olds), by a longitudinal study into citizenship education then being carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER, 2007). The proposed additional items relate to aspects of pupils' attitudes, behaviours, influences, and experiences at school considered relevant to sustainable development. Responses to the proposal were largely negative and from these I summarized the key objections:

- Questionnaires that require learners to report their attitudes, behaviours and influences are fraught with problems. Respondents are easily led, will too readily agree unless questions are much better prepared, and their reported behaviours may be due to factors other than learning. Responses to such questions do not prove formal education is the cause of these responses and the links between knowledge, attitudes and behaviour are far more complex than the questions assume.
- There is no consensus on sustainable development and it is not the role of education to teach learners (assume) what it is. It is not a body of knowledge that can be taught by experts to passive learners who then apply it to living differently. Rather it is a process of social learning in which teachers and learners should actively participate.

- The indicator should measure education for rather than education about sustainable development. It should not seek ‘right’ answers but evidence of the learner’s ability to apply relevant knowledge, skills and values in making judgements and taking informed action.
- Sustainable development is more about citizenship than individual behaviour. The indicator should focus on participation and community rather than behaviour and the individual.
- Any indicator needs to reflect a high level of sustainability literacy. Some of the proposed questions may not encourage this, for example those that promote recycling rather than an overall reduction in production and consumption.

Such responses persuaded Jake Reynolds that more work on possible approaches to an ESD indicator needed to be done and in November 2005 I was contracted to research additional approaches.

### **Political and sustainability literacy**

An early decision was made to refocus the indicator from the wording in *Securing the Future* (‘knowledge and awareness of sustainable development’) to that in the first objective of the original SDAP (‘the skills, knowledge and values base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society’). The focus on active citizenship in the latter was in my view enabling as it provided a bridge to theory and practice in political and citizenship education. Just as the Programme for Political Education (PPE, Crick & Porter, 1978) identifies the propositional and practical knowledge; intellectual, communication, and action skills; and attitudes and procedural values, required by politically literate citizens in a liberal democracy, so it should be possible to reach broad agreement on and monitor the knowledge, skills and values required by sustainability literate citizens in a liberal democracy seeking sustainable development.

Reference to the PPE’s framework for political literacy, which I applied in developing the *What We Consume* curriculum for WWF (Huckle, 1988), suggests that an ESD curriculum or indicator might be prescriptive in the sense of specifying what it is reasonable to expect a sustainability literate citizen to know, value and to be able to do. Definitions of political literacy and sustainability literacy do however suggest that these should not be prescriptive in the sense of requiring learners to adopt pre- determined or settled positions on political or sustainability issues.

*The politically literate person is one who will know what the main political disputes are about, what beliefs the main contestants have of them, how they are likely to affect him, and he will have a predisposition to try to do something about it in a manner at once effective and respectful of the sincerity of others and what they believe.*

(Crick & Lister, 1975, p. 49)

*A sustainability literate person is able to: understand the need to change to a more sustainable way of doing things; have sufficient knowledge and skills to decide and act in a way that favours sustainable development; and recognise and reward other people’s decisions and actions that favour sustainable development.*

(Parkin et al, 2004, p. 30)

It is then reasonable to expect a school or college leavers to have propositional and procedural knowledge of environmental and development issues and the politics of sustainable development; the intellectual, communication, political and action skills they need to ‘make a difference’; and the ability to consider and

apply a range of procedural and substantive ethical principles, such as those outlined in the Earth Charter (Corcoran, Vilela & Roerink, 2005). Taking the example of climate change, they should understand the basic science of atmospheric warming; something of the scientific debates over the causes, evidence and trends associated with such warming; proposed technological, economic and political solutions; and the costs and benefits of a low or zero carbon economy. Such knowledge should include consideration of prevailing and alternative models of political economy and democracy and their potential to enable global society to limit warming in ways that are more or less effective and equitable.

As regards skills and values, it is also reasonable that school leavers should gain intellectual, communication and action skills to enable them to participate effectively in climate politics. They should also clarify their values in relation to such related issues as respect for evidence, fairness towards present and future generations and other species, toleration of a diversity of ideas, values and interests, and the virtues of lifestyles with a low carbon footprint.

### **Answering points made in the initial consultation**

The focus of political and sustainability literacy is the development of the learner's autonomy or ability to make and justify their own rational judgements in the fields of ethics, politics and sustainable development. An approach to indicators, drawing on these concepts, would therefore answer the points made by respondents to the initial consultation (see page 00) in these ways:

- Rather than ask learners to self report knowledge, attitudes and behaviour via a questionnaire, items should be designed to test their ability to apply relevant knowledge, skills and values in reaching their own decisions on sustainability issues. Such items might also explore why individuals do not always act in accordance with such considered decisions.
- While ESD should not teach or prescribe a single view of sustainable development, there is a body of knowledge surrounding sustainable development that it is reasonable to expect learners to acquire. Social learning (or action research) may be an appropriate vehicle for such learning.
- Measuring education for rather than education about sustainable development suggests a political/sustainability literacy approach that would indicate the learner's ability to apply relevant knowledge, skills and values when making judgements and taking informed action.
- Test items might allow learners to report their participation in a community project for sustainable development in such a way as to reveal the knowledge, skills and values acquired.
- A learner's ability to explain the limitations of recycling and justify policies that seek to reduce overall production and consumption is an indicator of his/her sustainability literacy.

A further advantage of the sustainability literacy approach is that it can accommodate the socially critical approaches to ESD outlined in my earlier article. Sustainability literate school leavers might reasonably be expected to be able to distinguish between neo-liberal, social democratic, participatory socialist and other approaches to sustainable development; to have formed their own provisional beliefs concerning the meaning and realization of such development; and to have begun to act as autonomous citizens and consumers in ways that reflect considered responses to calls for environmental, ecological and global/cosmopolitan citizenship (Beck, 2005, Dobson, 2003, Huckle, 2008b, Park et al, 2008). Socially critical approaches enable these outcomes by allowing pupils to reflect and act on critical ideas, alongside other ideas, and by providing experiential and democratic activities to enable them to do this.

## **Six possible approaches to an ESD indicator**

In carrying out the time limited contract to suggest additional approaches to an ESD indicator I resorted to rationales found in the theory and practice of ESD. In addition to the citizenship survey approach that Jake Reynolds had initially suggested, and the sustainability literacy approach that responses to that suggestion had prompted me to consider, I also proposed sustainable schools, action research, frame of mind, and dilemma approaches (see Table One). My report to the SDC justifies these approaches, lists the advantages and disadvantages of each as I saw them, and includes sample tests or survey instruments in six appendices. Time did not allow me to suggest marking schemes for these tests. A significant omission since their setting and marking highlights issues of interpretation involved in evaluating such outcomes as sustainability literacy or the acquisition of sustainability as a frame of mind.

In 2005/6 Jake Reynolds was working with Ben Hren, who was seconded from WWF, on the national framework (Teachernet, 2008a) and self assessment tool (teachernet, 2008b) for sustainable schools. (DfES, 2006, Scott, 2007). He encouraged me to propose at least one approach based on the emerging framework: an approach that assesses how well pupils can associate activities carried out in school with the routes to learning and topics for learning outlined in the framework, and whether they can recognise, from lists provided, the values, skills and knowledge that a number of imaginary pupils would need to address sustainability issues that concern them.

Action research or community based (social) learning is well established in ESD (Robottom & Hart, 1993, Wals, 2007) and reference to Habermas' theory of knowledge constitutive interests (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) suggests that such research may focus on effective practice (technical interest); improved understanding (practical interest); and/or the critique of current social arrangements and consideration of alternatives (the critical or emancipator interest). In justifying an approach based on action research, I suggested that it might allow pupils to develop their own indicators in the way the CEE forum had suggested; might provide a means of assessing learning as sustainable schools worked with local and distant communities; and might appeal to those (for example Scott, 2005) who sought indicators based on open-ended rather than prescriptive learning. To support this approach I outlined a framework for guiding and assessing students' accounts of an action research project that would accommodate technical, practical, and socially critical approaches.

Michael Bonnett (2004) argues that education should develop sustainability not as an aspect of policy but as a frame of mind. Learners are more likely to become active citizens capable of creating a sustainable society if they have developed a love of themselves and the rest of the human and non-human nature that sustains them, than if they are taught the knowledge, skills and values prescribed by policy makers. As a frame of mind sustainability is essentially about coming to terms with realist nature: the structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly at work in the bio-physical world (Soper, 1995). It is fostered by an ESD curriculum that draws on the arts and humanities, alongside the natural sciences, and I based a sample instrument to measure whether school leavers have developed such a frame of mind, on its eight components.

**Table One** Six possible approaches to an ESD indicator

Approach	Indicator	Rationale
<b>Citizenship survey (CS)</b>	The percentage of pupils who report knowledge, attitudes and activities relevant to active citizenship for a sustainable society in a questionnaire used by the NFER study into citizenship education.	Makes use of existing and possible additional items in questionnaires that form part of an ongoing NFER study (NFER, 2007). This focuses on the impact of the introduction of citizenship education into secondary schools.
<b>Sustainability literacy (SL)</b>	The percentage of learners who attain the required level of sustainability literacy.	Written tests at the end of primary, secondary and further/higher education draw on the Forum for the Future's concept of sustainability literacy (FftF, 2004) and the objectives (knowledge, skills and values) suggested for each stage of education by the Panel for ESD (Sterling, 1998).
<b>Sustainable schools (SSchs)</b>	Percentage of pupils that are able to relate activities carried out in school to key themes of sustainable development and can recognise the values, skills and knowledge that are relevant to taking considered action on issues relating to such development.	An objective test for Yr9 pupils based on the DfES framework and self-assessment tool for sustainable schools (teachernet, 2007).
<b>Action research (AR)</b>	The percentage of learners who have successfully taken part in action learning designed to explore ways of creating a more sustainable society.	An action research project focussing on an issue in the school (college/university) and/or community (near and/or far) allows learners to develop and refine their own definitions and indicators of sustainable development and determine what knowledge, skills and values are appropriate to realising such development.
<b>Frame of mind (FoM)</b>	The percentage of learners who have development sustainability as a frame of mind.	The writing of Michael Bonnett (Bonnett, 2004) and others suggests ESD should focus on eight objectives. These have been used to design a test to measure whether Yr11 pupils have developed sustainability as a frame of mind. Test for other ages / stages could be developed.

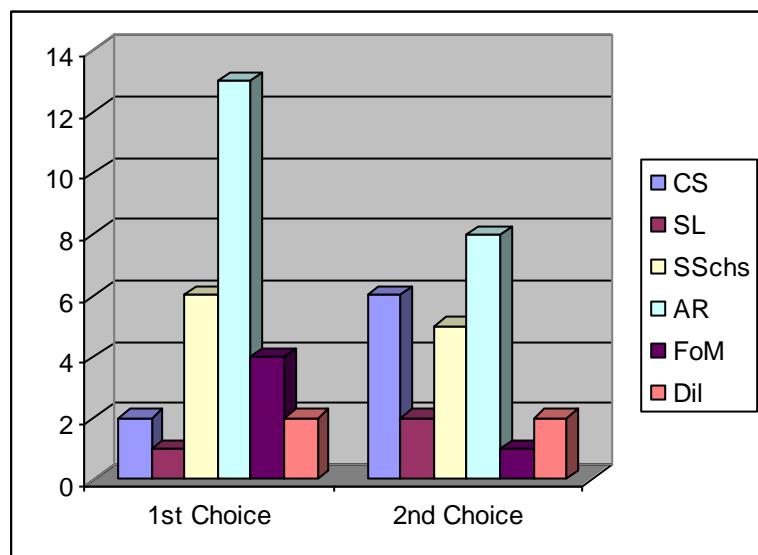
<b>Dilemma (Dil)</b>	The percentage of learners having the skill to match imaginary characters' decisions to the knowledge and values that is likely to have prompted such decisions.	Dilemmas might focus on decisions taken by young people as consumers, citizens / voters, or workers. A dilemma for Yr11 pupils based on a consumer decision has been developed.
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Dilemmas have long been used by moral or values education and ESD to examine the moral reasoning of students (Pozarnik, 1995, Veugelers, 2000).. Somebody who is sustainability literate should have the skill to match the decision taken by a consumer, citizen or worker, faced with a dilemma, to the knowledge and values that are likely to have prompted that decision. A sample test for school leavers focussed on three imaginary teenagers buying different cotton T shirts. From prepared lists, students had to indicate the knowledge and values that were likely to have shaped each purchase.

### Consulting the ESD community

Having received my report the SDC decided to consult only members of the ESD community rather than consulting more widely (pupils, parents, teacher unions, business, etc). Two consultative workshops facilitated by Ann Finlayson, then the SDC's education commissioner, were held in February 2006. My report (Huckle, 2006b) lists those who attended and their expectations. It outlines their preferences from amongst the six suggested approaches as revealed by a card ranking exercise; records the results of small group discussions on each of the approaches; and reports the results when participants were asked to score their two preferred approaches on eight criteria (validity, reliability, simplicity, objectivity, cost, equal opportunities, good practice, and fit with government policy). Additionally it records participants' views regarding the qualities of a desirable indicator and their suggestions regarding other approaches.

Of 31 participants who attended the workshops (9 from the NGO sector; 11 local and national government, 6 university, and 5 schools and colleges) 28 expressed first and 22 second choice preferences (see Figure one). These reveal strong support for the action research approach and much support for the sustainable schools approach. While these approaches were scored highly on the eight criteria by their supporters (mean scores of 17/24 for action research and 19/24 for sustainable schools), other approaches were scored highly by their supporters (for example mean scores of 18/24 for frame of mind and 16/24 for citizenship survey).



**Figure One** First and second choice preferences expressed by participants

It is clear from these results, and from the discussions at the workshops, that the majority of the participants thought that knowledge, skills and values could not and should not be prescribed, taught and assessed, due to the problematic and discursive nature of sustainable development; issues of validity and reliability that surround testing; and the unwelcome impact of such testing on ESD. They expressed a strong preference for approaches (action research and sustainable schools) that emphasise process over content or learning over teaching, and allow relevant knowledge, skills and values to be acquired whilst learning about sustainable development in specific contexts.

Participants also sought to shift the focus of the indicator from learners to educational institutions. With some influence from Jake Reynolds and Leszek Iwaskow (the inspector with responsibility for ESD at the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)), there was much interest in and support for the then emerging sustainable schools framework. The proposal that the SDC subsequently made to Government (SDC, 2006) suggests that while an indicator of 'individual capability to contribute to a sustainable society' could be developed, its precise form would be difficult to determine without a research exercise similar in scale to that taking place for the well-being indicator. It then shifts the focus to educational institutions and proposes that one indicator could be the percentage of schools rating themselves good or outstanding using the self-evaluation tool linked to the sustainable schools framework. Reflecting views expressed at the earlier CEE forum, it suggests that similar tools and frameworks could be developed for further and higher level institutions, but admits that the proposed indicator is based on the untested assumption 'that if a place of learning, like a school, lives a sustainable development ethos and enables its students to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills, this will establish positive, sustainable behaviours later in life'.

Because of the limitations of an institution-level indicator ('the accuracy of the results, and the potential false connection between institutional and individual performance' the SDC proposes that a sample of secondary schools self assessment forms could be analysed alongside interviews with 14 – 16 year old pupils to 'help test the accuracy of the self-evaluation data'. An indicator could then be formed as the product of the two sets of results and would seek to measure 'the degree to which the school (or other place of learning) is successful at developing learners' capability to contribute to a sustainable society'. The Department of Children Schools and Families (DCSF, previously DfES) and the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) resumed discussions on an ESD indicator in August 2007. The SDC proposal was then still the front runner and officers were examining whether the pupil interviews could be incorporated into Defra's wider survey of public attitudes, knowledge and behaviours (Defra, 2007).

The SDC proposal does not overcome issues of ESD content. It merely transfers decisions as to what is to count as relevant knowledge, skills and values to those who interpret the sustainable schools self-evaluation tool (Teachernet, 2007) and complete the self-assessment forms, and those who design the interview questions to be asked of pupils and who interpret the results. Rather than an ESD that accommodates critical knowledge and pedagogy, the SDC proposal would allow an ESD that is uncritical and consistent with New Labour's agenda of weak ecological modernisation.

### **Explaining the preferences expressed during the consultation**

The SDC's preference for the sustainable schools approach, in a rather different form than that I proposed (Table One), is not difficult to explain given the work that Reynolds, Hren and Iwaskow had already done relating to this approach. What is more difficult to explain is why the majority of those consulted opted so readily for process over content, learning over teaching, and an institutional rather than a learner focussed

indicator. Action research was the approach accorded most first preference votes, but there was no discussion at the workshops of the guidance I had suggested or what knowledge, skills and values such research should promote. Three of the suggested approaches (sustainability literacy, frame of mind, and dilemma) seemed to have been perceived as more or less prescriptive ('leading the learner') whereas I had proposed and designed them in ways that, in my opinion, might facilitate open, democratic and critical forms of ESD.

The following arguments may explain the preferences expressed by the majority of those consulted:

1. Several of the suggested approaches would result in more prescription and testing of the kind that New Labour has imposed on English schools. ESD should not be associated with the narrowing of the curriculum and pupil anxiety that this involves.
2. While it may be possible to agree on the skills, knowledge and value base that all learners require to become active citizens in creating a sustainable society, this task is not without intellectual and political difficulties or problems of interpretation (as the sample tests/surveys illustrate). Philosophical and political debate of the kind that led to the PPE's framework for political literacy have not yet produced a comparable theory and practice relating to sustainability literacy, and until it does we are best to avoid approaches based on contested foundations.
3. The theory and discourse associated with sustainable development and ESD remains distant from school teachers' everyday knowledge and classroom realities. We should therefore adopt an indicator that is practice rather than theory based.
4. The DfES and OFSTED agendas are already clear and political realism suggests that we should recommend an approach that fits with the emerging framework and self-assessment tool for sustainable schools.
5. The approaches and their author are too strongly associated with socially critical approaches to ESD. Rather than being open and democratic as he maintains, they are too ready to lead the learner towards pre-determined answers. Without detailed marking schedules we cannot be sure that the sample tests and survey instruments are not biased in favour of such answers.

Clearly research would have had to be done to establish the prevalence and significance of these and other arguments in the minds of those consulted. This article seeks only to draw their preferences to readers' attention and highlight the way in which these allowed SDC to propose an ESD indicator that would allow, but not require, socially critical approaches.

### **The marginalisation of socially critical ESD**

Having been a little surprised by the preferences of those who attended the consultative workshops, I began to reflect on the current status of socially critical approaches and factors that account for their marginalisation. For Stevenson (2007) reduced status and marginalisation is the result of a persistent theory/practice gap in environmental education that has widened over the last twenty years. He associates theory with the socially critical and transformative ideas of the 1970s and 1980s which I and others have sought to sustain and update, but perhaps fails to fully acknowledge that such ideas have always been less influential than positivist and idealist ideas (conservative and progressive approaches, (Huckle, 1983)), and that in recent years those who support approaches to ESD based in cultural theory have subjected socially critical approaches to an influential critique.

My earlier article explained how New Labour's policies on education have reinforced structures and norms of schooling in England that further marginalise socially critical approaches. To the extent that policy documents (Winter, 2007), government advisers and members of the ESD community support or propose forms of ESD and ESD indicators that do not reflect transformative aims, do not require critical pedagogy, and do not evaluate the acquisition of knowledge, skills and values that contribute to sustainability literacy, they can be seen to be contributing to the continued widening of the gap that Stevenson observes.

A critique of socially critical ESD based on cultural theory is a further factor to be considered in explaining the widening gap and accounting for the workshop participants' preferences. The substance of this critique is summarised in chapter 11 of *Sustainable Development and Learning* (Scott & Gough, 2003) where the authors describe socially critical theory as an 'unsatisfactory' theory of social change in that it claims to understand both social problems and social and environmental solutions. In a world of complexity and uncertainty these problems and solutions cannot be fully understood and a prescriptive ESD based on such theory is likely to close options rather than promote the kind of open learning that is the key element of cultural theory approaches to ESD. These acknowledge research evidence suggesting that a clear link between prescribed learning and desirable social change 'remains elusive and probably doesn't exist.'

I have no evidence that workshop participants were influenced by such views, or that they have contributed to the gap that Stevenson observes, but given the standing of their advocates within the UK ESD community, such influence is likely. Socially critical ESD agrees with ESD based on cultural theory that a primary aim of ESD is to challenge learners' views of the world as a means of influencing their knowledge, skills and values, and hence their ways of thinking and living. It accepts that there is no clear link between learning and social change, but parts company with cultural theory by firstly suggesting that while there are tensions surrounding sustainable development, and things we do not fully understand that necessitate critical thinking (Scott, 2007 p. 4), there is a body of existing knowledge surrounding such development that it is worthwhile for learners to acquire. Secondly not all the facts, theories, rationalities, or discourses that may be acquired through open learning, are of equal worth. We do have ethical principles (for example those outlined in the Earth Charter) and educational processes (critical pedagogy, participatory and critical action research) for evaluating these and deciding which are the most useful in suggesting and advancing the kinds of democracy and citizenship that may encourage sustainable development. Yes, like all forms of knowledge, critical theory can be promoted within and beyond classrooms in undemocratic ways that involve indoctrination, but such practice runs counter to the basic tenets of critical pedagogy and is most frequently associated with mainstream ESD that supports little more than the greening of capitalism

### **Addressing the gap between socially critical theory and practice in ESD**

Stevenson's answer to closing the theory/practice gap (encouraging more socially critical pedagogy or practice) focuses on teachers' professional learning and stems from a re-conceptualisation of the relationship between policy discourse (official knowledge) and teachers' everyday practical theories (lay and tacit knowledge) and the contexts shaping their work. Since ESD knowledge (theory, discourse) is currently too distant from teachers' everyday knowledge and realities (being perceived as subjective, ideologically laden, complex, exclusive, and abstract), professional development should enable teachers to construct their own socially useful ESD knowledge by reflecting and acting on official and academic knowledge together with their own 'local and professional' knowledge of what works in classrooms, schools and communities. Stevenson's argument reflects the participatory left's view of knowledge, and recognises the value of participatory action research as a form of professional development.

The contradictions between neo-liberalism and social democracy in New Labour policy, featured in my earlier article, result in contradictions and the kinds of opportunities and spaces for ESD that Stevenson explores. Current calls for more healthy and sustainable schools; a more flexible curriculum; greater links between schools and communities; more education in the outdoors; greater emphasis on citizenship education and children's participation in community development; and measures to improve children's happiness and mental health; all acknowledge the excesses of recent policy and all offer spaces to develop a new discourse of professional learning in ESD and explore the gap between socially critical theory and existing practice. In their account of working within these emerging spaces to develop a community-related school curriculum, Barratt Hacking, Scott and Barratt (2007) acknowledge possibilities but refer back to Stevenson (1987) in recognising the significant barrier posed by 'the dominant conception, organisation and transmission of knowledge' (p. 242).

## **Conclusion**

In my earlier article I argued that exposure to critical ideas and movements that reveal the limitations of conventional forms of knowledge production and demonstrate alternatives should be an essential part of ESD. Given opportunities to adopt and refine approaches to a proposed ESD indicator that were more likely to encourage such exposure and prompt new forms of knowledge production, government advisers and influential members of the ESD community opted for approaches that were less likely to do this. For reasons that I have speculated upon, they opted for indicators that are less rather than more likely to ensure greater sustainability literacy. The micro-politics of ESD (those attending the consultative workshops) failed to significantly challenge the macro-politics (Government policy) that had previously paid only lip-service to such education.

A particularly worrying aspect of the consultation on indicators was the participants' readiness to discount ESD content or the core knowledge required by the sustainability literate citizen. Propositional and procedural knowledge relating to the politics of sustainable development and sustainability citizenship should be a core component of the type of professional learning that Stevenson envisages, and this should involve and encourage closer links between the ESD and citizenship education communities. Such knowledge might well be developed or 'tested' in the context of linked curriculum and community development (action research) projects, but these should accommodate such voices as those who link sustainability to radical democracy (or a greening of socialism) alongside those who seek the greening of capitalism.

Such professional learning may convince teachers and others that the struggle for a more relevant and empowering ESD, linked to a more appropriate indicator, is part of a wider struggle for greater social justice and democracy. The global anti-capitalist movement continues to act as a source of inspiration and ideas for many teachers and teacher educators (Rickowski, 2005, Hill & Boxley, 2007). Their work to challenge the reduction of humanity and the rest of nature to capital and enable learners to envisage and enact more sustainable futures, contributes to schools recapturing 'their moral purpose and serving the public or common good' (Stevenson, 2007, p. 283)..

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