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## The Cambridge Primary Review: a reply to R.J. Campbell

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**ABSTRACT** The author was disappointed by R.J.Campbell's sour critique of the Cambridge Primary Review in *FORUM* Volume 52 Number 1 2010. His description of the Review's proposals on curriculum and pedagogy as 'backward-looking, cumbersome and partial' is such a bizarre misjudgement that it calls for some response. The author comments in turn on R.J.Campbell's criticism of the Review's twelve aims for the primary curriculum, his doubts about the curriculum domains outlined, and his discussion of pedagogy.

Campbell's critique opens with an attack on the complexity of the Review's linked principles, aims, and domains. 'This complexity,' he suggests, 'may reflect the realities of curriculum theorising, but as a planning tool for teachers to use, it is egregious.' My own experience, in discussing the Review with fellow teachers, suggests otherwise. The framework of principles, aims and domains offers teachers an opportunity to review the foundations of their practice and the teachers I know have been happy to grasp it. 'The realities of curriculum theorising' are not the preserve of professors of education but the indispensable accompaniment to curriculum planning at every level. As the Review points out, the failure to specify the aims and values that the curriculum serves was a major flaw in the Plowden Report. Pragmatism is not enough.

Campbell seems uncertain what to make of the Review's twelve aims. He calls them 'very ambitious' and in the same sentence declares them to be 'motherhood and apple pie ... what's not to like?' Two problems bother him. First he argues that the social and personal aims, as opposed to 'the strictly educational aims,' are unrealistic. Citing the work of Basil Bernstein, he suggests that 'if such an all embracing set of aims were to be nationally adopted, it would be setting up some schools, especially those in economically deprived areas, to fail.' The Review itself acknowledges that schools cannot combat disadvantage unaided. But to abandon, on this account, any one of the Review's twelve aims would be to deprive all children, whether disadvantaged or privileged, of their

educational entitlement. The Review demonstrates that social and personal aims are no less strictly educational than academic aims. Which of them would Campbell choose to cut?

One aim that he would presumably cut is that of enacting dialogue. The inclusion of dialogue is his second objection to the list of aims. He argues that dialogue is not an aim but a method of teaching. He is wrong. Dialogue is far more than a teaching method. As the Review explains, it is central to our understanding of the relationship 'between self and others, between personal and collective knowledge, between present and past, between different ways of making sense.' Campbell quotes these words later in his critique but appears not to grasp their significance. Yet they are the key to the educational response to social disadvantage. Dialogue between different ways of making sense is central to the educational engagement of children from divergent social and linguistic backgrounds. How to listen to the voices of children who take little part in dialogue, or are disengaged from the culture of school, how to value their thought and appreciate their language, how to incorporate their point of view into the curriculum, this is the greatest challenge that teachers face as they consider how to approach the aim of enacting dialogue. Campbell highlights the problem but fails to see how its resolution is embedded within the very aim which he rejects. The answers that teachers and students come up with will have a profound effect, both on schools and on society.

Campbell moves on from the Review's twelve aims to its eight curriculum domains. He challenges two of them: citizenship and ethics, and faith and belief. Citizenship and ethics may best be learnt, he suggests, through immersion in the life of the school rather than 'through formal inclusion in a national curriculum.' This may be so but it does not contradict the Review. There is no reason why a school should not meet the requirements of the citizenship and ethics curriculum chiefly 'through the ethos of school life.' Indeed such a strategy would surely be welcomed by the Review, in accordance with its seventh aim, that of empowering local, national and global citizenship, the purpose of which is 'to help children to become active citizens by encouraging their full participation in decision making within the classroom and school, especially where their own learning is concerned.' But room needs also to be found for a more direct and self-conscious conversation about the relevance and value of such participation in respect of the society into which the children are growing. Practice and reflection are complementary.

As to the proposed domain of faith and belief, Campbell's critique distorts the Review's argument. Controversially, and perhaps mistakenly, the Review makes no recommendation as to the teaching of religion in denominational schools, nor indeed as to the institution of faith schools as a whole. It recognises that denominational schools 'see their mission as the advancement of particular religious beliefs and moral codes' but it insists that 'non-denominational schools should remain essentially secular, teaching about religion with respect and understanding but not attempting to inculcate or convert. Further, other beliefs, including those about the validity of religion itself, should also be explored.'

From these unambiguous statements Campbell draws the remarkable conclusion that 'the Cambridge Review's argument for the mandatory status of religious education is constructing a case for the continuation of the widespread attempts to indoctrinate young children into religious belief, particularly but not exclusively in denominational schools.' There is no basis for this conclusion. Quite apart from the fact that 'advancement' is neither equivalent to 'indoctrination' nor a euphemism for it, the Review explicitly rules out any attempt 'to inculcate or convert' in non-denominational schools. Its argument for religious education within these schools is that 'religion is so fundamental to this country's history, culture and language, as well as to the daily lives of many of its inhabitants, that it must remain within the curriculum.' Campbell suggests that teaching about religion, if it is legitimate at all, can be covered adequately in the domain of time and place, which includes history and geography. It can't. Children need the opportunity to explore religious and secular beliefs philosophically, morally, and artistically, as well as in terms of time and place. Teachers will find that their students, even the youngest of them, have plenty to say.

And so to Campbell's critique of the Review's approach to pedagogy. It is hard to know just what to make of Campbell's complaints about the Review's argument here. He seems to accept its emphasis on dialogic teaching and he acknowledges the convergence of several lines of research in support of this and related concepts. His point seems to be that the Review devotes too much attention to its director Robin Alexander's research and too little to other studies which arrive at much the same conclusions. In view of the acknowledged convergence of ideas this seems a somewhat lame objection.

The Cambridge Primary Review is open to a variety of criticisms, some of which have already been aired in this journal, in the articles by Mary Jane Drummond and Christopher Schenk. Occasionally R.J.Campbell touches on genuine problems himself, for example that of the mechanism for implementing the Review's curriculum proposals. But for the most part his negative critique misses the point and seems to be motivated by antipathy to the entire project. The Review deserves a far more creative response.

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*News Item*

On arriving at the Education Department on 14 May 2010 to take up his new post as Schools Minister, Tory Nick Gibb shocked his senior officials by saying: 'I would rather have a physics graduate from Oxbridge without a PGCE qualification teaching in a school than a physics graduate from one of the rubbish universities with a PGCE'. Bognor Regis and Littlehampton MP, Mr Gibb went to a grammar school in Kent before studying law at Durham University. It would be nice to know which universities he considers to be 'rubbish'.