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## The Fable of the Squirrels and the Hedgehogs

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**ABSTRACT** Education is so serious and important an enterprise that like life, death and taxes its excesses need tempering and combating by humour. The author believes that educational lampooning can be a powerful weapon against current orthodoxies.

In woods around the country there could be trouble brewing. The red squirrels there, though an endangered species, are all paid-up members of NUTS (the National Union of Teacher Squirrels). They teach a national squirriculum or, if in academy, something close to it, though because of ever-changing demands from the DfE (Department for Forest Education) many of them are finding it difficult to see the wood for the trees.

Understandably, as professional rodents with good PR, they are held accountable for initiating young squirrels into the valued aspects of squirrel culture ('the best nuts that have been nibbled and digested') and to prepare them for life in an upwardly mobile, canopy-seeking society. In particular they aim to get as many as possible to the top of the tree, though what the 'top' should be continually changes as do the DfE's and politico-squirrels' ever-changing priorities.

The core element in the squirriculum is tree climbing (taught initially through synthetic scabbling and barking at print), though nut counting is also considered to be almost as important. There are subsidiary subjects – too often offered as part of the afternoon squirriculum – such as nit-picking, preening bushy tails or bark-etching for the aesthetically inclined.

But now the NUTS teachers are faced with a new wooden framework from the HEMISs (Her Majesty's Inspectors of Squirrels) – hedgehogs, some of whom are given to huffing and puffing and liable to roll up into balls if asked direct questions about the actual content and value of the squirriculum. Following recent 'research' in the schools they have supposedly been visiting for years past, the HEMISs have discovered, much to their surprise, that there

has been a narrowing of the squirriculum in schools seeking higher scores on tests of tree-scaling. Not only that, but in pursuit of those scaled scores some schools have been rolling poor climbers off tree trunks so that they fall into the undergrowth never to be seen again. The inspectors are also concerned that too many tree schools are failing to follow the DfE's E bark but are instead barking up better, more suitable trees of their own choice.

Through their new framework the inspectors are hoping to promote a more 'ambitious' squirriculum – with an emphasis on knowledge-rich activities focusing on key arboreal concepts and on logical progression routes to tree tops – but curiously giving far less emphasis to the actual skills of tree-climbing itself and the personal qualities it promotes. Rumour has it that their covert, preferred model squirriculum is constructed of wood sold from Spielman's old ark or other academy chains. How will teacher-squirrels cope as the workload implications of squirriculum development become clearer and once the HEMISs have visited and passed their 'research-informed' judgements on squirriculum intent, implementation and impact?

The HEMISs are beginning to scurry up and down tree trunks and along a sample of foundation tree-branches reporting on the richness (or poverty) of schools' squirriculum. How this narrative will end is far from clear. Time and inspection (if principled and transparent) may tell.

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