

CHAPTER C1 - The Development of State Education

*“Education without values, as useful as it is,
seems rather to make man a more clever devil.”*

C. S. Lewis (The Abolition of Man, 1943)

When we first read Berg’s ‘*Risinghill: Death of a Comprehensive School*’ we found certain parts of the story difficult to follow — mainly because we had not understood the politics of education. This, we soon discovered, had a massive impact on the school. It also became clear that, unless we were able to explain the political motivations and the differing party political perspectives on how the working-class and the (presumed) less academically able should be educated, our story would be difficult to tell.

As children, we were described by Terence Constable, a former Risinghill teacher, as the “waste clay of an educational experiment” (1968). But what was this experiment? And on what basis was it deemed to be a failure? To find out, we were forced to go back to the beginning, to understand, first and foremost, the premise upon which this ‘experiment’ had begun life.

Initially we had taken only a cursory look at the educational politics prior to the opening of Risinghill, but this had not told us a great deal. A more detailed examination, however, revealed that, as early as the 19th century, at the heart of the education debate was the grammar school and how to educate working-class children. This was of interest to us because the politics of the grammar had featured heavily in Berg’s book.

When we looked more closely at some of the arguments that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s about state education, we discovered that many of these were about preserving the status of grammar schools and the role of the 11+ examination, based largely on intelligence testing, to determine a child’s academic abilities. Although interesting, these arguments did not take us any further forward in terms of understanding how the comprehensive system had evolved, much less why it was deemed to have failed. We could not, for example, find any scientific research upon which this experiment might have been based. Nor did we find any meaningful

discussions about what it was meant to deliver. It seemed to us at a first look that the comprehensive school had evolved more by luck than judgement, and without any great enthusiasm either.

C1.1 - So what is a comprehensive school?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) it is:

a secondary school catering for all abilities from a given area
(1989)

To some of us in the Group this definition did not make a lot of sense because there were no grammar schools among the schools merged to form Risinghill, and the secondary schools we had attended prior to and upon joining Risinghill did not have too many children who had passed the 11+ examination. Others of us in the Group did understand that the grammar schools had 'creamed off' those considered more academically able, but only understood it from a personal perspective of loss, envy and disappointment without understanding its socio-political import¹. Both views were reinforced by noting that Risinghill did not have an intake of the local 11+ successes after its establishment. Although our classes were streamed within the different year groups, the pupils were roughly at the same academic level for their age, with a few exceptions in the 'A' and 'B' streams, and it varied considerably thereafter. There was no proper 'grammar streams' as commonly understood.

We soon discovered that Risinghill was not, in fact, a comprehensive school. It was officially named 'Risinghill Secondary Modern School' on 6 May 1959 (London Metropolitan Archives, 2006). This was in line with other comprehensives of that era, including Kidbrooke, London's first 'comprehensive' school. However, Kidbrooke was never referred to as a secondary modern and neither was Risinghill. The term 'comprehensive' was an unofficial - one might say rhetorical - designation.

This came as quite a surprise as we had never thought of Risinghill as anything other than a comprehensive as per the definition, at least in intention. It was completely different to our previous schools - which *were* commonly known as

¹ It was probably true for the majority of parents at Risinghill, as well as children, that they were not really aware of the separation of children into radically different forms of education. However, where one child went to a grammar and another to a secondary modern or comprehensive school the contrast in the education received between the siblings was marked, and the opportunities available to one over the other child stark.

secondary moderns or technical schools - so we were confused. Besides, this was not how Risinghill was described to our parents at the time:

Risinghill School is a Comprehensive School. This means that it includes all kinds of work hitherto done in separate grammar, technical and modern schools. (Duane, Undated)

We should perhaps explain that, for a school to be truly comprehensive, it needs to have an equitable spread of pupils across the whole ability range; hence the dictionary definition. In 1960, the recommended proportions were 20 percent in each of five ability groups²:

We were told we would have the full range of ability; that is 20% in the top group – those who would normally go straight to the grammar school; 20% in the bottom group – those just above ESN³; and 20% in each of the three other groups; average, above average and below average. (Laiken, Undated)

Although this might well have been the original intention, Risinghill did not have anywhere near the recommended spread of academic abilities:

But in fact we never had a pattern that was basically different from: 0.7% in the top group; 7% in the second group; 20% in the third group, 30% in the fourth and NEVER LESS THAN 43% IN THE LEVEL JUST ABOVE ESN. So in fact we were a large secondary modern school. (Idem)

This difference between the theoretical and actual distribution of ability at Risinghill is dramatic when shown graphically, highlighting the gap between advertised intention and actual practice (Figure 1). (N.B. Children falling in the 'ESN' range are not included in these figures). In fact, inspection of the lower 4 quintiles in Figure 1 shows that Risinghill was not only a large secondary modern school, but one with a student population with an ability range much less than that expected of a 'normal'

² I.e. ability groups defined by dividing into quintiles the ability range of the eligible population as a whole as determined by some measure, such as IQ scores.

³ Educationally Sub-Normal (ESN) – the phrase then current to refer to those in the very lowest ability range.

secondary modern school taking the lower 80% of the ability range, (excluding the ESN pupils).

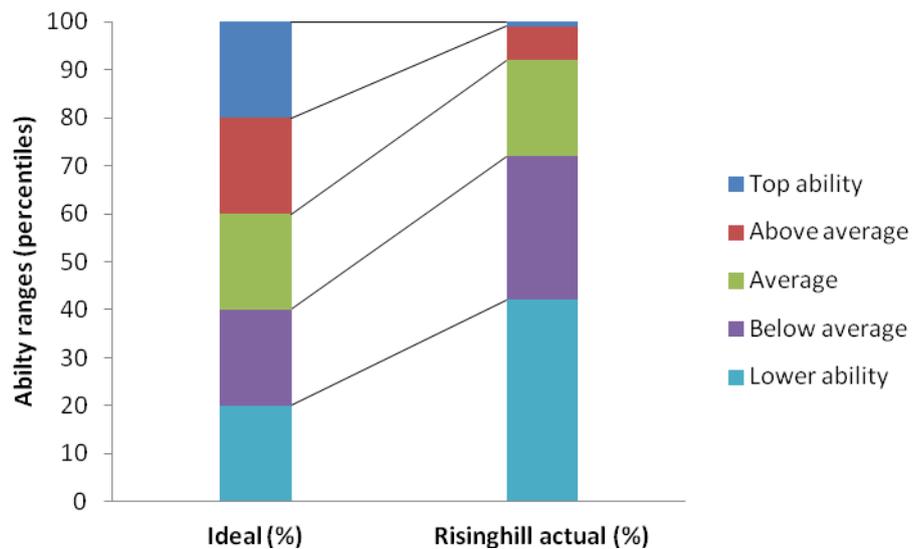


Figure 1: Differences between the ideal and actual range of student abilities at Risinghill

This is shown graphically in Figure 2 where Duane’s figures are re-plotted excluding the top ability range and re-scaling the remaining quartiles to 100%. Over 70% of pupils fell into the Lower Ability or Below Average ranges of ability, so the school’s population did not even match that of a secondary modern.

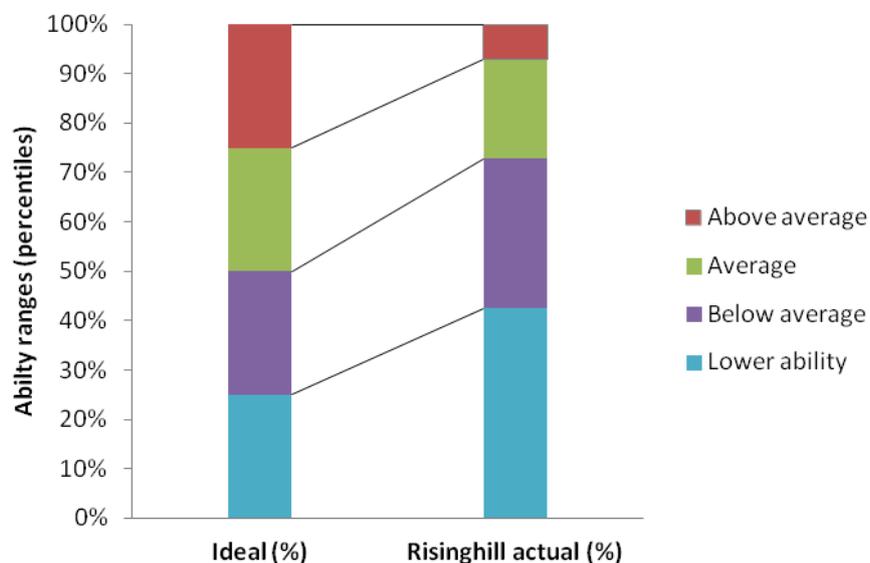


Figure 2: Distribution of abilities at Risinghill, excluding the top quintile. Here “Ideal” refers to a normal Secondary Modern School.

When examining the politics of state and comprehensive education and the role of the grammar school within it, all will become clear. However, although the grammar and comprehensive are inextricably linked, unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this book to present all the arguments ‘for’ and ‘against’ either. Rather, our aim in this first chapter is to provide a basic understanding of the history of the comprehensive model, as without this knowledge it is impossible to make any sense of what happened at Risinghill. The decisions (some might say indecisions) of that era had a significant impact on the school.

C1.2 - The Beginnings of State Education

Today we take our state-funded education system for granted and accept that all children have the right to free education until they are 16, but of course this has not always been the case. For centuries most children received no formal education at all.

Grammar schools started in the 16th century with an emphasis on teaching Latin grammar to the sons of wealthy parents, hence the name ‘grammar’ schools. It was not until the middle of the 19th century and the growth of industrialisation that education became a broad, political and social issue, with Britain needing a literate and numerate workforce that would have the ability to manage the wide variety of processes involved in industrial production.

Some children were being educated by the church, ragged schools (free schools for poor children) and other benefactors: the majority of children, however, were not educated at all. Many generations of families were poor and illiterate. Other than the Poor Law⁴ and the workhouse system⁵, state help for poor families did not exist. Consequently, the majority of children started working at a very young age to help supplement the family income.

⁴ The Poor Law Boards of Guardians operated on a union/parish basis. Accepting financial help would often mean a family would have to enter a workhouse and be separated. Education was not a priority for workhouse children.

⁵ For a summary of the Workhouses and the Poor law see the Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poor_Law_Amendment_Act_1834 (Accessed 12 March 2014)

In 1833, in a bid to start educating children who were working, the Factory Act ordered factory owners to provide children under the age of 13 with at least two hours of education a day. (Factory Act 1833 (3 & 4 Will. IV) c103) Unfortunately many children remained uneducated as the wealthy owners did not always adhere to the legislation.

Partially funded state education for children up to the age of ten was started by a Liberal government in 1870. (Elementary Education Act 1870 33 & 34 Vict c. 75) The schools that were set up were known as 'Board' schools and across the country they were managed in small, local areas by elected school boards. These supplemented existing schools. Parents were still expected to pay school fees, but these were waived for some of the poorer ones.

Providing education for working-class children was also seen as a means of reducing their involvement in crime. There is a long history that documents the methods used to educate and reform children caught up in crime. (Packman, 1981) For many years, such children and young people were categorised in law as 'deprived' or 'delinquent'⁶.

Children up to the age of 16 who had committed a crime(s) and were deemed by the courts to be delinquent and/or out of control could be sentenced to reformatories; these were later known as 'borstals' or 'approved' schools and are now called 'secure units'. Here the focus was on education and reforming their criminal behaviour to achieve rehabilitation into the community. Conversely, those who were assessed as likely to start offending were placed in industrial schools, providing them with education and vocational training as a means of helping them to find work (Parker, 1990). Education was a focus for reform in both institutions; however the children were perceived to be different. Reformatories and industrial schools also started to receive state funding in 1870. (Ref1, xxxx)

It was in 1880 that education became compulsory for children between the ages of five and ten years, but this created financial difficulties for families who relied on their children's earnings. To ensure children's attendance at school, the School Boards

⁶ Although these legal distinctions no longer exist, these terms are still used to describe different groups of children.

introduced 'School Board Officers' (later to be known as Truant Officers). (Ref2, xxxx)

Compulsory state-funded education effectively became free with the 1891 Education Act. This legislation provided state payment of children's school fees. (Ref3, xxxx)

The kind of education provided in these schools is within the passed-on memories of our parents and grandparents. Philip remembers his grandfather talking about his schooling in the 1890's in Peckham (a depressed area of south London, then and now). The memory is of a rigid, authoritarian system and large class sizes - but his grandfather did come out of it numerate and literate. In contrast his grandmother attended a small, one-class, one- teacher rural school in Hampshire, where she told him of helping teach the younger children, and reading them stories by the time she approached the leaving age of about 14. He also recalls his father-in-law talking about assisting at a rural boys borstal, teaching gardening and farming. Rough and ready are words that now come to mind of the education given.

C1.3 - The Introduction of Local Education Authorities

In 1902, the management of state-funded schools was removed from the numerous small school boards. (Education Act 1902) These were replaced with Local Education Authorities (LEAs), and grammar schools were brought into the LEA funding systems. In inner London, the London County Council (LCC) took over the powers and responsibilities from the School Board for London and the Technical Education Board in 1904 (Ref4, xxx). By then the LCC was already a powerful and influential body⁷. It had a progressive approach to education, and was ahead of the rest of the country in building new schools and offering scholarships. A Chief Inspector was responsible for the running of all London schools, which were separated into divisions on a geographical basis. With a variety of schools in the capital, the aim of the LCC was to co-ordinate the operation of all of them:

Its immediate priorities were to integrate the Board Schools and the 'non-provided' schools mostly owned by religious organisations into a single coherent service. (London Metropolitan Archives, 2006)

⁷ Created in 1889, the LCC was the first metropolitan-wide form of general local government. See www.london.gov.uk [Accessed 27 December 2013].

In 1913 the LCC appointed, the now controversial, Sir Cyril Burt as its first psychologist. A major part of his role was to consider the needs of delinquent and maladjusted children. He was also interested in the use of intelligence testing to determine children's abilities and the debate about whether intelligence was linked to that of nature (genetics) or that of nurture (family environment and other factors).

At that time it seemed obvious that a child's performance at school and indeed later on in life was related to social class, but it was not clear whether this was because better-off people were able to give their children a better start in life, with education and so on, or whether intelligence and educability were to some extent inherited genetically, with a higher average level in the upper classes.

By 1918 legislation had been introduced to raise the school leaving age from 12 to 14. (Education Act 1918 8 & 9 Geo. V c. 39) This change gave LEAs, including the LCC, the additional responsibility for providing and managing secondary schools. The majority of children did not, however, have the opportunity to attend a state secondary school as very few existed. Instead, they attended the local elementary school from the age of five until they left at 14. Here, the focus was on providing all children with a basic standard of education to enable them to enter the workforce. These children (in general) did not sit examinations.

It follows that the schools offering the best education were the independent and grammar schools, where young people had the opportunity to sit the 'School Certificate' and the 'Higher School Certificate'⁸, enabling them to apply to universities. But they could continue their education after the age of 14 only if they had a scholarship or if their parents could afford the school fees:

This system divided children along clear lines of social class – children from poorer backgrounds were almost all confined to elementary schooling. Less than 2 per cent of the population attended university. (Giddens, 2001)

⁸ The Secondary School Examinations Council, who administered these examinations, was set up in 1917

Therefore, the majority of school-leavers had no qualifications — restricting their access to many jobs and professions.

Although LEAs aimed to develop a coherent education service, in many parts of England the schools were unevenly spread, and there continued to be a variety of state and private schools operating alongside the elementary ones. These were Independent (private) schools, Voluntary Aided (church-run) schools and other grammars in the direct grant aided categories. There were also a small number of technical schools specialising in the engineering and needlecrafts trades, also commerce and other vocational disciplines.

C1.4 - Early Education Reforms

During the 1920s the debates about the most appropriate methods for educating all children gained momentum. Simon (1997) attributes the first formal call for one type of secondary school to the Assistant Masters Association (AMA), who passed a resolution at its 1925 conference, whereas (Fogelman, 2006) reports that it was the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) who first called for a 'multilateral' school in 19xx on the grounds that it would offer more parity in the system. This was the original name for the comprehensive.

While the LCC was very supportive of the idea of a single secondary school for all, the Conservative government in office was not. Nor did the concept appeal to too many in the educational hierarchy who, although recognising the need for a more equitable system, thought that integrating grammar school children with the masses was taking equality too far. Despite all the negativity, the idea of a multilateral school did begin to gain some support in government, largely due to the influence of a small group of progressive Labour MPs. To explore the issues, several committees were set up to report on specific aspects of children's education. Some of these committee reports have had an on-going influence.

The Hadow Report of 1926 (Board of Education, 1926) paved the way for selection by ability. Sir Cyril Burt provided information on psychological testing for this report. He, and the report's authors, acknowledged that less-able children would benefit from reforms in secondary education, but they were adamant that grammar schools and selective education were necessary to educate 'brighter' children:

However, the dominant view of educational policy-makers in the inter-war years was that no reorganisation should affect the status or integrity of the grammar school but should be carried through by the creation of separate secondary schools. Thus the authors of the most influential of the inter-war reports on education, the Hadow Report of 1926, concluded that children's secondary education should be determined on the grounds of ability, and the authors apparently had no doubts that it was possible to distinguish between academic children, who would benefit from a traditional examination-orientated education in a grammar school, and the less able, who would benefit from courses of practical instruction in a modern (Kerckhoff et al., 1996)

Another important report of the period was the Spens Report of 1938 (Board of Education) It was this committee report that first proposed the long standing 11+ examination system, used to separate children into different types of schools according to academic ability and aptitude. By this time Sir Cyril Burt had left the LCC and was now Professor of Psychology at the University College London. In this role he provided a memorandum that was used to develop the second part of the chapter in the Spens report on '*The Mental Development of Children between the ages of 11+ and 16+.*' The authors took the view that it was possible to determine children's intellectual abilities at the age of eleven:

We were informed that, with few exceptions, it is possible at a very early age to predict with some degree of accuracy the ultimate level of a child's intellectual powers, but this is true only of general intelligence and does not hold good in respect of specific aptitudes or interests. The average child is said to attain the effective limit of development of general intelligence between the ages of 16 and 18.

(Ibid)

With assurances that children's abilities could be measured using intelligence tests, the Spens report rejected proposals for a single secondary school that would incorporate academic, technical and general education. Instead, the report endorsed a tripartite (three part) schools system with academic grammar schools for

'bright' children, a variety of specialist technical schools for those who would benefit from developing specific technical skills, and secondary modern schools providing a mixture of general and vocational education for the remainder; the remainder representing the vast majority of children. The Spens Report did, however, recognise that in very rural communities and under-populated newly built areas, a tripartite system might not be viable. In these circumstances it was thought that a single multilateral school, serving a number of small communities, might be more appropriate.

Some educationalists and politicians, though, remained concerned about determining children's futures at the age of 11, believing that some children could be late developers, and other children who passed the 11+ might not be emotionally suited to the grammar school regime. Moreover, the evidence emerging at this time showed that the brighter, less-privileged child who passed the 11+ did not automatically gain a grammar school place. Competition for these schools was fierce, and many children were turned away because of their social backgrounds. From our research with the Risinghill pupils we know that this state of affairs continued well into the 1960s:

In 1960, I passed my 11+ and was considered to be a clever child. My mother was overly proud and was determined that I should attend Dame Alice Owen School, which at the time, was situated at the Angel, Islington. I remember going with her for an interview and also remember her bitter disappointment when my application was rejected on the grounds that we lived only in one room. It was considered that I would have no scope for study; a little like Virginia Woolf, an Owen's girl needs a 'Room of One's Own'. (Fisher, 2006)

So for all these reasons the case for a multilateral school continued to be argued in and outside of government. The broad thrust of this argument was:

- Greater equality in education would be achieved because all children would be in the same school and would therefore all have the opportunity to take academic examinations.

- Their vocational and general educational needs could be met within the same environment.
- There would be social and cultural benefits from grouping differing social classes and mixed abilities together. Society was, after all, becoming more multicultural, less stratified, and so was the workforce.

The landmark Butler Education Act of 1944 (Education Act 1944 7 and 8 Geo 6 c. 31) introduced during the period of the wartime coalition government, aimed to ensure that every child be given an equal chance to succeed; this was to be based on their individual ability. The Act was wide-ranging and carried forward many of the recommendations set out in the Hadow and Spens reports.

The Act recognised the importance of education for economic advancement and social welfare. Its aim was to provide secondary education for all children so that every child had equal opportunity to obtain a place in a grammar school, regardless of family background. Most Local Education Authorities (LEAs) interpreted the 1944 Act to mean the provision of schooling according to ability.
(Chan et al., 2002)

It is worth noting that, for many people, the term 'secondary education for all' meant a 'grammar school education for all'. (Chitty, 1989)

A tripartite system of secondary education was introduced for all children with a change from primary to secondary education at the age of 11. The appropriate type of school was to be determined by the 11+ examination, which used a variety of tests to assess children's verbal and non-verbal reasoning. This included mental arithmetic, a written essay question and a general problem-solving paper:

Academic selection at age eleven — the age of transition from primary to secondary school — was supposed to sort out the more able children from the others, regardless of social background.
(Giddens, 2001)

It was thought that this new system would ensure that the most academically-able children would benefit from the education provided by grammar schools and further education, while those attending secondary modern and technical schools would gain from an education more suited to their perceived needs and future role in the workplace.

What is interesting is that the 1944 Fleming Report, which was commissioned by Butler (Committee on Public Schools, 1944) gave recommendations and proposals on how to integrate and link independent schools with state sector schools, but the findings of this report were never implemented.

Nonetheless, Butler does appear to have conceded to the mounting pressure from the Labour Party and other influential bodies, such as the LCC, for a different type of education. The Act did not, for example, specify that non-selective secondary schools (in effect multilateral schools) would be unacceptable. This gave some LEAs, notably the LCC, a unique opportunity to experiment with the provision of education:

The White Paper recognised “three main types of secondary school to be known as grammar, modern and technical schools,” but very significantly went on to say that “it would be wrong to suppose that they will remain separate and apart. Different types may be combined in one building as considerations of convenience and efficiency may suggest. In any case the free interchange of pupils from one type of education to another must be facilitated.” This statement enunciates no educational philosophy or principle and makes no statement of national policy, but it leaves the door open to any suitable combination, and the discretion of local education authorities is in no way cramped by any over-riding decision by the Central Government. (London School Plan, 1947)

Unlike today, the LEAs had considerable autonomy to organise their schools in whatever way they considered appropriate:

“A well-known phrase described British education as being a ‘national system, locally administered’. In other words, the general

framework was set by national policy, but much power resided with the LEAs who were able to determine the detail of how they interpreted and administered this. (Kerckhoff et al., 1996)

As such, many LEAs began to develop their own, preferred structures. Some implemented the tripartite system while others chose not to include technical schools, establishing instead a bipartite (two part) system of grammars and secondary moderns. This was because technical schools required extra space and expensive specialist equipment. But some LEAs, including the LCC, while initially providing a tripartite system embarked on a radical programme of full 'comprehensivisation' as it was called at the time.

C1.5 - An Education Service

How the 'national system, locally administered' worked in practice is an important element of the Risinghill story. For this reason, it is helpful to explain the system in a little more detail.

Clyde Chitty draws attention to the dynamics of this model where the balancing of autonomy with power and accountability within a loose framework of consensus are described as follows:

As with all ambiguity models, organizational structure is regarded as problematic. There is uncertainty over the relative power of the different parts of the system. The effective power and influence of each element within the structure is said to vary with the issue and according to the level of commitment of the individuals concerned. (Chitty, 1989)

Dr Eric Briault, the deputy Chief Education Officer (CEO) of the LCC at the time of Risinghill, described the system as a 'triangle of tension' – between the school, LEA (locally administered) and government (national system). In his view,

. . . providing the sides held, the tension could be seen as constructive and valuable in preventing the dangers which would arise if too much power became concentrated at one point of the triangle. Briault, 1976, quoted in (Chitty, 1989)

What Briault did not take into consideration, however, was the inherent conflicts between the three points, also the divisions within the triangle. We should perhaps explain that schools, namely the head teacher and Governing Body (GB), were part of the structure. As with the central government and LEAs, this section also enjoyed a level of independence:

I will begin by saying that the local education authorities, as I see it, will have responsibility for the broad type of education given in the secondary schools ... the governing body would, in our view, have the general direction of the curriculum as actually given from day to day, within the school. The head teacher would have, again in our view, responsibility for the internal organization of the school, including the discipline. (Chitty, 1989)

By the time Risinghill came on to the scene (in 1960) the system appeared to be grinding to a halt, largely because the observed protocols and lines of responsibility between the three parties were becoming increasingly blurred. By way of example the central government was wandering into areas that, hitherto, had been strictly the domain of the LEAs, and the LEAs, in turn, were encroaching on territory that, historically, had always been the responsibility of the heads.

Last, but by no means least, was the role of the Chief Education Officer (CEO), a civil servant, in the system we have just described. It is worthwhile here turning to Derek Gillard's (1987) paper *The Chief Education Officer: the real master of local educational provision?* This provides an insight into the extraordinary powers wielded by CEOs, quoting Ribbins:

On the face of it therefore, CEOs have traditionally had considerable opportunities for exercising power, especially in education policy making. Even as late as the 1970s this was still clearly the case. Peter Ribbins, for example, writing about secondary reorganisation, says: 'In most of the case studies a report presented by the CEO is identified as forming the basis for the authority's final decision as to the form of reorganisation to be adopted ... in some cases the identification of the plan with the

CEO was so great that it was even named after him as with the “Peter Plan” in Darlington, where the Conservatives grumbled that the plan was “the view of one man and one man alone.” (Ribbins, 1985)

But at the same time, a CEO was supposed to:

Implement, with care and accuracy, the decisions and policies of the authority as expressed in meetings of the Council and Education Committee ...and must ‘never in public be critical of, or unenthusiastic about, the decisions of the Council.’ (Brooksbank and Ackstine, 1984)

What happened at Risinghill does, therefore, have to be viewed in the context of a delivery system that, in our opinion, was seriously flawed. Without giving too much away at this stage, we can tell you that there was an extraordinary level of interference by the LCC and its CEO in the day-to-day running of the school when this was supposed to have been the responsibility of the school’s GB and its head, Michael Duane:

A constructive result of this meeting, Dr Briault claimed, was that Mr Duane radically reorganised the school into year groups to allow closer supervision by the staff. (Anon, 1968e)

Duane, for the record, did not radically reorganise Risinghill. Following a visit from the LCC’s inspectorate in 1962, he agreed to reorganise the first year into forms but categorically refused to change anything else:

The wholesale reorganisation of the whole school would in my opinion undo the work of the last two years by cutting through the bonds formed between the Tutors and the Heads of House on the one hand and the children, particularly the disturbed children, on the other. (London County Council, 1962c)

He also refused to be coerced on the issue of discipline and punishment (another area in which the LCC inspectorate meddled) but more about that later. It is the 1944

Education Act that we would like to end this chapter with, taking two quotes from a book by Dent (1962) that was written about the 1944 Act in 1962:

After 16 years there are still important sections of the Act not implemented; yet nothing less than complete implementation will suffice to satisfy the nation's needs ...

The Education Act, 1944, concerns intimately every one of us – man, woman, and child. It lays unprecedented obligations upon both the public authorities and the private citizen. Its full implantation – in the spirit in which it was conceived as well as in the letter of its law – may make all the difference between a happy and glorious future for our country and an unhappy inglorious one. To make it a real success, the wholehearted co-operation of every citizen is required.

The 'spirit' in which the Act was conceived and how it was interpreted are an integral part of our story. So too is the question of 'full implementation' which, in the 21st century, has still not been achieved – and indeed may be even further off.
