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EL NUEVO MODELO DE INSPECCIÓN DE EDUCACIÓN EN IRLANDA DEL NORTE y SU COMPARACIÓN CON EL MODELO DE EXTREMADURA1

THE NEW EDUCATION INSPECTION MODEL IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND ITS COMPARISON WITH THE MODEL FROM EXTREMADURA (SPAIN)

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Resumen

El documento analiza y compara los sistemas de inspección educativa de Irlanda del Norte y Extremadura, resaltando su importancia como herramientas estratégicas para transformar los sistemas escolares. El análisis revela similitudes y diferencias clave, aunque se constata que

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ambos sistemas buscan mejorar la calidad educativa y evaluar el liderazgo, garantizando la inclusión del alumnado. Se observa que la Inspección en Irlanda del Norte a través del *"New Framework"* se enfoca más en la cohesión social, la innovación digital y la participación comunitaria, mientras que la Inspección en Extremadura prioriza más el cumplimiento normativo y los métodos pedagógicos tradicionales. Tras analizar, como ejemplo significativo, la intervención de ambos sistemas de Inspección en la evaluación de centros, se propone un modelo híbrido que combinaría el enfoque participativo e innovador de Irlanda del Norte con el rigor normativo de Extremadura, centrándose en el bienestar y la inclusión del alumnado y la participación activa de la comunidad educativa. Finalmente, se identifican desafíos y recomendaciones para ambos sistemas de Inspección de educación.

Palabras clave: Inspección educativa, Irlanda del Norte, Extremadura, Innovación, Calidad, Equidad.

Abstract

The document examines and compares the educational inspection systems of Northern Ireland and Extremadura, highlighting their significance as strategic tools for transforming school systems. The analysis identifies similarities and differences, stating that both systems aim to enhance educational quality and evaluate leadership while ensuring student inclusion.

It is observed that the inspection framework in Northern Ireland, guided by the "New Framework," places greater emphasis on social cohesion, digital innovation, and community engagement. In contrast, the inspection system in Extremadura prioritizes regulatory compliance and traditional pedagogical methods.

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Using school evaluation as a significant case study, the document proposes a hybrid model that integrates Northern Ireland's participatory and innovative approach with Extremadura's regulatory rigor. This model focuses on student well-being, inclusion, and the active involvement of the educational community.

Finally, the document outlines challenges and offers suggestions for improving both educational inspection systems.

Keywords: Educational Inspection, Northern Ireland, Extremadura, Innovation, Quality, Equity.

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INTRODUCTION

Educational inspection systems are strategic tools that not only monitor and evaluate, but also transform school systems. Although it is not feasible to establish a common framework for educational inspection in the European Union due to differences in school supervision between Member States (Ehren, Melanie, Catharina Margaretha et al, 2013, p. 3-43), it is clear that inspection systems in Europe aim at models characterised by improving the educational quality of the system as a whole. These models are characterised by the inspectorate's dialogue with school management teams to ensure compliance with regulations and the promotion of school self-evaluation, making schools active agents of their own development (Brown, M., McNamara, G., Ohara, J., O'Brien, S., Faddar, J., & Young, C. 2018, p. 43).

This article compares the educational inspection systems in Northern Ireland and Extremadura, highlighting differences, similarities and areas for improvement, and proposes a hybrid model that combines the best of both.

The first step will be to analyse the normative framework of these two representative models of educational inspection:

- **Northern Ireland**: The framework developed under the name *"Empowering Improvement - New Framework for Inspection",* in application of key legislative documents such as the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 19982 and the Education (Northern Ireland) Act 20143 , focuses, as we will see below, on pedagogical innovation, school leadership and the well-being and inclusion of pupils. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is the agent that will develop, through this new inspectorate framework, the education

2 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1998/1759/contents
3 https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2014/12/contents

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system's pursuit of quality teaching, social inclusion and technological innovation.

- **Extremadura**: The Education Inspectorate, regulated by Decree 61/2023, supervises and advises the education system, promoting impartiality, advice and continuous improvement.

Having outlined the regulatory framework, it is essential in this analysis to describe the organisation and functioning of the Education Inspectorate in both regions as a preliminary step to the subsequent comparison that we will develop:

- **Northern Ireland**: The educational inspection in Northern Ireland is integrated within the Department of Education, although it provides inspection services to the Department for the Economy, and works closely with the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) at national level in the United Kingdom4 . The main purpose of the Education Inspectorate is to evaluate the quality of teaching in educational institutions, promoting continuous improvement and ensuring accountability to society. To carry out its functions, the inspectorate uses a variety of techniques such as documentary monitoring, direct observation in the classroom and interviews with teaching and administrative staff, techniques that allow it to obtain a comprehensive and accurate view of the functioning of schools, identifying areas of strength and aspects that require improvement. The results of these evaluations are communicated through detailed reports that are accessible to the public, ensuring transparency and accountability.
- In **Extremadura**, the educational inspection depends on the Regional Ministry of Education and is organised into a General Inspectorate and provincial inspectorate teams that operate in a coordinated manner.

4h ttps://www.rqia.org.uk/

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The General Plan of Action of the inspectorate includes a series of actions framed within the functions and attributions of the inspectors related to the evaluation and supervision of the system and the provision of advice to its members. Inspectors make regular visits to schools, where they conduct interviews with teaching and administrative staff, and review relevant documents to assess compliance with regulations and the quality of teaching. From these visits, where necessary, reports are issued containing recommendations and corrective measures to improve the functioning of schools. These reports focus not only on identifying problems, but also on providing practical solutions and guidance to foster the professional development of teachers and the continuous improvement of educational institutions.

"EMPOWERING IMPROVEMENT - NEW FRAMEWORK FOR INSPECTION"

In this policy context, Northern Ireland considered, through its Education Training Inspectorate (ETI), the development of a new framework for its Education Inspectorate which it called "Empowering Improvement - New Framework for Inspection"5 , published by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in September 2024 and which represents, through the following features, a significant advance in the methodology of its educational inspection:

1. **Collaborative and evidence-based approach**. The new inspection framework has been developed in collaboration with schools and educational organisations, ensuring that policies and practices reflect the needs and realities of the educational environment. This

5 https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/empowering-improvement-new-framework-for-inspection_2.pdf

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participatory approach encourages the involvement and engagement of all stakeholders.

2. Main objectives

- Support and Continuous Improvement: The framework is designed to support educational institutions in their continuous improvement process by providing guidance and resources for professional development.
- Transparency and Accountability: Transparency in the inspection process is promoted, ensuring that findings and recommendations are accessible and understandable to all stakeholders.

3. Inspection methodologies

- Documentary Supervision: Exhaustive review of institutional documents to assess compliance with regulations and the quality of educational management.
- Direct observation: On-site assessment through observation of classes and school activities, allowing a direct understanding of pedagogical practices.
- Interviews and Surveys Conducting interviews with teaching staff, administrative staff and students, as well as surveys to collect qualitative and quantitative information about the educational environment.

4. Areas of evaluation

- Quality of Teaching and Learning: Evaluation of pedagogical practices and their impact on student learning.
- Leadership and Management: Analysis of the effectiveness of school leadership and administrative management.

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- Well-being and Integral Development of the student body: Consideration of the physical, emotional and social well-being of students, as well as their integral development.

5. Review and improvement of the framework. The inspection framework will undergo continuous review during its first year of implementation, allowing for adjustments and improvements based on feedback received from educational institutions and other relevant stakeholders.

6. Findings and recommendations. The public inspection reports will provide a detailed overview of the strengths and areas for improvement of each educational institution, offering specific recommendations and corrective measures to foster continuous improvement.

In short, in the words of Faustina Graham in the preamble to the document, this "New Framework" represents a transformation of the inspection process, including such significant aspects as:

- A substantial change in the format of the reports, which now explicitly take into account the context and uniqueness of each school or organisation. The reports will no longer have exclusively quantitative indications of the level of performance of schools and the conclusion will be customised for each school or organisation, with a greater focus on the context, ethos and culture of the school or organisation and its vision and values.
- The formulation of five questions, which will be outlined later in the paper, as the core of all inspections, seeking a renewed learner-centred approach.

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- Greater emphasis on the professional dialogue of the education inspectorate with members of the education system during inspections.
- The use of existing documentation of the school or organisation as evidence for proposals for improvement.
- Greater emphasis on identifying, publicising and disseminating good practices carried out by schools.

It can be seen, therefore, that a new framework, i.e. a structured set of guidelines, principles and procedures that will guide the evaluation and improvement of the Education Inspectorate in Northern Ireland, is intended to be put in place. A new framework that seeks not only to evaluate, but also to empower educational institutions to drive continuous improvement. The mission of this new framework focuses on promoting educational excellence and the holistic well-being of students, while its vision advocates for an inclusive and equitable education system.

The framework, as indicated above, is structured around five key questions that guide the inspection process, ranging from the vision of the school to how educational successes are managed and the right conditions are created for the growth of a learning community:

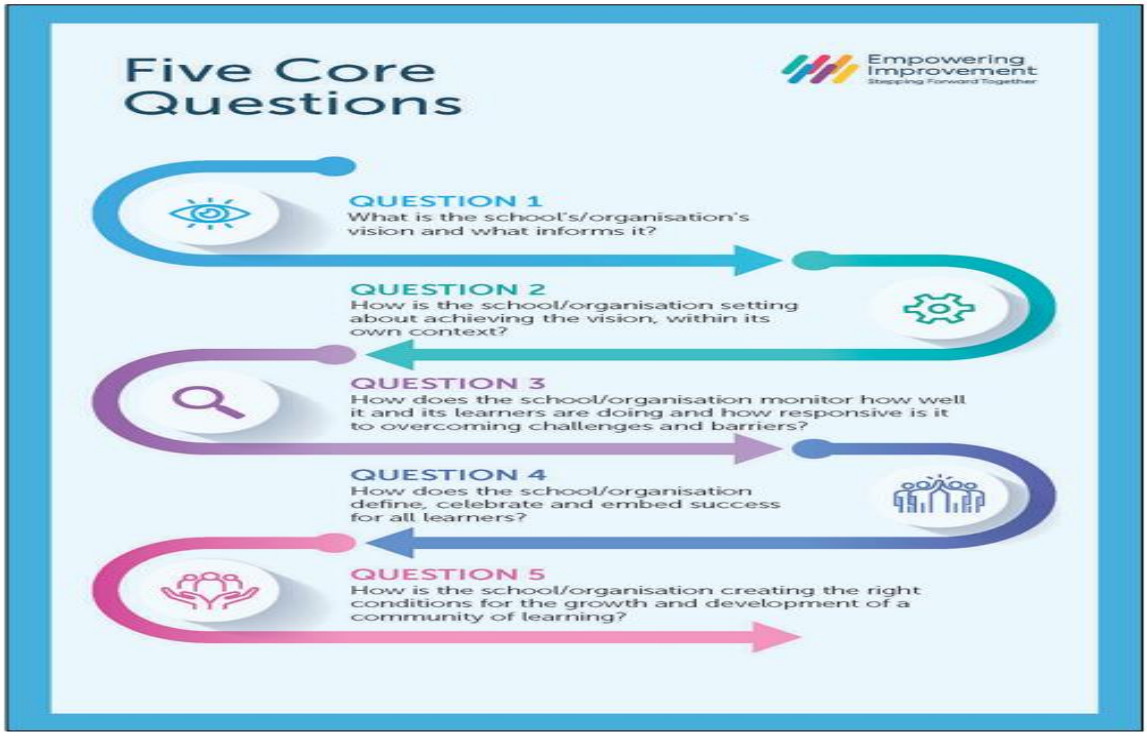
1. What is the school's/ organisation's vision and what informs it?
2. How is the school/organisation setting about achieving the vision, within its own context?
3. How does the school/organisation monitor how well it and its learners are doing and how responsive it is to overcome challenges and barriers?
4. How does the school/organisation define, celebrate and embed success for all learners?

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5. How is the school/organisation creating the right conditions for the growth and development of a community of learning?

FIVE CORE QUESTIONS



("Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection", 2024, p.3).

These questions are broken down into nine contributory areas that provide a comprehensive overview of the key words of the Inspection process:

1. **Curriculum for all**: Ensure that the curriculum is inclusive and accessible to all students.
2. **Planning, teaching and assessment for successful learning**: Improving the quality of teaching and assessment to support effective learning.
3. **Health, wellbeing and keeping safe**: Promote a safe and healthy environment for all students.

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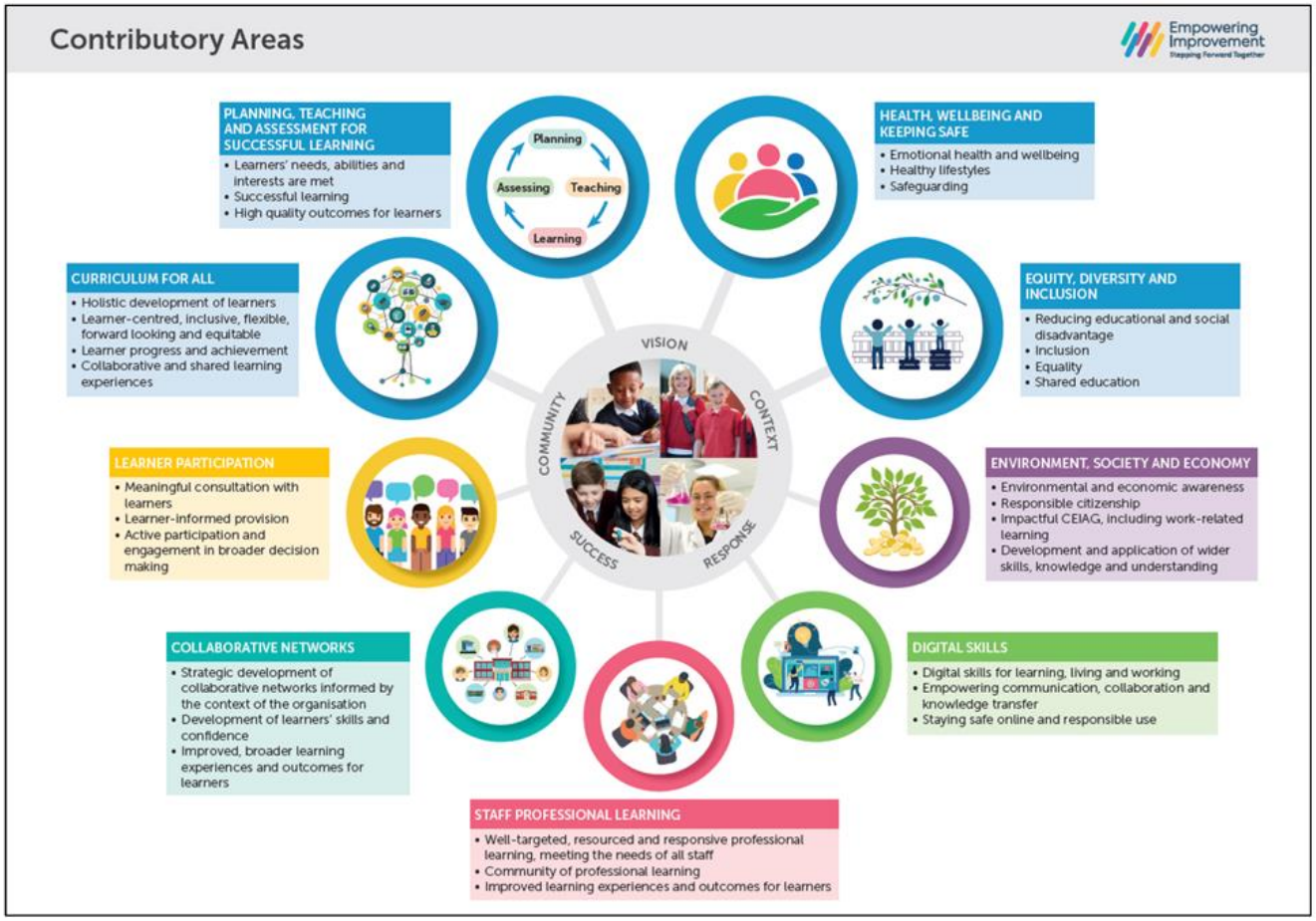
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4. **Equity, diversity and inclusion**: Promoting equal opportunities and inclusion of all students, regardless of their background.
5. **Leadership and management**: Assessing the effectiveness of leadership and management in educational institutions.
6. **Staff professional learning**: Supporting the continuous development of education professionals.
7. **Collaborative networks**: Encourage collaboration between schools and their communities.
8. **Student outcomes and achievement**: To assess the academic performance and achievements of students.
9. **Self-evaluation and continuous improvement**: Promote self-evaluation and continuous improvement within educational institutions.

NINE CONTRIBUTORY AREAS

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("Empowering Improvement: New Framework for Inspection", 2024, p.4).

The inspection process described in the new framework is based on the collection of evidence through multiple sources, such as direct observations, interviews, surveys, and quantitative and qualitative data analysis. Transparency is key, ensuring the active participation of educational institutions at all stages of the inspection process. In addition, the framework will be subject to continuous review during its first year of implementation, allowing for adjustments based on feedback and observed results.

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"EMPOWERING IMPROVEMENT - NEW FRAMEWORK FOR INSPECTION" AND THE INSPECTION SYSTEM IN EXTREMADURA

The next step is to compare this new approach provided by the new framework in Northern Ireland with the inspection system in place in Extremadura, regulated by the Organic Law on Education (LOMLOE) and Decree 61/2023. In Extremadura, by way of summary, the inspection system is characterised by centralised and evaluative supervision, paying special attention to academic results and having as its main objectives to ensure compliance with educational regulations, to evaluate the quality of teaching and academic results and to efficiently manage the resources of educational centres. An inspection system which, in order to ensure compliance with educational regulations, verifies that schools follow the applicable laws and regulations by monitoring the implementation of official curricula and evaluating teaching methods and their effectiveness, as well as students' academic results.

This analysis between the two education systems will be structured in two sections.

1. The first is to set out the similarities and differences between the two inspectorates.
2. The second to exemplify these differences, if possible, although it is already clear that this is not possible, in a specific topic chosen at random, such as the evaluation of centres.

We will begin by describing the similarities found in both inspection systems in the following sections:

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- **Common objectives**: Both systems seek to improve the quality of education and to ensure equitable and quality education.
- **Leadership assessment**: The effectiveness of school leadership and management in both regions is assessed.
- **Commitment to inclusion**: Strategies to address vulnerable students are a priority in both systems.
- **Teacher evaluation**: The quality of teaching practice and leadership is assessed through observation, interviews and document review in both systems.
- **Self-evaluation**: Self-evaluations are essential to prepare schools for external inspections and subsequent improvement plans.

It then goes on to outline the following differences:

- **General approach**:
    - Northern Ireland: The New Framework focuses on continuous improvement, pedagogical innovation and student well-being.
    - Extremadura: Regulations focus on the supervision, control and enforcement of education regulations.
- **Social cohesion**: In Northern Ireland, this is a key priority due to the context of the Troubles6 , while in Extremadura the focus is more on diversity than on social inequality.
- **Digital innovation**: Northern Ireland has an emerging focus on digital platforms, whereas in Extremadura it is more established.

6 *The Troubles* was a violent conflict in Northern Ireland that lasted approximately 30 years, from the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This conflict pitted two main groups against each other: Unionists/Protestants, who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists/Catholics, who sought unification with the Republic of Ireland.

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- **Pedagogical innovation**: In Northern Ireland the focus is on the personalisation of this innovation, whereas in Extremadura it is more uniform but more rigid and normative.
- **Pupil well-being**: Centralised in Northern Ireland, including emotional health and safety, less prominent in Extremadura.
- **Inclusion and equity**: Prioritised in Northern Ireland with specific measures, in Extremadura their application is less uniform but more normative.
- **Teacher development**: Continually encouraged in Northern Ireland, limited and not always linked to inspection in Extremadura.
- **Pedagogical evaluation**: Innovative and active in Northern Ireland, traditional and normative in Extremadura.
- **Use of evidence and feedback**: Dynamic in Northern Ireland, more formalistic in Extremadura.
- **Key indicators and areas of evaluation**: In Northern Ireland focus on well-being, inclusion and active learning, in Extremadura on academic outcomes and regulatory compliance.
- **System innovation and flexibility**: More dynamic and adaptive in Northern Ireland, more rigid and sometimes dependent on political guidelines in Extremadura.
- **Participation and transparency**:
    - Northern Ireland: Promotes active participation of all stakeholders (teachers, students, families and school heads) in the evaluation process.
    - Extremadura: The participation of the education community is more limited, centred mainly on management teams and teaching staff, although represented in the School Councils of the schools.
- **Training and professional development:**

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- Northern Ireland: Prioritises in-service training for education staff and the use of contemporary research to improve educational practice.
- Extremadura: Training of inspectors is continuous, but could benefit from further integration with inspection processes and evaluation results.

- **Inspection methodology:**
  - Northern Ireland: Uses an evidence-based approach to visits, with a strong emphasis on institutional self-assessment and active collaboration.
  - Extremadura: The inspection is carried out through visits to the centres, interviews, document review and issuing of reports.
- **Priority areas for action:**
  - Northern Ireland: Focuses on the quality of learning and teaching, school leadership, student well-being and efficiency in the use of resources.
  - Extremadura: Focuses on monitoring compliance and evaluation of the education system.

Having outlined the similarities and differences, as a preliminary step to presenting the conclusions and proposals, it is appropriate to compare the two inspection systems applied to a process, the evaluation of schools, in a randomly selected school in both regions.

In Northern Ireland - the example of *Gracehill Primary School and* Nursery Unit*7* has been chosen. This school has been chosen for two reasons, because it is the latest report published, at the time of writing, on 20 November 2024 in the reports section of the ETI website*8* , a report which already reflects the spirit of the New Framework, and the second reason is

7h ttps://www.gracehillps.com
8 https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/type/inspectionreports

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because this school is a clear example of the evolution of the inspection system in Northern Ireland through 3 public reports carried out in 20099 , 201710 and the one mentioned in November 202411 . By simply looking at the indexes of the aforementioned reports, it can be seen that in 2009 the inspection report focused mainly on statistical and numerical aspects, on concepts such as the teaching-learning process and the leadership and management of schools, topics which may be quite similar to those included in an inspection report in Extremadura. The inspection report carried out in March 2017, does not differ in essence in its table of contents from the concepts outlined in 2009, highlighting as an anecdote that, due to union action, teachers did not cooperate with inspectors, thus limiting the full evaluation process of that school. However, it can be seen that the culture of self-evaluation is beginning to identify priorities for improvement in the school and information is appearing on issues related to child protection, emotional intelligence and pupil well-being, which were not previously noted. It is in the 2024 report that terms that define *the* New Framework described above appear, such as:

- Considering the data obtained from parents', pupils' and staff's opinions as very important. For example, Year 7 pupils highlighted the opportunities to develop leadership skills or the positive feedback from parents when they received data, not just quantitative data, on their children's progress and learning.
- The inclusive and welcoming environment provided by the school, with a focus on children's emotional well-being and holistic development.

9 https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/focused-inspection-gracehill-primary-school-ballymena
10 https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/report-primary-inspection-gracehill-primary-school-and-nursery-unit
11 https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/report-primary-inspection-gracehill-primary-school-and-nursery-unit

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- The self-evaluation and school improvement planning processes that the school leadership team has implemented.
- The need to review teaching planning to ensure progression in learning and to cater for the diversity of skills in the classroom.
- The school is achieving its vision, a key concept of the New Framework, of "Caring, learning, achieving. Together", although areas for improvement in planning and assessment were identified to better meet the needs of all pupils.
- The supportive environment and good relations are a feature of the school's vision as an ideology, together with child protection, training for non-teaching staff and the promotion of healthy habits.
- The principal's leadership is effective, supported by a competent management team.
- In conclusion, the school has significant strengths and some areas for improvement, such as increasing the options offered to the most able pupils and improving the monitoring and evaluation of the school. The Pre-school Unit also shows similar strengths and areas for improvement.

When looking for a report similar to those presented for this school in Northern Ireland in Extremadura, we have to note that we did not find any inspection reports on comprehensive school evaluations, despite having regulations since 2002 that could frame such action12, regulations that assigned to the education inspectorate in Extremadura a leading role as the agent responsible for the external evaluation of schools and despite having

12 Order of 26 August 2002, on the evaluation of publicly funded schools in the Autonomous Community of Extremadura that teach the subjects established in the General Organic Law of the Education System. In 2011, a "Plan for the improvement of educational success" was designed based on article 13 of Law 4/2011 on Education in Extremadura, to be integrated into the educational project of each centre, on a multi-annual basis. The aforementioned Law 4/2011 on Education in Extremadura devotes its Title VII to the evaluation of the education system and specifically Article 171 to the evaluation of educational centres, for which the Evaluation Agency, now defunct, was created.

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a school evaluation action included in the General Action Plan of the Education Inspectorate of Extremadura as a regular action. Therefore, no comprehensive school evaluations have been carried out in Extremadura; in fact, the only official school evaluation procedure was the comprehensive evaluation of bilingual sections carried out during the 2013/2014 academic year13 . This evaluation focused on relevant issues such as the compliance of the organisation and functioning of the section with the regulations, the grouping models (unitary and mixed groups), the assessment of the methodology and the monitoring of coordination meetings, and included a follow-up report on key aspects by the Educational Inspection and Evaluation Service.

However, although the Autonomous Community of Extremadura does not have an institutionally established plan for the evaluation of schools, it is fair to mention the actions of the Education Inspectorate of Extremadura in an attempt to reverse this current lack of institutional initiative in the future:

- The "Plan Director de Actuación de la Inspección Educativa 2023-2026"14 includes a strategic line of work related to educational centres, consisting of the "evaluation of educational centres [...] through the analysis of the organisation, operation and processes of teaching and learning for educational improvement, with the effect of recognising achievements, introducing innovations and, where appropriate, proposals for improvement" and cites, among the usual actions, two with a direct impact on the evaluation of centres, which would be the "a. Supervision, monitoring, evaluation and assessment in the area of the organisation and operation of educational centres, both public and private, programmes and services" and "b.

13 The report resulting from this evaluation, as well as the regulations that governed it and a list of the participating schools can be consulted through the following link, available on the Educarex educational portal: secciones-bilingues.html https://www.educarex.es/evaluacion-estadistica/evaluacion-integral
14 https://www.educarex.es/pub/cont/com/0050/documentos/plan_director_DOE.pdf

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Supervision, monitoring, evaluation and advice on academic planning in educational centres". However, the reports resulting from these actions are criticised for not including a qualitative and in-depth assessment and, above all, realistic and contextualised proposals for improvement.

- The creation of a working group within the Education Inspectorate of Extremadura created to design instruments to implement improvement plans for schools following the external evaluation process.
- The participation of the Education Inspectorate of Extremadura in the Erasmus+ Project 2018-1-ES01 KA201-049937, called "Supervising Schools in the 21st Century: Digital Tools and Improvement Plans (SS21DTIP)" which included a case study on the practice in six schools in Extremadura, in order to explore to what extent school self-evaluation has become a fundamental part of the daily functioning of school life, producing a self-evaluation and school improvement manual in the form of a digital tool .15

Having set out this comparison exemplified in the evaluation of schools, and by way of a summary prior to the conclusions, the following challenges for both inspection systems can be extrapolated from my humble perspective, based on concepts already set out above. The challenges for Northern Ireland would be to ensure the sustainability of the new framework, which will require not only resources but also a continued commitment; to ensure that the evaluation of the system is realistic in order to avoid self-evaluation being a burden rather than a benefit; and to focus more of the inspectorate's work on diversity, pupil well-being and equity. As far as Extremadura is concerned, challenges are proposed in actions that improve the

15 ss21dtip - Supervising Schools in the 21st century. Digital tools and improvement plans

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decentralisation of the system and avoid inequalities in the quality of inspections; the design of actions related to the training of inspectors that modernise approaches and training; in including not only regulatory aspects in the actions but also other aspects that improve the integral development of pupils and their welfare; improvements and finally, in the commitment to transparency by adopting a more public approach to the reports.

And to consider the following **conclusions**:

- We can conclude that both are strong education inspection systems that address challenges specific to their socio-cultural contexts. Northern Ireland excels in social cohesion and transparency, while Extremadura has a robust approach to digitisation and regulatory rigour. An exchange of best practices could enhance both systems, benefiting both students and the wider education communities.
- The new inspection framework in Northern Ireland is notable for its collaborative and evidence-based approach, with strong involvement of schools and organisations in its design. In contrast, inspection in Extremadura has a more centralised and normative approach. Both systems share the aim of improving the quality of education, but differ in their methodologies and approaches to implementation and monitoring.
- Northern Ireland's model can be considered more inclusive and adaptive, but its success will depend on consistent implementation and continuous evaluation. In contrast, the Extremadura system, although well-structured, faces challenges related to decentralisation and variability in resources, approaches and transparency of reporting.

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Therefore, mutual learning between the two models could enrich inspection practices in both contexts, hence the proposal for a hybrid model of Educational Inspection with these characteristics:

1. A participatory and collaborative approach including schools, teachers and educational organisations, promoting a sense of ownership and commitment among all actors involved, strengthening trust and cooperation between inspectors, teachers and the educational community.

2. Transparency and continuous evaluation through the implementation of a continuous review process of the inspection framework during its first year of implementation, with official and public annual evaluations of the General Action Plan and the Provincial Plans in the case of Extremadura.

3. Education and training of inspectors in technological tools, contemporary methodologies and emotional management.

4. A focus on diversity and equity that supports the inclusion and holistic well-being of all students to achieve an equitable education system through the implementation of programmes that address students' needs and significantly improve the quality of education.

5. **Transparency** in the inspection process with a more public approach to inspection reports promoting accountability.

7. Planning and evaluation of education systems that allows for a more complete understanding of the well-being and holistic development of students, developing specific indicators that reflect national and regional education priorities to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the education system.

In short, it is clear that, although recent efforts in the Inspectorate of Extremadura to improve its actions are commendable, looking at initiatives such as the New Framework in Northern Ireland can reduce the road, which is still long to go, ensure the standardisation and institutionalisation of actions through a process-based management approach, This will ensure

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that the Inspectorate in Extremadura, and in many other autonomous communities in Spain, can no longer be characterised by the Latin aphorism of Gregory the Great: *omnia videre, multa dissimulare, pauca corrigere.*

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