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Inspectors to the ready!

The new inspection framework for Catholic schools

Matthew Dell explores the change from diocesan inspection to a national approach, the Catholic Schools Inspectorate (CSI).

Inspection is changing for Catholic schools. Over the last few years, the Catholic Education Service and NBRIA (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors) have been working together to develop a national inspection framework, and the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has authorised a new inspection framework for all Catholic schools, under the name Catholic Schools Inspectorate (CSI). They have also been busy recruiting and training inspectors for this new inspection regime which starts this autumn. In this article, I suggest that this change is a positive step in the exercise of collegiality and will strengthen Catholic education in England and Wales.

Why have Church inspections?

Some might challenge the need for the Church to inspect its schools, arguing that there is enough inspection with Ofsted and other government accountability measures. Leaders in Catholic schools suffer from a 'double regulatory framework';¹ state legal requirements as well as canonical obligations. However, I feel strongly that Catholic schools are potentially fragile and prone to suffer from 'mission drift' especially when teachers appointed to leadership teams lack concern for the Catholic nature of the school. A classic danger is the newly appointed Catholic headteacher, who has not worked in a Catholic school before, who perhaps has not paid sufficient attention to their personal induction regarding what Catholic education demands, who then through neglect or deliberate actions undermines the Catholic identity of their school. In these situations, Catholic school inspection acts as a vital safeguard.

Catholic school inspection also acts as a way to ensure that the leadership of the school maintains and develops a relationship with the Church. There is a risk that those leading Catholic schools can see themselves as separate from the Church, whereas there is a need to be in communion with the diocese. Inspection is carried out on behalf of the bishop and is a tangible reminder of that relationship. The reports are often celebrations of good practice, and it is common practice for schools to draw attention to their diocesan reports as part of their promotion to prospective parents.

The need for change

The current model of diocesan inspection has been in place since the introduction of Ofsted in 1992. For over 30 years, each diocese has made their own arrangements for the inspection of classroom religious education, prayer and liturgy and the Catholic life and mission of the school. This has been supported by the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors (NBRIA), who have helpfully provided inspection frameworks for dioceses to use as they wish. However, as the NBRIA frameworks have only been advisory, some dioceses have made their own arrangements, which has led to an inconsistent approach to inspection across Catholic schools in England and Wales.

The change is for a national inspection framework for all Catholic schools; it will be called the Catholic Schools Inspectorate (CSI). This change will bring us in line with the Church of England and the Methodist Church which use a single national framework for the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS). It may be helpful

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to have a similar system, especially if there was a concerted effort to challenge this arrangement between the state and faith schools. To have a national system of inspection may help protect the current state funding arrangements, as there have been calls to end the state support of faith school inspection.²

The system of individual dioceses organising their own inspections had one significant strength in that it fulfils Canon Law precisely. The bishop has the right to ‘watch over’ (inspect) his schools (Canons 804 and 806). However, there are many weaknesses. First, dioceses vary in size and smaller dioceses may have issues in managing inspection processes,

getting sufficiently qualified and trained inspectors, and then quality-assuring those inspections. Secondly, variations in inspection processes across dioceses make it difficult to make comparisons between schools in dioceses, that could in turn lead to regional differences on issues. Thirdly, there could be an accusation of favouritism. Individual dioceses using their preferred local inspectors to inspect in their ‘own patch’ resulting in their schools receiving a ‘congratulatory pat on the back’, rather than a rigorous objective inspection.

Another area that has been inconsistent is the inspection of private Catholic schools. Some dioceses have only been inspecting state funded

Catholic schools. This could be described as negligent as all Catholic schools should be ‘watched over’ by the bishop, based on Canon Law. Catholic school inspection can be seen as the Church taking a keen interest in its schools, a pastoral responsibility, a duty of care. Prior to the formation of Ofsted (1992) and the renewal of denominational inspection for Catholic schools, there was a long tradition of inspecting Catholic schools. In this country, the history of inspection has been documented well by Peter Ward who identified the first inspection of a Catholic school back in February 1849.³ A fascinating insight into Catholic school inspection is provided by Canon Drinkwater who wrote a booklet primarily for young priests who had the responsibility of inspecting Catholic schools on behalf of their bishop.⁴ In his honest and humble presentation, he discusses the problem of inspection reports, debating the value of them and the reception by the school of any criticism. I hope to think that Canon Drinkwater would be in favour of the new approach to Catholic school inspection as his primary concern was that inspection has a positive impact on the education of pupils.

State-funded Catholic schools (Academies and Voluntary Aided schools) have been subject to denominational inspection under various sections of the relevant educational legislation.⁵ I have been a diocesan inspector for over 20 years; my first inspection was in 1999. Back then I was called a ‘Section 23 Inspector’; then this was changed in 2005, and I was called a ‘Section 48 Inspector’. What is interesting about these two titles is that my identity as an inspector for the bishop was framed through secular government legislation. With the new CSI, this secular framing of Catholic school inspection will be discarded, and inspectors are simply CSI inspectors.

Advantages of the change

A strength of a national system will be that it will help dioceses focus more on supporting schools, leaving the inspection to a national system. Diocesan advisors to Catholic schools can concentrate on just advising their schools. In the early days of my inspection experience, I worked with a lead inspector who was also the diocesan advisor. I felt this was not a professional arrangement. The new system will be potentially a fairer and more transparent system. It will have a

clear process for dealing with complaints with the aim of all schools being judged in a consistent way according to their particular context.

Over time, inspection reports generated by the CSI will enable the development of data that hopefully will identify trends and issues within Catholic education. The CSI will be able to produce reports based on this data that will guide Catholic educators to improve their provision. The motto of Ofsted is ‘improvement through inspection’, hopefully with a national system the data from all diocesan inspections can be pulled together so that insights can be drawn and improvements made that in turn will benefit the experience of pupils. I have observed some stunning practice in Catholic schools, so much so that in some reports I have written ‘... this is an area of outstanding practice that other schools may want to learn from’. With a national inspection approach such examples could be drawn together more easily and shared more widely. CSI has the potential to be a powerhouse for Catholic school improvement.

For the academic community that is focused on research into Catholic education, the introduction of CSI is a significant step forward. The problem with the current system of individual diocesan inspections is that large scale analysis has been restrained by the different inspection frameworks that each diocese has had. I recently co-authored a paper that was partly based on an analysis of 75 diocesan inspection reports from four dioceses.⁶ In selecting the four dioceses, we had to use ones which followed identical frameworks; we were restricted in our choice. Academics may be inspired by the introduction of CSI to take a keener interest in using inspection reports as an evidence base for their research.

The inspectors

Another good feature of the new CSI is in the recruitment for inspectors. The system for appointing, now called ‘licensing’ inspectors, is transparent and consistent. The person specification makes it a requirement for the potential inspector to be a practicing Catholic and have a reference from their local parish priest. This is significant as the inspector is acting on behalf of the bishop and therefore needs to be in communion with the Church. Inspectors, once licensed, can carry out inspections across diocesan

boundaries, potentially making it easier for dioceses to find inspectors from a ‘national register’. The new national system will also have the potential to improve the ongoing formation of inspectors, with regular regional training conferences. National quality assurance procedures will help refine the system and ensure high levels of consistency across the dioceses. This can strengthen the process, making it fairer, more objective, and ensuring that inspectors act ‘without fear or favour’.

Collegiality and subsidiarity

CSI is on one level an expression of collegiality. Here the bishops of England and Wales have recognised that by acting together they can strengthen Catholic schools. Another good example of collegiality in action is CAFOD, and it is my hope that CSI will also become a positive example of diocesan collaboration. In another sense, CSI is also an expression of the Church applying the principle of subsidiarity. Subsidiarity is sometimes misunderstood as trying to ensure that decision making is organised at the lowest level; however, it is about finding the right level for the decision making, noting that the lowest level is not always the best level. A national approach to Catholic school inspection is recognising that it is best that this activity is carried out at a national level rather than the local level (diocesan).

New instructions from Rome

The recent instruction from the Congregation for Education has reminded bishops of their right and duty to visit each Catholic school in their diocese, adding that ‘the Bishop is required to visit them at least every five years’.⁷ This matches the current cycle of Catholic school inspections which are approximately every five years. The instruction goes on to outline that the bishop should take with them suitable qualified companions (lay and/or clerics), and that the visit should focus on certain areas such as the quality of the curriculum, and ‘the conformity of the educational project of the school with the doctrine and discipline of the Church’. The suggestion is that the visit is divided into three stages: a pre-visitation document prepared by the school; the visit itself in which a report is drawn up with recommendations; a post-visitation implementation of said recommendations. This feels very familiar for

Catholic schools in England and Wales in that it mirrors the standard inspection experience, except the presence of a bishop. In my experience of inspection, over 20 years in three different dioceses, I have never had a bishop join the inspection – it would make for an interesting experience!

Conclusion

The new inspection arrangements for Catholic schools will start this autumn, and it is very much hoped that the pupils in Catholic schools will benefit from them. The aim of inspection is to ensure that pupils receive their entitlement to quality religious education, that they experience prayer and liturgy that enhances their spiritual development, and that they have an authentic experience of Catholic community in their school. The new Catholic Schools Inspectorate has a significant responsibility on behalf of our Catholic community in safeguarding as well as developing Catholic Education.

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¹ Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions), ‘The Identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue’ (2022), par. 75, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_2022_0125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html.

² See for example: <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2017/06/nss-calls-for-end-to-state-funded-religiosity-inspections-in-schools>.

³ Ward, P., ‘Step by step: An introduction to the history of Catholic denominational inspection in England and Wales’, in Whittle, S. (ed.), *Irish and British Reflections on Education: Foundations, identity, leadership issues and religious education in Catholic schools*, Singapore: Springer, 2021.

⁴ Drinkwater, F. H., *The Religious Schools Inspector: Some hints for beginners*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1962.

⁵ Education (Schools) Act 1992, Section 13; Schools Inspection Act 1996, Section 23; Education Act 2005, Section 48.

⁶ Cottrell-Boyce, A., & Dell, M., ‘Active Participation in Catholic school-based liturgy’, *International Studies in Catholic Education* 14:2 (2022), forthcoming.

⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions), ‘The Identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue’ (2022), par.59 f.