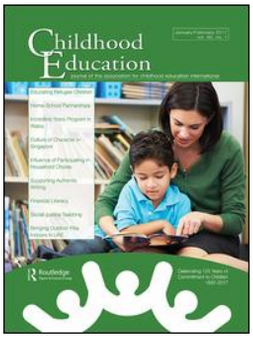

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Is Personalized Learning the Future of School?

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When I first stepped into Santa María la Blanca School in Madrid, Spain, one of the world's top 35 most innovative schools, and saw how their Education: Basic & Interactive (EBI) Project was implemented, I thought about my own school teaching days in Chicago, when our school principal asked us to adapt our lesson plans according to our own students' levels.

Personalization is never easy, but this innovative teaching approach can offer the change needed for school improvement. When entering an EBI classroom, you would see students focused on accomplishing self-guided tasks and eager to move on to the next challenge in their self-paced learning. The EBI Project is based on the Iruaritz-Lezama Foundation pedagogical model, an innovative model of customized teaching focused on creating a personalized teaching environment that caters to all students' needs.

What Is Personalization?

How can schools foster active student participation and turn classrooms into personalized and diverse learning scenarios? A Santa María la Blanca school administrator shared with me the story of how his school was customizing individual learning and the teaching-learning classroom environment through EBI. The EBI Project uses Microsoft Dynamics CRM Online as a communication tool and the curriculum is designed based on the individual needs and interests of every student. Through the EBI Project, students connect everything they learn to their own reality while using technology as the platform for personalized learning.

Differentiation enriches this pedagogical model. We all learn in different ways and so students are designers of their learning experiences. As Andreas Schleicher[1], the Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), said after his visit to Santa María la Blanca,

> It was all about the learning environments and about learner ownership. The lessons weren't one-size-fits-all. . . . I witnessed students designing their own learning experiences on constant reviews and revisions of their learning goals. These students were able to explain to an outsider, like myself, what they were learning, how they were learning, and why it mattered.

This personalization results as students and educators adjust their thinking and understanding about their roles and how people learn. The EBI Project uses their own individual research-based and developmentally appropriate diagnostic assessments and prompts that measure personal and academic readiness. The results are used to inform the classroom teacher of students' skill levels; teachers then can design a customized Student Learning Plan along with a comprehensive monitoring plan for each student while personalizing the curriculum to each student's learning style (see Figure 1). This educational methodology enables students to work according to their own unique learning rhythm, helping them develop strategies to overcome challenges along their learning journey and achieve their goals.

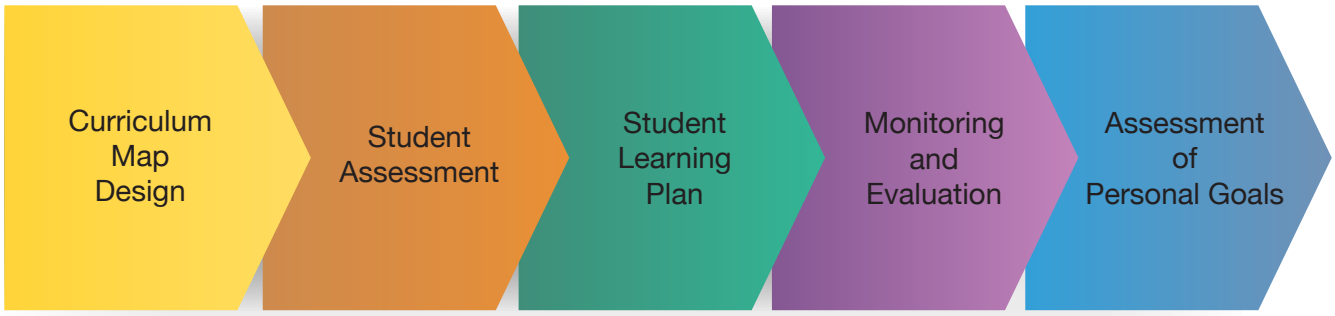

Figure 1. The Personalization of the Learning Process
Source: Adapted from the Iruaritz-Lezama Foundation.

The Personalization of the Learning Process at an EBI School

Although teachers need to work together to support the EBI overall mission, students need to understand their own role. Transitioning to this student-centered learning environment may create a sense of anxiety or uncertainty, since teachers are expected to act as "analysts," "specialized teachers," and "tutors," and students become the "creators of knowledge," taking ownership of their own learning. But Santa María la Blanca school teachers are more than facilitators who guide students through their curriculum, facilitating their learning. They give directions and support each student's education by providing academic and personal counseling as they assist students in the process of becoming autonomous learners.

After a one-week teacher training camp, same-grade teachers work together to design the Curriculum Map to determine how content, skills, assessments, and other essential questions will unfold over the course of the year. This map provides an in-depth view of the many elements necessary in educating students, including instructional techniques and assignments students will go over in the school year. An EBI school designs four Adaptive Learning Guides to satisfy each classroom learner profile (special needs, learning difficulties, at level, and gifted) and how well and to what extent they meet the national learning standards and students' unique learning level based on their capabilities (see Figure 2). These instructional adaptive contents take full advantage of the collaborative online EBI platform. Adaptive Curriculum Guides for each subject topic comprise (1) *heading* (general information about the duration, the learning goals, and key competencies of the unit), (2) *start point* (subject topic-specific tasks that activate students' cognitive maps, interests, and motivation), (3) *research* (individual and/or group research activities using concept maps, charts, diagrams, and timelines among other resources), (4) *skill development* (individual and/or group opportunities to deepen the new learned material by applying concepts and articulating new knowledge), and (5) *relationship* (individual and/or group activities to connect content to reality and support students in developing the targeted competencies).

Santa María la Blanca teachers have adopted this formal self-directed or autonomous learning model, maintaining high expectations of performance as students, from grade 3 and up, establish goals and work through the customized curriculum adapted to their personal level and capacity. Students

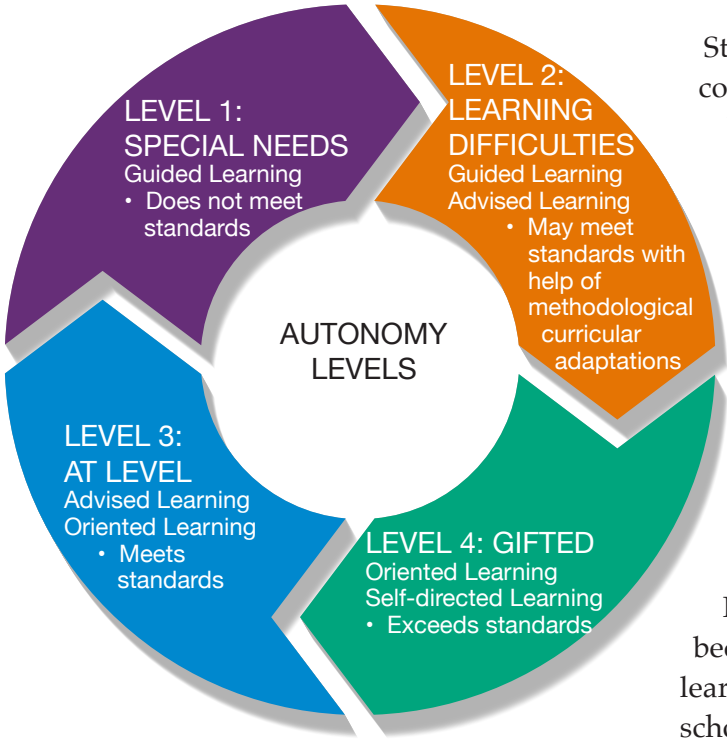

Figure 2. Adaptive Learning Guides
Source: Adapted from the Iruaritz-Lezama Foundation.

are empowered to plan their daily, weekly, monthly, and semester goals and have strategic meetings for designing a class plan. Students use the EBI technology platform via their classroom netbook or tablet to organize, evaluate, and internalize their learning on a day-to-day basis. They engage in goal-directed activities that target their appropriate level of challenge in different areas of the curriculum. Individual and small-group practice is coupled with teachers' feedback about students' individual performance to help them progress in meeting the established standards and goals. Teachers also monitor and adjust their students' learning, allowing them to take an active role and deepen their skills and outcomes.

Student-teacher interaction, peer collaboration, and active learning have been positively correlated with academic achievement[2]. When students and teachers work together within EBI settings, they ask questions, identify problems, create solutions, and transform knowledge through active learning. The EBI classroom setting also incorporates communicative structures for engaging students and teachers in constructive discourse and shared problem solving, rethinking their relationship to empower students. From this perspective, the EBI approach becomes the lever for changing the teaching-learning practice and outcomes within the school.

More Than Test Scores

Although Spain's obsession with achievement testing has made it harder to innovate, the adoption of this revolutionary EBI education system developed with Microsoft to advance the way children learn for the future helped students get more out of the curriculum, and, crucially, increased students' achievement and gave a boost to their 21st century skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving.

New 2016 standardized test results show that Santa María la Blanca students are top performers in math, reading, and science (mean scores of 533, 536, and 526, respectively), or the equivalent of nearly two years of schooling above the OECD average. These PISA-based Test for Schools (or OECD Test for Schools, as it is known in the United States) results show that this school has improved dramatically since they adopted the EBI Project in 2009. They have turned in some of the highest test scores in Europe, even ranking above the West's reigning education superpower, Finland (see Figure 3).

The PISA results in Figure 3 reveal what is possible using the EBI education system. This personalized pedagogical model has improved student academic performance, demonstrating that education can be transformed in ways heretofore unthinkable. In fact, Santa María la Blanca's success has led other school districts to learn from those best practices across the school to develop each student's dormant potential to reach a level of excellence, and make personalized learning a reality. *It is the adventure and challenge for all educators to develop each student's potential as they progress to higher-level work.* This school invests much time and effort to ensure that all students have the supports they need to succeed in school. As Andreas Schleicher said,

	Mathematics	Reading	Science
Shanghai-China	613	570	580
Japan	536	538	547
Korea	554	536	538
SMB School	**536**	**533**	**526**
Finland	519	524	545
OECD average	494	496	501
Spain	484	488	496
USA	481	498	497

Figure 3. Snapshot of performance in mathematics, reading, and science
Source: OECD[3]

> Santa María la Blanca has moved beyond the paradigms of standardisation and compliance and enables their teachers to be inventive. The teachers are no longer looking upwards to bureaucracy, but look outwards to the next teacher and the next school to create a network of innovation. . . . If all Spaniards knew what some Spanish schools know, students would probably match their peers in the world's top performing education systems. . . . Perhaps there is not much we can find in Singapore that we can't see somewhere in Spain too.

Today, the seeds of such a dramatic transformation in education are being planted in the state of Washington. Some Seattle schools are restructuring themselves, taking the lead in adopting the EBI framework. Participating schools will receive target instructional and professional development time and resources from the implementation team so they can adopt this personalized learning and individualize instruction methodology and accelerate students' personal and academic growth and achievement. By doing so, Seattle schools will provide a customized teaching and learning experience to support their students as they embark on this pedagogical model for school improvement. So the question remains: Are we up to the challenge of making personalized learning the future of school?

Notes:

[1]Schleicher, A. (2014). What Spanish schools can learn from Spanish schools. *Education & Skills Today. Global Perspectives on Education and Skills*. Retrieved from http://oecdeducationtoday.blogspot.com/2014/04/what-spanish-schools-can-learn-from.html

[2]Martin, A., & Marsh, H. (2003). Fear of failure: Friend or foe? *Australian Psychologist, 38*, 31-38.

[3]Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2016). *Dónde se sitúa su centro educativo en el contexto internacional. PISA para centros educativos 2015-2016.* Paris, France: OECD. •