

Research reading list

The MARIO Reading List

Research foundations for human-
centered student support

Why this list exists

Schools do not struggle to care about students. They struggle to make care consistent. Most schools already have committed adults, strong intentions, and more student information than ever, yet important signals still fail to become timely, owned, well-coordinated adult action. MARIO exists to close that gap.

This reading list is a curated guide to the research MARIO is built on. It is written for school leaders, student support teams, and governing boards who want to understand, and be able to defend, the evidence behind a decision to work with MARIO. It is intentionally short: a curated map of the strongest evidence, not an exhaustive bibliography.

MARIO is not built around a single intervention or a single study. It operationalizes several of the most durable evidence bases in education (trusted adult relationships, metacognition and self-regulated learning, student voice and self-advocacy, wellbeing and belonging, formative insight and feedback, coordinated systems of support, and implementation quality) into one connected, practical model of student support. Technology plays an enabling role in that model. It is not the center of it. The center is the relationship between students and the adults who know, guide, and support them.

How we talk about evidence, four honest claim levels

- 1 The underlying practices, relationships, reflection, feedback, coordinated support, are well evidenced. That is what this document shows.
- 2 MARIO operationalizes those practices in school systems, pairing software with professional learning and implementation partnership.
- 3 MARIO's own approach to frequent 1:1 learning conversations has been externally studied, with published, peer-reviewed results (section 8).
- 4 Schools should still evaluate implementation quality and outcomes over time, and should be wary of any provider who claims otherwise.

Each section that follows names an evidence area, explains why it matters for schools, summarizes what the research suggests in plain language, and lists a small number of credible sources worth reading in full.

1

Trusted adult relationships

Why this matters

Students engage more deeply, persist longer, and seek help sooner when they are known by a trusted adult. For many students, especially those navigating learning differences, transitions, or difficult seasons, one consistent, caring adult is the difference between coping and disappearing.

What the research suggests

This is one of the most robust findings in education research. Cornelius-White's meta-analysis of 119 studies covering more than 355,000 students found that learner-centered teacher-student relationships are meaningfully associated with stronger engagement, participation, and achievement. Roorda and colleagues found the effects are strongest for academically at-risk students, the students schools most worry about. Meta-analytic work on teacher immediacy links frequent, warm, responsive adult contact to student motivation, and positive relationships are associated with teacher wellbeing too.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO's foundation is the structured 1:1 conversation between a student and a trusted adult. The software does not replace that relationship; it strengthens the conditions around it, helping schools make meaningful adult-student connection more consistent, visible, and sustainable across an entire student body, not just for the students who are easiest to reach.

Selected reading

Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-centered teacher-student relationships are effective: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 113–143.

Synthesis of 119 studies: positive, learner-centered relationships are consistently associated with stronger student engagement and achievement.

Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., Spilt, J. L., & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher–student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A meta-analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(4), 493–529.

Relationship effects on engagement and achievement are strongest for academically at-risk students.

Allen, M., Witt, P. L., & Wheelless, L. R. (2006). The role of teacher immediacy as a motivational factor in student learning: Using meta-analysis to test a causal model. *Communication Education*, 55(1), 21–31.

Frequent, responsive teacher contact drives student motivation across cognitive and affective learning.

Spilt, J. L., Koomen, H. M. Y., & Thijs, J. T. (2011). Teacher wellbeing: The importance of teacher–student relationships. *Educational Psychology Review*, 23(4), 457–477.

Strong teacher-student relationships also support teacher wellbeing, relational investment is not a workload tax.

Takeaway for school advocates

MARIO is not collecting wellbeing data for its own sake. It is designed around the relational work that research says matters most, and it helps schools do that work consistently, for every student.

2 Metacognition and self-regulated learning

Why this matters

Students who can plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning make faster progress, and carry that advantage with them long after any single intervention ends. These skills are teachable, but they rarely develop by accident.

What the research suggests

The Education Endowment Foundation identifies metacognition and self-regulation as one of the highest-impact, lowest-cost approaches available to schools, associated with an average of seven months' additional progress. Zimmerman's foundational work shows self-regulated learning is a teachable cycle of planning, performance, and reflection, and Dignath and Büttner's meta-analysis confirms that structured training improves outcomes across primary and secondary settings. Andrade's review shows student self-assessment supports achievement and self-regulation when students are supported in doing it well.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO helps students reflect on their learning and wellbeing, set goals, and review progress with a trusted adult, turning metacognition from an occasional classroom activity into a sustained habit, supported by the adults around the student.

Selected reading

Education Endowment Foundation (2018). *Metacognition and Self-Regulated Learning: Guidance Report*. London: EEF. Practical evidence synthesis: explicitly supporting planning, monitoring, and evaluation is high-impact and low-cost (average +7 months' progress).

Zimmerman, B. J. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 64–70. Self-regulated learning is a teachable cycle, not a fixed trait.

Dignath, C., & Büttner, G. (2008). Components of fostering self-regulated learning among students: A meta-analysis on intervention studies at primary and secondary school level. *Metacognition and Learning*, 3(3), 231–264. Self-regulation training programmes reliably improve academic outcomes across age groups.

Andrade, H. L. (2019). A critical review of research on student self-assessment. *Frontiers in Education*, 4, 87. Self-assessment improves achievement and self-regulation when students are supported in doing it well.

Spiegel, J. A., Goodrich, J. M., Morris, B. M., Osborne, C. M., & Lonigan, C. J. (2021). Relations between executive functions and academic outcomes in elementary school children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(4), 329–351. Executive functions, planning, attention, self-control, are meaningfully linked to academic outcomes.

Takeaway for school advocates

Reflection is not a soft skill. It is one of the best-evidenced levers in education, and it works best when it is structured, supported, and sustained.

3 Student voice, agency, and self-advocacy

Why this matters

Students are not passive recipients of support. When they participate in decisions about their own learning, naming goals, expressing needs, advocating for themselves, motivation, ownership, and outcomes improve. For students with learning differences, self-advocacy is among the strongest predictors of successful transitions beyond school.

What the research suggests

Bandura's work on self-efficacy shows that students' belief in their own capability, built through real experiences of agency, shapes effort, persistence, and achievement. Test and colleagues provide the standard framework for self-advocacy and show that explicitly teaching it dramatically increases students' active participation in their own learning-plan meetings. Patall's research demonstrates that meaningful choice builds motivation.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO is designed so that students are active participants in conversations about their learning and wellbeing, reflecting, setting goals, and building the language of self-advocacy over time. Student input is treated as a starting point for dialogue with a trusted adult, not as a verdict delivered by a survey.

Selected reading

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215.
Students' belief in their own capability, built through genuine experiences of agency, drives effort and persistence.

Test, D. W., Fowler, C. H., Wood, W. M., Brewer, D. M., & Eddy, S. (2005). A conceptual framework of self-advocacy for students with disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education*, 26(1), 43–54.

The standard framework for what self-advocacy is and how schools can develop it.

Test, D. W., & Neale, M. (2004). Using the Self-Advocacy Strategy to increase middle graders' IEP participation. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 13(2), 135–145.

Explicitly taught self-advocacy increases students' active participation in their own learning-plan meetings.

Patall, E. A. (2013). Constructing motivation through choice, interest, and interestingness. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(2), 522–534.

Meaningful choice and interest-based ownership build student motivation.

Takeaway for school advocates

A check-in is not the point. The point is a student who, over years, becomes better at understanding and advocating for themselves, with adults who listen.

4

Wellbeing, belonging, and readiness to learn

Why this matters

Wellbeing is not a separate agenda from learning. Students who feel safe, connected, and emotionally settled learn more; students who are anxious, isolated, or in distress cannot fully access even excellent teaching. Post-pandemic, this is no longer a theoretical concern for any school.

What the research suggests

Durlak and colleagues' landmark meta-analysis of 213 school-based programs (270,000+ students) found that well-implemented social-emotional support improves not only wellbeing and behavior but academic achievement, an average gain of 11 percentile points, and Taylor and colleagues found these benefits persist years later. Allen and colleagues identify teacher support as the strongest school-level driver of belonging. Immordino-Yang and Damasio explain why: emotion and cognition are physiologically intertwined: "we feel, therefore we learn." Global prevalence research signals elevated youth anxiety and depression, making everyday support structures a first-order priority.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO helps schools understand whether students are safe, connected, and ready to learn, and treats that insight as the beginning of adult action, not the end of a survey. Social-emotional evidence is one strand of MARIO's foundation; MARIO is not a packaged SEL curriculum, and it complements rather than replaces a school's existing programs.

Selected reading

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405–432.

213 programs, 270,000+ students: social-emotional support improves behavior, wellbeing, and achievement (+11 percentile points).

Taylor, R. D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2017). Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects. *Child Development*, 88(4), 1156–1171.

The benefits of social-emotional support persist at follow-up, in many studies, years later.

Allen, K., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 30(1), 1–34.

Teacher support and positive personal characteristics are the strongest drivers of school belonging.

Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Damasio, A. (2007). We feel, therefore we learn: The relevance of affective and social neuroscience to education. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 1(1), 3–10.

Emotion and cognition are physiologically intertwined; emotional state shapes what students can learn.

Racine, N., McArthur, B. A., Cooke, J. E., Eirich, R., Zhu, J., & Madigan, S. (2021). Global prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms in children and adolescents during COVID-19: A meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 175(11), 1142–1150.

Global evidence of elevated youth anxiety and depression, the case for everyday, upstream support structures.

Takeaway for school advocates

Wellbeing is not the soft side of school. It is the precondition for learning, and the evidence connects it directly to achievement.

5 Formative insight, feedback, and timely adult response

Why this matters

Schools rarely lack information about students. What they lack is the ability to reliably turn that information into timely, well-judged adult response. Data that no one acts on changes nothing.

What the research suggests

Black and Wiliam's seminal review established that formative practice, adults gathering insight and adjusting what they do, produces some of the largest gains available in education. Hattie and Timperley found feedback among the most powerful influences on achievement, with effects that depend heavily on quality, timing, and dialogue. Boud and Molloy argue that effective feedback builds the learner's own capacity to judge and direct their learning; Gordon's work in medical education shows why one-to-one settings are uniquely powerful for exactly this.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO extends formative practice beyond academics to wellbeing, readiness, and personal goals, helping adults notice patterns and respond in a structured, timely way. Student signals are treated as prompts for connection and conversation, never as automated judgments.

Selected reading

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7–74.

The foundational case that formative insight, acted on by adults, produces major learning gains.

Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112.

Feedback is among the most powerful influences on achievement, and its quality and timing determine whether it works.

Boud, D., & Molloy, E. (2013). Rethinking models of feedback for learning: The challenge of design. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(6), 698–712.

Effective feedback builds the learner's own capacity to evaluate and direct their learning.

Gordon, J. (2003). ABC of learning and teaching in medicine: One to one teaching and feedback. *BMJ*, 326(7388), 543–545.

From medical education: the one-to-one setting is uniquely suited to responsive feedback, reflection, and co-created plans.

Takeaway for school advocates

Student signals are not the intervention. The adult response is.

6

Inclusive, coordinated systems of support

Why this matters

Most schools have caring adults and multiple sources of student information. Support still fragments, counseling notes here, teacher concerns there, wellbeing data in a dashboard no one owns. Students slip through gaps between well-intentioned adults.

What the research suggests

Decades of research on multi-tiered systems of support (RTI/MTSS) show that schools improve outcomes when they identify needs early, match support to need, and monitor follow-through. Burns and colleagues' meta-analysis found strong effects for well-implemented tiered-support models. Durlak and Wells established that prevention and early intervention outperform waiting for crisis, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model explains the underlying logic: students develop within nested, interacting systems, so coordination between adults matters as much as any single adult's effort.

How this informs MARIO

MARIO grew out of learning support practice and remains grounded in inclusive education. It helps counselors, advisors, learning support teams, teachers, and leaders coordinate around students, so that noticing reliably leads to owned, followed-up action. It does not replace a school's systems of record, safeguarding platforms, or clinical judgment; it connects the everyday support work that happens between them.

Selected reading

Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (2006). Introduction to response to intervention: What, why, and how valid is it? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(1), 93–99.

The core logic of tiered support: identify early, match support to need, monitor response.

Burns, M. K., Appleton, J. J., & Stehouwer, J. D. (2005). Meta-analytic review of responsiveness-to-intervention research: Examining field-based and research-implemented models. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 23(4), 381–394.

Well-implemented tiered-support models show strong effects on student outcomes.

Durlak, J. A., & Wells, A. M. (1997). Primary prevention mental health programs for children and adolescents: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 25(2), 115–152.

Prevention and early intervention consistently outperform waiting for problems to escalate.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Students develop within nested systems; coordination between the adults around a child is itself an intervention.

Takeaway for school advocates

A system of record stores information. A system of support helps adults act on it. Schools need both, and most already have the first.

7 Implementation quality and professional learning

Why this matters

Education is full of good ideas that failed in practice. The difference between an initiative that changes student experience and one that becomes shelfware is almost always implementation: adult skill, routines, leadership, and follow-through.

What the research suggests

Durlak and DuPre's landmark review found that implementation quality dramatically shapes outcomes, well-implemented programs routinely achieve effects two to three times larger than poorly implemented ones. Fixsen and colleagues' synthesis shows that training alone rarely changes practice; coaching, feedback, and organizational support do. Darling-Hammond and colleagues identify effective professional learning as sustained, practice-based, and collaborative, and teacher-efficacy research shows educators' belief in their own capability predicts persistence and student outcomes.

How this informs MARIO

This is why MARIO is not software-first. MARIO pairs its platform with professional learning, coaching, and implementation partnership, because the evidence is unambiguous that a login is not a strategy. The aim is not more work for teachers; it is making the student-support work schools already do more focused, consistent, and shared.

Selected reading

Durlak, J. A., & DuPre, E. P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(3–4), 327–350.

Implementation quality can double or triple program effects, or erase them.

Fixsen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blase, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, National Implementation Research Network.

Training alone rarely changes practice; coaching, feedback, and organizational support do.

Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). *Effective Teacher Professional Development*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

Effective professional learning is sustained, practice-based, collaborative, and supported, not one-off.

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Hoy, A. W. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 783–805.

Teachers' belief in their own capability predicts persistence, openness to new practice, and student outcomes.

Takeaway for school advocates

The evidence does not support buying tools. It supports building practice. Any provider who sells software without implementation support is ignoring the research.

8

MARIO's own approach has been externally studied

Beyond the converging research above, MARIO's core practice (frequent, targeted one-to-one learning conversations) has been the subject of a peer-reviewed study published in *Support for Learning*, the journal of nasen (the UK's National Association for Special Educational Needs).

The study analyzed six years of student outcome data in a special education learning support setting where students received structured, five-to-seven-minute one-to-one conversations on an every-other-day cadence. Students in the one-to-one conversations cohort showed a statistically significant improvement in academic outcomes compared with both their own prior performance and a control cohort, and the gains persisted after students transitioned out of the course. In feedback surveys, students self-identified gains in self-reflection and independence.

$d = +0.83$

Improvement vs. a control cohort

$d = +0.99$

Gains persisted after transition

78%

Students helped "a significant amount"

How we bound this claim

We state this evidence precisely, because that is how evidence should be treated.

This was a retrospective cohort analysis in one school context, encouraging, externally published, and consistent with the broader research base, but not a claim that any tool guarantees these outcomes everywhere. Schools should expect any partner, including MARIO, to keep studying its approach and to support schools in evaluating implementation and outcomes over time.

Selected reading

Bowman, P., Farrar, E., & Novak, K. (2022). The impact of frequent, targeted one-to-one conversations on special education learning support. *Support for Learning*, 37(4), 464–479.

Published by nasen. Six-year retrospective analysis of frequent, targeted 1:1 conversations in learning support.

Synthesis

How the evidence comes together

Read together, these evidence bases converge on a small number of conclusions that should shape how any school, with or without MARIO, organizes student support.

- **Students do better when they are known.** Trusted adult relationships are among the most reliable levers in education, especially for students at risk.
- **Knowing is not enough.** Insight changes outcomes only when it becomes timely, structured, followed-through adult action.
- **Students must be participants, not subjects.** Reflection, agency, and self-advocacy are teachable, high-leverage, and durable.
- **Wellbeing and learning are one agenda.** Belonging and readiness to learn are preconditions for achievement, not competitors with it.
- **Implementation decides everything.** The same practice can transform a school or become shelfware; professional learning and follow-through make the difference.

MARIO's contribution is not any single one of these ideas; most good schools already believe them. MARIO's contribution is helping schools practice them consistently: pairing structured 1:1 conversations and student reflection with professional learning, and using technology to help the right adults notice patterns, coordinate follow-up, and protect the human work at the center of student support. Not more work: better use of the conversations, observations, and care schools are already trying to give.

The commitment

MARIO uses technology to protect and strengthen human connection, never to replace it. The goal, in the end, is simple: every student seen, heard, and valued.

References

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