Designing Evidence



to Support Learner Wellbeing

Christina Cipriano and the Design of More Responsible Evidence for All Learners

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The promise of school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) evidence begins with a practical question: can it help an adult decide what support a young person needs, soon enough to matter in the school day? Christina Cipriano is the Joseph W. and Alma W. Keilty Endowed Chair and a professor in education at UMass Amherst (University of Massachusetts Amherst, College of Education, 2026). A Reading Rockets feature summarizes her premise with a compact metaphor: “SEL is not another subject or activity on the ‘to do’ plate, it is the plate itself” (Reading Rockets, n.d., para. 1).

For students with learning differences, a useful account of participation may need to consider anxiety, attention, emotion regulation, belonging, and the demands of the setting. The practical challenge is to gather evidence schools can use without overwhelming the routines it is meant to support. Evidence suitable for classroom reflection does not automatically support progress monitoring, referral, or system evaluation; the purpose and context of use determine what must be established (Pellegrino et al., 2016).

That question organizes the work of Cipriano and the Education Collaboratory: what can this evidence responsibly enable an adult to do for this learner, under these conditions? Their studies connect assessment design with students’ experiences, educators’ practices, and the interpretation of results. Establishing that this work helps requires both defensible inferences and evidence that acting on them improves learning and instruction, a distinction Bennett (2011) makes in his account of formative assessment. The case therefore follows the evidence from task design to classroom use while keeping those claims separate. Cipriano’s role is collaborative: researchers develop the technical arguments, students help shape instruments and reports, and educators and school partners inform how evidence is produced and interpreted. Her public writing supplies another source of urgency. The description of her book, *Be Unapologetically Impatient*, connects its challenge to settled routines with her family’s experience navigating her oldest son’s rare disease (Cipriano, 2025). That personal context helps explain the agenda.



The Average Is Not the Learner

Variation is a useful place to begin. In a study by Cheyeon Ha, Zi Jia Ng, and Cipriano, students reported which emotion-regulation strategies they would select in different school situations. Separate analyses of 410 primary-school students and 724 secondary-school students revealed differing patterns across emotions and situations (Ha et al., 2025). The two assessment forms were not fully parallel, and the data were cross-sectional, so descriptive contrasts between the groups cannot establish developmental change. The study nevertheless gives the case a concrete starting point: what a student reports about emotion regulation depends on the situation the assessment asks that student to imagine.

The broader intervention literature presents a related challenge at a different level. A 2023 review encompassed 424 studies, 252 interventions, and 575,361 students. Its post-intervention meta-analysis estimated a positive average difference favoring universal school-based SEL programs, $g = .194$, with a 95% confidence interval of [.166, .221]. It also found substantial heterogeneity among effect sizes, $I^2 = 93.7\%$ (Cipriano, Strambler, et al., 2023). That statistic describes variation in the research results, not differences among individual learners. The review also documented inconsistent measurement and incomplete psychometric and implementation reporting. These findings make the average useful as a summary of the literature, while limiting what it can tell a school about a particular program, outcome, setting, or learner. They also sharpen the measurement task: specify what is being assessed and what an interpretation is intended to support, rather than treating "SEL" as one interchangeable construct.

The limits become especially important when intended learners are poorly documented. A review of 269 elementary-school SEL studies identified 11 that explicitly excluded students with disabilities. It also found inconsistent descriptions of disability and racial identity and limited subgroup analyses (Cipriano, Naples, et al., 2023). These reporting gaps constrain what readers can determine about representation and benefits. Nor does a count of participants establish that a task was accessible, that scores supported the proposed comparisons, or that a school's resulting decision was justified. For measurement developers, the implication is practical: identify the learners and decisions the tool is intended to serve, design access from the outset, and investigate barriers that could distort interpretation. A broad claim of inclusion needs evidence about those conditions, not simply a diverse sample.

Language raises a parallel question. In a follow-on review of the same 424-study evidence base, only 57 studies reported participants' language status (Lucas et al., 2026). Language accessibility is also a feature of the task: students must be able to understand its scenarios and response options without unnecessary language demands obscuring what the assessment seeks to measure. Accessibility guidance emphasizes matching supports to individual needs and the intended construct, rather than assigning them solely by disability category or first language (Thurlow et al., 2013). Questions about gender likewise require attention to the construct, response options, reporter, purpose, and burden of asking (De France et al., 2025).

Across the portfolio, the distinction is straightforward:



representation concerns who appears in the evidence;



access concerns who can engage with the task;



validity concerns which interpretations and uses the evidence supports.

Designing Tasks with Learners

The need for more usable evidence is documented in the team's earlier research. A review of 25 emotion-regulation assessments and 55 studies identified limited translation of raw data into actionable information, alongside gaps in psychometric evidence and representation (Ng et al., 2022).

The Student Emotion Regulation Assessment, or SERA, makes the task concrete. Its primary-school and secondary-school forms each use 16 digital school scenarios and 64 items to ask how likely students would be to use eight strategies in situations involving anger, anxiety, boredom, and sadness. The intended evidence concerns reported strategy use, not demonstrated emotion-regulation ability. Four development studies involved 8,083 students and 114 educators (Ng, Willner, et al., 2025). Reports present strategy profiles rather than a single competency score; individual student reports are provided for grades 6–12, while educators receive aggregated reports for grades 1–12. The design places emotion and situation inside the evidence, but feasibility still has a cost: the 2025 paper reports about 30 minutes to complete SERA, or 45 minutes for grades 1–2 including breaks (Ng, Willner, et al., 2025).

The development record also sets limits. Close overall factor-model fit coexisted with weak loadings or low reliability on several strategy scales, and the cited study did not establish invariance for specified cross-group or longitudinal comparisons. The authors call for additional reliability and validity evidence before recommending SERA for measuring progress or guiding SEL instruction (Ng, Willner, et al., 2025).

Access is equally specific. Illustrations, narration, and a tutorial are documented design features; their presence does not establish accessibility for every intended learner. The 2025 paper describes an English-only version. The 2023 educator guide states that SERA was not designed for students with limited English proficiency or, in the guide's wording, "low cognitive ability" (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2023b, p. 8). That dated restriction must not be equated with all disability, but it prevents an unqualified claim that the instrument serves all learners. The guide and sample report also prohibit grading students or evaluating teachers; the sample report explicitly cautions against progress monitoring (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2023a, p. 2). Response-quality checks and suppression of small-group displays protect aspects of interpretation and confidentiality, while also making it important to ask whose responses remain in a report.

The School Climate Walkthrough adds co-construction. Students helped shape its items, timing, interface, daily prompts, and presentation of results. The resulting tool combined scores on nine school-climate dimensions with 73 additional student-reported items about observable events that day (Hoffmann et al., 2022). Student participation therefore influenced both the experiences represented and how the evidence could be encountered. This is a substantive design contribution: learners can identify consequential features of school life that adult developers may miss. It is not, by itself, evidence of equitable access or improved climate. Nor do subgroup displays establish that scores support every proposed group comparison.

The Walkthrough authors identify the next tests: replication in a separate sample, relationships with other measures and outcomes, test–retest reliability, sensitivity to change, and more representative samples (Hoffmann et al., 2022).

What Learners Encounter

A student's report cannot, by itself, show what adults did or what opportunities the classroom provided. The next strand of the portfolio therefore turns to teaching. Zieher, Cipriano, and colleagues' "how of SEL" framework combines three knowledge types—declarative, procedural, and conditional—with five proposed pedagogies: modeling, practice promotion, transfer promotion, elaboration, and validation (Zieher et al., 2024). Compass translates that interest into an observational checklist for elementary classrooms (Meyer et al., 2026). Its question is more specific than whether a school adopted an SEL program: what teaching practices were visible, and what opportunities did they offer learners? This expands the evidence beyond the student.

THREE KNOWLEDGE TYPES

declarative	procedural	conditional

FIVE PROPOSED PEDAGOGIES

modeling	practice promotion	transfer promotion	elaboration	validation

(Zieher et al., 2024).



The Compass evidence must be read by source and purpose. The 2026 development article documents iterative work with practitioners; the NCME conference program describes additional validation and generalizability studies; the federal award records the research plan (Institute of Education Sciences, n.d.; Meyer et al., 2026; National Council on Measurement in Education, 2026). These are different kinds of evidence, and neither the plan nor a conference description substitutes for a complete validation report (Zieher et al., IP). The development work supports Compass's formative ambition: helping educators notice and discuss social and emotional teaching. It does not establish that using the checklist improves student outcomes or warrants evaluative decisions about teachers. An observation can make a classroom encounter more visible; explaining the organizational conditions behind it requires another layer of evidence.

What Adults Make of It

Project Flourish brought these questions into the organization of school life. A partnership among Yale researchers, Trajectory of Hope, and the Urban Assembly, it combined a broad descriptive study of more than 40,000 students in more than 1,000 public schools with intensive, two-year work in seven schools (Project Flourish Team, 2024). These were distinct strands of the project, not a single impact evaluation. The named project closed in January 2025 (Project Flourish, n.d.).

In a related study of 12 schools, nine embedded SEL specialists produced 652 field notes. Their observations and reflections identified leadership support, professional learning, integration into daily routines, and family and community engagement as supports for implementation; unclear direction, educator burnout, and student disengagement were recurring barriers (Ng et al., 2026). These accounts suggest where leaders might investigate a gap between adopting SEL and making it part of students' experience. They do not establish the effects of the specialists or the conditions they described. The contribution is organizational as well as technical: the usefulness of a measure depends on the routines, relationships, and interpretive support that surround it.

A second paper from the partnership examined what happens when educators and students sit with their own school's results. In facilitated discussions, 37 educators and 11 adolescents reviewed data about educator well-being, school climate, and emotion regulation. One educator said, "I found this [data report] a little bit challenging to understand. … I had questions about these numbers" (Ng, Foster, et al., 2025, p. 10). The researchers used these discussions to develop a four-session protocol: Data Exploration, Data Description, Data Interpretation, and Data Implication. Participants raised questions about representation and context and proposed changes such as allowing more time between classes. The study makes interpretation visible as work that needs time, facilitation, and local knowledge. It did not test whether the protocol improved decision accuracy or student outcomes.



(Ng, Foster, et al., 2025).

For a school, evaluating such a protocol means studying what participants actually infer and do with the results, not simply whether the intended steps were followed. Ing et al. (2021) make this distinction concrete through two district cases: validation must examine actual as well as intended use, including the professional support available to interpret and act on results.

Cipriano and Sophie Barnes turn that distinction into practical guidance: distinguish SEL assessment from mental-health screening, choose a measure for its intended purpose, consider strengths alongside needs, interpret findings collectively over time, and ask whose perspectives are missing (Cipriano & Barnes, 2025). A trend becomes a starting point for inquiry, with students, educators, and families contributing knowledge that a dashboard cannot supply. The family role is especially clear in Cipriano's account of disability inclusion: "the systems they operate in were not designed to include their children" (Hoysala et al., 2025, para. 5). Involving families in interpretation can help expose what a school's measures and routines overlook.



what can this evidence responsibly enable an adult to do for this learner, under these conditions?

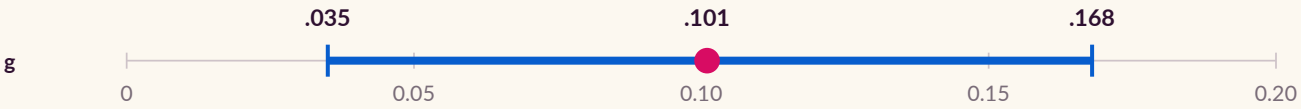
When Findings Travel

The same care is visible in the team's practitioner-facing writing. In Education Week, Eliya Ahmad and Zi Jia Ng distinguish distraction that creates space to calm down and re-engage from distraction that becomes sustained avoidance. Their advice asks educators to attend to the student's emotion, the function of the distraction, and the plan for returning to the task (Ahmad & Ng, 2024). This is a concrete example of translating a research distinction into questions a teacher can use.

40
studies

33,737
students

g = .101
average academic-achievement difference



95% confidence interval: .035 to .168 (Ha et al., 2026).

A focused reanalysis of the 2023 corpus, not an independent replication.

Public communication also tests whether the meaning of a result survives translation. Ha and colleagues' synthesis, first published in 2025, analyzed 40 studies involving 33,737 students and estimated an average academic-achievement difference of g = .101 (95% confidence interval: .035 to .168; Ha et al., 2026). It reanalyzed academic-outcome studies from the 2023 corpus, so it adds a focused analysis rather than an independent replication. For programs lasting more than four months, the authors reported an improvement index of 8.4 percentile points: a model-based estimate of how the average comparison-group student's percentile rank would differ if that student received the intervention.

It is not an observed gain of 8.4 percent, an increase in test-score points, or a letter-grade improvement. Nor does the duration comparison establish that extending a program causes larger gains.

Coverage illustrates how easily those distinctions can blur. Education Week reported percentile points, then quoted Cipriano using “8.4%” and a letter-grade analogy (Prothero, 2025). NPR described a full-school-year program and nearly a full-grade improvement, without reporting 8.4 (Turner, 2025). These formulations are easier to picture than a standardized effect size, but they change the unit or duration category reported in the analysis. Preserving those distinctions is a shared responsibility of researchers, institutional communicators, journalists, and subsequent readers. For school leaders, the practical safeguard is to return to the study’s population, comparison, measure, and uncertainty before using a public summary to justify a local decision.

From Design to Responsible Use

Evidence-centered design begins with a disciplined chain: what is claimed about a learner, what performance would count as evidence, and what task could elicit it (Mislevy et al., 2003). In an unpublished 2026 chapter, Cipriano (2026) proposes four extensions to that architecture.

- Contextualized actor models represent learners and educators within the relationships, resources, accessibility conditions, and institutions that shape performance.
- Heterogeneity-aware evidence models represent variation across groups, settings, development, and implementation.
- Her third proposal treats implementation as part of the construct when adaptation changes the educational encounter being studied.
- Decision-centered use models specify who will use the evidence, for which decision, and with what representation, aggregation, uncertainty, and limits.

These proposals connect questions that the portfolio raises at different scales, from a student’s encounter with a vignette to a district’s judgment about a program. They remain a theoretical agenda, not evidence that the tools described here implement a common model or that the proposed extensions improve decisions.

Published scholarship provides standards for evaluating that agenda. Pellegrino et al. (2016) ask whether classroom assessment reflects how students learn, serves instruction, and supports the inferences drawn from responses. Bennett (2011) distinguishes the argument that an interpretation and instructional response are defensible from the argument that acting on them improves teaching and learning. These are practical distinctions. Developing a tool, validating an interpretation, documenting implementation, improving a decision, and demonstrating student benefit are different claims. Each needs evidence matched to the instrument, population, decision, and conditions; evidence for one cannot stand in for another.

An Agenda for Earlier Support

The goal is earlier support. In a podcast interview, Cipriano challenges systems that make access to support contingent on children first experiencing failure (Fowler, 2025). That concern does not make a new measure the necessary remedy. Schools can respond to classroom observations, a learner's account, and family knowledge while a formal instrument is being evaluated. The research question is whether adding the instrument improves a specific decision: for example, helping an educator and learner choose a manageable change to a classroom routine, then checking whether participation improves. A proposed referral or placement use requires its own evidence; a profile developed for reflection cannot acquire that authority by association.

For learners with disabilities and learning differences, the next studies must establish access, score meaning, and consequences for the decisions proposed. Progress monitoring also requires evidence that a tool can distinguish meaningful change from measurement error under comparable conditions. Co-design, strengths-based framing, and contextual tasks help specify these questions; they do not answer them. The strongest objection is practical: imperfect measures may add labels, burden, and data that schools cannot use. An assessment should therefore be tested against information schools already have, with explicit conditions for revising or stopping its use.

Cipriano and Sophie Barnes offer a governing check: "Notice whose voices are included in the data itself and the meaning making. Whose voices are missing?" (Cipriano & Barnes, 2025, "Social and Emotional Data" section, recommendation 5).



Funders should support studies that connect accessible tasks and defensible interpretations to feasible school responses.



Researchers should examine the support students actually receive, participation and well-being, missed needs and unintended harms, alongside student burden and staff time.



Schools should specify permitted uses, who can see the data, and who reviews a concern before action.



Students and families should help judge whether the resulting support addresses the problem they experience.

> *The final question belongs in the school day: what does this evidence enable an adult to do for this learner, under these conditions, and how will we know whether it helped?*

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About the author

Eric M. Tucker is the President and CEO of the Study Group, which exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy. He has served as President of Equity by Design, Superintendent and Executive Director of Brooklyn Laboratory Charter Schools, CEO of Friends of Brooklyn LAB, Cofounder of Educating All Learners Alliance, Executive Director of InnovateEDU, director at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and Cofounder and Chief Academic Officer of the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues. As an entrepreneurial, strategic, and impact-focused leader, Eric has over 25 years of experience building catalytic partnerships in education, securing over $300 million of investments for enterprises and initiatives that have transformed outcomes for learners and educators. Eric has expertise in measurement and assessment system innovation, participatory and advanced R&D, analytics, and human infrastructures for improvement and co-edited *The Sage Handbook of Measurement*. He earned a doctorate and a masters of science in measurement sciences from the University of Oxford and bachelors degrees from Brown University. Eric served as an ETS MacArthur Foundation Fellow with the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in Education. He served as a Senior Research Scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST).

About the Study Group

The Study Group exists to advance the best of artificial intelligence, assessment, and data practice, technology, and policy; uncover future design needs and opportunities for educational systems; and generate recommendations to better meet the needs of students, families, and educators.

About the Education Collaboratory

The Education Collaboratory is a research center that advances the science of learning and social and emotional development. First housed at Yale University, and now established at the University of Massachusetts Amherst College of Education, the Education Collaboratory connects evidence, policy and practice by setting a new standard for rigorous, actionable research built to serve every learner.

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