The "L" of RULER
Developing Our Emotion Vocabulary

Background

Adolescents' ability to label their emotions continues to develop through their teenage years. In a study conducted by YCEI researchers, 230 adolescents were asked to generate emotion words for five categories—happy, relaxed, angry, sad, and nervous. They found that older adolescents (7th-8th graders) tended to use more precise emotion words (e.g., joyful, ecstatic). In comparison, younger adolescents (5th-6th graders) often relied on metaphors (e.g., red hot), social experiences (e.g., bullied, underappreciated), personality traits (e.g., shy), and other non-emotion responses (e.g., describing someone who is happy as smiley, friendly). Notably, some adolescents struggled with precision—28% described sadness using words associated with anger, and 23% described happiness using words better suited for calm.

What does this mean when implementing the Mood Meters with students or for adults who are trying to provide accurate supports to students or others? The study highlights the importance of giving students and adults opportunities to expand their emotion vocabulary for greater precision. As you use the Mood Meter and the other RULER anchor tools, encourage students to move beyond basic labels. For example, when a student identifies that they are feeling happy, prompt them to describe it further—are they feeling energized or inspired? Or do they mean peaceful or content? This enhances their vocabulary and supports their ability to regulate emotions more effectively.

Activity: Exploring Emotional Nuances in Vocabulary

Objective

To help school staff broaden their emotional vocabulary and develop a deeper understanding of nuanced emotions by comparing and contrasting related emotion words, as well as exploring unique emotions from other cultures that don't have direct translations into English.

Instructions

Step 1: Group Work - Comparing & Contrasting Emotions (10 minutes)

- Divide yourselves into small groups (3-4 people each).
- Consider the following emotion-related word pairs, and decide on several pairs to discuss as a group:
    - How might you define or describe the words in the pairs you've selected?
    - What are some similarities and differences between them?
    - How might knowing the distinction influence how you interact or communicate with students or colleagues?

Emotion-related Word Pairs:

Stress vs. **Pressure**	**Jealousy** vs. **Envy**	**Excitement** vs. **Nervousness**
Solitude vs. **Loneliness**	**Happiness** vs. **Joy**	**Embarrassment** vs. **Humiliation**
Empathy vs. **Compassion**	**Guilt** vs. **Shame**	**Disappointment** vs. **Regret**

IMPORTANT NOTE: **After** (and *only* after) you've completed the above activity, scan this QR code for the definitions of these terms.

Step 2: Exploration of Emotion Words in Other Languages (10 minutes)

There are words that exist in other languages that do not have a single word translation into English (and vice versa). Does this mean that the feelings themselves aren't experienced among people in those populations? It's unlikely that this is the case. It may be more likely that the existence of these terms is in some way a reflection of their cultural values.

Here are some examples:

→ **Schadenfreude** (German): Feeling of pleasure derived from another person's misfortune.
→ **Freudenfreude** (German): Feeling of pleasure derived from another person's success.
→ **Iktsuarpok** (Inuit): The feeling of anticipation when you're expecting someone to show up at your house.
→ **Sisu** (Finnish): Extraordinary determination and resilience in the face of adversity.
→ **Saudade** (Portuguese): A deep emotional state of nostalgic longing for something or someone that is absent.
→ **Kvell** (Yiddish): The feeling of overwhelming love and pride you get when you see your child accomplish something significant.
→ **Hygge** (Danish): The sensation experienced while sitting around a fire in winter surrounded by friends.

With your small group:
- Reflect on whether you've experienced these emotions.
- Are you aware of other emotions that don't have a single word translation in English?
- Are there other emotions you've experienced that don't have a single word translation in English?