



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Kyle Schwartz

A SIMPLE EXERCISE BUILDS BRIDGES FOR CHANGE

When Kyle Schwartz was a first-year teacher at Doull Elementary School in Denver, Colorado, she sensed a disconnect with her students. So in the middle of the year, she engaged them in a simple exercise: She handed out sticky notes and asked each student to complete the following sentence: "I wish my teacher knew" Then she asked them to fold up their papers and hand them in.

Schwartz hoped the exercise would give her insight and build connections to improve her relationships with students, and it did. But she didn't expect it to spark a global movement and make her a well-known author and speaker, which is what happened when she posted about it on Twitter one evening in 2015.

Since then, her work has inspired teachers, leaders, and young people around the world. Her first book, *I Wish My Teacher Knew: How One Question Can Change Everything for Our Kids*, has sold over 60,000 copies. Her new book is *I Wish for Change: Unleashing the Power of Kids to Make a Difference*. Learning Forward's Suzanne Bouffard recently spoke with her about the movement she started and why student perspectives are important for educator learning .

TED TALK



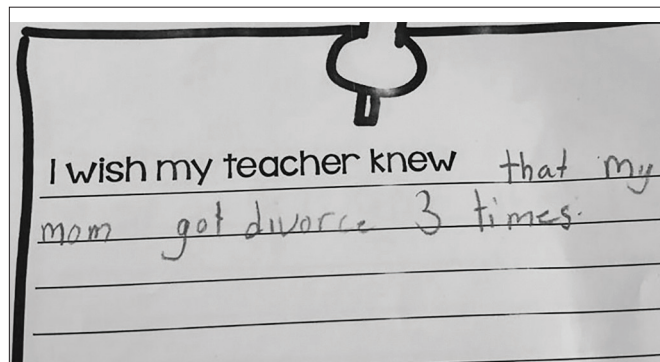
<http://www.tedxkyoto.com/en/events/tedxkyoto-2016/what-kids-wish-their-teachers-knew-kyle-schwartz-tedxkyoto>

Teachers tell me that the book has helped introduce language about regulation and dysregulation, and about trauma, so there is a shift away from calling students disrespectful, for example, and toward understanding why they're behaving the way they are.

Q How did the "I wish my teacher knew" movement start?

A: The roots of the movement are very humble and genuine. I did the exercise with my students for three years before I told anyone about it. One night, I found one of the notes crumpled up, and I reread it. It said, "I wish my teacher knew that I don't have pencils at home to do my homework." I remembered how that note had struck me and changed my perspective about the student.

I saw something worth sharing in that note, so I took a picture and uploaded it to Twitter. Other teachers saw it and right away they said, "I'm going to do this in my class." I thought maybe five people would try it. I'm astounded at how far it has gone. I get messages from people all over the world. I have gotten notes in Japanese and German and Arabic and Urdu.



Schwartz's book has sparked conversations about teachers' and administrators' assumptions about students.

Q: The exercise, and your book, have become a form of professional learning, even though you didn't originally intend for that. How are educators using this and learning from it?

A: I have heard from schools that are using it for a book study, to spark conversations and reflections about teachers' and administrators' assumptions about students. I have even heard from some districts, including one in Alabama and one in Utah, where all staff in the district were asked to read it.

And, of course, many teachers are using the exercise in their classrooms and learning about their students and their practice from it. The really interesting thing is how kids have taken it on. Some of them have anonymously sent my TED Talk to their teacher or done a feature on the exercise in the school newspaper.

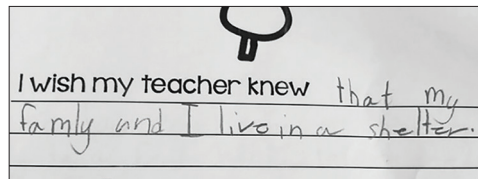
I've also heard from some brave teachers who have modified the exercise to be "I wish my principal knew ..." or "I wish my superintendent knew ..." A university administrator told me that he did "I wish my boss knew ..." One of his longtime subordinates wrote, "I wish my boss knew that my child is chronically ill." The boss had been working with him for years and never knew, and he immediately told the employee he wished he had known so he could support him. The message people are sending their bosses is "If you only knew more about us, you could be a better leader for us."

It is a different type of professional learning from what we often see, and I really applaud the schools that are doing this and having the difficult conversations it brings up. I'm honored by that. Teachers tell me it has given them the information to connect with and help students they have been struggling to reach.

But I think the biggest shift is that it's creating a shared language in schools. Teachers tell me that the book has helped introduce language about regulation and dysregulation, and about trauma, so there is a shift away from calling students disrespectful, for example, and toward understanding why they're behaving the way they are.

Q: How is the book having an impact on preservice teacher preparation?

A: The book is on a lot of college syllabuses for preservice teachers. I'm really encouraged by that. Nine years ago, I went through an amazing, rigorous teacher education program, but relationships, connection, and trauma were words that were hardly used in our course work. Fortunately, I



Many teachers now use this exercise in their classrooms.

spent a year teaching with a mentor in a high-needs classroom, and my mentor was my professional learning about relationship building. But if that had been more of a focus in my program, I would have started in my own classroom more prepared than I was.

I'm so encouraged by how many university students have reached out to me and told me they are using and discussing the exercise. It's become part of the conversation. I'm hoping there is a shift in education, because the daily work of teaching is relationship building, but that hasn't been credited as a skill set to develop. You have to learn how to form these relationships, and that work is just as valuable as everything else we do.

Q: Why do you think the "I wish my teacher knew" exercise has resonated so strongly?

A: Everybody wants to be known. The exercise really gets at the heart of creating relationships and building connections.

When I started doing speeches, I was surprised that people were exploding to tell me about their own experiences in school when they were young. One time, a woman jumped into an elevator with me to tell me about her own experience losing her mother as a child and how her family told her never to let people at school know. She said she wishes a teacher had done the exercise with her.

A lot of times, this need for relationships and connections isn't honored in professional learning. I remember a professional development workshop on math that I went to, and at lunchtime, teachers were saying, "I can't get to this stuff because there's so much

going on. I have 29 kids in a class and no paraprofessionals, and not enough planning time. Now, they want us to rewrite the curriculum." Professional learning has to acknowledge the realities of teaching. A technique or practice isn't a "best practice" if it can't exist in a human classroom.

And we need our leaders and policies to support us in this relationship work. There is such a thing as secondary trauma, which many of us teachers experience when we are working with and connecting with students who have experienced trauma. It can be stressful and exhausting. And when people talk about the teacher self-care movement, I say, "Yes, and ..." Sometimes hearing from nonteachers that I just need to engage in self-care makes me feel patronized, or like it's putting all the burden on teachers.

Teachers need to engage in self-care just as anyone else, but we also need a reasonable workload and support in the classroom. Teachers need access to mental health care and a fair salary. And they need to be evaluated on the whole picture of what they're doing in classrooms, not just on certain skills. We need substantial structural change and support. We can't self-care our way out of the stresses we face.

Q: How does your new book, *I Wish for Change*, build on the movement?

A: The next step, after creating connections with kids, is empowering them. *I Wish for Change* is about helping kids find what they are passionate about and make a difference in the world. How can they affect their community in a positive way? That's a need we all have, and it is grounded in our need for belonging.

When kids don't feel like they belong, they pour their energy into ending their own isolation, sometimes not in positive ways. We have to help them see that they are agents of change. I often tell my students: "You are not here so you can make money in a decade. You are here so you can make a difference now." ■