

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 33: Kyle Schwartz

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Terry: Hello, and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today, I'm joined by Kyle Schwartz, a third-grade teacher teaching at Denver, Colorado's Doull Elementary School, and the creator and author of the Twitter sensation and the new book, *I Wish My Teacher Knew: How One Question Can Change Everything for Our Kids*. Hello, and welcome, Kyle.

Kyle: Hi, Terry. Thank you so much for having me.

Terry: You're welcome. Thank you for being here with us. My first question for you is to describe the basic concept of *I Wish My Teacher Knew* and how it was created.

Kyle: Well, the basic concept behind *I Wish My Teacher Knew* is a lot simpler than people might think. I really just came into class one day and passed out a bunch of sticky notes to my students, and had them finish the sentence "I wish my teacher knew ____." And I did this in my first year as a teacher just because I wanted to really get to know my students better. I had a feeling that I didn't know what I didn't know. And so instead of making assumptions about my students, or you know, allowing some pre-conceived notions to affect my opinion of my students, I really just asked them to tell me what I needed to know.

And in the first year that I did this as a teacher, it literally was just passing out notes, collecting them, reading them, getting to know my students a little bit more, and in some cases taking steps to help them. So when a student said, "I wish my teacher knew I don't have pencils at home to do my homework," you know, I was able to give that student pencils. So it was that simple, but as the years kind of went on it evolved into a real community-building exercise that was able to really build a lot of empathy and compassion in my students, and just raise the bonds between my students and myself. And that's just where the idea came from.

Terry: I mean, talk about a desirable result as part of social and emotional learning to raise that empathy level in class—a focus we didn't have even a few years back, I think.

Kyle: You know, I guess I would challenge that notion a little bit. **I think that there are a million ways that teachers have been doing this type of work, the social-emotional work, and**

teachers continue to do this work in their classroom. The *I Wish My Teacher Knew* notes were one activity that I did on one day in my first year of teaching. But beyond that, there were just daily activities and daily exercises to build those relationships with my students. And I would venture to say if you talk to any teacher in America, they have some story or some lesson that they do or some way that they reach out to kids and build relationships. So I am very pleased that the social-emotional side of teaching is being uplifted, but I believe it's been happening for years and years.

Terry: I see—it's only the pedagogical recognition of it now that we bring to the forefront, but all along teachers have been building these kinds of lessons into their lesson plans under the academic radar, as it were?

Kyle: Yeah. Absolutely. I think these little notes went viral for me, but I bet that there's something in each teacher's classroom that could go viral, too.

Terry: I see. And so what was the year that you brought it in, Kyle?

Kyle: Well, this is going to be my fifth year of teaching. So I believe it would be about 2011, the 2010–2011 school year.

Terry: You must have been really surprised, but delighted with the viral response that you got to this and just watching this great idea spread.

Kyle: Well, I was very shocked at the power of social media. I think a funny thing people don't really know about this is I have just recently become a part of the Twitter community. I mean we're talking like within *weeks* of these notes going viral. So it was very surprising to me how powerful social media could be, and I say in my book it should shock people that children are going without basic resources. It should be front-page news when kids have to go to school, and are hungry, but it isn't usually. **And I think that there is something about these notes, and the raw emotion behind them, and the vulnerability that students displayed that really kind of cut through the clutter,** and was able to reach people and allow them to understand what it's really like to be a student in America today.

Terry: Right. I think one of them said, "I wish my teacher knew that lunch at the school is the only meal I get during the day."

Kyle: Yeah. You know, that's an issue for many kids, and they talk about hunger. I kind of focus on hunger as an issue that is facing a lot of kids today in school. Well, there are many effects of living in poverty. Hunger is kind of one that we can all point to and see, and that's real for kids. They're coming to school hungry, and one, you know, story in my book that I tell from a friend of mine who's a school nurse, a wonderful school nurse, Valerie Wintler. She tells the story at her school, which goes from kindergarten through high school, and she says the younger kids, you can tell when they're hungry. You know, they're going to say they have stomachaches, they have headaches. You can tell that it's hunger.

The older kids know how to disguise it.

And so a lot of the times their hunger might manifest itself as irritability, or apathy, and it's really easy for teachers to make assumptions about a kid when they come in and they're irritable. But I'm hoping that readers of this book and people who are engaging in the larger discussion around it will realize like maybe this child isn't, you know, disrespectful or irritable. Maybe there's a need there that I can help meet, and by helping meet that need, I can help the child learn.

Terry: I like how some of them were whimsical too, about a student writing, "I wish my teacher knew how to do a backflip." That was very funny. So a lot of varied responses, I'm sure.

Kyle: And you know, I think it's interesting—there were some very funny responses. Like, "I wish my teacher knew more about velociraptors." Yeah, like this kid just really wanted me to know more about velociraptors. But I thought it was also telling what children chose to share, and what they chose not to share. I had a child in my classroom one year who had a lot of challenges and a lot of struggles. And you'd think maybe he'd share that but he really just wanted—he was just like, "I wish my teacher knew more about football." I mean like that's valid, too, you know? Your will for me to know more about you as an athlete is just as valid as your will to want me to know something about a challenge in your life.

Terry: Excellently put. I think it would be interesting for our listeners to hear about your upbringing a little bit, and how school didn't appeal to you as a youngster, but ultimately your path led you to work in Washington, D.C. for AmeriCorps. It took you to Chile, and all the way to the Denver Teacher Residency program. Could you fill in that biographical sketch for me?

Kyle: Yeah, absolutely. And I kind of tell the story of my path into education in the book, and it is very unlikely. I say that there is—if you were to talk to me as an elementary school student and you were to tell me that I would grow up to be a teacher, I would have thought you were crazy because when I was younger, elementary school teachers were my arch nemesis. I had a lot of problems in school. And as an adult, after getting into the education field, I kind of reflected on those problems in school and those behavioral issues that I had. And I can see how they were all kind of started by a move that my family made.

So when I was five years old, both of my parents had lost their jobs, and were on unemployment. And they chose to do what many Americans do, and they moved west for more opportunity. And so we left a suburban, small town environment in central Illinois, and we moved to a suburb of Denver, which was a very different cultural experience for me. I remember thinking, "Why are there fences everywhere if no one has cows inside of them?" And I remember so clearly my first day going to kindergarten, and you know, being made fun of for wearing strange clothes, and having a country accent, and saying things a little bit differently.

And my older sister had the exact same experience, but she chose to deal with it in a slightly different way. I chose to just say, "If they don't like me, I don't like them. I'm not going to be friends with anyone here. I'm going to check out from this. I'm going to be mean to kids before they have a chance to be mean to me." And it might sound shocking, but as like a five- and six-year-old, I remember having those very pragmatic thoughts. And you know, the consequences of those thoughts followed me throughout my entire education career.

So I had a lot of behavior issues. I really desperately wanted to please my teachers, but you know, I didn't want them to know that I cared about anything because if I cared about school, if I cared about what they thought, then that leaves me in a vulnerable position. So I really struggled a lot in school, and I always felt like I was a bad kid. And I would even use that word to describe myself. Like, "Oh, when I was growing up, I was a bad kid." And my story has kind of led me to have a lot more empathy for my students, but one thing I point out in the book is I had this really difficult reaction to a cultural change, to moving from a small town to a suburb.

I had that reaction, but I didn't struggle in school because of it. And if I had a learning disability, had school been more difficult for me, had my parents not have been able to model vocabulary for me, I think my path would have been very different because I was in a situation where I wasn't valued at school, largely because of my own actions because I didn't want people to value me. I wanted to kind of check out and not participate in school. But I didn't find value in school, and had I looked for value somewhere else, my life would have been very typical, and very different.

But being as it was, I got through school. I did fine. And middle school and high school were a little bit better for me. I started making friends, and started having better social behaviors, although still very much being a frustration for my teachers. But then when I went to college I did fine, but I kind of felt like something was missing. And I chose to take a year off from school and join an AmeriCorps program in D.C. And that was very life-changing for me because we started working in public schools in D.C. **And to see how public schools were in D.C. and compare them to my very well-resourced suburban schools that I attended was a very shocking experience for me. It perfectly illustrated the inequities in our education system—how some schools have many, many resources, and other schools have few, and what that means for children.**

And so I had this desire to work in education, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do, if I wanted to be a teacher, or if I wanted to work in education policy. But I ended up moving to Chile and working in schools there, which I adored. I had met the best people, I had the best experience, and I really just saw a whole other education system.

And then I took what I learned there. I wanted to come back to my hometown of Denver, and I knew Spanish there, and I knew that there were lots of kids there who needed great teachers. So that's what I set about doing. And I joined a kind of non-traditional teacher

preparation program called The Teacher Residency, which is where teachers spend an entire school year working in schools alongside a mentor teacher. And that, for me, I think, is the best teacher preparation program that one can do. It really gave me the cadence of a school year. It gave me a beautiful model of a lead teacher in Rachel Bernard, and it set me up for success in my first year of teaching. And that's kind of my path into teaching, from a very unlikely kid who hated school and wanted nothing to do with it, to now spending my days going to school every day.

Terry: Excellent. Did you—your capability in Spanish, did you actually teach in a bilingual setting? I know that you wrote in your book that more than half of your class doesn't speak English as a primary language at home.

Kyle: Yep, about 60% of our students, between 50% and 60% of our students, speak a language other than English at home. We would call them "English language learners," and for our particular school it's typically Spanish that they speak at home. I don't instruct in Spanish, although about a third of classrooms in my school do use Spanish as a language of instruction. But for me what it does is it allows me to communicate with parents. And it allows me to communicate with the family, and they have patience with me and my sometimes halting Spanish. It really creates, I think, a stronger relationship since I'm very fortunate to be able to communicate with parents like that.

And also, I see kids who are bilingual as an asset. And I think that this is a mind shift, you know, in education is that we sometimes call kids who speak a language other than English at home, we call them "limited English proficient." We call them like "still learning English" and we don't call them "bilingual." And I think that my hope for all my students who speak Spanish at home is that they will continue with their Spanish and build that up because it's such a resource that they have, and that our community has in them.

Terry: Excellent message and a refreshing perspective indeed. I'm wondering if we could shift to your book here, which I enjoyed, and it's got a really interesting structure. Well, why don't you talk about that? I know each chapter has special sections in it, one that's called "Teacher Tools," another one called "In My Classroom," and so forth. So could you flesh that out a little bit for me?

Kyle: Absolutely. So teachers, as they're reading this book, [will see] it's laid out in different chapters. And each chapter is kind of an issue or a reality that students face in our schools. So there's a chapter that focuses on student mobility, a chapter that focuses on poverty, a chapter that focuses on grief and trauma. So in each one of those chapters, most start with an anecdote from my teaching career, an experience that I've had in my classroom that kind of illuminates the situation.

So the first chapter is about student mobility, and it starts with a student of mine who needed to move from my classroom because his father was deported. And you know, that's a very disruptive thing for a classroom—not only for him, but for the other kids to

see their friend leaving in this traumatic way. So it shows us that when kids move and come into our classroom, that's something that teachers need to take very seriously, and that there are steps that we can do to address that.

And so I addressed that in a section in each chapter called "Teacher Tools." And they're very actionable things that teachers can do in their classroom to address these issues. So in the chapter about student mobility, one of the teacher tools that I encourage teachers to use is transition mementoes, to just give a kid a physical object that they can take with them from their classroom. And in my classroom, I sometimes use shark teeth necklaces because eight-year-olds are obsessed with sharks.

Terry: That is the story about Ronaldo that I think you described in the first chapter.

Kyle: Yes. And so we gave him a shark tooth necklace, and he just loved it, and he wore it, and it kind of became a tradition. So whenever another student had to leave our classroom, we would give them a shark tooth necklace. And this year we did that with one of my students, and we gave them a shark tooth necklace, and we told him it's so he can be strong like a shark at his next school. And I actually ran into his mother a few months after he had transitioned schools. And she said that he wore the shark tooth necklace every day, and he tells everyone that it's from his old class, and that it shows that they still care about him no matter where he is. That just was a beautiful example of these small actionable things that teachers can do in their classroom to support all learners.

Terry: That's a great memento, and to have it be treasured that much really speaks to how important is the message of acceptance and inclusion, and that he felt—like in chapter one, I think the proper title is "Welcomes and Farewells: Building Community," [Even in Transition] and how he felt like such a part of the community that this keepsake took on this very sort of symbolic meaning for him.

Kyle: And I think it's also—you know, it's nice for that kid that we used to have [in our school] something that just proves to them that they're cared about it. Be it a shark tooth necklace, or a picture, or a book, but **it's also really great for the students who are still in the class to be able to get that sense of closure, to be able to send their friend off and to know that their friend has memories of them, and that they will always have memories of their friend.**

Terry: Before we go on, thank you. And before we get into more specific chapters, and I'm excited to talk about them, if you could summarize one of the final sections that's after the chapters (it's called, "I Wish My Teacher Knew Teacher's Guide") and how it walks teachers through using the "I Wish My Teacher Knew" lesson in their classrooms.

Kyle: Yeah. So that was something I definitely wanted to include in the book because teachers have seen these notes on Twitter and thought, "This is going to be a powerful tool in my classroom, but I want to have a little more information on how to do this activity and have

this experience with my class." And so I just go through the steps very clearly about how you would have this same activity done in your class and what options you could have. **So I really want teachers to kind of start with setting the purpose—to tell kids like, "We're doing this not because it's cute. We're doing this because in order for you to learn, and for me to teach at my best, I need to know things. And so you can tell me whatever you want to share. But if you think I need to know this to be a better teacher to you, I encourage you to share with me."**

I also encourage teachers to be an example and share with their class what they would have wanted their teacher to know, and to really make the options clear for kids. So this is definitely an elective activity in my classroom. So I tell kids from the beginning, "You're invited to share with me whatever you'd like. You can share with me something serious or something silly, or you could share nothing at all." And some kids do choose that option. It doesn't happen very often, but there are some kids who choose not to share anything. And they still benefit from hearing from other students, but you know, that's their option to not share.

But I think something really interesting that surprises most people about the notes is that after kids have written me these notes, they all wanted to share them with the class. They wanted everyone else to hear what they wrote. I wasn't really planning on like letting them all speak out, but they asked me and I went with it, and it kind of has become a part of the activity for me. So we all sat. I share with teachers how in our class we all kind of sit around in a circle, and kids are invited to share if they'd like. And surprisingly, most kids do share. You know, even though that feels really vulnerable as adults if we were reading like, "I wish my teacher knew that my mom isn't around a lot, and so that's why my homework is not done." That feels really scary for an adult to share, but for kids they wanted their class to know that, and it was a great way to build empathy.

Terry: May I just say I was taken with that one share that a boy had written, "I wish my teacher knew that I don't think the other kids like me," and what happened in that community setting.

Kyle: Yes. That was a moment in our classroom that I very vividly remember because the other kids just kind of really rallied around him, and they were like, "We do like you. We do like you!" And just to have him be able to hear that from the other kids was just really, I think, really powerful for him.

One thing I haven't shared about that story before is that this kid is such a great kid. So like—just his thinking is so far outside the box. He created like a survey for kids, and he said like, "Do you like me?" And it was like, "Yes. No. Kind of." And he was like, "Can I give this to the class?" And I'm not sure if in every situation I would have let that happen, but in this situation knowing my students and knowing him, I did. And literally, they all wrote like, "Yes. We like you." And for that kid and the way his brain worked to have hard, tangible evidence that the kids around him liked him, and that they were willing to put it

on paper, completely changed his confidence level. It completely changed the way he related to them. So it's kind of like those moments that aren't on the lesson plan that teachers can really grab hold of, and do so much good within their classroom.

Terry: Well, that sounds like a defining, formative moment to me, and a beautiful one. So you do allow for anonymity also as well?

Kyle: Yes. And I tell kids that they can put their name on it or not. I also share in the book that you should probably be honest with kids that you know their handwriting. And that's what I do. I say, "You can put your name on this or not, but you know I probably will know your handwriting." So that's kind of a limitation here. And I think that type of honesty kind of builds community. There are really intentional steps that a teacher could do to build in more anonymity if they wanted to, but I think—and I kind of go through some options in the book.

But really, I think that the most important thing that I share within the teacher's guide is that this is all about community. This is all about building empathy. So if it's kind of like a quick lesson or like a quick exit ticket for kids, you're losing some of the potential of this activity. So I really encourage teachers to take some of the very valuable class time that they have, and to devote that time to this activity, to devote time to allowing students to share and following up with students, and allowing kids to share their thoughts. **Because the power of this lesson is in the community that it builds not only from the teacher-to-student relationship, but I have seen it transform a classroom and kids' ability to have empathy for each other.** So I encourage teachers to do that in that section.

Terry: Excellent. And also sometimes, this can become a repeated exercise.

Kyle: Yes, absolutely. People ask me a lot, "When can I do this? And how often should I do it?" And the answer is "When needed." So I kind of call that step in my activity guide "Repeat when needed." I typically do not do this activity at the beginning of the school year, although I can see some benefits of that [repetition]. I do this activity when I feel like the classroom already has a base and a foundation of relationships built where students have already formed a level of trust with me and with each other. And that's when I find it the most beneficial. But you know, allowing this activity to kind of live on its own and to say like, "When you guys think you need to do this again, we can. You can always come to me and we can do this again."

So there's a big event at the school or some changing activity at the school that kids really need to talk about or maybe they're responding to something that's going on in the country, this is just a good invitation for kids to talk and to have a conversation be started in your classroom.

Terry: Excellent. It sounds like a pretty comprehensive guide for teachers to get started to use *Wish My Teacher Knew* in their own classrooms.

Kyle: Yes.

Terry: Excellent. Now, in chapter one, in “Welcomes and Farewells,” you talk about two kinds of student mobility—involuntary and voluntary. And you go on to say that student mobility affects the whole community as well as student learning. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Kyle: Yes. So there has been a lot of research done on student mobility, and you can kind of break up the reasons for students moving into voluntary and involuntary. And they're exactly what they sound like. Voluntary is a family making a choice to move children to a school, and involuntary is a larger event or experience in the family that they have to move the child's schools, and it might not have been their choice. So I think what's really important for teachers to know is that typically, involuntary moves happen in the middle of the school year, because most families know that to alleviate the stress and trauma of moving schools and changing communities, to do that between school years would be their choice. So the kid is moving involuntarily in the middle of the school year.

Oftentimes, there is a reason for that. And in order to teach that kid and create a relationship with that kid in that family, it's best if teachers try to find out what that reason is. So that's a big impact on our schools, especially schools like mine that have very high student mobility, that when kids are coming in and out mid-year there's oftentimes events sort of following that or preceding that, that are really difficult for that kid. And as a teacher, it's also difficult for us. It's very difficult when a new member joins a community, oftentimes with not a lot of notice. It is very difficult.

And so there are things that teachers can do to lessen the burden on themselves and lessen the stress on the new student when they come in. One thing I talk about in the chapter is to create welcome packages, and to really have—already, you know you're going to have new students in the middle of the year. You know it's going to be a difficult time for them. What can you do at the beginning of the year to prepare for that eventuality so when a new student comes in, you're not flustered and stressed, you're in a position where your main goal can be to welcome that student, and to make that student feel like they're invited into your community?

Terry: Excellent. And in chapter two you write about students in poverty, building on resources and breaking down barriers. I wonder if you could explain—you write also that teachers are truly on the front line of student poverty. Can you talk about the implications of that and the meaning of that? It's such a powerful idea.

Kyle: You know, I use that metaphor of being on the front lines because the zeitgeist of our culture, and the larger things happening within our culture, the decisions that policymakers make, the decisions that cities and school districts make, they affect our classroom and they affect our school system even more than other institutions in our

country. So when—you know, jobs leave our communities, when housing stability becomes difficult, when a major event happens in our city, those are all things that we experience in a classroom level every day. More than half the students live below or very close to the poverty line in this country. And I talk about how the Free and Reduced Lunch statistics kind of describe this reality. **But when we're talking about half of students, more than half the students living below the poverty line or very near to it, there are very real implications in our classroom.**

One very obvious one is student hunger, but there's also not having safe places to sleep at night. There is neighborhood disruption. There's a lot of things that children are going through that are impacting their ability to learn. So we're only focused on what happens in our classroom if we're only focused on academics—which is obviously a very important focus for school—but if we choose to only focus on that, we are not helping our students learn, because they've got these things that are impacting their ability to learn at their best in our classrooms and schools. And teachers of the community really need to educate themselves about the forces that are impacting our students that are creating such high concentrations of poverty in our schools, and really work to address them on a large scale. I think that teachers really need to band together to advocate for our students on a large scale, but then also do those small day-to-day things in our classroom that help our students access material and access learning in our classroom.

So one thing that I talk about is just having a food drawer in my classroom, and having food available for students whenever they need it, because the truth is I'm not going to know exactly who ate dinner last night. And I can talk to kids and they might tell me, but there might be a kid in my class that came to school and they didn't eat anything last night, and they're not going to be able to learn at that point.

So I tell the story in my book about my first or second year of teaching when I used to pass out granola. It was like I would notice a kid would have a headache or feel fatigued, or they came in late so they missed breakfast. And I would just give them a granola bar because I was like, "Oh, but this kid's probably hungry. Let me give them a granola bar. I will solve this problem." But one of my students taught me a very valuable lesson because he threw that granola bar right back at me and said, "I don't need this." And the truth was he needed the granola bar. He was hungry; he didn't eat breakfast, but by placing a granola bar on his desk, I had basically announced to the class that he didn't have food at home. And I think that that, for me, was very valuable learning that if sometimes my approach to solving a problem is misguided, I need to be reflective and continuously improve as a teacher on that.

So I literally just took all the granolas, I put them in a drawer, and I tell all my students in my classroom, "There's food in this drawer. If you need it, you can take it." And you know, I think some teachers would be like, "Oh, then all the kids would take the food." Well, that's kind of the point, first of all. And really the kids who need it, take it. And the kids who don't need it kind of forget that it's there. But as evidence to the fact that every

couple of days when I check that drawer and it's empty again, there are kids that really need this food.

And so that's one way that teachers can address the symptom of poverty, that kids are coming very hungry to school. They can address that situation in their classroom.

Terry: I really like how you point out in chapter two that this food drawer really takes away the student embarrassment of having a granola bar put on their desk for other students to see. I mean there's just much more privacy about going to a drawer rather than the other way that you described. So that's a very effective thing, and I think it's—I mean it has to matter in the alertness and learning capability of a lot of your students.

Kyle: And I would say yes, like, these small steps of just having granola bars or graham crackers available to kids [are important]. We really need to do that as teachers, and I would guess any teacher you talk to is probably doing something similar to this. **But we also need to, as educators, let people know that this is happening because to me, it is unacceptable that we are letting children in this country suffer, especially on something like hunger that has such an easy and direct solution. It is unacceptable that we let children suffer in the classroom.**

And if we, as teachers, use our power and our voice as teachers to advocate, to uplift the narrative of our students, to uplift the voices of our students, to make them advocates for themselves, we can really change things for our kids. So it's not just about this quick giving of a granola bar to a kid. If you're doing this and that in your classroom, I really encourage you to work on a larger scale to change the situation, because teachers are so powerful. We have such a trusted voice, and we know what's going on. Like I said, we're at the front lines. And so we really have a power to work as advocates, to impact not just the kids that we come into contact with, but to impact an entire system. And to bring justice for an entire education system is really our call as teachers.

Terry: You know, in chapter four, another thing that teachers deal with is grief and loss, and it's called, "We Will Get Through This Together." Again, being in the culture we live in today, you know, there's losses certainly in the news daily, and in people's lives daily. And what are some of the ways that you talk about in the chapters that teachers can support students through the grief process?

Kyle: Well, that chapter, the chapter about grief and loss, I wasn't really intending on putting in the book. I kind of thought it was another—it would be like a subset of another issue. But the more and more I researched for the book and learned about the national context of trauma in our school, everything kept coming back to grief. And so I really dug into this and learned so much as a teacher in researching for this book. And I am so thrilled to be able to share it with other teachers in this chapter, because we have so many students who are grieving in our schools.

I share some statistics in the book, but one of them is that one out of every 20 children aged 15 and younger will suffer the loss of one or both of their parents. If we're thinking one of 20 children, that's one kid in our class. And 1.5 million children are living in single parent households because of the death of a parent. And that's just speaking about a grief and loss situation around a parent.

So we really have in our classroom so many kids who are going through a grieving process, a bereavement process. And whether or not we're going to recognize that as teachers, it's happening anyway. So I really encourage teachers to really get to know their kids and reach out to kids who are grieving. One thing that I talk about in the chapters of "Teacher Tools" is to tell the truth to kids. And it seems very simple, but it is a very scary thing for a teacher who doesn't have a lot of experience with grief and trauma themselves. And supporting others through that, it can feel very scary.

Terry: It's got to take a ton of judgment to know exactly how to do that.

Kyle: Yeah. And so a lot of times because we're uncomfortable with it, there's a lot of situations where teachers don't act. And that's going to be really hurtful to a kid who's in a bereavement situation, is a teacher who's ignoring or not taking action towards the problem.

One thing I say in the book that I think is so important is that you don't have to be an expert on grief and trauma and loss to support a child who is going through grief. All you have to do is be an ever-present source for that child. You have to be in a—you can make a positive impact on them just by being present, by being encouraging, by being authentic with them. And a quote that I have in here from Professor Linda Goldman is "We're powerless to control the losses and catastrophic events our children may need to face, but by honoring their inner wisdom, providing mentorship and creating safe havens for expression, we can empower them to become more capable and more caring human beings."

And I would encourage all teachers, if there is a grief or loss situation in your classroom—and there probably is—you don't have to wait for someone to give you permission to care for that child. You can be a caring and nurturing force for that child right away. And it starts with, you know, telling the truth. So if a child asks you a question about death, which may seem like really scary for us—I had a kid in my class literally just raise her hand and say, "Is my grandma going to die? I need to know this." And you know, taking that moment to be like, "Okay we're pausing the lesson on summarizing a text because we need to deal with this now," and to have that teacher judgment to be like, "This is something we need to talk about because you're not going to learn anything today if your inner monologue is saying, 'Is my grandma going to die?'"

So we took the moment to say, "Well, what's going on with your grandma?" And she let me know that her grandma had cancer. And telling the kid the truth, "Sometimes people

who have cancer do die. I don't know if your grandmother is going to die. Maybe we can ask somebody else about it. Maybe we can find out more."

I feel like if a kid is old enough to ask an intelligible question, it is our responsibility to give them an intelligible answer. And I heard that quote somewhere, and I wish I could give credit to it, but that's always stuck with me. The kid is going to ask me a question. I don't need to like shush them and tell them it's not okay to talk about. I can just tell them the truth.

So in the book, I give kind of like a table of examples of tough questions that kids ask about grief and loss, and just very simple direct answers that teachers can have in their back pocket. And it's helped me as a teacher to have these questions available because it does come up in our classrooms. And it comes up in our students' brains, and we can address that. And we can just be a supportive adult who's willing to answer their questions about grief and loss.

Terry: That's a powerful message, and it sounds like a very useful tool. In chapter five, and I think this leads into chapter five, "When Students Are in Danger: Supporting Students in the Trauma-Informed Classroom," grief certainly being a form of trauma, you write, "Knowing the reality of abuse in America is the first step in becoming a trauma-informed educator." Talk about that a little bit for me, if you will.

Kyle: I think that it's very shocking to hear statistics about adverse childhood experiences, experiences that can create trauma in our children. And so I give several statistics about how common abuse is in America. But one of them is that in 2013, 47 states reported approximately 3.1 million children received preventative service from child protective services and agencies in the United States. And of the children who have received maltreatment or abuse, nearly 80% suffer from neglect, 18% suffer from physical abuse, and 9% suffer from sexual abuse. About 1 in 10 children will be sexually abused before turning 18 years old.

And that statistic, there's many numbers around these statistics, and obviously it's really hard to pinpoint one number of how many kids have experienced an adverse childhood experience because it's hard to count those because we don't know about all of them. **But the likelihood of a teacher in America having not just one child but many children in their classrooms who have experienced trauma is very, very high.**

And so as teachers if we know this, if we know that many of our children are experiencing trauma, we need to educate ourselves about this, and we need to start looking for, you know, warning signs or signals of abuse. And I give a very detailed list from the Mayo Clinic about the signs of abuse and neglect that we can look for so that we can support students. **But one thing that is very interesting is many students respond to trauma in ways that we punish kids at school for.**

So it is, you know, having emotional flings or acting out inappropriately. We punish a kid for that at school. However, that could be a sign of trauma. And so to just open our mind and say, "When I'm viewing this behavior, when I'm having this experience of a child in my school who's, you know, not displaying pro-social behavior, when this is happening, is it because of the trauma that I need to address?" Because if it's because of a trauma, disciplining a child is not going to help the situation.

So I really just encourage teachers, you know, just to read the chapter and see what is it that is happening when a kid is traumatized. What is happening in their body? What signs can I see—look for that, so that I can support a kid because a kid who is in an agitated state cannot learn. Their minds are not accessing the parts of their brain that are responsible for critical thinking. And if our goal as teachers is to teach, this is a part of that goal. This is the work that needs to be done to make that goal happen.

Terry: So then this idea is that if I see acting-out behavior that maybe the first consideration I have is that this a symptom or a sign of abuse, and that truly becomes sort of a trauma-informed lens then for a teacher.

Kyle: Yes, yes. And that's the first step; I really think to be trauma-informed is to literally know what it looks like when a kid has been traumatized. And I think back to kids that I had in my classroom years ago, and you just have these aha moments where you're like, this kid was acting out, and they were saying these things, and they were yelling these things, but what they were really communicating was "I need help." They were really trying to communicate, "I don't know how to deal with this situation. I don't know how to control the situation in my body. I don't know how to control these thoughts, and I need support."

So they might have been like saying something differently or acting differently, but notice what are they really trying to communicate with me. What is it that I can do to support them when they become in an agitated state?

And so I gave a list of self-regulation activities that you can do with kids and with the whole class, because your whole class is going to benefit from knowing how to regulate their bodies.

So having a kid in your class who has experienced an adverse childhood experience, who might have experienced trauma, that's kind of like a blessing for us as teachers, because what we're trying to teach that child about self-regulation and about how to work through these issues, those are lessons we also want all kids to know. We want them all to know how to control their bodies, and how to deal with the difficulties in life. So I would just encourage teachers to look into trauma-informed instruction. If I had a magic wand, I would make like an entire semester be trauma-informed instruction and teacher preparation programs. I think it is essential to supporting our students right now where they are in our classrooms.

Terry: Excellent. I'm just taken by the power of that—how critical you feel it is that teachers recognize this trauma in students. You also write about value-driven classrooms and cultures that develop character in chapter six. And you make a very—to me it was a really—I didn't understand it at first. You write that character education and reading comprehension go hand-in-hand. Could you explain that for me?

Kyle: Yeah. So I think there's been this new buzzword in teaching which is character education, or values-driven education. Even though it is not new at all, and if we look at the history of our American education system, teaching students character was at the very heart of developing a universal education system, but we've kind of developed these new words around it or this new thinking about it. But what I argue is that it's not like a cute extra thing that we can do when we have time to teach kids to develop strong character.

Developing character, and developing emotional intelligence, is essential to their academic success. And I mean that in two terms. One is that kids cannot learn difficult concepts unless they have perseverance and determination. So we do need to teach kids to persevere, to work hard, to be curious so that they can do academic work. But I also argue that academic work is character-based. So I cannot read a piece of literature and understand it if I don't know how to empathize with the characters. If I don't understand a character's motivation, if I can't see the emotional motivation of a character, I cannot understand literature. So I think that we've—in the many arguments to teach character in schools and to pay attention to the social-emotional side of learning, I think one strong argument is that social-emotional learning is academic learning. You have to know how to understand someone else's point of view in order to, you know, do academic work like writing an opinion piece.

So I think that there are many reasons why we need to have a renewed focus on character education in our schools. But I do also think that our academic demands on students *require* us to do that as well. So it's not an extra thing that we can do for kids to teach them character and to teach them strong values. It is very well within our scope in teaching academics to do that as well.

Terry: So reading comprehension would be a much more nuanced sort of—you would judge how well a child was—what their level of comprehension was on a much more nuanced and character-driven scale. It's a very interesting kind of—it seems like a paradigm shift from back when I was in primary school, when we considered what reading comprehension was.

Kyle: It is, isn't it? Because when I was growing up, reading comprehension was bubbling in the right letter. That was reading comprehension. So I think—and I really credit our newer, higher standards. In Colorado we've adopted the Colorado Academic Standards, a subset of which is the common core standards. And those standards, these high, rigorous academic standards, really do require a higher level of thinking for our students, and if we're going to get them to those higher-order, higher-level critical thinking tasks,

character education needs to be a part of our instruction.

Terry: In your final chapter, Kyle, I love it, the title "I Can't Wait to Learn More"—it's a great title for the last chapter—"Classrooms Where Student Engagement Thrives." Talk about some of the teacher tools that you write about as a way to foster engagement in classrooms.

Kyle: Well, one thing I write about in the chapter is that engagement is different than entertainment. I have a great ability to be very entertaining for my students. You know, I can make silly faces, I can stop a book on a cliffhanger, but that's not real engagement. That's great entertainment and has a role in the classroom as well. But real engagement is when kids are just authentically interacting with work. They're making real, genuine contributions, so you know, not just a worksheet that shows that they can answer questions, but what can they do to solve an actual real problem?

So one thing that I talk about is service learning, and acts of service as being a tool for teacher or for student engagement. You know, I think—and service learning and acts of service, they seem like another one of those cute things that are nice to do when we have time in our classrooms. But I think that they are so powerful when used correctly in schools. So I talk about how my students read this book called "Beatrice's Goat." And it's about a girl who receives a goat in Uganda and she—because of the goat she's able to go to school.

I was just reading the book and I was like, "Okay." That was what we were doing for the day. And then the kids were like, "No. We need to give goats now." And I was like, "Oh, okay. I guess we're doing that now." It's like, "Okay. Well, how can we give goats? How would a goat help someone if we gave them a goat?" And they ended up having this massive project around raising money to give goats to people through the organization Heifer International. And there was so much learning that went on through that, because they had to create. They created bookmarks to sell, then they had to decide how much money are we going to sell these for. They had to add up the money, and in the end it was very powerful learning that every member of my classroom community contributed to in their own unique ways. And it helped solve an authentic problem. They actually made an impact on the world and on the lives of people that they were able to give these goats to.

So I think that to me it's not—**the service learning and the acts of service that I speak about in the book are a tool for student engagement, [and] I think, kind of speak to the whole goal of education.**

Our whole goal is not to produce kids who turn in assignments and check off boxes. Our goal is to prepare kids to enter our society, and to be powerful members of that society once they've entered into it.

Terry: Beautiful example for them to form this ad hoc community around providing a goat to change a family's life somewhere in a part of the world that's foreign to them. I mean

that's just an amazing example.

Kyle: You know, and the geography that they learned because of it, just all the connections that they were able to make because they said, "Can we do this?" And I said yes. And that was such a powerful thing that happened in our classroom.

Terry: Obviously, teaching has become so much more than a job for you, and I'm wondering if there was a particular individual that you would say, "This was the person that really turned the light on for me where I said, 'Ah, this is going to be not just my vocation, but also my avocation.'"

Kyle: Yeah. There really did have to be that person because growing up I never would have wanted to become my arch nemesis: an elementary school teacher. So I think really for me the thing that made me want to pursue education was working with a student in Washington, D.C. We were doing some tutoring work, and every week I got to go and tutor him in reading and writing. And so it just became the best part of my week to go and hang out with this kid and teach him to write his name, and to draw letters, and to clap syllables out. And it just became like this beautiful part of my life. And I just—I realized that that's what I wanted to do. I really wanted to work to give all kids the excellent education that they deserve.

And I think really right now is such an exciting time to be a teacher. And I am so—I feel like I have my dream job. As hard as it is, and as much, like, pressure there is on us in this age of accountability and data, as hard as it is, it is truly an exciting time to be a teacher right now. We know more than we've ever known before about learning. We are developing content-based pedagogy that is going to do amazing things for students. And I am just—I'm so thankful to that student for kind of showing me the light and showing me how wonderful and rewarding a career in education could be.

Terry: What a beautiful way to wrap our interview today, with that example of the relationship that you formed with that student. Our guest today on *Unrestrained* has been the teacher and author, Kyle Schwartz. And her book is called *I Wish My Teacher Knew: How One Question Can Change Everything for Our Kids*. That's available on Amazon.com. And also the Twitter hashtag #Iwishmyteacherknew—you can find lots of great information there. Any other thing you'd like to clue us in on about the availability of the book or about the participating on Twitter that you'd like to add?

Kyle: You know, absolutely. The book is available on Amazon and wherever books are sold, at Barnes & Noble as well. **I would be so excited to connect with your listeners through Twitter if they would reach out to me either by using the #Iwishmyteacherknew or my handle is @kylemschwartz. So I would love to connect with all your listeners on Twitter, and hear what's working in their classrooms, and learn from them, and just have this community that collaborates and shares and does great things for kids.**

Terry: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for your time today, Kyle. It's been a pleasure to speak with you.

Kyle: Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it very much.

Terry: All right. And to our listeners as well, thank you.