

Bearing Witness to Students' Lived Experiences

OCTOBER WEBINAR TAKEAWAYS

Balance both the hard and soft skills in your role as teacher.

The capacity to listen, to be present, to remember, and to hold, the stories of your students are part of the “soft skills” of teaching. Sometimes these become less prioritized over the years due to other pressures. It is important to maintain a balance between the soft and hard skills of teaching.

Teachers already know how to be empathic people.

You do not have to be a therapist to be able to witness another person’s experience: we are asked to do this all the time with our children, partners, and family members. Our society has unfortunately characterized these essential, basic skills as “professional” rather than “human”.

We can’t always fix it but don’t ignore it.

A main challenge of bearing witness is not to feel like you need to DO something about what you hear, like try to solve the problem, give advice, move into action, or make the person feel okay. While some situations can be addressed with action, most cannot, and simply bearing witness can be tremendously powerful in itself. This involves, to some degree, accepting the limitations placed on you. Listening does not mean you are helpless or giving up!

It makes us stronger (not weaker) to share our worries.

People are socialized to keep uncomfortable topics to themselves, so as not to disturb others, to appear different, or to be criticized. It is difficult for most people to tell someone, even someone who cares about them, about a troubling feeling or experience due to shame and fear. Giving students practice at communicating uncomfortable experiences is essential to helping them develop skills that will make them better people, better friends, and better citizens.