



Wednesday, April 18, 2018

## For our future leaders, look to the 'march for our lives'

By Chloe Learey

Regardless of where you fall on the political continuum as it relates to the issue of gun control or gun rights, witnessing high schoolers from coast to coast demonstrating leadership on these thorny issues offers a great opportunity to consider where and how leadership skills emerge.

Many have questioned how students in their early to late teens successfully coalesced a movement in such a short time, including a national march in Washington, D.C. For those who say they are puppets of adults pushing an agenda there is not much to discuss. For others, from those who say, "these young people should be seen, not heard" to those who say, "this generation will save us," it is an opportunity to reflect on what skills and experiences provide the foundation from which leadership can launch.

The importance of "soft skills" has been reported in leading business publications like Fortune and Forbes. Even the highest academic achievers will struggle in the classroom and the workplace if they are not able to communicate effectively with other people, name and understand their feelings, regulate their emotional state, manage their time, show empathy, and listen well. We know that 80 percent of the brain is developed by the age of 3, and 90 percent by the age of 5, before kids even get to kindergarten. This is the time when the foundation of these soft skills is established. These early years are critical to future success in all realms of life.

Soft skills are often related to how you work with others or so called "people skills." An August 2017 NPR Education piece entitled "Social Emotional Skills, Everybody Loves Them But Still Can't Define Them" attempted to better define soft skills. The author, Anya Kamenetz, highlights a variety of terms: character, grit, resilience, noncognitive traits and habits, social emotional skills, growth mindset, and agency. There is a mix of the concept of skills ('how to listen') and internal traits ('a sense of power to influence your life'). While imperfect, she lands on soft skills as the phrase that best covers some of these key concepts.

The idea of character traits that are inherent is a slippery slope towards blaming individuals for any lack of success - "she just didn't have enough grit, didn't pull herself up by her bootstraps." There are echoes of 'nature vs nurture' here, and

it is the interplay between the two that determines the outcome. A child who experiences trauma and develops a fight-response may eventually get labeled with oppositional defiant disorder. Her strategy for survival was to fight which impacted the development of how her brain developed. Supports could either reinforce that development or they could help create different neural pathways to help her develop new strategies. Her brain development is not just a matter of nature.

What does this have to do with the students we are seeing on the news and on the streets? We see people who are able to articulate their feelings (18-year-old male crying publicly, 17-year-old female expressing anger), show empathy for others' experience (acknowledging that students in Chicago and Los Angeles live with daily violence), standing up to negative comments and threats (understanding that not everyone will agree with them and that they still have a right to speak), and moving forward in the face of adversity (organizing despite large political forces that worked to thwart them). We see people who demonstrate a range of the social emotional skills that make it possible for them to successfully understand, plan and execute a variety of strategies so they can make a difference in their world. We see people who believe they have the power to make change. We see people who can think critically and adapt their understanding of an issue based on new information.

Regardless of whether you agree with their agenda, hopefully you see the value of what they bring to table. An engaged, active citizenry is vital to the health of our democracy, and the skills that all of us need to be successful on that front are developed in the earliest years of our lives. All environments are learning environments for young children because the growth of the brain is so rapid during this time of life. If we make investments to ensure that the environments of young children, at home and in child care, are promoting healthy social emotional development we will continue to see the kind of participation we hope for in our schools, workplaces and communities across the spectrum of beliefs. These investments pave the way for successful future leaders.

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