

Why Secondary Teachers Need Fred Rogers

By Kimberly Athans

Kimberly Athans teaches literacy and education courses at Point Loma Nazarene University in San Diego, California. In her over 25 years in teaching, she has taught middle and high school English in California and Texas, as well as composition and rhetoric and literature courses at the community college level. Her research focuses on best practices teaching writing, on literacy in secondary schools, and on the legacy of the National Writing Project. She can be reached at kathans@pointloma.edu.

Abstract: This article discusses the legacy of Fred Rogers, and bridges the connections of his work in early childhood development to the needs of older students. The author draws upon her own experiences as a child watching *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, and as a teacher who has tried to incorporate several of his ideas into her own high school English classroom. She argues that especially in this time of uncertainty, change, and political unrest, and when facing students after a long absence in a pandemic, teachers need to be equipped to meet their students' social-emotional needs before their academic needs. The article offers specific suggestions and insights from Fred Rogers and scholars on social-emotional learning to help teachers and students cope with the challenges they face today.

Keywords: teaching in a pandemic, the legacy of Fred Rogers, social-emotional learning, secondary English, teaching resilience and empathy

On his PBS television show, *Mister Rogers* used to sing a song called "It's You I Like." The song gained notoriety when he sang it with Jeff Erlanger in 1981, the ten-year-old boy with severe disabilities who would subsequently introduce him into the Television Academy Hall of Fame in 1999 ("Jeff Erlanger," n.d.). The lyrics (Rogers, 1971) repeat the words "it's you I like" throughout and other lyrics emphasize how people are perfectly likable exactly as they are, right then and always. These lyrics are the echoes of a man who dedicated his life to making children feel understood, valued, and loved. They could be on a poster in every classroom in America. They should be stamped on the heart of every teacher who walks into the profession with the intention of making a difference in the lives of young people.

Who Was Fred McFeely Rogers?

Fred Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, in 1928, a community "with its tidy homes and many parks and playgrounds [that looked] like quintessential small town America" (King, 2018, p. 20). This town became his vision of the neighborhood, a place where "children could feel understood and valued" (p. 158). A victim of childhood bullying, illness, and isolation, he turned to puppetry, music, and ministry to channel his emotions. His life philosophy came from a quote from *The Little Prince* which reads: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (de Saint-Exupéry, 1943, p. 50). That is how he lived his life each day, and from all who knew him, he was the same person offscreen as he was onscreen. Rogers was concerned with matters of the heart above all else, a mantra that allowed him to become a pioneer in social-emotional learning in early childhood education.

Rogers became the producer, writer, performer, director, and program manager of *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*, a show that

began in 1968, airing over 1,000 episodes in 33 years. Storytelling was also at the heart of what Rogers did on his show, a technique taken from early child development scholar Margaret McFarland, whom he worked with for many years. He took his calling very seriously, stating: “If it’s for the children, it has to be the best we can give” (as quoted in King, 2018, p. 165). McFarland’s influence was invaluable for the program. He met with her weekly to discuss the scripts, music, and letters from his audience:

She said that attitudes aren’t taught, they’re caught. If the teacher has an attitude of enthusiasm for the subject, the student catches that whether the student is in second grade or in graduate school. She said that if you show them what you love, they’ll get it and they’ll want to get it. (King, 2018, p. 138)

Every day before the show, Rogers uttered a prayer: “Dear Lord, let some word of this be yours” (King, 2018, p. 204). Rogers used television as a conduit for his ministry. While he never mentioned God, the music he composed, stories he developed, and themes of his program all centered on the Christian principles of loving your neighbor and self, living a consciously moral and authentic life, looking for the goodness in everyone and accepting them as they are, and being kind to others. In fact, many of his aphorisms (see Appendix A) have become well-known sayings of kindness and love that followers of Rogers’s life and work often espouse. His focus on social-emotional learning over cognitive development, coupled with his insistence on authenticity, honesty, and sincerity, was what made his show unique. As King (2018) offers, “While Sesame Street used fast pacing and quick cut technique to excite and engage young viewers and keep them glued to the screen, Fred Rogers deliberately headed in the opposite direction, creating his own quiet, slow paced, thoughtful world, which led to real learning in his view” (p. 194). Rogers championed an approach that allowed children to take their time to process their learning and to use their imagination. It was that stillness and philosophy of deeply, simply, and slowly that made him a national icon.

What Can Secondary Teachers Learn From Fred Rogers?

Although much of Fred Rogers’s work was in child development and early childhood education, and although the age range for the audience of his program was for children ages 3-7, his teachings are just as relevant for older children and teenagers. As a former high school English teacher of 20 years, I used many of the same things Rogers did in my own classroom. For example, I always strove to offer my students time to think and read silently. I knew how their fast-paced, stressful lives were bombarded by noise and distractions, and I attempted to offer them a safe haven of silence. I had a reading corner with a rug and pillows in my classroom, low lighting or natural window light for quiet time, and lots of color and comfort. I wanted my classroom to feel more like home, much like Fred’s 1950s living room set. I started each year having them write “Where I’m From” poems, and learned their names by the end of the first week of school. I always incorporated projects where they could work in groups and use art supplies so that they could showcase their creativity. Sometimes we went outside and sat in the shade of the trees to read or write in our journals. I encouraged them to live in the moment and practice mindfulness. I called on them by name and gave them hand-written individualized feedback and comments on their papers. I also read to my students almost every day and established rituals and routines they could rely upon. We created a class book of six-word memoirs at the end of the year, and I wrote a memoir for each of them. I practiced active listening,

worked very hard at getting to know each and every student, and paid attention to what was going on in their lives. Sometimes I brought in goodies for celebrations or rewards. I went to their plays and their games, their choir concerts and their poetry readings. I had a chalkboard in my room filled with their quotes that amazed me, and I showcased all of their work. I framed artwork by former students and hung it on my walls. By the time I got to my twentieth year, my room was quite cluttered, full of trinkets and coffee mugs and little gifts from previous students, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. I did these things to show my students that I cared about them. Academics and learning were important, but *they* were even more important.

I created every activity, assignment, and assessment with the intention of bringing out the unique individuals my students were. For example, when teaching *Frankenstein* to my seniors, I had my students create a monster that represented their fears, asking them to write an explanation of the symbols/imagery/portrayal of their monsters. I remember one student had tape over the mouth because she felt like speaking her mind got her into trouble, another had two tickets to prom in their hand because they always felt like the only one who was alone, another student had a bandage over her heart for the pain of her parents’ divorce. I will never forget Andy’s monster with his monster’s stuttering speech bubbles because he, too, struggled with stuttering his whole life. After the whole-class share of our projects, Andy said he never spoke for that long in front of a class, and if it weren’t for our class, he never would have done it. There were many tears shed in that moment by his classmates.

Carol Jago (2020), associate director of the California Reading and Literature Project at UCLA, speculates about the need for teachers to recognize the vulnerability of their students in the pandemic, thereby creating a classroom community where students support one another, urging:

Generating sympathy isn’t enough. We need to nurture empathy. Fortunately, English teachers have at their fingertips a powerful tool for teaching empathy—literature.

Books situate social-emotional issues within real world settings, both past and present. They invite classroom conversations about controversial issues and allow room for children to ask themselves, “I wonder what I would have done? I wonder what I might have felt.” (paras. 5-6)

Like Fred, I used stories to usher in conversations about what it means to be a human being in our world, how to live for the greater good and love our neighbor, and how to live an authentic life. As Jago (2020) states, there is no better medium than literature to teach empathy and understanding of self and others.

Now more than ever before, students need an adult in their lives who cares about them. They need teachers who are there for them, who see them, who listen to them. They need safe spaces of refuge in an ever-changing, often scary world. They need a Mister Rogers, and we can provide that for them in so many little gestures and intentional ways. Fred loved a sign on his college campus so much that he scribbled the message on a piece of paper and carried it in his wallet for years. It read “Life is for service” (Tuttle, 2019, p. 30). This is a testament to the servant heart of teachers. We are called to teach, and no matter where we end up in our careers, those souls in our classroom are our responsibility. As we continue to trudge through compassion fatigue, languishing, cognitive deficit, and the ways in which the pandemic has affected our mental,

physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. The sobering statistic that 71% of our students are suffering from stress, anxiety, and depression (Son et al., 2020) is disconcerting to say the least, making our need for Fred's legacy even more timely.

I remember a time when I was teaching *Macbeth* to my seniors. Many of them were not taking it seriously or were putting their attention and efforts into their other classes. No matter how I tried to make connections to Shakespeare and our lives today, they were disengaged. One morning as I saw them exchange flashcards for their other classes for the big quiz coming up, I had had enough. I spontaneously stated that we had finished reading Act III, and that we were going to write. I told them to review independently for 15 minutes, while I went to the front of the room and wrote a prompt that took up the entire board. As I sat there and watched them reading the prompt, I felt vindicated. Finally, they will take my class seriously, I thought. This is not the blow off English class where we just hang out and discuss books.

Then something happened. I looked at them. There they sat in their seats with tired eyes, probably from staying up late to study the night before, or to ride the bus from an away game, and here they were now, most of them probably without any breakfast, at 7:45 in the morning, writing about *Macbeth's* descent into madness. I saw their distinctly different backpacks next to their desks, laying haphazardly all over the floor, their lunch bags spilling out among science goggles and choir music folders. I saw their wrinkled shirts and their pajama bottoms (one girl had slippers), and even a blood testing kit for diabetes. At that moment, it hit me. I saw their souls. I was suddenly very aware of the power I had. As they sat there biting their lips and scratching out phrases on their papers, flipping quickly through the text for enough quotes to get an "A," I realized I was not showing them anything, except that I wasn't listening to them or adjusting my teaching to meet them where they were. I remember getting tears in my eyes and feeling like a mother more than a teacher at that moment. I learned a lot about myself and my

seniors that day. It was humbling, to say the least.

One of the things Fred Rogers is known for is the saying that teachers, coaches, mentors, and parents need to love their work in front of kids. This idea comes from Margaret McFarland who invited a sculptor to a work with children at the Arsenal Center. She implored him not to teach sculpting, but "to love clay in front of the children" (King, 2018, p. 139). Tuttle (2019) muses, "I wonder if he ever considered this: that like the sculptor loving the clay, which helped them to better love the clay, he was loving the children themselves in front of them" (p. 63). Not only did I fail to love Shakespeare and figurative language and poetry in front of my kids that day, I also forgot to love them. I had forgotten one of Fred Rogers's most important lessons: grace. Biographer Maxwell King (2018) stated that Fred Rogers was all about grace—in everything, for everyone. He saw God in all things, and of course he gave away that grace.

Rogers is revered for cultivating honesty and authenticity in himself in the same way he cultivated self-love in his viewers: "by choosing good liturgies and keeping them day after day, program after program . . . song after song" (King, 2018, p. 102). We have liturgies (or work of the people) in our classrooms. Daily or weekly rituals, traditions, expectations, activities, and schedules, we keep these to help our students build discipline in their work and to lessen their anxiety by giving them something to rely on. Another way to ease the transitions in the day-to-day classroom, especially amid the backdrop of whatever may be happening in their town, city, or country, is to connect the dots. As Tuttle (2019) espouses:

When Fred Rogers addressed issues of difference . . . he was connecting the dots...between the grown-up versions of these social realities and their analogue issues in childhood . . . If we are going to develop generations of emotionally intelligent adults, we must address the emotional needs of the children who will become them. (p. 92)



Social-Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Finn & Hess, 2019, p. 7). In short, it is the integration of social and emotional development of children and adolescents within academic learning and curriculum. The five SEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills (CASEL.org). Teachers can implement social-emotional learning in their classrooms in the following ways: be intentional, create a warm and inviting classroom culture, focus on relationship-building and connecting with teachers and peers, make discipline more inclusive, foster empathy in your classroom, have students actively engage in activities that are relevant to them, let them have choices in their assignments, have them make goals and help them reach them, take the focus off of grades and place it on learning, foster inclusive practices and a sense of belonging in your classroom, greet them at the door and ask them about their day, play learning games together, lead morning or restorative justice circles, and model taking care of yourself. Benefits of including social-emotional learning in your classroom include the following: improves classroom and school climate, increases student motivation, teaches problem-solving and coping skills, improves classroom behavior, increases students’ ability to manage stress and depression, helps students with goal setting, increases academic achievement, provides a safe space to talk about feelings, and supports self-efficacy and student advocacy. Intentionality while planning lessons is a good way to incorporate social-emotional skills, as is differentiating instruction for all learners according to mind styles, learning modalities, and multiple intelligence theory. Ask yourself, “What do I want my students to know, feel, and do at the end of this lesson?” (Martinez, 2016). Social-emotional learning is something most teachers have

been doing naturally for decades; however, in this day and age, intentionality with these practices is vital. Students are dealing with more adult issues and carrying the weight of significant problems now more than ever before. Review the social-emotional learning wheels for elementary and secondary students (see Figures 1 and 2) and notice the dramatic difference that a few years make as far as the emotions that our students are working through in our classrooms on a daily basis.

It is especially important as we return to our classrooms following the pandemic that we review these concepts and think about strategies that we can use to implement some of these ideas. All students need to develop self-awareness of the ways in which the pandemic has changed their lives. They need to consider the emotions they are experiencing and the most effective ways for them to use these emotions in their learning and interactions with others. The focus of teachers should be on teaching “self-awareness and regulation skills, whether it is through morning messages and circle time for young children or narrative writing and group discussion for older students” (Meyer, 2021, Regulating section, para. 1). Questions which evolve from these discussions may be: *Who am I? Why do I feel this way? How can my emotions help me learn? How can I be happy?* (Meyer, 2021, Regulating section, para. 4). “Exploring a sense of self and identity is critical to SEL development, and students need this exploration as their lives move beyond the pandemic” (Meyer, 2021, Regulating section, para 5). The underlying need for SEL goes well beyond the pandemic. Finn and Hess (2019) argue that SEL is, among other things, an “attempt at rebalancing an education system that in recent decades has focused overmuch on reading and math scores while giving short shrift to character development, civic formation, and the cultivation of ethics among its young charges” (p. 7).

Perhaps the most important thing that secondary teachers need to remember, as they teach 150-200 students each year, is to help students to realize their gifts and contributions that they bring to your class or school and to celebrate their uniqueness. Rogers



Figure 1. Emotions Wheel for Elementary

Courtesy of San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, California Association of Teachers of English Convention, February 2021.

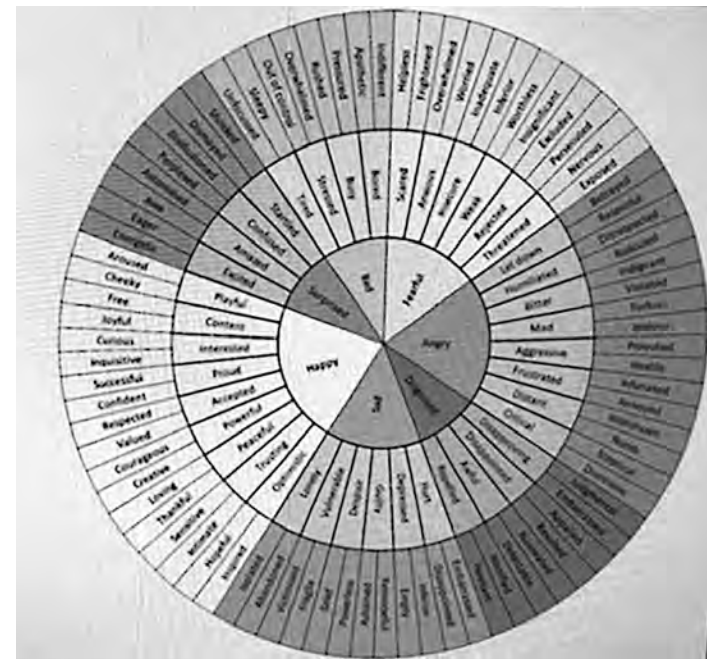


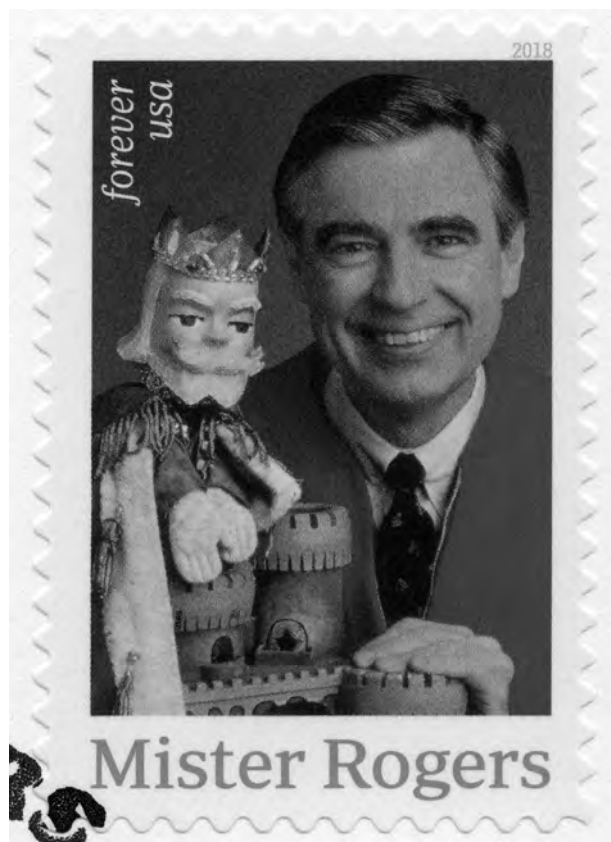
Figure 2. Emotions Wheel for Secondary

Courtesy of San Joaquin Valley Writing Project, California Association of Teachers of English Convention, February 2021.

referred to this as individuation, a Jungian term that refers to:

a lifelong process of integrating influences and instincts that make a person whole, a discovery of his or her uniqueness. It also carries with it the idea that we become who we were intended to be, by design, not just who we think we should be. (Hollingsworth, 2005, p. 120)

When Amy Hollingsworth (2005) was interviewing Fred Rogers, she asked him to imagine that he had one final broadcast and could share the single most important lesson of his life. Rogers responded,



“Well, I would want [those] who were listening to somehow know that they had unique value, that there isn’t anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and there never will be” (pp. 160-161). Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could see his final wish as our own personal goal and reminder as we went back to school in the fall? Fred Rogers taught America about early childhood, he was an exemplar of the best values a person can possess, and he deeply and profoundly affected several generations of people. Wouldn’t it be even more wonderful if his legacy could live on through us in America’s classrooms? I can’t think of a better way to create a beautiful day in our neighborhood.

References

- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (2022, June 21). What is the CASEL Framework? <https://www.casel.org>.
- de Saint-Exupéry, A. (1943). *The little prince*. (Richard Howard, Trans.). Mariner.
- Finn, C., & Hess, F. (2019). *What social and emotional learning needs to succeed and survive*. American Enterprise Institute.

Hollingsworth, A. (2005). *The simple faith of Fred Rogers: Spiritual insights from the world’s most beloved neighbor*. Thomas Nelson.

Jago, C. (2020, August 31). Feelings first. National Council of Teachers of English. <https://ncte.org/blog/2020/08/feelings-first/>

“Jeff Erlander.” (n. d.). Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.org. <https://www.misterrogers.org/articles/jeffrey-erlander>

King, M. (2018). *The good neighbor: The life and work of Fred Rogers*. Abrams Press.

Martinez, L. (2016). SEL is good teaching. Edutopia.org. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/sel-is-good-teaching-lorea-martinez>

Meyer, D. (2021, April 27). *How should social emotional learning change post pandemic?* Elmhurst University. <https://www.elmhurst.edu/blog/social-emotional-learning/>

Rogers, F. (1971). It’s you I like [Song]. http://www.neighborhoodarchive.com/music/songs/its_you_i_like.html

Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students’ mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 22*(9). <https://www.jmir.org/2020/9/e21279/>

Tuttle, S. (2019). *Exactly as you are: The life and faith of Mister Rogers*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Appendix A

The Aphorisms of Fred Rogers

1. Try your best to make goodness attractive.
2. Look for the helpers. There will always be helpers. If you look for the helpers, you’ll know there’s hope.
3. Everyone has something special to offer the world.
4. The best gift you can give a person is your honest self.
5. You have made this day special just by being you.
6. What is human is mentionable, and what is mentionable is manageable.
7. You are loved and capable of loving.
8. Love is at the root of everything—all learning and relationships.
9. I like you just the way you are.
10. Children long to belong. I think they really love to know they are part of something important.
11. I offer an expression of care to every child.
12. Children have deep and complex feelings, just as adults do.
13. The outside world of children’s lives have changed, but the inside world hasn’t.
14. You don’t have to do anything sensational for people to love you.
15. So much that is spontaneous is what can be truly inspired.

-
16. You're the only person like you in the whole world.
 17. People like honesty.
 18. Be in touch with your inner child.
 19. I care about you.
 20. Music is essential to our being.
 21. Children confront fears through play.
 22. All I can do is be myself.
 23. Children can have a full range of feelings and express them in healthy, positive ways.
 24. I don't think you have to use labels to allow people to see what inspires you.
 25. One of the greatest helps in the development of literacy is the dining room table conversation.
 26. I think people should have complete silence every day.
27. Give the kind of nourishment that comes from an understanding of development of the human personality.
 28. Children long to belong and feel as if they are a part of something important.
 29. Life is a continuum and so are the ways of expressing life and creativity.
 30. It is alright to share your feelings, especially negative ones.
 31. Self-knowledge is the starting point of authenticity.
 32. Self-esteem in a child comes from truth about themselves.
 33. I found that suppressing feelings has the same fate as trying to suppress a beach ball in the ocean-they both come out sideways.
 34. How we see ourselves affects how we see others.
 35. There is one thing that evil cannot stand, and that's forgiveness.