

Educator in the Neighborhood:

Amy Brereton, Vice President for Academics, Endeavor Schools

Amy has been in the field of education for 20 years and holds a PhD in Educational Research from Cambridge University. She has worked as a teaching assistant, classroom teacher, and school leader. She lives in Annapolis, MD, with two fascinating 9-year-olds, one Naval Officer who keeps her laughing, and four hermit crabs (one is named Fred).

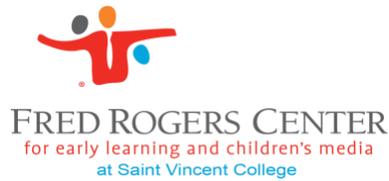


*What's your earliest personal memory of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood?*

I remember a crystal-clear picture in my brain. I was expelled from preschool for crying. I kept crying and crying. I can remember sitting inside the cubby. I remember a deep desire for seeing my mother and also the tension of wanting to play with the other children. I remember the teachers telling my mother I wasn't ready for school. I was the fifth child of six children. I remember thinking, "Oh, I'm the only one not ready to be a big girl and not ready for school." I remember going home and sitting with my sister and watching Mister Rogers. It was an episode when I think he made binoculars with toilet paper rolls. I remember him saying, "I'm proud of you." And I remember my mom saying, "I'm proud of you Amy and I'm happy to have you here with me at home." I remember then making something with toilet paper and being with my mother and feeling proud. I did eventually go back to school the next year.

*You have been showing episodes to families and educators instead of directly to children. Can you say a bit about how you've been working with MRN episodes this year?*

The formula has been fairly similar, but the audience is different. The way I select episodes is a process of talking with school leaders and teachers and deciding which episodes would meet the interests of families. That's been true with every group I've showed episodes. I'm trying to



understand what they are interested in. We've done episodes to address Kindergarten readiness, about divorce with families going through that, about death with a school where we lost a teacher suddenly, and the mistakes episode for families feeling stressed and worried that they aren't doing enough for their children.

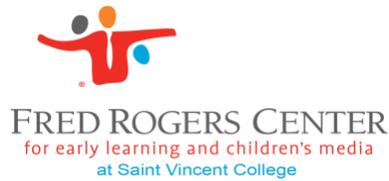
*Could you share a bit about how your educators are learning from MRN at this time of Covid-19 and the closing of schools and centers?*

It's been so wonderful to watch. Teachers are hungry to take in as many episodes as they can make time for. They're making their own videos for children and also running their own video meetings to connect in real time with children and also parents. They are connecting in multiple ways. They are looking to MRN episodes to understand technically how to film and what to talk about. We've seen teachers go from making videos that maybe looked a little bit pop culture-y. And now they've just slowed it down and have been more real. They are taking time to address things like their pets and the weather. I love this video from a teacher who was trying to hang her bird feeder; she wanted to talk about perseverance, so she showed how she tried to hang a bird feeder and it just wasn't going the way she wanted it to. And today a video came in from a teacher in a bilingual classroom. Instead of just showing students the fruit and giving the name of the fruit, she decided to show children the inside of the fruit, too, so they looked inside an orange and inside a melon. It's a short video but very powerful.

Technically, teachers are being more relaxed with the camera view. Also, they seem to be okay with the content being more real. I think watching MRN helps them think about their language, the words that they choose. The one video you saw with the teacher talking with children about a mask, showing them all about the mask... you can see the teacher being careful with her language and the pacing of the conversation. This has changed in light of watching how Fred Rogers is so careful with his words and careful with his timing.

As someone who is trying to inspire educators, work with thousands of educators who I might not ever be able to meet in person, the message I've been pushing is you might not have time to come to my office hours or to some of the special professional development opportunities. I get it... you might not have time because of your other responsibilities. But maybe you can just squeeze in watching a little MRN... if you are able to watch it, you will be able to pick out things that will help you. You are welcome to join our conversations, but you don't need to; watching MRN is enough for you to be inspired.

Also, the extent to which MRN gives them permission to make errors and mistakes. A huge take-away for them is to be able to just show up as yourself. So much teacher craft knowledge they've been honing feels unusable right now because they don't have a child in front of them or their materials. They feel so much distance and so much lacking. So, Fred's general message to everyone is important. You're fine just as you are. You have plenty to bring to this situation.



That is encouraging and liberating for them. This has unleashed their creativity. Because they are no longer scared that they're going to mess up.

*What is your favorite episode moment from this year?*

I think probably when I played the episode about how everybody makes mistakes (episode #1580) and there were just so many parents crying and they were voicing their fears that their children were going to be behind because they were scared they weren't going to give them the right opportunities. They were afraid that they were going to make a mistake as a parent. Which ties into the beginning of the year episode (episode #1465) and the fears families have about their child not being ready for school. One parent said, "I wished more parents said this [that there are many ways to care for children, not just one right way] to each other. We need to help each other instead of what we do [compare our children to one another]. I usually walk away from interactions with parents feeling like I'm doing something wrong. The message of acceptance in the MRN episode, and that there are many ways to care, was powerful for them.

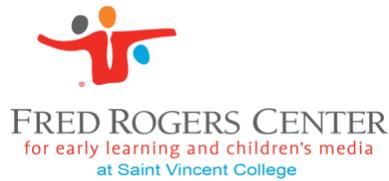
*Has anything surprised you about people's engagement with MRN?*

I feel deep emotion when I watch episodes. I was surprised by how much crying happened. I was hoping people would have a warm feeling about Mister Rogers. But the crying is surprising. It's like there is an emotional hot button that he pushes, and something is just released. There is something special there about how he communicates. And it's not just nostalgia because parents have teared up who never watched him as a child. One parent who grew up in another country said, "I don't know why I'm crying. I never even heard about him until I came to this meeting!"

*I know Fred Rogers has long impacted your work. How has your study of MRN episodes this year further impacted your work?*

I think it really has brought me back to watching him as a coach, even down to the train the trainer notion. Coach the coach. When I watch him, I also see ways I can speak differently to educators and parents. The intentional viewing of his work and how adults are responding to it brings other things to the surface. I've always taken in what he says to me, but now I'm taking another step back and watching another person go through the process... how does his work inform me as a helper of helpers of children? There's so much there. An example would be in the episodes about mistakes... Fred is talking to children, but he isn't just talking to children. He's talking to the adults sitting next to the children. I see that layer more now. And I'm learning from it in ways I never have before.

*Which puppet or person of MRN do you most identify with? Why?*



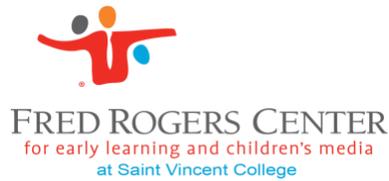
As a child I would have said Daniel Tiger because I was shy. But not now as an adult. Maybe, hmmm... this is tough... maybe [Neighbor Aber](#). I've been noticing him a lot lately. He comes in and seeks to be part of the solution. But he has really good boundaries. As I'm watching I really appreciate that about him. He is kind and helpful, but when he's called someplace else, he moves on. I find that helpful. He is present in his helper role with Daniel or Henrietta or whoever. But when he has a responsibility somewhere else, when the King needs him or the Mayor, he goes on to the next responsibility. I feel like that now. I need to be present and also leave to take care of the next responsibility, whether that be my family or another school or whatever. I don't know if it's that I identify most with him, it's more that his qualities resonate with me; I want to emulate them. He is kind and helpful, but also responsible.

*What is something you've learned in your readings from the FRC archives?*

Last time I was reading some notes and Fred was talking about the child and the parents growing together and it was just gorgeous. He talked about how values are built from parents modeling these things for children and being honest when they get them right and when they don't and working together. That was so helpful to read. He was unpacking the notion that says the adult is the keeper of the knowledge and not to be questioned. The parent is somebody who has the language and the experience to be able to articulate what behavior is working and not working, both in themselves and also in the child. And to model a different way. Or at least explore a different way. Becoming is more realistic than being. Michelle Obama writes about the notion of 'becoming' in her book and it's one our CEO at Endeavor is so helpful to remind us of often, but Fred Rogers showed me this concept first in the Neighborhood. When I was growing up, you didn't question an adult. Questioning adults was disrespectful because the adult had the knowledge and children were expected to obey quickly. This image of the adult as the 'knower' was not helpful for me as a teacher or a parent when I became an adult. I am keenly aware that there is so very much I do not know as a teacher and as a parent. It sure is liberating to know that as a parent I don't need to know everything or have the right response. That my responsibility is to be honest. To be gentle with myself and gentle with children as they figure out what to do with their emotions.

*Why do you think MRN matters for families and educators?*

I think that Fred has done as much thinking and action research and book research as other early childhood educational theorists, including Malaguzzi, Vygotsky, Piaget, Steiner. He's relevant as a child development thinker and theorist. He has much to offer. He's relevant to be studied. But what we have from *him*, unlike the others, is actual footage of him *showing* us what this looks like. We are just starting to crack this open. This is a big gift as early childhood educators. What would you give to be able to see Montessori at work with children in a classroom? We have that in Fred Rogers. We can see him do it, not just read about. We just don't know that's what it is



yet. We have had hundreds of years to celebrate Montessori. So, we understand it better. More people have taken it in and talked about it.

We are in early days to understand Fred Rogers' work for its pedagogy. We see him as a child entertainer, but he's not a childhood entertainer; he's a major thinker in early childhood education. Many of the lessons he teaches us about speaking and interacting with children are what matter. Maybe children won't keep watching him. But we teachers can watch him to learn for many generations to come. The show may get dated, but his practice will not. It's going to lead to different kinds of conversations. And we probably won't be alive to see the effect of it, but it's exciting to be around for it at the beginning.

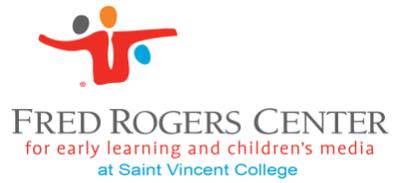
*What message from Fred Rogers do you think especially matters right now for families at home with children [due to Covid-19 closures]?*

I think that during this global pandemic, it is helpful for parents to know that they do not need magic words or a background in psychology to help their children navigate this difficult time. Children simply need the adults who love them best to be present with them, to listen to them and to model how to name and work through the array of emotions that both parent and child may be feeling. Fred said, "For a child, moving through life within a family may be a little like being in an airplane: There may be a lot of rough weather outside, and the plane may shake around quite a bit, but inside you're safe. Sad, scared and angry, perhaps, but within the special atmosphere of a loving family, even those feelings are safe. When a child learns to trust that there is a loving caregiver right there to help in rough times, he or she can weather most any storm-and ultimately be stronger for the experience." This notion that the child is in a good place, simply by being loved and cared for by the adults who love them best is so reassuring. And, it may just be that this unprecedented time yields powerful growth in our children because through it all they have been held secure in the simple love of their families.

*Do you have a hope for how you might continue to grow engagement with MRN in your organization next school year?*

Yes. Teachers want to have a book club model but for watching episodes. I want to release them to themselves to do this and I will eavesdrop and learn with them. I will continue to show episodes to families when we are ready to travel again. I have found that MRN helps families engage with their own intentions for their children. This helps us be more aligned with what we offer children. It is not threatening for them to watch MRN episodes. And, play. I always feel like I'm in some sort of war to defend play. Fred is an ally for this. To help parents realize that their children can play and learn. Play is not devoid of learning. And with teachers, they know this... they don't believe play is devoid of learning in their hearts.

*Is there anything else you'd like to share?*



It's interesting that the best ideas are just a no-brainer. To get educators together to watch MRN and talk with each other. I think this is a genius endeavor. Simple. Thank you.

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*Educators' Neighborhood* interviews are conducted and transcribed by Melissa Butler.