

Bodnarek: One of the best parts of my job is teaching my students about my faith

I absolutely grew up wanting to be a teacher, and I knew I was called to the vocation of teaching.

When I was little, I would sit my stuffed animals in a row and pretend I was teaching them, and when I got a little older and I had to study for exams, I would pretend to teach information to my empty bedroom as a way to understand it better.

I am currently teaching at St. Theresa Middle School within Elk Island Catholic School Division. I teach Grade 8 English Language Arts, Social Studies, Religion, Health, and Film Studies. I am currently teaching 80 students across three different Grade 8 classes.

(Catholic Education Week is celebrated in Alberta May 10-14. It's a chance to promote, celebrate and support Catholic education in the province. Read the letter From the Alberta And Northwest Territories Bishops. The bishops will also celebrate liturgies and Masses. Here is a full schedule and more information on Catholic Education Week).



Michelle Bodnarek

Being a Catholic teacher is different from being a teacher in a public school because I get to share another part of myself with my students that I would not

have the opportunity to do if I taught in a public school.

I truly believe one of the best parts of my job is getting to teach my students about my faith of which I am so incredibly proud! Unfortunately, it's an opportunity a lot of teachers take for granted, but I am committed to unapologetically sharing my faith with my students.

I grew up in Edmonton Catholic School District and although I valued being surrounded by symbols, prayers, and teachings of the Catholic faith at school, what I was lacking was an example of a strong, practicing, and devout adult. This is what I want to be for my students – an example of an adult who not only practices her faith but is open and honest about her journey and relationship with Christ.

An aspect I find encouraging about my vocation is the empathy and responsiveness developing in young adults right now. In my classroom, and around the globe, students are growing up in a time that recognizes diversity and privilege and are encouraged to learn more about social justice, mental health, and political responsibility.

Growing up I always dreamed of being a teacher because I love children and the idea of having a job that allowed me to hangout with kids all day seemed too good to be true. I love kids of all ages, but my favourite age of kids is definitely the young teen years.

When people would ask me what my dream placement would be, I always answered, "Teaching middle school language arts!" Nine out of 10 people are horrified when I say middle school. However, I love this age group because I believe that these are formative years when a person begins to define their self-concept.

They are also the perfect age for the goofy – but sometimes mature – humour that is just so infectious! I have found that middle-school students are still willing to allow themselves to be silly, goofy or uncomfortable and it is in these golden moments of vulnerability when true growth and self discovery happens. After a year of teaching this age group, my thoughts solidified as I have spent eight months laughing, crying, and growing with my students.



The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenge for teachers, students, parents and staff. Courtesy of Michelle Bodnarek

I state the obvious when I say that my biggest challenge as a first-year

teacher is burnout. I was warned by countless people to prioritize my own health and wellness in my first year, but alas, I fall prey to the late-night e-mails, the weekends marking, and the early mornings making sure my classroom is “just right” when students walk through my door.

In my first semester I ran on pure gratitude and excitement, trying to meet the high expectations I place upon myself. However, after a lonely Christmas due to the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and returning to online learning, I found myself losing some of that excitement.

There have been many high times of fresh and engaging lessons, but at the cost of my sleep schedule, a healthy meal, a workout, even my prayer life. My district, the Elk Island Catholic School Division, is very supportive with this however, as we have had multiple professional development days devoted to health and wellness.

The biggest reward so far is the parent support I have received throughout the year. This is an aspect I was nervous about being a young and inexperienced teacher. I have had nothing but supportive and helpful parents contacting and had wonderfully constructive meetings. I always send a newsletter on Fridays to parents recapping the week with important information/dates coming up and I usually receive emails of appreciation and gratitude, which makes me feel like my hard work isn't going unnoticed.

I even had one parent send me an e-mail calling me an inspiration, saying “In a world that is a bit messy right now, you bring a breath of fresh air – keep spreading the sunshine!” I did not choose this career for the recognition, but it feels incredibly rewarding knowing that parents acknowledge how much I care for their children.



Michelle Bodnarek said she will never forget her first day of teaching. Courtesy of Michelle Bodnarek

That first day of school was one I will never forget. I was so incredibly nervous, I got no sleep the night before and my stomach was in knots the entire morning, and all the thoughts of inexperience and unworthiness flooded my brain.

However, as soon as those kids walked in the door, those nerves fluttered away and my excitement and enthusiasm set in. Every morning I get those same butterflies while driving to work and I take this as a small sign from God that I am exactly where I am supposed to be, doing what I love.

Although I, like many other teachers in the province, can ramble all day about how COVID has impacted our jobs and teaching pedagogy and complain about all the extra things added to my plate, the most stressful aspect of it all is the fear and anxiety it is causing my students. The pandemic has created disappointment, fear, lack of control, loss of routines, anxiety, depression, and isolation in my students, and this is on my mind constantly.

The most stressful part of teaching during a pandemic is navigating my students through the transition of online to in-person learning. Some of my students prefer online learning, but the majority despise it, and this causes unwanted and unneeded stress in their already rapidly changing lives.

With this most recent shift to online learning, I constantly worry for my students not only academically, but I worry about their health and wellness. Sure, teaching a different mode of learning causes stress and frustrations for me, but we don't know the long-term effects that learning from home has on teenagers yet, and this truly frightens me.

As much as technology enables all these amazing things, the dependency and negative effects of technology is also what I find most discouraging about my vocation.

I have seen firsthand the destructive influence and capabilities that technology, especially social media, has on kids' mental health and their perceptions of global issues. I try to deal with this paradox as most teachers do, which involves proper education and moderation.

With this, I turn to Scripture; God richly gives His children all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17), but all those things must be used in moderation (Philippians 4:5). I do not quite have the answer to this, but if I find it, I will let you know!

-Michelle Bodnarek teaches Grade 8 English Language Arts, Social Studies, Religion, Health, and Film Studies at St. Theresa Middle School in Sherwood Park