

Narrative: Kim Dickerson, Third Grade Teacher, Gilbert Linkous Elementary School

Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Sean Skidmore, Imani Holmes

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My name is Kim Dickerson, I am twenty six years old, and I have been teaching third grade for Montgomery County Public Schools for four years, as well as two years that I worked as a special education assistant while attending graduate school. I grew up in Christiansburg and had a great childhood. My father was employed with General Motors for 39 years before he started teaching, which he has been doing now for 8 years. My mother always had odd jobs here and there, but now she works as an administrative assistant. I attended Radford University, where I did a five year program to obtain my masters in education. I have wanted to teach ever since I can remember, and the positive experiences I had with the teachers I had growing up were a great inspiration for me. I can remember that my fourth grade teacher was particularly influential because he was the first male teacher I ever had, and he did lots of fun hands-on activities with us. I can't imagine myself doing anything other than teaching.

Every day teaching is a new experience. We have block scheduling and switch classes throughout the day, so the kids are constantly on the move. I teach the same lesson three times a day for 45 minutes each. Aside from the core classes which include math, science, and social studies, the kids also have two specialty classes a day which include either P.E., art, music, guidance, and success maker, which is a computer lab. Lunch and recess are scheduled in the afternoon, followed by silent reading, then dismissal. Although the work is stressful, I thoroughly enjoy making a difference in the lives of the children I teach. It's important to make the children feel like they are successful and wanted so that even years from now, if they don't remember everything they learned in third grade, they still remember what it felt like to be here. The only part of the job that I dislike is that I only have the kids for six hours a day. I can't go home with them and I can't change their home lives. The first year I taught, I lost a lot of sleep over this, but I told myself that this is all I can do and to make the best of the time I have with them. If I feel like the child is having a poor experience either in school or at home, I work with the guidance counselors to help them.

The parents in this community often ask, "what more can you do for my child?" which has sometimes been a struggle for me. In fact, last week we had twenty-seven parent-teacher conferences. However, many of the parents in the community are very supportive of what we do in the classroom every day, which has been very nice, especially in comparison to stories I've heard from friends who teach in other locations where the parents are not as supportive. In the rare

occasion that a parent is angry or aggressive, we will work with the school administration to smooth out any problems. It also helps that during every conference or parent meeting, all three of the third grade teachers are there to provide answers and support.

Sometimes I have to purchase supplies for the classroom out of my own pocket, especially if I see a book or other items that apply to the topics we are currently discussing in class. The parents are very willing to help out children in need with supplies and will often ask if there is anything I need. Also organizations like the Lions Club and local churches will help out with purchasing supplies for the classroom. The Lions Club helps provide children with vision impairment with glasses or fix glasses that the children already have. I don't mind spending money on extra supplies for the classroom because I love doing hands-on activities, for instance, we carved pumpkins earlier this fall. These activities keep the children engaged and excited about learning. Also, there are tax write-offs for teachers for out-of-pocket purchases for the classroom, so it's not as big of a burden.

While there are certain state standards for education like SOLs [Standards of Learning], we are usually allowed to teach in a style that suits us and our students best. Our principle is very observant and will usually offer advice on our teaching styles, but she is very willing to allow us to work the way we want, which is great, especially since not all schools are like that. Also, the fact that our children are very bright and our test scores are very high, we are allowed to have a lot of fun here. There are some things, however, that I refuse to discuss in the classroom, and those are Santa, Jesus, and where babies come from. If they're interested in any of these things, I refer all of those questions to their mom and dad, because there are some things that are just not appropriate to discuss with eight- and nine-year-olds. On the other hand, if there is something more appropriate to be discussed in school that they are asking questions about, I will expand upon and discuss those questions because it keeps the kids engaged and interested.

At first I was scared to death when I found out I would be teaching third graders because I always thought I would teach kindergarten. Now I couldn't see myself teaching anything other than third grade. People often view teachers as very conservative, reserved people. I don't want to say that no teacher fits this profile, but not all teachers are that way. For that reason, it is very important for me to maintain a positive image in the community. So it is imperative that I am careful what I post on sites like Facebook and Twitter. I often have parents and even students who want to be friends on these sites, so I have to closely monitor who my friends are and what I say.

I am not married, which is extremely fascinating to a lot of the students, since I am one of the very few unmarried adults at the school. Sometimes I get asked, "how come your name doesn't

have an ‘r’ in it?” and I explain that it’s because I’m not married. One time in particular, the child asked me why I wasn’t married and I had to simply answer “oh, I’m just not.” One day in class we were doing a human lifecycle activity where the children had to decide what they would be doing when they got older. A few of them said they would be married, but most of the kids said they would have lots of pets. I joked that I should get a lot of pets, too. Working here has a pretty big effect on my social and dating life. Since I’m single, it is often assumed that I am free to chaperone or help out with extracurricular activities, and I think I will stay single if I keep saying yes, although, I have had more free time in recent years than I did when I first started. I go back and forth with the idea of having my own children. It’s hard for me to decide, because I have sixty kids that I have to deal with every day I am at work, so it’s hard to imagine going home to my own. Also, I think it would be hard to raise a child in this time period.

A lot of people think that teachers arrive at work every morning at 8:15 and leave by 3:45 with summers and weekends off. We are usually here by 7:00 every morning, which is an hour and fifteen minutes before our contract hours start, and I never leave before 4:00. I am here every Sunday even if it is only for a couple of hours and I am taking work home with me every night and there’s no time clock, you know, so we are always working. We’re not always paid for the extra work we put into teaching every day. Unfortunately, some people go into this field thinking they will have two months off every summer and have weekends off, but that is a huge misconception, and it’s important for people to think about, especially if they are considering going into this field.

Nothing too crazy happens on a day-to-day basis, but we are all-inclusive in Montgomery County Public Schools so we do have some children that are more difficult to deal with. For instance I had a runner--a child who felt it necessary to get up and run out of the building randomly. I’ve also had a non-verbal student, so communication was difficult in that particular instance. As far as the majority of the other students, eight- and nine-year-olds sometimes say things that are borderline inappropriate that we probably shouldn’t laugh at, but it’s hard not to so we do anyway. We have a very diverse student body here with many students who speak different languages. In my language arts class, I have eleven students. Five of those eleven speak different languages and four of those five speak four different languages. We often use this as a teaching opportunity, encouraging the kids to appreciate different religions and cultures. We don’t force any beliefs or ideas on any of the students, we just want them to try to understand things that may not be familiar to them.

While some teachers would say that high SOL test scores are the most satisfying part of the job, I want to prepare these children for life and teach them the skills they need as they get older. I want to teach them more than just the phases of the moon and lessons on the food chain. I want to teach them things they can apply to their everyday real lives. I enjoy the sense that I am making a difference in their lives and that they have someone else in their lives besides just their parents, though some of them don't have one or both parents, that is supportive of them and there to guide them through this crazy world.

There was never a doubt in my mind that I would go to college and teach. I had to work hard, sometimes I was working two or three jobs through college. I've always been the type to work. In fact, I never not want to work, and I can't even picture myself being retired. I was able to buy my first house when I was 25 because I worked hard during college. I always have to be doing something. I usually tutor and babysit during the summer months so I can continue to work, and I am considering going back to school to get my Ph.D. to start teaching at the college level. I am about to teach a course at Radford University in the fall for students interested in teaching. Although if it doesn't work out I think I am right where I want to be. The last time I tried to see myself in five to ten years, I was married with children and teaching, but only one of those happened. You never know what tomorrow is going to bring, and the more I try to plan the less it happens. So for right now I am just sitting back and letting things happen and trying not to plan. Even though the teacher in me wants to plan, plan, plan, I am trying not to do that.

I am so thankful each and every day that I live in America and I have had the freedom to do what I want to do and go to school, and my parents have worked hard all of their lives, too, to support me and my choices and help me, so I'm thankful for those that are protecting my freedoms and that's something we talk about here in 3rd grade, that other people don't have the same freedoms that we have, so I think the American Dream is what I'm living right now, actually. I mean, I got a great job and not only is it job, it's a career, and I'm 26 years old and that's not always the case for other 26-year-olds. I have a pretty successful group of friends that are lawyers, accountants, and even doctors, and I guess we turned out okay. For those students who are still debating what they want to do and finding themselves, I would say don't second guess yourself if there is something you want to do. Develop a plan and do it. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something, that's what I tell my students, so keep working hard.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.