

## **Interview with Kim Dickerson**

For HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Fall 2011

Occupation: 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, Gilbert Linkous Elementary

Time and Place: October 13, 2011, 9 am, Gilbert Linkous Elementary

Interviewers: Sean Skidmore and Imani Holmes

KD = Kim Dickerson

SS = Sean Skidmore

IH = Imani Holmes

SS: Um, can you please tell us your name and, if you don't mind, your age?

KD: Kim Dickerson, 26 years old.

IH: Will you please tell us your job title, the organization you work for and how long you've been working here?

KD: Okay, I'm a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher from Montgomery County public schools and this is my fourth year teaching and I'm an elementary school educator.

SS: Okay, uh, please describe your family background. What it was like growing up there.

KD: Okay, I am a local. I am from Christiansburg and I lived there my whole life. Um, I had a great childhood, I graduated from high school went to Radford University got my masters and did a five year program and started teaching right after I earned my masters degree.

SS: Uh, what did your parents do for a living?

KD: Um, my parents, my father worked for General Motors for 39 years before retiring and now he's a teacher. He's teaching high school and he's in, I think, his eighth year of teaching. Any, um, my mother has just always had, um, part-time jobs here and there. She, um, administrative work, administrative assistant, so.

IH: Um, so what exactly lead you to teaching?

KD: I have always wanted to be a teacher. There was never a doubt. Even when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade I wanted to be teacher because I always had great teachers that I looked up to and I wanted to be just like them. I can't ever remember having a bad teacher so I wanted to, um, imitate the teachers that I had, so.

IH: Is there, like, a certain teacher that stuck out especially for you?

KD: Uh, my fourth grade teacher probably. Uh, I never had a male teacher and he was my first male teacher and we got to do all of these hands-on projects and it was very memorable for me. I still remember doing those projects so he kinda inspired me to be a teacher.

IH: Cool. Can you describe a typical day in your classroom?

KD: Ooh, there are no typical days in third grade [laughing] every day's a new day. Um, I have a set routine and schedule for the kids. They come in in the morning and they unpack, sign in for lunch, get ready for the day. We switch classes here in third grade so we're moving all day long. We have two specialties, which are P.E., art, music, guidance, success maker, which is a computer lab. Um, we have block scheduling here so we are on 45 minute blocks for our core classes which are social studies, science and math, and I teach all of the science so I teach the same three lessons a day, and lunch, and then recess

in the afternoon, some silent reading and then its time to go home. So we're always moving, always doing something.

IH: How long have you worked at this school?

KD: This is my fourth year but I student-taught here and I also, um, was a special-ed aid while I was working on my masters. So I have been here for about 6 years.

IH: Um, I guess its kinda broad but what's it like to be a teacher?

KD: [Sighing] Oh, I love it, something new everyday. It's stressful but there's nothing else I would do. I love making a difference and I love teaching but at the same time, um, the children have to have a feeling of success and feeling like they need to be here and they're wanted, so even though years from now they probably won't remember everything I've ever taught them, they'll always remember the way that they felt when they were in the third grade, hopefully.

SS: What's the best part about your job?

KD: Definitely not the money [laughs]. I would have to say, um, when the students come back after you taught them and they're so appreciative for what you've done for them and they still remember you and they invite you to their baseball games and dance recitals and they keep in touch even when they are in middle school, it's the most rewarding feeling so I would say the feeling you have knowing that you made a difference.

IH: Um, on the other hand, the worst part about your job?

KD: Um, I have these children for roughly 6 hours a day. I can't go home with them, I can't bathe them, I can't feed them. Although I would like to I can't change their home lives so I have to do what I can do when they're with me. And my first year, I really lost sleep and really worried that I wasn't doing enough but you just have to tell yourself this is all I that I can do and I am doing as much as I can do when they're with me. So I think that's the most difficult, emotional part of the job.

SS: So, like uh, building off that, have you ever had kids that you actually worried about, uh, their personal kinda home life, um, while they were here?

KD: Mmhm. Yes

SS: You have concerns about? Okay.

KD: Yea, and I usually work very closely with the guidance counselor if I am concerned. Um, that way if we need to take it a step farther, we can. [Nodding] So, yea, it's happened.

SS: Um, have you ever had to deal with like, ummm, aggressive or angry parents ever? Um, or, just ticked-off parents?

KD: Yes. Um, we actually just had 27 parent-teacher conferences last Thursday where we departmentalize and team-teach with all 60 of the third-grader's parents as a team and we did 27 last week and not really aggressive parents, but in this community, parents frequently want to know "what more can you do for my child?" um, so that's been a struggle. But for the most part, we have great parents here and they're very supportive of us and what we do every day in the classroom, so, um, it's actually much better than some of friends who teach elsewhere have it as far as parents are concerned, so.

SS: So do you, um, is there like a protocol for dealing with parents that the school gives you or do you kinda just have to figure that out on your own as it happens?

KD: Well, we definitely work together as a team and the 3 of us that teach third grade never meet with a parent alone, there's always 3 of us there. And if things do get out of hand, we do step back and take a look at the situation and then, if we have to, then we

will go get our administrator, who is our principle, or the guidance counselor to help us deal with the situation so that's happened before where we've had to ask them to come in and sit in for conferences. So, our principle's wonderful at backing us up and being supportive of us so that's definitely a great option to have if we need her.

IH: Um, when it comes to like supplies in the classroom, do you end up paying for a lot of them out of pocket or does the school supply you with funding?

KD: Um, yes, but things like books I typically purchase myself if I see something I think would go great with a lesson or unit but this is a very giving community and we have parents who are fortunate enough to help out students who don't have and we have, uh, the Lions Club and extra local business, churches help us out if we ever need anything and a lot of times the parents will ask "what do you need?" and just send in what ever we need but there is a tax write-off, up to \$200 if you're a teacher, if you, um, purchase supplies out of pocket.

IH: What's the Lions Club?

KD: The Lions Club is an organization, um, that help us get students glasses or, um, fix glasses so they help us out greatly with that. And it's just a group of, um, men and women that do community service.

SS: Okay, um, is it worth it to spend your own money and go out and do extra things to bring to the classroom for the kids, do you feel?

KD: Um I definitely did more of that my first year of teaching and I had so many people give me things when I first started so I didn't have to do a lot of that. But, I love, um, to do hands-on activities, especially in science, we've done pumpkins here recently in the fall, so I really don't mind spending my own money but here at this school all of the parents are so great about offering to help before you do it so if you ever do anything and you can get your materials together beforehand, the parents are more than happy to supply you with what you need but, I do spend a lot of money out of pocket and I'm okay with that because, um I see how it is, you know, makes the children want to learn and want to participate in fun activities, so I keep that in the back of my mind at the same time, so.

IH: Um, does the New River Valley school system kinda give you the freedom to teach in your own style?

KD: Yes. I am a product of Montgomery county public schools. I went to Christiansburg and Blacksburg was always our rival school so it's kinda weird for me to be teaching over here but, um, we do have state standards. We do have the SOLs, which are the Standards of Learning for the whole state of Virginia so we those but our principle is wonderful at giving us the opportunity to teach in a style that works for us and works for our students so she's observant. She comes around and sees what we're doing, she gives us advice but she does give us the freedom to teach how we want to teach. So, that's great. Not all schools are like that.

IH: Are there any limits, do you think, at all?

KD: Um, as long as we're following our standards and, um, you know, we're giving homework and we're giving class work, its not a party everyday but we do have a lot of fun here and she's very supportive of that. So, um, as far as that's concerned, you know we have good at this school because our scores are so high and our children are very bright that we do have a lot of freedom of what we do in the classroom.

SS: What kind of things are completely off-limits for teaching children? What, like, subject matter, activities, things like that, do they tell you those things or is mostly what you can do?

KD: Mostly what you can do but you'll know your audience. I refuse to talk about 3 things and that's [laughs] Santa, Jesus and where babies come from. I refer all of those questions to the parents so that's something that's off topic for me but if they're interested in something and they're asking questions and they're engaged and it's appropriate, I will expand and go further. But there are some things at this level when you're 8 or 9 years old that just aren't appropriate so I will say "if you're interested in that, go home and ask mom and dad." So there are things you just know aren't acceptable for this level.

IH: Um, do you think you'll always teach third graders?

KD: I love third grade and it scared me to death when I got a job in third grade because I always said I wanted kindergarten and I can't see myself teaching anything other than third grade now but, um, I would like to go on and do some higher education as well, possibly. I'll be teaching a course at Radford in the fall. It's a core class for students who are just deciding they want to be a teacher and I presented last week there and that was definitely interesting for me to teach high school students, so.

IH: So you're going to be teaching a like, a whole course for the semester at Radford?

KD: Mhm. Yes.

IH: Are you excited about that?

KD: [Smiling] I am. A little nervous [laughing]. An audience of 8 and 9 year olds is a little different than an audience of 19 and 20 year olds so it'll be interesting.

SS: Um, how does your job affect you life outside of school?

KD: Uh, professionally, [quiet laugh] all eyes are always on you so you have to make good choices in the community. Um, social media, Facebook, Twitter, you have to be very careful of what you post and who are your friends because you'll have parents trying to be your friend on Facebook. You'll even have *students* trying to be your friends on Facebook. So that's definitely something to worry about and always think about, because for teachers the public eye, I don't wanna say its in the past, like what you have to be to be a teacher, you're supposed to be this conservative what people think of as usually being very conservative and times have changed but people's perceptions of teachers haven't necessarily changed so definitely have to be careful.

SS: Um, I don't know if I should ask you that question. Um, are you married?

KD: No, I'm not married.

SS: Okay.

KD: And that is fascinating to third graders: the single teacher who's never been married. I think I'm the only one in school, one of the only ones in the school, so it's very fascinating for them. Cuz I'm not married.

SS: So, does, does teaching affect your dating life at all or, uh.

KD: [Sighing] Um, most definitely. I'm asked, you know, to do all of the, not all of, but its assumed that since I am single and don't have children that I can participate in extracurricular school activities so I'm going to remain single if I continue saying yes to all the extracurricular activities [laughs]. But I still have a lot of free-time, much more now than I did my first year of teaching so its definitely gotten better. But, um, yea its definitely a topic of, um, discussion amongst the children because they're confused. They

just don't understand why I'm not "Mrs" because they haven't had that before, so, new to them.

IH: How do you usually answer that question or approach it with them?

KD: Um, well, when we do like timelines where, you know, all the other teachers are married or they'll ask why my name doesn't have the "r," actually one of them did this year, um, I said why don't we write it like this or why does my name not have the "r" in it? "Oh, because you're not married." Someone said, "why?" and I said, "because I'm not married is why I don't have the 'r' in it" and he's like, "No, why are you not married?" And I said, "Oh, I'm just not." I like to joke with them about that. We just did human lifecycle projects and they had to come up with what they thought they were going to be doing as they get older and I only had a couple of them say they were going to get married but several of them had children and lot of them had pets. And I said, "maybe Ms. Dickerson just needs to get animals like dogs and cats because that's what you all are going to do when you get older," and laugh about it so its funny.

IH: If you weren't teaching 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, what do you think you would be doing instead?

KD: [Thinking] I have no idea. There was never another option. Um, I declared my major when I applied to Radford so I don't know. Probably just be teaching another grade level or working in special education. It would still be in the education field. I don't know of anything else I would do.

SS: Uh, do you eventually want children of your own?

KD: I go back and forth with that a lot because I am with 60 3<sup>rd</sup> graders 180 days out of the year. I can only imagine what it would be like to go home and deal with my own children. I've always said I wanted my own children but teaching has definitely changed that because it so hard, I believe, to raise a child in this society right now that I've changed my mind a couple times. So I'm not really, I'm still kinda unsure. Sitting on the fence with that one.

SS: Um, if you did, uh, theoretically, would you want them to be in your classroom? As they got older would you want to be their teacher also as well as their mother or would you want other teachers?

KD: I think there's a fine line. We definitely have teachers here who have taught their children but I wouldn't necessarily want that. I don't think I would want to spend all day with them here and then go home with them and be their mother. So, no [shaking head].

SS: Do you think theres any conflict of interest there between being teacher and a parent? Like...

KD: [Nodding head] yea, like playing favorites and being the teacher's pet. I think that would definitely be talked about. Because teachers are talked about at the pool, at, you know, a restaurant, it's gossip. So, I definitely think that's just adding fuel to the fire.

IH: Um, what's the craziest thing a student has ever done in your classroom?

KD: [Thinking] Hm. I don't really know. I haven't had any super crazy stories or super crazy things happen here. Um...

IH: Or the funniest thing. Anything out of the ordinary.

KD: Well 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, typically, they don't develop a sense of humor until age 9, 8 or 9, so they're very literal before that. So some of them are now able to pick up on our sarcastic sense of humor here in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. But they're always saying things that are sometime borderline inappropriate and you don't know if you should laugh or not but you do anyway. Um, so that's probably one of the best parts about 3<sup>rd</sup> grade too. Um, but you

know, you'll have children, I've had a runner. Someone you know, feels its necessary to get up and run and leave the building. Um, I've had a non-verbal student who has no communication skills whatsoever so that was difficult and crazy. Um, we are fully-inclusive here in Montgomery County so children with all learning abilities are in one classroom so there's always something new when things like that are going on.

SS: Um, is there anything super important you would like anyone watching this to know about teaching? Is there any big issue or important fact about your job or something interesting you would like to discuss?

KD: Um, I think sometimes people think this is a job where we're here from 8:15 to 3:45 and we get our summers and weekends off, and that's a bug misconception. We are here, I get here every morning at 7 am, which is an hour and 15 minutes before my contract hours start. And I never leave here before 4 o'clock. And I'm always here every Sunday, working, even if its for a couple of hours, and I take things home with me every single night and there's no time clock, you know, we're always working. And we're not necessarily paid for those hours that we're always putting in to do what we do each and every day. So I think that's a misconception and unfortunately some people go into this field thinking, "I'll have my summers off, I'll have 2 months off, I won't have to work weekends," and that's a huge misconception so I think its important people know that especially if they're considering going into the field for that reason.

SS: You answered that question before we even asked that question. That's a really good answer

IH: [Laughing] yea. I know you mentioned you don't talk about like, Santa, where babies come from, Jesus, but does spirituality ever play a role in the classroom at all?

KD: Here yes, because this is one bug melting pot. We have students who are here from other countries. In my language arts class, I have 11 students and 5 of them speak a different language and out of those 5, 4 of them speak 4 different languages. So, we have a wide variety of cultures and religions that are celebrated here and we use those as teaching opportunities. We're not trying to push anything on a student and make them believe something or not believe something but we try to expose them to celebrations of that culture and religion that they may not know otherwise.

SS: What uh, what about your work gives you the greatest sense of satisfaction, um, and peace regarding your work?

KD: Um, well some people would say its SOL test scores but [laughs] that's not true. I wanna prepare these children for life and give them the life-skills that they can use as they get older. Not just, you know, lessons on food chains, and food webs, and phases of the moon. I want to, um, teach them things that they can apply to their real life, everyday life. And just that sense of knowing you're making a difference, that they have someone else in their lives besides their parents, or some them don't even have parents, that are supportive of them, to help guide them through this crazy world because time are definitely changing, so, it's not easy.

IH: Um, what were your dreams when you were younger and how have those been fulfilled or changed?

KD: Um, there was a never a doubt in my mind that I would graduate and go to college and teach. And, um, I had to work hard. You know, I worked sometime 2 and 3 jobs through college. I've always been the type to work. I never want to not work. I can't even see myself retired right now, I just always have to be doing something and its hard for me

during the summer so I baby-sit and tutor during the summer as well so that I can continue to work. But, um, I would eventually like to go back and get my PhD and work at the college level so that's still a hope that I have and a dream that I have. Um, we'll see if that happens or not but I think I'm right where I want to be.

SS: Uh, where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years?

KD: [Sighs] well, the last time I tried to see myself in 5 or 10 years, you know, I thought I'd be married with children and teaching and one of those is right but, you know, I bought my first house when I was 25 years old, I've been there for almost 2 years and I was able to do that, um, because I worked hard in college and did what I needed to do and, 5 to 10 years, I don't know what tomorrow's going to bring. The more I try to plan the less it happens so I'm just sitting back and letting things happen and trying not to plan as much even though the teacher in me wants to plan, plan, plan. I'm trying not to do that.

IH: In our class, like we mentioned earlier, we're been talking about the American Dream and what it means to people. What do you think about the American Dream or what does it mean to you?

KD: Um, 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 old. You know, I have a group of pretty successful friends, um, accountants and doctors and lawyers even and, um, we went to school and we worked and we, um, turned out okay I guess, so.

SS: I think I can follow that question...man, never mind. Um, is there anything else you want to mention at all, finally? Anything I might have missed, anything important that you want to say? Anything at all?

KD: Um, no, I mean for those students who are maybe still debating on what they want to do and finding themselves, um, don't second-guess yourself if there's something you wanna do. Um, develop a plan [smiles] and do it. Don't let anyone tell you, you can't do something. That's what I tell my students, too. So, keep working hard.

SS: Alright. Well, that's it, I guess.

KD: Okay, thank you guys.

IH: Thank you.