Bridging the Gap

An Ivy League academic hopes to influence education policies where they matter at the ground level.
Name: Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell  
Current Position: Assistant Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Education  
Age: 38

Bridwell-Mitchell always had a strong desire to change the way schools were run and to ensure that policy trickles down in a way that would better serve black students and students from underserved neighborhoods.

Education:  

How she got the job:  
In 2011, while working with the commerce, organization, and entrepreneurship program at Brown University, Bridwell-Mitchell learned that Harvard was creating a new program at its Graduate School of Education. "The new program was a culmination of public policy, business management, and education curriculum, which was the perfect job for me based on my training," she explains. But Bridwell-Mitchell considered not applying for the Harvard job. Instinctively she felt that balancing research with policy and practice is not real academia. "Publishing in the top-tier academic journals is the standard of excellence in the field; publishing for policy or practitioners is often considered valuable, but less important. Academia has a set of standards that you move up based on the number of articles that you get published in the highest ranked publications, which cater to an exclusive audience of other academics that doesn't include the general public, community educators, and the people on the ground at local schools." But Bridwell-Mitchell also recognized that if she wanted to have an impact on schools and education, she needed to be working in an academic department much closer to that field, and this caused her to reconsider.

Experience and training:  
During her undergraduate studies, Bridwell-Mitchell interned at the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts and the U.S. Department of Education. She also interned and did consulting at Benjamin Banneker Charter Public School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, while a student at Harvard's Kennedy School. "After graduating from the Kennedy School, I wanted to become a public school teacher. I wanted to work in an urban school and applied for a job as a teacher in Brooklyn, New York. I felt this would give me a good idea about how schools really worked," she says. Bridwell-Mitchell chose to work at an intermediate school that happened to be right across the street from a public housing project. "Working in a school made me realize that public policy can get lost in the daily organizational dynamic of schools." The hands-on experience in the classroom made her realize that while policy was important, "the way to understand the impact of policy was to look at how schools work as organizations."

Professional challenges:  
Bridwell-Mitchell belongs to an exclusive group of academic scholars that she hopes will eventually help close the gap between policymakers and local schools. "The people who design and implement policy don't always understand the type of organizational dynamics that are involved, especially when those dynamics may be different depending on the communities and kids that you serve." Bridwell-Mitchell believes that an organization's dynamics, including the environment that it operates in, are going to affect the policy and the school outcome.

Nurturing talent:  
Bridwell-Mitchell's parents planted the "education and social justice" seeds within her at an early age. Her mom is a professor of education and her dad is the head of a community action program. At 13, Bridwell-Mitchell moved from Cincinnati to Cambridge, Massachusetts, a small, liberal community near Boston. In high school, Bridwell-Mitchell's teachers at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School and other mentors encouraged students to get involved with issues of social justice. "When Nelson Mandela visited Boston, I spoke at one of the events at Roxbury Community College," she recalls. "I also belonged to an organization called Students Against Violence and for Equality, and we had a big rally and we marched when Rodney King was beaten by police in Los Angeles."

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Major accomplishment:  
Bridwell-Mitchell very rarely doubted her ability to do well and accomplish the goals she set for herself. She jokes, "It never occurred to me that I was not as fabulous or as smart as my peers." While senior professors often pride themselves on mentoring outstanding graduate students, there were times during her early academic career when senior professors overlooked or underestimated her talent. "One example of this was a senior professor making a last-minute decision to withdraw his support from one of my research projects, which eventually received a $460,000 award from the National Science Foundation," Bridwell-Mitchell says. She adds, "I was an African American woman in a field that is dominated by older white men. As a consequence, they have very limited experience interacting with someone who was smart and accomplished but didn't look like them."

—Chrisena Coleman