

A talk with Dr. Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell

How can we use research to tell the Montessori story?



BY **DAVID AYER** WITH
DR. EBONY BRIDWELL-MITCHELL

The National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector welcomes new board member Dr. Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, Associate Professor of Education at Harvard University. Bridwell-Mitchell's expertise lies in leadership, management, and organizations, and her research focuses on organizational management and theory, public policy, and education, so we are excited about her contributions to our work expanding the reach of Montessori in public education.

MontessoriPublic sat down with Bridwell-Mitchell to learn more about her story and her thoughts on public education.

MontessoriPublic: Dr. Bridwell-Mitchell, you have an impressive résumé and a long list of educational and professional accomplishment. As a Montessorian, I'm always interested in how people got to where they are. Can you tell me your story?

Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell: Let me start with how I ended up in Montessori in the first place. I attended Mercy Montessori in Cincinnati from second through sixth grade because my mom, who had a doctorate and was a university administrator, did her research and sought out an educational model where I would thrive.

And it was a place where I thrived!

But I think the largest benefits weren't just those few years I was in Montessori, but in the way those years shaped the way I approached my own learning and achievement. It took me a long to realize how much the way I thought about my own work, what was important to me, how I liked to learn, was a direct result of how I came to learn how to learn in a Montessori school.

MP: And after Montessori? What came next?

EBM: We moved to Cambridge when I was 13, and I attended Cambridge Rindge and Latin school—a huge sprawling high school where I had to make my own way. Being Black and a woman in that context is challenging, but having learned that you go to school to do things that feel import-

Rindge and Latin, and the physical proximity to Harvard in Cambridge, probably helped foster that idea as well.

MP: So where did that take you in higher education?

EBM: I went to Cornell for undergrad, and then got my Masters at the Harvard Kennedy School [the John F. Kennedy School of Government], and then my Ph.D. at NYU [the New York University Leonard N. Stern School of Business].

MP: The Business School you say? Were you studying education at that time?

EBM: I had always studied education. My undergraduate degree—I'm just now realizing, even at Cornell, probably as result of my Montessori edu-

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ant to you—having “learned how to learn”—helped me thrive there as well. But I didn't realize until much later in my career, researching and advocating for these kinds of outcomes for schools and children, how much Montessori had shaped me in that way.

MP: And then college? Was that always part of your vision for yourself?

EBM: For my family, there was never a thought that I wouldn't go to college. Both of my parents had. But for a lot of Black people my age at that time, they might have been the first in their family. For me, besides my family's vision for me, the environment at Cambridge

cation, rather than choose one of the 150+ majors available, I designed my own, called American Policy Studies, concentrating in education policy.

MP: And these days your academic work focuses on institutions, organizations, and systems. What's going on in American public education from that perspective?

EBM: Well, I went to the Kennedy school because I planned to doing public policy. But I went to work in schools after my Masters, at a middle school in Brooklyn. I quickly came to see that

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what mattered was not so much the policies that were set and the way they were enacted—or not!—by people on the ground, but how the organization itself worked—or didn't!

It turns out, in education research, there is a small—tinier then, but still small—community studying the organizational dynamics in schools. Most of that research on organizations goes on in business schools. This is not because only business are the only organizations that need to run well but because business schools figured out early on that if business organizations worked better, they could make more money! So that's where the most research on organizations has been cultivated. So, I went there to learn from that research to improve school organizations.

So what's interesting to me about organizations and what's happening in education is what I study, which is sometimes called institutional analysis. It's the idea of understanding how dynamics of an institution can make it more or less difficult for organizations in an institutional context to change.

And this is the public school story. Schooling and education is an institution, and my field shows that all institutions have certain dynamics that can be described, explained, and even predicted. My approach asks how much we can change public schools for the better, how fast, and what organizational conditions need to be in place for change to happen. How do we make that change especially since schools are institutions? Not by focusing on some niche program or reform, where every two years we have some new wonderful thing everyone should be doing. These all have to be implemented in an organizational context. What are the conditions for any reform to work, not just any niche reform.

MP: So you and I have talked before about Montessori as a reform, maybe even a "niche" reform, and how that

could happen, and the role of research about Montessori in that. What role would it play? What are the issues with the research? It's hard (but getting easier) to come by good solid randomized controlled trial (RCT) research showing that "Montessori works." Or does academic research even do the job? What should our story be?

EBM: Well, first thing, Montessori might be trying to compare itself to the wrong standards of evidence. Very

data we already have. Look at SEL, say, and articulate how people say SEL works and matters for kid's outcomes. What do we know about the Montessori model that suggests it might support that? We're basically making an argument for the role of those outcomes. That's the very first thing we should be doing.

MP: Like in Dr. Angeline Lillard's work, the *Science Behind the Genius*, where she lays it out: Here's what people say is

Build a conceptual framework. Summarize research results. Show variation across contexts.

little research in the world comes from RCTs, so you don't necessarily need to hold yourself to that standard. If you want to have impact, you may not actually need to do that.

Second, you can start by developing a conceptual framework for the outcomes that might matter. So before you even go down the rabbit hole of how much does Montessori matter, there's a lot to be gained from a conceptual review of the literature of the kinds of outcomes that might matter. Not only different kinds of student outcomes—test scores, social-emotional learning (SEL), locus of control. There are other outcomes Montessori might matter for. At the teacher level, there's a lot of conversation about teacher turnover, professional communities, their experiences in schools. Or think about outcomes at the organizational level. What's the culture and climate like in Montessori? What's the engagement with community?

So what are the categories of outcomes where Montessori might matter? Make an argument for that. That can come from the literature and from

good in education, here's what Montessori does, look at the correspondence. But she's careful in that work to assert correlation, not necessarily causation. Maybe that's enough?

EBM: Not even "enough"—you don't have to have to have causation to make an argument. Let's say you go to a superintendent with five big positive outcomes, one organizational, one teacher-level, three student level, and you say, "Here's how Montessori would produce those." Not the demonstrated evidence that it does, just—here's the reasoning it would do it because of this or that. They care about, first, what are the outcomes, what does it do, and having a framework that makes sense. Then you assemble the evidence.

MP: This could be powerful for us. I've been telling the story for a while, but I've been a little hung up on proving the case.

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EBM: People are persuaded by the reasoning, not just the proof. “Here are the five reasons Montessori would matter for teacher turnover. Because it creates conditions where teachers can set a learning agenda that lets them feel connected to kids, because it requires school leadership to be deeply engaged with the teachers...” So try and figure out reasoning for why Montessori would work. And then, you don’t want every outcome, you want maybe five the field cares about. And that you could buttress as actually being somehow related to the Montessori model.

MP: We can get too hung up on measurements.

EBM: Measurement is important. Most of my research has been empirical. But the first step is, “What’s the argument about the outcomes that matters?” And then now you have outcomes that let you do the research on that, organizational research around those outcomes. Under what conditions might we reach those outcomes? Do the research, assemble diverse case studies from existing research—large urban schools, schools with mostly Latinx students. Like that.

In short: Build a conceptual framework. Summarize research results. Show variation across contexts.

MP: So that’s the framework that could drive change? What keeps Montessori from being the policy of the month?

EBM: That’s a fascinating question! What’s the context and conditions under which this might work? How much might we expect Montessori to have an impact given what we know about the institutional conditions of conventional public schooling? Institutional logics are bundles of beliefs

and practices. The beliefs and practices at the core of Montessori are different from those at the core of conventional public school. What happens when there are competing logics? Can they be hybridized? If they can’t, not completely, can Montessori prevail? I don’t have the answer, but it’s a fascinating question.

MP: Because Montessori is really different. It’s content delivery vs human development.

EBM: Content delivery and consumption!

MP: So maybe it’s doomed! Maybe we’ll be lucky to have just one Montessori school in each district, like a STEM school or an arts magnet. Which would be better than what we have now, but not like 50,000 schools.

EBM: Maybe... but I also wonder...can logics diffuse in a different direction? Jennifer Lin Russel, in her article *From Child’s Garden to Academic Press*, talks about how kindergarten moved from play-oriented to academic-focused, as the external social environment moved in a similar direction.

MP: Which partly had to do with children in third grade not reading. Which always seems so astonishing to me, coming from private Montessori where third graders not reading would be a school-closing scandal.

EBM: Well, I’m not a learning theorist, but reflecting on what I’ve seen in schools—kids get to third grade and start having trouble reading because that’s how long it takes them to figure out that they hate school! Kids might like to read! But they might hate school by third grade.

MP: Conventional school sometimes doesn’t think of them as agents with desires and interests of their own.

EBM: That’s part of why I’m excited to be involved with public Montessori. I think the time is right for rethinking how we bring more agency into schools, not just for students but teachers. And Montessori, based on my own experience and based on its design, is a package that enables that kind of agency in a way that the field wants and needs and is totally doable—we just need to fan the flames.

Dr. Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell is an Associate Professor of Education with expertise in leadership, management, and organizations at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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