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Changing the Montessori narrative

What does Montessori need to do to get some traction?



BY **DAVID AYER**
WITH **JARED JOINER**

Jared Joiner joined the NCMPS Board of Directors in 2021. *MontessoriPublic* sat down to talk about his background and Montessori story, and his take on Montessori's place in education reform.

MontessoriPublic: Can you tell us a little about your background—where you grew up, what school was like for you as a child?

Jared Joiner: I grew up in the DC area, and you could say I was around education since before I was born—my mother was a career educator, K through 6th grade teacher, and administrator even after she "retired". I actually attended Spring Montessori Bilingual Montessori Academy (still in business!) for preschool, but I only have vague memories. But my mom was a constructivist educator by philosophy, and her classrooms always included manipulatives and exploration, so it must have matched what she believed in.

MP: I have to ask, because I've heard from other Black educators, and we've seen it in some of the research—sometimes there's a feeling in Black communities that Montessori "isn't for us". Was that a factor for your family, as a Black child in Montessori?

JJ: I recall a diverse group of families at Spring—certainly we weren't the only Black family there, and some of my friends went on to high school with me. I think it's less, "this isn't for me" and more "do I see myself in it?" The Montessori narrative is still kind of "private schools for wealthy families." But as more of those other stories get told, it can be seen more as "for all families". If we're creating more public and affordable Montessori experiences, Black and brown, or generally economically disadvantaged families will have more access. If you see yourself represented there, you're more likely to think it's for you.

MP: So what did high school look like for you?

JJ: After that, for kindergarten through eighth grade, I attended Georgetown Day School *(Ed.: founded 75 years ago as the first integrated school in DC)*, which has a similar progressive approach along with a social justice focus. I can say that my early experiences informed what I believe today: that this kind of education should be accessible to every child. I went on to Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, a public high school in Maryland. It became an International Baccalaureate Programme school after I enrolled and that curriculum allowed me to study diversely across disciplines—literature, history, sciences, arts—and synthesize those learnings in the capstone Extended Essay and Theory of Knowledge courses.

MP: And after that?

JJ: College in St. Louis (Washington University) in Philosophy and Neuroscience, and some tutoring as a "side hustle", then and later while I worked in a lab. Working one-on-one with students made me think, maybe I should go into teaching! I joined Next Step Public Charter School in DC. *(Ed: Next Step is the oldest charter school in DC and has made its name offering bilingual adult basic education, GED, and ESL programs to youth between the ages 16-30. It serves 500 students per year who are some of the most at-risk youth in the city.)*

That experience teaching kicked off my education career. I was working with students who hadn't been served, or been successful in DC public schools—recent immigrants, formerly incarcerated, living on their own—to get GEDs and complete their education, and it made me want to learn more. I joined the board of the school, and saw a lot behind the scenes.

I returned to grad school for an M.Ed. in Mind, Brain, and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education (where I met Sara Suchman, Executive Director at NCMPS), and went on to work in Boston public schools, San Francisco public schools, and ed tech.

MP: And now?

JJ: Now I serve as Director of Educational Practice at Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI), where I'm kind of getting back to my roots, supporting the creation of the learning experiences that help educators integrate support for student wellbeing and academic achievement,building relationship-focused education that meets the needs of all students and values them as whole people.

At CZI, that means supporting practices and innovations that are aligned to a broader definition of student

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success and a universal goal of making sure every student has access to positive, supportive relationships with educators. Our work includes a focus on Black, brown, and indigenous students to make that universal goal possible.
Ed: Learn more about CZI's work at chanzuckerberg.com.

MP: And you joined our board, out of many organizations you could support with your time and energy—what was the appeal?

JJ: I had a personal connection through Sara and my education experience, and it really felt aligned with what I personally believe about schooling. I have a vision of what school could look and feel like, and NCMPS helps bring that to more children.

MP: In your undergraduate and graduate work on philosophy, neuroscience, the mind, the brain, and education, did Montessori come up? Are people in that world even that aware of Montessori?

JJ: I... think so? The folks in the Mind, Brain, and Education program—it may be Human Developmental now—talked about Montessori, Reggio, and Waldorf in similar ways, focusing on the variability, or "jaggedness" of students' development. Not all development happens at the same rate. And the fact that there are social and relationship elements of learning. Montessori comes up, less as a "research-based" model than as, "here's how a school experience that actually aligns with the research could look".

MP: So a sense that "those Montessori folks might know something about this" but not necessarily "here's a solution".

JJ: Mmm-hmm.

MP: So in the ed reform movement—we in Montessori have this strong feeling that education should be more about than standards, if it's about standards at all—education should be about the whole person. Which is lofty, but doesn't really solve the problem that, say, superintendents have, which is test scores and "gaps" and graduation rates. How does that dichotomy play out in your neighborhood of the ed reform world?

JJ: Well, first, that's the million-dollar question, right? But I think unfortunately there's this false dichotomy about how learning happens. You either have to do academic standards, or whole child, and there aren't enough conversations bridging those two worlds. Whereas in reality what the science and the research tells us is that it's both. In order to have "academic success" you have to think about who students are, what their identities are, their mental health, their cognitive development, executive function, things like that. All of that comes together and contributes to meeting those standards.

And the pandemic hasn't done us any favors—it hasn't removed things from superintendents' plates. So they feel the pressure of a laser-focus on academics.
And it's also politically fraught. If we use a lot of jargon it can be hard for parents to know what's really happening in classrooms, even if they might be OK with specific teaching practices. Schools might fall back on academics to steer clear of those political challenges.

MP: So is that potentially a play for public Montessori—we do both?

JJ: What Montessori has—because of a century of doing this work—is concrete practices that support whole child development and academics. People want to see the integration of the two and be able to point to for concrete practices that do both, and Montessori has codified practices in terms of teacher training, pedagogy, materials, and assessment, for example, that a lot of the newer work that's around now doesn't really have.

MP: With Montessori, you can hire a teacher who comes with albums, lesson plans, curriculum, etc. "off the shelf". And it does everything you want—it solves the whole child/academic dilemma. And it's not just some new thing we cooked up in a think tank—people have been doing it all over the world for more than a hundred years.

JJ: One challenge I think about is this: why is there 30-50 years of learning sciences and cognitive developmental research that doesn't get implemented? There's this mindset that if we just have the research and the evidence and the randomized controlled trial (RCT), educators will just go to the What Works Clearinghouse *(Ed.—the federal resource for "evidence-based" practices and interventions)* and find it and do it.

MP: So we generate all these papers and studies, and yet we don't get a lot of traction.

JJ: Right. But nothing is that linear, especially in education. What are the specific activities that can help a provider get their work onto the radars of superintendents and chief academic officers? It's like there's "demand generation" that needs to be done. Because there's a lot of stuff out there that's getting readily taken up in schools and districts because those programs just have really good marketing. It's time for things that have strong evidence to build out the storytelling capacity that the other providers have.

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But the other side is this issue of "usability". How do we help educators deploy practices without feeling like they have to be experts in it from day one? Educators have a developmental pathway too! How do we make things easy for them to pick up, and what supports do they need to help them do better and better over time? Educators are incredible people, and they want to do things the right way, and we don't give them the space or grace to be in that developmental space. So they might hear, "this is a UDL [universal design for learning] program," and they think, "I'm not trained and certified in UDL, so I can't do this." And maybe the same for Montessori.

The brand names can make people apprehensive and less willing to deploy these practices. How do we clear the space for them to do that?

MP: So what does a "friend of Montessori" tell us? Go lighter on the brand name? We're stuck on the package deal—you can't just do the Montessori math, or the language, because all the parts work together. The mixed-age classroom, the spiral curriculum, all of it. But schools say, "OK, that sounds like a lot".

JJ: Right, and that to me is the challenge of the randomized controlled trial (RCT). We got this effect under these precise conditions. If you want fidelity of implementation, you have to do it in this exact way, which isn't the reality of schools. So the question is, how might we take a more developmental approach to implementation—for any practice!—but Montessori definitely. Because of the sheer diversity and variety of classrooms across the US, it's going to look different in every community. What are the design principles, the parameters, we could recommend, rather than us being so precious about what it looks like. I'm not the Montessori scholar here. But when school models are hard for leaders to implement, if it's going to require a lot of change, what's the middle ground that would allow more schools to implement and have impact for students.

MP: This came up in my conversation with (Board member) Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell (A talk with Dr. Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, *MontessoriPublic* Summer 2021)—we don't even necessarily need the good RCT, we need the good story.

JJ: Research and evidence have a purpose. They're necessary but not sufficient for uptake. It's actually the storytelling that's needed for things to spread like wildfire and I think we've lost sight of that. Everyone wants to be evidence-based, do the study. But nobody reads the study! But people do read *EdWeek*, or *The New Yorker*, or listen to a podcast, and share that.

And, there is evidence for what is measured. For no-excuses charter schools, for example, there is a lot of evidence about narrow outcomes because that's what has been studied, and it lines up with a vision some people have for what school should look like, especially for Black and brown kids. But what about all the other models and outcomes, where we haven't had the donor to fund the study, which might also show really powerful effects?

MP: So we need to change the narrative.

JJ: For a lot of people—even for me as a Board member—the initial frame for Montessori is tiny, private, nursery school experience. That's a narrative framing challenge that other Montessori organizations don't necessarily have. So it's our challenge to solve.

Jared Joiner serves on the NCMPS Board of Directors and is the Director of Educational Practice at Chan Zuckerberg Initiative.

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