

## **Genius and Joy through Student-Driven Civic Action**

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### **Abstract**

Need in Deed's work with Philadelphia public school teachers and their students centers empathy, informed investigation, and civic action. Bolstered by these values and with the support of the My Voice framework and dedicated Need in Deed staff, educators are equipped to co-create authentic classroom communities with their students. In Need in Deed classrooms, students feel a sense of belonging, are supported in taking academic risks, and understand their agency as change makers. In this piece, Need in Deed staff and teachers give an overview of the My Voice framework and share stories from Need in Deed classrooms that highlight Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's five pursuits of culturally and historically responsive teaching - identity, skills, intellectualism, criticality, and joy.

A small group of An Nguyen and Rochelle Krauss’s third graders take the stage in a large room packed with other students, teachers, and community members from across Philadelphia. They take a deep breath as their teachers beam encouragingly from the audience, and then they dive into the story of their year-long civic action project with Need in Deed. They describe getting to know each other and building a warm and supportive classroom community full of honesty and laughter, and the process of deciding as a class to study the social issue of addiction for the year. Photos of local neuroscientists and anti-tobacco advocates fill the projector screen as the students excitedly tell about the community partners who came to their class to support their research and answer their questions about addiction. Based on the complex causes and effects of addiction they identified through the project, the students created a brochure to share with community members.

As they conclude their presentation, applause fills the room and giant smiles and bounces of joy take over these young scholars. Following the third grade students is an 8th grader sharing a speech about her class project on school uniforms. Several 5th graders are up next to talk about their animal welfare advocacy. After the large group presentations, students split up into groups to have more intimate conversations about their projects with students from another class, while community members listen in. The room is abuzz with student learning, pride, and joy. For longtime Need in Deed teacher, Bernie Magee, this moment is a high point in every school year. “When the kids start complimenting each other...they’re nervous, and then someone says something to another child, gives a compliment, and the kid is just so happy and proud, and like, ‘Yeah! I did do that!’” (B.Magee, interview, January 8, 2024).

This beautiful scene takes place at Need in Deed’s annual Shout Out – an event that celebrates year-long civic action projects developed in over 50 Philadelphia classrooms. Need in

Deed is a non-profit organization with a vision for equitable public education, where students' lived experiences are meaningfully connected to the academic curriculum and are catalysts for students becoming advocates for social change. Need in Deed's program, open to all 3rd-8th grade Philadelphia public school teachers, offers professional development on high-quality, academically embedded service-learning and civic action.

Need in Deed teachers use the My Voice Framework to accompany their students through a year-long civic action process centered on empathy, informed investigation, and civic action. Teachers collaborate with each other through the Need in Deed teacher network and receive ongoing professional development and support from Need in Deed staff.

The My Voice Framework includes lessons and resources for the five stages of the process, following the acronym VOICE:

**Value Your Voice:** Students examine their identities and build community as a class. They identify social issues in their community and determine a central social issue to research and address through action.

**Open the Issue:** Student questions on their chosen social issue guide them in a research process focused on analyzing the causes, effects, and complexities of the issue. They explore a variety of meaningful resources including visits from experts in the community.

**Identify Your Project:** Based on their learning and analysis of their issue, students narrow in on an aspect that they would like to explore more and address through an action project.

**Conduct Meaningful Service:** Student skills, talents, interests and learnings influence how they decide to address their issue through service. They explore the options of direct

service, advocacy, education, indirect support, or other methods for making an impact. Students make a step by step action plan, gather resources, and carry out their plan.

**Evaluate and Celebrate:** Reflection is built in throughout the process, and is emphasized at the end of the project. What was learned? What impact was made? What would you do differently next time? What is there to celebrate? The Shout Out represents a collective celebration for participants from each Need in Deed class, while individual classes also choose their own ways to celebrate their accomplishments.

Dr. Gholdy Muhammad's theory and model of culturally and historically responsive education focuses on the five goals or pursuits of identity, skills, intellectualism, criticality, and joy. She defines the five pursuits this way: "Identity – teaching students to know themselves and others; Skills – teaching students the proficiencies needed across content areas; Intellectualism – teaching students new knowledge; Criticality – teaching students to understand and disrupt oppression; and Joy – teaching students about the beauty and truth in humanity," and adds, "Collectively these five pursuits teach the whole child and give children academic and personal success for their lives" (Muhammad, 2021, p.1).

Per Dr. Muhammad, this model is meaningful for all children and necessary in creating equitable educational environments for children of color who have been historically marginalized within education. In both our commitment to equity and our program goals and outcomes, we see a strong alignment between Dr. Muhammad's model and the work of Need in Deed. In Need in Deed classrooms, students feel a sense of belonging, are supported in taking academic risks, and understand their agency as change makers. The following accounts and examples from Need in Deed teachers highlight the ways that Dr. Muhammad's five pursuits are vibrantly evident in Need in Deed classrooms.

## **Identity**

Need in Deed's My Voice framework supports students in naming and honoring their own identities as well as the identities of their classmates through an ongoing focus on community building. Students grow in their sense of who they are, who they do and don't want to be, and how they can better understand and impact the contexts of their school and their broader communities. Dr. Muhammad writes, "Youth need opportunities in school to explore multiple facets of selfhood, but also to learn about the identities of others who may differ. If they are going to enjoy a quality of life and live alongside other people, they must deeply know themselves and the histories and truths of other diverse people" (Muhammad, 2020, p.67).

Third grade teacher, Suzanne Cilli, says that identity is "like our anchor in class this year...any discussion that gets difficult, if we relate it back to identity...the answer is always there" (S.Cilli, interview, January 4, 2024). They explore identity through books about kids from diverse backgrounds, and create identity webs about important aspects of themselves. Ms. Cilli emphasizes that some aspects of identity are visible and some aren't, and sometimes we get to choose what to reveal and when. Students visit each others' identity webs through a gallery walk and notice connections between themselves and their classmates.

Sara Casselle's third grade class also begins the year with a strong focus on identity, and they continue to weave in identity work throughout the year as students grow and learn more about themselves. Through a Need in Deed lesson, Ms. Caselle has her students share what they know and are proud about regarding their names. She shares:

This year, I had a student from Cambodia who shared her name, it's very, very long...and she shared the meaning, and it was really special for her, even though she wants us to call her by a shortened version, but she also loved that everyone understood that this name means this beautiful thing" (S.Caselle, interview, January 5, 2024).

Students' photos, poetry, and name stories are posted on the walls so they can both see themselves reflected in the classroom, and notice how they change throughout the year. As they find that aspects of their identities are evolving, they're invited to change what they share with the class. Ms. Caselle observes:

Throughout the year...they're able to...more clearly express...who they are through what they're learning and what they enjoy and what their interests are, and Need in Deed allows that...because they're really driving what is important to them when we start to talk about the different issues.

When Ms. Cilli's class begins their exploration of social issues, students start to consider how issues impact them and other people who may or may not share their identities. A student shares that he has family members who had to leave their home due to war, and another shares how her family has been impacted by gun violence.

"Need in Deed...is so powerful in thinking about, that, your reality is not everyone's reality. And it's not just the person who's struggling with mental health that you pass on the street, or someone that's struggling with addiction, or someone who's struggling with housing, it could be the person who's sitting next to you in class, and to not...assume."

They learn to question their assumptions about each other and members of their community. She explains that the identity and community work they've done creates a space where students can share tender and uncomfortable aspects of their identities and experiences and know they'll be heard. Ms. Cilli takes special care that, in a majority white school, her students of color see their identities reflected in the books, lessons, and discussions in her class.

"For the students in my classroom who are in the global majority, it's really important that their voices are heard and that the social issues that may affect that, that the other kids in the class are able to avoid or steer around because of their privilege, that I bring those to light."

Ms. Caselle says that her students' Need in Deed work helps them to be more comfortable with difference, and as classmates share their varied experiences it sparks curiosity and empathy. She

explains, “One of the things I love about Need in Deed is that it allows them to see things differently, other perspectives, and then that changes maybe their own perception of themselves a little bit too.” When they begin studying social issues and engage in a debate to choose their Need in Deed class issue, their connections and curiosity about each others’ perspectives is what gets students to build consensus around one issue for their civic action project.

## **Skills**

The Need in Deed model supports skill development by providing a meaningful context for building and practicing grade and content appropriate skills. Dr. Muhammad emphasizes that skill development is essential, but that focusing on skills without context and thoughtful application is not enough. She writes:

Oftentimes educators begin and end their curriculum and instruction with *skills*. But skills need to be contextualized and authentically embedded within students’ lives and the real world around them. Skills must move to real action where students are learning to connect the academic success that they will experience with skills to real social change that help to make a better humanity for all. (Muhammad, 2021).

In-depth social issue research is a practical and engaging setting for developing and applying a wide range of academic skills.

Erica Darken teaches English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) to 5th graders, and explains, “Need in Deed’s model is really compatible with a lot of best practices for English Learners...Need in Deed provides opportunities for students to have meaningful interactions through reading, writing, listening and speaking. And then of course through all of those, they’re building their content knowledge” (E. Darken, interview, January 5, 2024). Darken’s students begin by writing about themselves and their families - topics that are most familiar to them - while building their writing skills. They share their writing aloud in small groups and use stickers to make connections with each others’ writing as a scaffolded way to practice their speaking

skills. They participate in a shared writing process to gather their ideas and questions about social issues. Students interview each other and then a family member, so they are able to practice using both English and their home languages to speak, listen, and write about social issues.

Once an issue is chosen and students move into research, Ms. Darken's students have more opportunities to build reading and listening skills through analyzing articles and hosting community partner visits. One year her students chose to study immigration, and they had the opportunity to interview three adults with immigration experiences. Students were able to practice asking the community partners questions about their experiences, and Ms. Darken noted: "You could really see over the course of the visits how the students gained confidence in speaking in front of a group." They went on to synthesize what they were hearing and decide what to do for their action project. In this case, students were very impacted by learning about families facing deportation who were living in sanctuary at local churches. Students decided to write letters of support to the families, a genuine and heartfelt way to practice their language skills while making an impact on members of their community.

Katherine Collier teaches seventh grade and her class is also largely made up of English Learners (ELs), who use the Need in Deed process to practice their language skills. Recently her students have been discussing the economy, homelessness, litter, addiction, gun violence, the cost of healthcare, and war, and are passionately and curiously involved - even those who normally don't speak up in class - because of the personal connections they're making. Ms. Collier explains, "Each of the activities in Need in Deed are skills based and aligned [to] standards...and also allow kids to explore these things that are happening around them...One of my students brought up the idea of people having different perspectives, and the way that



influences the world around him” (K. Collier, interview, January 3, 2024). As students share their perspectives on the issues they care deeply about, they collaborate to make meaning of their social contexts.

### **Intellectualism**

Dr. Muhammad asserts, “Intellect or knowledge is what we learn or understand about various topics, concepts, and paradigms. It is the understanding, enhancement, and exercising of mental powers and capacities that allow one to better understand and critique the world” (Muhammad, 2020, p.104). The My Voice framework encourages intellectual development by placing issues that matter to the students, and their questions about those issues, at the center of the learning environment. In Need in Deed lessons, meaningful processes of investigation, analysis, synthesis and problem-solving are highly engaging because they are student-led.

Noga Newberg’s third grade students have been debating and narrowing down their topics, and she sees them sharing passionately and “understanding each other, understanding how these issues impact their world and the people around them” (N. Newberg, interview, January 11, 2024). After finding connections between poverty, climate change, and animal welfare, one student exclaimed, “Ms. Newberg, all the issues are connected!” Another student came into class excitedly and shared, “Ms. Newberg, I stayed up so late last night preparing for part 2 of the debate!” Ms. Newberg adds, “Every part of Need in Deed is teaching students new knowledge...all the research they do, there’s just so much new knowledge.” She explains that struggling readers in her class can still engage and can share their strong opinions and strong ideas. “It’s a beautiful way to engage across a class and across abilities.” Last year one of her students who has faced particular challenges presented at the Shout Out. “For her to see herself as a leader and speak in front of the crowd...I can really see her light there.”

In his many years with Need in Deed, 8th grade teacher Dr. Joe Alberti has had the opportunity to witness a high level of intellectual engagement among his students as they identify and study social issues. While working towards their class issue selection, his students practice choosing sources credibly, synthesizing information, building persuasive arguments, and are motivated by using these skills related to meaningful information and content within the real context of persuading their peers. “They've taken the first few months to become so invested in this topic, that they're then experts in it, especially in the class...they then go above and beyond and shine in their presentations” (J. Alberti, interview, January 5, 2024).

Earlier this year, his students were debating between discrimination and poverty as two key issues. “Because they've become so invested in their own topics, it makes building consensus really interesting,” Dr. Alberti says. Students have to learn to “speak to the other people in the class to build those bridges between them.” One student suggested connecting the two issues and studying school funding because of its relationship to both topics. This idea, that wasn't presented at the beginning of the project, was proposed, discussed, and embraced by the class, and will be their main topic of investigation this year.

Emily Goedde's 7th graders went through a similar process this winter. The class engaged in a four corners lesson debating between their top four social issues: inflation, child abuse, homelessness, and refugee kids. However, Ms. Goedde explains that the debate gradually evolved into a socratic circle:

What happens in a socratic circle is, you leave the topic behind and you start learning how everything is connected in some way, and Need in Deed and the topics they were selecting did that for them. They started saying things like, ‘Well, it might seem like inflation isn't connected and it's just money, but actually money can cause stress on families, and stress on families can cause, maybe, parents to act in ways they shouldn't act.’...So they were sort of taking one issue and connecting it to the next, and it was happening very organically. And I wasn't involved in it at all...I had

stepped out of the circle and they were showing themselves to make those critical connections and...show themselves as thinkers” (E. Goedde, interview, January 9, 2024).

Inflation had the smallest number of votes at the beginning of the process, but when they voted at the end of their dialogue, the majority of students moved to that topic because they saw its concrete ramifications and wanted to learn more about it.

Candice Smith teaches 5th grade. Her students’ past two projects - on diversity and animal welfare - have centered on her class teaching the concepts they’ve learned to younger students. After months of research and meeting with countless community experts, students applied their deep learning to create lesson plans. She explains,

“They taught lessons...that’s the highest form of showing that you learned something, that you can take what you learned and teach it to somebody else, that shows true learning. And you know it’s not easy to get 33 kids - every single kid participated, they all wanted to do something. And it’s because they were so interested. So they, you know, wrote plays before they performed them...they collaborated and created powerpoints and they researched...they created games, they made projects with the younger kids” (C. Smith, interview, January 8, 2024).

Ms. Smith also said that after the experience, the 2nd grade teachers have even adapted lessons her 5th graders created to use again with their current students.

### **Criticality**

Through research, analysis, examinations of multiple perspectives, and investigating social contexts, Need in Deed students learn to interrupt assumptions about social realities and become advocates for social change. Dr. Muhammad writes, “Criticality is the capacity to read, write, and think in the context of understanding power, privilege and oppression...not only to make sense of injustice, but also to work toward social transformation” (Muhammad, 2020, p.12). Need in Deed civic action projects build criticality by placing student identity and

curiosity at the center of the process and entrusting students to decide how they want to impact their realities.

An Nguyen's third grade students, who studied addiction and presented at the Shout Out, transformed their thinking throughout last school year. From the first identity and community building lessons, they were building their sense of agency. Through the year-long process, her class transformed from students who had a limited understanding of the topic of addiction - 'it's bad and we hate it' - to a deeper understanding about causes, effects, complexities and solutions. They deepened their science vocabulary and ability to speak knowledgeably about addiction's causes. The more they learned about brain science, advertising, and other complex factors contributing to addiction, "they asked themselves, *How do we disrupt this?* And their answer was, *By educating, starting with our community...* They said, *We need to start with home, right here in the neighborhood*" (A. Nguyen, interview, January 3, 2024). Ms. Nguyen says it was a tough topic for them, particularly for students with addiction experience in their families, but ultimately a truthful and transformational process. They were able to understand that if a person in their family struggles with addiction, it's not personal. Ms. Nguyen highlights the role of student voice and choice in engaging students in Need in Deed: "Teachers didn't dictate the issue or the final project, [and] they saw how much say they have in the process." Students named what they wanted to learn and what would make them feel safe in the process. They determined where they wanted to distribute the flyers they made as their final project. Their Shout Out presentation was further evidence of their ownership of the project and sense of agency.

Ms. Caselle sees her third graders develop criticality as they start to ask system-level questions when they engage with new topics. They recently read about extreme weather and natural disasters, and started asking big questions about systems of support. "What are the

systems in place that can help the people who are suffering so much because of this?” Another time they were discussing war and asked, “What happens when this happens? Like, who’s there to help them?” Ms. Caselle observes, “When they can see that something is not equitable...they know better and they’re saying...*what can we do?*”.

## **Joy**

In a recent interview, Dr. Muhammad (Ferlazzo, 2023) said:

Joy can infuse our relationship building with students, as we check in on their hearts and on their wellness. It emerges when we integrate more art, poetry, and music into our instruction and when we create learning experiences that encourage students to have fun and problem solve, with their voices (and perspectives) centered.

The Shout Out is a clear and vibrant picture of joy in the Need in Deed experience, and there are so many other daily moments where joy is evident. Whether making connections with classmates, coming to a hard-won consensus on a social issue, showing pride in a research presentation, or seeing their work make an impact on community members, joy infuses the Need in Deed process.

Ms. Collier recently forgot that it was “Need in Deed Wednesday” and started teaching a lesson on ancient civilizations, when a student said “Hey, what about Need in Deed?”. She pivoted and the class was thrilled. She explains that they see Need in Deed projects as both a break and a challenge. Each year when her students collectively work on their final project, they are full of excitement and joy that they get to do this, and eighth graders from past years check in to see what students this year are doing.

Ms. Goedde has observed multiple aspects of joy in her Need in Deed process. “Joy is so important,” she says, “and it’s interesting because we’re talking about really hard topics, but the way that I see joy happening with this is that I see student engagement. And to me,

engagement means joy.” She thinks in particular of two students who don’t regularly speak in class, but whose hands are up over and over again when they’re brainstorming for Need in Deed. “That means that something is sparking...and to me, interest is joy. This isn’t maybe joy like laughter, but it’s a deeply engaged kind of moment.” Finally, she sees joy in student agency and the voice they have in their learning:

Being able to say ‘this is what we want to talk about, this is what we think is important’...is then that agency...it’s a long joy...The joy is also seeing that they’re part of this community...they have agency in Need in Deed in way that they don’t necessarily always - I mean we try to bring it into classwork, but it comes naturally with Need in Deed. And that, I think, is joyful.

### **Join Us!**

As Dr. Muhammad (2020, p.68) writes,

Our goal is not just to help students become better test takers or academic achievers, but also for them to gain the confidence to use learning as a personal and sociopolitical tool to thrive in this world and to help them know themselves.

There is a clear alignment between Dr. Muhammad’s work and the Need in Deed framework and teacher network. As we work toward a more equitable education landscape in Philadelphia and beyond, the work of Need in Deed’s teachers powerfully shapes the student experience by focusing on identity and agency to make social change as the meaningful context needed for academic growth.

We hope that educators will be inspired by the work and example of Need in Deed to dig deeper into cultivating student voice and civic action. Need in Deed teachers frequently recruit their peers to join the Need in Deed network because of the joy and power they experience in the work. “All of this aligns with where I’ve wanted to head as a teacher, and this has cemented it in an organized and collaborative way,” says Ms. Cilli. We encourage 3rd-8th grade teachers in Philadelphia to join the Need in Deed network! Applications for the following school year’s

teacher network are accepted March through May. To apply or for more information about our work, visit [www.needindeed.org](http://www.needindeed.org), or email Julia Shields Chrestay at [julia@needindeed.org](mailto:julia@needindeed.org).

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