

# “An Offense to Their Human Rights”: Connecting Bud, not Buddy to the Flint Water Crisis with Middle School ELA Students

MATTHEW KNIELING

As a first-year English language arts teacher in a diverse city, I am constantly learning about the unique capabilities and perspectives of middle school students. Joining the work of Critical Youth Studies scholars (Lesko, 2001), who aim to dismantle deficit paradigms of youth, my experiences as a middle level educator have unsurprisingly challenged the limiting perspectives too often forced upon students, especially students of color and low-income students. As such, every day, in addition to teaching, I am learning and growing from and with my students because of their unabashed and profound insights.

Around the end of November 2015, my sixth graders and I began reading *Bud, not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (1991). I was particularly excited to be teaching this novel, which takes place in Flint, Michigan, because I grew up 20 minutes outside of Flint. Despite my initial enthusiasm, my students displayed marked disinterest. The prescribed curriculum accompanying this unit was largely filled with worksheets/handouts and paragraph-length writing responses, to which my students responded begrudgingly.

About two weeks into the novel, my distaste with the unit’s progress grew into a curiosity for new pedagogic possibilities. Moreover, it was around this time that the Flint water crisis began making national headlines. I began putting together ideas for incorporating the water crisis into our reading of the novel through a case study. The results of this unit provide remarkable insights into the capabilities and capacities of middle level students.

## A Case Study of Flint, Michigan: Then and Now

It was with an understanding of the value and the

imperative of grounding education in real-world contexts that I designed this case study. My overall goals were to work toward creating both an autonomous and collective learning community, to push my students to become critical readers and draw their own conclusions, and to start a conversation about the history of inequalities. The ultimate task, then, was for students to compare and contrast Flint in *Bud, not Buddy* vs. Flint today.

*My overall goals were to work toward creating both an autonomous and collective learning community, to push my students to become critical readers and draw their own conclusions, and to start a conversation about the history of inequalities.*

The case study consisted of three components: research, an essay, and a creative project (see Figure 1). My role throughout the unit was more of a facilitator; I would provide mini-lessons at the beginning of class, centered on skills to support my students’ work and grounded in the concept of habits of mind (CWPA, NCTE, & NWP, 2011) The students would then work independently for the

remainder of class. As a result, students had significant autonomy in their learning.

While students mostly worked independently throughout this project, there was also significant student-initiated collaboration. It was common to overhear students ask each other questions, from more procedural inquires (*Have you read this article? What websites have you found?*) to deeper inquiries (*Why did the governor change the water source? Should he be fired?*). Though I circulated the room to offer additional support, when students initially asked questions, I often deferred to their peers, which eventually created an environment of student-led collective learning.

## Authentically Engaged/Enraged

From the start, my students were appalled to learn about Flint’s water crisis. I remember hearing during the first day of students conducting their research: “Did you hear

**A Case Study of ...**  
**Flint, Michigan: Then & Now**

➤ **Project description:**

As we read “Bud, not Buddy,” we learn a lot about the city of Flint, Michigan. Through Bud’s experiences, we learn about issues in the city that relate to the economy (The Great Depression, poverty, etc.), classism, racism, basic human rights. Now, you are going to have the opportunity to learn about what is happening in Flint today! In other words, you are going to be doing a **case study** of Flint. A case study is an in-depth study of a specific topic. In this project, your case study will be exploring the similarities and differences between *Flint, Michigan—then and now*.

➤ **Part I—Research:**

For the first part of the project, you will begin learning about Flint, Michigan today. What are demographics of the city, what are some of the issues, etc.? You will do this by researching and reading different news articles about Flint. In total, you will have to provide **three news articles** that you think are important in understanding the city today (though you will read more than three) and complete a set of **Cornell Notes for each article**.



➤ **Part II—Essay:**

After you have chosen your three articles and completed your Cornell Notes, you will begin to write your essay, which will compare and contrast Flint, Michigan as it is portrayed in the novel and what you learned about today’s Flint from your research. **Things to consider:** How is the portrayal of Flint in the book different from or similar to your research on the city today? What issues are still present today that were present in the book? Are there new issues in Flint that weren’t present in the book? Or does it seem like some issues have been resolved?



➤ **Part III—Creative Project:**

Once your essay is complete and you have learned a lot about of Flint, you will have the opportunity to demonstrate your learning in a **creative way!** Here are some options:

- A poem about Flint, Michigan
- A drawing of Flint—then and now
- A short story about the city
- A song about Flint, Michigan (maybe from Bud’s perspective?)
- Letter to people in Michigan (citizens, politicians, etc.)



FIGURE 1: *Project description*

what the governor did?” “Have you seen the water?” and “This is messed up!”

Having started the school year with a unit on human rights, I quickly learned my students had a passion for justice and an earnest desire to call out injustices. Their ability to recognize and name inequalities and injustices is truly remarkable. As such, throughout their research, I intentionally offered little information about the water crisis from my own knowledge. Instead, I wanted my students to strengthen their skills in recognizing injustices—which they do in their everyday lives—in an academic setting.

Within the first week of researching, one of my students called me over and shared, with a solemnly curious tone, “I was wondering, what if the governor knew it wasn’t safe when he made the decision?” I asked him if he read that argument in an article, to which he replied, “Not exactly, but I’m starting to wonder.” A few days later, I overheard a student shout into the dull glow of her laptop: “Whoa! This is racist!”

My students carry an understanding of the world and a critical curiosity that surpasses the expectations placed upon middle level students. They offer profound perspectives and connections between course content and their own experiences. Though their investment throughout the research was indicative of their engagement and revealing of their passionate anger, their essays and projects offered a more direct look into their process of meaning making.

## Findings from Student Work

After reading all of their papers and reflecting on what I learned, I was able to categorize my students’ ideas and arguments into three broad categories: racism, economic injustice, and perspective-taking. Ultimately, my students displayed an impressive ability to demonstrate critical perspectives and genuine empathy, pose challenging questions, make thoughtful connections to the novel, and employ complicated rhetorical strategies to convey their ideas.

### Racism

In *Bud, not Buddy*, we learn about experiences of racism that Bud encounters. My students were quick to see the connections between Bud’s experience of racism and the role of race within the water crisis. My first indication of

this connection was when the aforementioned student inadvertently shouted her realization. However, other students shared in this understanding. As one of my students wrote:

The main similarities and the main differences is that “Bud not Buddy” and Flint have the similar racism because in Flint they don’t want to fix the water because of the black people and “Bud not Buddy” is similar with the racism because Bud couldn’t stay outside because he was black.

Another student echoed that sentiment when she wrote:

In “Bud not Buddy” they said a brown person should not be out at night and then years later they are still being mean to people that are brown.

*They validate the potential for literature to provoke meaningful conversations about injustices today.*

These quotes, along with others, reveal an understanding among my students of the role that race plays in situations of injustice. Additionally, they validate the potential for literature to provoke meaningful conversations about injustices today.

### Economic Injustice

My students were almost unanimously infuriated about the economic injustice tied to the water crisis. They could not fathom that residents in Flint are still paying for toxic water. In a letter to Michigan’s governor written from the perspective of a Flint citizen, one of my students powerfully demanded that “you guys should care more about our lives and [our] health than just some money.” This sentiment was similarly articulated when a student reflected on the impact of this economic injustice on livelihoods and families:

Some people are getting upset over the fact that they still have to pay for their bill even though the water is poisoned by the lead from the pipes. People are getting poor by them having to pay for their water and they shouldn’t worry about their water bills they should worry about their families, food, and clothing.

Some students even recognized how intergenerational poverty relates to the water crisis. One student, for example, described how economic issues connected to the water crisis by explaining how, “in ‘Bud, not Buddy,’ there is a lot of poverty. In Flint today they are in debt.”



FIGURE 2: Example of creative project

She went on to explain how the governor then switched its water source “just to save some money.”

This perspective of economic injustice was also represented in one student’s creative project: a drawing of Flint “then and now” (see Figure 2). The “then” depiction of Flint is largely representative of the Great Depression (the time period of *Bud, not Buddy*), whereas the “now” depiction simply reveals the mayor with dollar signs. This visual representation is demonstrative of the general conclusion to which the majority of my students arrived: issues of greed and economic injustice are inextricably tied to the city’s water crisis.

### Perspective-Taking

Many of my students also insightfully engaged in processes of perspective-taking in their writing. These varying perspectives took multiple forms. One student, for example, took the perspective of a Flint citizen himself in order to explain the gravity of the crisis. “I know if I lived there I would complain every day being scared for my kid’s life.”

Another student wrote a letter to the governor as her creative project, in which she asked the governor to consider the perspective of a Flint citizen: “What if you [Governor Snyder] were one of the citizens in Flint, would you like to have

contaminated water and still need to pay for it?”

Some students also engaged with their readers directly, asking that they reflect on and grapple with this perspective of Flint citizens:

But if this was you what would you do? How would you respond to this problem? There are questions about this that have not been responded. Like how the government office said not to worry about the water problems. Well the government office knew what was happening to the water because they had filtered water and it was clean, so why did the government office tell residence not to worry when there was clearly something to worry about. They clearly knew what was going on with the water. Are they trying to kill people?

Through this complex process of perspective-taking, students like this one were able to wrestle with remarkably powerful and poignant dilemmas: *Are they trying to kill people?*

This theme of perspective-taking among my students not only revealed their capacity both to empathize and to negotiate and consider different points of view, it also demonstrated their ability to engage in complicated rhetorical processes employing different perspectives in order to articulate and promulgate their views and ideas through writing.

*This theme of perspective-taking among my students not only revealed their capacity both to empathize and to negotiate and consider different points of view, it also demonstrated their ability to engage in complicated rhetorical processes employing different perspectives in order to articulate and promulgate their views and ideas through writing.*

### Conclusion

#### Learning Points

Throughout this process, I learned a myriad of important lessons. First, I discovered the possibilities of replacing classroom management with curriculum. Because this project engaged the students and provided them with a balance of autonomy and structure, I found that many behavioral issues decreased significantly. As someone who admittedly struggles with classroom management, understanding that engaged students do not need “managing” was an important lesson.

Additionally, I gained valuable insights regarding teacher-student

dynamics. The design of the case study allowed me to work toward more authentic student ownership. “Student ownership” of learning is common rhetoric within education; unfortunately, the concept can be used to place guilt upon students (e.g., shaming students for not taking ownership over their learning when they do not complete homework). Through this case study, however, I started understanding the potential for students to truly experience ownership over their education. Moreover, I learned to support through silence. Though my inclination was to answer all of my students’ questions, pausing and allow other students’ voices to fill that space contributed to this productive notion of student ownership/engagement.

### Future Considerations

I learned equally profound insights by reflecting on the hidden curriculum within this unit. I realized that I could have worked more intentionally toward disrupting privilege in language/literacy practices, which is a particularly salient lesson as a white teacher in a racially/linguistically diverse school. The notion of code-switching has been critiqued among scholars (Canagarajah, 2006) as perpetuating inequalities tied to language and negative attitudes among students regarding their own languages. I see now the ways in which I perpetuated language inequalities by placing less emphasis on the creative project (which invited non-Standard English) than the essay (which called for dominant Standard English). Placing equal value on both parts could have disrupted language marginalization and created a space where dominant Standard English is not solely and disproportionately emphasized and valued in my linguistically diverse classroom. Moreover, I could have worked toward introducing Canagarajah’s notion of code-meshing: “merging local varieties with Standard

Written English in a move toward gradually pluralizing academic writing and developing multilingual competence for transnational relationships” (p. 586).

*As someone who admittedly struggles with classroom management, understanding that engaged students do not need “managing” was an important lesson.*

Another missed opportunity in this case was to ground the work in my students’ community. Though curricular pacing was an issue, tying this project back to the students’ community and their knowledge of it would have been an opportunity to relate their learning to their lived experiences more intentionally.

Furthermore, by tying the work to the local community, I could have addressed another missing opportunity: action. I am concerned about the message that the project sent to my students regarding the difference between advocacy and action. Though learning about the issue of the water crisis may have *felt* like we were participating in something “good,” forming the case study into a local action research project (Sagor, 2000) could have helped my students understand the power they possess to affect real change.

---

### REFERENCES

- Canagarajah, A. S. (2006). The place of world Englishes in composition: Pluralization continued. *College Composition and Communication*, 57(4), 586–619.
- Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), & National Writing Project (NWP). (2011). *Framework for success in postsecondary writing*. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/framework>
- Curtis, C. P. (1999). *Bud, not Buddy*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- Lesko, N. (2001). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Originally from Michigan, **Matthew Knieling** is a sixth-grade ELA teacher in western MA who is particularly interested in culturally sustaining and social justice pedagogies, restorative justice in schools, and language and literacy. [matthewknieling@gmail.com](mailto:matthewknieling@gmail.com)