

*Rikke Alberg Peters*

*University College Lillebaelt*

*Hildegunn Juulsgaard Johannesen*

*University of Southern Denmark*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5617/adno.8377>

## What is actually true? Approaches to teaching conspiracy theories and alternative narratives in history lessons

### **Abstract**

This article presents an empirical study that examines the teaching of conspiracy theories as part of the lower secondary history curriculum in Denmark. We argue that this topic is highly relevant, especially when taught in relation to the use of history. Within this approach, answering questions about true and false is secondary to understanding how and why alternative narratives co-exist and, at times, conflict. By applying a qualitative action research approach involving two teachers who taught in three different classes, our aim was to obtain in-depth knowledge of what happens in the classroom when different teaching strategies are applied, as well as to determine whether and, if so, how students show signs of critical thinking and historical reflection.

Our results show that, although they required extended contextual knowledge to practise source evaluation and historical reflection, the students were highly motivated and participated actively in discussions. Both teachers in the study used an open-ended dialogic and enquiry-based approach to prompt their students to investigate the theories for themselves and to draw their own conclusions. When teachers facilitate classroom discussions in an open-ended way, the complex existential aspects of the use of history are opened up and students are given the opportunity to explore the complexity of historical narratives. During the observations, we noted some high-level examples of historical reflection and contextualisation among the students. However, the teaching of conspiracy theories is not an easy task, and teachers face many ethical dilemmas when deciding which role to adopt.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, alternative narratives, use of history, controversial issues, teaching strategies, historical reflection

## Hvad er egentlig sandt? Tilgange til at undervise i konspirationsteorier og alternative forklaringer i historiefaget

### **Sammendrag**

Denne artikel præsenterer et empirisk studie af, hvordan der kan undervises i konspirationsteorier i historie i udskolingens på en måde så elevernes historiske refleksion opøves. Emnet er yderst historiefagligt relevant, særligt hvis det undersøges i forbindelse med historiebrug. I denne optik er besvarelser af spørgsmål om sandt og falsk sekundært i forhold til at forstå, hvordan og hvorfor alternative fortællinger eksisterer og til tider

kommer i konflikt. Ved at anvende en kvalitativ aktionsforskningsmetode, der involverede et tæt samarbejde med to lærere, som underviste i tre forskellige klasser, var vores mål at opnå dybdegående viden om, hvad der sker i klasselokalet, når forskellige undervisningsstrategier tages i brug, samt at afgøre, om og i givet fald hvordan eleverne viste tegn på kritisk tænkning og historisk refleksion.

Vores resultater viser, at selvom eleverne havde brug for omfattende kontekstuel viden for at kunne praktisere kildekritik og historisk refleksion, så var eleverne meget motiverede og deltog aktivt i klassesamtaler. Begge lærere i undersøgelsen brugte en åben dialogisk og undersøgelsesbaseret tilgang til at få deres elever til at undersøge teorierne for sig selv og til at drage deres egne konklusioner. Når lærere benytter en åben tilgang til samtaler i klasseværelset, så åbnes der op for forståelsen af de mere komplekse eksistentielle aspekter af brugen af historie, og eleverne får dermed mulighed for at arbejde med kompleksiteten i historiske fortællinger. Vores observationer viser nogle eksempler på historisk refleksion og kontekstforståelse på højt niveau. Imidlertid er undervisningen i konspirationsteorier ikke en let opgave, og lærere står over for mange etiske dilemmaer, når de skal beslutte, hvilken rolle de skal indtage.

Nøkkelord: konspirationsteorier, alternative fortællinger, historiebrug, kontroversielle emner, undervisningsstrategier, historisk refleksion

## Introduction

In December 2012, the United States (US) was shocked by yet another tragic school shooting when 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 children and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School. In the years that followed, Alex Jones, a radio host and YouTube celebrity who is one of America's most popular conspiracy theorists, claimed that the event never took place. Using the Internet and radio as a platform, Jones broadcast "new evidence" to his millions of followers, propagating the theory that the Sandy Hook school shooting was orchestrated by the US government in order to justify the introduction of restrictions on the constitutional right to bear arms (see Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR), 2017).

In the aftermath of shocking events, the spread of conspiracy theories tends to increase. False information, propaganda, hoaxes and fake news are all undeniably on the rise, in part because of the proliferation of digital and social media (Hobbs, 2017; Brockhoff, Peters, & Thorup, 2018). Inevitably, some people end up believing in fake news and conspiracy theories, and research shows that such phenomena do have an effect on people's political, social and medical choices, as well as on their attitudes and trust in democracy (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008; Oliver & Wood, 2014; Hobbs, 2017; Douglas et al., 2019). In some cases, this can lead to extremist behaviour and violence, especially when the false information in question is propagated by extremist political or religious groups (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 15; Mulhall, 2019, pp. 32–33, 77). Unfortunately, US school shootings represent good examples of dramatic events from the recent past that have been twisted and assigned alternative explanations by different actors. In this

regard, conspiracy theories provide an alternative to the official statements and authoritative versions of events that are commonly accepted as being the ‘truth’.

Due to their digital culture and habits, children and young people are confronted on a daily basis by various social media influencers, popular YouTube figures and so-called experts who post all sorts of compelling photo and video content (Lenos & Krasenberg, 2017; Nettets vildveje, 2018). Some of these influencers and political figures have an extremist political or conspiratorial agenda, which young people might not always be aware of (Boyd, 2014, pp. 176–177). The far-right extremist and eccentric Rasmus Paludan, who ran for the Danish parliament in the spring 2019 election, was well known among teenagers, who had been following him on YouTube for months before he became headline news in Denmark (Boffey, 2019; Schrøder, 2019; SELMA, 2019). Alex Jones, the owner of Infowars, and Shane Dawson, a popular YouTuber, both of whom have millions of subscribers, are another two examples of sources with controversial conspiracy content that teenagers might encounter online. Further, a significant number of teens watch popular television series such as *The X-Files*, *Decoded*, *Stranger Things* and *House of Cards*, which all appear to popularise conspiracy beliefs and narratives (Gilbert, 2019).

Conspiracy theories and alternative explanations are interesting social and historical phenomena, as they force us to confront the complicated dilemma of there sometimes being multiple and conflicting interpretations of what actually happened in the past. These challenging circumstances prompted us to question whether history teaching could and, indeed, should take a topic such as conspiracy theories into consideration or whether it should simply rely on a more unproblematic understanding of the past by focusing strictly on determining what happened by investigating primary sources. Does the complex nature of our contemporary media society require history teachers to engage their students in the discussion of alternative historical narratives? If we examine the new Danish history curriculum (Emu, 2019), we may find indications that it is the role of teachers to engage learners in recognising biases, practising source evaluation skills and critically engaging with controversial content (see also Wansink et al., 2019, p. 68). To investigate how this challenging topic could be taught in lower secondary history classes, we designed a qualitative research study in collaboration with two teachers who were curious to explore which teaching strategies to apply when dealing with controversial topics such as the Sandy Hook school shooting or conspiracy theories associated with the 9/11 terror attacks as part of the history curriculum.

## Purpose of the study

This study contributes to the growing body of literature discussing controversial issues in the field of history education (e.g., Barton & McCully, 2007; Wojdon,

2014; Wansink et al., 2019). There is currently a lack of empirical research into how best to introduce topics such as conspiracy theories and fake news into lower secondary history education in the Scandinavian countries. In an international context, Philpott et al. (2011) and Lockwood (1995) focus on the teacher's crucial role in introducing controversial issues into social studies classrooms, while Pace (2003) focuses on college teaching, examining which teaching strategies serve to maximise critical thinking and thoughtful debate among young people. Hobbs (2017), specifically taking up the conspiracy topic, examines how German high-school students have explored the constructed nature of authoritative narratives and practised source evaluation, while Lenos and Krasenberg (2017) examine practices and guidance for dealing with conspiracy theories, fake news and propaganda in the classroom. However, we can find no analysis of teachers' reflections that builds on a corpus of theory and a systematic empirical approach.

The aim of this action research study is to explore the teaching of conspiracy theories and alternative explanations within history lessons in lower secondary schools (grades 7–9 within the Danish school system) as a means of introducing aspects of alternative and conflicting historical narratives. The secondary aim of the study is to explore whether and, if so, how the contentious and controversial nature of such topics has the potential to motivate younger students (aged 13–15 years) to engage in dialogue in the history classroom that shows signs of critical thinking and historical reflection. In addition, and based on both our findings and the theoretical assumptions presented below, this study aims to describe those teaching strategies that could be successfully used when dealing with conspiracy theories.

In the first section of this study, we offer a brief definition of conspiracy theories based on the prior literature and discuss some of the intriguing mechanisms associated with them. Then, we elaborate on our theoretical framework for dealing with conspiracy theories in history lessons. These theoretical considerations were conveyed to the participating teachers, as they represent the foundation of the analytical discussions and mutual reflections that occurred throughout the whole action research project. In the following section, we set out our methodological research design and introduce the applied procedures, including how we conducted the action research. In the final sections, we present the results of the research project and our conclusions.

## Conspiracy theories – definitions and mechanisms

Conspiracy theories can be described as alternative theories concerning *who really did it, how they did it and why*. The term *conspiracy theory* refers to an attempt to explain specific events or phenomena as being caused by secret plots on the part of powerful actors who have managed to conceal both their role and their motives (Douglas et al., 2019). For the conspiracy theorist, nothing happens

by chance. Extraordinary powers are attributed to individuals or groups, be they corrupt politicians, the ‘power elite’, economic or political institutions such as the United Nations, scientists or religious organisations (Barkun, 2003; Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008; Douglas et al., 2019). Conspiracy theories are extremely effective narratives that, for some, offer sensible explanations for complicated relations and phenomena that may have had significant impacts on people’s lives (Brockhoff et al., 2018).

Conspiracy theories can be small or large, local or global, harmful or entertaining, or all of the above (Uscinski & Parent, 2014). They often propagate *us versus them* thinking. Examples include the widespread 9/11 conspiracy theories claiming that the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York were an *inside job* perpetrated by the US government, the various anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish theories linked to the well-known racist propaganda that Muslims (or Jews) plan to take over Europe and subjugate westerners, the idea that climate change is a hoax orchestrated by scientists, and the belief that a connection between the MMR vaccine and autism has been hidden by the authorities for years.

As Sunstein and Vermeule (2008) indicate, another distinct feature of conspiracy theories is their self-sealing quality, which makes them very difficult to effectively debunk. They are so highly resistant to counter arguments or corrections that anyone trying to argue against their claims risks being accused of taking part in the plot (or conspiracy) themselves. Another interesting issue regarding conspiracy theories is the fact that they are not all false. Some conspiracy theories have turned out to be correct, for example, the Watergate scandal, the Thule Air Base case in Denmark and the Tuskegee University syphilis study (Sunstein & Vermeule, 2008, p. 4; Vollmond & Hansen, 2014, p. 23; Hobbs, 2017, pp. 21–22).

Conspiracy theories illustrate the undeniable fact that there exist contradictory interpretations of what happened in the past and, further, that such interpretations ultimately have both societal and ethical consequences when people believe in them and propagate them for different reasons. In light of this, conspiracy theories can be seen as alternative narratives or explanations that conflict with the accounts advanced by “the relevant epistemic authorities” (Robertson, 2016, p. 37), be they historians, scientists, public service journalists or government officials.

## Theoretical approaches

In this section, we present a theoretical framework for dealing with conspiracy theories in history lessons. This theoretical framework formed the basis for our study, and it acted as an overarching frame for our action research project. First, we discuss whether conspiracy theories can be understood as being controversial. Second, we explore the connection between conspiracy theories and the use of history within a history didactics framework. Third, based on the work of Peters

(2017) and Hobbs (2017), we discuss how conspiracy theories could be taught in the classroom.

### **Teaching conspiracy theories as a controversial issue**

In recent years, there has been an increase in calls for the teaching of subjects that “arouse strong feelings and divide communities and society” (Council of Europe, 2015) as part of democratic and general education. According to proponents of this approach, teaching controversial political, religious or emotional issues of a sensitive nature plays an important role in preparing young people for community participation and supporting their engagement in a democratic dialogue (Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004a; Oulton, Dillon, & Grace, 2004b; Haynes & Murriss, 2008; Hess, 2009; Council of Europe, 2015). Within educational theory, attempts have been made to identify what it takes for an issue to be understood and taught as being a controversial one. Yet, can conspiracy theories be considered to represent a controversial issue at all and, if so, how should we deal with them? According to the so-called “epistemic criteria” (Dearden, 1981; Hand, 2008; Tillson, 2017), which have gained significant influence in educational research in recent years (Petrovic, 2016; Zigler, 2016; Yacek, 2018), a topic cannot be considered controversial if the relevant argument conflicts with the overall (epistemic-scientific) consensus and rationality.

To teach something as controversial is to teach it as unsettled. That is to present it as a matter on which contrary views are or could be held; and we take it that teachers ought only to teach something in this way when ‘contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.’ (Hand & Levinson, 2012, p. 618)

A strictly scientific approach, as suggested by the epistemic criteria, would probably exclude conspiracy theories from being taught as a controversial issue (see also Hardee & McFaden, 2016; Zigler, 2016). However, critics of the epistemic criteria have challenged the notion that objective standards exist by which all arguments can be evaluated (Petrovic, 2013; Cooling, 2014; Bertucio, 2016; Shudak & Anders, 2016; Yacek, 2018). The criteria ignore the fact that a controversial issue is not subject to static standards but rather to changing narratives, different (historical) assumptions and varying interpretations, including existential reasons and desires as “aspects of being” (Bertucio, 2016). As Bertucio (2016) remarks, “The success or survival of moral positions is based not on rational deliberation but on drumming up popular support and manoeuvring ideological camps” (p. 15).

Following the approach of Bertucio (2016) and of Hartsell and Harden (2016), we suggest the application of a more existential understanding as a basic condition for discussing controversial issues in teaching based on “a type of reflection which focused on the existential consequences of the choices we make—the ways in which our choices affect our lives and by extension the lives of others and society in general” (Hartsell & Harden, 2016, p. 33).

Considering the case of the Sandy Hook school shooting and the conspiracy theory linking the incident to a desire by the Obama administration to tighten gun control laws, there can be little doubt that one side of the gun laws debate has deep roots within US society. Divisive and emotional arguments associated with the right to bear arms polarise the US. Still, the Sandy Hook conspiracy has heart-breaking and ethical consequences for the survivors and for the victims' families and friends, which we can all relate to as human beings. This calls for a focus on teaching controversial issues that relates to human existence individually, socially and historically.

The conspiracy theory draws attention to the emotional consequences for those people directly affected. It also offers an insight into society due to its prevalence, scepticism regarding official explanations, and the creation of alternative, biased narratives.

### **Conspiracy theories and the use of history**

When teaching conspiracy theories, teachers are confronted with similar challenges to those related to the teaching of rival or alternative narratives. As Seixas (2017) brilliantly demonstrates, it comes down to the question of whether or not it is appropriate to “present one narrative that historians, curriculum boards, or other experts had concluded was the best? Alternatively, [...] present students with conflicting interpretations and teach them the disciplinary tools to be able to judge for themselves the merits and shortcomings of each [...]?” (p. 253).

By 2014, the Danish government had introduced a revised national curriculum for primary school and lower secondary school education (grades 1–9). In the case of history, the concept of use of history was explicitly defined as an independent skill that students had to master (Riise, 2014).

The use of history is concerned with selection, justification, highlighting and oblivion. In contrast to knowledge concerning the past, *the use of history* can be defined as narrative attempts to create meaning. In this case, history is used with a certain goal or agenda in mind, be it political, moral, informative, entertaining or identity shaping (Aronsson, 2005; Karlsson, 2014, pp. 73–78; Kayser-Nielsen, 2015).

According to this view, history education is centred on presenting and interpreting multiple perspectives as to how the past is remembered or used and *why*, rather than on naively establishing what actually happened (Stradling, 2003; Wojdon, 2014). Parkes (2009, 2013) argues that one need not be afraid of engaging students on topics such as historical denial, as simply encountering this phenomenon can help to sharpen the understanding behind the substance of historical narratives and, thus, to determine what can be said with confidence and thoroughness in relation to the past. This may even help to clarify public and political uses of history (Parkes, 2009, 2013, pp. 31–32). Students need to engage with different narratives and interpretations of the past rather than simply reading primary sources as the sole means of acknowledging the past.

However, multiple perceptions and interpretations do not mean that *anything goes*, leaving us with the challenge of relativism in classroom discussion and without any tools to make judgement between the narratives (Seixas, 2000; Parkes 2011, 2013). Indeed, a crucial aim for classroom discussion is to include the implications and consequences of conspiracy theories and historical denial, for example by discussing their biased reading of sources arguing for only one possible meaning and denying that texts are open to various interpretations (Parkes, 2013). There is a crucial difference in discussing how an event in the past (described truthfully) can be viewed differently in different narratives or narrative versions of truth, and conspiracy theories that are making unsubstantiated claims.

Although Peter Seixas and Robert Parkes take their point of departure from different theoretical positions, they have both developed useful didactical guidelines for examining the “plausibility” of historical narratives. Parkes (2013), with inspiration from Frank Ankersmit’s concepts of ‘referential statements’ and ‘narrative substance’ as means to analyse rival or multiple narratives, argues that we can discern “factual reference from narrative proposals” (Parkes, 2013, p. 31). Seixas (2017) builds on Jörn Rüsen and his notion of different categories of ‘narrative plausibility’ as a framework for working with narratives and interpretation in history didactics.

The teaching of history, therefore, implies the inherent potential of conflicts and contradictions in different historical narratives as well as in the use of history. What is contested in relation to historical events is pushed by new questions and competing notions of the past in the present. In addition, historical sources merely illustrate a narrow section or particular aspect of conditions in the past, which later interpretations may consider controversial in light of present-day problems. This requires teachers to be aware of the different layers of conflicts and controversies in the presented history as well as in the relation between past and present understandings. The teaching of history is, in this sense, not concerned with creating consensus on historical phenomena but rather with being aware of contradictions or conflicts, such as the existence of multiple perceptions and interpretations (Seixas, 2017; Parkes, 2009, 2013).

### **Teaching conspiracies – problem-based approaches**

A recent Danish study concludes that many students believe that there is a definitive and true account of what happened in the past, that is, an absolute narrative of the past (Poulsen & Knudsen, 2015). Furthermore, the teaching and the understanding of the subject tend to focus on historical knowledge and chronology rather than on interpretations and narratives. In addition, the historical method of source criticism is considered to be important, although it is dealt with separately and not necessarily with any connection to the content. An international analysis of how violence is normalised in educational materials, indicates that controversial and problematic issues in history are not given much consideration, let alone dealt with as an interpretative and controversial topic (Bermudez, 2019).



If students are to critically engage in discussions about different narratives and to enhance their critical thinking, Peters (2017) suggests an enquiry- and problem-based approach when dealing with conspiracy theories, whereby the history teacher avoids judging whether a particular theory is true or false when dealing with this topic:

Instead of finding arguments to prove or disprove a conspiracy theory, the teacher should encourage the students to try to examine how a conspiracy theory creates a certain narrative and, thus, becomes an effective story (its composition, narration), what kinds of arguments are used (certain concepts, biases, references to facts and/or science) and how it tries to convince its audience (with the use of various source material) in order to discover underlying societal conflicts and to understand why and how conspiracy theories arise and spread. (Peters, 2017, our translation)

This argument is much in line with the work of Hobbs (2017), who suggests that rather than simply disproving a conspiracy theory, students should be encouraged to ask and discuss questions such as:

- Why do people believe in conspiracy theories and alternative narratives and what attracts people to them?
- What do conspiracy theories tell us about society, culture, and ourselves and how have they developed over time?
- What negative (and positive) impacts do conspiracy theories have on society?
- What types of arguments are used [in conspiracy theories]?

(Hobbs, 2017, pp. 19–20)

This does not necessarily mean that the question of true or false, harmful or benign, should not be addressed. The strong German far-right Stab-in-the-back Myth, according to which the army's war effort in the First World War had been ruined by internal forces, fuelled interwar antisemitism and destabilised the Weimar democracy (Barth, 2014). Anders Behring Breivik's belief in the Eurabia myth resulted in the deaths of young Norwegians in 2011 (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 7). These are extreme cases that call for an ethical discussion of the harmful and morally undesirable consequences of certain conspiracy theories (see also Wansink et al., 2019, p. 75). Again, it is important to help students to distinguish between credible and incredible content, between plausible and implausible narratives, as well as to discuss with them how to confront the *us versus them* thinking captured within the more radical alternative theories. As Seixas (2017) suggests, 'plausibility' could be introduced as "the central criterion for assessing interpretative narratives in history" (p. 258).

When discussing possible approaches with the teachers involved in this study, we suggested a problem-based focus that was not concerned with creating consensus on historical phenomena or with searching for arguments or facts to disprove a certain theory or narrative. Our analytical focus, as based on theoretical assumptions regarding a use of history approach and the existential approach, was on how to encourage students to ask open questions as well as how to explore the

mechanisms associated with conspiracy theories, as alternative narratives, in order to enhance students' critical thinking and historical reflection.

## Methodological design and procedures

In this section, we outline the procedures applied to conduct our study and collect our data. First, we introduce the action research framework and discuss the methodological strengths and limitations of the method. Second, we present the research process itself, which includes both the organisation of the collaborative activities and the teachers' implementation of the course. Third, we discuss the methods used for data collection and our analytic procedures.

### **Action research framework**

The overall framework of this study involved investigating, in close collaboration with practitioners, different ways of dealing with conspiracy theories, as controversial issues, in lower secondary history teaching. More specifically, the study sought to identify strategies that encourage critical thinking and increase students' awareness of conflicting narratives and how they impact on both individuals and society.

The study was conducted through collaborative classroom action research in which a team of two researchers designed and enacted the research in close collaboration with two teachers from two different schools. Action research was chosen as the method of enquiry because we wanted to assign primacy to the teachers' reflections and planned actions as well as to explore what happens in the classroom when teachers approach the topic with different methods and strategies. Three classes were involved in the study, two grade 7 classes and one grade 8 class (13–15 years old). The participating teachers were selected from among those teachers who responded to the advert for our project featured on the HistorieLab homepage.<sup>1</sup> A total of six teachers responded to our call for participants; however, only two teachers were selected after the initial interviews. One teacher taught in both grade 7 classes. Our selection criteria were based partly on geographical considerations (the schools had to be relatively nearby in order for us to follow the actions closely) and partly on didactical and practical considerations (the teachers had to exhibit an open and explorative attitude towards planning actions as well as involving and engaging students in accordance with problem-based principles). Action research implies an ongoing reflection on the findings, so the participating teachers had to collaborate in planning several rounds of interventions and data collection.

According to Johnson and Christensen (2017), action research can be defined as a method by which researchers and practitioners work together in solving

---

<sup>1</sup> See <https://historielab.dk/har-du-lyst-arbejde-kontroversielle-emner-historie-kommende-skoleaar/>

specific problems or challenges that practitioners, such as teachers, face. Action research is “used to try out new strategies and practices” (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 58), which the researchers observe closely in order to generate new and specific knowledge regarding context-related challenges (see also Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Brekke & Tiller, 2016). The knowledge that is generated is usually local and works at the bottom level of the educational science knowledge scale. However, as Johnson and Christensen note (2017, p. 63), local knowledge can be relevant at the more general level too, while it can also be integrated into more general theory. Our study faces a challenge in that it involves only three classes and only two teachers, which makes the generalisation of the didactical findings difficult. Yet, our empirical findings could provide some interesting insights into teachers’ and students’ perceptions and roles, and they could also suggest ways in which teachers could successfully address the issue of conspiracy theories.

The primary concern of the two participating teachers was determining which teaching strategies and teacher roles to apply, when dealing with conspiracy theories and other divisive issues, and further how to integrate such theories into the history curriculum in a way that would enhance students’ historical reflection and critical thinking and, thus, have a positive effect on their knowledge of how history is used by different actors. Their secondary concern was how the students would respond to the topic, considering the amount of misinformation and alternative explanations to which they are exposed on the Internet on a daily basis. Both teachers were very keen to address conspiracy theories in history lessons, although they felt that they lacked practical tools, strategies and teaching materials as well as practical knowledge concerning how to engage learners in recognising biases, practising source evaluation skills and critically engaging with controversial content.

### **Organisation of the study**

In terms of our contribution to the project, the researchers developed the research questions on the basis of initial conversations with the participating teachers and with reference to the prior literature. We were also responsible for collecting and analysing the data. The five main themes concerning the teachers’ challenges, which were mirrored in the main focus points of our interview and observation guides, were:

- 1) Historical contextualisation (establishing narratives and source criticism)
- 2) Teacher roles in classroom discussions
- 3) Teaching strategies
- 4) Historical reflection and level of motivation
- 5) Controversy as a trigger for curiosity and critical thinking

In addition, we offered suggestions for teaching materials, discussed different teaching strategies based on the relevant theoretical assumptions and assisted in

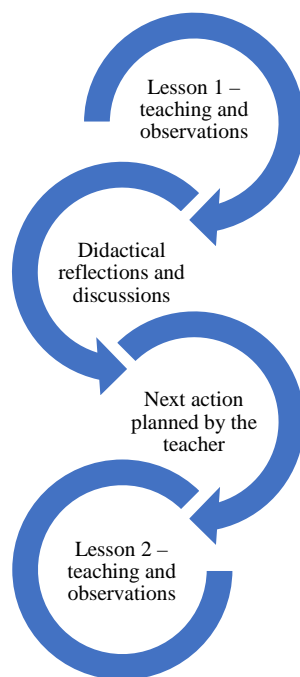
planning and designing the lesson format. Apart from suggesting a problem-based mindset, we did not specifically encourage the use of different approaches and strategies, but the two teachers did themselves apply different ways of handling the topic in the classroom according to their teaching methods and with respect to differences among students. Although related topics such as fake news and propaganda were discussed, conspiracy theories became the primary topic, since both teachers expressed their insecurity as well as their eagerness to introduce conspiracy theories as part of the history teaching. The teachers designed the courses and the teaching practices, selected which teaching materials to use and taught the courses in collaboration with us.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we were invited into the classrooms to co-teach on several occasions. The courses consisted of 12–15 teaching blocks or modules (each 1.5 hours in length).

A generic teaching and project design came into being due to our collaboration with the teachers. The design of the action research project was based on an open and curious attitude towards engaging in issues in history with internal complexity. The basic foundation involved the creation of a space for self-reflection by the teachers on their own strategies and roles when fostering a critical enquiry approach. The reflections took place before and immediately after each lesson or teaching block. During these discussion sessions, new actions were designed in close collaboration with the teachers, which provided a unique opportunity to create and evaluate new actions based on previous experiences in the classroom. This process is illustrated in Figure 1 as an example from one of the cases.

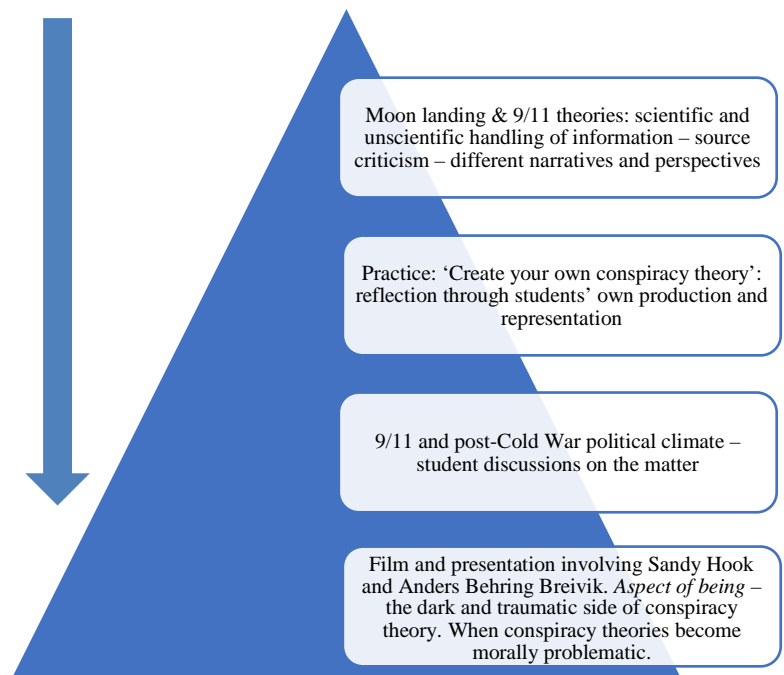
The content, practices and activities in all three classes were to some extent similar. To illustrate how the reflective teaching design was implemented, one of the teachers introduced the students to the topic by presenting several conflicting theories regarding the Moon landing and 9/11 (Figure 2). This involved the use of both text and video, which illustrated different points of view and ‘truths’, that is, the conspiracy theories as well as the falsification of the theories by official authorities. The focus of this action was on introducing different and conflicting narratives and encouraging the students to consider how truth is really a messy, complicated subject. At this point, and as a twist, the other teacher introduced a piece of fake news and, after the revelation that it was fake, the students were encouraged to put together their own fact-checking list. As a means of increasing the students’ awareness of the different ways of handling information sources and, in particular, scientific source evaluation criteria, Karl Popper’s scientific falsification theory was introduced in the following action.

---

<sup>2</sup> The materials and resources for each lesson were chosen from the following sources: Omtanke Online, <http://omtankeonline.dk/gymnasiale-uddannelser/kommunikation-og-kildekritik/>; HistorieLab, <https://historielab.dk/til-undervisningen/undervisningsforloeb/konspirationsteorier-hvem-skyldige/>; Vollmond & Hansen, 2014; DR/Kultur: Den første rejse til månen, 2016; DR/Kultur: Attentatet på John F. Kennedy, 2012; DR3: *Conspiracy Road Trip*, 11. September, 2014; Rigsarkivet, <https://www.sa.dk/da/undervisningstilbud/ungdomsuddannelserne/kildekritiske-vaerktoejer/kildekritiske-begreber-forklaret-gennem-en-fodboldkamp/>; and Historienet.dk, <https://historienet.dk/samfund/politik/politikere/konspirationsteori-hvem-draebte-john-f-kennedy>.



**Figure 1.** Process between the actions



**Figure 2.** Overall framework and purpose – *From source criticism to ethical reflections*

The teaching block dedicated to the Moon landing consisted of several actions in order to improve the enquiry- and problem-based set up by allowing several classroom discussions and practices to take place. This was supposed to allow room for the students' curiosity and, further, for the teacher to follow up on the students' recognitions and make them transferable, for example, by drawing the students' attention to the various types of alternative narratives. Between these two topics – *Moon landing 1969* and a source evaluation of *9/11* beliefs – the students created their own conspiracy theory by creatively building on their newly acquired knowledge of conspiracy beliefs, motives, narratives and arguments. They then presented their theory to their peers.

Towards the end of the course, a six-lesson teaching block was delivered in one of the cases. In the other case, the teacher introduced a similar exercise where the students produced their own conspiracy theory. The aim of the former case was to introduce the darker and more traumatic side of the conspiracy theory topic through the cases of the Sandy Hook school shooting and the extremist Anders Behring Breivik. The activities planned for this action focused more specifically on extremist ideologies as well as on *us versus them* thinking and its ethical and societal consequences. We participated in this teaching block by introducing the topics and providing explanations and contexts. In addition, a documentary about the Sandy Hook school shooting was shown to the students. The aim was to draw the students' attention to the various types of extreme and controversial theories and to foster critical and ethical thinking through practices of identifying

propaganda and manipulation. The students' examples and analyses were discussed in the classroom at the end of this teaching block.

### **Data collection**

The methods used for data collection consisted of a number of qualitative approaches, primarily interviews and observations, but also teaching materials provided by the teachers, teacher notes and reflections, notes from our conversations with the teachers, as well as lesson plans. This variety of data and the use of qualitative approaches were intended to provide us with a better understanding of the meaning behind what takes place during history lessons and to allow us to hear what the participating teachers and students think in their own words. Through the use of this approach, we were provided with the teachers' reflections on the introduction of these subjects, and we were able to observe in detail what happened when the teachers applied different strategies and adopted different roles and approaches during classroom discussions.

At least one of us two researchers was present during all the history lessons delivered throughout the project. We followed a structured observation schedule and took extensive classroom field notes during each lesson. We used a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule and conducted 30-minute interviews with both teachers as well as group interviews with students from all three classes. The student interview groups consisted of 2–5 students, and a total of six interviews were conducted with students. All the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The semi-structured interview format was chosen so that the participants would feel free to construct their responses and reflections and, further, so that we could ask follow-up questions. The semi-structured nature of the interview questions allowed for comparisons to be made between the answers related to the teachers' views and reflections on their approaches to teaching subjects such as conspiracy theories and fake news and those concerning the students' thoughts about the incorporation of such subjects into history lessons.

The first step in our analytic procedure involved reading through the full transcribed interviews, observation field notes and teacher reflections several times. We examined the notes and transcripts individually as well as collectively, as we shared our findings and interpretations with each other. When analysing the gathered material, we followed a loose qualitative coding procedure by organising the data into different categories and themes. This facilitated the identification of the main concepts so that we could relate them to the identified themes, make comparisons, contrast views and divide them into differences and similarities.

In the next section, we present and discuss the outcomes and elaborate on the teaching strategies that served to initialise an open-ended and enquiry-based approach which triggers curiosity and critical thinking.

## Results

### **Historical contextualisation (establishing narratives and source criticism)**

One theme that emerged in several observations, concerned the fact that it proved very difficult for the students to identify the meanings of the sources, including recognising the author's purpose, credibility and authority. In one case, the students did not recognise the different levels of credibility of established public service media such as the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, and random web sources. The students did know how to find and check the author's name, credentials, affiliations etc., but to understand the motive and origin of the source (i.e., one of the central aspects of source evaluation and criticism), they needed to have more information concerning the background of the source and the historical context (which was often provided by the teacher). In general, the students required additional contextual knowledge in order to understand the societal implications of alternative narratives. Ideally, as for all history topics, content knowledge should not be separated from narratives. Yet, we found this to be especially important when dealing with conspiracy theories, as the motive aspect is so important when establishing why some actors believe in and propagate certain alternative explanations.

That being said, we also observed a lesson during which the students engaged in source criticism at a very high level by, for example, comparing pseudo-science theories to scientific methods and, thus, introducing several perspectives into the teaching. The students were introduced to the principle of verification/falsification in science, as developed by Karl Popper, and some of them appeared to understand that principle to some extent, although they admitted in the interviews that it had been the most difficult theory to deal with during the course. At this point, many students became aware of how certain conspiracy theories are difficult to falsify and, in many ways, linked to political ideologies.

A presentation given by an individual student provided an example of the exemplary performance of the scientific argument. The student seemed to have widespread knowledge of various conspiracy theories gained through the Internet and social media. He presented a theory about Adolf Hitler surviving the Second World War. First, he presented various theories about Hitler's escape to South America and discussed how eyewitnesses had apparently seen and taken pictures of the Führer. He then rejected the theory based on the work of historians and backed by a well-chosen quote from a leading expert in the field. All in all, an exemplary academic procedure and critical review was performed by a student aged just 14. When the teacher asked the student what he would consider to be a true account, the student provided a very surprising answer: He believed that Hitler did survive the war and managed to escape! One would hope that the critical tools gained through teaching would with time enable this student and his peers to adopt a more critical perspective on things they find online.

### **The role of the teacher in classroom discussions**

Teaching controversial issues and, in particular, conspiracy theories in history lessons required that the teachers adopted a teaching role that differed from the way they usually conducted themselves in the classroom. This became clear quite early on in the research. When dealing with controversial issues, the students not only gained content knowledge, they also needed to engage in thought processes that involved higher-order thinking as well as methodological approaches that amounted to source criticism. For both teachers involved in the study, it was very important to reflect on their own approaches and roles in the classroom, particularly during the classroom discussions that they wanted to facilitate in such a way that the focus was on the students' thought processes, questioning and argumentation. Facilitation became a byword for the teachers when they reflected upon their role. As one of the teachers reported prior to the course, she considered her role to be "more than just a teacher" and rather a "nurturing facilitator" whose most important skill was enhancing the students' productive critical thinking and helping to develop their empathy and commitment to societal issues.

Both teachers facilitated and engaged in an open-ended dialogue. It became obvious during the observations that, by remaining open and merely acting as facilitators, the teachers succeeded in fostering a classroom atmosphere in which the students felt secure when participating and expressing views. In particular, one of the teachers sometimes challenged the students' viewpoints and beliefs by either adopting an oppositional stance or introducing conflicting perspectives from different actors and encouraging the students to use reasoned arguments. This practice was well received by the students. Indeed, during the interviews, they gave their teacher credit for openly handling disagreements and different views on the matter without imposing judgements on their contributions.

In the prior literature, there is widespread consensus as to the crucial role played by the teacher when approaching controversial issues (Oulton et al., 2004a, 2004b; Philpott et al., 2011; Yacek, 2018), but is there such a thing as an appropriate or ideal teacher role? By examining our classroom observations and the transcripts of the teachers' interviews, it became evident that it is important to adopt an appreciative and inquisitive, yet not judgemental, role that allows for the students' views and arguments to be in focus. However, the teacher, as a facilitator, should not simply act as a silent listener. Indeed, being a "nurturant facilitator" (as Lockwood, 1995, p. 29 describes it) implies taking up students' viewpoints, discussing them in the classroom and raising new questions. The teachers were aware that they played an important role in developing their students' views and critical reasoning skills. They admitted that they did not always feel adequately prepared to teach conspiracy theories, although they found the topic to be highly relevant. One of the teachers described the process of becoming aware of how he could guide the students and help them to establish a historical context without imposing his own views, although he found maintaining the balance between staying neutral and guiding the students to be very challenging. The



teaching of conspiracy theories might not correspond particularly well with some teachers' need to maintain control and to stay in charge of planned classroom activities.

One of the main dilemmas that almost all teachers face when teaching about these issues, is how to deal with the controversial aspects of such issues: Should the teacher avoid adopting a stance and disguise their own biases or is the teacher obliged to point out problematic perspectives and openly reject potentially harmful conspiracy theories (e.g., Philpott et al., 2011)? The teachers were very aware of this dilemma, and they characterised the teaching of conspiracy theories as involving constant self-reflection and the weighing of the pros and cons of different roles. Teacher self-reflection, teacher self-evaluation and discussions with colleagues were found to be particularly useful strategies for handling the dilemma.

### **Teaching strategies**

One class showed additional signs of intellectual curiosity. In this case, the teacher had adapted a problem- and enquiry-based approach that encouraged the students to explore their own ideas, gave them extra credit for engaging in the discussion, and offered them opportunities to pose their own questions. This approach was applied when the teacher wanted the students to ask questions about the inner conflicts within narratives or conflicting explanations of events. The teacher even revealed to the students that he was also going through the process of exploring the complexity of conspiracies and reflecting on their societal consequences and, further, that he found it fascinating to be on the same journey as his students as the course developed. To teach conspiracy theories, both teachers had to follow a different approach and plan lessons differently. One of the two participating teachers, who had many years of teaching experience, remarked:

If you compare this topic to a more classical history topic, you typically have your textbook, a teacher's guide and a clear teaching strategy: You know how the lesson should begin and how it ends. We did not have any of that in this course. It's like moving into open space with your students and trying to launch something that triggers their engagement with the content.

This was not considered to be frustrating. On the contrary, this teacher quite enjoyed reflecting on his approach to planning, although he admitted that teaching conspiracy theories was challenging and time consuming because he had no textbook and so had to find materials and activities himself: "If I teach a topic such as the Great War, I know 90% of the time which questions and answers the students will come up with. In this topic, I have no idea at all what is going to happen." To their credit, both teachers exhibited a very flexible approach to lesson planning, which involved taking a step back every time the students were unable to establish a historical context or failed to fully comprehend the impact or controversy of a particular theory. Each lesson was unpredictable, as the teachers never

quite knew which questions would arise or how the students would respond to the material. The teaching of conspiracy theories, therefore, stresses the importance of a high level of flexibility when didacting, planning and carrying out classroom activities.

### **Historical reflection and level of motivation**

All the students reported that they enjoyed learning about conspiracy theories and, further, that it was the most interesting topic they had dealt with when studying history. Early on in the course, the teachers realised that they could capitalise on the students' interest in conspiracy theories and their obsession with the truth. This made it easier to introduce relatively complex historical topics and periods such as the Kennedy era and the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the psychological interplay between the superpowers during the Cold War when competing to be the first nation to set foot on the Moon, and the international conflicts that evolved in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attack. The high levels of student motivation were confirmed in our classroom observations and in the teachers' interviews. A clear majority of students were actively participating in the classroom discussions as well as in the group work. Many stressed that they enjoyed participating in the discussions. One student remarked, "There were no incorrect answers, only different viewpoints and interpretations". The student further explained that they [the students] were often reluctant to speak up in the classroom due to a general fear that the teacher would criticise an answer, whereas when dealing with controversy, they felt that they could freely construct answers that would at least be taken into consideration by both the teacher and their classmates as a reasonable contribution. The motivational impact was also evident in the engagement that many students demonstrated with the content during group work. Most students expressed a desire to learn more about the topic and to explore more conspiratorial content. It was observed that the students sometimes even continued the discussion after the lesson.

In addition to the very positive response from the students in terms of their motivation and curiosity, it also became clear that the material proved intellectually challenging for them. This was especially true when dealing with the 'inner logic' of conspiracy theories, including their narrative and rhetorical strategies, the underlying societal and social conflicts, and even the power aspects of many alternative theories (see Robertson, 2016). Both teachers included a task where the students were asked to create their own conspiracy theories. This was intended to encourage reflection on aspects such as motives, to appeal to the emotions and to question how they could convince their classmates of the alternative 'truth'. The students came up with different kinds of theories. Some of them were banal, merely touching upon the entertaining aspects of the famous person disappearing type of conspiracy, while others were quite elaborate and inspired by recent events in the local community involving individuals with high reputation and power. Neither of the teachers fully rejected the more banal theories, although they

encouraged the students to dig a bit deeper into the narrative aspect and inner logic of their theories. Some students did realise that their theories were a bit ‘thin’ and, further, that for theories to resonate, there must be some political, social or cultural conflict involved.

A rather surprising finding concerned an apparent bias related to the students’ gender. Many of the boys in the three classes were clearly attracted to the entertaining and more controversial aspects of the conspiracy theories that they were already familiar with (e.g., the Illuminati or 9/11 theories). The girls, however, were clearly more sceptical towards any explanation that challenged official narratives. We did not design our study to examine gender differences, so any conclusions based on this finding can only be rather vague. It may be that teenage boys are more drawn towards alternative stories and to views that question authority and, further, that they may be more exposed to controversial conspiracy-related media content that captures their attention (see e.g. Mogensen & Rand, 2019). These assumptions are worth mentioning, as they correspond to a major concern reported by one of the teachers. The teacher was increasingly worried about his students’ existential involvement in the theories, which prompted him to remark, “What if my students find the guy who dares to question the authorities really cool and start believing in conspiracy theories?” This ethical concern was justified, as the boys’ attitude towards certain theories demonstrated. When asked during the interviews about the most important thing they had learned from dealing with the topic of conspiracy theories, one of the male students answered, “To be critical and not believe in everything. It is so easy to get people to believe in all sorts of things and to create false evidence.” Even though this male student admitted the importance of critical source evaluation, he and a classmate later both stated that the 9/11 terror attack was a ‘false flag operation’ carried out by the US administration, and that it is necessary to be critical of any official explanations. We did not identify this openness to alternative theories among the female students, who maintained a critical perspective favouring the authoritative explanation of events.

### **Controversy as a trigger for curiosity and critical thinking**

Within some prior studies concerning controversial issues in teaching, there seems to be a widespread idea that introducing controversial issues as part of the curriculum helps students to achieve greater critical awareness. Accordingly, teaching issues of a politically, religious or emotionally sensitive nature plays an important role in preparing young people for participation in society, not least because it strengthens their ability to engage in democratic dialogue with people whose views differ from their own (Oulton et al., 2004a; Hess, 2009; Philpott et al., 2011). Critical thinking is highlighted as both a useful tool and an important skill that is promoted by teaching controversial topics (Oulton et al., 2004a; Cowan & Maitles, 2012). Yet, dealing with controversial issues does not automatically lead to more rational, unanimous or fair explanations of historical

phenomena. In fact, it is important to emphasise students' reflection on the existential consequences for society of individual human choices (see also Bertucio, 2016; Hartsell & Harden, 2016; Zigler, 2016). This creates space for contradictions, complexities and alternative narratives to be central to reflections in the classroom rather than simply allowing for a discussion that is aimed at uncovering the truth.

When the students considered how it was possible to communicate with people on the Moon in 1969 or why many Americans just do not believe the official explanations behind the Moon landing, they touched upon the aspect of a *will to believe*: "Why not just choose to believe it?", as one female student remarked.

Sometimes, the students were sceptical of both the conspiracy theories and the official explanations:

Boy: Why would they spend so much money if it was fake?

Girl: Maybe it was worth spending so much money.

(Comments from a discussion about the Moon landing in 1969)

Boy: Why are there no conspiracy theories about other terrorist activities, for example, in France, etc.?

(Comment from a discussion on 9/11)

One boy remarked that it would be interesting to know whether Hitler succeeded in fleeing to Argentina: "It makes sense because Josef Mengele succeeded, he escaped after all." Moreover, the students simply expressed their doubts when they felt seduced by arguments:

Boy 1: You say it may well be true, that you would easily believe him.

Girl: [continues] Yes, you will also have your doubts.

(Comments from a discussion about the Moon landing in 1969)

Boy 1: Well, for example, those scientists who offer their conspiracy theory, backed up by some absolutely incomprehensible facts, by some really difficult words, which you might feel seduced by, thinking he probably knows...

Boy 2 [interrupts]: Yes, exactly, and then you fall into a trap when there is a really wise scientist, who presents all sorts of facts and such. In that case, you could easily think that it could well be true.

(Comment from a discussion on 9/11)

These examples demonstrate a classroom discussion in which there was room for critical thinking and search for complexities. Yet, they also confirm an existential *Bildung* aspect in which the students reflected on fundamental complexities and contradictions within their understanding, thereby forming part of a larger historical cultural framework.

## Concluding remarks

The teaching of topics such as conspiracy theories undoubtedly has curricular relevance for history teaching at the lower secondary level. Introducing controversial topics involving alternative narratives concerning historic as well as present-day events and phenomena not only provides students with content knowledge but also engages them in classroom discussions about how historical narratives are established. Further, it encourages critical thinking about why different actors believe in alternative narratives and the extent to which they succeed in convincing the public of their ideas. Our data confirm that when applying an open discussion- and enquiry-based teaching approach in which students' curiosity is acknowledged, the students are highly motivated and participate actively. Within this approach, the question of *What is actually true?*, however intriguing it may be, becomes secondary to the understanding of how alternative narratives co-exist and, at times, collide or even conflict and, above all, how they influence our worldviews. Our data also show how lower secondary students respond to conspiracy theories as well as how they deal with the intriguing aspects of alternative narratives.

Some students showed clear signs of critical reasoning and thinking, particularly when investigating who is most prone to believing in conspiracy theories and reflecting on *why* that is the case. However, other students, in particular the male ones, became fascinated with the anti-authoritative aspects of some conspiracy theories. This raises an ethical concern when dealing with conspiracy theories in the classroom, which is reflected in the teachers' concern about their own role as adult role models.

We conclude that, if students are to engage in critical thinking, teachers must help them to establish a historical context and support them when applying historical methods, that is, source criticism. Introducing alternative narratives in lower secondary history teaching is not an easy task, as it both challenges traditional teacher roles and demands flexible lesson planning.

Both teachers chose to pursue an open-ended and appreciative dialogue so that their students could investigate the arguments behind the theories, discuss them and draw their own conclusions. We consider that this strategy is vital for the existential *Bildung* aspects of dealing with this topic, as it opens up the complex aspects of the use of history. The teaching of conspiracy theories represents an ideal opportunity for history teachers to let their students explore how alternative narratives touch upon important aspects of the existential conditions of society, science and everyday life in a morally and ethically fragmented landscape.

## About the authors

Rikke Alberg Peters is associate professor at HistoryLab, University College Lillebaelt. She has a PhD in History of Ideas from Aarhus University and several years of experience teaching at university, in upper secondary school and in teacher education. In 2014 she was a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science where she conducted a research project on online extremism. Her research focuses on conspiracy theories and political propaganda, in particular in relation to history didactics. In recent years she has developed enquiry-based resources and tools for history teaching in lower secondary school and led the Historical Sources project at HistoryLab.

Institutional affiliation: HistoryLab, University College Lillebaelt, Stationsvej 14, 7300 Jelling, Denmark.

E-mail: [rlap@ucl.dk](mailto:rlap@ucl.dk)

Hildegunn Juulsgaard Johannesen is a PhD student in educational research at the University of Southern Denmark. Her PhD project focuses on controversial aspects in lower secondary history teaching in Denmark (years 7–9). More specifically, she explores the narratives that are produced in the classroom between teacher and students and students in between.

Institutional affiliation: Department for the Study of Culture, University of Southern Denmark, Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense M, Denmark.

E-mail: [hjoh@sdu.dk](mailto:hjoh@sdu.dk)

## References

- Aronsson, P. (2005). *Historiebruk – att använda det förflutna* [Use of History – to Use the Past]. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Barkun, M. (2003). *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barth, B. (2014). Stab-in-the-back Myth. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/stab-in-the-back\\_myth](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/stab-in-the-back_myth)
- Barton, K., & McCully, A. (2007). Teaching controversial issues ... where controversial issues really matter. *Teaching History*, 127, 13–19.
- Bermudez, A. (2019). The Normalization of Political Violence in History Textbooks: Ten Narrative Keys. *Dialogues on Historical Justice and Memory Network Working Paper Series*, 15, 1–22.
- Bertucio, B. (2016). Alasdair MacIntyre and Contemporary Capacity for the Epistemic Criterion. *Thresholds in Education*, 39(1), 5–19.
- Boffey, D. (2019). Danish far-right party calling for Muslim deportation to stand in election. *The Guardian*, 5 May. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/05/danish-far-right-party-stram-kurs-calling-for-muslim-deportation-to-stand-in-election>

- Boyd, D. (2014). *It's Complicated. The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Brekke, M., & Tiller, T. (2016). *Læreren som forsker. Indføring i forskningsarbejde i skolen* [Teacher as researcher. Introduction to research work in school]. Aarhus: Klim.
- Brockhoff, M., Peters, R. A., & Thorup, M. (2018). *Den skjulte sandhed. Konspirationsteorier, magt og konflikt* [The hidden truth. Conspiracy theories, power and conflict]. Aarhus: Klim.
- Cooling, T. (2014). The Epistemic Criterion: A Response to Michael Hand. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 35(1), 86–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2014.884858>
- Council of Europe (2015). *Living with Controversy – Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE) – Training Pack for Teachers*. Strasbourg. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://edoc.coe.int/en/human-rights-democratic-citizenship-and-interculturalism/7738-teaching-controversial-issues.html>
- Cowan, P., & Maitles, H. (2012). *Teaching controversial issues in the classroom – Key issues and debate*. London: Continuum.
- Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) (2017). *Kampen mod sandheden* [The struggle for truth]. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/webfeature/infokrigerne>
- Dearden, R. F. (1981). Controversial Issues and the Curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 13(1), 37–44.
- Douglas, K. et al. (2019). *Why do people adopt conspiracy theories, how are they communicated, and what are their risks?* Report, CREST – Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/conspiracy-theories/>
- Emu (2019). *Danmarks læringsportal* [Denmark's learning portal]. Børne- og undervisningsministeriet, Historie [Ministry of Children, Education and Gender Equality, History]. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://emu.dk/grundskole/historie>
- Gilbert, S. (2019). The American Paranoia of Stranger Things 3. *The Atlantic*, July 4. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/07/stranger-things-3-american-paranoia-review/593185/>
- Hand, M. (2008). What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion. *Educational Theory*, 58(2), 213–228. <http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00285.x>
- Hand, M., & Levinson, R. (2012). Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(6), 614–629. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-5812.2010.00732.x>
- Hardee, S. C., & McFaden, K. (2016). White on White Education: The Power of Intersectional Sociological Imagination and Autobiography as Tools for Examining Controversy in Teacher Education. *Thresholds in Education*, 1(39), 85–100.
- Hartsell, R., & Harden, S. B. (2016). Controversy's Graveyard: The School of Education Classroom and Educational Policy Debate. *Thresholds in Education*, 1(39), 31–43.
- Haynes, J., & Murriss, K. S. (2008). The 'Wrong Message': Risk, Censorship and the Struggle for Democracy in Primary School. *Thinking*, 19(1), 2–11.
- Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion*. London: Routledge.
- Hobbs, R. (2017). Teach The Conspiracies. *Knowledge Quest*, 46(1), 16–24. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1153347>

- Johnson, R. B., & Christensen, L. (2017). *Educational Research. Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Approaches*. Sixth Edition. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Karlsson, K.-G. (2014). Historia, historiedidaktik och historiekultur – teori och perspektiv [History, history didactics and history culture – theory and perspective]. In K.-G. Karlsson & U. Zander (Eds.), *Historien är närvarande: Historiedidaktik som teori och tillämpning* [History is present. History didactics as theory and application] (pp.13–89). Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Kayser-Nielsen, N. (2015). *Historiens forvandlinger – Historiebrug fra monumenter til oplevelsesøkonomi* [Transformations of history – Use of history from monuments to experience economy]. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2000). Participatory Action Research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 567–605). London: Sage.
- Lenos, S., & Krasenberg, J. (2017). *Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda in the classroom*. Ex Post Paper, RAN Centre of Excellence. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran\\_edu\\_dealing\\_fake\\_news\\_conspiracy\\_theories\\_propaganda\\_classroom\\_29-30\\_11\\_2017.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_dealing_fake_news_conspiracy_theories_propaganda_classroom_29-30_11_2017.pdf)
- Lockwood, A. L. (1995). Controversial Issues: The Teacher's Crucial Role. *Social Education*, 60(1), 28–31.
- Mogensen, C., & Rand, S. H. (2019). *Vrede unge mænd. Viden om ekstreme online fællesskaber* [Angry young men. Extreme communities online]. Center for Digital Pædagogik. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://cfdp.dk/tema/vrede-unge-maend/>
- Mulhall, J. (2019). Populism on the Streets of London. In N. Lowles (Ed.), *State of Hate 2019, People vs. the Elite* (pp. 29–85). Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/state-of-hate-2019-final-1.pdf>
- Nettets vildveje (2018). *Om løgn, manipulation og propaganda online* [On lies, manipulation and propaganda online]. Medierådet for børn og unge. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://indd.adobe.com/view/8d91fa8e-6b2a-47e0-b0c9-429d89df2737>
- Oliver, J. E., & Wood, T. (2014). Medical Conspiracy Theories and Health Behaviors in the United States. *JAMA Intern Med.*, 174(5), 817–818. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2014.190>
- Oulton, C., Day, V., Dillon, J., & Grace, M. (2004a). Controversial issues – teachers' attitudes and practices in the context of citizenship education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30(4), 489–507. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305498042000303973>
- Oulton, C., Dillon, J., & Grace, M. M. (2004b). Reconceptualizing the teaching of controversial issues. *International Journal of Science Education*, 26(4), 411–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950069032000072746>
- Pace, D. (2003). Controlled Fission. Teaching supercharged subjects. *College Teaching*, 51(2), 42–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567550309596410>
- Parkes, R. J. (2009). Teaching History as historiography: Engaging narrative diversity in the curriculum. *History Education Research Journal*, 8(2), 118–132. <https://doi.org/10.18546/HERJ.08.2.09>
- Parkes, R. J. (2011). *Interrupting history : rethinking history curriculum after 'the end of history'*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Parkes, R. (2013). Postmodernism, historical denial and history education: What Frank Ankersmit can offer history didactics. *Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2, 20–36.



- Peters, R. A. (2017). Konspirationsteorier i historieundervisningen, sådan! [Teaching about conspiracies in history class] *RADAR – Historiedidaktisk Tidsskrift*. HistorieLab, 2. januar 2017. <https://historielab.dk/konspirationsteorier-i-historieundervisningen-saadan/>
- Petrovic, J. E. (2013). Reason, Liberalism, and Democratic Education: A Deweyan Approach to Teaching About Homosexuality. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 525–541. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12039>
- Petrovic, J. E. (2016). On the Nature of Controversy as Pedagogy: Introduction. *Thresholds in Education*, 39(1), 1–4.
- Philpott et al. (2011). Controversial issues: To teach or not to teach? That is the question! *The Georgia Social Studies Journal*, 1(1), 32–44.
- Poulsen, J. Aa., & Knudsen, H. E. (2015). *Historiefaget i fokus – Dokumentationsindsatsen* [The subject of history in focus. The documentation report]. HistorieLab. <https://historielab.dk/til-undervisningen/udgivelser/historiefaget-i-fokus/>
- Riise, A. B. (2014). Historiebrug får større plads i nye Fælles Mål [Use of history gets more attention in the new Common Objectives curriculum]. *Folkeskolen.dk*, 22/05/14. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://www.folkeskolen.dk/544937/historiebrug-faar-stoerre-plads-i-nye-faelles-maal>
- Robertson, D. G. (2016). *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age. Millennial Conspiracism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Schrøder, A. S. (2019). Rasmus Paludan: Meet the far-right leader who wants to deport all Muslims from Denmark. *Euronews*, 30/05/19. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://www.euronews.com/2019/05/30/rasmus-paludan-meet-the-far-right-leader-who-wants-to-deport-all-muslims-from-denmark>
- Seixas, P. (2000). "Schweigen! Die Kinder!" or Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools? In P. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. S. Wineburg (Eds.), *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, (pp. 19–37). New York: New York University Press.
- Seixas, P. (2017). Teaching Rival Histories: In Search of Narrative Plausibility. In H. Elmersjö et al. (Ed.), *International Perspectives on Teaching Rival Histories. Pedagogical Responses to Contested Narratives and the History Wars* (pp. 253–268). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- SELMA Partners (2019). What happens when you interact with hateful content? *SELMA Hacking hate*. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://hackinghate.eu/news/what-happens-when-you-interact-with-hateful-content/>
- Shudak, N., & Anders, P. (2016). Criteria for Controversy: A Theoretic Approach. *Thresholds in Education*, 39(1), 20–30.
- Stradling, R. (2003). *Multiperspectivity in History Teaching: A Guide for Teachers*. Council of Europe. Retrieved 3 December 2020 from <https://book.coe.int/en/history-teaching/2593-multiperspectivity-in-history-teaching-a-guide-for-teachers.html>
- Sunstein, C. R., & Vermeule, A. (2008). Conspiracy Theories. *John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics, Working Paper No. 387*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1084585>
- Tillson, J. (2017). When to Teach for Belief: A Tempered Defence of The Epistemic Criterion. *Educational Theory*, 67(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12241>
- Uscinski, J., & Parent, J. (2014). *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vollmond, C., & Hansen, M. Aa. (2014). *Hvem stod bag? Konspirationsteorier, skjulte magter og alternative forklaringer* [Who did it? Conspiracy theories, hidden powers and alternative explanations]. Frederiksberg: Frydenlund.
- Wansink et al. (2019). Confronting Conflicts. History teachers' reactions to spontaneous controversial remarks. *Teaching History*, 175, 68–75.

- Wojdon, J. (2014). History textbooks facing controversial issues – case study of the Martial law in Poland. *Yesterday and Today*, 12, 75–89.
- Yacek, D. (2018). Thinking Controversially: The Psychological Condition for Teaching Controversial Issues. *Journal of philosophy of education*, 52(1), 71–86.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12282>
- Zigler, R. L. (2016). Reframing the “Controversy” over Evolution and Intelligent Design. *Thresholds in Education*, 39(1), 70–84.