

A Parallel Universe: Conspiracy Theories and the Limits of Education

Johannes Drerup

<http://justiceinschools.org>

Narrator: It was just before lunch at Sophie Scholl¹ School in Dortmund, an upper secondary comprehensive school² with a culturally diverse population, where many students spoke a first language other than German. As the country continued to grapple with the changes Covid-19 had brought to schools, Mrs. Faulkner was teaching a lesson in her social studies class on the history of pandemics.

Mrs. Faulkner: Of course, the situation in 1918 was different; they didn't understand the Spanish flu well and had no vaccines like we do today. But what sounds familiar in this article about the Covid-19 pandemic?

Narrator: Peter raised his hand immediately, and Mrs. Faulkner instinctively held her breath. She searched for other volunteers, but many students were eyeing Peter warily, reluctant to raise their hands.

Mrs. Faulkner (*sighing*): Ok, Peter, what's on your mind?

Peter: Pandemics are powerful tools to control the population—our bodies *and* our minds. Isn't it a rather strange 'coincidence' that almost exactly 100 years after the Spanish Flu, we allegedly face this global pandemic? It's all about who controls the information. The 'official' history leaves out a lot of relevant sources. History is written by those in power, you know.

Narrator: Mrs. Faulkner sighed. At one time, she had loved Peter's contributions to class. He was intelligent, insightful, and sometimes critical, with a passion for history and current events. But something had changed in him. He'd become socially withdrawn, pulled into conspiracy websites making inflammatory claims using questionable evidence. She had been through too many conversations like this with Peter, and she worried that this one would again take up valuable class time. But she couldn't just let that point stand.

Mrs. Faulkner (*gathering her patience*): Peter, there are certain things that we can know are objectively incorrect. For example, Germany was not invaded by Poland in 1939, as some people claim; Germany was the invader. You're right to be skeptical in principle, since there was indeed a conspiracy going on during

¹ Sophie Scholl was a young political activist and part of the White Rose non-violent resistance group, which was killed by the Nazi regime together with her brother Hans. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophie_Scholl (Last accessed on 06.01.2022). The school's values reflect Scholl's commitment to democratic ideals.

² The Sophie Scholl School is a *Gesamtschule*, a type of school for children ages 11-18, is akin to an American high school in that all educational tracks are contained in one school. In other cases, these various vocational and university tracks are conducted in different schools (*Hauptschule*, *Realschule*, *Gymnasium*). A *Gesamtschule* typically is less selective and has a more heterogeneous student population than, for instance, a *Gymnasium*.

that time. Germany claimed that Poland was attacking, but this was a straightforward lie. Throughout history you do find networks³ of powerful people who engaged in conspiracies to further their political interests—like the Nazi regime did. But this doesn't mean that we can't distinguish between historical facts and fiction.

Peter: Exactly, I think we're finally on the same page—official sources can't be trusted! And yet we've learned nothing since Hitler's day. People still believe the propaganda the state gives them: they all wear masks and get vaccinated, just like the mainstream media tells them to.

Mrs. Faulker (*frustrated*): People wear masks because they're critically evaluating a serious situation. But I'd like to hear what other—

Peter (*interrupting*): This has nothing to do with critical thinking. Most people behave like sheep. And skeptical people who use their brains are stigmatized as 'conspiracy theorists.' We need to seek out alternative sources and alternative perspectives.

Narrator: As Peter spoke, Mrs. Faulkner watched the other students. Some rolled their eyes; others simply looked uncomfortable. But several of Peter's classmates nodded eagerly and leaned toward him, ready to hear more.

Mrs. Faulkner (*cautious*): Ok, that's a good point, Peter. But the comparison you make between our current liberal and democratic government and the Nazi government is problematic and just wrong. People are free to voice their opinions in our society today, which they could not do under the Nazi regime. Now, I do want to hear what others—

Peter: A liberal democracy? A country that even *considers* vaccine mandates hardly qualifies as liberal. Don't I have the right to decide for myself what I want to do with my body? And quite a few people believe that the vaccines are much more dangerous than any virus could ever be. We need more than one perspective, especially the official perspective of so-called 'experts.'

Narrator: Two boys vigorously nodded their agreement. Meanwhile, a girl was on the verge of tears; Mrs. Faulkner knew that she had lost multiple family members to Covid-19, before the vaccine had been developed.

Mrs. Faulkner: I'm glad you brought up expertise, Peter, since the people who propagate the views you're promoting generally do not have the relevant

³ See, for instance: Ferguson, Niall (2019): *The Square and the Tower. Networks, Hierarchies and the Struggle for Global Power*. Allen Lane. According to Ferguson, the "problem with conspiracy theorists is that, as aggrieved outsiders, they invariably misunderstand and misrepresent the way networks operate. In particular, they tend to assume that elite networks covertly and easily control formal power structures. My own research – as well as my own experience – suggests that this is not the case. On the contrary, informal networks usually have a highly ambivalent relationship to established institutions, and sometimes even a hostile one." (ibid.; p. xix).

expertise to make the claims they do. But we'll have to leave it at that. We're out of time.

Narrator: After class, Mrs. Faulkner reflected on Peter's development over the last few years.

Mrs. Faulkner (*troubled*): Peter was such a promising student, one of my favorites. But since the pandemic hit, he's become a committed member of the so-called "Querdenker"-movement.⁴ And he's more extremist than ever. He even told me he feels like a secret agent⁵ who finally sees the true nature of world history. Our relationship has fallen apart—I just don't know how to respond when he refuses to engage in rational dialogue. And today I gave him a stage for his irrational views—once again. I want to help him, but he seems to live in a parallel universe.

Narrator: Entering the teachers' room, Mrs. Faulkner saw her colleagues Mr. Berger and Mrs. Schmitz. They had discussed Peter's worrisome development many times before.

Mr. Berger (*concerned*): What is it?

Mrs. Faulkner (*sighing*): I just had another debate with Peter about his conspiracies. I'm really worried about that kid.

Mr. Berger: I'm starting to worry more about his classmates. Misinformation is spreading like a virus in my classes. The more time we use to discuss this stuff, the more we legitimize his 'theories.' I worry that other students are starting to believe these are normal political views.

Mrs. Schmitz: Ok, that *is* a problem. But I'm not so pessimistic about Peter—I think it's only a phase. We just need to keep questioning his views and over time he'll see he's on the wrong track.

Mr. Berger: Yes, but time is exactly the point. We are spending so much time on this boy and his ideas that we're neglecting the other students' needs. Think about Susanne – she barely can write a single proper German sentence. But I'm supposed to engage with Peter's fantasy world? No, the next time Peter starts with this stuff, I'm going to tell him to focus on Goethe's *Faust*, instead of the Illuminati.

Mrs. Faulkner (*chuckling ruefully*): Yes, and he'll probably tell you that Goethe was a member of the Illuminati and that you should check your sources.

⁴ This movement is a mixture of individuals with varying political leanings, including right-wing extremists, who either radically doubt that Covid-19 exists or believe that it's all part of a big conspiracy initiated by Bill Gates and others. On the Querdenker movement, see: Reichardt, Sven (ed.) (2021): Die Misstrauensgemeinschaft der "Querdenker". Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

⁵ Recent research suggests that one of the reasons why people adopt conspiracy theories is that they find it entertaining to engage with them: Van Prooijen, Willem/Ligthart, Joline/Rosema, Sabine/Xu, Yang (2021): The entertainment value of conspiracy theories. In: British Journal of Psychology. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12522>.

Mr. Berger: Exactly, this has to stop! I agree that Peter is a very promising student, and I care about him, too. But we need to think about the other students. Some of his ‘theories’ have clear antisemitic undertones—like when he says that all ‘official’ history books were written by the Rothschilds.⁶ Did you know that Anton in your class is Jewish? We have to protect Peter’s classmates. These ‘theories’ do not belong in the classroom, not in this school and not in this country with our history.

Mrs. Schmitz: Agreed. But Peter’s just a kid. We can’t leave him alone to deal with this.

Mr. Berger: I also don't want to give up on him, but I cannot see what else we can do. I never thought I would say it, but I really think it is hopeless. We can’t convince conspiracy theorists by rational means. I mean, my family couldn’t celebrate Christmas together this year for the first time ever because my brother fell in with conspiracy theorists. He now refuses to get vaccinated even to protect our elderly mother. If I can’t even reach my own brother, what can we do as teachers? Not even scientific experts and professional politicians know how to handle these issues, so what can we do?

Mrs. Schmitz: I’m so sorry. What a terrible thing to happen to your family. But as teachers, we can’t give up on a kid, whatever his beliefs. And giving up is certainly not in line with the inclusive and dialogical ethos of our school. We can’t preach dialogue and critical thinking and then shut students down every time they say things out of line with our expectations.

Mrs. Faulkner: True, but I doubt that what's going on with Peter counts as ‘critical thinking,’ and we certainly don't want to foster just any type of debate in our school. There are limits to what counts as a reasonable controversy.

Mrs. Schmitz: Sure, but we have seen harder cases. Remember Andre Jacobi? He was truly addicted to computer games, but we didn’t give up on him, and now he’s studying to be a neurosurgeon. I’ve seen it many times: with constant effort and care, many obstacles can be overcome.

Mrs. Faulkner (*fondly*): You really have worked wonders before. But Andre was receptive to our help. Peter doesn’t seem to hear a word we say.

Mrs. Schmitz: What about his parents? Did you talk to them?

Mrs. Faulkner: Not yet, but I assume that they play an important role in this mess. I’ve heard that they actively engage in the Querdenker-scene.

⁶ The Rothschilds are a famous Jewish family of bankers, who in the 19th were the “richest people in the world,” perhaps even “the richest family in all history” (Ferguson, Niall 2000: *The House of Rothschild. The World’s Banker 1849-1999*. New York, Penguin Books, p. xxiii). Their phenomenal wealth is certainly one of the reasons why the Rothschilds have been the object of (usually antisemitic) conspiracy theories throughout history and even today.

Mr. Berger: I'm pretty sure all we'll get from them is another round of fairy tales. Besides, you don't want trouble with these Querdenker guys.⁷ They are becoming increasingly radical—some are even considering violence as a response to current policies.

Mrs. Faulkner: I still have to try. I'll talk to them next week at parents' day. It may not be my business what they think about politics. But it is my business what happens here. Their son is drifting into this conspiracy world and spreading his ideas in our school. I don't think we should fear these Querdenker guys, but then again, they definitely mean trouble... What crazy times we live in.

Narrator: Mrs. Faulkner left the meeting even more uncertain about how she should position herself in the classroom.

Mrs. Faulkner: Should I engage in more discussion to publicly deconstruct Peter's views? Would this help Peter—or his classmates? Should I just shut Peter down next time and write him off as a lost cause? Or should I simply ignore his statements and not engage in a debate in order to keep the peace? But wouldn't it be irresponsible not to take a clear stand here—despite political pressure from outside the school—especially around safety issues like vaccination? And what about the dialogical ethos of the school? What's the right thing to do?

⁷ There has been quite a bit of debate in the German media about political pressure on teachers, among others from the Querdenker movement and right-wing political parties. There have been disciplinary complaints against teachers because they were allegedly not sufficiently neutral, and there were online platforms, where students and parents could report teachers for partisan behavior.