Conspiracy Theories and Critical Thinking

Class Description:
The Grade 7 classroom was located in a typical elementary school in a suburban neighbourhood in Delta, British Columbia. There was a total of 29 students, 16 males and 13 females. The teacher is female and has been teaching for seven years. It is a racially diverse classroom of children who come from various ethnic backgrounds. The socioeconomic status of the children could be described as middle class. There were no obvious indicators of wealth such as high end name brand clothing and accessories. Nor was there obvious indicators of poverty worn clothing, unkempt hygiene. The teacher did indicate three males that needed additional support. One diagnosed with autism and a hearing impairment, another diagnosed with autism and is a Jehovah’s Witness, and a third ELL with an unstable family environment. These two males required more monitoring, one on one communication and patience from the TC’s during the lessons than did the other students. A third student was identified as gender fluid, listed on the class list as female but preferring to be called by a male name. This challenged the TC’s to attempt to avoid saying “his”, “her”, “boys and girls” and instead call the group by their division and number.

This classroom appeared to be keenly interested in the topic at hand but needed monitoring, guidance and support to stay on task. The teacher dealt with a social issue, unrelated to our lesson, for at least one student every time we provided a lesson. Given the preteen age this is not unusual. Had we been alone in the classroom these social issues would have been a disruption to the lesson.

Overview:
Two teacher candidates (TC’s) from UBC were assigned to a Grade 7 classroom in an elementary school in the Delta School District and required to provide four lessons that included characteristics of enacted learning. Prior to providing the lessons the TC’s met with the students and encouraged them to choose the topic for the TC’s to provide. The students were guided to complete an active think-pair-share session and then the TC’s held an initial vote to determine the interest in the topics provided. Next, we held another vote on the topics that showed the most interest. The students voted in favor of conspiracy theories. Many expressed interest in learning about the Illuminati.

Project Plan Rationale:
In Grade 7, children are accessing the internet independently and exploring topics that may not be covered in school. For example, when the topic of conspiracy theories was proposed by a student in the classroom, many students wanted to explore the Illuminati. In researching the Illuminati further, the teacher candidates discovered there was recent information on the internet. However, due to the use of explicit language associated with the internet activity on this theory, the teacher candidates decided it was not an appropriate theory to cover in a Grade seven classroom.
The TC's realized the students may look up information about the Illuminati whether or not we cover it in the classroom. With this being said, it was decided to focus on critical thinking skills so the students would have the tools to assess the information on the Illuminati and any other topics that they come across in the future.

**Project Plan Objectives:**

The main focus for the unit on conspiracy theories was to have the children learn about critical thinking; when the students actively discuss whether or not they think our conspiracy theory/ the conspiracy theory their group is assigned to research is true or not, they are learning about critical thinking by engaging in critical thinking through this process of researching, gathering evidence, and coming to a decision about their belief around the conspiracy theory. Along with this, the students will further reflect on their learning by answering the questions I used to think and now I think or after looking deeper into conspiracy theory we learned that. In addition, students were asked to make a connection critical thinking when answering one of these questions.

**Resource Critique:**

It was challenging to find conspiracy theory resources for the students that were age appropriate. For example, we found non-fiction chapter books on Malaysia Flight 370 and Amelia Earhart but could not find quick reference texts for these theories. We did locate age appropriate quick reference texts for a few of the theories; crop circles, flight 19 and aliens in Roswell, from our public library. We were unable to find quick reference texts for three of our theories. Due to the limitations of books we also researched and pre-screened several websites for each theory. We found these sources were not directed towards student learning, rather they were intended for general public viewing. If the students were unable to connect to the internet we would have needed to adjust or lesson. Students would only be able to research three of the six theories.

We provided the students with a resource list (see below) categorized by theory. The list included websites and/or quick reference books which we provided in class. Despite our reminders to use the references provided we found many students doing their own searches on the internet.

We found ourselves questioning the credibility of our sources. We have no knowledge of who actually created the conspiracy theories- therefore, what really is a reliable source?
# UNIT PLAN: Conspiracy Theory and Critical Thinking

## Big Idea(s):
Religious & cultural practices that have emerged during this period have endured and continue to influence people.

## Curricular Competencies: What students will DO
| Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions, gather, interpret and critically analyze ideas and communicate findings and decisions. |
| Assess the credibility of multiple sources and the adequacy of evidence used to justify conclusions (evidence). |

## Concepts and Content: What students will KNOW
| What a conspiracy theory is: A theory that explains an event or situation as the result of a secret plan by, usually, powerful people or groups. |
| Theory: An idea that is intended to explain facts or events word covert will need to be defined as hidden, secret or concealed. An idea that is suggested or presented as possibly true but not known or proven to be true. |
| Recognize common conspiracy theories in our society. |
| Detailed information (note taking sheets) about one specific theory their group was given to look deeper into |

## Enacted Learning
Enacted Learning may be achieved by:
First the idea came from the students and they actively voted to have this as the topic of discussion so they are invested in the lesson. Second, the students will observe the TC’s perform a skit on a conspiracy theory. This skit is designed to intrigue the students since it directly connects to the school, people and objects they recognize. We predict the students will have a connection and will have many questions and responses, thus actively engaging with the TCs and the content. Finally, the students will be guided to actively discuss and debate in groups the validity of the TC theory. They will be asked to write down thoughts and then groups will be invited to share with class, sparking a class discussion. The main focus of our four lessons is to have the children learn about critical thinking; When the students actively discuss whether or not they think our conspiracy theory/ the conspiracy theory their group is assigned to research is true or not, they are learning about critical thinking by engaging in critical thinking through this process of researching, gathering evidence, and coming to a decision about their belief around the conspiracy theory.
**Materials / Technologies**

Students will use the following:

**Lesson 1**
- Paper, Pens/Pencils, Popsicle Sticks (already in classroom)

**Lesson 2/3**
- Paper, Pens/Pencils, Popsicle Sticks (already in classroom)
- Computers/IPad - to search Internet on theories and use Google documents and google slides
- Resource List - Books / Websites on the specific examples
- Data Collection Sheet on Google documents

**Lesson 4**
- Teacher laptop to access google slides for group presentation
- Projector/Screen

**Pre – Unit Preparation**

The teacher will need to make the following preparations prior to the class(es).

- Plausible conspiracy theory for lesson 1 (attached)
- List of theories – Aliens & UFO in Roswell, Moon Landing Hoax, Flight 19(Bermuda), Malaysia Flight 370, Amelia Earhart, Crop Circles
- Websites to collect data
- Books
- Data Collection worksheet (attached)

**Lesson Details (Teacher Actions / Student Actions)**

**LESSON ONE -**

**Rationale:** Prior to exploring specific conspiracy theories students need to understand what defines a conspiracy theory.

1. Take inventory of existing knowledge: Ask students to discuss in pairs what they know about conspiracy theories, then class share. Record answers on the board.

2. Define theory, then conspiracy theory and write on board.

3. Provide personal example that students will relate to: Teacher candidates will share a conspiracy theory related to their school. (attached)

4. Assign students into 6 groups of 4 students. Provide 1 sheet of regular paper to students. Make 2 columns on page True/Untrue. Do they think it is true or not? What makes them think it is true or not (evidence)? Write why they think - or what evidence supports true or untrue.

5. Inform them theory is untrue. Discuss with students. How did you feel not knowing the theory was true or not? How did it feel finding out it wasn't true? How did other people's reactions affect your belief?

6. Assess. Ask students to complete exit slip - define conspiracy theory and hand back to us.
LESSON TWO –
Rationale: After understanding definition of conspiracy theories students will review common conspiracy theories and consider if they meet the definition.

1. Review definition of conspiracy theory, our theory and what we need to consider when learning about conspiracy theories from last lesson.

2. Model how we would assess the fake school theory on data collection sheet.

3. Assign students to work in groups of 4 people (approximately 6 groups)

4. Once they are in their group they will pick a theory from a hat/bucket. The name of 1 conspiracy theory in our society (Roswell, Amelia Earhart, Bermuda Flight 19, Flight 370, Moon Landing is a hoax, crop circles). AND 1 data collection sheet and resources - books or IPad/laptop

5. Advise students to complete the data collection worksheet→ review the theory, document what the theory is about, who is involved in the theory, indicate if there is a connection to an influential organization, where does this theory take place (is it specific to one country or worldwide). Are there barriers preventing society proving the theory?

LESSON THREE –
Rationale: Continued exploration of what does and does not supports a theory, what makes the theory believable and reflect on learning

1. Go over reminders for their note taking sheet
   ● no copying and pasting- write in own words
   ● point form okay but be detailed
   ● 1 data collection sheet per group
   ● divide work up, if you finish your section, help someone else on their section
   ● regroup in 20 minutes (most of sheet should be done)

2. Have students continue working on their note taking sheet (first 20 min)

3. Have students’ complete final presentation tasks in their groups. This will be done on google slides. *(Explain this orally + post on projector- see below)*
   ● Write a headline about the conspiracy theory they learned about
   ● Pick one picture that represents your theory and explain its significance in a short paragraph (why did you choose it? why is it important?)

   ● Write a sub-headline(s) that discusses what your group learned about your conspiracy theory/ conspiracy theories in general AND critical thinking. Idea’s for starters:
     ○ We used to think….. now we think....
     ○ After looking deeper into conspiracy theories, our group learned that...
     ○ any other ideas???
Come up with 2 or more questions (as a group) you still have about conspiracy theories or a specific conspiracy theory that you would like to know more about.

4. Show example modelled
   - Our example: see attached document

5. Write on board:
   - Slide 1: Headline and image
   - Slide 2: Why you chose this picture
   - Slide 3: Your sub headline about your learning AND questions remaining (at LEAST 1)

6. REMIND STUDENTS:
   - presentation next Friday
   - everyone needs to talk at some point
   - this is very informal - can read off of your slides

LESSON FOUR -
Rationale: Reflection and sharing on learning about conspiracy theories and critical thinking.

1. Give students 5 minutes to review their info with their group
   - set up laptop, get images ready, use popsicle sticks to draw who will go first

2. Each group will present their reflections on their learning (approx. 5 min/group)
   - class can ask the presenting group questions if they have any
   - students presenting can add anything if they would like

3. Wrap up - thank students for having us as guests in their classroom

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<tr>
<th>Assessment / Evaluation</th>
<th>Adaptations / Modifications</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-assessment:</td>
<td>● Google docs could be used to record the data collection.</td>
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<td>● How many conspiracy theories can a student name?</td>
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<td>Post-assessment:</td>
<td>● Do they know where the theories are in the world.</td>
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<td>● Vote on whether they think theory is plausible.</td>
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At the beginning of lesson 1 the students will be asked to share their funds of knowledge on what they know about conspiracy theories. Some may share examples of current theories others may define.

At the end of lesson 1 students will be asked to define what a conspiracy theory is and what is important to consider when learning about conspiracy theories. Acceptable answers would include words like story, hidden, secret, government, religious, school, influence, organization.

At the end of lesson 4, students will have reflected on their learning about conspiracy theories by making a headline about their conspiracy theory (focusing on main idea of their conspiracy
theory), representing their entire conspiracy theory with one image and explaining its importance, creating a sub headline about the knowledge they have acquired and learning that has taken place (we used to think.... now we think...., after looking deeper into conspiracy theories, our group learned that...), and coming up with further questions they may have on conspiracy theories after spending some time exploring them (extending their learning)

**we will have these reflections tangibly, so they will be “evidence” of their learning for us to look back at**

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<th>Extensions/possible cross-curricular connections</th>
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Language Arts – this lesson could be expanded to
- having the students write their own conspiracy theory.
- having students present the data in the form of a news report, court case, technological presentation (gives students a chance to be creative)
Approx. 24 students per classroom – 4 students/group = 6 groups therefore a min. 6 theories needed

**Roswell:**
- [http://www.roswellfiles.com/story.htm](http://www.roswellfiles.com/story.htm)

**Crop circles:**

**Amelia Earhart:**

**Flight 19:**

**Apollo Moon Landing Hoax:**
- [http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ap/Apollo_moon_landing_hoax](http://encyclopedia.kids.net.au/page/ap/Apollo_moon_landing_hoax)
- [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/12/faked-moon-landing-would-have-been-exposed-within-four-years-sci/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/12/faked-moon-landing-would-have-been-exposed-within-four-years-sci/)
- [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/07/18/apollo-11-fake-proof_n_5599372.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/07/18/apollo-11-fake-proof_n_5599372.html)

**Malaysia Flight 370:**
Attachment for Lesson 1

SCHOOL CONSPIRACY THEORY

This will be spoken by both teacher candidates to the audience of the students:

Teacher Candidate 1
“We did some research and we have discovered that your elementary school has its own conspiracy theory. Does anyone know what this conspiracy theory is?

Okay you know how you guys have hot lunch on Friday’s? And you know how your parents pay for this hot lunch right? Sometimes its 4 or 5 dollars.

Well, we discovered that the food doesn’t actually cost as much as your parents are paying. So with that extra money we found out that the money is being used to buy stuff for a secret room connected to the staffroom where only teachers and principals can go.

Teacher Candidate 2
This room has 2 flat screen tvs, a giant touch screen computer with a ton of apps, an Xbox AND play station games and you know those games at the arcade like the motorcycle.... (action) they have that too. There is a popcorn machine and a junk food machine. We heard there is even a wall full of posters with ideas to prank students.

We found out that teachers are taking turns going in there when you are at recess, on lunch, sometimes when you are at the library AND they even go in there while you are busy working in groups DURING class time. We haven’t actually been inside this room because we are not staff but when we were visiting your teacher in the staff room last week we saw a teacher sneak behind a door and disappear”.

There is no truth to this theory and we will be informing the students the theory is not true
Further details are outlined in the lesson plan.
Data Collection Sheet

**Subject:** Social Studies 7  
**Title of Lesson:** Conspiracy Theories

Date:  
**Group Member Names:**

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<th>Theory name and summary of what the theory is about</th>
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<th>Where does the theory take place?</th>
<th>Who is involved in the theory?</th>
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<th>Is there a connection to powerful people(s) or groups? Explain.</th>
<th>What makes the theory secretive? Explain.</th>
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<td><strong>What effect does the theory have on society? Explain.</strong></td>
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<th><strong>Are there barriers preventing society from proving the theory?</strong></th>
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| **What supports the theory?**
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| **What does not support the theory?**
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