NATIONAL INSTITUTE of Teaching | CDILS CENTRE FOR DIGITAL INFORMATION LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

Navigating conspiracies and misinformation in schools: Where do I begin?

Pears Foundation

Conspiracy beliefs and misinformation are an increasing problem in schools, and for schools. Yet few teachers report having received training in how to respond to these problems.[1] Only a small minority of teachers feel very confident to respond when pupils mention conspiracy theories or misinformation, and fewer still believe their efforts to respond have had a positive impact.[2]

Misinformation

False, inaccurate, or misleading information that is shared with others. When shared with the deliberate aim of deceiving, it is often called *disinformation.*

Conspiracy theory

An explanation - often put forward without strong, verifiable evidence - that important events are secretly manipulated by a powerful group of people.

The Centre for Digital Information Literacy in Schools (CDILS) was established in September 2025, with generous support from the Pears Foundation. Our work aims to equip educators with the confidence and knowledge they need for teaching and leading effectively in an age of misinformation, and with the ability to apply this knowledge confidently in their own school contexts.

[1] Burtonshaw, S., Kane, M., Dorrell E., et al. (2026). Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools 2026 Research Insights. Public First.

[2] Jerome, L., Kisby, B., & McKay, S. (2024). Combatting conspiracies in the classroom: Teacher strategies and perceived outcomes. British Educational Research Journal, 50(3), 1106-1126.

From our careful scoping of the research literature and interviews with international experts, we've identified eight key messages that we think are vital for school teachers and leaders to reflect on:

1 Young people are vulnerable to real-world harms of conspiracy theories and misinformation; the 'information age' amplifies this vulnerability

- Exposure to misleading material has been associated with various harms among young people, such as problematic health beliefs and behaviours, reduced trust in experts and public institutions, and acceptance of racist and other discriminatory worldviews.
- All of us are susceptible to misinformation in principle—regardless of age, intelligence or political leaning—but young people's developing cognitive abilities and vulnerability to social influence can make them particularly susceptible.
- These challenges are not new, yet are more severe in the 'information age' due to our ready access to vast amounts of information, and the ease of generating false content. Algorithms—by delivering this content in ways tailored to our assumed identities and interests—help misinformation to spread and to stick.

Reflective questions

How might my pupils' age and developmental stage shape the kinds of misinformation they're exposed to, and how they respond to it? What about the characteristics of their home, community, and social environments? What are my assumptions about who is most vulnerable to misinformation, and how confident am I that those assumptions are valid?

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Whether people *believe* conspiracies and misinformation isn't the only thing that matters

- Young people often share misinformation not because they believe it, but because it's funny, controversial, or entertaining, or because they *believe* it will generate "likes" on social media. So the sharing of misinformation, and social beliefs about what other people think and like, both matter regardless of how much misinformation is treated as true.
- Sharing misinformation spreads it to more people, but also lends it credibility – when we think our peers endorse and *believe* something, we're more likely to consider it plausible ourselves.
- Social media algorithms amplify these problems: engaging with and sharing misinformation (e.g., through 'liking' and reposting) encourages the algorithms to show similar content to us and our friends, reinforcing our impression that other people widely believe it.
- People share misinformation less when they're reminded that most people frown upon the sharing of misinformation, and when responsible information-sharing is praised and rewarded.

Reflective questions

How could I help my pupils recognise how online environments make certain problematic beliefs and attitudes appear more common—including among their peer groups—than they actually are? How can we create positive, school-wide norms around the responsible sharing of information?

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3 Conspiracy theories and misinformation appeal to people's core psychological needs

- The power of conspiracy theories lies heavily in their apparent promise to help us make sense of the world and our experiences, to feel control over what happens to us, and to feel belonging and valued among other people.
- Young people who experience these needs more acutely—such as those who have been (or who feel) socially excluded or disadvantaged, or those who feel 'wronged' by society—could be at particular risk from being drawn to conspiracies.
- Conspiracy theories, in practice, don't often deliver what they seem to promise. For example, becoming conspiratorial typically involves widespread distrust of others, which can increase feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Reflective questions

How might I create a classroom/school culture that supports pupils' belonging and voice, and that supports them to feel a sense of fairness and justice in their lives?

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Everyday mental shortcuts and biases shape what we think is true

- Misinformation takes advantage of a normal human tendency to simplify how we process information. For example, we accept and remember information more readily, and we question it less, when it aligns with our pre-existing beliefs and identities. This means we're often bad at spotting dubious information if it suits our personal motives, or those of our social or political groups.
- We're also more likely to believe information when it feels familiar. This means fake news can become more potent, the more frequently we hear about it. Even debunking misinformation could accidentally reinforce this familiarity, if we're not careful!
- Fake news takes advantage of these kinds of mental shortcuts. For example, it tends to use a narrower and simpler vocabulary than reliable news, making it less effortful for us to process. And it often uses (negative) emotive language, which captures attention and is more likely to be shared.

Reflective questions

How can I challenge inaccurate ideas without accidentally reinforcing them through repetition? How can we ensure all our school staff can do this 'challenging' skilfully, and what are the appropriate times or contexts in which to do it?

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5 We're better at catching misinformation when we can think slowly and carefully

- Even without receiving any explicit teaching about how to detect misinformation, just pausing to think carefully and deliberately can often help people spot it. For example, asking people to explain *why* something is true or false, or giving people more time to reflect, can reduce misinformation sharing and acceptance.
- Some people are better than others at analysing information in this careful way, but certain situations make it harder or easier too. For example, even a lack of sleep can increase susceptibility to misinformation! We might therefore need to find and create the right conditions for careful thought.

Reflective questions

How could I get my pupils to develop the habit of slowing down and thinking carefully when evaluating potentially untrue information, and to do this without prompting? How could my school's routines and structures lead children to evaluate potentially untrue information in more careful and deliberate ways?

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To challenge misinformation effectively, you don't have to be an expert

- Teachers sometimes avoid challenging misinformation because they don't feel knowledgeable enough about the topic to do an effective job of it.
- Conspiracy theories can be almost impossible to falsify, because they so often rely on distrust of public institutions, experts, and other credible sources of knowledge. So even if you can bring hard facts to the table, these facts alone may be ineffective at correcting the young person's understanding.
- Fact-based debunking might work better for non-conspiratorial misinformation, but it can still be risky in the moment, unless you really know your stuff, and it could backfire by making more of your class familiar with the misinformation.

Reflective questions

How can I challenge inaccurate ideas without accidentally reinforcing them through repetition? How can we ensure all our school staff can do this 'challenging' skilfully, and what are the appropriate times or contexts in which to do it?

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7 Listening and asking curious questions might be more powerful than offering answers

- Modelling 'intellectual humility' in our discussions—such as by acknowledging that we don't have all the answers, asking questions, and showing we're open to hearing alternative viewpoints—can encourage other people to reciprocate this same approach, rather than 'digging in'.
- Even very young children respond favourably to signs of intellectual humility, and these receptive kinds of conversations can therefore form a safe foundation for building critical thinking skills.
- Helping young people feel listened to and respected in conversations, able to explore their misconceptions non-judgementally, and giving them spaces to interact positively with other peers and adults, may all feed the psychological needs that otherwise draw them to conspiratorial content and misinformation.

Reflective questions

What kinds of open questions could help my pupils explore their thinking rather than feel judged or shut down? How can I make the time and space for these kinds of conversations in my classroom/school?

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People can develop the skills to be more critical consumers of information (but there's no magic bullet)

- There is no 'one size fits all' technique for reliably tackling misinformation and conspiracy beliefs. But various intervention strategies are known to reduce these kinds of beliefs, and the sharing of fake news, with at least some level of success. It's likely that a variety of strategies are needed, rather than only one.
- At present, strategies centred on building critical thinking seem to be among the most promising. Equipping young people to question and evaluate the information they encounter, and to do so habitually rather than only on instruction, may be one of our most important goals in this regard.
- Various manipulation strategies—such as efforts to polarise groups, or the use of emotional language—are commonly used for deliberately spreading misinformation. Teaching people about these manipulation strategies ("pre-bunking") can equip them to spot the 'red flags', which in turn can help them avoid believing and spreading misinformation.

Reflective questions

Which critical thinking routines or media literacy tools could become regular parts of my teaching, in my subject or phase? Which whole-school approaches can ensure children encounter critical thinking routines regularly and across the full curriculum?

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At CDILS, we are shaping work that could ultimately support tens of thousands of teachers across the country. We don't have all the answers, and we're not pretending to. What we do have is a shared commitment to getting this right and being evidence-informed. We're inviting colleagues to work with us, to test ideas, and to help us ask the right questions so that together we can build something that reflects real classroom experience and strengthens professional judgement across the system. Your insights and feedback will help ensure this work is grounded, practical, and genuinely useful to schools in navigating an increasingly complex information landscape. We look forward to exploring the conversation more and discussing these ideas together.

If you would like to take part or learn more, please contact:
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