



Connecting



**CST Annual
Conference 26**

15 & 16 October, ICC, Birmingham

#CSTConf26



"We're sitting on the precipice of the misinformation age."

Back in 2021, Eliot Higgins (Founder of Bellingcat – an opensource investigation platform), used this phrase to warn about the rapid escalation of digital falsehoods and manipulated media.

- Have we fallen off the precipice?
- What does this mean for the way we educate our young people?





The Leadership and Safeguarding Challenge for Trusts: Navigating Conspiracy theories, Misinformation and Digital Influence in schools.

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 **NATIONAL
INSTITUTE
of Teaching**

CDILS
CENTRE FOR
DIGITAL INFORMATION
LITERACY IN SCHOOLS

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In the past 12 months, where have you seen the impact of online misinformation, conspiracy theories or digital influence? Select all that apply.



Use 1 word to describe how well you think schools are currently responding to the challenges of conspiracy theories, misinformation and digital influence.

Session overview

1. Understanding the challenge

2. What can we do?

3. Reflection and next steps



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The big picture



Writing
circa 3200BC



Printing Press
circa 1440



Digital Technologies
circa 1980



A systemic shift in how knowledge itself is formed and trusted

Radically altered information environment

Introducing the Commission...

COMMISSION INTO
COUNTERING ONLINE
CONSPIRACIES
IN SCHOOLS

Hearing the challenge...

The Pears Foundation grantees work across youth, community cohesion and online safety.

They consistently raised concerns about the rise of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy belief amongst young people

Tackling the problem

The Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools was created to undertake large scale qualitative and quantitative research to create deeper insight into how this issue was impacting young people... and what we could do to tackle this.

Funding the creation of CDILS

The Commission made a series of recommendations including:

'Expert-led, research-informed and sustained continuous professional development (CPD) must be made available for school staff and leaders.'

Three years of research

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IN SCHOOLS

Over the last three years the Commission has undertaken...

45 focus groups

13,500+ survey
participants

2 research reports

18 with parents

3x

Young people aged 9-18 in full
time education
2,000+ participants per year

14 with young people

3x

Parents of young people aged
9-18 in full time education
2,000+ participants per year

11 with school staff

3x

Primary, secondary and post
16 teachers and school staff
500+ participants per year

2 with youth workers



More to be published this year...

Five insights for today...

1. **Conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation** are seen as an increasing and evolving problem by young people, parents and school staff.

2. Young people are **accessing** conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation online **from a young age, including offensive content**.

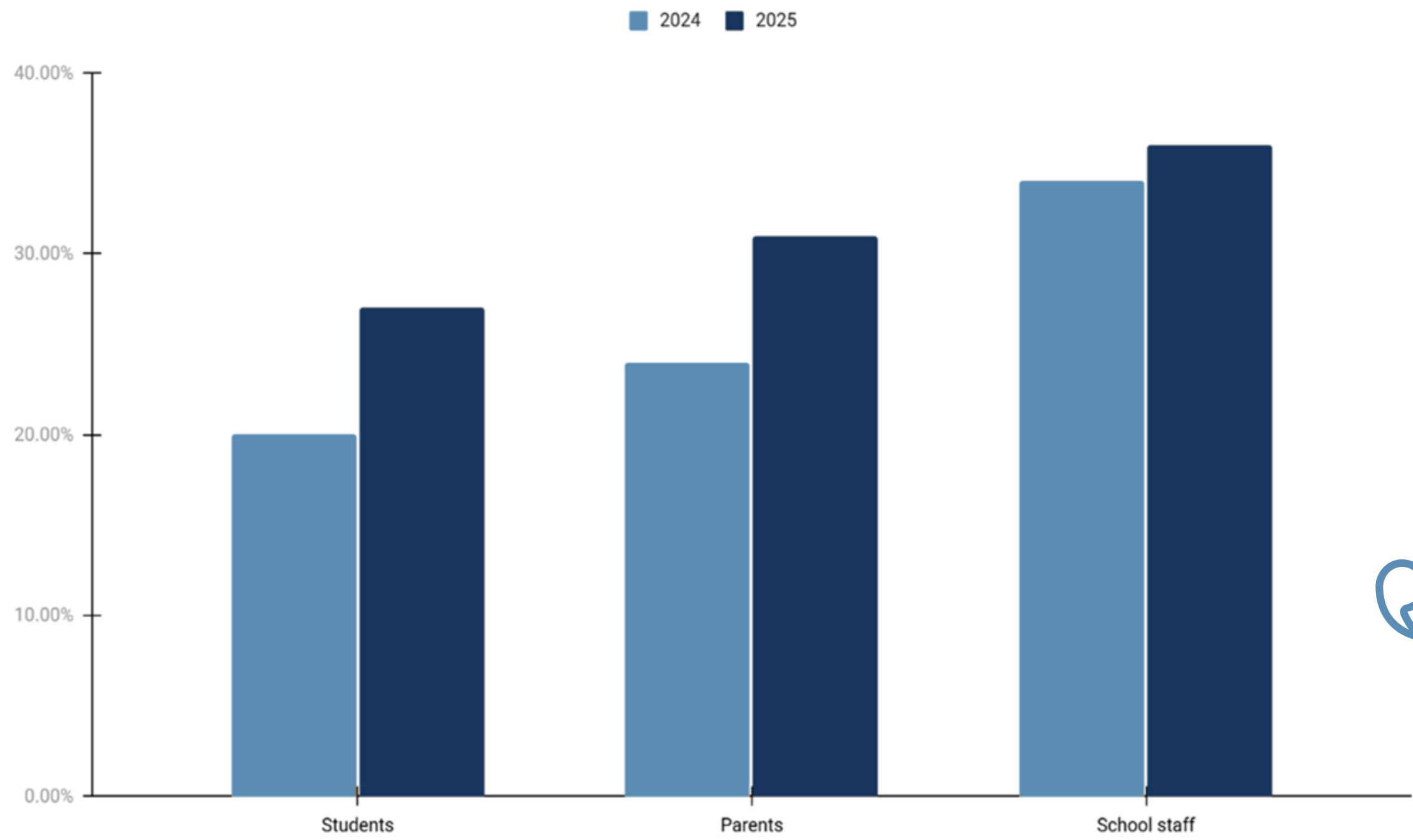
3. Teachers feel that **parents both compound the challenges of, and complicate their ability to address**, online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst their pupils.

4. **School staff feel ill equipped, under resourced and nervous to** tackling online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people.

5. **Teachers and leaders** both tell us that they need **more support and training** in this space.

Insight 1: Conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation are seen as an increasing and evolving problem by young people, parents and school staff.

% Who say conspiracy theories are a problem in their or their children's school



They [children] are bombarded with so much on social media...It's difficult when it's in your face all the time, and there's no let up, because they're watching on their phones a lot the time or tablets... Yeah it's this kind of access to media all the time and not being able to kind of differentiate the kind of the real and the fake of it all."

Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, West Midlands



People can make money off doing fake news, actually, because it gets loads of likes."

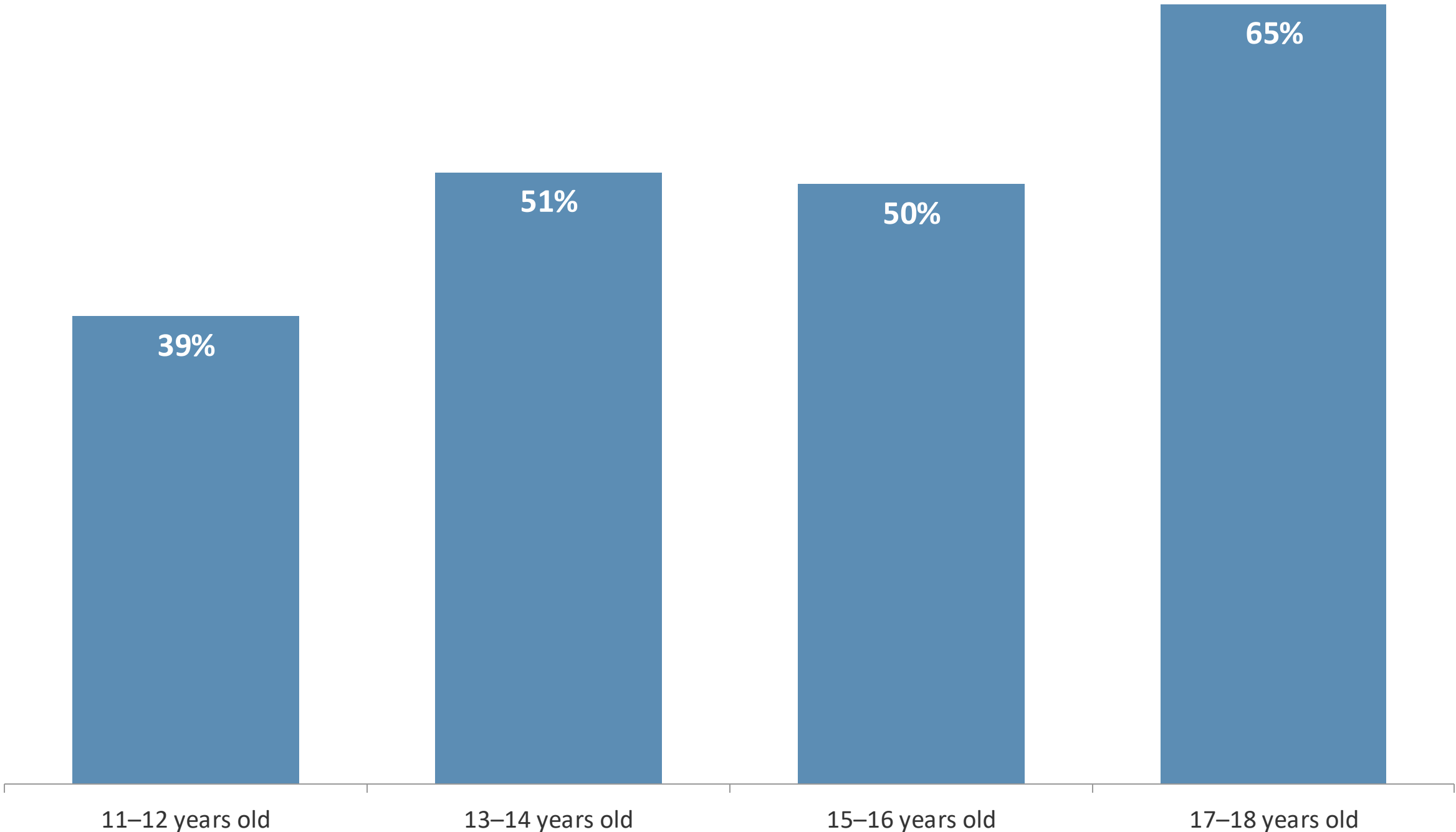
Year 10 Pupil, Male, North East

Insight 2 – Young people are accessing conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation online from a young age, including offensive content.

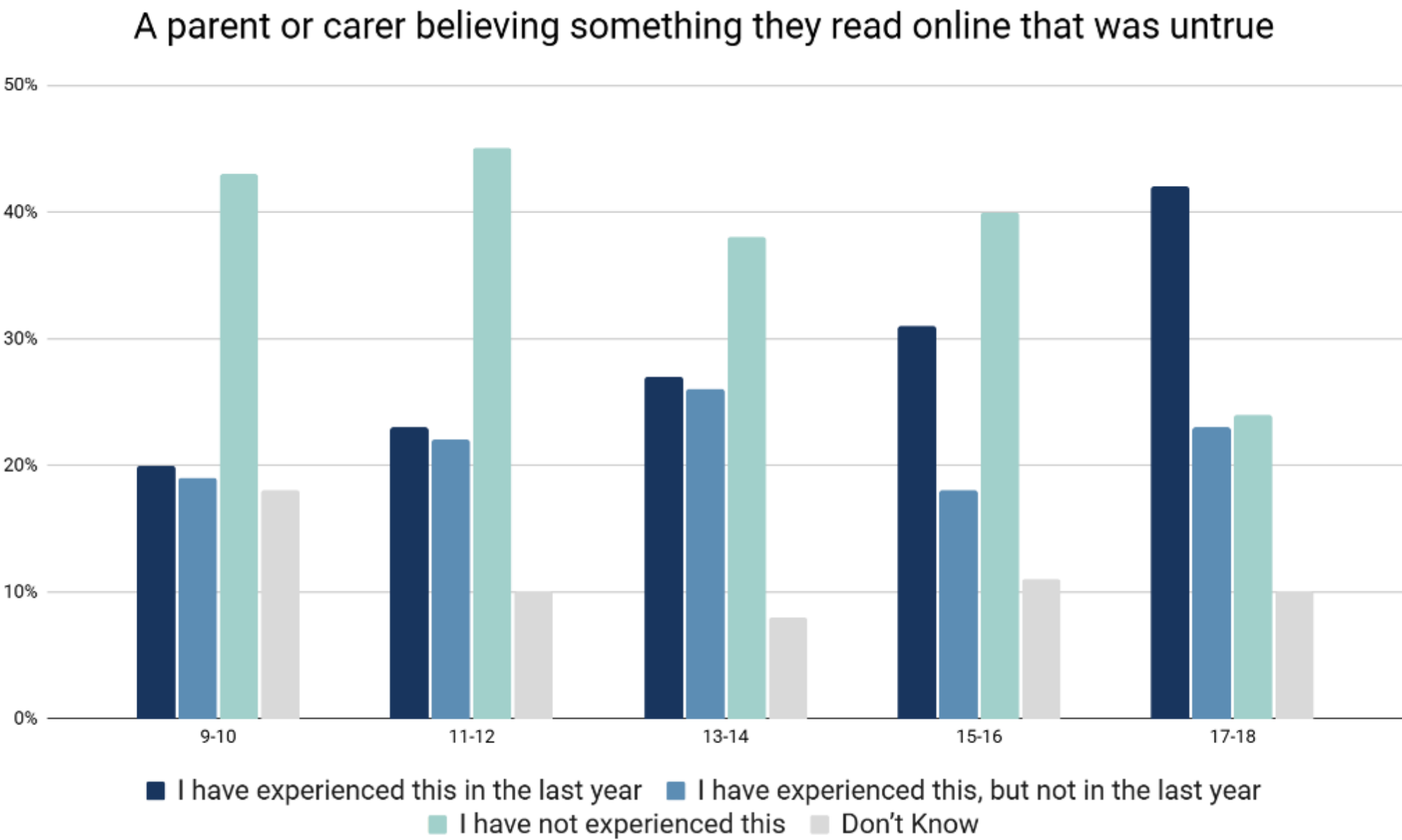


On social media, we are finding that that's coming into primary schools as well, and it's getting earlier and earlier so that does bring problems into school. It used to be just Year 6, Year 5, Year 4 and even some of the younger years have access to it [social media]. I think that really does have a big impact.”
Classroom Teacher, Primary, Female, West Midlands

% of students who have encountered false or misleading information that was offensive towards groups of people online (e.g. homophobia, sexism, racism)



Finding 3: Teachers feel that parents both compound the challenges of, and complicate their ability to address, online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst their pupils.



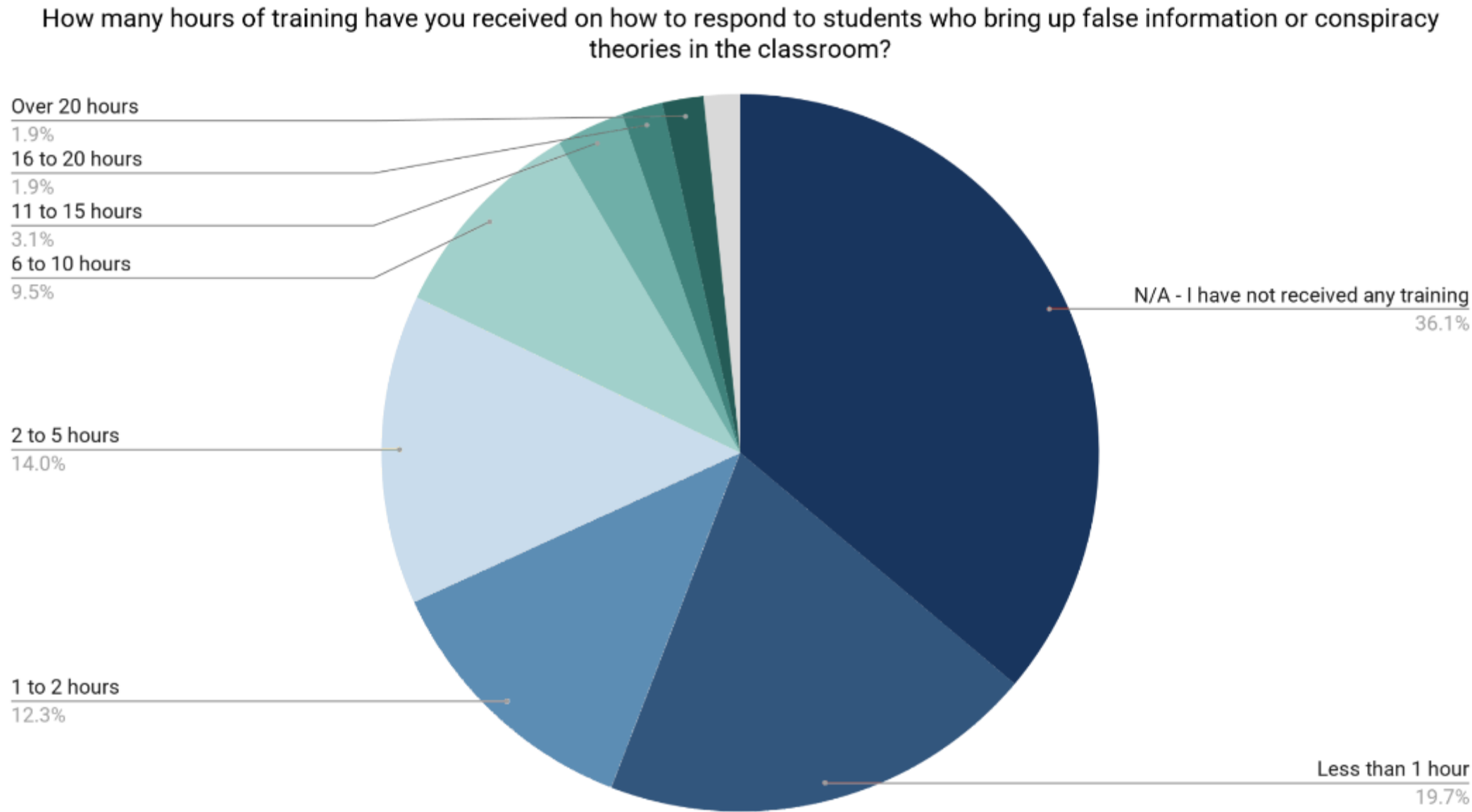
“My mum is probably the most gullible person I know. If she saw a video, to be honest, I don't think she could tell the difference between AI. And what's real. For example, she showed me a video of something, and I don't know how she believed it was true because it was obvious that it was AI.”

Year 10 Pupil, Male, West Midlands

“It [misinformation] could be something that the parents are talking to them about...especially some of the stuff we've seen in the news recently about the hotels [for asylum seekers], and the protests outside the hotels...this has bled into the classroom.”

Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, West Midlands

Insight 4: School staff feel ill equipped, under resourced and nervous to tackling online conspiracy belief, misinformation and disinformation amongst young people.



I don't have enough of the information myself, especially if it's something that I've not heard about so sometimes I can be a bit anxious[in case I address it wrongly]. I've had it with Gaza-Palestine as well, where I'm on the spot and I'm just like 'Oh God, I don't know what I'm supposed to say'."

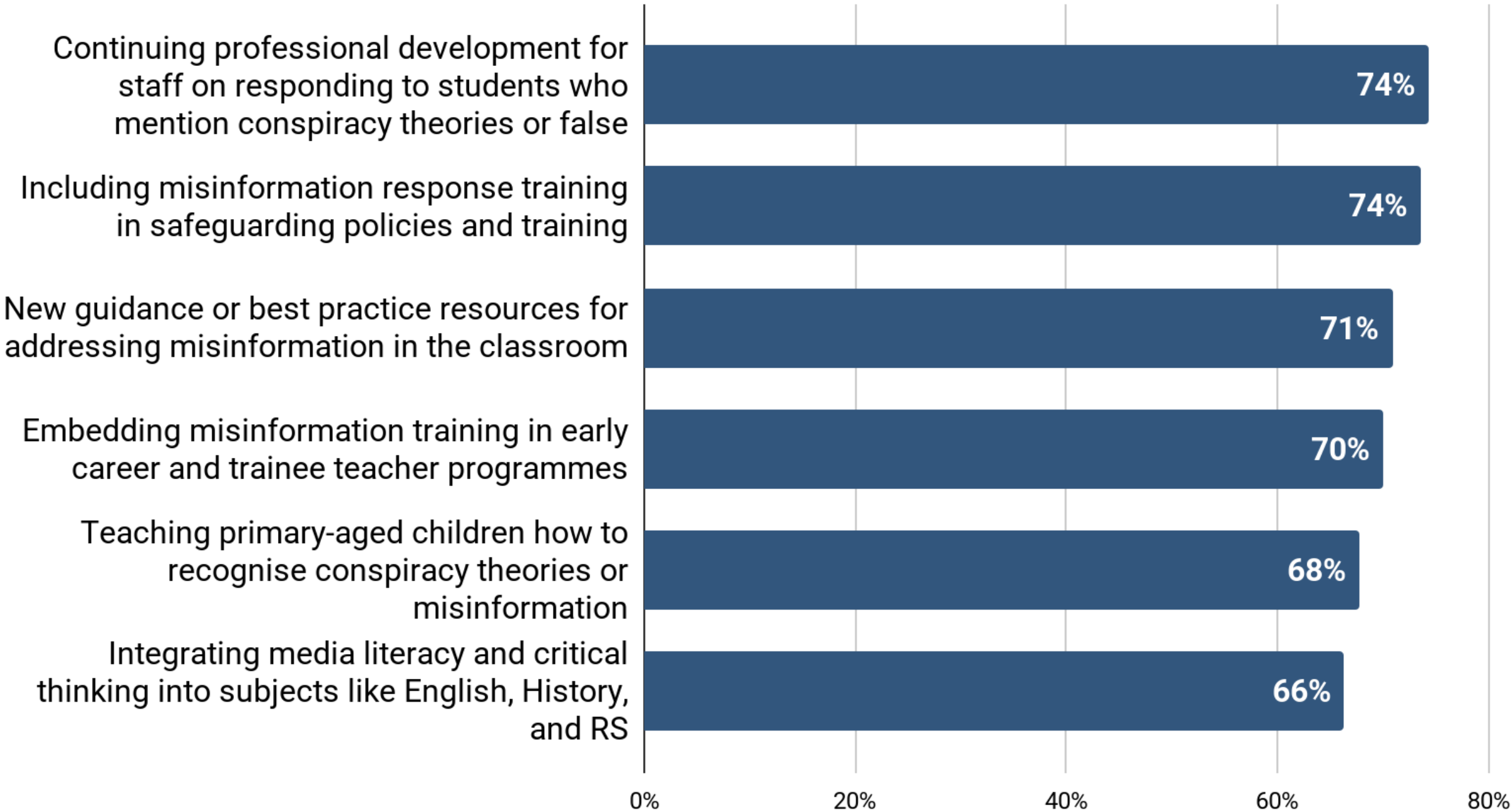
Senior Leader, Primary, Female, West Midlands

We have so many different [types of] guidance and so many different things that we have to do."

Classroom Teacher, Secondary, Female, East of England

Insight 5: Teachers and leaders both tell us that they need more support and training in this space.

Percentage of school staff who believe each action would make them more confident responding to pupils who bring up conspiracy theories in the classroom



It gives us guidance, and it is just that, but it's, it's not dictating what we have to do."
Senior Leader, Primary, Female, West Midlands

Yeah, we had to do some training on that. But it was only literally one of those little online training things, watch the videos, answer the questions."
Middle Leader, Secondary, Female, East of England

The purpose of CDILS



- How can we increase teacher and leader confidence to respond to conspiracy theory, mis and disinformation in schools?
- How can we effect system-level change?

ITT

ECTP

NPQ

Train the trainer

Governor training

National Curriculum Review



Experiences of a MAT CEO

Session overview

1. Understanding the challenge

2. What can we do?

3. Reflection and next steps



Why might teachers hesitate to challenge misinformation?



Teachers have a professional responsibility to teach factual information and address misconceptions

So, many teachers will instinctively want to correct misinformation with facts

I'm not confident in the facts

I'm not sure how to persuade them

The students may know more than me

The students might be defensive when challenged

I'm worried about parents' reactions

It's not the right time/place

They're probably just being deliberately provocative

Getting into a debate could spread the claim further

They might portray me as complicit

I'm not sure what I'm allowed to say

Developing the skills to navigate misinformation



- **Critical thinking** e.g. evaluating sources, finding corroborating evidence, discriminating fact from fiction
- **Media & digital literacies** e.g. understanding algorithms, AI and deepfakes, 'pre-bunking'
- Focusing on **facts** and **fact-discernment** alone won't be enough, though...

Four reasons misinformation sticks



01

Shared ≠ swallowed



02

**Misinformation is
sticky**



03

**Misinformation
tastes sweet**



04

Being wrong sucks



1. Shared $\neq$ swallowed

1

It's funny and entertaining

2

It made me furious!

3

**I'll get a lot of 'likes' and
new followers**

4

**It'll show people what I'm
interested in**

5

**It matches my outlook on
the world**

6

**I want them to like me — *they
might even see my message!***

A problem shared is a problem *made so much worse?*

- So, people share information when it feels **normal** and **valued** in their social groups
- But our beliefs are shaped by what we think **other people believe**. And sharing shapes what other people *think* we believe!
- Meanwhile, algorithms, bots, the media etc. amplify certain ideas, and hide others.
- Children (and adults) use social cues, such as likes or comments on social media, to help judge whether something is true.



A problem shared is a problem *made so much worse?*

- This is where we might intervene!
- Even very young children recognise **misinforming** as socially bad
- People tend to **share** misinformation less, and tend to **spot** misinformation better, when:
 - *Responsible sharing of information is seen as normal and is valued/rewarded by the group*
 - *Being accurate is linked with our reputations within the group*



What 'school norms' do you have/want to have?



2. Misinformation is sticky



- **Explanatory depth:** *"I understand this"... until I have to explain it.*
- **Illusory truth:** *I've heard it before, so it feels more true.*
- **Truthiness:** *It feels right, so I'm inclined to believe it.*
- **Continued influence:** *I know it was wrong, but it still shapes my thinking.*
- **Sleeper effect:** *I remember the claim, but forget why I didn't trust it.*



The 'Truth Sandwich'



Fact

Lead with the fact and make it simple and concrete.

Warn about the myth

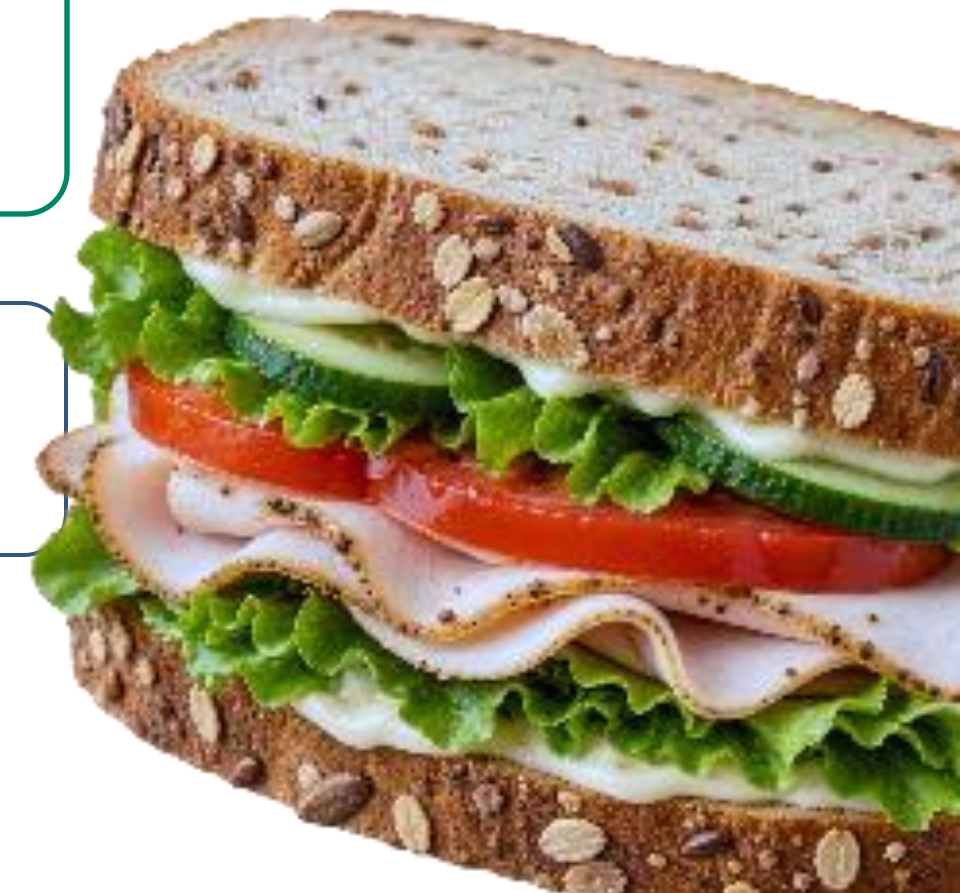
Warn beforehand that a myth is coming. Mention it only once.

Explain fallacy

Explain how the myth misleads.

Fact

Finish by reinforcing the fact, multiple times if possible.



From debunking to prebunking



Debunking

- This is a reactive response after a misleading claim appears
- It involves identifying the claim, checking it, and correcting it with evidence

Prebunking

- This is a proactive response before misleading claims take hold
- It seeks to help pupils recognise the signs of misleading narratives and techniques, in advance
- Potentially valuable when pupils have not yet formed strong, misinformed beliefs

Both matter, but they work at different points in the process

Pre-bunking: The DEPICT Framework

Six common manipulation techniques to watch for:



Discrediting



Emotional
manipulation



Polarisation



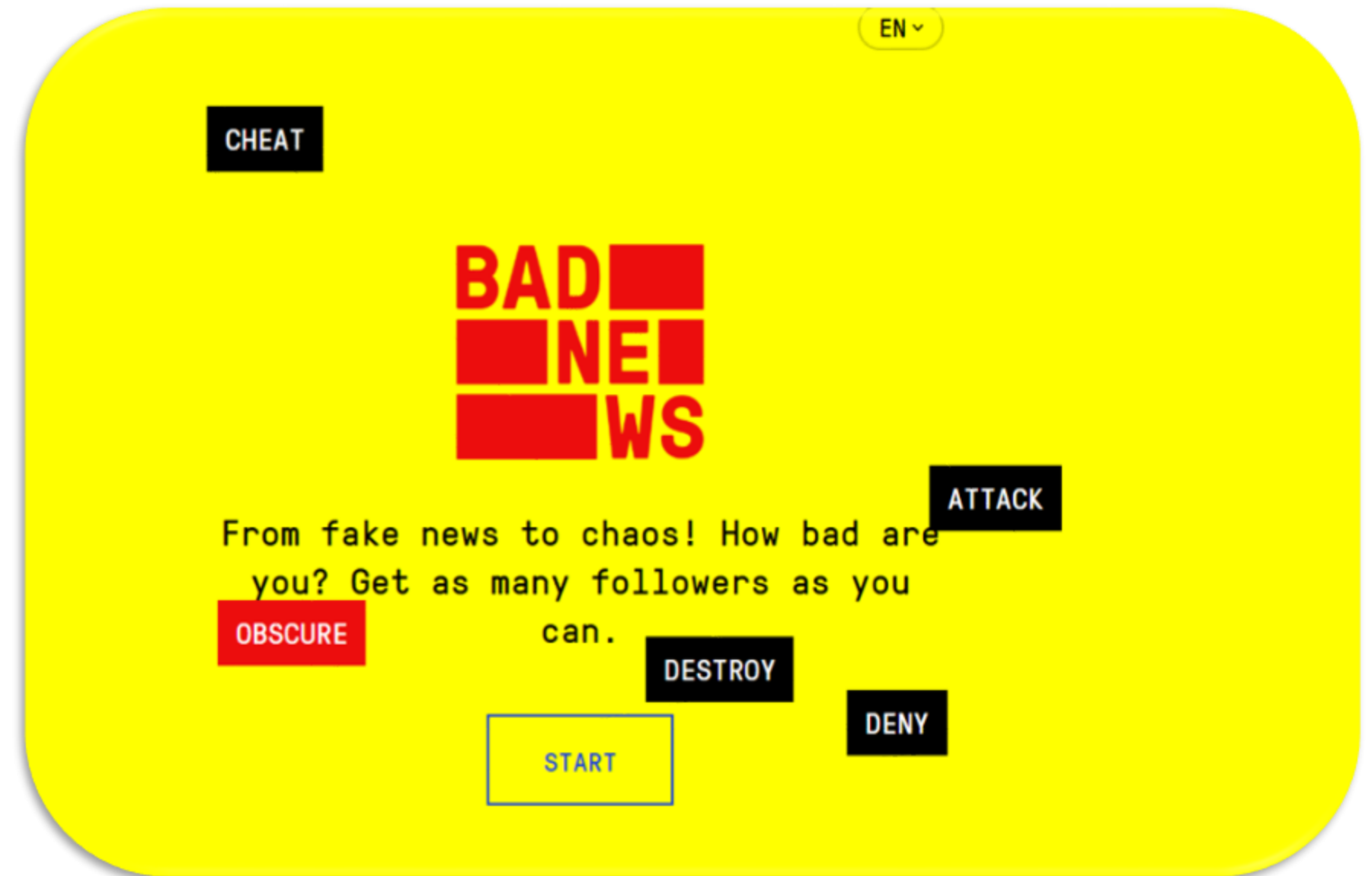
Impersonation



Conspiracy



Trolling



getbadnews.com



3. Misinformation tastes sweet



Certainty

The need to explain what is going on



Control

The need to feel safe and not powerless



Belonging and self-esteem

The need to feel valued

Motivated reasoning



We don't treat all information neutrally. We prefer information that:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fits with what we believe• Fits with what we want to be true | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes us feel good• Makes us (and our groups) look good |
|---|--|

And when this is true, we will more readily:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look for it• Pay attention to it• Treat it as credible | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Believe it• Share it• Avoid conflicting information |
|--|---|

These biases appear from a very early age, and vary both between and within people



4. Being wrong sucks

"Tell me more..."



1 Open up a conversation

2 Learn more about the misinformation — and where it came from

3 Understand why it is being shared

4 Help learners feel heard and respected

5 Open the door to critical thinking

Intellectual humility



"I don't have enough information to say for sure. Let's look at what evidence we'd need."

"There's no need to question this – it's obvious!"

"That's not right – I'm your teacher and I know best."

"I don't know the answer yet, I'd need to look it up."

"I know the correct answer, and this isn't it."

"I used to think something similar, but I changed my mind after learning more about it."

"I know I'm not always right, but in this instance I'm really certain"

"That's just a misunderstanding, Don't believe what you see on TikTok!"

Intellectual humility

Being transparent about the extent of your knowledge, and conveying only the level of certainty that is warranted



1 What is that?

2 Are you sure?

3 What if I told you it was actually a sponge?



That's a rock



Hmm, I'm pretty sure



Hmm, it could be a sponge



That's a rock



Yes, I'm definitely sure



No, it can't be a sponge

Intellectual humility



"I don't have enough information to say for sure. Let's look at what evidence we'd need."

"I don't know the answer yet, I'd need to look it up."

"I used to think something similar, but I changed my mind after learning more about it."



"That couldn't be right – I'm your teacher and I know better."

"I know the answer, and this isn't it."

"There's no need to question this – it's obvious"

Intellectual humility can build trust, credibility and might even be contagious!

Session overview

1. Building understanding

2. What can trusts do?

3. Reflection and next steps



Questions to take back to your SLT



1. Where do the challenges of the misinformation/conspiracy theory currently appear in our trust and what evidence do we have?

2. Do our staff have the confidence to respond well when misinformation, conspiracy beliefs or digital influence emerge?

3. If a pupil left our trust tomorrow, what knowledge and habits would help them navigate an AI infused world of algorithms and competing truth claims?

4. What opportunities exist within the current curriculum to build better resilience to misinformation? What opportunities would we like to see the new National Curriculum provide?

Reflection

1. Where are the greatest opportunities for schools to meet challenges of misinformation, conspiracy theory and digital influence?
2. What support does the system need to respond well to the challenges? What are the enablers? *e.g. curriculum reform*

Take some time to reflect on today's session and share your thinking with your SLT.

Please get in touch and let us know:



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niot.org.uk/research-projects/centre-for-digital-information-literacy-in-schools

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If you'd like to know more about the work of the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracy Theory in Schools please contact:



sally.burtonshaw@publicfirst.co.uk or visit:

counteringconspiracies.publicfirst.co.uk



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Thank you



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