International Coalition of Girls' Schools
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eBRIEF
RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR PRINCIPALS

Issue 5 | 20 March 2025

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Girls are more susceptible to conspiracy theories: Preparing students to face misinformation, disinformation and conspiracies online

As the terms misinformation, disinformation and conspiracies continue to dominate public discourse, how we can counter the unreliability of dangerous or harmful information online remains an important consideration. This is especially important for children and young people, who are increasingly exposed to this type of content via electronic devices and online platforms. For the first time, researchers from the Commission into Countering Online Conspiracies in Schools have tackled this question via the largest ever study of its kind in English schools. Through polls, focus groups and conversations with young people, educators and parents, this new report considers how conspiracy theories are impacting young people.

The report highlights that children, young people and adults receive news and search for information in different ways, leading to differences in their world views. Young people tend to get their news from less traditional channels, such as the social media platform TikTok, in comparison to adults. The Commission's Report found that 77% of 11-12-year-olds use social media, despite the age limits on most social media platforms being 13 and has suggested that the appeal of social media's accessibility and immediacy may play a critical role in how it is used.

The Report further indicates that some demographics of young people are more susceptible to conspiracy theories than others. In contrast to previous research, the Commission's research has found that girls are one of the groups more likely to be receptive to conspiracy theories, especially when compared to their male counterparts.

Age and ethnicity had no impact on susceptibility to conspiracy theories, although children with older siblings and those from lower socioeconomic demographics were more receptive to conspiracies. Those who felt marginalised were also more receptive to conspiracies, as were those who felt that the lives of ordinary people were getting worse, those who felt the world is becoming a scarier place, and those with strong beliefs in free speech. The Commission's preliminary research has also indicated that young people with autism are vulnerable.

There are many understandings of what conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation constitute. Often, this differs to what has been set out in academic research. Young people's understanding of conspiracy theories reflect an additional cross-over with national and international news, influencer items and celebrity content. Despite age limits on social media platforms, young people are accessing social media from a young age and obtaining news from non-traditional sources, making this a further challenge.

The report shows that young people's trust in adults is high – but low in public institutions and politics. Children identified both parents and teachers as accurate sources of information where they felt they could go to "fact-check" a story. Teachers were also important as trusted adults in children's lives, with 63 per cent of young people saying they would be confident to speak to their teacher about these challenges beyond fact checking

alone. However, levels of trust in parents and teachers declined during adolescence, making the window of opportunity critical in addressing this challenge. By age 17 to 18, only 17 per cent of young people “completely trust” teachers compared to 27 per cent at age 11 to 12. This makes primary school a critical entry point.

The Report shows that younger students aged between 11 and 12 are more likely to rely on their school, word of mouth and internet for news. As they age, social media starts to take a bigger part in this process due to ease of use and the ability to access information quickly. While young people can be influenced by social media, the research also showed that they could have their opinions changed by mainstream news sources, showing an awareness of multiple sources of information. However, when gaps in information are present, adolescents are regularly turning to social media for answers.

The Commission’s Report considered why students explore and discuss conspiracies, especially in school environments, finding it is generally driven by genuine curiosity, rather than an intent to cause disruption. However, most school staff think that young people believe conspiracy theories to some extent.

Despite concern from media, educators, families, and researchers about conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation, young people do generally not share similar concerns. While young people did recognise that conspiracies can be harmful, students did not necessarily think that all conspiracy theories are problematic. Another concern lies in the impact on how students perceive information. The influence of conspiracies can lead students to reach inaccurate or worrying conclusions about the value of information sources, including the rejection of books, journals, academic sources or valid news outlets.

Educators hold concerns about how conspiracies could impact the way students treat peers and staff. This includes the risk that conspiracy beliefs could influence young people’s social interactions generally, even when there is not a direct connection to a specific conspiracy theory.

Despite these concerns, the Report found that neither parents nor school staff place conspiracy beliefs in their top five concerns for young people in schools currently. This raises important questions for educators about how we prioritise and deliver support for young people, especially girls, to navigate misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy content online. Whilst the Report found that teachers and schools are prepared to support students, it highlighted school staff are actively seeking the resources, time and support to do so, with many adults generally reporting a lack of confidence in how to educate young people about conspiracies, misinformation and disinformation.

The Report has made far-reaching recommendations for policy makers and educators to consider including: leadership, support for teachers including regularly updated resources and best practice guides; expert-led, research-informed and sustained Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for school staff and leaders (and roles outside of schools such as Youth Workers); training embedded into the early career teacher training; media literacy and criticality to be embedded in the school curriculum from primary school; safeguarding training and policies to include conspiracy theory, misinformation and disinformation.

The Report recognises schools as “anchor institutions” that are part of a broader community and network including youth and voluntary sectors, partners the Report highlights as essential in supporting children, especially from an early age when levels of trust in adults is higher. The report has also identified that parents can also support children, however, more research is needed to better understand how families and guardians can be supported to address this at home.

References

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