

What school staff need from AI literacy: Differentiated concerns across professional roles

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Abstract

Scoping discussions for a longitudinal study of young people and generative AI revealed that school staff with different responsibilities have distinct concerns about how they can support students in relation to AI. This position paper maps those concerns and argues that community-centred AI literacy requires recognition of role-differentiated adult approaches as a precondition for the harder design task: building literacy around what young people are actually doing with AI, informed by their lived experience.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; *Field studies*; **Ethnographic studies**; **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Keywords

AI literacy, generative AI, young people, community-centred, schools

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1 Introduction

In preparing a UK-based longitudinal study following 13–14 year olds and their generative AI use across school and home, we held planning discussions with six categories of school staff: academic teachers, pastoral leads, safeguarding leads, educational technologists, IT staff and governors. Every group had a specific – different – concern about how to engage with AI in a way that supported children and met their professional obligations. All felt under-equipped and unsure how to make the situation better.

These discussions were scoping work prior to data collection. They were held with staff in UK secondary schools as part of preparing a longitudinal study exploring children’s AI use, and served

to inform the study’s recruitment, ethics and design. The observations below are offered as a position grounded in those preparatory conversations.

These discussions underlined that AI literacy in schools cannot be delivered as a single policy mandate or teaching requirement. It is a community-centred problem, and approaching it as such requires acknowledgement that the adults around a child do not share a common starting point. This paper offers a framing of AI literacy as role-differentiated coordination work, with implications for how AI literacy interventions should be designed.

2 Policy vs practice: what is required and what is needed

The UK’s revised Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) statutory guidance [4] requires schools to teach aspects of AI literacy across the school career. The guidance focuses on harms: AI-generated imagery, risks associated with AI chatbots.

This is important but insufficient: the UK is increasingly dependent upon its educational institutions to provide support to the community in a wider range of areas [6, 10]. Parents and other adults will look to schools for technological advice. The starting point for this is appropriate levels of comfort within the school setting itself.

Our discussions made it clear that AI is simultaneously a teaching tool, a learning tool, a safeguarding concern and an infrastructure risk. Students may encounter AI through teacher-led activities, personal devices, school networks and home use. They may be exposed to staff using it positively in class, sanctioning them for certain use types, or applying safeguarding protocols based on monitoring data. No single staff role has visibility across all of these, yet each role is expected to respond to what happens within its slice and somehow provide a coherent message to students.

Academic teachers have a dual bind: schools are increasingly subject to incentives from the government to introduce AI tools into the classroom – and rules around their appropriate use. This may result in senior management goals and expectations on teacher use [2]. Teachers therefore have to adapt tools in the classroom, justify those tools, and ensure they are safely deployed. In schools lucky enough to have dedicated educational technologists, their role is crucial in supporting teachers to find such tools, cut through the hype and fear associated with them, and ensure procurement and rollout. Where they cannot help is in supporting teachers to understand how children use additional AI tools to support, or circumvent, learning activities outside school.

Pastoral leads also need to consider the external use of such tools. They need to address widespread AI use in ways detrimental

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to academic attainment — but, as RSHE leads, they also need non-judgemental approaches to discussing AI use with students. This is particularly true where that use intersects with wellbeing, identity and relationships. As the community increases its reliance upon schools, it is this role more than others that bears the weight of expectation for future-proofing children's positive relationship with digital technologies. It is also the role that could serve as a feedback mechanism for all the other staff groups — they could hold the keys to understanding what “normal” AI use in children looks like at any moment in time.

IT staff and safeguarding leads need that nuance most. The two functions are increasingly intertwined as schools become digital, not just in protecting student and staff personal data, but in monitoring for concerning behaviour on school networks and devices [5]. IT teams perform risk management around new tools and set up filtering and monitoring of online traffic. To set those filters, safeguarding teams need to pinpoint what to monitor. Some things are obvious — words associated with violence, terrorism, the harm of self or others — but personal AI use is less settled. The role of AI in general, much less in a school's more vulnerable populations, is more than a filtering problem. What does concerning AI use look like?

All of this then has to be wrapped up for governance consumption. Governors hold strategic oversight of the school and specific safeguarding obligations [3]. AI as a socio-technical issue creates two governance tensions. First, governance structures treat technology as infrastructure, separate from pastoral or academic issues. Second, joining those threads requires specific governor expertise — which is not always present.

While the policy detail here is specific to the UK, the structural dynamic — AI-related responsibilities distributed across professional roles that were not designed to coordinate on a single cross-cutting issue — is likely recognisable wherever schools, or similar institutions, have to support complex issues such as AI literacy development. For those building AI tools and supporting literacy efforts, this matters because AI literacy materials and training tend to assume a unified institutional perspective. They are typically built for “schools” or “teachers” rather than for the specific roles that have to coordinate around children's actual use. That mismatch makes interventions easy to publish but hard to implement.

3 Building literacy collaboratively

The role-differentiation argument above is necessary but not sufficient. Understanding what each adult group needs is a precondition for the harder question: how to build AI literacy that reflects what young people are actually doing. Generative AI tools are already present in the lives of most UK secondary-age students [8]. The question is not whether young people are using them, but how, and what support they need while doing so. Research into children's AI use, like parallel work in online safety and cyber security, suggests that young people are often more aware of the risks adults worry about than those adults expect [1, 7, 11]. Children do report concerns about dependency on AI tools, both for academic work and for companionship. They are aware of accuracy problems and of the social risks of being seen to rely on AI. Where they struggle, as

adults also do, is in translating awareness into consistent practice [9].

Children know that adults struggle with these issues too: this is a crucial point in building effective AI literacy. If children already have a working understanding of many of the risks, then an AI literacy model built around telling them what is right, wrong, or to be feared by adults who also struggle with these things will fall on deaf ears. What the staff in our planning discussions wanted was not a way to warn students, but a way to understand what students were already doing well enough to build a coherent institutional response around it.

Community-centred AI literacy must therefore include mechanisms for involving young people directly in shaping it. We know through co-design, participatory research and child-led inquiry that young people are competent informants on their own digital lives. What makes generative AI distinctive is that the adults around the child are also still working out their position. AI literacy design therefore has to support not only children's voices but the interpretive work that follows: school staff being able to hear how young people are using these tools, why, what worries them, where they find value, and to translate that into role-specific institutional responses.

It is not to say that young people have all the answers; it is more that they are aware that they may have as many answers — and certainly more relevant answers — than the adults who are required to teach and monitor them. This approach is also not intended as a back-door to a laissez-faire approach to technology use in schools. Rather, involving children builds credibility and trust. It also requires a real desire to learn on the part of school staff, as well as a means of facilitating the exercise. If everyone involved is invested in the process, then the outcomes should be stronger and better received.

Our preparatory work has made one thing clear: no single intervention or policy mandate can address the distinct professional obligations that shape how different adults in a school engage with AI. A community-centred approach must first account for these differences before it can meaningfully involve young people. Without role-differentiated adult literacy, the risk is not that schools fail to teach AI literacy, but that they teach it in ways that contradict children's lived experience and undermine the trust needed to build it collaboratively. For designers and researchers, the implication is that AI literacy in schools is not a single design problem. It is a coordinated set of design problems across adult roles, scaffolded so that children's voices can be heard, interpreted, and acted upon.

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