



Whose historical thinking? Representation of women in the Digital Inquiry Group's *Reading Like a Historian* world history curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This study reports on a content and discourse analysis of the Digital Inquiry Group's world history *Reading Like a Historian* educative curriculum. History curriculum has a powerful influence on how students view the past, and underrepresentation of women in curriculum materials is an enduring issue. Educative curriculum materials are an influential, yet understudied, component of teaching practice heralded for the ability to instigate classroom reform. This study examines the representation of women in online world history lessons through the framework of women's history scholarship. Our findings indicate that the majority of lessons present a male-defined history, lessons featuring women inconsistently support historical interpretation through the frames employed by historians of women and gender, and modification of original documents excludes women and limits the use of gender as a category for analysis. Despite the reform minded mission of DIG materials, the *Reading Like a Historian* world history lessons perpetuate male-defined history that marginalizes women.

KEYWORDS

Educative curriculum;
gender; historical thinking;
world history curriculum

Building on Woyshner's (2002) foundational work on the marginalization of women's history in secondary education, this study explores the representation of women in the Digital Inquiry Group's (DIG) curriculum resource, *Reading Like a Historian* (RLH) world history lessons. There is an established tradition of research, including Woyshner's, scrutinizing the representation of women in textbooks, standards, and lesson plans (Chick & Corle, 2016; Clark et al., 2004; Crocco, 2006; Engebretson, 2014; Hahn et al., 2007; Maurer et al., 2017; Roberts & Butler, 2012; Winslow, 2013). Studies have also illuminated the impact of the history curriculum on students' perceptions of women, both as historical agents and in contemporary society (Akita & Mori, 2021; Levstik & Groth, 2002; Schmidt, 2012; Wineburg, 2001). Additionally, studies continue to suggest that women's representation in history classrooms remains marginalized (Seibert, 2020; Shelburne, 2022). Given Woyshner's (2002) assertion that the application of the structuring principles of women's history scholarship to history curriculum could help address the underrepresentation of women in history classrooms, this article critically explores the gap between current scholarship on women's history and DIG's RLH world history lessons.

DIG, previously known as the Stanford History Education Group, was founded by Sam Wineburg in 2002 and sought to transform transformed history teaching in schools through its inquiry-based approach (Digital Inquiry Group, n.d.-b). Its *Reading Like a Historian*

(RLH) curriculum, downloaded over 15 million times globally, is an influential and widely accessible resource (Digital Inquiry Group, [n.d.-a](#)) that is an illustrative example of impactful digital scholarship (Wineburg, [2013](#)). The comprehensive and free nature of *RLH* lessons make them an accessible resource for world history teachers—a group often grappling with a content-heavy subject matter—who tend to rely on curricular aids to enhance their content knowledge (Crocco, [2010](#)). *RLH* material, writ large, has emerged as an important educative resource for teachers (Krajcik & Delen, [2017](#); Reisman & Fogo, [2016](#)). Considering the under-researched nature of world history (Bain & Harris, [2009](#); Girard & Harris, [2018](#); Harris & Bain, [2010](#)), conducting an examination of how women are represented in *RLH* world history lessons reflects the enduring importance of: critically unpacking embedded and taken for granted ideological values and presuppositions running within and through institutions and curriculum (Cherryholmes, [1982](#)) and studying how historical knowledge and history teaching continues to evolve over time and space (King, [2017](#); Lévesque, [2008](#); Seixas, [2004](#)).

This study extends Woyshner's analysis, probing the presence and portrayal of women in the curriculum. Given current attacks on social studies education over the teaching of divisive concepts and difficult histories (National Coalition Against Censorship, [2021](#)), as well as the ongoing critiques historians of women's history level at interpretations defined by hetero-normative and White male-centric history (Fuentes, [2016](#); Lerner, [1977](#); Scott, [1986](#); Tetreault, [1986](#); Woyshner, [2002](#)), this is a timely study. If *RLH*'s aim is to educate students in "thinking like a historian," the question arises: whose historical thinking are students reflecting?

We assessed the *RLH* world history curriculum, seeking to discern how the materials either challenged or reinforced assumptions about women and gender. Using the lens of contemporary frames in women's history scholarship, we critically explored the extent to which the curriculum sustains cultural biases that perpetuate women's oppression (Chick & Corle, [2016](#); Clark et al., [2005](#); Stevens & Martell, [2019](#)). Two research questions guided the study:

- (1) How are women and their experiences represented in the content and discourse of *RLH* world history lesson materials?
- (2) How do *RLH* world history lesson materials challenge or reinforce existing cultural assumptions about women/gender in history?

Literature review

Women in the social studies curriculum

Despite gaining ground during the 1970s, feminism and the study of gender and sexuality in social studies education has not secured a central space in the field (Bohan, [2017](#); Crocco, [2004](#); Schmeichel, [2011](#); Woyshner, [2012](#)). At the same time, the representation of women in social studies curricula remains significantly marginalized (Clark et al., [2005](#); Crocco, [2006](#), [2018](#); Engebretson, [2024](#); Hahn & Bernard-Powers, [1985](#); Hahn et al., [2007](#); Lerner, [1977](#); Leslie, [2021](#); Sadker et al., [2009](#); Tetreault, [1986](#); Trecker, [1971](#); Woyshner & Schocker, [2015](#)). Formal social studies curricula are often derived from textbooks and state standards. It is important to analyze these materials because they inform teachers and students about

what content is deemed valuable or historically significant (Au, 2009, 2012; Ross, 2006; Winslow, 2013).

Educational policies, standards, textbooks, and curricula are shaped through negotiation, compromise, and ideological struggles. Standards are often crafted by state boards of education composed of politically appointed members and influenced by policymakers and interest groups, with decisions driven by political ideologies and epistemological beliefs about the nature and purpose of history education (van Hover et al., 2010). Textbooks, developed by publishers seeking to align with various standards, tend to reflect and reinforce dominant narratives and ideologies (Goldstein, 2020). In contrast, curricula can emerge from diverse sources, including teachers, academics, and professional organizations. Curricula often aligns itself with standards, but not always—indicating the potential of curricular materials, such as DIG’s materials, to operate independently from standards and provide alternative and critical perspectives to textbook-based history. Multiple studies (Akita & Mori, 2021; Chick & Corle, 2016; Roberts & Butler, 2012; Shelburne, 2022) reveal a profound underrepresentation of women across standards, textbooks, and curricula with depictions often relegated to a limited roster of political or celebrated figures.

The under representation of women within social studies textbooks is not a recent phenomenon. Three decades ago, Sadker and Sadker (1994) highlighted the near absence of women in social studies textbooks. Subsequent studies (Chick, 2006; Chick & Corle, 2016; Clark et al., 2004; Schocker & Woyshner, 2013) echoed these findings, demonstrating how textbooks prioritize political and military history—dominated by the experiences and perspectives of White, western men—over social history (Bennett & Williams, 2014; Schmidt, 2012; Woyshner, 2006).

Because of the prevalence of military and political history narratives, Crocco (2018) noted that “efforts to incorporate gender and sexuality into school history over the last several decades have largely been token attempts to include these groups in a national narrative focused on political and economic change” (p. 340). As with textbooks, Engebretson’s (2014) discourse analysis of the 2010 National Council for the Social Studies curriculum standards noted the privileged place of political history and the underrepresentation of women. Similarly, a study by the National Women’s History Museum found that the political and military history in American history standards resulted in greater representation for men (Maurer et al., 2017). Maurer et al. (2017) found 15 commonly cited women across United States history standards, including Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman. Only three, Rosa Parks, Norma McCorvey, and Eleanor Roosevelt, were from the post-World War II era. When women are represented in U.S. History textbooks and standardized curricula, research has suggested that they are typically found in narratives detailing social/political reform movements such as abolition, temperance, or suffrage (Crocco, 1997; Schafer & Bohan, 2009; Schmeichel, 2015; Schmidt, 2012; Winslow, 2013).

This pattern of limited representation persists in students’ historical understanding. At first glance, a reading of Wineburg and Monte-Sano’s (2008) survey of high school students’ perceptions of the most famous Americans would seem to reveal there has been an increase in the representation of women in students’ minds. When asked to list the “most famous Americans in history,” over half of the 10 most named figures in the study were women. However, this finding requires a couple of qualifications. First, the women named (i.e., Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Amelia Earhardt, Oprah Winfrey, and Marilyn

Monroe) align with Banks's (1988) critique of a "Heroes and Holidays" approach to representing marginalized groups. Second, as the authors noted, the procedures of the study—which stipulated no presidents be listed and at one stage prompted students to list women—"inflated the number of women that appeared on students' final list" (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008, p. 1189). While the findings suggest potential for increasing visibility of women in U.S. History, the methodological decisions reveal the need for intentional efforts to make women visible to students. Studies that examined classroom interventions to promote teaching women's, including women of color's, history reveal how rarely women, gender, and intersectional analysis appear in social studies curriculum (Kohlmeier, 2005; Vickery et al., 2019).

In terms of world history education, scholars have noted that an absence of women, Western bias, and educators' lack of knowledge shape instruction (Merryfield & Subedi, 2003; Ortega-Sánchez & Heras-Sevilla, 2023; Shelburne, 2022; Winslow, 2013). Winslow's (2013) study of New York State's Global Studies standards and end-of-course assessment found that in the last 25 years the exam only featured 25 women, and the only women represented in the curriculum "occupied positions of political or military power, like Elizabeth I of England and Catherine the Great of Russia" (p. 326). Similarly, Shelburne (2022) examined the representation of women across Virginia's 2008 and 2015 world history standards and curriculum frameworks and found only seven women.

To counter this bias, Noddings (2001) argued for increased emphasis on social history. However, this proposition has been critiqued for its potential to confine women to the social realm (Woyshner, 2002) and reinforce normative definitions of womanhood (Schmidt, 2012). Woyshner (2002) called for a broader definition of political history encompassing any action taken to influence the government and community, thus including a wider range of women's experiences. Wineburg (2001) also criticized the myopic focus on political and military events, asserting that the scarcity of women in history curricula is misleading, socially dysfunctional, and an educational challenge that needs addressing.

Scholars have proposed solutions such as policy and practice alterations alongside curriculum blueprints and lesson plans specifically designed to address the pervasive underrepresentation of women in social studies (Brugar et al., 2014; Eckert, 2024; Hahn et al., 2007; Hickey & Kolterman, 2006; Levstik, 2001; Merryfield & Subedi, 2003; National Council for the Social Studies, 2022; Sincero & Woyshner, 2003; Waring & Forsyth, 2024). While groups like the National Women's History Museum have made efforts to create classroom materials featuring women's experiences, research has indicated that more work is needed to represent the perspectives of Black women in the lesson plans produced by this organization (Colley & Broome, 2020; Colley & Mitchell Patterson, 2022). In this context, DIG, with its mission to improve history education through research, direct engagement with classrooms, and provision of free materials, holds the potential to make a substantial contribution to this ongoing discourse. However, the question remains: how do DIG materials augment or transform the representation of women in the social studies?

Reading Like a Historian lessons as educative materials

Educative materials are an influential component of teaching practice (Bopardikar et al., 2021; Brunner & Abd-El-Khalick, 2020; Quebec Fuentes & Ma, 2018) but remain under-explored within social studies education (Callahan et al., 2014). A recent study by the

American Historical Association found that history teachers use free online resources more than textbooks, and 52% of survey respondents reporting using *RLH* materials (American Historical Association, 2024). As Ball and Cohen (1996) argued, educative materials' intimate connection with daily instruction makes them potential catalysts for teaching reform. Recently, online educational resources such as DIG's *RLH*, "Read, Write, Inquire," and the C3 hub have emerged in social studies. Commercial platforms, like "Teachers Pay Teachers," supplement these resources with additional content (Rodríguez et al., 2020). Among these *RLH* world history lessons are a well-established and high-quality alternative to textbooks that promote teaching reform (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Davis & Krajcik, 2005; Drake et al., 2014).

The DIG educative curriculum stands out due to its popularity and influence (Blankenship, 2015; Fogo et al., 2019; Johnston, 2014; Reisman, 2012a, 2012b; Reisman & Fogo, 2016). At the time of study completion, the DIG website housed 114 U.S. history and 53 world history *RLH* lesson plans in addition to source analysis and assessment materials.¹ DIG materials are living resources; the online lesson plans may be updated and added to, and new topics may be introduced. This immediacy highlights the power of DIG's online educative curriculum to quickly and efficiently provide teachers with resources. At the same time, older versions of lessons may continue to be circulated among teachers and used in the classroom. In terms of its wide usage and incorporation of scaffolds for teaching historical thinking, DIG's online *RLH* lessons constitute educative curricular materials connected to the everyday practice of history educators.

DIG materials encourage students to "think like a historian," embodying disciplinary methods such as contextualization, corroboration, and source analysis. Research on DIG has primarily evaluated its effectiveness in promoting historical thinking and literacy. *RLH* lesson plans follow a consistent structure: background information, a Central Historical Question (CHQ), analysis of primary sources with student handouts, answering of the CHQ, and a final discussion. Each lesson comes with a lesson plan, student handouts, original source documents, and an image-based PowerPoint for background information. Reisman (2012a) measured the effect of the *RLH* curriculum on students' historical thinking, transfer of historical knowledge to current issues, mastery of factual knowledge, and growth in reading comprehension. Over a period of six months, she found substantial gains across all four areas. Reisman and Fogo (2016) assessed the quality of history instruction using the materials and found that while teachers' limited subject and pedagogical content knowledge negatively impacted the quality of instruction, *RLH* supported teachers in engaging students in historical reading and thinking. Fogo et al. (2019) studied teacher rationale for changing the *RLH* materials and concluded that they are a curricular fit. When teachers adapted the materials to fit the needs of their students, they did not disrupt the core structure/theory of the content of the materials.

Taking a different approach to research on DIG's *RLH* resources, Collin and Reich's (2015) comparative analysis of a lesson from two different educative organizations, DIG and the Zinn Education Project, interrogated the implicit assumptions of differing disciplinary literacy models. They found DIG's *RHL* lesson centered academic knowledge and encouraged student disciplinary thinking in ways that might provoke moral questions. However, they suggested that DIG materials did not guide students toward historical thinking that addresses ethical considerations of how histories are represented in terms of asking "moral questions of who has the right to tell which histories in which ways?" (Collin & Reich, 2015, p. 20). In

contrast, the critical literacy of the Zinn Education Project's lesson emphasized moral education as everyday understandings of use of history in the public sphere.

Despite these investigations, the historical content represented in DIG lessons, including representations of women in *RLH* materials have not been fully examined. Given studies that critique the lack of representation of women in social studies curricula, it is crucial to examine their depiction in influential materials like those found in DIG. Guided by scholarship on women's history, we aimed to fill this gap in the analysis of DIG's representation of women within their world history lesson collection.

Theoretical framework

This study uses theoretical frames from women's history scholarship to analyze the content and discourse surrounding women and gender in the *DIG* world history lessons. Historians draw on different theoretical perspectives and methods of interpretation when constructing historical accounts. These perspectives are part of their "historical read" of source materials and influence their choices regarding source selection and frames for analysis (Leinhardt & Young, 1996). For example, political, Africanist, economic, postcolonial, and social historians researching the Industrial Revolution would select different sources and ask distinct questions, leading to diverse historical interpretations. Similarly, historians of women and gender use analytical frames to challenge male-centric historical narratives. Thinking like a historian involves recognizing how different frameworks shape historical inquiry. In this section, we review the historiography of women's history to synthesize a theoretical framework which can be used to analyze the representation of women and gender in the *RLH* world history lessons.

Women's history scholarship emerged alongside the second wave of feminism during the 1970s and 1980s (Popkin, 2016). Lerner (1977) called for a "paradigm shift" in historical studies, challenging the relegation of women to the private sphere and their consequent erasure from mainstream political histories. She proposed a phase model of women's representation, which was later developed into an evaluative framework by Tetreault (1986). Lerner's phases span from male-defined history, in which historical narratives exclude women and are oriented along male ways of being, to female-oriented history, in which women's experiences are valued and researched:

- *Phase One, Male-defined history*: women excluded from historical narratives; historical narratives are shaped by male-defined value systems.
- *Phase Two, Compensatory History*: the history of significant women.
- *Phase Three, Contributory History*: the history of women's contributions and status within male-defined society.
- *Phase Four, Oppression Framework*: women's history only included in oppression narratives.
- *Phase Five, Female-oriented History*: the experiences of women in the past are valued and researched; women's perspectives are considered when constructing historical narratives.

Lerner's classification of women's representation in history sparked further frameworks used to critique male-dominated historical narratives in historical scholarship and school

curricula (McIntosh, 1983; Sklar, 1980; Tetreault, 1986). Scott (1986) championed the inclusion of gender as a category of analysis in historical scholarship, alongside class, geography, and race. Scott argued that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships and a primary way of signifying relationships of power. She maintained that historical investigation that uses gender as a category of analysis “will provide new perspectives on old questions . . . redefine the old questions in new terms, [and] make women visible as active participants” (p. 1075). This approach challenged “male-defined” history by interrogating the assumed norm of White male history and expanding the understanding of political action to include women’s contributions and influence on historical events.

Lerner, Scott, and others started a conversation about the representation of women in historical scholarship and the importance of centering women and gender to fully examine the human experience. Dayton and Levenstein’s (2012) review of U.S. women’s and gender history scholarship identified key areas of inquiry in the field, including “the intersection of race, class, gender and sexual orientation (and other categories) in shaping individual women’s identities and gender regimes; relational differences among women of varied statuses; the mutual construction of sexual and gender norms; and the conceptual destabilizing of gender and sex” (p. 794). These categories highlight how scholars began to critique binary understandings of gender as solely “male” or “female” and explore how gender-identities intersect with other dimensions of identity, such as sexuality, race, and class.

Contemporary historians of women and gender stress the importance of spatial and intersectional analyses, emphasizing their relevance to understanding gender and race relationships in different historical and geographical contexts (de Groot, 2018; Yan & Offen, 2018). Yan and Offen (2018) pointed to a close link between “gender studies and new critical histories of colonialism and empire, contact zones, cross-cultural encounters and racialization” (p. 18). Spatial analysis aids intersectional analysis of race and gender by considering how gender functions across the cultural geographies of the past, thus illuminating the gendered structures of colonial and racial subordination. For example, Wiesner-Hanks (2010, 2015) blended global history with research on women, gender, and sexuality, revealing the value of a wide spatial lens to extend historical research beyond traditional categories like military and political analysis of nation states. Stryker (2007) and Fuentes (2016) interrogated the concept of “woman” in women’s history. Stryker (2007) brought a queer lens to “the woman question” and defined gender as a historical and geographical construct used to maintain control and hierarchy.

Gender history has emerged to study gender in its many forms, including study of masculinity, nonbinary gender identities, and the transgender experience across time (Dayton & Levenstein, 2012). The study of women’s history and gender history is deeply intertwined. Examining gender as a historical and geographic construction requires the deconstruction of social signifiers, including sexual practices, of gender identities across time. Fuentes’s (2016) research investigating the racial and gendered power dynamics within colonial Caribbean society exemplifies this theoretical approach. Fuentes argued that White women possessed forms of power because of the presence and position of enslaved women in society. Fuentes posited that “gender” was a privilege of White women and that the co-opting of the bodies of women of color for sexual objectification rendered them “genderless” in the historical context of White colonial Caribbean society. Her work underscores the importance of intersectionality, a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989), to understand how multiple forms of discrimination and privilege

interact to shape individual and collective experiences. Intersectionality provides a critical lens for examining how women's roles in history are constructed and how their agency is framed within broader social structures.

Like earlier scholars, contemporary historians of women's history critiqued the marginalized place of women as a niche topic of interest in the realm of social history and have continued to advocate for the mainstream integration of gender as a category of historical analysis. Influenced by feminist theory, including second wave feminism and Black feminism, Queer, and post-colonial studies, the theoretical frameworks used in women's history challenge oppressive gender narratives in historical scholarship. Contemporary scholars have advocated for the recognition of gender as a historically constructed concept and the critical examination of race and gender power relations through spatial analysis.

We surveyed the literature and synthesized the following theoretical frame representing how women are positioned in historical narratives:

- *Women-oriented:* The experiences of women are valued and researched. Multiple gender perspectives are used to construct historical narratives.
- *Gender as a category for historical analysis:* Historical investigation asks questions about the relationship between gender and power. Historical narratives represent women as active agents whose experiences are important to the study of the past.
- *Gender as a geographic and historical construction:* Historical investigation examines how gender is defined across time, culture, and place. Historical narratives do not represent gender identity as static or universal concepts.
- *Spatial analysis of the intersection of race and gender:* Historical investigation asks questions about the gendered dynamics of cross-cultural encounters and includes analysis of the intersection of race and gender.

These theoretical understandings provide a guide for investigating how the content and discourse surrounding women in the *RLH* world history lessons challenge or reinforce cultural assumptions about women/gender in history. In the context of world history, the concept of intersectionality is particularly vital. Women's experiences cannot be fully understood without examining how gender operates in different cultural and historical contexts, often intersecting with colonialism, economic exploitation, and racial subjugation.

Gender is an important category of analysis, and investigating how gender operates as a system of power provides deeper insights into historical events, systems and structures. Shifting beyond binary understandings of "man" and "woman" recognizes the constructed and fluid nature of gender over time, culture, and space and, in doing so, challenges reductive and myopic narratives. These principles guided our evaluation of the *RLH* world history lessons. However, we recognized that this scholarship can still reproduce binary discourses especially when the omissions and absences of women in the materials analyzed are pervasive. We aimed to challenge this binary discourse by:

- Drawing on Stryker's (2007) critical essay "Transgender Feminism: Queering the Woman Question" as a theoretical touchstone to critique normative understandings of gender.
- Including the category "gender as a geographic and historical construction" in the analytical framework to foreground the fluidity and contextual nature of gender.

- Shifting the language in the framework from biologically-oriented terms like “female” to descriptors of gender identity, such as “women.”
- Addressing Queer erasure by critiquing the absence of non-binary and gender-diverse representations in the *RLH* curriculum.

In adopting this framework, our goal was to be part of a larger critique of how gender itself is constructed and represented in curriculum. We also looked to the Queer agenda for social education outlined by Schmidt (2024), which integrates gender<>sexuality to “interrupt/disrupt” Western, binary constructions of gender. Historians of women’s history support this agenda when investigating power and hierarchy in gender relations of different times and places. By synthesizing these approaches, we aimed to illuminate the limitations of traditional gender discourses in history education and propose more inclusive frameworks for future curriculum development.

Methods

The research methods within this study align with a rich tradition of research examining the role of textbooks, standards, and education policies in shaping discourse in education (Fleming, 1987; Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Leonardo, 2003; Lucy et al., 2020; Schocker & Woysner, 2013; Siebert, 2020). These prior studies employed discourse and content analysis to shed light on how narratives concerning race, gender, ethnicity, and key historical and civic concepts are perpetuated in curricular texts. Similar methodologies have been deployed in research on women’s representation in various social studies curriculum (Chick & Corle, 2016; Clark et al., 2004; Engebretson, 2014; Roberts & Butler, 2012; Shelburne, 2022; Winslow, 2013). The central methods of data collection and analysis within these studies included identification of the number of women in texts and an unpacking, often through a feminist lens, of how language “hangs together” to reinforce/challenge gender discourse (Gee, 1990). This study extends this tradition, examining women’s representation in the *RLH* world history curriculum.

In this qualitative investigation, we applied both content and critical discourse analysis to the *RLH* world history lesson materials. We adopted elements of content analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) in which specific language units (e.g., named women) are tallied to evaluate women’s representation. Language units (e.g., a word, phrase, or passage) were assessed in the context of the whole lesson and in relation to their role in contemporary gender constructions (e.g., descriptions of women leaders like Cleopatra). The synthesized theoretical frames of women’s history scholarship (e.g., use of gender as a category of historical analysis) were used to critically analyze the positioning of women in the curricular discourse of the *RLH* lessons (e.g., incorporation of women’s experiences into the central historical investigation).

Our approach to critical discourse analysis was informed by a recognition that knowledge claims possess the power to shape discourse (Foucault, 1975/1995). Language, viewed as a social practice, acquires meanings that are historically and socially situated (Fairclough et al., 1997; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). The norms of the taken-for-granted world are constructed and maintained through discourse, and non-normative behaviors are penalized (Gee, 1990). Educational institutions and organizations, as knowledge arbitrators, generate and perpetuate power through normative classroom discourses. The curriculum, including

online educative curriculum, become powerful instruments that define legitimate knowledge and either perpetuate or disrupt dominant discourses (Apple, 2004).

Data collection and analysis

The *RLH* world history lessons in this study are housed on the DIG website, which is consistently updated with new lessons and materials. The study focused on *RLH* world history lessons available on the website prior to October 2022. The study encompasses 53 world history lessons spanning from ancient Egypt to the late twentieth century categorized by era (ancient, modern, and medieval) with the number of lessons increasing in recent eras. These lessons were the primary data source, and only English language materials were considered.

The literature has frequently noted the absence of women in social studies curriculum. We approached our analysis by looking for the presence of women and analyzing how they were represented and positioned. We were inclusive about what constituted presence when locating women in the lessons. For example, images of women in lesson PowerPoints, even when not part of the lesson inquiry, were included in frequencies of women's representation. Data collection included lesson introductions and images on website landing pages, student materials, teacher materials, original source documents, and lesson PowerPoints. For our purposes, data consisted of images, words, phrases, and passages of text. For each lesson, the following information was collected: lesson title, lesson CHQ, named men, named women, collective/unnamed references to women (e.g., "wife," "mother," images), and words, phrases, and passages of text that reference women, gender, or sexuality. Due to the emphasis on source analysis within each lesson, source authors were included under named men and women. We excluded authors from the count of named men and women when gender was indiscernible in student handouts (e.g., gender neutral first names, sources without authors, authors listed by first initial). A handful of lessons attribute authorship; when available, the publication date, date of last update, and lesson author were also collected.

The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first stage quantified representation of women in lessons, coding for the number of named men and women and the presence of women's experiences. Table 1, provides an example of how we captured the extent women were represented in all world history lessons. Frequencies were placed in a spreadsheet and used to calculate the Gender Disparity Ratio (GDR) of named women to men in *RLH* world history lessons. GDR is equal to the number of named women divided by the number of named men. Since division by zero is not possible, we replaced any instances in which the number of named men is zero with infinity (inf) to ensure that calculations can proceed

Table 1. Sample analysis of women's representation.

Lesson	Named Women	Unnamed Women	Named Men	Experiences of women featured
Hammurabi's Code	0	✓	5	✓
What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?		"rights of wives" "his wife" "status of women"		Use of gender as a category of historical analysis e.g., Teacher Materials: "The codes outline an inferior social position for women."

without errors. In no instance was this necessary. A GDR of one means perfect gender parity, a GDR over one means there are more named women than men, a GDR of less than one means there are more named men than women, and a GDR of zero means there were no named women in lessons.

We also made descriptive notes about the tone and context of language used. Frequencies and GDR were used to indicate the representation of women but were not used to determine whether a lesson featured the experiences of women. A lesson might include only one named woman but position her as central to the historical inquiry. We determined a lesson to feature the experiences of women if the lesson was about a woman/women-centric event, featured women's perspectives in the source set, highlighted women's contributions, or used gender as a category for historical analysis.

The second level of analysis addressed the positioning of women in the lessons. Nine lessons were identified as featuring the experiences of women. To identify the power dynamics present in the discourse around gender in these lessons, the theoretical frames of women's history scholarship were used (de Groot, 2018; Lerner, 1977; Stryker, 2007; Tetreault, 1986; Yan & Offen, 2018). Lessons were coded for certain frames such as women-oriented history, the use of gender as a category of historical analysis, the representation of gender as a geographic and historical construction, and a spatial analysis of the intersection of race and gender. In an iterative process, we held up these theoretical understandings as a mirror to see the extent of their connection to the data. Researchers deliberated on codes identifying the narratives around gender presented in these lessons and how women were positioned as significant/insignificant historical actors. Table 2, provides an example of the analysis of discursive links between theoretical frames in women's history scholarship and data from the lessons.

The lessons which did not feature the experiences of women were determined to fall under phase one of the analytical model used by women's historians: male-defined history (i.e., history that excludes the experiences of women). We discussed how the images, phrases, and words that did reference women in these lessons operated within the framework of male-defined historical narratives. Additionally, we noted references to women/gender were often cut in modification of original documents for student use. In critiquing this exclusion, we determined whether the cut text could be used to answer the CHQ and discussed the implications of its exclusion on students' interpretation of the past. Table 3, provides an example of when references to women/gender were cut and the use of

Table 2. Discursive links between theoretical frames and lesson materials.

Lesson & CHQ	Sample data	Woman -oriented history	Use of gender as a category of historical analysis	Gender as a geographic and historical construction	Spatial and intersectional analysis
Hammurabi's Code What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?	Student materials: "What do codes 117, 138, & 141 suggest about the status of women in Babylonian society?"	✓ Materials guide students and teachers to consider the perspective of women when constructing a historical narrative in response to the CHQ.	✓ Materials ask students to consider the relationship between gender and power.	✗	✗

Table 3. Sample analysis of omitted text.

Lesson & CHQ	Omitted Text	Could the omitted text be used to answer the CHQ?	Impact of omission on students' historical interpretations
Ibn Battuta What was the Muslim world like in the 1320s?	<i>Document A:</i> These men are celibate; the married men have separate convents . . . Meccan women are extraordinarily beautiful and very pious and modest. They too make great use of perfumes to such a degree that they will spend the night hungry in order to buy perfumes with the price of their food. They visit the mosque every Thursday night, wearing their finest apparel; and the whole sanctuary is saturated with the smell of their perfume.	✓	The omitted text describes gender and sexuality norms in 14 th century Muslim society. The text supports student investigation of differences in gender construction across geography and time.

theoretical frames to analyze the impact of these omissions on the discourse around gender in the lessons.

From collected data, memos, and discussions, the following findings emerged: (1) the majority of lessons present a male-defined history, (2) lessons featuring women inconsistently support historical interpretation through the frames employed by historians of women and gender, and (3) modification of original documents excludes women and limits the use of gender as a category for analysis.

Limitations

While the products from DIG encompass a wide range of resources, including civic online reasoning, U.S. history lessons, assessment tools, and materials for historical inquiry, this study focuses exclusively on the world history lessons. This scope represents a limitation, as a comprehensive analysis of the representation of women and gender in the *RLH* curriculum would require examining its U.S. history lessons as well. Our rationale for this world history focus is threefold: first, while the *RLH* U.S. history lessons have been extensively studied (Reisman & Fogo, 2016), world history remains under-researched (Bain & Harris, 2009; Crocco, 2010; Girard & Harris, 2018; Harris & Bain, 2010). Second, world history inherently grapples with global diversity and complexity, offering unique opportunities to explore marginalized voices, including that of women. Third, as former world history/global studies teachers, we recognize the persistent challenges of finding and accessing engaging, high-quality inquiry-based materials, making DIG’s world history lessons go-to resources for many teachers and teacher educators.

Positionality

In terms of our positionality as researchers, we lean on King’s (2024) argument that positionality statements are most valuable when they crucially reflect on how researchers’ perspectives inform the research process rather than focusing on personal identities. While positionality statements that disclose researchers’ sexual, racial, and gender identities can be valuable in certain contexts, we intentionally chose to center our professional roles and

collaborative process in this statement. This decision aligns with King's (2024) perspective that reflexivity in positionality statements enhances the research process while performative disclosures risk detracting from the study's purpose. By focusing on our professional experiences as educators and researchers, we aim to avoid performative gestures that might distract from our examination of women and gender in widely used curriculum materials.

As a doctoral student, a full professor, and alumni doctoral student, we brought diverse perspectives shaped by our teaching experiences as world history and global studies educators in Virginia and New York. Now, as teacher educators, we use DIG materials extensively in our work with students. Throughout this study, we held weekly discussions to reflect on theoretical frameworks, data analysis, and findings. These meetings facilitated critical conversations about gender, feminism, and intersectionality, which informed our analysis and revealed how our professional experiences shaped our interpretations. Given the fact that the research team was comprised of scholars of differing ages, time was spent discussing generational paradigms and differences in our understanding of women and gender as we designed and embarked on the study.

Recognizing the value of DIG as a transformative resource for history education, we approached this study with pedagogical curiosity, aiming to explore how women are represented in this ambitious curriculum. We intentionally adopted a "generous read" of the materials, seeking to identify and assess representations of women, even in ambiguous contexts (e.g., the inclusion of 18 women in the Atatürk lesson). From the outset, we were mindful of the importance of situating ourselves professionally in the genealogy of our field (Boveda & Annamma, 2023). This study constitutes what Nader (1972) termed "studying up," which for us meant critically examining a respected and influential curriculum. Our shared professional identities as educators within patriarchal and heteronormative school cultures underscored the importance of synthesizing a framework that integrates women's history scholarship with gender studies to interrogate intersectionality and challenge binary narratives. Ultimately, this research highlights the persistent marginalization of women in history education and underscores the potential of *Reading Like a Historian* lessons to advance gender representation meaningfully. By grounding our work in women's and gender history, we aim to move beyond critique and contribute to the development of more inclusive practices in history education.

Findings

Across the lessons, the content and discourse of teacher and student materials presented a male-defined history in which women were represented to a limited degree. Where women's experiences were featured, most lessons presented a woman-oriented historical narrative and used gender as a category of historical analysis. However, few lessons examined the geographic and historical construction of gender or supported intersectional analysis. Finally, even when the central historical question was broad enough to incorporate the experiences of women, editing of original source documents in the lesson materials excluded women and the use of gender as a category of historical analysis. Findings indicate that while a limited number of lessons challenged dominant historical narratives which place study of women and gender on the margins, the majority of lessons reinforced notions that women are insignificant to the study of the past.

The majority of lessons presented a male-defined history

Male-defined history represents women as insignificant to the study of the past by excluding women from historical narratives that are constructed along male-defined value systems (Lerner, 1977). Women were underrepresented in the content of the *RLH* world history lessons and were discursively represented as lacking agency as historical actors, thereby undermining their historical significance. When women were mentioned, it was usually in a collective, unnamed capacity; as symbolic figures; in relation to men; or as victims. Figure 1 presents frequencies of gender representation and GDRs of named women to named men in *RLH* world history lessons. The presence of women in collective/unnamed capacities is represented as a value of one and lack of collective/unnamed reference is represented as a value of zero. The GDR of the *Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey* lesson is a clear outlier in representation due to a single slide in the lesson PowerPoint depicting 18 women in the Turkish parliament. Only two lessons reached parity in GDR, *China's Cultural Revolution* and *Women's War of 1929*, and in 16 lessons, women were not represented in either named or unnamed capacities.

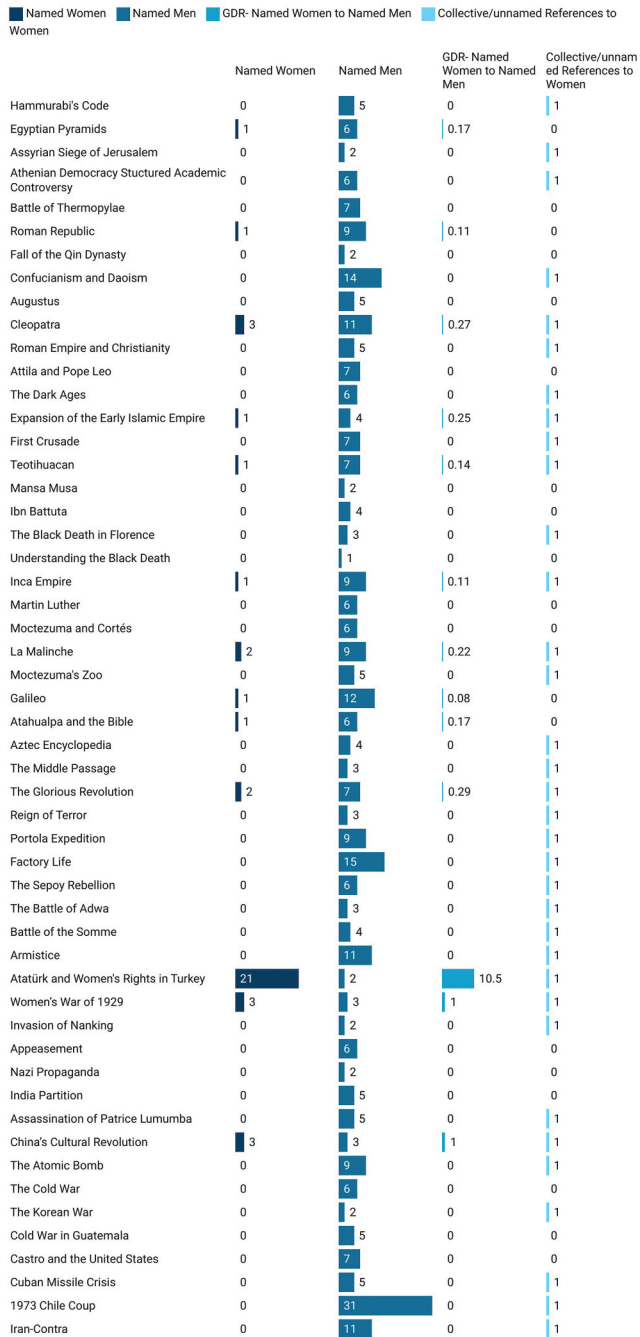
Out of all the lessons, 13 included named women in curricular materials. These included historical figures like Cleopatra but also the authors of secondary and primary sources as well as named goddesses. Often, references to “women” and “female” were used generically when referring to large groups, as seen in the *Assyrian Siege of Jerusalem* lesson. Specific terminology like “Citizen women” was used in the *Athenian Democracy* lesson to denote different voting rights. Images of unnamed women also appeared frequently in lesson PowerPoints, typically as background figures or accompanying men. Of the 41 named women in lessons, 18 names came from a blurry and out of focus image of women in parliament from the *Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey* lesson (Figure 2).

Women's identities in lessons were often tied to their relationships with men. For instance, in the *Expansion of the Islamic Empire* lesson, a woman warrior was described in relation to her male relatives. Similarly, Cleopatra's identity and power in the lesson bearing her name was largely framed in relation to men: “involved with Marc Antony,” “had relationships with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony,” “descendant of Ptolemy,” and “Caesar establishes Cleopatra as ruler of Egypt.” In many cases, her defeats were attributed to male figures, thus placing the focus away from her and toward the male counterparts. The final discussion question in the teacher materials shifted focus away from Cleopatra to the male figure, Octavian: “Victors write history. What can we learn about Octavian from these stories?” Within the lesson, Cleopatra was described as charming and ruthless, a description in contrast with Augustus who was defined by powerful adjectives without reference to charm: “ruthless and forgiving, rash and calculating.” Such representations subtly reinforce stereotypes that women rely on their sexuality to achieve power, suggesting that their political agency is dependent on their relationship with men.

Many women represented in lesson PowerPoints were not real-life historical actors, but religious or symbolic figures. For example, images of woman religious figures from the Christian tradition were present in an image in the *First Crusade* lesson. An image of an Aztec sculpture of the goddess Coatlicue was included in the *Teotihuacan* lesson PowerPoint. The single woman represented in the *Sepoy Rebellion* lesson was not an actual person but, rather, the personification of the virtue “Justice,” also an image in the lesson PowerPoint.



Representation of Women in RLH World History Lessons



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Representation of Women in RLH World History Lessons.



Figure 2. Slide from Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey lesson PowerPoint.

In the context of military history lessons (e.g., *Assyrian Siege of Jerusalem*, *First Crusade*, *Invasion of Nanking*, and *Armistice*), women were often depicted as victims of violence, a position reflecting powerlessness. With few exceptions (e.g., *Expansion of the Islamic Empire*) military forces were portrayed as exclusively male. The experience of women as victims of war was underexplored, and gendered violence in warfare was unexplored. Documents and/or support materials in the lessons on the *Invasion of Nanking* and *Armistice* gave some mention of the experiences of women and children as civilian casualties of war. Even when source documents contained content on sexual violence, *RLH* lessons often avoided discussing this sensitive topic, as seen in the *Invasion of Nanking* lesson in which mention of rape was included via Source C, but no guidance for discussion on this matter was provided in teacher materials. The student activities for Document C focused on reliability and corroboration between sources rather than historical interpretation that uses gender as a category of analysis. Similarly, two documents in the lesson on the *Armistice* described how conditions created by both war and the armistice negatively affected women and children. The inquiry focused on determining attitudes toward the armistice ending World War I, and the student work centered around evidence and corroboration. While students could reference the conditions of women and children as evidence to support attitudes against the war, the teacher materials did not encourage these interpretations.

Lessons featuring women inconsistently supported historical interpretation through the frames employed by historians of women and gender

We identified nine lessons as featuring women: *Hammurabi's Code*, *Athenian Democracy*, *Cleopatra*, *La Malinche*, *Aztec Encyclopedia*, *The Battle of Adwa*, *Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey*, *Women's Ways of 1929*, and *China's Cultural Revolution*. The discourse

around women and gender in these lessons inconsistently aligned with theoretical frames in women's history scholarship. Women-oriented history includes the perspectives of multiple genders when constructing historical narratives. Though sometimes to a minimal degree, the lessons featuring women also presented a women-oriented history by centering a woman historical figure, a women-centric event, or including the contributions/perspectives of women. However, rarely did the lessons support teacher/student examination of gender as a geographic and historical construction or an intersectional analysis of race and gender. Table 4, shows the alignment between lessons featuring women and the frames used in women's history scholarship.

Three lessons presented women-oriented history but did not align with any other frames of women's history scholarship: *Cleopatra*, *The Battle of Adwa*, and *China's Cultural Revolution*. The *Cleopatra* lesson was women-oriented because it centered a woman in the historical narrative. However, the lesson's primary focus was on the circumstances of her death and did not actually examine or feature her experiences as a historical actor. The *Battle of Adwa* lesson supported the use of information about the experiences of women to answer the lesson inquiry, "How did Ethiopia defeat Italy at the Battle of Adwa?" In supporting discussion, the teacher script stated, "The other factors mentioned to explain Ethiopia's victory—namely, the courage and support of the people and the participation of women." Despite the mention of women's contributions, the experiences of men and women in war were not explored through the lens of gender. Finally, *China's Cultural Revolution* presented a women-oriented historical narrative by providing students multiple sources from the perspectives of women to answer the question, "Why did Chinese youth get swept up in the Cultural Revolution?" This lesson again supported the use of information about women's experiences to answer the CHQ but did not guide teachers or students toward the use of gender as a category of analysis when creating an historical interpretation.

Of the lessons that did not center women as the main topic of historical inquiry, only three guided teachers/students toward the use of gender as a category for historical analysis. The student materials for the *Hammurabi's Code* lesson asked, "What do codes 117, 138, & 141 suggest about the status of women in Babylonian society?" as part of their guiding questions. Teacher materials provided a script to answer the question:

The codes outline an inferior social position for women. Code 117 suggests that men may have been able to sell their wives into forced labor to repay a debt. . . . However, the codes also suggest that women had some rights in Babylonian society. . . . code 117 limits the amount of time that women might be in servitude as repayment for debt. Both could have been improvements over past practices.

The *Athenian Democracy* lesson employed a Structured Academic Controversy format to address the question, "Was ancient Athens truly democratic?" In this process, students analyze a chart indicating the percentage of citizen women in Athens' population. They are prompted with questions like, "According to the Athenian Constitution, who had the right to vote in Athens?" and "Which groups of Athenians were able to vote? Which groups were not?" Contrary to typical lessons, there was no teacher script provided to guide discussions, suggesting that students are to debate women's voting rights independently. Finally, the *Aztec Encyclopedia* lesson presented the following CHQ: "How reliable is the Florentine Codex for learning about Aztec history and culture?" The teacher script supported discussion of the missing perspectives of women: " . . . it seems that the research assistance and

Table 4. Discursive links between theoretical frames of women's history and lessons featuring women.

Lesson & CHQ	Discursive links between frames and lessons			
	Woman-oriented history	Use of gender as a category of historical analysis	Gender as a geographic and historical construction	Spatial and intersectional analysis
Hammurabi's Code What can we learn about Babylonia from Hammurabi's Code?	<i>Source C:</i> 138. If a man wishes to separate from his wife who has borne him no children, he shall give her the amount of her purchase money and the dowry which she brought from her father's house and let her go.	<i>Student materials:</i> What do codes 117, 138, & 141 suggest about the status of women in Babylonian society?	✗	✗
Athenian Democracy Structured Academic Controversy Was ancient Athens truly democratic?	<i>Source C:</i> Citizen women; Total number of people: 29000.; Percentage of the population: 12%; Ability to vote: No	<i>Student materials:</i> According to the Athenian Constitution, who had the right to vote in Athens?" and "Which groups of Athenians were able to vote? Which groups were not able to vote?	✗	✗
Cleopatra Did Cleopatra die by snakebite?	A woman historical figure is the focus of historical investigation.	✗	✗	✗
La Malinche What was La Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico?	<i>Teacher materials:</i> What do historical sources tell us about Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico? There are no surviving documents made by Malinche herself, but she appears in multiple historical sources about the conquest.	<i>Student Materials:</i> Vocabulary- Malintzin: name Indigenous people called Malinche; adding "–tzin" in Nahuatl is a way to show respect Tweet in lesson PowerPoint: Spaniard colonization w patriarchy.	✗	✓ <i>Teacher materials:</i> [Students] may argue that she was enslaved by the Spanish, subjected to sexual violence, and had to carry out their orders ... [or that] ... her work as an interpreter came to be respected by the Spanish.
Aztec Encyclopedia How reliable is the Florentine Codex for learning about Aztec history and culture?	<i>Teacher Materials:</i> While it seems that the research assistance and elders were not representative of Aztec society as a whole—for example, women were not included-	<i>Student materials:</i> Who made the document? What were their perspectives, experiences, and knowledge, and how might these have influenced what they wrote?	✗	✗
The Battle of Adwa How did Ethiopia defeat Italy at the Battle of Adwa?	<i>Teacher materials:</i> The other factors mentioned to explain Ethiopia's victory—namely, the courage and support of the people and the participation of women.	✗	✗	✗

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Lesson & CHQ	Discursive links between frames and lessons			
	Woman-oriented history	Use of gender as a category of historical analysis	Gender as a geographic and historical construction	Spatial and intersectional analysis
Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey Did Atatürk's reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?	<i>Document D source note:</i> Sabiha Sertel was a prominent Turkish feminist, writer, journalist, activist, and socialist. She wrote an advice column in her journal <i>Resimli Ay</i> (The Illustrated Monthly). Under the name Cici Anne, or "sweet mother," she would respond to letters from women asking her views on various subjects.	<i>Student materials:</i> Using evidence from these documents, write a paragraph that addresses the question: Did Atatürk's reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?	<i>Student materials:</i> 2. According to Atatürk, why had being a good mother always been the most important virtue for Turkish women?	✕
Women's War of 1929 What happened at the start of the Women's War of 1929?	<i>Source A:</i> A meeting of women was called and Nwanyeruwa's excited story was told as confirmation of the rumor [that women would be taxed].	<i>Source A:</i> From the whole countryside women poured into Oloko and proceeded according to custom to "sit" upon the man who had tried to assess Nwanyeruwa.	<i>Teacher materials:</i> This angered Igbo women, many of whom already resented British rule and the fact that the British ignored their traditional roles and rights in Igbo society.	<i>Student materials:</i> What do you predict Nwanyoji's perspective on the Women's War will be? Why might her perspective differ from Margery Perham's?
China's Cultural Revolution Why did Chinese youth get swept up in the Cultural Revolution?	<i>Document C source note:</i> Rae Yang was a young girl in the spring of 1966, when she became a part of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.	✕	✕	✕

elders were not representative of Aztec society as a whole—for example, women were not included." Each of these examples highlights the lesser status of women in past societies.

Four lessons centered around notable woman historical figures, women's rights, or a woman-centric historical event as the main topic of the historical inquiry: *Cleopatra*, *La Malinche*, *Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey*, and *Women's War of 1929*. Outside of the *Cleopatra* lesson, lessons that positioned women as central to the historical inquiry aligned with multiple frames of women's history scholarship.

For example, the *La Malinche* lesson guided teachers and students to use gender as a category of historical analysis and employ spatial and intersectional analysis of race and gender. The CHQ asked, "What was La Malinche's role in the conquest of Mexico?" According to background information in the teacher materials, La Malinche was an Indigenous woman who traveled with Cortez and acted as a translator. She is a popular figure of legend in Mexican history and is commonly depicted as a traitor due to her relationship with conquistadors. In this lesson, La Malinche's gendered experience of sexual abuse, slavery, and motherhood was used to introduce the contested history of La Malinche

The lesson on La Malinche began with a tweet depicting her as a controversial figure due to her relationship with the conquistadors. Subsequent materials encouraged students to interrogate the sources of historical information about Malinche, emphasizing her absence in primary documents yet her significant presence in accounts of the conquest. Using gender as an analytical tool, the lesson encouraged students to delve deeper into Malinche's portrayal and role in Mexican history.

Students were prompted to critically examine historical sources, including their dates, perspectives, and intended audiences, and compare them to form their understanding of Malinche's role. Sources presented her as both a victim in terms of sexual abuse and slavery and a person of significance. For instance, the lesson guide led students to consider how Aztecs perceived Malinche through her respectful title, "Malintzin."

The lesson highlighted Malinche's agency, facilitating diverse interpretations of her role in the conquest, which was evidenced in the teacher materials that guide class discussion of sources analysis:

Students may have various interpretations of what Malinche's role was in the conquest of Mexico based on this document alone. They may argue that she was enslaved by the Spanish, subjected to sexual violence, and had to carry out their orders, including as an interpreter. Alternatively, they may argue that she was enslaved but through her work as an interpreter came to be respected by the Spanish.

Here, the teacher script supported historical investigation that asks questions about the racial and gendered dimensions of cross-cultural encounters during Spanish colonization. The lesson concluded by drawing attention to the lack of sources from Malinche's perspective. The lesson underscored her experience as a woman and as a political figure while promoting discourse on the influence of transnational events on gender relations. However, the lesson fell short in addressing potential sexist biases introduced in the introductory tweets concerning women's sexual relationships. Despite this oversight, the La Malinche lesson aligned with ongoing work by historians of women and gender, focusing on women's experiences in historical events.

The *Atatürk and Women's Rights in Turkey* lesson specifically focused on women's rights and asked, "Did Atatürk's reforms actually improve the status of women in Turkey?" The gendered experiences of women were central to the lesson inquiry, as sources explored the lives and perspectives of women. Source D gave detailed background of author Sabiha Sertel, informing students that she was a prominent Turkish feminist, writer, journalist, socialist, and activist. Additionally, student materials encouraged students to consider gender as a geographic and historical construction. For example, the question, "According to Atatürk, why had being a good mother always been the most important virtue for Turkish women?" guided students toward critically examining gender norms as part of their primary source analysis.

Notably, despite the representation of women in the lesson, there was a gender imbalance in the primary source documents provided for student analysis. Three out of five sources originated from male authors. Moreover, the title of the lesson was anchored on the male figure of Atatürk, also known as "Father Turk." The lesson, while focusing on women's rights, limited its exploration to a specific area of women's political participation—the right to vote and hold public office, thereby presenting a somewhat restricted view of women's involvement in politics.

The *Women's War of 1929* fully aligned with the theoretical frames of women's history scholarship. The lesson posed the question, "What happened at the start of the Women's War of 1929?" The teacher's guide reveals that thousands of Nigerian women protested a proposed tax on Igbo women. Students examined documents from two women: Margery Perham, a British historian who documented colonial Nigeria, and Nwanyoji, a protester. Students were tasked with evaluating the document reliability and explaining discrepancies between sources. The background materials and sources represented women as active participants, explored gender roles, and discussed gender-specific forms of protest. For example, one source described how women, coming from all over the countryside, enacted a customary protest by "sitting" upon the man who proposed the tax assessment on Nwanyeruwa. A supporting question in the student materials was designed to probe Nwanyoji's perspective on the Women's War and how her viewpoint may differ from Perham's. However, the instructional guide oriented the discussion toward Perham's British heritage rather than her gender identity, with the rationale that Perham's interest in African history, particularly the British colony of Nigeria, explains her perspective.

Modification of original documents excluded women and limited the use of gender as a category for analysis

In our analysis of *RLH* world history lessons, we observed several issues around how women were (not) included and discursively represented. These representational deficiencies were further exacerbated within lessons in which source materials were modified for student use. In 19 of the *RLH* lessons, references to women were omitted from the original documents prepared for student use, thereby limiting the use of gender as a lens for historical analysis. Similarly, in two other lessons, language that could help analyze masculinity was also excluded.

For instance, in the lesson focused on the leadership of *Augustus*, the original documents made numerous references to the role of women in Roman religion, citing deities and priestesses. However, in the student-version of these texts, these mentions were absent. Likewise, in the lesson on *Ibn Battuta*, the original source materials provided insights into gendered practices and perceptions in the 14th-century Muslim world. For example, the source material said, "These men are celibate; the married men have separate convents" and "The Meccan women are extraordinarily beautiful and very pious and modest." The student materials excluded these references, limiting the possibility of student exploration of gender and sexuality and the experiences of women.

While the *Cleopatra* lesson provided sources, such as Michelangelo's sketch of Cleopatra, an excerpt about Cleopatra written by Shakespeare, and writings by historians Plutarch and Dio, that together could have served as an entry point to inquire into how Cleopatra's gender and sexuality were depicted in relation to her status, agency, and power, the lesson instead asked the question: "Did Cleopatra die by snakebite?" Interestingly, the modification of Plutarch's sensual descriptions of Cleopatra found in the original document, "She was lying on a mean pallet-bed, clad only in her tunic," were cut from the student versions. Such edits censoring sensual descriptions of Cleopatra and concentrating the historical question on the cause of her death serve to dilute the potential for exploring gendered depictions of Cleopatra and their significance.

The *First Crusade* lesson asked students to compare Christian and Muslim perspectives to answer the question, “What happened when Crusaders entered Jerusalem during the First Crusade?” In teacher and student materials women were mentioned in an unnamed capacity and described as victims: “neither women nor children were spared.” However, women were present as active participants in warfare in the original sources student documents drew from. In the original account from Raymond d’Aguiliers, women were mentioned as both civilians and combatants present at the battle: “One incident must not be omitted. Two women tried to bewitch one of the hurling machines, but a stone struck and crushed them, as well as three slaves, so that their lives were extinguished, and the evil incantations averted.” Omission of this reference to women warriors perpetuates a discourse that denies women agency in historical narratives about warfare.

A key passage about the role of women in the Muslim League was cut from the modified source from Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the *Indian Partition* lesson. In the inquiry, students were asked, “Was the partition of India a good plan given what people knew at the time?” The original source from Muhammad Ali Jinnah contained a lengthy passage about the importance of a committee of women. The inclusion of the passage could have provided additional material for close reading and contextualization questions while expanding the historical narrative. While this question may not be directly related to the central question, it does provide information about the political activities of Muslim women in 1940s India. Women worked to enlist other women in the Muslim League, and they organized propaganda campaigns to promote political consciousness in women.

A modified version of Winston Churchill’s speech to the House of Commons was part of the lesson on *Appeasement*. Once again, the original documents enriched the historical context and provided more to the story. During this speech in the House of Commons, Churchill engaged with Viscountess Astor. Churchill began by stating the Munich Agreement was a defeat for both Great Britain and France, to which Viscountess Astor replied, “Nonsense.” At another point, Astor called Churchill rude, and he responded by stating, “she must very recently have been receiving her finishing course in manners.” The teacher materials did not provide any additional information. Students did not need the story of Nancy Astor to answer the central question, “Was appeasement the right policy for England in 1938?” However, she did support Chamberlain’s policy and voiced early opposition to the war. Additionally, Churchill’s retort about manners and a finishing course illustrates views about women in politics.

In two lessons, references to beliefs about masculinity and the sexual practices of men are omitted from modified student documents. In the original source document, from the *Battle of the Somme* lesson, soldiers were described as entering battle “in the true spirit of a sane and cheerful manliness.” In the *Understanding the Black Death* lesson, an original source document stated, “men must preserve chastity as they value their lives,” linking sexual behavior to health outcomes. Such exclusions halt inquiry into how gender and sexuality function across time and culture.

Women and their experiences were excluded from the historical thinking activities *RLH* world history lessons facilitate. Except for a handful of lessons, teachers and students were not encouraged to consider gender when interpreting past events. Where women were present, they were not presented as figures with historical significance, a factor compounded by the modification of original documents for student use.

Discussion

This study examined the representation of women in the *RLH* world history curriculum. We asked: How are women and their experiences represented in the content and discourse of *RLH* world history lesson materials? and How do *RLH* world history lesson materials challenge or reinforce existing cultural assumptions about women/gender in history? Our analysis of 53 world history *RLH* lessons found women to be underrepresented, framed as less significant than males, and sidelined through editing of original documents, guidance provided in lesson materials, and focus of CHQs. These findings reveal that the marginalization of women in history curriculum remains an enduring problem and that the gap between secondary education curriculum materials and women's history scholarship persists.

Taken as a whole, *RLH* world history lessons predominantly reflected phase one of Lerner's framework: male-defined history in which women exist in the margins as wives, mothers, symbols, and passive figures. Consistent with literature, women's participation in political and military events was a largely unexplored narrative (Bennett & Williams, 2014; Chick & Corle, 2016; Engebretson, 2014; Schmidt, 2012; Woyshner, 2002, 2006). Other frames employed by historians of women and gender were absent. The *RLH* world history lessons frequently centered inquiry around cross-cultural encounters between groups across geographic regions, but lessons rarely supported teachers and students' intersectional analysis of the racial and gendered dimensions of these interactions. Additionally, *RLH* lessons avoided addressing sexuality. References to heterosexuality—whether of men or women—were edited out/omitted from original documents when they were modified for student use, and there was no representation of Queer sexuality. No people were identified/represented as Queer in lesson documents or accompanying background information. This finding is consistent with previous studies that highlight the absence of Queer representation in the social studies (Schmidt, 2010; Thornton, 2003).

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the long tradition of binary framing of gender in history scholarship and education reproduces itself and persists in the discourse of school curricula. This binary was reinforced by the materials analyzed in which no individuals were represented as Queer, transgender, or non-binary. Eisner (1985) conceptualized such exclusions as the null curriculum or “the options students are not afforded, the perspectives they may never know about, much less be able to use, the concepts and skills that are not part of their intellectual repertoire” (p. 107). In this case, the null curriculum teaches that women, gender identity, and sexuality are topics of irrelevance to understanding the past. The lessons analyzed represent gender solely in binary terms, depicting individuals as either “man” or “woman.” These findings suggest that even reformist curricula are not immune to the taboos around sex and gender that fuel the ongoing backlash toward trans and gender-diverse individuals.²

We contend, it is important that history education equips students to understand how social constructs, including gender, evolve over time. History education has the capacity to lay the conceptual groundwork for this understanding by helping students understand themselves and their social institutions as existing in the continuum of time (Jeismann, 1979, as cited in Thorp, 2017). The integration of gender as a category of analysis in our history classrooms provides students the opportunity to understand that just as governmental and economic systems change over time, so do the rules around gender. The first

step is to intentionally include women in history lessons, but it is not enough to simply “add women and stir.” Reckoning with gender as a social institution requires addressing its role as a mechanism of control. As Stryker (2007) noted, and as we are seeing in our current moment, gender operates as a means of control “when some loss of gender status is threatened, or when claims of gender are denied” (p. 61).

Within lessons that did include content about women, opportunities to highlight the experience of women and unpack gendered perspectives were missed or overlooked. For example, the opportunity to inquire into how sexist notions of women’s leadership have shaped Cleopatra’s depiction across time was missed in favor of a discussion of the accuracy of historical narratives recorded many years after the events occurred. While the importance of analyzing sources for authors’ perspectives is a signature strategy within *RLH* lessons, it is noteworthy that the *Women’s War of 1929* lesson failed to engage students in analyzing how historian Margery Perham’s gender identity might impact her work. In the *First Crusade* lesson, the potential for intersectional analysis of Western gender norms was lost due to text edits made to the original document. In the *Invasion of Nanking* lesson, the use of rape as a weapon of war was presented as significant not necessarily as an example of gender-based violence but, rather, as an event to be used as a piece of evidence when evaluating the accuracy of differing historical accounts. In these examples, interpreting/modifying sources using the frames of women’s history would re-position women and gender as important to the study of the past.

Interestingly, the *La Malinche* lesson serve as a significant outlier in terms of its emphasis on spatial analysis to examine difficult historical topics such as sexual violence, native complicity in colonization, and sexism in historical representation. This lesson was a case example of how the theoretical frames used by historians of women and gender can align with the historical thinking work scaffolded by the *RLH* lessons. The stark contrast between this lesson and others raises important questions regarding the author of this lesson’s knowledge of women’s history and agency in emphasizing gender in contrast to other authors: To what extent do the authors of *RLH* lessons have the freedom to explore divisive issues? What does the lack of women reveal about the priorities of lesson authors? Such questions are challenging to answer as the majority of lessons do not attribute authorship. Further research should extend this study to DIG’s U.S. History resources to determine if similar patterns regarding the representation of women exist there or if it is a unique issue within the world history section.

The *RLH* lessons as an educative curriculum are in and of themselves a product of research on the nature of historical thinking that sought to challenge teaching history through the non-critical chronicling of the past. The internet provided the portal for these important educative materials to be shared freely at multiple scales. DIG resources perpetuate a version of historical thinking which has become the desired or aspirational pedagogical ideals for many educators. However, this lens appears to present the “historian” as a singular, normative figure rather than reflecting the diversity of perspectives within the field. All historians employ source analysis and corroborate between different accounts; however, in emphasizing specific aspects of historical thinking and letting them drive the inquiries presented by DIG, the theoretical commitments and intertextual reading that are a part of a historian’s thinking are lost.

Wineburg developed the historical thinking skills used in the *RLH* curriculum based on empirical research investigating the cognition of historians during the 1990s. Examining

how this research was interpreted when developing DIG's historical thinking pedagogy may help explain the gap between women's history scholarship and the *RLH* world history lessons. Wineburg (1998) investigated how historians with different background knowledge read historical texts. This study reinforced his (Wineburg, 1991) earlier findings that historians use the following heuristics when interpreting documents: corroboration, sourcing, and contextualization. These heuristics became foundational to DIG's historical thinking skills. Wineburg (1998) positioned these historical thinking skills in relation to other research, including Leinhardt and Young's (1996) work, which offered a broader model of historical thinking.

Leinhardt and Young's (1996) model of historical thinking included a separate "interpret" process which incorporates the textual and historical reads of historians. This approach is particularly relevant to this study's analysis of the representation of women and gender in the *RLH* world history lessons. They asserted that historians draw on disciplinary context when constructing interpretations based on larger theoretical frameworks. They described the influence of this thinking on historical accounts:

[the] historical read invokes the interpretive stance assumed by historians, which includes their global sense of historical purpose and their theory of history. Different historians have different notions of the purpose of history. . . . Different historians also have different theoretical positions. For example, a Marxist historian, a feminist historian, and an economic historian, each constructing explanatory narratives of the same series of events, would emphasize different aspects. (p. 449)

The historical read recognizes that the perspective from which the historian structures their inquiry—influenced by their purpose for history and theoretical stances—shapes their creation of a historical account. For example, as this study illustrates, when reading historical documents, historians of women's history employ different theoretical frameworks for analysis to create a historical account than those employed by most *RLH* world history lesson authors. The historical read extends to teachers; Apaolaza-Llorente et al. (2023) found that teachers who define themselves as "very feminist" integrate critical gendered analysis into the curriculum while the curriculums of middling or non-feminist teachers fall into the compensatory and contributory phases of women's history instruction.

While recognizing the power of Leinhardt and Young's (1996) scholarship, Wineburg (1998) foregrounded the thinking tasks of sourcing, contextualization, and corroboration, perhaps to create a definition of historical thinking which does not take the background knowledge of students for granted. Wineburg (1998) offered the following commentary on Leinhardt and Young (1996): "however, when asked to step out of their specialization and read a document they had never seen, historians relied on more general problem-solving strategies, such as those identified in the study by Wineburg (1991)" (p. 323). Due to *RLH*'s focus on reading primary sources and because students are not involved in the development of the central historical question or the selection of documents/document text, students do not perform the mental process of the historical read in *RLH* lessons. Instead, students piece together arguments aligned with the historical account created by the lesson author through their staging of the central historical question, selection and modification of sources, and provision of guiding questions. While this approach is practical, and many would argue necessary given the constraints of classroom time and resources, it also reflects the limitations of current historical thinking curricula. The findings of this study, which reveal an

underrepresentation of women and a gap between DIG's world history resources and the methodologies employed by historians of women and gender, illuminates the importance of unpacking how historical thinking pedagogy incorporates or could incorporate more diverse perspectives.

Though they investigated the same phenomenon (the cognitive processes of historians when reading texts) Wineburg (1998) and Leinhardt and Young (1996) drew different conclusions about the implications of their research for history education. Wineburg (1998) advanced ideas for historical thinking heuristics that can be used by students with little background knowledge. Leinhardt and Young (1996) posited students should participate in the selection of inquiry topics, identification of sources, and reading across texts which are “vibrant, positioned . . . and have a clear historical voice and stance” (p. 480). Through its focus on the “general problem-solving strategies” of historians, the *RLH* historical thinking pedagogy de-emphasizes the ideological nature of historical interpretation. The views of Wineburg presented here are nearly 30 years old. We are optimistic about the recent work of scholars—including those involved in *RLH*—who have built from Wineburg's work to address this gap with the creation of curriculum materials about Historiography-Based Inquiry (Marczyk et al., 2022, 2024). The findings of this study underscore the importance of these scholars' ongoing work and its impact on the creation of future educative resources.

Although the *RLH* curriculum encourages critical reflection on history, it struggles to extend this critical lens to the representation of women within their world history resources. Despite some availability of historical content about women, the emphasis on making historical thinking skills accessible to learners appears to have come at the expense of including the experiences of women as a central point of the historical inquiry. Rather, it seems that decisions to build resources with broad appeal may have led to the development of palatable, sanctioned, safe, sanitized—and male-oriented—choices in the content and direction of historical inquiries.

As social studies teachers and teacher-educators, we contend it is important to consider how failing to discuss the historical construction of gender—as well as race, class, and ethnicity—in the classroom limits students' ways of thinking about the past, present, and future. We agree with Schmeichel (2014) when she argued, “attention to women in social studies cannot work towards equity as long as it is characterized by a shifting away from the troubling and potentially difficult explorations of systemic processes that shape gender relationships in asymmetrical ways” (p. 247). Guidelines for pedagogical approaches to reducing gender-based violence emphasize the importance of understanding this violence as a social issue and not an individual event (Lange & Young, 2019). Providing historical context for assumptions about gender and sexuality is an important step in young people's understanding of gender-based oppression (Engebretson, 2013). The emphasis on military history in *RLH* world history materials presents an opportunity to investigate gender-based violence in warfare, aligning with current frames in women's history scholarship which emphasize the racial and gendered dimension of transnational encounters. However, such a discussion appears to have been set aside in favor of more comfortable questions about narrative details and differences in national accounts.

We recognize the complex ideological issues that come with enacting curriculum that address hard histories. The DIG educative curriculum makes choices to increase its accessibility to teachers and students. However, what are the consequences of these choices? As the National Council for the Social Studies (2021) contended, “It is important for *all* social

studies educators to use their pedagogical knowledge, professional judgment, legal mandates, and classroom experience when teaching in the classroom” (para. 10, emphasis original). While it is important for materials to be accessible, it is also important for designers of educative curriculum materials to include content from different perspective and not ignore or reduce the histories of women and other groups. Understanding these frameworks is part of understanding the essence of history. Teaching one history, through the paradigm of male experience, versus histories which consider history through multiple identities, creates a historical master narrative (Jenkins, 1991). If lesson inquiries are formulated using male paradigms of historical thought and are scaffolded by teacher/student materials in which women and gendered analysis is largely absent, these lessons instead serve to reinforce narratives that place women in subordinate positions in society. Examination of the representation of women in educative curriculums like DIG’s *RLH* lessons is an important component in understanding how women’s history is currently taught in secondary schools.

Implications

The *RLH* curriculum’s focus on pre-designed historical questions and curated source sets is both a strength and a limitation. These materials offer an invaluable resource for teachers who may lack the time, training, or confidence to create inquiry-based lessons. However, this reliance may also constrain opportunities for students to engage in developing their own questions and selecting documents, potentially presenting inquiry as a formulaic process rather than a dynamic act of historical thinking. At the same time, the challenges teachers face in designing inquiry-based lessons cannot be overlooked (Thacker et al., 2018; van Hover et al., 2021). DIG materials provide accessible entry points for implementing inquiry in classrooms that might otherwise prioritize content memorization over critical thinking (van Hover et al., 2012). Rather than dismissing these materials, it is critical to both appreciate the value of *RLH* world history lessons and explore ways to adapt them to offer perspectives that promote the representation of more diverse voices. Recognizing the strengths and limitations of *RLH* world history lessons provides an opportunity to explore practical implications of this study for teachers, teacher educators, and curriculum developers.

Teaching

For classroom history teachers, this study highlights the importance of adopting a critical lens when using pre-designed curricular materials like *RLH*. Teachers can extend these lessons to include additional sources that represent women and non-binary individuals, challenging traditional narratives and fostering a more inclusive approach to history. For example, they might:

- Incorporate primary sources that foreground diverse perspectives, such as writings by women, Queer individuals, and people of color.
- Frame historical questions that invite students to analyze power structures and interrogate whose voices are included or excluded.
- Use collaborative activities, such as historiographical debates or document-based inquiries, to help students uncover the complexities of gender and identity in history.

Teachers could also revisit original source materials, discussing source restoration to include more sophisticated gender representations. Additionally, emerging digital archives and online platforms provide valuable opportunities to extend and enrich the *RLH* curriculum, making it more inclusive and intersectional.³

Teacher education

Teacher educators play a pivotal role in preparing preservice teachers to navigate the complexities of teaching history through an inclusive lens. This study's methods and findings can guide teacher educators in using DIG materials to model their current use, critically examine them, and adapt them to address issues of gender and intersectionality. Specifically, teacher educators can:

- Guide teachers in understanding the aims of *RLH* lessons and the rationale behind their design.
- Introduce critical frameworks and analytical criteria tools to evaluate and modify curriculum materials.
- Emphasize the importance of historiography in teacher preparation. For example, the process of analyzing lessons in this study can itself be mirrored as a pedagogical strategy, helping preservice teachers learn to critically examine historical narratives and engage students in these practices. This approach could complement existing efforts in discipline-specific methods programs.
- Facilitate discussions on the representation of marginalized groups in history curricula and other resources, helping preservice teachers identify gaps and develop strategies to address them.

Curriculum development and the historiographical eye

An emerging insight from this study is the need for a “historiographical eye” as a pedagogical tool. The historiographical eye is essential to teaching about the nature of history and offers a valuable approach to teaching how historical narratives are constructed, whose voices are prioritized, and how power shapes history. Integrating this perspective into curriculum development and classroom teaching can enrich how history is taught and learned. For example:

- Curriculum developers on such initiatives as the *RLH* project could integrate historiographical analysis as a core element of lesson design, providing opportunities for students to critically examine and reconstruct historical narratives. This approach would deepen students' engagement with the interpretive nature of history.
- DIG could collaborate with educators and historians through sustained partnerships to develop lessons that address gender and intersectionality. These efforts could revisit and adapt existing templates to create more inclusive historical narratives while preserving the strengths of the current framework.

Taken together, these implications recognize the importance and value of the social studies community collaborating as curriculum designers to expand curriculum libraries and develop lessons that intentionally incorporate diverse and intersectional perspectives. For teacher educators, this means fostering a critical awareness of curriculum

design and leveraging high-quality online resources, such as DIG's *RLH* curriculum, to develop model lessons that challenge traditional narratives. For classroom teachers, it means engaging students in inquiries that address the complexities of gender, power, and identity in history. These collective efforts can contribute to a history education that reflects the diversity of human experiences while empowering students and teachers to think critically about the past and its connection to the present.

Conclusion

As noted in our introduction, Cherryholmes (1982) reminded us that “criticism is needed to disclose and peel back the layers of values and commitment embedded in interpretations and explanations . . . Social Studies materials based on the product of an unreflective social science tend to reinforce and reproduce those values” (pp. 61–62). Similarly, Wineburg's (2012–2013) critique of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* clearly recognized the value of criticism and reflection on established resources and the danger of seeing history as static narrative:

History as truth, issued from the left or from the right, abhors shades of gray . . . Such a history atrophies our tolerance for complexity. It makes us allergic to exceptions to the rule. Worst of all, it depletes the moral courage we need to revise our beliefs in the face of new evidence. It ensures, ultimately, that tomorrow we will think exactly as we thought yesterday—and the day before, and the day before that. Is that what we want for our students? (p. 34)

DIG's *RLH* educative resources, like other online educative curricula, continue to grow with the addition of new inquiries. As resources continue to be developed, our analysis highlights the potential benefits of revisiting and revising what has been built. The American Historical Associations has argued that historical questions matter (Barringer et al., 2023); do the current inquiry questions create a space for students to engage in significant inquiries that involve developing an informed and disciplined approach to understanding history and the past? Revisioning could well begin by reworking and moving beyond such question as: “Did Cleopatra die by snakebite?” and “How many Persians were at the Battle of Thermopylae?” As we consider such revisioning, we must ask ourselves: do our current choices when designing inquiries create a history that atrophies or amplifies our tolerance for complexity? How can we build inquiries that are informed by a diversity historical thought to prepare students to see the same thing and come to different conclusions as they enter the contested space that is historical “truth”?

Notes

1. As of February 2025, there are 134 U.S. history, and 57 world history lessons housed on the DIG website. World history lessons not included in this study are on the topics of the Kingdom of Meroë, samurai, the Russian Civil War, and the Zapatista Uprising.
2. At the time of this study's revision, a series of alarmist executive orders were issued by the United States government targeting trans-people (Exec. Order No. 14168, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14183, 2025; Exec. Order No. 14187, 2025; Exec. Order, No. 14190, 2025).
3. Two examples are the “Speaking While Female” online speech archive (<https://speakingwhilefemale.co/>) and PBS's map of Gender-Diverse Cultures (https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/)

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