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Consequential Clicks in Curriculum Planning: Teachers Navigating Online Searches for “Difficult History” Topics

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Given heightened scrutiny and conflicting messages surrounding history curricula, it is important to examine how teachers navigate online searches for planning and the literacies they employ. Using a critical digital literacies framework, the authors explored the search strategies, sites visited, and guiding values of 19 United States social studies teachers as they used internet resources to plan lessons on histories they identified as “difficult.” Most chose histories associated with genocide, enslavement, and/or colonialism. Using both free and paid websites, teachers considered credibility, bias, and diverse perspectives, while also taking into account school district approval and caregiver concerns. A small percentage of teachers discussed issues related to critical consciousness during their searches. Implications for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers are included.

Teacher agency in designing curricula and as curricular-instructional gatekeepers (Thorton, 2005) can play a crucial role in shaping students' education. However, the curricular agency of history teachers can be threatened by polarized national climates (e.g., Kaka et al., 2024; Skårås, 2021; Tribukait, 2021; Woo et al., 2024). In the United States, where curricular authority is typically held at the state level, 44 states have recently taken actions to prohibit teaching so-called divisive curriculum topics, including discussions of race, racism, sexism, and LGBTQ+ topics in history (Kaka et al., 2024; Pollock et al., 2022; Schwartz, 2024). Pollock et al. described these efforts as multifaceted campaigns that seek to ban or censor student and teacher engagement with "difficult historical facts, current events, complex opportunity barriers, real biases, [and] marginalized communities' voices" (p. vii).

Complicating this landscape, other legislation (sometimes within the same state) has expanded requirements to teach topics such as racism and genocide (Stout & Wilburn, 2022). For example, California passed a law requiring all high school students to complete at least one ethnic studies course to graduate (A.B. 101, 2021-2022), while Texas requires all K-12 students to receive Holocaust instruction during Holocaust Remembrance Week (Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission, 2025).

In 2024, the American Historical Association (AHA) found that history teachers felt they had significant autonomy in decision-making, including "deciding what to teach, how to teach it, and what materials to use" (p. 12). The bulk of teachers (between 77% and 86%) valued "building appreciation for diversity," "presenting multiple sides of every story," and "presenting US history as a complex mix of accomplishments and setbacks" as important or very important (AHA, 2024, p. 133). In short, teachers shared a common goal: helping students grasp key historical concepts and grapple with the complex topic of racism and its lasting impact on society.

At the same time, teachers are increasingly turning to online resources for planning. (AHA, 2024; DeCoito & Estaiteyeh, 2022; Sawyer & Myers, 2018). In doing so, they may draw upon vast but largely unvetted online repositories to gather instructional resources (Hunter & Hall, 2018). The AHA noted that teachers valued freely available online resources over textbooks, relying on "a short list of trusted sites led by federal institutions including the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and Smithsonian museums" (p. 11), as well as sites such as Crash Course and Digital Inquiry Group. Additionally, 61% of respondents reported regularly using the largely unvetted online educational marketplace TeachersPayTeachers.com (TPT), with newer teachers indicating higher use, despite researchers raising major concerns about the quality of materials found on the site (e.g., Shelton et al., 2023).

Online planning may be particularly challenging when teachers aim to teach sensitive or traumatic histories, sometimes referred to as *difficult histories*. Within this context, it is important to understand which histories teachers consider to be "difficult" and how teachers search for and evaluate online history resources, given the challenge that misinformed, racist, and trite history education content can often top

common internet search results (e.g., Gallagher, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2020, 2023). In this study, we addressed the following questions:

RQ1: What difficult histories do teachers identify as topics they want to use internet resources to plan to teach in their classrooms, and why?

RQ2: What search strategies do teachers use and what internet sites do they turn to when planning student learning around difficult histories?

RQ3: How do teachers articulate the values that guide their use of the internet when planning for student learning around difficult histories?

Literature Review

Planning to Teach Difficult Histories

Building on Britzman's (1998) work on difficult knowledge, scholars and educators in multiple countries have engaged in theoretical and empirical work on how histories considered "hard" or "difficult" might be taught in classrooms (e.g., Goldberg, 2020; Gross & Terra, 2018; Logtenberg et al., 2024; Stoddard, 2022). Definitions of the term "difficult histories" vary (see Stoddard, 2022), but they all involve trauma in the past that may be connected to trauma in the present. Harris et al. (2022) described difficult histories as "events in the past where people suffered greatly as a result of unjust actions, policies, or systems that created dehumanizing experiences" (p. 4). Goldberg noted that difficult histories can be those that "expose learners to historical suffering and victimization that constitute a collective trauma" in a different part of the world or in "their own nation" (p. 130).

Additionally, as Goldberg (2020) highlighted, histories may become difficult when they disrupt students' and teachers' sense of national identity, particularly when implicating the dominant group in past and ongoing systems of harm. The instructional context, then, is paramount to what histories are considered difficult and for whom (Jones, 2023), with some scholars contending that the term should be used cautiously, so as not to wrongly set those histories apart from other histories (e.g., Demoiny & Tirado, 2023; Jones, 2023; Miles & Thind, 2022).

Jones and Edmondson (2024) explained that labeling histories as "difficult" risks centering white discomfort and dominant national narratives. They emphasized that histories labeled difficult, often including enslavement, settler colonialism, and racial violence, are framed as such due to their disruption of white innocence and national myths.

There have been few empirical studies of how history teachers plan to teach histories labeled as difficult (Barton, 2019). In their study of teachers' planning on the topic of school desegregation during a weeklong workshop, Suh et al. (2021) found that, despite an extensive focus on the topic, most teachers defaulted to traditional chronologies for the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and considered the events as only in the past.

Demoiny and Tirado (2023) studied preservice teachers' (PSTs) instructional decision-making as they engaged in a field trip to a former plantation cottage in a southern U.S. state to learn "difficult history at a local historic site" (p. 2). They found that, although the teachers gained content knowledge related to the site and "some PSTs began to wrestle with their proximity to the difficult histories, they did not make connections to present-day legacies of the oppressions connected to the local difficult history content" (p. 13).

Scholars have noted that some teachers may avoid teaching these history topics due to concerns about exposing students to trauma and fears of teaching events that might be perceived as divisive in light of current political situations (e.g., Goldberg, 2020; Stoddard, 2022). Nonetheless, Barton (2019) encouraged researchers to "investigate teachers who do address the difficult past" (p. 13) and examine how teachers "go about developing resources for instruction, or using those that are already available" (p. 14). Taking up those calls, the current study examined the online planning practices of teachers interested in teaching difficult histories in their classrooms.

Teachers' Online Planning

Over the past decade, teachers worldwide have increasingly turned to online sources for curricular support (Tosh et al., 2020). Pittard (2017) was among the first researchers to document how teachers plan online, describing how U.S. elementary teachers used Pinterest to search for or stumble upon classroom ideas, with the platform providing links to other web content, often for teacher purchase. More recent work by Carpenter et al. (2024) illustrated that many educators now turn to TikTok for teaching inspiration related to pedagogy and content, with the platform's algorithm playing a central role by curating resources aligned with their interests.

Teachers' planning processes commonly involve a complex interplay among for-profit and not-for-profit websites, social media, and local in-person networks (e.g., Sawyer et al., 2020; Schroeder et al., 2024; Silver, 2022). When the present study began in fall/winter 2023-24, some teachers were also using generative artificial intelligence (GAI) — particularly large language models (LLMs) such as generative pretrained transformers (GPTs) and chatbots — to support administrative tasks, assessment, feedback, and lesson planning (Cheah et al., 2025; Moundridou et al., 2024). However, Trust et al. (2025) noted, "As increasingly more teachers turn to GAI for lesson planning, resources, and instructional support, questions about the quality and reliability of AI-generated materials have moved front and center in educational research" (para. 15).

In a study of 310 lesson plans created by GAI including ChatGPT, Co-Pilot, and Gemini to cover the eighth-grade Government and Civic Life standards in the *Massachusetts History & Social Science Curriculum Framework*, Trust et al. (2025) found that the lessons were not designed to promote higher order thinking. Predominantly, the lessons centered on the lower level of Bloom's taxonomy (e.g., "remember," which includes recalling basic facts and concepts; Krathwohl, 2002). The authors also

noted that the “AI-generated lessons shortchange examination of many historical and contemporary social, economic, and political realities” (para. 71). Trust et al. concluded that additional research is needed to investigate AI-generated lesson plans.

Scholars agree that online planning is an inevitable part of 21st-century teaching. They also contend that online curricular content can be inaccurate and potentially harmful, especially for historically marginalized students because of the many biases, both overt and covert, that researchers have observed in online curricula (e.g., Benko et al., 2022; Freedman et al., 2024; Lechtenberg, 2021). Particularly when it comes to the subjects of history and social studies, teachers should dedicate significant time and apply a critical lens to online planning (e.g., Gallagher, 2022; Rodríguez et al., 2020; Swalwell et al., 2023). Researchers have, therefore, begun to investigate teacher decision-making when planning with online sources.

Related research using self-reported data suggests that teachers’ instructional planning is shaped by intentional decision-making processes, wherein teachers focus on particular features of potential materials as they assemble a lesson. For example, Shapiro et al. (2019) found that U.S. elementary mathematics teachers selected online resources based on their alignment with standards, difficulty level, and visual appeal. Similarly, Polikoff and Dean (2019) reported that US secondary English teachers considered difficulty level a key factor in determining if a resource was engaging.

Schroeder et al. (2024) observed that US elementary generalists considered the appearance, reusability, and cost of online materials. Analyzing social studies lessons created by PSTs, Rodríguez et al. (2020) concluded that teachers’ resource selection “generally defaulted to popular, highly visible resources” (p. 516). Teachers understandably often rely on search engines and other algorithmic processes to help them sift through content (Fyfield et al., 2021). However, such practices may not yield high-quality content.

Although teachers may have the best of intentions when they venture online to find content for lesson planning, the quality of educational materials they find can be questionable, particularly on sites specifically designed to provide content to teachers (e.g., Rodríguez et al., 2020, 2023; Shelton et al., 2023). In the worst cases, the content teachers locate online can be harmful. Rodríguez et al. (2020) found TPT and Pinterest materials addressing topics such as the US Civil Rights Movement embodied racist, “color-evasive ideologies” (p. 511). Additionally, our study of the 100 best-selling US history activities on TPT found that 70% of the content was of low/moderate quality, with nearly half potentially harmful to historically marginalized students and communities (Harris et al., 2023).

Despite quality concerns about online platforms used to share curriculum resources, these sites remain popular (Brown et al., 2023). Part of the problem is that when teachers go online to search for materials, they are often drawn to websites with appealing designs and professional aesthetics (McGrew et al., 2024) and may conceptualize some of these for-profit platforms and search engines as neutral and objective. This myth of platform objectivity (Bishop, 2018) ignores the reality that a platform is a

microsystem, shaped by the entanglement between technical, social, and economic dimensions and influenced by many factors, including users, creators, the site's design, search algorithms, and for-profit intentions, among others (van Dijck & Poell, 2018). As a result, teachers may select online resources without realizing all the forces at play within a seemingly simple website that could guide or misguide their choices.

In an era marked by widespread mis- and disinformation online, teachers' critical decision-making is more important than ever, particularly when planning to teach sensitive or difficult topics. This context presents a valuable opportunity to study how teachers approach online instructional planning. To our knowledge, there is no published research investigating teachers' online planning in action for lessons focused on difficult histories. There is also a need for research that casts a wider lens on the ecosystem of online content that teachers source, using observational methods in addition to self-reported data, to capture authentic planning decisions.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand how teachers approach the complexities of online content, we turned to scholarship on *new literacies*, which describes internet use as an issue of literacy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023; Kress, 2009; Leu et al., 2009). New literacies encompass skills, values, decision-making processes, and social practices that facilitate effective internet use, recognizing that these literacies are multifaceted, rapidly evolving, and central to engagement in a global community (Coiro et al., 2008). In the context of new literacies, we understand values to mean the “priorities and purposes” teachers deem important when searching online (p. 12).

According to West (2019), the new literacies framework “stresses the need to account for the ‘new’ ways in which people engage with literacy as a result of the growing influence of the Internet on our everyday lives” (p. 153). One of the framework's key principles is that “teachers become more important, though their role changes, within new literacy classrooms” (Leu et al., 2018, p. 323). As part of their new role, teachers must negotiate complex internet content to identify materials and critically evaluate the validity and relevance of information for their students (Cervetti et al., 2006).

More recently, scholars have conceptualized critical digital literacies within new literacies, which extend beyond technical skills or competencies to consider social, economic, and political factors that underpin digital practices (Aguilera & Pandya, 2021). This framing was built upon notions of critical pedagogy advanced by Freire (1996) and Giroux (2020), who positioned critical pedagogy as a theoretical and political practice intended “to resist the increasingly prevalent approach to pedagogy that viewed it as merely a skill, technique, or disinterested method” (Giroux, 2020, p. 1). Gouseti et al. (2023) explained that in the digital world, “‘being critical’ can relate to critical thinking and understanding regarding digital technology use as well as critical awareness, self-reflection, and evaluation of one's own and others' digital practices and online engagement” (p. 5). Similarly, Schroeder and Curcio (2022) suggested that teachers' 21st-century critical curricular literacies

should include both technical skills *and* critical understandings. As the authors explained, teachers' online planning must include technical questions, such as, "Is the author credible?" paired with more critical questions, such as, "Is the resource culturally relevant?" (p. 135).

Critical thinking *and* critical digital literacies can manifest in teachers' online planning in multiple ways. First, teachers must espouse a value, or appreciation, for examining the credibility and reliability of sources, drawing upon strategies such as lateral reading to fact-check and assess credibility (Kellner & Share, 2005; Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). One component of effective fact-checking is first uncovering who is behind the information as part of their vetting process (McGrew, 2020). For example, when examining materials, teachers need to understand the perspectives included and the author's purpose.

Second, critically digitally literate teachers will bring critical understandings of student identities, experiences, and marginalizations or exclusions to their lesson planning. Such an understanding of student identities is at the root of culturally relevant, sustaining, and revitalizing pedagogies and may enable teachers to problematize and connect classroom learning with home and community values, identities, and needs (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Teachers need to cultivate critical consciousness, as described by Freire (1996), which involves a broader understanding of sociopolitical systems that perpetuate inequality. Critically conscious teachers assemble lesson materials with the understanding that learning experiences are never neutral, and that class readings, discussions, and activities are a path to a more just and democratic society.

Finally, effective teachers also take advantage of digital media's unique opportunities to adapt, improve, and remix content (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). The critical digital literacies that today's teachers need are vast, and in the context of planning for difficult history topics, such literacies become especially vital.

In addition to the importance of critical digital literacies, another area to consider is curriculum literacy, which Marek et al. (2024) defined as "the capacity to navigate teacher identities, learner and community assets, and instructional materials" (p. 1). Their framework incorporated the work of Cohen and Ball (1999), who posited that creating high-quality instruction involves three main components: teachers, students, and materials. Marek et al. centered teacher identities as part of the "teacher" category, defining the knowledge as "understanding how one's personal beliefs, experiences, and identities influence one's curricular decisions" (p. 8). As part of the "students" category, the authors included "learners and communities," noting that "from a culturally sustaining perspective, instruction should aim to support learners in achieving high academic expectations while honoring and cultivating the assets of learners and their communities" (p. 7). Instructional materials must be evaluated along many quality indicators such as "academic rigor, cultural responsiveness, and localized meanings of quality" (p. 8).

With the components of curriculum literacy in mind (i.e., teacher identity, learners and their communities, and materials), the present study

examined how teachers approach the planning of sensitive and traumatic history topics using internet-based resources.

Researcher Context and Commitments

To pursue trustworthiness, we reflect on our backgrounds, our commitment to socially just education, and the use of the term *difficult histories*, acknowledging how these elements informed our approach. The four authors are white women who collectively identify as US university teacher educators and former secondary teachers. Two of us focus on social studies education, with an emphasis on teaching and learning around sensitive and traumatic histories. The other two focus on educational technology, with an emphasis on novel technologies in 21st-century teaching and learning. We all share a scholarly commitment to socially just education. Together, we were drawn to this study of teachers' online planning for difficult histories because of our prior research on the challenges that online resources pose for history teachers addressing sensitive topics (e.g., Harris et al., 2023).

When we began the present study in 2023, during a time of growing US state legislation limiting the teaching of history topics (Woo et al., 2024), we employed the term difficult histories because it was widely utilized in the field of history/social studies education (e.g., Epstein & Peck, 2017; Goldberg, 2020; Harris et al., 2022; Stoddard, 2022). However, in light of Jones and Edmondson's (2024) recent critique of the term, we acknowledge that the issue with difficult histories often lies in societal and individual reluctance to confront white supremacy, its enduring consequences, and connection to these histories. Most of what is labeled as difficult histories is deeply connected to white supremacy, which is often left unnamed to protect white comfort and status and is intended to uphold hegemonic narratives (Demoigny & Tirado, 2025; Jones & Edmondson, 2024).

We also wrestled with the implications of the difficult histories label, recognizing that it could signal which histories are deemed acceptable to teach and which are not, reinforcing dominant narratives and obscuring structural conditions (e.g., white supremacy) that render certain histories politically and emotionally charged and, thus, silenced in today's politicized educational climate (Jones & Edmondson, 2024). Thus, while we continue to use the term difficult histories in this study to align with the terminology we used with participants, we do so with caution and reflection. While this brief discussion cannot capture the depth of our ongoing conversations and our entanglement with the term, we offer it as a contribution to a broader, evolving conversation in the field.

Method

Participants

We recruited 19 teachers in a battleground US state where legislation had previously been passed to limit the teaching of topics some considered "divisive." We emailed local districts and educational organizations, posted on social media, and utilized snowball sampling. The sample was

disproportionately white and female, closely mirroring national statistics of U.S. teachers, of whom approximately 79% are female and 79% identify as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Participants taught grades 5-12. See Table 1 for participant demographics.

Data Sources

Participants first completed an online questionnaire that included open-ended and Likert-scale questions designed to capture demographic information, the topic they wished to plan for, and the reasons behind their choice. In our directions, we suggested they choose a difficult history topic they had not previously taught but wanted to teach, or a topic they had taught before and wanted to refine. We included in the questionnaire the following definition of difficult history topics adapted from Harris et al. (2022): “those that involve trauma and/or violence in the past and may be difficult to teach and learn in the present.”

We conducted semistructured videoconference interviews with two researchers in attendance. One researcher asked questions from the interview protocol; the other researcher took notes. Interviews were recorded through the videoconferencing platform and transcribed. We began the interviews by asking follow-up questions about the questionnaire (e.g., asking participants to explain their topic choices). Teachers were then prompted to engage in a think-aloud task, during which they discussed their decision-making process while completing the task (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). During the task, participants shared their screens and explained their planning for instruction on their topic by visiting various websites, with the lead interviewer asking clarification questions and prompting participants to think-aloud as needed. The approximately 1-hour authentic task mirrored the limited time US teachers are given for planning during their workday (Benner & Partelow, 2017; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2018). After the think-aloud task, we asked participants (referred to here as Teacher A, B, C, etc.) to “tell us about what your values are when it comes to searching for online materials” in order to learn more about their self-reported values that guide their decision-making.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was guided by the critical digital literacies framework and past research on difficult histories and online planning. Quantitative data, collected from the questionnaire responses and the summary of websites visited during the interviews, were analyzed descriptively. Qualitative data, which included open-ended questionnaire responses, interview videos, and interview transcripts, were analyzed using an interpretivist approach — meaning, our coding process was subjective and iterative, emphasizing the researchers’ interpretations and meaning-making processes (Miles et al., 2020). The qualitative analysis evolved along two strands. First, three authors conducted initial in vivo coding (Saldana, 2016) using qualitative data analysis software to code both open-ended questionnaire responses and written interview transcripts.

Table 1
Participant Self-Reported Descriptors (N=19)

Descriptors	n
Gender	
Female	15
Male	4
Race/ethnicity (self-described)	
“White”/“Caucasian”	15
Diné/“Navajo”	1
“Native American, Hispanic, Polish”	1
“White, Mexican”	1
“White, Hispanic”	1
Grade Level	
Elementary (K-5)	4
Middle (6-8)	16
High (9-12)	19
Years Teaching Experience	
1-3	7
4-9	4
10-15	2
16+	6
Geographic Location	
Large City	7
Small City	8
Large Suburb	3
Remote Town	1
<i>Notes.</i> Classifications from National Center for Education Statistics (2021). <i>Education demographic and geographic estimates</i> . https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries . Participants may teach in more than one grade level range.	

Second, two of the three authors from the first round of analysis watched and listened to each interview twice, recording the names of websites, website visit frequency, and search terms used. They also created additional in vivo codes to capture participants' rationales for visiting specific websites. Examples of some of our in vivo codes included, "worrying about harmful materials, thinking critically, credible credentials, awareness of student point of view"; "appropriate for students," "familiar to me [teacher]"; "student-centered, accessible, comes from community."

These authors also engaged in thematic coding and analytical memoing (Miles et al., 2020) across all data sets to reflect on emerging meanings, themes, and relationships within the data. The two authors met regularly with the other members of the research team throughout the coding process to discuss coding questions, potential themes, and interpretive decisions, engaging in ongoing reflexivity as we interpreted the data. Through this collaborative process, we addressed all research questions, including the construction of five themes that addressed question three: "considering credibility and reliability," "centering students," "engaging critical consciousness," "honoring perspectives," and "attending to institutional or caregiver preferences."

Building on our interpretivist and iterative coding process, we were guided by Tracy's (2010) description of *crystallization*, seeking convergence and complexity across multiple data points. As Tracy highlighted, the goal of crystallization is "to open up a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue" (p. 844). We pursued this approach by incorporating multiple researchers and data sources throughout the analysis. We also drew on Tracy's notion of *thick description* by showing the data in detail through participant quotes, analytical memos, and observed interactions, rather than merely telling about it. Finally, we sought multivocality, by intentionally "attend[ing] to viewpoints that diverge with those of the majority or with the author" (p. 844), ensuring that differing perspectives were represented in our interpretations.

Findings

Difficult History Topic Choices

Most participants chose difficult history topics that fell into the overlapping categories of genocide, enslavement, and colonialism; these categories were consistent with prior research on teaching difficult histories (see Jones & Edmondson, 2024). Figure 1 shows participants' topic choices in their own words. Notably, some participants indicated a desire to incorporate current events into their curriculum (interviews took place in fall and winter 2023/24), with two participants choosing to focus on what they described as the "Israel-Hamas War" and the "Israel/Palestine Conflict" and one choosing "Recent Presidential Elections." Eighty-four percent of participants chose a topic they had previously taught.

Figure 1

Difficult History Topics Chosen by Participants in their Own Words (N = 19 Participants)

"The Holocaust"
"Recent Presidential Elections"
"Slavery and Africans being brought to the New World as slaves"
"The Holocaust"
"Trans-atlantic Slave Trade"
"Civil War"
"The Israel/Palestine conflict"
"Colonialism"
"Native American Removal to Reservations during Westward Expansion"
"Indigenous experiences/Tribal experiences within Government and World History"
"Slavery in the US and around the colonized world"
"Genocides"
"Holocaust/Genocide Studies as well as the Israel/Hamas War"
"Holocaust Japanese Internment Civil Rights Movement Current Events"
"The Holocaust"
"white people's enslavement of Indigenous people"
"Double consciousness and code switching"
"Slave trade"
"Genocide"

Note: Topics are presented in the order in which questionnaires were received. We did not modify capitalization or punctuation.

When asked why they chose to explore their topics, participants' responses aligned with four main themes: student-centered learning and inclusivity, teacher identity and preparedness, navigating sensitive content, and justice-centered reasoning.

Student-Centered Learning and Inclusivity

Student-centered learning and inclusivity involved teachers' awareness of students' identities and lived experiences, their responsiveness to students' questions, a focus on student learning, the creation of a safe learning environment, and recognition of the challenges students face when engaging in historical empathy. Forty-two percent of participants' statements ($n = 67$ statements) aligned with this theme. Some statements aligned with multiple themes. For example, Teacher I said, "I would really love to be able to teach more about Indigenous experiences/Tribal experiences ... but in a way that doesn't retraumatize, victimize, or create unwanted reinforcement of power dynamics." This response emphasized the importance of creating a safe learning environment and employing a justice-oriented pedagogy to prevent the perpetuation of harmful narratives and oppressive educational experiences.

Teacher Identity and Preparedness

The theme of teacher identity and preparedness (30% of participant statements) focused on teachers' connection to the topic and their readiness to teach it. This included whether the topic aligned with standards or the curriculum, whether teachers had received prior training or instruction on the topic, their desire to feel more comfortable teaching it, and their interest in spending additional instructional time on it. For example, Teacher F discussed wanting to design learning around the enslavement of Black people in US history and noted,

I have quite a few students who see themselves reflected in those that were enslaved, and as a white person I do not want to seem belittling to my students, or [them to] think that I am just grazing over the topic because it's uncomfortable.

This statement demonstrates that some responses fit multiple themes, as this teacher reflected on how both their own identity (teacher identity and preparedness theme) and the identities of their students (student-centered learning and inclusivity theme) matter when teaching about enslavement.

Navigating Sensitive Content

Navigating sensitive content (21% of statements), focused on addressing marginalized topics, navigating controversial histories (including experiencing parental/caregiver pushback; Henceforth, we use the term *caregivers* to signify parents and caregivers unless in a direct participant quote), and providing essential background for complex topics. For example, when discussing genocide, Teacher S explained,

It's a sensitive topic because it's rooted in hate and prejudice, which we're seeing a lot of in our nation today... so... you got to be careful in how you're wording it, how you're presenting it, because there's been some instances where... students go home and tell mom and dad... and then some of them don't agree with that.

This participant discussed the challenges of teaching sensitive topics while managing potential pushback from caregivers.

Justice-Centered Reasoning

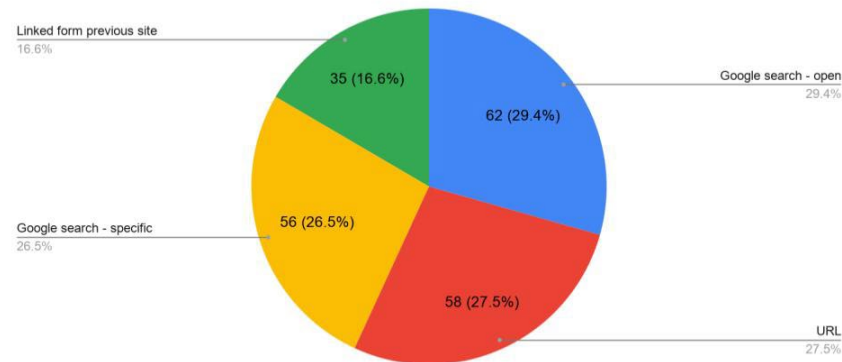
Although it appeared less frequently than other themes, justice-centered reasoning (11% of responses) reflected teachers' awareness of the importance of sharing complex histories as a means of fostering more just futures. For example, when discussing their chosen topic of enslavement, Teacher N stated, "We really do need to be genuine and honest about where our country's been." This comment reflects the teacher's prioritization of acknowledging and teaching complex historical topics. Taken together, these themes suggest how the teachers considered their chosen topics before engaging in the online planning task.

Search Strategies for Planning to Teach Difficult Histories

Figure 2 illustrates how teachers searched for websites/resources during the interviews. An open Google search (i.e., entering a topic name into Google.com) was the most popular starting point, and participants rarely scrolled beyond the first page of search results. Over half of teachers' searches involved seeking a known site (i.e., typing a URL or entering the site name in the Google search), suggesting that there are certain websites/sources teachers come to know and trust for planning.

Figure 2

Number and Percentage of Specific Search Types (N = 211)



Note. Each participant conducted multiple searches during their 1-hour interview with an average of 11 searches per person, totaling 211 unique searches.

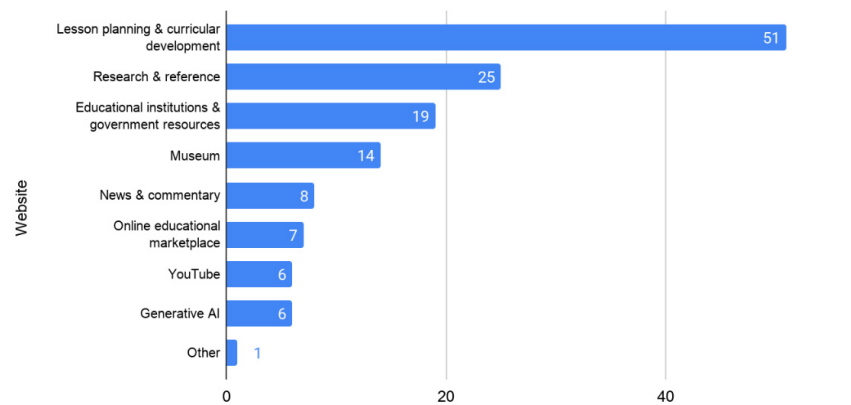
The 19 participants visited 137 websites in total during the interviews (Figure 3). The most frequently visited sites were those specifically designed to provide lesson plans or curricular ideas for teachers, such as PBS LearningMedia, followed by research or reference sites such as the Library of Congress (which may also include lesson plans; Table 2). These included the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, four curriculum/lesson planning sites, YouTube, the online educational marketplace site TPT, and the lesson planning-focused GAI, Magicschool.ai.

Half of the sites offered freely available content, whereas the other half required teachers to pay to access some or most of the materials. Additionally, although some of the most frequently used sites were designed specifically to address traumatic and difficult histories and featured named experts in these areas (e.g., Facing History & Ourselves, 2024), most were general educational platforms or broader sites (e.g., YouTube). This finding raises questions about how, or whether, resources on difficult histories are vetted on such platforms.

Twenty-eight percent of participants indicated in the questionnaire that they had previously used GAI for planning. Discussion of GAI in the interviews centered on the newness of the technologies and on administrators' or fellow teachers' recommending its use. In discussing Magicschool.ai, for example, Teacher B noted, "This was something our principal had thrown out to us and said, 'Play with it. And I've played with it a little bit.'" However, some participants expressed caution; Teacher L said, "It's AI; it's a tool. So, I always use it with a grain of salt."

Figure 3

Categories of Internet Sites Visited by Participants During Interviews
(*N* = 137 sites)



Note. The 137 sites included websites visited by more than one participant but did not include search engines, participants' Google drives, or school learning management systems.

Table 2

Internet Sites Most Frequented by Participants During the Interviews
(*N* = 19 participants)

Website Name	<i>n</i>
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum	10
Facing History and Ourselves	7
Teachers Pay Teachers (TpT)	6
Digital Inquiry Group (Stanford History Education Group at the time of the study)	6
PBS LearningMedia	5
YouTube	5
Magic School GAI	4
Newsela	4

Notably, some participants stated that they would primarily use district- or state-approved websites for planning. Teacher O noted, "I can justify it if someone's question[ing] why I'm teaching and I say, 'Hey, this was approved from the district.'" In discussing using resources to teach about enslavement, Teacher N said, "I feel like using the given curriculum is a very safe option, um, because it's district-provided, it's not me putting any

of my opinions onto students, so it feels very safe.” The assumption here might be that the resources are “neutral” if they are district approved. In this case, the district-approved curriculum was Teachers’ Curriculum Institute (TCI). The participant also evaluated resources linked on the state Department of Education website (e.g., National Geographic, EDSITEment, and SlaveVoyages.org) and noted, “I probably would stick with resources that I can defend, as these are resources that this state has recommended, so I feel protected from contentious people” (Teacher N). This comment suggests that concerns about caregivers and community members might play a role in online resource decision-making.

Values Employed in Using the Internet to Plan

Participants’ self-described values, or priorities, when planning to teach difficult histories using online sources spanned five themes: considering credibility and reliability, centering students, engaging critical consciousness, honoring perspectives, and attending to institutional or caregiver preferences. See Table 3 for an overview of the themes.

Table 3

Themes Describing Teachers’ Self-Described Values When Planning to Teach Difficult Histories Using Online Sources (N = 19 Participants)

Theme	Description	%
Considering credibility and reliability	Teachers expressed concerns about the credibility and reliability of online materials, which they described assessing through fact-checking, evaluating the source, considering author credentials, and avoiding perceived bias.	95
Centering students	Teachers expressed the desire to ensure that online content meets the diverse learning needs of their students, including varied reading levels, activities, suitable content (e.g., videos, images), and accessibility.	47
Honoring perspectives	Teachers expressed a focus on including diverse viewpoints and prioritizing community perspectives across the online content they selected.	26
Engaging critical consciousness	Teachers expressed a focus on assembling lessons that center students’ sociopolitical realities and frame students as change agents.	21
Attending to institutional or caregiver preferences	Teachers expressed attending to caregiver rights and opinions about history content as well as their school/district’s expectations when searching for online materials.	11

Considering Credibility and Reliability

First, nearly all teachers (95%) expressed concerns about the credibility and reliability of online materials, a key aspect of digital literacy (Cervetti et al., 2006). Teachers described fact-checking, evaluating the source, considering authors' credentials, and avoiding perceived bias. As Teacher F explained, "I do the research beforehand and fact-check anything I give to the students." Teachers also prioritized evaluating sources for perceived quality. Teacher H noted that they consult "museum teacher resources as they tend to have more highly resourced documents." Other teachers focused on whether a site was a .gov, .org, or .edu, considering these to be trustworthy.

Familiarity with a website, whether their own or that of fellow educators, also mattered. Teacher K explained valuing websites "that I know are solid sources. ... If it's not a source I've ever heard of ... or you look at it and it says Wikipedia, I won't use it." Other participants relied on familiarity with online sources within their teaching communities. For example, Teacher C admitted, "I'll poke my head next door to my mentor teachers and just be like, 'Hey, this is a site you've used? Do you like it?'"

Teachers also discussed assessing credibility and reliability by considering author credentials. One participant demonstrated their evaluation of an author's credibility by using lateral reading techniques (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019): They opened an additional search tab to research the author's background, such as their educational training. The participant explained that they seek "to know more about that person or that company to see if they have legitimacy" (Teacher L). Although other participants discussed this type of technique as important, Teacher L was the only participant who explicitly employed lateral reading skills during their internet searches to assess credibility and reliability, suggesting that this skill may be used less frequently among teachers.

Some teachers extended the discussion of credibility and reliability to GAI. Teacher C observed that a GAI site they had used in the past produced inaccurate historical information, an error they attributed to unreliable sourcing: "I don't know who fed [the AI site] information that I got ... but it was saying along the lines of, like, 'Hitler didn't lose the war.'" Teacher D expressed skepticism of GAI sourcing, explaining, "I do, however, feel that ChatGPT and other AI models are not culturally responsive platforms, and am aware that bias and white academic perspective[s] infiltrate every aspect of the AI models that currently exist because of the lack of responsibility towards this topic."

Avoiding perceived bias in sources was another approach to assessing credibility and reliability. The six participants who discussed bias in response to the question about what they value when searching online appeared to hold an assumption that sources (and materials) were inherently biased or not. For example, Teacher G explained that when they search for new material, they are "definitely looking for bias." Teacher M clarified that they look for "nonbiased" online materials, "which is a struggle." During their internet searches, some participants labeled sites as biased or not. Teacher L described the Digital Inquiry Group website as not containing any bias: "They give you the primary source, and they make

a lesson around it, which I like because it's not biased in any sort of way." Teacher C noted of the Facing History and Ourselves website, "A lot of left-leaning [materials], though, so this is like my first stop but not my last stop in terms of making sure I get the full picture for my students and not just like a completely biased one." Overall, in their pursuit of credible and reliable lesson content, teachers unanimously valued assembling multiple sources and materials. Teacher F explained it simply, "It's never just one resource being used."

Centering Students

About half of the participants (47%) discussed how they prioritized centering students' needs and identities in their online planning. Teachers expressed a desire to ensure that online content meets the diverse learning needs of their students, including varied reading levels, activities, suitable content (e.g., videos and images), and accessibility. For example, Teacher E responded, "So I guess my values would be, like, accessibility, multiple modes of, like, communicating the material, and lessons that are, like, meaningful to students." Additionally, concerned about what content was or was not appropriate for her students to see, Teacher H stated, "One of my main things when it comes to searching for online materials is that appropriateness level... knowing that if they clicked on it... it would not be okay for them to look at."

Taking a culturally relevant and sustaining approach, most teachers in this category centered students by considering their identities, political perspectives, cultures, languages, and wellbeing, and in doing so, moved beyond engaging digital literacy for online planning into engaging a more critical literacy, or what Schroeder and Curcio (2022) described as 21st-century critical curriculum literacy. For example, Teacher D described asking herself, "Does this make sense to my students? Am I meeting my students where they are at? Is the language that's being used on these resources going to make sense for my students?" Teacher L shared that they try to choose materials that reflect students' identities by not "always just hav[ing] a male white protagonist."

Honoring Perspectives

For some participants (26%), honoring perspectives was an important factor, with a focus on including diverse viewpoints and prioritizing community perspectives — an aspect of 21st-century critical curriculum literacy (Schroeder & Curcio, 2022). For example, when providing perspectives from communities under study, Teacher F described that they are always "trying to make sure that the history is coming from the group it's affecting." During their online searches, this teacher visited sites such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Learning for Justice website, both of which are known for incorporating diverse perspectives.

Teacher I expressed appreciation for sources that respected the perspectives of diverse communities and remained free from a perceived political agenda, noting, "If it is associated with the region/people involved, or has respectfully interacted with those groups, and the integrity for developing materials without political gain or agenda is there,

I will consider it.” Teacher Q said that one of their values for selecting online materials on difficult histories is avoiding sources they perceive as attempting to silence those histories. They stated, “I’m naturally skeptical of sites that are more conservative leaning because ... it’s been the conservative movement that has actively suppressed or tried to suppress and/or is actively trying to suppress some of this history that ... the students need to be learning about.”

Engaging Critical Consciousness

Another value that teachers (21%) described guiding their online planning was engaging what we termed critical consciousness, or the understanding that curriculum is not neutral and learning must center students’ sociopolitical realities (Freire, 1996). The teachers in this category expressed a commitment to “teaching for justice” (Teacher D) and understanding their students as change agents. Three of the four participants who demonstrated a commitment to critical consciousness shared extensive personal histories that explained why this priority was important to them. For example, Teacher F said,

I have a very strong sense of justice.... My grandfather actually marched with Cesar Chavez. Yeah. So, I, I always want to look at where the, where the larger people are involved and who were the injured party, because most of the time, their stories don’t get widely known.... And so, I want to make sure that when I’m teaching history, I’m teaching for those kiddos both sides of the story, that they’re not just seeing who won the battle.

These teachers seemed to understand that they (and other teachers) are inherently not neutral. Teacher I explained that her online planning was connected to her “own values and personal agenda” and the notion that “to make change, you have to be open to perspectives and hearing others.” This ability to acknowledge one’s identities and agendas may have enabled them to develop lessons that not only mattered to their students but also included greater nuance and diverse perspectives on history. Critical consciousness is at the heart of critical digital literacies (Aguilera & Pandya, 2021).

Attending to Institutions or Caregiver Preferences

The final theme, which addressed what teachers value when searching online, focused on attention to institutional or caregiver preferences and reflected two teachers’ feelings of being constrained by external forces (e.g., caregivers or the school district). For example, Teacher M discussed how she does not want to overstep caregiver rights when searching for online materials. She noted, “I respect the parents’ rights, and I respect the parents, and I don’t want to ever be viewed as putting things out there.”

Teacher O explained that she prioritizes district-approved online materials because these resources have already been vetted by the district and are deemed safe for her to use. She stated, “I try to stick to these things that have been approved [by the district] because... they’ve been filtered a little bit better.... I feel like I’m not going to get [in] too much trouble if I’m using stuff that they’re approving.” This theme did not align with a critical

digital literacies positioning. In fact, critical pedagogies place less emphasis on adhering to an approved curriculum and more emphasis on implementing curriculum that is meaningful for their students, responsive to the sociopolitical moment, and relevant to the communities to which those students belong (Freire, 1996).

Discussion and Implications

In examining how teachers planned online to teach difficult histories, we identified three areas of consideration for teachers and teacher educators. These areas raise questions about who holds the power to determine which resources teachers use to teach histories that are often considered sensitive, traumatic, and sometimes controversial, as well as the literacies that teachers need to navigate these spaces.

First, we found that teachers appeared to trust a relatively small set of websites when online planning. Some of these, such as Digital Inquiry Group and PBS, overlap with sites identified as commonly used by history teachers in other studies (e.g., AHA, 2024; Freedman et al., 2024). These sites varied in type, from nonprofit vetted sites focused on difficult histories to platforms such as TPT and GAI, where it is less clear how materials are created or vetted. Participants discussed the importance of familiarity with a website or organization as a key factor in judging credibility, which has implications for the ways teachers learn about online resources through teacher education, their teaching communities, and online marketing.

Additionally, some participants appeared to believe in the existence of “unbiased” (i.e., neutral) materials and websites. Participants reported that they critically assessed sources and perspectives; however, they sometimes oversimplified the concept of “bias” to be either present or absent in a website or source. For example, some participants assumed that a .org or .edu domain was an indicator of a website’s credibility, while others assumed that Wikipedia content was not credible. However, website domains are relatively “meaningless” (Wineburg & Zi, 2019), and although Wikipedia’s crowdsourced approach was initially criticized, recently, the site has been framed as increasingly credible (Cooke, 2020).

Two participants went further, assuming it was possible to design an entire lesson to be unbiased. For example, Teacher S stated, “I just want it to be factual. The best-known knowledge at the time.” Throughout this participant’s internet searches, they mentioned searching for “balanced” and “non-biased” materials and being careful to “present information and let the students decide.”

McGrew et al. (2024) noted that “people often equate ‘neutrality’ with credibility and judge sources based on perceived biases due to political perspective with little regard for other aspects of trustworthiness or consideration of expertise” (p. 401). Additionally, for some, “neutral” sites may be ones that align with their own views and thus may serve to reinforce the status quo and “existing inequities and power imbalances” (p. 402).

VanSledright (2004) suggested a move away from “bias detection” that “takes on the character of a good-bad dichotomy (telling the truth or lying)” toward understanding perspectives and authorial intent (p. 231). Going a step further, critically digitally literate educators must bring a holistic and relentless critical consciousness to their pedagogy (Aguilera & Pandya, 2021). Critically conscious educators understand that lesson plans and instructional materials can never be unbiased or disassociated from students’ lived realities. This understanding, coupled with nuanced reflection on one’s own identities and perspectives, seemed to facilitate participants’ ability to move away from the bias detection that VanSledright, as well as McGrew et al. 2024, have problematized, toward a focus on inclusive perspectives and author intent.

Second, more than 25% of the 211 searches in this study began with the Google search engine, and participants often did not scroll beyond the first page of results or acknowledge Google’s algorithm when evaluating the results the platform presented. This finding aligns with research on internet search patterns (e.g., Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). Importantly, participants did not question Google’s credibility or reliability as they did in some cases for individual sites. Teachers often seemed to trust Google readily, which aligns with the myth of platform objectivity (Bishop, 2018). Contrary to what we mostly observed in this sample, critically digitally literate teachers bring a more nuanced, critical approach to Google search, acknowledging limitations of the platform’s algorithms, its for-profit model, and general bias or lack of neutrality in its search results (Noble, 2018; Srnicek, 2011; van Dijck & Poell, 2018).

Recent research has shown that Google searches have become less effective over time due to the way Google’s algorithm prioritizes websites that are monetized with affiliate marketing and those that have better search engine optimizations (SEOs), both of which are problematic because they may push up websites in the list of results that are lower in quality (e.g., sites that lack robust content and instead are monetized, seeking referral clicks, or have been optimized with a list of keywords; Bevendorff et al., 2024). High-quality results can be buried pages deep, up to six times as deep as they were in the year 2000 (Fowler et al., 2020). Additionally, since we interviewed the teacher participants, Google introduced AI Overviews (Reid, 2024) at the top of the search results page — often accompanied by resource suggestions — which raises further questions about the power of the information that is and is not included in such overviews.

Third, several participants discussed the role of their school district in determining which online resources they use, underscoring the significance of websites that districts approve (and may fund). This finding is consistent with prior research showing that teachers’ curricular decisions are shaped, in part, by district-mandated tests, pacing guides, and directives from district personnel (e.g., Girard et al., 2021; Hong & Hamot, 2018). Given the current political context in the US and the nature of the histories chosen by participants that might be considered “divisive” (see Kaka et al., 2024), district-approved online resources may seem safe for teachers. Indeed, 74% of participants indicated in the questionnaire that their feelings about the topic that they chose or other difficult history topics have changed over the past few years. Again, this type of district control raises questions about who has the power to determine which

online resources are used in classrooms and which are blocked. This finding also suggests the paradoxes of autonomy and restriction that today's history teachers face (Schwartz, 2024; Stout & Wilburn, 2022).

Recommendations and Future Research

We view these issues as crucial for teachers and teacher educators to consider and discuss. Teacher preparation courses should address the importance of teachers' purposes and values when searching online for resources to teach sensitive and controversial topics. Discussing the planning for and teaching of the overlapping topics of genocide, enslavement, and colonialism within teacher preparation is essential, as these topics were often identified as difficult histories in this and previous studies (e.g., Jones & Edmondson, 2024). Additionally, Jones and Edmondson contended that it is important to recognize that the term difficult histories is itself not a neutral term and that its use implies power relationships and can lead to a false dichotomy of "difficult" or "not difficult" histories, allowing white supremacy to shape what is considered difficult in historical narratives (see also, Demoigny & Tirado, 2023; Jones, 2023; Miles & Thind, 2022). Future work could explore how teachers' ethnic or racial backgrounds influence which topics they consider difficult in history/social studies and how their online searches of those topics is impacted.

In the present study, we observed that the teachers who had most recently completed teacher preparation tended to value enacting critical consciousness and honoring diverse perspectives in their lesson planning around difficult histories. Although limited to our sample, this finding suggests that teacher education may play a role in fostering such values. One way to incorporate these issues into teacher education is to focus on enablers and constraints teachers face when planning controversial and sensitive history/social studies lessons online. The following preliminary questions may spark discussion among teacher educators, teachers, and policymakers, as well as encourage future research:

1. How does knowledge of and access to high-quality websites/sources enable and constrain teachers' online planning?

Participants demonstrated how much they rely on content provided by nonprofits that curate materials and develop curricula, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Digital Inquiry Group. Teachers may benefit from adopting the lessons (or portions of lessons) provided on many of these vetted websites. This approach may be especially useful in the context of sensitive or controversial topics, where teachers' confidence may be limited.

However, these sites do not necessarily include all the content that history/social studies teachers would need or want to teach, and teachers may have to engage in additional searching, including for and within sites that are not as vetted. Almost all teachers in this study indicated that they valued fact checking; however, confirmation bias can be an inhibiting factor (Aslett et al., 2024). An additional consideration is that these nonprofit websites are costly to maintain, and their continued presence is not assured, particularly when they contain content that may be

considered controversial. For example, the popular website Learning for Justice has transitioned to a community education program of the Southern Poverty Law Center, rather than focusing solely on teachers (Learning for Justice, 2024) and Brown University recently shut down the website for the 30-year old Choices Program aimed at teaching “challenging issues,” citing financial concerns (Brown University, 2025; Goldstein, 2025). How, then, might similar curricular websites be funded and expanded to continue to support the work that teachers rely on?

2. How does Google’s evolving design enable and constrain teachers’ online planning?

Most participants began their search with Google and did not continue past the first page of results. During the interviews, participants did not formally acknowledge Google’s algorithm or the platform’s for-profit motives (van Dijck & Poell, 2018) when evaluating content from their searches. This pattern held true for some other platforms they consulted, including social media and online marketplaces.

Because Google’s algorithm prioritizes websites based on SEO and affiliate marketing (Bevendorff et al., 2024), future teachers need to be aware that Google searching, along with the results it produces, is not neutral (Noble, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). As a result, they must navigate their searches accordingly. In some cases, teachers may have better results searching within a more trusted, not-for-profit source, such as the Library of Congress. With the introduction of AI into Google’s search engine, it will become increasingly important for teachers to approach results with a critical lens and question not only the accuracy of the information provided but also the many invisible forces that influence how a given platform can be used (van Dijck & Poell, 2018).

3. How do ever-evolving social, environmental, economic, and political factors enable and constrain teachers’ online planning?

In addition to understanding the technical aspects of platforms, future teachers must also be conscious of the ever-evolving social, economic, and political factors that can influence digital practices (Aguilera & Pandya, 2021); for example, emerging concerns surrounding GAI focus on the environmental harms of this technology, including energy, water, and rare earth metal consumption (Berreby, 2024; Hosseini et al., 2025). Additionally, researchers have found that, although GAI can produce interesting ideas and source materials for social studies lessons, uncritical use of the technology may lead to lessons that contain problematic narratives and discourses (Clark & Van Kessel, 2024). Critically digitally literate teachers will work to understand the potential harms associated with these technologies, making informed decisions about whether to adopt or reject them in their lesson planning. Expert online planners will bring critical understandings of sociopolitical and environmental contexts to design lessons that may inspire, problematize, and connect with students’ realities (Ladson-Billings, 1995; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014).

4. How do the expectations of caregivers, students, school administrators, and community members around “unbiased”

history/social studies curriculum enable and constrain teachers' online planning?

Some participants expressed concerns about upsetting stakeholders (e.g., caregivers and school district administrators) and even losing their jobs if they failed to teach sensitive or controversial topics in a way that aligned with stakeholders' beliefs or expectations.

Additionally, some participants suggested they wanted to assemble an unbiased curriculum — a panacea that does not exist (Freire, 1996). Rather than treating bias detection as a simple good–bad dichotomy, teacher preparation should support the development of teachers' critical consciousness when analyzing online sources and platforms. This work includes recognizing that instructional materials and learning experiences are never neutral and that examining the intentions and perspectives of both authors and platforms is essential.

Conclusion

Teachers increasingly rely on online resources to plan lessons (AHA, 2024; Schroeder et al., 2024); however, little is known about how they do so, particularly when preparing to teach histories that may be considered sensitive, controversial, or difficult. Given the increased scrutiny and conflicting messaging that teachers face in the United States regarding history curriculum, it is essential to understand how teachers navigate online lesson planning for difficult histories and the literacies they employ so that teacher-educators, school administrators, and policymakers can support them effectively. In light of GAI's potential to reproduce online materials that misrepresent or omit marginalized histories, it is more important than ever to examine how teachers navigate the vast landscape of online content, evaluate the credibility of sources, and ultimately construct inclusive and meaningful lessons about difficult histories.

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