

# Primary Source Inquiry Kits as Supports for Student Independent Research

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## I. Introduction

Each year, over half a million middle- and high-school students around the world participate in the National History Day (NHD) contest (National History Day, 2018). As students develop History Day projects, they have opportunities to engage in the practices of historians: to plan, carry out, and communicate their own history research using primary sources (Fehn & Schul, 2011).

Yet historical research is a complex task and requires a range of skills that many students struggle with, such as reading complex historical documents—often with anachronistic vocabulary and structure—gathering and synthesizing evidence across numerous sources, and translating evidence into findings and conclusions (De La Paz et al., 2014). These tasks are challenging for all types of students, but can be a particular struggle for ELLs and students with IEPs. This can lead many teachers and schools to treat National History Day participation as an enrichment activity targeted toward higher performing students.

In Maryland, though, many school districts have begun requiring all 8th-graders to participate in History Day contests. In order to help teachers develop History Day projects and engage in primary source-based research with a more diverse range of students, Maryland Humanities and Maryland Public Television teamed up through a grant from the Library of Congress's Teaching Primary Sources (TPS) Consortium to create a series of inquiry kits. The inquiry kits feature sets of historical documents on topics chosen to be both engaging to students and relevant to Maryland history curriculum. The kits were built to remove some of the barriers for teachers and students when trying to choose a topic for a History Day project, find high-quality primary source documents related to that topic, and analyze the documents as part of a History Day project

The kits, and the website in which they were embedded, are targeted at students with a 6th-grade reading level who might be conducting their own research. In order to cater to students' needs, the kits'

creators tried to include a balance of visual and textual sources, as well as sources that had accessibility features, such as read-to functions. Creators also wrote the text of the website and captions for the sources using accessible language and such practices as writing in active voice, avoiding compound sentences, and using simple verb tenses.

The inquiry kits are organized by historical era—including both U.S. and world history topics—and each kit includes a set of “Thinking Questions” and links to five primary source documents and one secondary source document.

In 2019, Education Development Center, Inc., a not-for-profit education research firm that is also part of the TPS Consortium, undertook a small qualitative study with nine Maryland teachers who were using the inquiry kits with students, in order to learn how the inquiry kits were being used by teachers and students and to assess their promise for supporting students in conducting independent research projects. This article summarizes some of the key findings.



## II. Our Study

### Research questions

In this research, EDC set out to answer two broad questions.

- First, to what extent are the Maryland primary source inquiry kits supporting students in undertaking independent history research? What roles do the kits play in this process?
- Second, what *features* of the inquiry kits encourage or inhibit student and teacher engagement and success?

It is our hope that other designers of collections of primary source sets and similar resources can benefit from a discussion of the features that helped and hindered students and teachers.

### Methods

In order to answer these questions, we asked teachers who had used the inquiry kits to complete an online survey about their experience. The survey included a mixture of open-response questions that asked teachers to share various aspects of how they used the kits, as well as a series of multiple choice (Likert Scale) items, which asked teachers to rate various aspects of the kits. In

order to analyze the results, we ran descriptive statistics of the closed-ended questions. We summarized open-ended responses based on a set of domains aligned to our research questions and developed a research matrix from those summaries.

## Participating teachers

Maryland Humanities distributed EDC’s survey by sending the link to several email lists, and by posting it to a Facebook group they maintain. Teachers who had used the inquiry kits in their classroom were offered \$50 gift cards to complete the survey, and nine teachers responded and completed the survey (See Table 1 for an overview of the teachers). These teachers taught a range of grade levels, from 4th grade all the way up to teacher preparation, although most (5/9) taught middle school. All teachers were focused on social studies, and U.S. history was the most-taught subject (6/9). All teachers worked in districts that encouraged or required them to participate in History Day with their students, and six of the nine teachers had their students participate in the contest. Of those six teachers, three had been participating in History Day for over six years, and the other three had been participating for only a year or two. Some teachers used the inquiry kits primarily with honors students or in enrichment classes, but five of the nine teachers used them with classes where at least a quarter of the students had IEPs or were designated as ELLs.

Table 1. Overview of teachers

Name <sup>1</sup>	Grades	Participate in NHD	Years Participating in NHD	Student Population	Subjects Taught
Ms. Howard	9–12	Yes	6 or more years	IEPs: A few ELLs: None	U.S. History, World History, AP European History, AP Psychology
Mr. Herring	6–8	Yes	6 or more years	IEPs: About half ELLs: A few	World History
Ms. Russo	6–8	Yes	1–2 years	IEPs: About 2/3 ELLs: About half	U.S. History
Ms. Morse	4–5	No	N/A	IEPs: A few ELLs: About 1/4	U.S. History, Civics, Geography
Ms. Chapman	Teacher prep	No	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mr. Garza	9–12	No	N/A	IEPs: A few ELLs: All	World History
Ms. Carson	6–8	Yes	6 or more years	IEPs: A few ELLs: A few	U.S. History, Maryland History
Ms. McLaughlin	6–8	Yes	1–2 years	IEPs: None ELLs: None	U.S. History, Geography

<sup>1</sup> All teachers are identified by pseudonyms.

## III. Findings

Overall, we found that the history kits were effective in supporting students in some, but not all, of the elements of independent history research. The kits were most effective in helping students with the initial stages of research—identifying topics and building initial skills in analyzing documents. Some teachers found the kits provided useful opportunities to model these processes by using a kit to show students how to develop their own projects. The kits did not seem to help students with other common challenges they face when embarking on historical research, however. Teachers described how students struggled with making sense of documents with complex reading levels, contextualizing documents within larger historical narratives, and synthesizing across the sources.

### Inquiry kits used to support History Day projects

In this section, we describe three positive roles that the kits played in supporting History Day projects, illustrating each with a teacher example.

1. **Finding a topic** for their history project
2. **Building skills** in reading and analyzing sources
3. **Building research skills required** for a History Day project

#### Role 1: Kits sparked students' ideas for research topics

A perennial challenge of teachers guiding students in research projects is helping them find topics that interest them, are appropriate, and have sources available. We found that the inquiry kits served a valuable role here.

Ms. Howard taught 9th–12th grades and had been participating in History Day with her students for more than six years. She taught a range of subjects from U.S. history to AP European history, and therefore the students she had conducting research had a range of abilities and reading levels—from 5th-grade up to college-ready. “When it comes to History Day projects,” Ms. Howard said, she wanted to give her students “complete choice of topics.” For this reason, the range of topics featured in the inquiry kits appealed to her. The day the History Day coordinator visited her school to introduce the inquiry kits and the contest’s annual theme, Ms. Howard took her students to the computer lab “so they could explore possible topics.”

Students were instructed to (1) read over the year’s theme to “understand what their topic had to address;” (2) go to the inquiry kits website and choose U.S. history or world history, “whatever interested them the most;” (3) pick a time period or era they wanted to study; and then (4) look at the kits and sources to home in on a topic. As students browsed the kits, Ms. Howard and her media specialist moved through the room to “check on their progress” and to “discuss topics with students,” answering questions as students asked them, and providing background information when students did not know much about a topic.

Ms. Howard reported that the kits helped her students with a research step that is often protracted and unfocused. “The inquiry kits helped my students develop a general idea of what they wanted to do for History Day much faster than previous years,” she said. Some students “picked a topic right away and used the sources they had, while others got ideas from seeing something listed.” Overall, she reported, they came up with “great topics—most of them very unique.” She also said her students had some “great discussions” as they looked at the inquiry kits’ topics.

These successes were accompanied by struggles in other areas, though. Some students struggled because they “weren’t familiar with a lot of the content”—such as the students who were interested in the Civil Rights movement but weren’t familiar with the Black Panthers. In her survey responses, Ms. Howard reported using the inquiry kits only to have students select topics—she said she didn’t want them to get started on research at this point—so it’s unclear what challenges or successes students had once they started analyzing and using the sources.

## Role 2: Kits helped students build skills in reading and analyzing sources

Once students have chosen appropriate topics, they need to experience working with historical sources. These documents are often complex, including anachronistic language and sentence structures, and often exist within a historical context unfamiliar to students (De La Paz et al., 2014). Therefore, students must be taught the analysis skills necessary to gather evidence and to use it to support the thesis of their History Day project.

Mr. Herring taught 6th–8th-grade world history and had been working with students on History Day projects for more than six years. About half of his students who used the inquiry kits had IEPs, and a few of them were designated as ELLs, but their performance was “mid- to higher-level,” and the students were “on the track for honors/AP history.” Mr. Herring used the kits for several purposes, including full-class instruction, History Day projects, and as homework/enrichment projects—but he primarily reported on using the kits to teach students “how to properly complete a primary source analysis.”

At the beginning of the school year, Mr. Herring and his students completed the research modules. He felt these modules were “absolutely fantastic,” and that they “really helped” his students have a foundation for working with documents and evidence. When teaching with the inquiry kits, Mr. Herring first modeled “how to properly use the materials” by modeling their use with one inquiry kit, and then having students complete the Voices of the Vietnam War kit while working in pairs. The students were instructed to read through each document twice—first “as a cold read, documenting any question they had” or vocabulary words they didn’t know, and then a second time with a peer, using the Library of Congress’s Primary Source Analysis tool to analyze the documents and answer the overall question from the inquiry kit. They discussed the inquiry kit’s Thinking Questions as a class, then students were supposed to “showcase their knowledge via a website, poster, Prezi, or Google Slide.”

Mr. Herring felt the inquiry kit’s Thinking Questions “helped to keep students on track, and helped them understand how to effectively ‘analyze’ documents.” But students struggled with using the Library of Congress analysis tool, and Mr. Herring decided to swap it out for another primary source analysis tool used in his district. Students with IEPs “struggled greatly” with some of the resources—particularly the videos, which lacked closed captions—and they “began to shut down when they saw the level of rigor that was needed” to work with the textual documents. While the interviews were engaging, some students struggled to “relate individual’s stories with the larger Vietnam story,” something he felt was generally difficult for 7th-grade students.

### Role 3: Kits helped build students’ research skills

In addition to being able to analyze historical documents, students require support conducting research in order to develop a History Day project. The National History Day contest and state affiliates provide models and tools for this process, and Ms. Russo used the inquiry kits to model the research process and to support students through the stages of developing their History Day projects.

Ms. Russo taught 6th–8th-grade U.S. history, and had been participating in History Day with her students for only a year or two. About two-thirds of the students with whom she used the inquiry kits had IEPs, and about half of them were designated as ELLs.

While she didn’t use the research modules, she did model how to develop a History Day project by using an inquiry kit to develop her own example project. She started by showing students how to use notecards to record information from a source, and then she developed an annotated bibliography to show students how to “explain why the source was important to their project.” Once Ms. Russo had modeled this, students were instructed to look through the inquiry kits and identify a topic for their projects. Students chose from a range of topics from U.S. and world history, and then they developed their own projects.

The teacher felt the kits were “a huge help to get them get started on their work,” and said they used the inquiry kits “a lot for the primary sources.” Students struggled, though, to “find the original source and use it in the annotated bibliography.” While she didn’t explain in what way they struggled to find the original source, she might have been referring to some of the sources in the inquiry kits that link to pages that include various sources, such as the [Taino Amulet](#) in the *Religion in the New World* kit, which links to an *Exploring the Early America’s* webpage.

### Other teacher uses of inquiry kits

Not all teachers who shared their experiences used the inquiry kits to support independent student research or History Day projects. Three other ways the kits were used by teachers included teaching historical content, preparing students for state assessments, and conducting teacher professional development.

### 1. To teach historical content

Mr. Garza mined the *Revolutions, Nationalism, Imperialism* kit for resources he used to teach his “advanced ESOL” high-school students about the *Scramble for Africa*. Mr. Garza “weaved the kit into [his] assignments,” used the Thinking Questions as “bell ringer” exercises, and used a combination of lectures, paired readings, and class discussions to help students learn about European imperialism before the class conducted a simulation of the Berlin Conference and students developed “eyewitness news reports” and a reflection paper. Mr. Garza found the sources with visuals and audio helpful, but had to make modifications to the kit so his students could understand the other “high-level sources.” He felt the Thinking Questions were “well thought-out,” but it was “on the students and me to work through them.”

### 2. To prepare students for state assessments

Ms. Morse worked with her upper-elementary students to give them experience using primary sources to respond to overarching questions and to prepare for upcoming state assessments. She chose the *Made in the USA: Early American Industries* inquiry kit, which was “most relevant to what they were studying in class at the moment.” Students were asked to “jigsaw resources, record key ideas and details, and respond to Thinking Questions.” Ms. Morse reported that the “varied resources of maps, artwork, and articles allowed [her] students to dig deeper into the material and gain a better understanding of what was occurring during that time period.” She engaged in small group instruction, and differentiated for her ELLs and her students with IEPs. While she felt the “visuals were great,” “the level of reading complexity was difficult at times.”

### 3. To conduct teacher professional development

A final use for the inquiry kits was to support instruction of pre-service teachers. Ms. Chapman worked with teachers to help them plan and prepare project-based learning units and assessments. She had teachers search the inquiry kits database, and introduced them to additional resources on the Library of Congress website and to “lesson templates for Research Based questions/kits.” She felt that the “lesson suggestions did assist teachers with choosing a few sources” and that the kits were a “great resource for teachers who do not have a lot of time.” The teachers Ms. Chapman worked with “struggled at creating essential questions,” though, and she felt that in general “teachers need more basic support on how to create Inquiries and how to teach PBL units.”

## 5. Conclusions and Design Recommendations

Our findings show that teachers found various uses for the inquiry kits—both to support the development of History Day projects and for uses unrelated to History Day—and that the kits have a promise as a tool to help a broader range of students embark on the process of independent historical research. Generally, teachers said that the kits helped students — including ELLs and those with IEPs — by giving them ideas they can use to start their projects, and by providing them with sources related to a topic. Teachers appreciated having questions that helped students organize their thinking and their

approach to the sources; where sources had supports such as visuals or audio features, teachers said they helped students make sense of the documents. While fewer teachers used the research modules, those like Mr. Herring who did, generally found the modules helpful, both as tools to use with their students and as structures to support their own lesson planning.

We also identified two major aspects of the inquiry kits that students struggled with that would make it more difficult for them to use the inquiry kits to support their historical research. First, teachers reported students struggled with their lack of content knowledge of the various time periods. This made it difficult for them to understand the sources and to contextualize them within larger historical narratives. Second, the most consistent feedback from teachers was that students found it difficult to “unpack documents,” and make sense of “high-level sources without visuals.” ELLs and students with IEPs struggled particularly with the “level of reading complexity” and with “accessing and using the materials.” Teachers had to “support vocabulary instruction and modify as needed” and “many scaffolds were required in order for students to even begin to access the materials.”

These two challenges with using primary sources are in no way unique to the Inquiry Kits, therefore our conclusions and recommendations are broadly relevant to other curriculum materials and primary source sets. Below are our recommendations for how the kits might be modified to deal with these challenges, so they could better reach their goals to support independent student research and the development of History Day projects.

## Design Recommendations

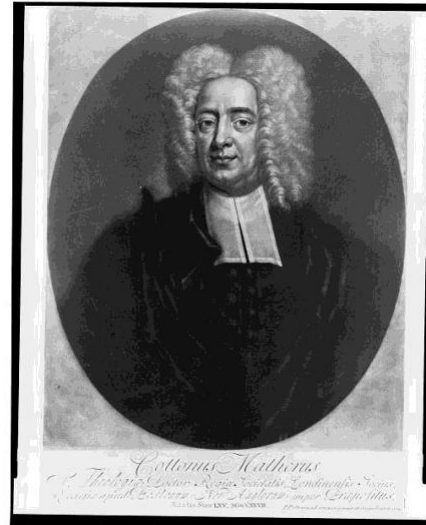
### Make sure that Primary Source inquiry kits include documents that can be used as evidence

While teachers appreciated the visual sources included in the inquiry kits—feeling that they were more accessible to students—many of these documents have limited application as sources of evidence for students answering research questions. For example, the [Religion in the New World](#) inquiry kit includes visual sources, such as a picture of a pre-Columbian religious statue and a portrait of the Puritan leader Cotton Mather. While these sources may serve important roles in helping students to visualize historical moments and the people involved, they can’t be used to answer Thinking Questions such as “Why did the Europeans try to convince the natives to follow a new religion?” or “How did some of the religious groups in the New World act as badly as the religious groups they left in Europe?” That is in part because a source like the portrait of Cotton Mather is not doing much more than documenting empirical reality (i.e., what Mather looked like).



A large portion of the visual sources that can be found in repositories such as the Library of Congress are these types of documentary sources, and therefore curriculum designers and teachers should be careful about selecting these sources, and thoughtful about the purpose they will serve.

Ideally, students have ample opportunities to interact with sources that allow them to develop evidence to support their arguments or theses. The inquiry kit also includes a petition written in 1692 to free several individuals in Salem who were jailed after being accused of witchcraft. In contrast to the portrait, this document is a rich source for evidence: Not only can it be used to gather an account of events related to the Salem Witch trials, it provides a view into how these jailings were contested. Additionally, this document is doing serious cultural work—this document isn't "an *account* of the action," it's "*part* of the action that is under investigation" (Seixas, 1998, p. 312).



### Make written sources in Primary Source inquiry kits accessible for a range of students

The designers of the Maryland inquiry kits have taken important steps to make the website on which the kits are housed accessible to struggling readers, such as writing in simple sentences and including captions for the sources. But teachers told us that many of the written sources the kits linked to were too complex for students—and it seems that even the practice of linking out to documents housed on websites such as the Library of Congress's might have caused students to get lost and confused. Teachers said that, especially when they were working with ELLs and students with IEPs, they had to modify documents and provide vocabulary and other supports in order to help students make sense of the written sources. Teachers will always have to tweak materials for their students, but creating these types of scaffolds can be both tricky and time-consuming, and the more teachers have to do it for each specific kit, the more difficult it will be for them to support a class of students conducting research on a variety of topics.

While some curriculum developers have tried to circumvent the literacy challenges of primary sources by relying on visual sources, others have argued that this approach misses opportunities to support students' literacy development (Reisman, 2012), and is therefore less aligned with Common Core-era standards, as well as with the C3 standards, which place an emphasis on the "shared responsibility for literacy learning" (NCSS, 2013 p. 7). For struggling readers, it's even more important that they be afforded these opportunities to engage with and develop complex and discipline-specific literacy. And, as highlighted in the previous recommendation, if one of the major goals of historical research is to use evidence in supporting ideas and arguments, many images found in historical archives aren't suitable for this purpose.

The inquiry kits could more successfully support a diverse range of students in comprehending and using primary sources for historical research—and therefore having opportunities to develop their literacy—if they took measures to offer more accessible text-based sources.

The petition to free the women accused of witchcraft mentioned in the previous recommendation is an example of a document that would likely be beyond most students' abilities. It was written in 1692, it includes anachronistic spelling, and it begins with the following sentence: "The humble petition of us whose names are subscribed here unto now prisoners at Ipswich humbly shareth, that some of us have lyen in the prison many months, and some of us many weeks, who are charged with witchcraft, and not being conscious to our selves of any guilt of that nature lying upon our consciences ..." This document could be a potentially rich source that students could use to explore the controversy and politics around religious persecution, but students are likely to shut down if they're presented documents like this in their original form.

One way the inquiry kits could present more accessible textual documents would be to modify the documents. Sam Wineburg and Daisy Martin highlighted three ways that historical documents can be modified: excerpting to highlight important parts of a document, simplifying complex structure and vocabulary, and presenting documents in more readable formats (Wineburg & Martin, 2009). In addition to these modifications, the kits could also make the documents more accessible by pairing them with close-reading and document-specific questions designed to help students identify and make sense of key elements of a document (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008; Seixas, 1998).

### Support students in contextualizing the Primary Sources

Several teachers remarked that their students lacked sufficient content knowledge to effectively use aspects of the inquiry kits. Students, and especially struggling readers, need historical knowledge to help them comprehend the documents they read (Doty, Cameron, & Barton, 2010), identify important takeaways, and understand references the authors make (Barton, 2005), so they can use documents to build mental models of historical events or themes.

Students also need contextual knowledge in order to use a document to deepen and modify their understanding of the historical context (Reisman & Wineburg, 2008). Seixas reminds us that "the historian does not analyze a text simply against a fixed contextual backdrop: the 'worklike' text adds to, enriches and reconstitutes the context" (1998, p. 312).

The fact that each inquiry kit includes a secondary source designed to provide a larger view of the topic shows that the designers recognized this need to provide students with a broader historical picture. The historian Keith Barton has argued that secondary sources, or historian accounts, are often efficient and useful tools to help students build contextual knowledge, and that "it makes little sense" to think that students could develop historical knowledge "entirely through piecemeal analysis of primary sources" (2005, p. 749). None of these teachers mentioned secondary sources though, and since they aren't called out in any explicit way on the site, it seems likely that many teachers and students did not know

how to distinguish the secondary sources from the others. The inquiry kits could help teachers and students take advantage of these secondary sources if they distinguished them from the primary sources and provided guidance on how teachers or students might use the secondary sources.

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