



Hogg Foundation  
*for* Mental Health



## Episode 144: Teaching in a Time of Division (Transcript)

Ike Evans:

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Hi, welcome to "Into the Fold," the Mental Health Podcast. I am your host, Ike Evans, and today we are delighted to bring you Episode 144 Teaching in a Time of Division. But first, some mental health headlines. In Hogg news, the Hogg Foundation invites eligible doctoral students from the University of Texas at Austin to submit a proposal for the 2023 Moore Fellowship. Candidates should have a primary research interest in the mental health impact of crises, stress, and adversity. Proposals related to COVID-19 are also eligible and encouraged. The submission deadline is March 22nd, 2023. For information on how to apply, go to the funding opportunity section of our main website, [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu).

In other news, a recent CDC survey found that teens and especially girls are experiencing more violence, suicidal thoughts and mental health challenges. This is according to a recent story by CNN. Teen girls are experiencing record high levels of violence, depression, and suicide risk in recent years, keeping with a trend of declining youth health and wellbeing overall. This is based on responses to the CDC's Biannual Youth Risk Behavior survey that was conducted in the fall of 2021, which tries to assess youth wellbeing. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Kathleen Ethier, director of the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health is quoted as saying, "Many measures were moving in the wrong direction before the pandemic. These data show the mental health crisis among young people continues." And finally, the Hogg Foundation is continuing its showcase of the New Voices Showcase for Youth. Last fall, young people submitted short videos that try to answer the question, how would the world be different if it cared about your mental health?

Six of the video submissions were of such quality and originality as to earn their creators small grant awards. The most recent of these is a short untitled video by Joshua Styles of Austin. If I had to describe it, I'd say it's a short moving slice of life by a young Black man who's looking for his own answer to the question. How would the world be different if it cared about your mental health? You can

find a link to it in the show notes for this episode. The remaining four videos will be published on our blog in the coming weeks, and that does it for mental health headlines. Don't be left out of the loop. Become a Hogg insider by subscribing to mental health headlines. You can find a signup link on our main website at [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu). The State of Florida is at the epicenter of a growing controversy over the control of schools and what they're allowed to teach.

Spurred by Governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida Department of Education has imposed a host of new restrictions on books in public schools. This extends to both classrooms and libraries. The restrictions focus on books that teach about race, sexual orientation, and gender identity. The new rules have created upheaval with some teachers even packing up their classroom libraries covering their shelves with construction paper to avoid the threat of felony prosecution. In Texas, there are signs that some lawmakers are trying to make similar things happen as of this recording, bills have been filed that would band classroom instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in Texas public schools before certain grade levels.

Public teaching has never been easy, but the willingness of some lawmakers to crack down on what is taught is unprecedented in recent memory. To help us understand what teachers are going through, we have brought on Nelva Williamson, a classroom teacher for Houston ISD, and Jesus Sosa of Richardson ISD. Jesus teaches social studies for grades nine through 12, and Nelva teaches AP African American studies for grades 10th through 12th at the Young Women's College Preparatory Academy in Houston. Nelva and Jesus, thanks for joining us.

Jesus Sosa: No problem.

Nelva Williamso...: Thank you for having me.

Ike Evans: So, our listeners would love to know more about you and your journeys as teachers. Jesus, why don't we start with you?

Jesus Sosa: Yeah. So, this is my third-year teaching and I didn't go to college to become a teacher. Initially, I wanted to be a lawyer and went the political science route, then got my master's and after adjuncting for a little bit, I realized what corporate world might be better went over there and I didn't really like it. So, I did alternative certification in the middle of the pandemic and came back and started teaching at Richardson for ESL World Geography. And since then, I've expanded to now teaching Mexican American studies and really helping the district develop lessons.

Ike Evans: And Nelva.

Nelva Williamso...: Well, I have been a classroom teacher for the past 42 years. This is my 42nd year in Houston ISD. And I did go to college to become a teacher graduating from

Texas A&M with a degree in EDCI Education-Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in history and in theater. I have been wanting to be a teacher like my entire life. My mom was a teacher. My great-grandfather helped to found a HBCU in Sumter, South Carolina. So, you might say that education is in my blood. I currently do teach the pilot one-year program of AP African American Studies as well as AP US history and AP World History. So, I'm like the AP history teacher for history at my campus, which is a small campus.

Ike Evans: So Jesus, there have been at least a couple of bills that have been filed that would ban classroom instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in Texas public schools. What is your sense of what is happening around the state on this and how have you been affected?

Jesus Sosa: It's very unfortunate that they're having to find ways to scare certain demographics who normally wouldn't go out and vote into going out to vote. And it's the parties that are typically going after the LGBTQ plus youth have had other ways to get the votes out, whether it's abortion, whether it's immigration or this or whatever. But since they've had a lot of wins in the Supreme Court in recent years, me personally, I believe they're running out of things that they can scare people on and making the case seem to be like, "Oh, these teachers," and that's the word I hear a lot indoctrination, that they're indoctrinating our kids into believing certain things. That's probably the most damaging thing they can do rather than trying to help. I know for my students, I never ask them to share anything that they wouldn't want to share publicly.

And I know I can't confirm, but I know a lot of them fall somewhere on the LGBTQ plus spectrum. Some of them have told me that they are, and for them, they like going into my classroom because they see representation, they see the rainbow flag and they'll see love is love. And I've always been a strong advocate of mental health and for my students, because I grew up not knowing what anxiety was, not knowing whether these things were normal or not. So, I just want to make sure I'm not there to teach them anything that they don't already know. I'm just there to show them that I love and I support them, but it does get tiring. And most recently for me, I had a student who's not even one of my students complain about the rainbow flag. So, that was a conversation with HR about needing to relocate it and I did make the case.

I understand that there's a student who doesn't appreciate it, but at the same time I have over a dozen letters from my students telling me, thank you. I feel loved in your classroom. I feel seen, I feel heard. So, if it's happening on such a small level within the students, I'm sure that seeing it on a state level or city level, a lot of the cities here in Texas are doing just must be really hard on them. So, it shouldn't be an issue, but it's unfortunate that they picked such a vulnerable demographic to go after.

Ike Evans: Okay. And so, what impact would you say this is having on your mental health or that of your fellow teachers?

Jesus Sosa: It's definitely exhausting because I believe it was sometime last year, sometime within the past few months when Governor Abbott told the agencies in Texas, anybody who was a doctor, a teacher, public servant, had to report anybody who was transgender youth to child abuse. And the system's already overloaded as it is when it comes to child abuse and the parents who are typically supportive of their trans kids, those are not as abundant as one would imagine. So, seeing the governor, essentially trying to turn teachers and public servants into the boogeyman, essentially trying to get us to tell them, "Hey, this kid has supported parents." That's how I view it. Hey, my kid, kids know from a young age what their gender is because it's not the same as biological sex. But a lot of people's, unfortunately, it's just not being well-informed enough on the thing, on the issues like the difference between this and that and they just... I don't know.

One word to summarize all of this would be just... It's exhausting trying to keep up with what are they trying to do now or what are they trying to get us to do to essentially trying to make us scare our kids into going back into the closet.

Ike Evans: Okay. So Nelva, "You teach AP African American history," like I said. So, what is the situation there in Houston and what are you looking out for?

Nelva Williamso...: Well, in Houston and because Houston is a very diverse city, I have not had really anyone come up against the fact that I am teaching AP African American Studies. My campus is the majority minority campus. The parents are very supportive of the program, as is the administration. So, I'm not coming up against anything directly. The one thing that has me looking is of course, what the state legislature might do in regards to following other states that are trying to censor history or censor history even more than what they did in the last legislative session.

Ike Evans: Okay. So, I think instead of -- I think it's become increasingly the case, we hear about things like African American studies from politicians or even high-level bureaucrats, but I think our listeners would love to hear directly from a teacher what it is that your students respond to in the material that you teach?

Nelva Williamso...: Well, that could be a very long answer, but I will make it brief. Yes. My students are really responding well to the material. It is the first time that many of them are having an opportunity to take a deeper dive into African American history and culture, the traditions of the Black community, and it is really resonating with them. We started in Africa and learned about the West African kingdom from which most of the enslaved people brought through the middle passage were captured from, and that really gave them an understanding that history for Black people does not begin with enslavement, that it begins on the continent of Africa. And I feel that that was something that was really eye-opening for not only the students but also for their parents. I have found out that parents are following along with the different lessons that I'm covering in class, the different topics that we're reading.

It has been really refreshing there, and also, in spite of the history that I have to teach about enslavement and how insidious that institution of chattel slavery was in the United States and also the remnants that we still feel from that system, it has been a great pleasure to teach my students that there was resistance in small ways and large ways from all sides, from men and women. They really -- because I teach at an all-girls school -- they really did connect to the stories of how women took agency over themselves to protect themselves, to protect their children and their families as they were -- even as they were in enslavement.

And the idea of the uplift of the Black community, even through enslavement and during reconstruction and how freedmen took such great care, I would say, in making sure that the visages of slavery were not a part of their community and the beginnings of education through freedmen's bureaus and then eventually with the development of HBCUs and the NAACP and the creation of sororities and fraternities and women's clubs. All of those things are part of history that have been neglected, and my students are really -- It's just opening up their eyes to all of this.

They're like, "Okay, it's not that we were slaves and then there was Dr. King in the '60s. There was all this history in between." So, it has really been refreshing for me and, as I said, eye-opening and uplifting for my students to see themselves in history as a vital part of the creation of this nation.

Ike Evans: Okay. So, Jesus, you mentioned being exhausted. So, one question that I have for both of you is, we know that teaching can be stressful, but what things help you to shore up your resilience or help you keep your head up? Let's go in reverse order. Nelva, if you want to take a swing at that first.

Nelva Williamso...: Sure. One of the things that I do just keep myself uplifted and above the fray is I will unplug. There are times when I just don't listen to the news, and I had to do that at the beginning of Black History month, and I was like, "This is my month, and I have unplugged." But there was so much backlash from things that people were not understanding about the AP African American Studies course in particular that I just had to unplug. I am part of a worldwide group of women who we walk for our help, it's called GirlsTrek, and I just had to get outside and walk. I have a little dog, Mr. Bentley, and who I love dearly. He's my little fur baby, and I play with him; I walk him. After school, I just unplugged. That time when I might have watched the news or scrolled on social media, I just simply put my phone away and I do other things.

And I've also found that I've started reading books that have nothing to do with history but are fun to read. I'm in a book club as well, and so those are ways that I have unplugged. I just have to just dim the noise that's going on all around me and focus on me and keeping myself kind of straight, as we would say.

Ike Evans: Okay. Jesus.

Jesus Sosa: Very similar to what Ms. Nelva said. I too have had to cut away from a lot of the -- just the inundated amount of news that I was getting on from every source. It used to be just TV and the newspaper maybe, but since social media, it's like there's news on TikTok, on Instagram, on Facebook, on Twitter, and for me, I know that the algorithm worked really well, so I would be getting a lot of the same content, and a lot of times the same content isn't always going to be necessarily positive news. During COVID times, I had to do this back then, I just had to stop watching the news so much and just keep it to a minimum, kind of just almost headlines. But that's one way that I've been dealing with it. The other one is talking about it with other teachers because we're all in the same boat, and for the most part, most teachers, we don't really talk about each other's political views, at least in my school.

But when it comes to do with the kids, we're all pretty much on the same page. We're there to teach the kids. Nobody goes into the profession thinking, "Oh, this is how I'm going to become a moneymaker genius," or something like that. We do it because we do care about these kids, and as hard as it is sometimes, sometimes it's worth it. Then, the last thing I do is once I get home, I have to make time for myself because I'm working and then I'm also working on my doctorate, and I'm like, I have to find some time to just unwind, to relax, to -- Even if it's just taking a three-hour nap. Those things do help, and just, it's funny how the body sometimes just needs a nap to completely revitalize itself, but making time for yourself, unplugging, and talking with others really does help a lot with this.

Ike Evans: Whenever the subject of classroom censorship comes up, parents and teachers are often presented as antagonists. A teacher does or says something in class that a parent finds out about it who then complains. And in this charged climate, you never know any one incident can find itself in the news, but that's not the whole story, I suspect. And so, how would you characterize the level of support that you get from parents about your concerns? Jesus, why don't we start with you?

Jesus Sosa: So, for me, I've been very lucky to have very supportive parents. I don't know if it's like this across the board or not, but at least for my school, majority of the parents that reach out to me are the ones that are concerned. They're like, "Hey, how's my kid doing?" Whether they're doing good or bad, they just want to check up. I'm very lucky to have a small group of parents who offer to chaperone on field trips, who offer to -- They told me, "Hey, if there's some kids who can't afford the ticket fee, let me know, and I'll see if I can help out." So, for me, personally, it's been very supportive. In my three years that I've been teaching there, I've only had two complaints. One, the recent one was about the pride flag, which wasn't even one of my students.

In talking to my superiors, they were telling me, well, they're like, "It makes sense that it's not one of your kids because you do build really good relationships with your kids." I have kids who are not -- You know, in the Latino community, homophobia is still very much a real thing. And I get a lot of kids

who are new arrivals here from Central America, Latin America, and I'm able to talk to them and tell them, "Hey, I know this is the way things were done back home, but here, in your new home, this is not okay." And talking to them makes them understand.

The other one complaint that I had was my first year teaching. We were talking about the Middle East, and I don't even remember the exact conversation, but it had something to do -- I brought up the fact that President Trump was being accused of putting kids in cages, and I said, "The world community right now is not looking good for us." Well, I had a kid, one of my own students, who went and complained to mom and dad and said, "Hey, Mr. Sosa's telling the class that President Trump's putting kids in cages." Thankfully, though, my principals were very supportive, and they said, "Look, one of the kids brought up the question. It wasn't Mr. Sosa just trying to talk about it. It's actually part of the conversation that just sprung up naturally," which right now, I think there's already one in place, but the conversation in Texas is gearing towards "don't let teachers talk about public events."

I'm sorry, current events, because that could lead to a lot of uncomfortable conversations for some people talking about gay issues, talking about Black Lives Matter, you're talking about women's empowerment. All of these things is seen as a threat to everything they know and love. So, this is how they're trying to censor teachers. Just stick to the facts. But at the same time, I remember when I was in high school, the debate was teachers teach kids about evolution, which has now just moved on to -- They picked the new boogeyman, and now they're going after books, which if you go and ask most librarians, they'll tell you, if you're trying to ban books, that's definitely not a good thing for you to be doing right now.

Ike Evans:

And Nelva.

Nelva Williamso...:

Well, at my current school, I have not had any type of pushback. As I said, it's a majority minority campus. The parents have been very supportive of what I'm teaching in history, although as Jesus has brought up, I am mindful, not that I'm trying to be cautious, but I am mindful about how I talk about maybe more conservative things that might not be comfortable for me as I'm a little bit more liberal, but I kind of temper how I talk about that so that no one can say, "Oh, well, she's to the left, and she's a liberal," or "She's to the right, and she's conservative. She doesn't like this person because of their views." I try to keep it real mild, but that, again, can be a stressor because it's like I still have to tell the truth. And I'm not trying to sugarcoat anything.

I show the students where I'm getting my information from, and it's not from just social media, but at this particular point in time, there has not been an instance. But as all teachers do, we just wait for that time, that one time where you might say something that is very benign and someone takes it in a different way. It could be like Jesus said, "A student outside the hallway who might not be privy or who is not privy to the entire conversation or what the lesson of the day

is in your classroom, but then they go and say something." But at this point in time, I have not had to deal with that.

Ike Evans: Well, yeah, and it's very much a mixed bag, and we don't want to give listeners the sense that the mood is entirely one of dread or anxiousness. I mean, setting aside everything else, I mean, teaching is still your calling, and it still provides endless moments of uplift, getting through to young minds, and nothing that has happened in recent months can rob you of that, it sounds like I'm hearing. My last question, and this is for both of you, is that for those setting policy on this issue, what message do you have for them? Or what do you want them to know about your reality as an educator? Nelva, let's start with you.

Nelva Williamson...: Well, the first thing that I would tell anyone setting policy is to listen to the teachers. Yes, listening to parents is just as important, but listen to the people who are in the classroom. Listen to the people who are in the school, because what the parent might be getting is totally out of context and in a vacuum. And if they have certain political leanings, they might take it one way or the other, though my caution to policymakers is to listen to teachers. I know that we are a much maligned group for whatever reason. I know at one point in time in the history of this country, teachers were looked up to and supported and very much respected by policymakers. And I'm not sure when the change began, but it would do them well to listen to teachers.

Jesus Sosa: I completely agree with Ms. Williamson about needing to listen to teachers. During COVID, I remember when teachers were very highly looked up to for a little bit, and this is not -- I'm not saying that everybody should be like, "Oh, thank God. We have teachers for this." I mean, right now, I don't think politicians realize how difficult it is to get a substitute teacher. In my own school, if somebody's out last minute -- And a lot of times, you can't control having a cold or a flu or a sick child or something like that, so if you're sick, you're going to have to put in for a sub. And the subs are not always there. There's a shortage of subs. They're not being paid the same amount across the board. Same thing with teachers. You've got some districts that are really good at paying teachers, and then you've got some that are trying to cut back, going down to a four-day school week.

And I don't think all of these decisions are coming from teachers themselves, because even with the big controversy going around around Greg Abbott's State of the State Address this past week, he really -- It almost -- For me, personally, I took that almost as if he's coming after teachers, public school teachers. And if they're not careful, they're going to turn this into a job that's underpaid, overworked, and a lot of people are going to be like, "Why am I dealing with the stress of it when I could be making a whole lot more money doing something else." So, my advice to them would be, just listen to us. Listen to the students. The students are going to be -- I mean, by the time they're 14, they're old enough to understand that there's gay people in the world, there's trans people. They understand that the world is not perfect. Black people, people of color, women, there's a lot of groups -- That doesn't mean that talking about them is



still going to be playing the victim. It just means learning the history. Otherwise, you're going to repeat it again.

And so, these kids are smart. Listen to the teachers, listen to the students, and just make sure that you're careful, because otherwise, you're going to turn a lot of good teachers away, retiring early.

Ike Evans: Okay. Jesus, Nelva, we really do appreciate. Nelva, it looks like you're wanting to --

Nelva Williamso...: One other thing, Jesus, I do you feel that it's almost purposeful in attacking teachers to then move on to the political agenda of what Greg Abbott was promoting in his State of the State school vouchers and things of that nature by demonizing teachers, and parents are going to say, "Oh, we don't want our kid to go to that public school. If they could go to a private school where teachers are not going to say or do those kinds of things, and now we have this money that we could use." Do you think that that's really the ulterior motive in all of this? As you were talking, Jesus, I kind of thought about that.

Ike Evans: Yeah, I'll let Jesus field that one.

Jesus Sosa: So, I mean, it's true. I don't know if that's why he's doing it or not, but it sure feels like it. Even this morning when I was watching the Spectrum 1 News, it's like minute-long news, they were talking about how there's some TEA staff members, like higher-ups, who are trying to advocate for Greg Abbott's plan to give parents school vouchers. They're saying, "Oh, school choice." They're saying, "School teachers or public schools are still going to get money," but now parents are going to be empowered. And anytime they do that, that sounds great. It's like a lot of things. It sounds great, but what a lot of people don't realize is this is giving the charter schools the power to pick and choose who they want. And all the trouble kids, all the ones that are -- who maybe need a little bit more love, who need a little bit more patience from the teachers, they're not going to be accepted.

And so, what it's going to end up doing is you're going to turn schools that some of them might be struggling already, you might turn them into something that's going to be essentially one day they're going to like, "Okay, this is not working out. Let's just go ahead and get rid of public schools and go to all public schools." Because from my understanding, they don't have to abide by all the rules. And if I understand again on this one, which I'm not a 100% sure, but I believe that charter schools can have their own criteria when it comes to hiring teachers. They don't have to go through the certification process like we do. So, if somebody's out there teaching them about biology, evolution is a myth, and the school's okay with it, there's not going to be any consequences from the state.

But the rest of us, they keep acting like the teachers are having this secret agenda that we're basing our lessons off of. Everything we base off is based on the TEKS, which I was a part of helping rewrite the ones for Mexican American Studies last year, and they didn't get approved because they felt that it was way too scary to talk about like the Texas Rangers killing people at the border 100 years ago. It happened. And to try to say, like Ms. Nelva said, "sugarcoat things," that's not doing anybody a favor. So, long answer short, I don't know if he's trying to attack teachers on purpose, but it's definitely coming across that way to the rest of the Texas public.

Ike Evans: Well, okay. This was a wonderful dialogue. Jesus, Nelva, you take care of yourselves.

Nelva Williamso...: Okay, thank you.

Ike Evans: And I'm a product of public schools, so it's close to home to me, for me as well. All right. Well, thanks so much.

Nelva Williamso...: Okay. All right. Thank you.

Jesus Sosa: Thank you, Mr. Evans.

Nelva Williamso...: This is fun. Okay.

Ike Evans: Nice meeting y'all.

Nelva Williamso...: All right. Nice meeting all of you, too.

Ike Evans: At time of recording, it is still February, which, as I'm sure you know, is Black History Month. This podcast has offered up a lot over the years pertaining to Black History, including even our previous episode titled "Black History, the Hogg Foundation, and The Red Scare in Texas." You'll find links galore in the show notes for today's episode, so please check those out. And that does it for this episode. We're glad you could join us. Special thanks as always to my colleagues, Kate Rooni, Darrell Wiggins, and Anna Harris for their production assistance. Thank you as well to the Hogg Foundation for their steadfast support. Just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is as well that by helping others, we enhance our own resilience.

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