

Article

Teaching Against Hate in a Globalised World. Lessons from Initial Teacher Education in Chile for Social Work Education

Jesús Marolla-Gajardo ^{1,*}  and María Yazmina Lozano-Mas ² ¹ Facultad de Ciencias Humanas, Universidad Bernardo O'Higgins, Santiago 8370993, Chile² Departamento de Didácticas Específicas, Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 35003 Las Palmas, Spain; yazmina.lozano@ulpgc.es* Correspondence: jesus.marolla@ubo.cl

Abstract

Hate speech comprises expressions that promote discrimination, violence, and the exclusion of individuals or groups based on identity characteristics such as race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. Social media platforms have provided a space for the amplification of such discourse, fostering a climate of intolerance that undermines social and democratic coexistence. In the educational sphere, hate speech has a detrimental impact on the initial training of students and teachers. That its presence within school environments contributes to social fragmentation, the deterioration of learning processes, and an increase in violence. Furthermore, such discourse reinforces prejudices and stereotypes that hinder the construction of a critical and pluralistic citizenship. From the outset of teacher education, it is essential to develop pedagogical strategies that foster critical thinking and education in democratic values. Digital literacy and explicit instruction on the impact of hate speech can contribute to the prevention of these exclusionary dynamics. An inclusive and reflective education is key to counteracting the effects of intolerance in contemporary society.

Keywords: citizenship education; hate speech; teacher education; social sciences; social work education



Academic Editor: Denise MacDermott

Received: 29 August 2025

Revised: 1 October 2025

Accepted: 2 October 2025

Published: 8 October 2025

Citation: Marolla-Gajardo, Jesús, and María Yazmina Lozano-Mas. 2025. Teaching Against Hate in a Globalised World. Lessons from Initial Teacher Education in Chile for Social Work Education. *Social Sciences* 14: 595. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14100595>

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

At present, hate speech has become increasingly prominent within the digital public sphere, generating social, political, and educational impacts. These expressions—marked by the promotion of discrimination, prejudice, and violence against individuals or groups on the basis of identity characteristics such as race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation—pose a challenge to democratic coexistence and citizenship education (Blanco-Alfonso et al. 2022).

The growth of social media has facilitated their spread, amplifying their reach and normalising exclusionary narratives (Horwitz 2021). Recent research shows how digital platforms enable the dissemination and reproduction of content that fosters intolerance, under the apparent impunity of anonymity and the absence of effective regulation (Lingiardi et al. 2020). Education is pivotal in preventing and mitigating the effects of hate speech, particularly within initial teacher education (ITE) and school settings (Abuín-Vences et al. 2022).

The educational sphere is not merely affected by such discourses; it also functions as a site where discriminatory attitudes may be reproduced and consolidated. The absence of robust digital literacy and of critical tools to interrogate the messages circulating on social media contributes to the perpetuation of intolerance within school settings (Parekh 2012), hence the importance of developing pedagogical strategies that enable student teachers and pupils to identify, analyse, and counter hate speech.

At the normative level, hate speech sits in a zone of tension between freedom of expression and the protection of fundamental rights, which has prompted debates about the need for stricter regulation in digital environments (Barendt 2019; O'Connor 2021). In this sense, analysing the impact of hate speech on education is crucial to understanding its effects on the construction of a democratic, participatory citizenship.

This study examines the proliferation of hate speech within initial teacher education (ITE) and school settings and identifies educational strategies for its mitigation. To this end, it reviews theoretical and empirical work on the relationship between hate speech, social media, and education, with the aim of proposing mechanisms that foster inclusive, respectful coexistence across both school and digital contexts

Hate Speech and Education

Hate speech is defined as any form of expression that promotes, incites, or legitimises discrimination, violence, or the exclusion of individuals or groups on the basis of characteristics such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or ideology (Benesch 2008). It may be explicit—through insults or direct threats—or more subtle, by disseminating stereotypes and narratives that reinforce structural inequalities (Bazzaco et al. 2017). The United Nations has noted that hate speech poses a threat to democratic coexistence by fostering intolerance and may lead to violent acts, especially when amplified by digital media.

The rise in social media has intensified the spread of such discourse, facilitating its virality and normalisation within the digital public sphere (Horwitz 2021). These platforms enable discriminatory messages to circulate with unprecedented speed, creating spaces in which extremist ideologies can be reinforced through algorithms that favour polarisation (Lingiardi et al. 2020). The anonymity facilitated by the internet has contributed to a sense of impunity among those who propagate aggressive speech, complicating the regulation and sanctioning of such behaviour (Blanco-Alfonso et al. 2022). As a result, hate speech harms direct victims and also erodes the social fabric by weakening trust in institutions and in pluralistic coexistence.

From a social perspective, hate speech and its reproduction not only affect minorities and historically marginalised groups; it also impacts the educational sphere and the construction of inclusive, democratic societies (Abuín-Vences et al. 2022). Such dynamics can lead to the normalisation of discriminatory attitudes and the systematic exclusion of certain groups within the school community, implicitly undermining the quality of teaching and the emotional well-being of teachers and students (Izquierdo-Montero and Aguado-Odina 2020), as well as academic performance (Parekh 2012). Indeed, research in social psychology shows that sustained exposure to these discourses can adversely shape individuals' identities, reinforcing discrimination and segregation (Bayer and Bárd 2020).

Critical theory further contends that these expressions have structural effects, generating a climate of fear and exclusion that limits the participation of certain groups in the public sphere (Waldron 2012). This is particularly problematic in democratic societies, where plural deliberation and dialogue are essential to the functioning of institutions.

When addressing this issue, it is essential to recognise the role of the education system in preventing and mitigating hate speech. Schools are spaces where the foundations of democratic coexistence and respect for diversity are built; as noted above, exposure to such discourse within school settings has negative repercussions and perpetuates exclusion and social segregation (Abuín-Vences et al. 2022). In this context, schools should implement methodological strategies that foster media literacy and the development of critical thinking, enabling students to recognise and deactivate hate narratives and to understand the impact of digital communication on social and political life. Only an education grounded in inclusion and democratic values can counter the effects of hate speech and cultivate active,

responsible citizenship, encouraging accountable language use in both physical and digital spaces—since hate speech is, ultimately, a communicative problem.

One of the main educational challenges in confronting hate speech is the influence of social media and the digitisation of communication. According to [Colleoni et al. \(2014\)](#), digital platforms have transformed how young people access information, exposing them to polarising narratives and, in some cases, to discourse that promotes discrimination. Consequently, media literacy has become a key tool for students and teachers to analyse critically the messages circulating in the digital sphere. [Waldron \(2012\)](#) argues that educational programmes should focus on teaching young people to identify hate speech and distinguish it from legitimate debate, fostering a culture of respect and evidence-based argumentation.

However, recent studies show that many institutions lack effective tools to address this problem in educational settings, which prevents the creation of safe and inclusive learning environments ([Izquierdo-Montero and Aguado-Odina 2020](#)). [Parekh \(2012\)](#) argues that, although many legal frameworks provide protection against discrimination, such provisions are insufficient in education unless accompanied by concrete pedagogical strategies. Moreover, fears of censorship and ongoing debates about freedom of expression in the classroom have hindered the adoption of clear guidelines for tackling the issue ([Barendt 2019](#)). In this context, it is necessary to strengthen educational initiatives that promote intercultural dialogue and respect for diversity, incorporating tools for discourse analysis and the deconstruction of hate narratives into curricula. Only then can education not merely inform but also form critical, responsible citizens in the struggle against intolerance.

Initial teacher education plays a crucial role. Teachers often lack specific training to address hate speech in the classroom, yet they must be prepared to mediate conflicts, deconstruct exclusionary discourses, and foster a climate of tolerance. It is essential to embed, in both initial and continuing teacher education, pedagogical tools that enable educators to identify, analyse, and respond to hate speech, promoting prevention and conflict-resolution strategies grounded in dialogue and human rights education.

Another fundamental aspect is the role of digital education and media literacy as tools to mitigate the spread of hate speech in educational settings. [Colleoni et al. \(2014\)](#) highlight that students often consume and share information without questioning its provenance or implications, thereby facilitating the dissemination of hate speech on digital platforms. It is therefore essential that education incorporate methodologies that teach students to evaluate information critically, detect false news, and recognise narratives that incite hatred or exclusion ([Waldron 2012](#)). The development of digital competences does not contribute to preventing misinformation, but it does foster responsible participation in the digital sphere, promoting the ethical use of social networks and other media.

For education to fulfil its transformative role in the face of hate speech, coordination is required between public policy, educational institutions, and civil society. According to [Parekh \(2012\)](#), comprehensive policies are needed to address the problem structurally. This entails developing clear regulatory frameworks, implementing protocols for action in cases of discrimination, and promoting awareness campaigns that involve the entire educational community ([Barendt 2019](#)).

Finally, it is essential to create participatory spaces in which students can engage in critical debate about diversity, equality, and human rights, thereby contributing to the construction of fairer and more inclusive societies. In conclusion, tackling hate speech in education requires a comprehensive approach involving schools, governments, and civil society. Beyond the academic sphere, it is crucial to implement preventive and regulatory strategies in digital spaces, ensuring that technology platforms assume responsibility for content moderation and the promotion of respectful debate ([Colleoni et al. 2014](#)). It is also imperative that education systems strengthen learning about human rights, fostering

empathy, respect for diversity, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Only through collective commitment and transformative education will it be possible to mitigate the effects of hate speech and advance towards more equitable and inclusive societies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodological Bases

This study is framed within a qualitative methodology, which enables an in-depth understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and meanings that participants attribute to a given social phenomenon (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). It prioritises the interpretive analysis of social reality, given the complexity and contextual nature of the emergence of hate speech in educational settings (Flick 2018). A qualitative approach is therefore the most suitable for exploring how hate speech affects coexistence in educational spaces and how it is perceived by the different actors involved, such as students and teachers.

Epistemologically, this research is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand social reality from the perspective of those who experience it (Guba and Lincoln 1994). It proceeds from the assumption that reality is socially constructed through language, interactions, and shared meanings—an assumption particularly relevant to the study of hate speech in educational contexts (Creswell and Poth 2018). Through this lens, the study analyses participants' narratives regarding their experiences with hate speech in the classroom and in digital environments, considering its impact on citizenship formation and school coexistence.

The aim of the study is to explore how hate speech manifests across different educational institutions, employing a focus-group design—a qualitative technique that collects data through participant interaction and discussion (Krueger and Casey 2015). This approach helps to identify discursive patterns and dynamics of exclusion that may not surface in individual interviews, while providing a space for collective reflection on the issue under analysis (Morgan 2019).

It also enables the identification of individual experiences and collective dynamics that may contribute to either the reproduction of, or resistance to, hate speech within initial teacher education. This technique is particularly well suited to the study of hate speech, as it makes it possible to detect areas of consensus and tension around the topic, creating a space in which participants can reflect on their own experiences and those of their peers (Morgan 2019).

2.2. Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory–descriptive design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of prospective teachers' experiences and perceptions regarding hate speech in educational settings. Such a design is appropriate when the phenomenon under study has not been sufficiently investigated or requires detailed analysis from the perspective of those involved (Creswell and Poth 2018). In this case, the study seeks to identify the presence and manifestations of hate speech within initial teacher education, and to analyse how these discourses affect the construction of professional identity and coexistence in educational spaces.

The exploratory approach enables the discovery of new categories and emergent patterns from participants' talk, without starting from closed hypotheses or predefined variables (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). Accordingly, the study is grounded in data collection within natural contexts—i.e., real educational environments—facilitating a more authentic understanding of the issue at hand (Flick 2018). Moreover, as a descriptive design, it allows for a detailed characterisation of prospective teachers' experiences and views regarding

hate speech, specifying how they perceive, experience, and manage it in their academic and professional contexts (Merriam and Tisdell 2016).

2.3. Sample and Instruments

The sample comprised 18 focus groups conducted across six universities in different localities of Chile, each composed of six participants selected at random within initial teacher education programmes. Sampling followed a purposive–random strategy, ensuring the inclusion of prospective teachers with diverse experiences and perspectives on the topic under study. In qualitative research, sampling privileges depth and richness over statistical representativeness; accordingly, we adopted a strategy designed to capture the diversity of discourses within the educational context (Patton 2015). Including multiple universities and localities offered a broader picture of how hate speech is perceived in teacher education and how such perceptions vary across sociocultural and academic settings (Creswell and Poth 2018; Morgan 2019).

Each session lasted approximately 45 min and was organised around a semi-structured interview guide, enabling the collection of detailed information while retaining the flexibility required to explore emergent themes during discussion (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The focus-group protocol was built around open-ended questions designed to identify the presence of hate speech in educational settings, its impact on school coexistence, and the strategies prospective teachers use to address it. A dialogic approach was prioritised to foster the collective construction of meaning, enabling participants to share experiences without the constraints of a rigid script (Flick 2018). This approach is pivotal in research on hate speech because it surfaces narratives that may not emerge in individual interviews and captures group dynamics that reflect how these expressions are constructed and reproduced within educational contexts (Silverman 2020).

The semi-structured interview protocol designed for the focus groups was organised around three thematic axes: (1) participants' experiences and perceptions of hate speech in the classroom and digital environments, (2) their understanding of the role of social media and digitalisation in amplifying discriminatory discourses, and (3) strategies and resources within initial teacher training to address hate speech and promote inclusive coexistence. Each axis was developed through guiding questions and prompts that allowed participants to elaborate on personal experiences, pedagogical challenges, and possible solutions. This structure ensured comparability across the 18 focus groups while providing the flexibility required to capture the nuances of each context.

2.4. Data Analysis

The data analysis process in this study was conducted through a qualitative, phenomenology-based strategy, using ATLAS.ti.24 latest version) for the organisation, segmentation, and coding of the transcribed material. The focus groups were audio-recorded, subsequently fully transcribed, and subjected to detailed analysis through thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2006). This strategy enabled the identification of recurrent patterns in participants' talk, generating emergent categories from their accounts and providing a structured view of how hate speech is perceived and manifested within initial teacher education.

A phenomenological approach was adopted to guide the analysis, as this perspective seeks to understand participants' lived experiences in relation to a specific phenomenon (Van Manen 2016). In this case, it allowed for the exploration of how prospective teachers experience, interpret, and respond to hate speech in their academic training, foregrounding subjectivity and the meanings that social actors attribute to their experiences (Moustakas 1994). This approach is particularly relevant to complex social phenomena such as hate

speech, as it captures the emotional, symbolic, and contextual dimensions that shape its reproduction and resistance within educational spaces (Creswell and Poth 2018).

The use of grounded theory tools within a phenomenological design is justified by the complementarity of both methodologies in analysing subjective experiences and constructing emergent categories from the data:

- Phenomenology focuses on an in-depth understanding of lived experiences and the meanings participants attribute to a phenomenon (Van Manen 2016).
- Grounded theory provides systematic strategies for identifying patterns and developing theoretical categories through inductive analysis (Strauss and Corbin 2014).

In this study, combining both approaches allows codes and categories to emerge directly from the data—specifically from participants' accounts of hate speech in their teacher education—without imposing prior conceptual structures. This methodological integration strengthens the validity of the qualitative analysis, enabling a more structured interpretation of social phenomena and identifying connections between individual experiences and the educational and cultural processes in which they are embedded (Charmaz 2014). In this way, grounded theory becomes a key tool within the phenomenological approach, facilitating the organisation and systematisation of the data without distorting participants' experiential perspectives. For the data analysis, the following methodological strategies were employed (Table 1):

Table 1. Methodological strategies followed to analyse the data.

	Strategy	Purpose
1	Horizontal reading of transcripts	Familiarisation with the data corpus
2	Open coding	Identification of key units of meaning, grouping them into preliminary codes related to the participants' experience
3	Axial coding	Establishing relationships between emerging codes. Building analytical categories
4	Interpretive analysis of the categories	Relate to the theoretical framework and the research objectives
Font: Saldaña (2021); Strauss and Corbin (2014).		

The use of ATLAS.ti facilitated the organisation and categorisation of the transcribed material, enabling the visualisation of relationships among the data and improving the systematisation of the analysis (Frieze 2019). Through segmentation, clustering, and co-occurrence tools, the interpretation of the narratives gained depth, ensuring the rigour and reliability of the study. The phenomenological approach, combined with thematic coding, provided a detailed understanding of how hate speech affects initial teacher education, while also allowing the identification of pedagogical strategies for addressing it in the classroom.

The study received approval from the Ethics Committee of Universidad Santo Tomás (No. 23-2024) and was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local regulations governing research with human participants. All participants were duly informed about the aims of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights, including the voluntary nature of participation and the option to withdraw at any time without consequence.

To ensure confidentiality and data protection, measures included anonymising transcripts, removing identifying information, and encrypting audiovisual records, thereby safeguarding participants' privacy.

3. Results

The findings highlight several themes introduced in the theoretical framework. First, participants address issues concerning freedom of expression in relation to the teaching profession; illustrative examples are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Freedom of expression and teachers' attitudes towards dissent.

Student	Commentary
LS2-2	With the lecturer we had, she'd say things like 'ladies' and all that. I'm very keen on debating those issues—if I don't agree, I'll say so—but I am afraid, for example, to voice an opinion that's very different from hers and then see it reflected in my marks, or in how she evaluates me, or in the level of demands she sets. That tends to happen sometimes with some teachers. I mean, it hasn't happened to me personally. . . but it does happen that teachers think, 'this student contradicted me,' and. . . that tends to happen. You're right: there is freedom of expression, which I think ends when you start overstepping someone else's boundaries. There will always be a limit. . . I can say, 'you know, your opinion is perfectly valid, I respect it, but I don't agree,' and that can be done; but I feel teachers perhaps don't have the tools to handle that in a more assertive way.
TA-2-3	The lecturer created an atmosphere of mistrust and insecurity about students' own practice—particularly during assessment—by focusing on shortcomings, which generated feelings of fear and uncertainty about what might happen in the evaluation process.
TA-2-4	I also had a similar experience with a lecturer who actually left the institution. He was very overbearing in the way he spoke; for example, when reviewing an assignment he focused only on the negatives, offered nothing on what was done well, and there was no constructive feedback—it was destructive [. . .]. This caused controversy too. It was an online class, and a classmate who was due to be assessed did not undergo the assessment for fear the lecturer would say something negative.
AN1-5	I had an experience with a female lecturer who, in relation to an assignment, made very harsh comments that made me cry and left me feeling awful. She was quite passive-aggressive with everyone—she was just like that.

The preceding comments foreground several issues related to a perceived lack of freedom to express one's views vis-à-vis teaching staff—particularly when dissenting from them—with potential repercussions for assessment processes (TA-2-3; A-2-4) and for relationships and everyday coexistence in the classroom. According to participants, lecturers often adopt stances that do not permit disagreement, disseminating or endorsing remarks with hateful or discriminatory content (LS2-2). Participants converge in identifying the diffusion of hate expressions by teaching staff as a problem: lecturers become agents in their reproduction—whether by uttering such comments, signalling agreement with external statements, or remaining silent in the face of these incidents (AN1-5).

The comment by AN1-5 illustrates the cross-cutting nature of the problem. From students' perspective, teaching staff become another agent in the emission, production, and reproduction of these discourses—so much so that students report impacts on their mental health and on the training process of which they are part. Hence, programmes must consider teachers' influence not only in disciplinary and formative terms, but also in the relationships they establish with students and in how they engage with salient social issues. There is, therefore, a direct relationship between the formative process and teachers' actions, especially when those actions generate and reproduce structures that disseminate

hate or deepen problems such as discrimination, marginalisation, and the exclusion of people for various reasons.

In line with the above, attention should be paid to hate remarks directed at those perceived as different—a pattern that also connects with migration dynamics (Table 3).

Table 3. Interculturality.

Student	Commentary
IQ-2	We were a community very rooted in our traditions . . . and we weren't interested in anyone else. Then they arrived like that—coming with children, with people—children out with their parents at three in the morning asking for money or selling sweets . . . and there were drugs being sold there . . . They also damaged the town square, caused destruction; there was a pit where they did all sorts of things . . .
IQ3-7	I also experienced something striking related to hate speech. I used to dance in an Aymara troupe, and they told me I wasn't dark-skinned enough [. . .] they shouted things at me in the street because I wasn't 'properly' Aymara—more 'pure-blood', according to them [. . .] that I didn't have old Aymara lineage. As I've been looking into this topic of discourse, I've been surprised by how something like this turns around what one might assume: that discrimination goes in one direction—and yes, mostly it does—but there is also this kind of discrimination. A lot of it happens through social media, and in that social-media context you're on the receiving end of these platforms and people often believe whatever arrives without questioning the information.

As observed, regarding the ethnic perspective, the comments do not refer to this dimension alone but are encompassed within a broader concern with cultural diversity. From this standpoint, issues linked to hate speech, migration, ethnicity, and the cultural practices of particular populations are treated as part of a single current aimed at marginalising and discriminating against cultural diversity. In effect, respondents register a distinction between a dominant culture and those that lack such recognition (IQ3-7).

Another aspect highlighted by participants concerns the violence arising from the spread of hate speech, as reflected in the focus-group comments (Table 4).

The preceding table highlights several aspects, notably the link between hate speech and false accusations against individuals, and the ensuing violence and harm (IQ2-7). Across students' responses, narratives about marginalisation and discrimination on gender grounds are pervasive. In particular, where gender and identity diversity are concerned, students report situations of violence that appear normalised as routine behaviours. At the same time, the focus groups themselves condemn and reject these problems (AR-1).

The violence deriving from such discourse can have a profound impact on people's lives. One participant reported withdrawing from their programme not only because of the harm to their mental health caused by peers' expressions, but also because they felt unable to return for fear that words might translate into physical aggression (AR-1).

A further point concerns the apparent impunity surrounding these acts, as the perpetrators could not be identified. This directs attention to the influence of digital social networks which, according to participants' accounts, are the primary spaces where hate-related comments and messages are generated and disseminated (AR3-3).

These accounts—consistent with those of other participants—first highlight the channel through which hateful comments are issued: social networks, where posts are made under the cover of anonymity even though there is reasonable certainty they come from known individuals within the victim's contact list. Second, the targeted themes range from gender-related issues to attacks on family, a person's physical appearance, and direct threats of physical violence.

Table 4. Internet and social networks.

Student	Commentary
IQ2-7	In general, there were false accusations. The class was quite aggressive . . . It got to the point where pupils from this class beat up my classmate and called in more people to beat him up, just for fun . . . there was a lot of injustice, a lot of hate towards people who had nothing to do with it, and many false accusations about people . . .
AR1-1	I experienced hate speech because I am a trans boy. One day more and more ‘confessions’ started to appear, invalidating my identity and mocking me. These were posted on a Facebook page where they put those messages. They even made fun of gender-neutral pronouns, using an ‘e’ ending in every word to mock. Then they kept doing it [. . .] I saw it—in class—and I had a panic attack; I felt awful all day and had to leave the institution. I didn’t go back for the rest of the semester—I didn’t—because I was extremely anxious about being there, afraid someone might do something to me, and I never found out who they were.
AR3-3	I went through something similar online when I was at school. Because it was trendy, we used an Instagram app where people could leave anonymous messages—it seemed cool and all (sic)—and that’s how they started cyberbullying me. I got threats that they would beat me up outside school, that it would be better if I killed myself. They went after my weight and my family. It led to self-harm and several suicide attempts. The school psychologist didn’t help, nor did the headteacher. My mum had to transfer me to another school. Those messages—that hate speech on the internet—came from the very people I thought were my best friends, because they were my Instagram contacts [. . .]
LS4-3	I was attacked anonymously on several occasions on social media because of my weight. They told me I was ‘too fat’, asked ‘when was I going to lose weight?’, ‘when was I going to stop eating?’, ‘how could I eat so much?’—they kept on attacking me. In the end, I even had a gastric sleeve [. . .] and afterwards they said, ‘She’s still not that thin!’—and I knew what I had been through [. . .]

The consequences for students’ mental health are troubling. Such expressions are associated with self-harm and suicide attempts. Participants concur that, in the face of these problems, school authorities fail to implement preventive or remedial measures; as a result, transferring to another educational institution often becomes the only viable option.

Therefore, the problems arising from the spread of hate speech are directly linked to the training process and, at the same time, cut across the themes selected for the attacks. Finally, the participating students converge on how such discourse might be addressed and remedied (see Table 5).

Among the proposals, participants emphasise the inclusion of families as key actors in addressing the problem, since families and dialogue are viewed as fundamental to eradicating acts of hate (AN1-6). They also advocate working from a school-coexistence perspective that tackles the issue in depth, foregrounding respect as an essential axis of communal life. As noted, there is broad agreement that hate speech spreads primarily via social media. According to students, the anonymity under which such messages circulate is one of the most difficult challenges to address, compounded by the apparent freedom and impunity afforded by platforms, which lack effective restrictions or measures to regulate hate expressions (LS2-5). Overall, the focus groups report that those who disseminate these messages believe there will be no social or legal consequences, a perception they attribute in part to lack of awareness.

It is noteworthy how students foreground values when discussing hate speech: all opinions should be respected under the umbrella of freedom of expression; yet a recurring contradiction appears. While they recognise this freedom as a fundamental right, they also argue that it should be limited to shield communities from hate speech. A recurrent formulation is that “my freedom ends where the other’s begins” (see Table 6).

Table 5. Limitations and hate speech.

Student	Commentary
AN1-6	To tackle the problem of hate speech, we'd need something like a school-coexistence programme—whatever form it takes—but I feel that unless it is addressed at the root, by bringing parents and children together and talking with them, making it clear that these things cannot happen and that there must always be mutual respect, it won't work. . .
LS2-5	The fact that those pages exist on social networks and the internet also creates a space that encourages hate speech, because, for example, I might have a lot to say and only tell my classmate; but since the pages are anonymous, no one will know who I am, and the people who create those pages give others a space to write whatever they want—they have no restrictions at all. So I think that's a problem: in the end, people won't stop to think that it reflects poorly on me to post such a strong insult—after all, it's anonymous [. . .]
AR-4-3	I believe everyone deserves respect, and some opinions may not deserve respect—depending on whether they are positive or negative—but people themselves do deserve respect. Therefore, freedom of expression fits with this: there are limits, and a person's rights end where they infringe upon another's. And who would set those limits? Well, in theory, the government.

Table 6. Freedom of expression.

Student	Commentary
CO-1-5	Freedom of expression is very broad [. . .] there was another situation several years ago. There was a march in Providencia in support of Miguel Krassnoff. He was an army officer during the dictatorship. He is a convicted man, and the march was to request prison leniency on the grounds that he was ill—something I do not agree with. . .
AR-4-3	I believe everyone deserves respect, and some opinions may not deserve respect—depending on whether they are positive or negative—but people themselves do. Therefore, freedom of expression aligns with the idea that there are limits: one person's right ends where it infringes upon another's. And who would set those limits? Well, in theory the government should. . . provide that protection? Yes, in theory, that's how it should be.

In line with the foregoing, and as reported by students across the different groups, the problem of the dissemination of hate speech is linked to the perceived need for stronger state control over such issues. Specifically, participants suggested that one way to curb the spread of hate messages is through state agencies, by restricting and limiting forms of expression that could be categorised as hate messages or hate speech (AR-4-3).

In the Chilean context, the testimonies analysed converge with recent studies showing that hate speech on digital media is most frequently directed against migrants, Indigenous peoples, gender and sexual minorities, and individuals perceived as not conforming to dominant cultural norms. Participants repeatedly highlighted derogatory comments towards migrants—often framed in narratives of criminality or social disorder—together with racist or exclusionary remarks towards Indigenous groups. In parallel, digital spaces have become arenas for the invalidation of diverse gender identities, particularly targeting trans students and those advocating for inclusive language. Body-shaming discourses were also recurrent, with students reporting mockery of physical appearance or health status. These findings reflect broader national trends, where social networks in Chile amplify discriminatory narratives against vulnerable groups and reproduce structural prejudices, reinforcing the urgent need to embed critical media literacy and intercultural education within initial teacher education.

Moreover, the accounts collected illustrate how these discourses do not operate in isolation but intersect across different axes of identity. Migrant status, ethnicity, gender

identity, and physical appearance are often combined in the construction of hostile narratives that circulate in Chilean digital media. Such intersectional forms of hate speech intensify the vulnerability of those affected, as students described how being simultaneously identified as migrants and belonging to a sexual minority, for example, multiplies the aggressions experienced. Importantly, these digital aggressions do not remain confined to the virtual sphere; rather, they permeate school settings and influence everyday interactions, normalising discriminatory attitudes among peers. This continuity between online and offline hostility highlights the structural dimension of hate speech in Chile, which requires systemic educational responses that transcend isolated interventions and instead embed recognition of diversity and ethical responsibility into the core of teacher education programmes.

4. Discussion

One of the most salient findings concerns the perception of teaching staff as actors who reproduce—and in some cases generate—hate speech or discriminatory attitudes in the classroom. This repeatedly reported observation problematises the role occupied by teachers in the ethical and civic formation of pupils. As [Abuín-Vences et al. \(2022\)](#) argue, the educational environment can become a site of exclusion in the absence of critical media literacy and human rights education. The experiences collected here reveal a persistent tension between the principle of teacher authority and the practice of democratic coexistence, whereby fear of reprisals for expressing divergent opinions inhibits plural dialogue—an outcome consistent with [Waldron \(2012\)](#) claim that hate speech harms its targets and creates structural climates of fear and silencing in public spaces, including the classroom.

In light of these testimonies, teaching staff cannot be understood solely as victims or mediators but also as potential agents in the reproduction of symbolic structures of exclusion. The normalisation of passive-aggressive remarks, destructive critique in assessment, and the tacit validation of discriminatory expressions contribute to consolidating a school culture in which respect for diversity is undermined ([Izquierdo-Montero and Aguado-Odina 2020](#)). The critical phenomenology adopted in this study makes these experiences visible from the participant's standpoint, highlighting how fear, insecurity, and the erosion of emotional well-being are inscribed in relational dynamics that profoundly condition the formative process. From this perspective, hate speech ceases to be merely a matter of content and becomes manifest in modes of interaction, evaluation, and silencing that shape students' subjectivity.

The findings point to an urgent need to reframe initial teacher education from an ethical, critical, and context-sensitive perspective. Although regulatory frameworks and education policies stress the importance of inclusive education, this study shows persistent gaps in teacher preparation to address ideological conflict, cultural difference, and diverse gender identities. Without robust formative intervention centred on critical digital literacy and the deconstruction of stereotypes, teachers risk perpetuating—even unintentionally—forms of symbolic violence ([Bazzaco et al. 2017](#)). The classroom must be a space of effective democratic formation; this requires equipping teachers with theoretical and practical tools to recognise hate speech—in all its forms—and to respond in pedagogically transformative ways.

Digital social media constitutes privileged arenas for the diffusion of hate speech, owing, among other factors, to the anonymity they afford. The accounts collected in this study show how students experience aggression on platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, frequently from anonymous profiles, thereby intensifying the sense of impunity. This corroborates [Benesch \(2008\)](#) argument that anonymity facilitates moral disinhibition,

potentially heightening verbal and symbolic violence. It is likewise confirmed that hate speech in public settings produces structural harm by eroding social trust and creating spaces in which certain subjects are stripped of their standing as legitimate interlocutors—a dynamic replicated in technology-mediated educational environments (Waldron 2012).

From the perspective adopted in this study, the reported experiences of digital violence affect communicative relations and profoundly shape the emotional and existential dimensions of students. Constant exposure to humiliating or discriminatory messages issued under the cloak of anonymity generates insecurity and fractures the sense of belonging and recognition within the educational space. This violence has psychosocial effects comparable to, or greater than, those of physical violence, insofar as it erodes the sense of self and produces prolonged states of distress, anxiety, and withdrawal (Bayer and Bárd 2020). The testimonies collected show how hate speech—when it encounters no boundaries or clear sanctions in digital environments—becomes a form of systemic exclusion that undermines victims' mental health and even their academic continuity, aligning with Moustakas (1994) view that affective experience is key to understanding meaning.

The findings confirm that hate speech operates within a cultural grammar that normalises aggression under the guise of humour, critique, or 'sincere' freedom of expression. Many prospective teachers do not recognise these discourses as forms of symbolic violence, thereby reproducing a depoliticisation of language and conflict. One of the central legal and ethical challenges of the twenty-first century is to set reasonable limits between freedom of expression and protection from hatred, especially when the latter manifests in apparently banal or indirect forms (Barendt 2019). In this vein, Bazzaco et al. (2017) insist that critical media literacy must go beyond the technical analysis of digital content and cultivate a communicative ethics capable of distinguishing legitimate opinion from discursive violence. The results indicate that prospective teachers still lack these competences, underscoring the need to embed—across initial teacher education—content on digital citizenship, communicative responsibility, and human rights, since it is teachers who can ultimately reframe educational practice in emancipatory terms.

The findings indicate that hate speech is embedded in the everyday lives of prospective teachers, shaping relational dynamics marked by fear, exclusion, and silencing. The repeated experience of verbal aggression in digital settings—often shielded by anonymity—has eroded trust in educational institutions and in the formative value of difference, aligning with Levinas's (2006) notion of the ethical estrangement of the Other: when speech ceases to be hospitality and becomes violence, the fundamental pedagogical bond is ruptured. Structurally, this points to institutional failure to guarantee safe and inclusive environments—both in physical classrooms and online—reinforcing what Parekh (2012) terms a "democratic indifference" to the pain of others.

Ultimately, hate speech cannot be addressed solely from the standpoint of individual harm; it must be understood as a structural phenomenon that jeopardises the educational project as a whole. As Blanco-Alfonso et al. (2022) caution, the banalisation of discursive violence in digital environments places the role of education as guarantor of social cohesion under strain, particularly in societies marked by cultural fragmentation and technological uncertainty. In this regard, the ethical responsibility of teacher-education institutions lies not only in providing disciplinary knowledge, but also in cultivating a critical sensibility capable of confronting the dehumanisation of the other in all its forms. Only through a situated, ethical, and transformative pedagogical praxis will it be possible to counter the effects of hatred and build educational communities that reproduce not fear, but mutual respect and social justice.

5. Conclusions

Throughout this study, we have provided substantive empirical evidence of how hate speech permeates initial teacher education, revealing not only its explicit presence in peer interactions but also its covert reproduction by teaching staff. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, the research makes visible students' subjective experiences—symbolic aggressions, institutional silences, and climates of insecurity—that compromise their emotional well-being and formative trajectories. The inclusion of emergent categories linked to digital anonymity, the banalisation of hatred, and the absence of structured pedagogical responses constitutes a significant contribution to the field of critical education, underscoring the urgent need to embed ethical, communicative, and digital competences within initial teacher education programmes. This study also confirms the central role of media literacy and digital citizenship as transversal pillars for addressing this phenomenon from a transformative—rather than punitive—perspective.

Likewise, this study advances a structural reading of hate speech in education, moving beyond purely behavioural or individualising approaches. Positioning teachers as doubly implicated—both as formative figures and as potential agents reproducing exclusions—directly challenges the institutional model of teacher education and its omissions in the face of contemporary forms of symbolic violence. The analysis also contributes to debates on the limits of freedom of expression in educational contexts, showing how an uncritical interpretation can enable discriminatory practices. In this sense, the study's principal contribution lies in linking lived experience to the structural conditions that make it possible, thereby proposing a horizon of pedagogical action centred on social justice, an ethics of recognition, and shared responsibility in building inclusive educational communities.

In sum, this study reaffirms that hate speech—far from being marginal or episodic—constitutes structural expressions that profoundly affect the quality of school coexistence, students' well-being, and the ethical legitimacy of teaching practice. By demonstrating how these discourses operate both in interpersonal relations and through the technological mediation of educational interactions, this research underscores the urgency of rethinking initial teacher education through an integral approach that articulates disciplinary expertise with ethical, emotional, and communicative preparation to confront contexts marked by exclusion, fragmentation, and intolerance. This approach not only enables a critical understanding of the phenomenon but also opens pathways for its transformation through pedagogical practices that are more inclusive, dialogic, and committed to social justice.

Accordingly, this work calls for a pedagogy of recognition and care, in which teachers are able to identify, resist, and de-activate the logics of hate that take root in school and digital spaces. This entails teacher education taking on the task of cultivating subjectivities capable of inhabiting conflict responsibly, promoting active respect for difference, and sustaining the educational bond even in contexts of dissent. Only in this way will it be possible to shape more democratic school communities, where language is not an instrument of exclusion but a tool for hospitality, critical thought, and citizenship-building. In this horizon, the contributions of this study offer a substantive basis for reconfiguring education policy, programme design, and everyday practice around an ethics of speech and coexistence.

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, J.M.-G. and M.Y.L.-M.; methodology, J.M.-G.; software, J.M.-G.; validation, J.M.-G. and M.Y.L.-M.; formal analysis, J.M.-G. and M.Y.L.-M.; investigation, J.M.-G.; resources, M.Y.L.-M.; data curation M.Y.L.-M.; writing—original draft preparation, J.M.-G. and M.Y.L.-M.; writing—review and editing, J.M.-G. and M.Y.L.-M.; visualizationvisualisation, M.Y.L.-M.; supervision, J.M.-G.; project administration, J.M.-G.; funding acquisition, J.M.-G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Agencia Nacional de Investigación y Desarrollo de Chile (ANID), FONDECYT 11231022 “Los discursos de odio desde la perspectiva de género a través de las situaciones de contingencia en los programas de formación inicial docente de historia en Chile”.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Scientific Ethics Committee of Universidad Santo Tomás, Chile (approval code 23-2024; approval date: 15 March 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Abuín-Vences, Natalia, Ubaldo Cuesta-Cambra, José-Ignacio Niño-González, and Carolina Bengochea-González. 2022. Hate speech analysis as a function of ideology: Emotional and cognitive effects. *Comunicar* 30: 37–48. [CrossRef]
- Barendt, Eric. 2019. *Freedom of Speech*, 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press.
- Bayer, Judit A., and Petra Bárd. 2020. *Hate Speech and Hate Crime in the EU and the Evaluation of Online Content Regulation Approaches*. Brussels: European Parliament.
- Bazzaco, Edoardo, Ana García-Juanatey, Jon Lejardi, Anna Palacios, and Laila Tarragona. 2017. *¿Es odio? Manual Práctico para Reconocer y Actuar Frente a Discursos y Delitos de Odio*. Madrid: Instituto de la Juventud (INJUVE). Available online: http://www.injuve.es/sites/default/files/2019/02/noticias/manual_frente_a_discursos_y_delitos_de_odio.pdf (accessed on 22 May 2024).
- Benesch, Susan. 2008. Vile crime or inalienable right: Defining hate speech in international law. *Virginia Journal of International Law* 48: 485–528.
- Blanco-Alfonso, Ignacio, Leticia Rodríguez-Fernández, and Sergio Arce-García. 2022. Polarización y discurso de odio con sesgo de género asociado a la política: Análisis de las interacciones en Twitter. *Revista de Comunicación* 21: 33–50. [CrossRef]
- Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101. [CrossRef]
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Colleoni, Elanor, Alessandro Rozza, and Adam Arvidsson. 2014. Echo Chamber or Public Sphere? Predicting Political Orientation and Measuring Political Homophily in Twitter Using Big Data. *Journal of Communication* 64: 317–32. [CrossRef]
- Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. 2018. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 2018. *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Flick, Uwe. 2018. *An Introduction to Qualitative Research*, 6th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Friese, Susanne. 2019. *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti*, 3rd ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Guba, Egon G., and Yvonna S. Lincoln. 1994. Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. London: SAGE Publications, pp. 105–17.
- Horwitz, Robert. 2021. *Digital Hate: The Globalization of Extremism and the Role of Social Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Izquierdo-Montero, Alberto, and Teresa Aguado-Odina. 2020. Discursos de odio: Una investigación para hablar de ello en los centros educativos. *Profesorado, Revista de Currículum y Formación del Profesorado* 24: 175–95. [CrossRef]
- Krueger, Richard A., and Mary Anne Casey. 2015. *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 5th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 2006. *Totalidad e Infinito: Ensayo Sobre la Exterioridad*, 2nd ed. Salamanca: Sígueme.
- Lingiardi, Vittorio, Nicola Carone, Giovanni Semeraro, Cataldo Musto, Marilisa D’aMico, and Silvia Brena. 2020. Lexicon and mapping of online hate in Italy: Toward a “hate map”. *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* 54: 345–60. [CrossRef]
- Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. 2016. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 4th ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan, David L. 2019. *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Moustakas, Clark. 1994. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. London: SAGE Publications.
- O’Connor, Ciarán. 2021. *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Available online: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok> (accessed on 22 May 2025).
- Parekh, Bhikhu. 2012. *El Discurso del Odio y la Libertad de Expresión*. Buenos Aires: Katz Editores.

- Patton, Michael Quinn. 2015. *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2021. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 4th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Silverman, David. 2020. *Qualitative Research*, 6th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Strauss, Anselm, and Juliet Corbin. 2014. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th ed. London: SAGE Publications.
- Van Manen, Max. 2016. *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing*. New York: Routledge.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 2012. *The Harm in Hate Speech*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.