

Article

Anti-Bullying in the Digital Age: How Cyberhate Travels from Social Media to Classroom Climate in Pre-Service Teacher Programmes

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Abstract

This article examines online hate as a driver of cyberbullying and a barrier to inclusive schooling, integrating theoretical, philosophical and methodological perspectives. We approach hate speech as communicative practices that legitimise discrimination and exclusion and, once amplified by social media affordances, erode equity, belonging and well-being in educational settings. The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory–descriptive design using focus groups with pre-service teachers from initial teacher education programmes across several Chilean regions. Participants reflected on the presence, trajectories and classroom effects of cyberhate/cyberbullying. Data were analysed thematically with ATLAS.ti24. Findings describe a recurrent pathway in which anonymous posts lead to public exposure, followed by heightened anxiety and eventual withdrawal. This shows how online aggression spills into classrooms, normalises everyday disparagement and fuels self-censorship, especially among minoritised students. The analysis also highlights the amplifying role of educator authority (tone, feedback, modelling) and institutional inaction. In response, participants identified protective practices: explicit dialogic norms, rapid and caring classroom interventions, restorative and care-centred feedback, partnership with families and peers, and critical digital citizenship that links platform literacy with ethical reasoning. The article contributes evidence to inform anti-bullying policy, inclusive curriculums and teacher education by proposing actionable, context-sensitive strategies that strengthen equity, dignity and belonging.

Keywords: online hate speech; initial teacher education; social–emotional learning; belonging and well-being; anti-bullying strategies



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1. Introduction

Blanco-Alfonso et al. [1] define hate speech as expressions that deliberately incite violence and prejudice against individuals or social groups based on specific characteristics—racial, geographical, religious, affective, sexual or gender-based—thereby creating contexts of marginalisation and discrimination. In such contexts, hate is exercised through beliefs and practices that aim to attack, defame, delegitimise or exclude certain collectives, whether based on immutable (e.g., ethnicity, gender) or mutable (e.g., religion) characteristics [2].

The main actors involved in these practices are often individuals, groups or communities who actively engage in discrimination and social exclusion through behaviours that

run counter to the principles of pluralism, democracy and civic education [3]. Groups most vulnerable to hate speech on social media include women, the LGBTIQ+ community and representatives of diversity more broadly [4].

Through this study, the following objectives are pursued:

1. To evaluate the impact of social media on hate speech.
2. To assess the role of teachers in the reproduction and dissemination of such discourses, and their impact on students.
3. To examine hate speech through the lenses of the banality of evil and otherness to understand its normalisation and implications for teacher education.

1.1. *The Impact of Social Media*

Social media acts as a catalyst for hate speech and creates an environment that fosters discriminatory attitudes and harmful practices. Lingiardi et al. [5] identify several factors related to the rise of these behaviours online.

Their dynamics enable the spread of hate speech and helps to create a cultural climate of intolerance and violence [6] that encourages verbal aggression and, sometimes, escalates to discriminatory, violent or even genocidal practices—a direct threat to democratic principles and social justice. Waldron classifies these expressions into three main categories:

1. Racist and segregationist speech.
2. Discriminatory speech targeting LGBTIQ+ communities and other expressions of diversity.
3. Dehumanising speech that perpetuates social inequalities [7].

Social media operate as a public sphere where ideologies and political positions that promote hatred are rendered visible and consolidated [3]. These environments amplify the circulation of hate speech and make its production and intensification easier. Users often adopt a ‘vigilante’ role, distorting ideas of justice and using them as a pretext to justify discriminatory, exclusionary and violent conduct.

Hate speech constitutes a direct attack on human dignity because it deliberately targets people based on characteristics that are essential to their identity—physical features, language, religion, ethnicity, nationality, gender or sexual orientation—instrumentalising those markers to legitimise verbal, symbolic or physical aggression [7]. Hatred is not limited to individuals but can also be directed against cultural assets such as monuments, flags, buildings or associations that symbolise the collective identity of communities and societies. This capacity to attack both the material and the immaterial reveals the scope and depth of hate speech as a mechanism of exclusion.

A fundamental point is the distinction between unchangeable characteristics (e.g., physical appearance) and changeable ones (e.g., religion or ideology). However, this difference does not mean that the attacks on the latter are less severe, as they are also pillars of individual and collective identity. This underscores the multi-layered and persistent effects of hate speech, which damages both the visible and symbolic dimensions of societies.

The debate on hate speech operates in a constant tension between the legal domain and freedom of expression—an essential right in modern democracies—which varies according to the social, cultural and legal context. As a result, speech that is punishable in some societies may fall under protected speech elsewhere [5,8]. This ambiguity creates fertile ground for perpetrators to hide behind democratic safeguards and use freedom of expression as a shield to legitimise messages that undermine principles of equality and mutual respect [1,6].

Identifying hate speech is complex but necessary. Arendt suggest a number of indicators for detection, in particular explicit statements—verbal comments, graffiti, clothing

or written statements—that often come from individuals or organised groups adhering to violent ideologies [9].

These indicators are supplemented by an approach that includes discursive and contextual dimensions. The content and style of the message are examined, and the tone of voice, metaphors and the implicit aim of the discourse are identified. The motivations of the sender are also important, as they clarify whether the message merely seeks to perpetuate prejudices or pursues broader goals such as social exclusion or political polarisation. The identity of the target—defined by characteristics such as ethnicity, language, religion or gender—is also crucial to understanding the scope and reach of hate speech [1,2].

Another determinant is the economic, social and political context in which such a discourse is produced. In times of economic crisis or political tension, these expressions tend to be amplified, and economic stress factors are used as catalysts to justify hostile messages. The level of dissemination and the status of the speaker—especially if it is a public figure (opinion leader, politician, etc.)—greatly amplify the effect by shaping a wider audience and normalising both symbolic and explicit violence.

Accordingly, hate speech is not an isolated expression; it is embedded in a broader social dynamic and functions as a mechanism for reproducing inequalities and exclusions. Its recognition and systematic analysis are essential to developing effective prevention and mitigation strategies that promote more inclusive societies and genuine respect for diversity.

1.2. *Speeches as the Banality of Evil*

Evil does not necessarily spring from radical or exceptional impulses; it often embeds itself in bureaucratic routines and normalised discourses that depersonalise and dehumanise the other [9]. This idea is essential to understanding hate speech, which rarely appears as an exceptional act but rather as a series of recurring, seemingly minor practices that reinforce structures of exclusion and symbolic violence. In this sense, those who disseminate such discourse act as functionaries of a system that legitimises discrimination and normalises communicative habits that strip people of their humanity through language and representation.

In hate speech, these narratives are built through stereotypes and prejudices that reduce the other to an abstract threat. Such constructions allow speakers to feel morally justified in their contempt and perpetuate a dynamic of dehumanisation that requires no grand ideological machinery but is reproduced through small, everyday actions.

The dynamics of hate speech can also be read as a failure to reflect critically on the ethical implications of one's actions [9]. This failure is evident on social media, where anonymity and immediacy widen the gap between speakers and the consequences of their words. The digitalisation of human relations has fostered a milieu in which ties are tenuous and the other appears as an image stripped of humanity [10]. In such a space, hate speech circulates without looking the other in the face, which facilitates its banalisation as the possibility of an ethical encounter is eliminated.

Stangneth [11] further argues that evil is not only the product of blind obedience but also of narratives that allow agents to rationalise their actions—often in the name of 'protecting' or 'defending' identity values that make exclusion seem necessary. Here, language becomes a political tool that both communicates and shapes social reality by legitimising patterns of discrimination and violence.

1.3. *Otherness, Power and Perpetuation of Hatred*

This cross-reading shows that hatred is perpetuated not only by narratives that justify exclusion or by systems that dilute alterity but also by a web of power that normalises

these practices and perpetuates their historical persistence. Otherness is a central concept in contemporary philosophy to analyse how dynamics of exclusion and violence are constructed. Levinas [12] understands the other as irreducible to our categories of knowledge. But hate speech denies this irreducibility, reduces the other to a homogenous, negative figure, erases singularity and turns the person into an object of contempt or fear. This logic is consistent with Nietzsche's [13] critique of traditional moral structures, which are often constructed in opposition to an external enemy deemed necessary to justify the cohesion of the dominant group.

Žižek [14] extends this critique by suggesting that hate speech functions as a structural tool to maintain power and reinforce dynamics of domination. In today's societies, he argues, people construct symbolic enemies to channel internal tensions and reinforce collective identities based on exclusion. This tendency is amplified in digital environments, where social platforms reinforce hatred by privileging interactions that generate controversy, polarisation and traffic [15]. In this sense, Žižek's production of symbolic enemies finds an equivalent in the neoliberal logic outlined by Han, in which differences become a functional problem—either to maintain collective identities or to legitimise hierarchies of productivity and competition.

In analysing neoliberal society, Han [15] notes that the discourse is closely linked to market dynamics, in which exclusion is justified by productivity and competition. The 'performance society' he describes marginalises those who do not meet its standards and uses hate as a mechanism to reinforce these hierarchies. In this context, hate is both a symptom of social tensions and a functional tool for maintaining structural inequalities. Hate speech thus appears as a practice that is deeply embedded in systems of power that normalise exclusion under the banner of freedom of expression.

The ethical philosophy of Levinas [12] presents a radical challenge to what has gone before by placing responsibility for the other at the heart of human existence, but it faces formidable obstacles in a world where the banalisation of hatred and the justification of exclusion are deeply entrenched [16]. Alterity, which should constitute an ethical encounter, becomes a battleground, fuelled by discourses that circumscribe difference as a threat and solidarity as fragmentation.

This dynamic of alterity and hatred is echoed in the critique of the 'norms of intelligibility': symbolic violence against the other is exercised through normative frameworks that determine who counts as a recognisable human subject. Hate is rooted in a structural logic that creates different vulnerabilities and makes some bodies more susceptible to exclusion or violence [16]. Hate speech perpetuates these norms by coding the other as 'less human' or 'unintelligible', thereby shoring up social hierarchies of value. In the digital sphere, these norms are exacerbated because platform algorithms and market logics favour conflictual narratives and reinforce the conditions that favour exclusion and violence [17].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Development

This study adopted a qualitative approach, suitable for exploring the social dynamics, narratives and perceptions associated with hate speech. Such an approach seeks to understand the meanings actors attribute to the phenomenon and to provide an in-depth, contextualised account of the problem; it is not designed to yield statistical generalisation [18].

Building on the premise that human experience is subjective and situated, qualitative inquiry privileges methods capable of capturing nuance and meaning [18]. Accordingly, the study employs an exploratory–descriptive qualitative design [19–21], well-suited to complex social phenomena examined from participants' perspectives. The exploratory component allows the identification of dynamics, meanings and emergent structures in

specific contexts, while the descriptive dimension documents participants' experiences with sufficient detail and depth to capture the particularities of the settings in which the problem manifests.

An exploratory–descriptive design was appropriate for phenomena that are understudied or insufficiently conceptualised. It enables simultaneous attention to outward manifestations of hate speech and to the underlying meanings, relational dynamics and tensions that shape them—elements essential for grasping the phenomenon's complexity.

The design also draws on Patton's [15] emphasis on flexibility in qualitative inquiry, allowing the study to respond to contextual specificities. Focus groups were used as the main method of data collection to capture interaction and discussion to gain a broader, relational view of how hate speech is constructed, reproduced, countered and experienced. By encouraging participant interaction, focus groups make visible collective narratives, group dynamics, tensions and points of consensus [22]. They are particularly valuable when social phenomena are co-produced in dialogue, contrast and negotiation—an apt approach given that hate speech circulates and takes shape in social spaces, both face-to-face and digitally. The flexibility of the design is used to conceptualise hate speech as both discrete discursive events and relational practices that reflect broader cultural, social and political tensions. Focus groups are integrated as sites of social interaction where meanings are negotiated and shared understandings are formed [20].

The choice of this design also reflects the integration of technological tools—in particular ATLAS.ti—into the analysis process. An exploratory–descriptive, inductive approach is well suited to a phenomenon as diverse and multifaceted as hate speech. It enables the identification of emerging patterns and core themes directly from participants' accounts, without using predetermined categories.

In conjunction with ATLAS.ti, this inductive approach supports systematic coding, transparent data management and the mapping of relationships between narratives and their social context. The result is a rigorous and nuanced analysis that both promotes conceptual understanding and enables practical, contextualised interventions.

2.2. Recruitment Process and Participants

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, focusing on students in initial secondary teacher education programmes who could offer relevant insights into hate speech in educational and digital contexts. This strategy is particularly appropriate in qualitative research, as it targets individuals whose experiences are directly related to the phenomenon of interest [15]. In compiling the focus groups, diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and geographical location was emphasised in order to capture a range of narratives and contexts. To ensure a contextually diverse sample, participants were selected from multiple teacher education institutions in different regions of the country to include perspectives informed by different sociocultural settings.

Each focus group comprised six to seven students—a size that allowed for fluid discussion and equal participation [22]. Participation was voluntary and encouraged through open invitations within the institutions to ensure that interested students could participate in a safe, respectful environment. This recruitment and facilitation process fostered trust—an essential prerequisite for participants to share their experiences and reflections openly and in detail [23].

Although the study does not aim to be statistically representative, this strategy allowed access to a wide range of perspectives that enriched the understanding of the phenomenon. All participants volunteered after receiving a detailed explanation of the study's objectives and procedures and gave their written consent. The consent guaranteed anonymity, confidentiality of the data and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

The coding process was as follows: University–Focus group–Participant number (Table 1).

Table 1. Coding process.

Code	University	Programme/Course	Num Focus Groups	Num Students per Group
CO	Concepción	Teacher education/social education	6	7
AR	Arica	Teacher education/social education	6	7
IQ	Iquique	Teacher education/social education	6	7
LA	La Serena	Teacher education/social education	6	7
TA	Talca	Teacher education/social education	6	7
				210

Font: Own elaboration.

The interviews were structured around the following axes (Table 2).

Table 2. Thematic axes and Questions.

Thematic Axes	Questions
1. Teaching practices	In the context of teaching practice, are hate discourses made visible?
2. Social relations and hate speech	What do you think should be done regarding freedom of expression in relation to hate speech?
3. Social media and hate speech	Do you consider social media to be a space that conveys messages of hate?

Font: Own elaboration.

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected through focus groups based on Flick [24]. The sessions were held in locations previously agreed upon with the participating institutions and students to ensure a safe and conducive environment for discussion. Each session lasted approximately 90 min and was facilitated by the lead researcher. With explicit consent, the sessions were recorded and transcribed in full for later analysis. The recordings were supplemented by field notes documenting non-verbal aspects (body language, emotional reactions and group dynamics) observed during the meetings. This holistic approach captured both the explicit content of the discussions and the contextual subtleties, providing a solid foundation for subsequent thematic analysis [25]. The focus group guide comprised open-ended questions that were aligned with the objectives of the study and encouraged participants to reflect and discuss and covered the following topics:

- Perceptions and experiences of hate speech in educational and digital contexts.
- The perceived effects of such discourse on participants' contexts and relationships.
- Possible strategies to mitigate the impacts of hate speech.

The questions were structured flexibly so that the moderator could adapt the pace and direction of the discussion to the participants' answers and the group dynamics [22]. The guide not only asked about general perceptions of hate speech but also included specific prompts about specific situations that participants had observed or experienced. The aim was to explore and identify patterns and relationships between hate speech and the educational and digital dynamics in which it is embedded.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis with ATLAS.ti24 used to systematically organise and code the material. This allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and themes, as well as the categorisation of responses into categories and subcategories that aligned with the aims of the study [26]. The following steps were followed (Table 3):

Table 3. Analysis process.

Stages	Process	Explanation	Application to the Study
1	Data familiarisation	Reading and rereading the transcripts to gain an initial understanding of the content.	
2	Initial coding	Application of inductive and deductive codes informed by the focus group topic guide and theoretical frameworks on hate speech.	Iterative review and refinement to enhance interpretive precision and minimise redundancy.
3	Theme identification	Grouping codes into themes and subthemes concerning the construction, dissemination and effects of hate speech.	On the basis of the coding categories, broad themes are delineated that reflect shared participant narratives—for example, categories relating to strategies of discursive exclusion, the emotional effects on victims and the mechanisms by which hate speech is legitimised in digital contexts.
4	Review and refinement	Validation of themes through investigator triangulation and consultation with external experts in qualitative analysis.	This phase involved a team-based review of the findings, in which researchers compared their interpretations of the data to ensure consistency and credibility [15]. Consultations were conducted with external qualitative-analysis experts to incorporate independent perspectives and strengthen analytic validity. Triangulation enhances the robustness of the results and enables the refinement of themes and subthemes in relation to the theoretical framework, ensuring a coherent connection between the empirical data and key concepts on hate speech.

Font: Own elaboration.

The use of this technique is based on its capacity to structure and synthesise large amounts of qualitative data so that significant patterns in participants' narratives can be identified [27]. A hybrid coding approach was chosen, combining inductive and deductive strategies: the former allowed new themes to emerge from the data, while the latter drew on existing theoretical frameworks on hate speech and relationship dynamics. This combination ensured a balance between openness to new insights and alignment with the research objectives.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Santo Tomás (No. 23-2024) and was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki and applicable local regulations. All participants were clearly informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and about their rights as participants. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymising the transcripts and encrypting the audiovisual recordings.

2.5. Methodological Considerations

Although the results of this study are not nationally representative due to the purposeful selection of the sample, they provide a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in specific educational contexts. The group dynamics inherent in focus groups facilitated access to collective perceptions and experiences, although we recognise that these may be influenced by interactions between participants. To mitigate this risk, strategies

were used to encourage equal participation and minimise the dominance of individuals in the discussions.

3. Results

3.1. Impact of Social Media on Hate Speech

The impact of digital social media on the production and reproduction of hate speech cannot be overlooked; this is analysed and discussed in the focus groups (Table 4).

Table 4. Social media and hate speech.

Student	Comment
CO5-6	I've noticed that, over the smallest things, huge arguments suddenly erupt on social media—often in the comments. I mean, a single comment can end up with something like 99 replies, and the discussions always go straight to attacking the person. It can happen in the context of memes, news, or pretty much anything.
AR2-1	To be honest, no. I have not personally experienced anything like that. But I have seen peers engaging in hate speech and creating content of that kind to disseminate on social media.
AR1-4	I think the problem is that much of what is said is anonymous. I've received messages like that. People make it anonymous so as to avoid consequences and to be able to say what they think without being judged.
IQ4-1	People say whatever comes to mind because they believe nothing will really happen; social media gives you that sense of anonymity, of distance.
AN1-6	The problem is that the internet has given many people a false sense of power. Anonymity ultimately allows them to say anything without consequences. That, in the end, is what enables hate speech to be voiced freely, on the assumption there will be no repercussions. That is generally what empowers people who enjoy spreading hate—they are constantly looking for pretexts and opportunities to attack others and disseminate hate.
AR2-1	I had a classmate who was bullied because of her appearance, especially because she was very tall. I actually remember that she suffered harassment and abuse via social media [...]. It seemed as though all my classmates had something against her and were posting things about her online, even though she was a very quiet person.
LA3-2	There was one subject I really enjoyed at the beginning, but over time I stopped attending because of the lecturer's comments. He often made jokes about migrants and women, and it created such a hostile atmosphere that I lost all motivation. In the end, I even considered dropping the course altogether, even though I was interested in the subject matter.

Font: Own elaboration.

Indeed, the students indicate that most expressions associated with discrimination, rights violations and violence originate, circulate and are expressed in digital spaces (CO5–6). It is evident that social media platforms trigger a range of responses to certain comments—whether to messages or memes—and participants agree that such responses generally do not remain at the level of discussion or dialogue but escalate to direct attacks on a particular individual. Focus group reports describe a hate-reinforcing dynamic: A comment on a news story that others dislike prompts not a reasoned exchange but direct attacks on the commenter. This pattern was reported by several participants, who stated that classmates or institutional peers produced and disseminated such messages via social media. However, responses concurred that there are no measures in place to prevent or raise awareness of these situations; the predominant response was silence. In particular, participants agreed that the dissemination of such comments typically occurs under the cloak of online anonymity—a common occurrence (AR1–4).

The above confirms a belief that is shared across all groups: Actions taken via digital social media, if done anonymously, can escape social and legal consequences (AN1–6). Con-

sequently, a significant proportion of hateful content is disseminated without knowledge of the sender's true identity.

The participants in the focus groups agree that the spread of hate speech is linked to the sense of freedom and power that social media and the general digitalisation of communication convey. There is still a mistaken belief that what is spread on social networks has no consequences. On the contrary, material disseminated in digital spaces can have legal consequences in addition to the moral, ethical and social damage suffered by those affected. Another factor that facilitates and amplifies the problem is the speed and extent of dissemination: news, images and other expressions can be spread at great speed and reach different contexts, both nationally and internationally (IQ4–1).

In relation to the reproduction of inequalities and exclusions, it is necessary to underline the normalisation that often operates around various manifestations of hate directed at individuals on the basis of both mutable and immutable characteristics (Table 5). This normalisation is not limited to the interaction between peers through the dissemination of hate messages but also includes the influence and participation of teachers as active agents in the production and transmission of such discourse, as they also contribute to its dissemination and legitimisation in certain contexts.

Table 5. Hate speech.

Student	Comment
LA1-3	Teachers also disseminate hate speech—for example, lecturers who crack jokes or who repeat comments made by others [...]
AN3-1	Fundamentally, I believe the teacher needs to be a role model for students, because students—indeed human beings in general, and students even more so—imitate everything they see. As I was saying, that girl who said all those things did not think them up; she heard them. She heard them from someone—A, B or C—and that is precisely why the teacher must be someone whom children can emulate in a positive way.
LA4-2	I feel that, as teachers, there needs to be a kind of filter on what they say. They can, perhaps, express their opinions, but sometimes it is not what one says so much as how one says it. Some speak very negatively about foreigners, for example, while others encourage reflection on the problems we face—teachers can act in both ways [...].
AN3-1	I genuinely believe—particularly we who are teachers working at key stages in children's development—that we have an important role as agents of social change. Our duty is not to tell children what to think, but to help them understand their reality and their world, and how to confront the problems they will face.
IQ3-1	We should not try to impose our views. It should be possible to hold a respectful conversation that also acknowledges and validates the other person's opinion. As I mentioned, when someone sets out to defend their point of view, many exchanges end in conflict and, in the end, it feels as though a viewpoint is being imposed. We should be more open to considering other perspectives, rather than merely projecting our own. Many teachers act like this: they seek to impose their own point of view.
CO2-4	In one of my courses, the lecturer constantly made remarks about students who spoke with an accent or came from rural areas. Even if he said them as “jokes”, it created a feeling of shame among those students, and some of them stopped participating in class. It showed me how much damage a teacher's words can do, even without direct insults.

Font: Own elaboration.

In general, participants' comments concurred in the view that some lecturers within their programmes have been involved in situations that resulted in the dissemination of hate speech and hate messages (LA1–3). This highlights both the importance of teaching staff as role models for those in training (AN3–1) and the link between staff conduct and the dissemination of hate speech. Accordingly, the teaching profession can act in ways that

contribute to the reproduction of inequalities and discrimination, while at the same time having tools at its disposal to promote change in response to these issues (LA4–2: AN3–1).

In line with this perspective, prospective teachers recognise themselves as agents of change and transformation and recognise the importance of their role as educators in addressing sensitive issues and in the practices they will develop throughout their careers. However, as the testimony indicates (LA4–2), this role is strained when learning occurs in a hostile environment marked by violence and the spread of hate speech. In such contexts, the effects are not limited to the deterioration of students' mental health—which is already complex and worrying—but also shape their relationship with a particular subject and even an entire field of knowledge, leading to rejection, demotivation or distance from a space that should be a place of learning.

A negative relationship with a lecturer in relation to a subject or course can, as students report, be a trigger for rejection of the subject, learning and teaching, and even dropping out. Students frequently note that, although they enjoy certain subjects, their relationship with the lecturer is marked by comments and situations that convey exclusion and hatred, causing them to drop out of the module. If the problem is more severe, they may discontinue the programme altogether. It is therefore important to recognise that dropping out is not only due to 'poor results', but also to a poor relationship with the lecturer or difficulties that have nothing to do with the discipline or course taken.

Accordingly, if teaching staff are positioned as agents of power and influence over students' education, their role requires careful consideration. Although students acknowledge problems with peers based on intolerance, they express particular concern about the role of lecturers, who should be able to contribute to conflict resolution based on ethical values, rather than acting as mediators who exacerbate problems. They expect teachers to serve as moral and ethical role models, leading to a critical appraisal of the profession's role in relation to hate speech and other socially salient issues.

In this regard, several comments underscore the problem of intolerance and the value of respect as a basis for building human relationships. They agree that difficulties arise when a single point of view is imposed over alternative positions that might challenge the original point of view. A significant part of the social problems that culminate in the dissemination of hate messages is due to entrenched structures of intolerance towards diversity (IQ3–1).

3.2. Hate Speech as the Banality of Evil

Hate speech, understood through the lens of the banality of evil, can be linked to how participants position themselves in relation to possible solutions to the problems it causes. Two fundamental areas of work consistently emerged in the focus groups (Table 6):

- The importance of training programmes for addressing hate speech.
- The importance of freedom of expression as an inherent value of democratic practice.

Table 6. Hate speech and banality.

Student	Comment
TA4-3	In a sense, the responsibility cannot rest solely with the state or the government; it is also a matter of upbringing at home, with the family as the fundamental pillar.
CO2-2	I don't think this can be laid solely at the door of education, because I believe I received a good education, and even if I talk with a friend about someone, I know it is wrong. The family's influence is also strong [. . .]. But I do not say such things directly with the intention of causing harm; there are people who do so with the aim of harming others. . .

Table 6. *Cont.*

Student	Comment
CO1-6	Freedom of expression is very broad and, moreover, poorly regulated. There was another situation several years ago: a march in Providencia in favour of Miguel Krassnoff. He was an army officer during the dictatorship who has been convicted, and the march was to request prison benefits because he was ill—something I do not agree with—but it happens under freedom of expression [. . .]. Although it is very valuable in a democracy, regulation is lacking.
IQ1-3	I think it is important to say, for example, that I can respect someone’s right to say what they wish. But there are limits. For instance, claiming that vaccines cause autism in children is different because it endangers public health. Here we question whether freedom of expression should be upheld when it may inflict harm on people’s health; in such cases, I do not think one can say whatever one wants.
LA2-1	Freedom of expression is valuable, but some matters are different. As I mentioned, we can respect differences over political parties. But I would never align myself with someone who disrespects another person or who denigrates someone for being a foreigner or for being poor, for example.
AR3-5	Sometimes hate is expressed in small, everyday comments that people treat as normal. For example, when a teacher repeatedly says that certain groups “don’t try hard enough”, it seems trivial, but it shapes how others see those students. That’s why I think the banality of evil is real: it’s not always open violence, but ordinary words that quietly legitimise exclusion.
IQ2-6	Freedom of expression is important, but when people use it to spread hate, it no longer feels like a right—it becomes a weapon. I have seen classmates justify offensive remarks by saying “it’s just my opinion”, and that normalises the idea that hurting others is acceptable. That is how everyday comments turn into something much more harmful.

Font: Own elaboration.

The analysis confirms that several commentaries concur on the importance of what is learnt in the family and its relationship to the production and reproduction of hate speech. While education is recognised as fundamental, the family is understood to exert a significant influence on the construction and subsequent reproduction of messages that promote discrimination and segregation (TA4–3; CO2–2).

Even when education is designed to encourage reflection on the problems arising from hate speech, in many cases, the influence and socialisation provided by families predominates (CO2–2). In some cases, the criticism goes beyond what education or the family can do and relates to the underlying intent—whether harm is intended or not. This is particularly related to the second aspect mentioned: freedom of expression. Some commentaries recognise the value of freedom of expression as a democratic right, but at the same time argue that the exercise of this right should be regulated in some way (CO1–6). In this sense, students concur that there should be controls or norms that restrict what is said. Several remarks question the limits of freedom of expression and emphasise the importance that society should place on issues such as health and education—issues that are repeatedly questioned (IQ1–3)—thus articulating the limits that freedom of expression should have in society (LA2–1).

While the right to freedom of expression is highly valued, participants argued that its exercise should be subject to limits and control. They suggested that certain topics in the debate ‘can be respected’. Others, however, are more difficult to tolerate in their opinion, such as discrimination or marginalisation on migration status, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, among other characteristics that can be categorised as changeable or unchangeable.

Although this position introduces a tension between the law and the concept of freedom, it is worth noting that students sometimes rationalise—or even legitimise—practices such as the production and dissemination of hateful content.

4. Discussion

The study demonstrates a normalisation of abuse—including its reproduction by some teaching staff—that worsens the climate of coexistence and discourages dissent. This pattern is interpreted through the lens of the ‘banality’ of everyday harm, with seemingly minor, routine practices depersonalising the other and enabling exclusion [9]. Approaches from critical linguistics show how rhetorical devices such as disparaging humour, dehumanising metaphors and markers of difference naturalise hierarchies and legitimise unequal treatment [7,28]. The recurrent recourse to jokes, passive-aggressive remarks and silence in the face of violence, as described by students, fits with the concept of ‘dangerous speech’, which identifies narratives that target recognisable groups and elevates the risk of harm, and moral disengagement, which rationalises offence as acceptable or ‘normal’ [29].

Recent studies show that polarising and false content spreads faster and further than truthful information [30] that incidental exposure to opposing views can increase polarisation [3] and that ‘echo chamber’ environments reduce information diversity [8,31]. Similarly, there is documented evidence of increased online harassment of minority groups and of recommendation pathways that increase exposure to extreme content, which is directly related to the accounts gathered [5].

The findings support a diverse educational and institutional response. Pedagogically, it is advisable to embed critical media literacy and provide targeted teacher education to identify and disable frames of hate and disinformation [32]. The literature indicates that small nudges towards accuracy reduce the spread of harmful content and improve accuracy-focused judgement and discernment. Restorative approaches strengthen belonging and the learning climate when relational damage is present [33,34]. From an organisational and policy perspective, it is recommended to articulate clear protocols, ensure psychosocial support and coordinate with platforms to balance facilitation and transparency with the protection of rights and democratic coexistence [35,36].

Consistent with the findings, the centrality of digital platforms in the escalation of hate is not explained solely by the ‘freedom’ perceived in anonymity but also by social logics that privilege controversy and affective reactivity. Recent studies show that digital systems favour echo chambers and engagement cascades that amplify polarising content and reinforce prejudices [37,38]. This technological pattern converges with what has been philosophically described as the ‘banalisation of evil’—small, repeated and normalised acts—and with the ‘violence of sameness’ in ecosystems that homogenise and punish difference [9,10]. Societal perceptions of impunity and the speed of news dissemination are consistent with this construct: greater anonymity, greater virality, lower moral inhibitions and a higher likelihood of escalation [29,39]. In education, an environment is created in which dissent is replaced by personal attacks, and the classroom loses its character as a deliberative space.

For historically marginalised groups, the logic of anonymous offence intensifies processes of stigmatisation and silencing, with consequences for academic performance and persistence [40,41]. From an ethical perspective, this structural harm not only affects the immediate victims but also undermines the fabric of mutual recognition that makes education as an encounter with otherness possible [7,12]. The convergence between the subjective suffering and the hostile climate in the classroom reported by the participants makes it necessary to consider the incidents not as ‘isolated cases’, but as symptoms of a relational and technological dynamic that normalises exclusion.

In light of the foregoing, the pedagogical discussion should focus less on purely punitive responses and more on educational ecologies that integrate critical digital citizenship, media literacy and sustainable socio-environmental work. The literature suggests that

critical literacy approaches enable the distinction between legitimate opinion and discursive violence, thus disabling stereotypes based on evidence and empathy [42]. In parallel, ‘prebunking’ or cognitive inoculation interventions are effective in strengthening resistance to manipulative narratives before mass exposure [42]. For teaching staff, this means initial and ongoing professional development with clear rubrics for incident response, restorative justice protocols and cultivation of socio-emotional competencies based on current frameworks. In this way, the classroom regains its ethical and democratic potential: it is not about prescribing ‘what to think’ but ‘how to think with others’.

Taken together, the results indicate that the problem is not confined to individual incidents but arises from a socio-technical order that normalises aggression and prevents the recognition of the other. The correspondence between students’ perceptions of impunity, anonymity and escalation and what is described in the literature about the amplification of polarising content suggests that prevention requires interventions on multiple levels: the design and governance of platforms, appropriate legal frameworks and, above all, pedagogical changes that restore the classroom to a deliberative space and a place to foster relationships [7,32,37].

The integration of media literacy, inoculation strategies and socio-emotional development for both teachers and students proves to be a coherent triad of action, consistent with the evidence and the ethical obligation to welcome otherness in school life [12,42]. From this perspective, the ‘banalisation’ of evil in digital contexts is not inevitable: it can be combated through critical reading routines, restorative protocols and the leadership of teachers who can break the chains of dehumanisation in highly networked environments [9]. This section can be divided into subsections. It should provide a concise and precise presentation of the empirical results, their interpretation and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

5. Conclusions

Through this study, a number of aspects have been confirmed that make a substantial contribution to the subject under examination

- First, the study confirms, that hate speech in the everyday lives of student teachers is not a series of isolated episodes but the outcome of practices that facilitate its production, circulation and normalisation.
- Secondly, and in connection with the above, the findings highlight the central role of social media—due to its anonymity, speed and reach—the perception of impunity and the ambivalence of the teaching role, which can either reproduce dehumanisation or enable spaces of care and reflection.
- Thirdly, linking these experiences to conceptual frameworks about the banalisation of harm, otherness and the contemporary logic of hormonalisation, it can be concluded that the problem threatens the ethical dimension of the pedagogical relationship and, thus, the democratic promise of the school.
- Finally, freedom of expression, an inalienable value, can no longer serve as an alibi for exclusion. It requires critical education, communicative responsibility and reasonable boundaries in educational and digital contexts.

On the basis of the foregoing, a first approach can be made to addressing this issue; that is, a concrete agenda for action follows:

- At the formative level, mainstream critical digital citizenship, media and information literacy (MIL), and socio-emotional and restorative interventions across initial and continuing teacher education.

- At the institutional level, establish clear protocols for the prevention, detection and response to cyberhate, alongside school climates that interrupt silencing and foster recognition of the other.
- At the systemic level, promote shared responsibility among schools, families, platforms and the state to disincentivise the amplification of harmful content and protect those who are most vulnerable.

Taken together, the findings support the view that the ‘banality’ of evil inherent in hate speech can be transformed into pedagogical opportunities to restore trust, ensure dignity and reorient coexistence towards an ethic of care and social justice.

The limitations of the study should be acknowledged and reframed as a research agenda. Purposive sampling and the use of focus groups increase interpretative richness but may be influenced by social desirability and the situational nature of the case, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, it is important to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies linking student narratives with digital traces, content analyses and ethnographic classroom observations, as well as to include measures of socioemotional well-being, school climate and academic trajectories (persistence, academic delay and dropout). A promising research direction lies in combining qualitative methods with computational analytics to map hate repertoires, evaluate the effects of algorithmic moderation and document the territorial and intersectional inequalities that condition exposure and vulnerability.

In terms of contribution, the research builds a productive bridge between theory and practice by problematising the ‘banality’ of evil in the digital sphere and translating it into operational pedagogical criteria. Specifically, it proposes an ethic of communicative care as a formative core, the transversal inclusion of critical digital citizenship in curriculums, socio-emotional support and institutional early warning and response systems for cyberbullying and hate speech. In addition, it is recommended to strengthen governance with clear protocols, focus teacher evaluation on relationships and school climate, and improve cross-sector coordination with families, platforms and policy actors. Translating the reported experiences into actionable guidelines allows the school to be reconfigured as a space of hospitality and democratic deliberation, capable of deactivating the logic of exclusion and reinstating dignity as an organising principle of educational life.

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