

# Next steps toward an inclusive country? Inviting and amplifying youth voice in public anti-hate messaging

Public  
anti-hate  
messaging

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore a national anti-hate messaging project, #USvsHate, and its call to students to create public messages refusing “hate, bias, and injustice.” Participants indicated that #USvsHate’s invitation to publicly express students’ ideas about equal human value functioned as a next step in furthering youth voice and critical consciousness toward societal inclusion and justice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Using grounded theory, analysis drew from teacher interviews ( $n = 45$ ), student focus groups ( $n = 30$ ), anonymous participant questionnaires and student-created messages and backstories ( $n = 250$ ) gathered between 2017 and 2020.

**Findings** – Participants indicated #USvsHate’s call to amplify student voice offered a next step to act upon awareness of social issues by denouncing hate while promoting inclusivity. Four invitations related to the project’s “anti-hate message” call emerged as important to participants: the invitation to comment personally on improving society; the creative invitation to share perspectives in any media form; the invitation to speak to a promised public audience; and the invitation to join a collective “us” improving society.

**Originality/value** – Youth voice and critical consciousness scholarship show the importance of supporting K12 youth to develop abilities to speak about injustice while pursuing an inclusive democracy. Still, less research highlights youth who might enter a classroom with some level of such awareness. This research extends existing scholarship by examining a potential next step to inviting critical consciousness and youth voice in any classroom. It also explores the potential pitfalls of this open-ended approach.

**Keywords** Racism, Hate, Anti-hate, Inclusion, Critical consciousness, Youth, Teachers, Student voice

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

What happens to teaching and learning when youth are encouraged to lift their voices creatively with others to publicly say no to hate? This paper explores a national anti-hate



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messaging project, #USvsHate, and participants' reactions to its specific invitation to students: to create public "anti-hate" messages that address, explore and refuse hate, bias and injustice in schools and society. We asked a specific research question of narratives collected from participants since #USvsHate's 2017 origins: *How did teacher and student participants describe their experiences with #USvsHate's core messaging invitation to students to speak up publicly against "hate"?*

Our qualitative study found participants saying that the project's invitation to creatively, publicly and collectively express students' ideas about equal human value functioned as a possible *next step* in furthering inclusive youth voice in schools of varying politics and demographics. Participants indicated four *invitations* related to the project's overarching "anti-hate message" call:

- (1) the invitation to comment personally on improving society;
- (2) the creative invitation to share perspectives in any media form;
- (3) the invitation to speak to a (promised) public audience; and
- (4) the invitation to join a collective "us" improving society together.

Participants said these invitations constituted a next step for youth voice beyond typical classroom work.

By analyzing a project inviting youth at any stage of critical awareness to uplift their initial voices and existing perspectives collectively against hate, this research extends existing scholarship on youth voice and critical consciousness development by examining an initial next step to developing such skills. We also ask critical questions throughout about the potential pitfalls of this next step approach inviting public "anti-hate messages" from all.

### **#USvsHate: project overview and related literature**

#USvsHate was created by the authors and educator/student partners in response to a nationwide post-2016-election spike in incidents of explicit bias and harassment on school campuses (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019; Rogers *et al.*, 2017). #USvsHate offers an *onramp* (initial invitation; Pollock and Yoshisato, 2022) to youth to speak publicly to shape school climate and broader society, asking students to create public "anti-hate" messages in any media for their school and schools across the country. Anti-hate principles on [usvshate.org](https://usvshate.org) define hate as "any time people denigrate, disrespect or harm an individual or group as if their identity makes them an inferior or less valuable type of person." The site invites original messages celebrating diversity, challenging stereotypes and communicating equal human value. Educators prepare students to create messages by teaching anti-hate lessons of their choice from partner organizations on [usvshate.org](https://usvshate.org), or they invite anti-hate messages during teaching of their own design. Participants then share #USvsHate messages locally to shape school climate (e.g. hallway displays, public community displays) and submit local favorites to #USvsHate's national contest. Winning messages are chosen through a collective voting process, then amplified on social media and the project website, with some reproduced as posters or stickers sent back to participating classrooms. Between 2017 and 2019, Authors 1 and 3 piloted #USvsHate in San Diego, CA, and in 2019 #USvsHate expanded nationally through a contest hosted by Teaching Tolerance (now Learning for Justice). Since its inception, #USvsHate has engaged over 14,000 students, from kindergarten through college. #USvsHate now operates nationally out of the University of California San Diego's CREATE center, directed by Author 1.

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#USvsHate draws from many bodies of work insisting that K12 schools should be sites for building student skills toward participation in a multicultural democracy (Rogers, 2022). #USvsHate builds on school climate research showing that collective activities promoting inclusion support student success (Coulston and Smith, 2013); on scholarship arguing that messaging in schools (Gay, 2010) should explicitly broadcast belief in all communities (Delpit, 2006; Perry and Steele, 2004; Pollock, 2017); and on longstanding work encouraging students to actively counter biases and injustices, stemming from multicultural (Nieto, 1999), antibias (Derman-Sparks *et al.*, 2020), culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995), antiracist (Pollock, 2008) and social justice pedagogical traditions (Chapman and Hobbel, 2010). Overall, #USvsHate aligns with research showing that dialogue against bias and injustice in schools enables opportunities for students from all social groups to build skills for a more inclusive nation (Sleeter and Zavala, 2020). #USvsHate's specific intervention is its open-ended invitation of "anti-hate" teaching and learning and, specifically, of student-made public *messaging*. This messaging focus distinguishes #USvsHate from important programs offering collections of antibias/inclusion resources and training (e.g. the Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools) or efforts that offer readymade anti-hate messaging for schools (e.g. the Anti-Defamation League's "No Place for Hate" banners). Messages submitted to #USvsHate have always included perspectives from historically underrepresented and excluded social groups (Appendix, Figure A1 and A2) and from youth "standing up" for others as a collective "us" (Appendix, Figure A3 and A4) [1].

As self-critical researchers seeking both to protect youth and improve the project's ongoing design, we have engaged in ongoing documentation and analysis of students' and educators' real-time reception and use of #USvsHate, to see whether the project's invitation to "anti-hate" teaching, learning and messaging supports learning and action that scholars call for and participants themselves support. While defining an anti-hate message on its landing pages and offering curated "top lessons" from national organizations, for example, #USvsHate potentially invites sharing of under-informed perspectives by both students and underprepared teachers; we, thus, have encouraged deeper learning through additional preparatory resources and text throughout the project's website and studied the potential pitfalls of using an "anti-hate" frame in an era of spiking explicit bigotry (Pollock and Yoshisato, 2022). #USvsHate's invitation of anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2002) student voices in school communities potentially invites backlash; we thus have explored #USvsHate teachers' preparation for potential "pushback" (Pollock *et al.*, 2022), including local debates over what counts as "partisan" teaching (Pollock and Yoshisato, 2021). Overall, in an era of publicly modeled bigotry targeting historically excluded communities, we have reasoned that schools cannot "do nothing" (Freire, 1970; Tatum, 2017) and considered it more ethical to learn with participants how best to insist on basic inclusion in any school climate. For this article, we attended to participants' commentary (2017–2020) on the most basic aspect of #USvsHate: inviting student anti-hate *messages* publicly calling for inclusion and more just treatment of communities. To analyze such narratives in our data, we tapped two key realms of scholarship for a conceptual framework: scholarship on K12 student voice and on critical consciousness development in K12 schools.

### **Student voice and critical consciousness: conceptual underpinnings**

Youth voice scholarship calls for supporting K12 youth to weigh in on remedying injustices, both to build youth skills for our shared democracy and to support students themselves (Nylund and Tilsen, 2006; Akom *et al.*, 2008). Research emphasizes the benefits to students and student-serving institutions of inviting students to build skills to understand social

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problems, then lift their voices to improve classrooms and schools (Yonezawa and Jones, 2008, 2009) and communities (Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Warren and Mapp, 2011). While this work is increasingly undertaken within progressive K12 classrooms, much occurs in out-of-school settings committed to social justice youth development (Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002), including in the arts (Dewhurst, 2014; Goessling *et al.*, 2021). As we developed this project, we, therefore, considered how youth can start building such skills for improving schools and society inside typical K12 classrooms.

Scholars focused on supporting K12 youth to develop critical consciousness in schools and classrooms have honed in on various mechanisms. Building on the work of Freire (1970) and others (El-Amin *et al.*, 2017), for example, Seider and Graves (2020) examine how school experiences can build skills in *social analysis* (students' ability to name and critique social, political and economic forces contributing to inequity and inequality); *political agency* (the recognition that one can impact social or political change); and *social action* (one's ability to undertake activities that directly call out oppressive systems and the inequities they perpetuate). Such skill-building can buoy youths' academic achievement, improve schools and prepare youth for shaping an inclusive democracy (Shuster and Giesemann, 2021). While most research focuses on supporting historically underrepresented and excluded students with such learning, scholarship has also demonstrated benefits for majoritized students (Sleeter and Zavala, 2020). Overall, developing students' skills to examine, critique and enact change regarding social problems has been found beneficial for student-teacher relationships, increased levels of engagement and academic outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2010). Seider and Graves (2020) allude to key pedagogical tactics for developing critical consciousness skill sets, including providing youth language for analyzing inequality (172); supporting youth in teaching and motivating other youth (174); offering opportunities for students to engage in social action within their school community (177); and encouraging students to act on societal issues beyond school walls (179). Schools can enter such skill-building in different ways.

As its own imperfect contribution to this realm of work, #USvsHate offers one mechanism to support youth to voice whatever initial critical consciousness they have to offer. In Seider and Graves' (2020) terms, in its definitions of "hate, bias, and injustice," #USvsHate offers youth basic language to refuse intersecting forms of harm treating any group as inferior. #USvsHate then invites youth to "teach" others their anti-hate perspectives through public messaging, leveraging "the outsized influence of peers" in shaping student views (175). As social action, #USvsHate invites students to shape their own school climates, other schools' climates and public digital space through public messaging. Essentially, #USvsHate invites any critical youth voices that exist to come forward so that other youth can hear them. As a classroom- and school-level project inviting youth to uplift their voices via anti-hate messaging, #USvsHate, therefore, offers a possible onramp (Pollock and Yoshisato, 2022) to *begin* developing and strengthening critical thinking skills on how to build an inclusive nation from within any classroom, through the amplification of youth voices ready to share "counterstories" resisting dominant narratives denigrating their communities and others' (Valencia, 2010; Delgado Bernal, 2002). In analyzing participants' commentary on #USvsHate's "anti-hate" messaging invitation, we heard participants positioning the project as a potential next step to invite initial critical thinking through lifting voices with something ready to say.

## Methods

As ethnographers focused on collaborative design with educators (Pollock, 2004; Barab, 2014; Penuel *et al.*, 2011) and as critical scholars attending carefully to the task of remedying

injustice and harm (Nelson, 2016), we have studied the project while designing it since its inception, both to feed participant feedback into iterative project improvement and to ask self-critical research questions about the project's outcomes. We build on interviews, participant observation (primarily of teacher gatherings, to date), focus groups and informal questionnaires with youth. We also draw from analysis of student messages and teacher backstories submitted with those messages, exploring participants' experiences of the program during teaching, learning, message-making and local reception of messages.

We note before proceeding that while we wrestle with any negative data we find, we have tended to find positive #USvsHate reactions in this data set – possibly an overall result of #USvsHate's voluntary nature (as one youth put it, “not every teacher would pick this up”). Our methods have also tended to entice those interested enough to comment. As we have not directly observed participating classrooms, we cannot say with certainty the extent to which our data speak for silent participants. Still, to date, even anonymous questionnaires have shown largely positive responses. To counter possible bias, we continue to proactively advertise our wish to interview students who do not like the project; on voting forms, we embed anonymous questionnaires inviting critique and negative experiences; we provide contact information for anyone to reach out to Author 1 with concerns; and we critique #USvsHate relentlessly ourselves.

### **Project participation**

Since 2017, contest participants have joined the project voluntarily, typically after teachers hear about it through personal networks, informal recruitment e-mails from our university center or Tweets from partnering national organizations like Learning for Justice or the National Writing Project. Individual teachers then engage their students in the project how they see fit, then choose (often with students) a subset of students' work to submit to biannual contests. To mitigate teacher bias in contest entries, submission processes welcome students' direct submissions as well. After the contest submission deadline, participating educators and youth help select nationally winning messages through Google Form voting.

### **Research participation**

All teachers who submit students' work to any contest receive an invitation to become a research participant themselves and/or to extend the research invitation to their students. We have offered interested teachers a student questionnaire for their classes and also gathered youths' anonymous take on #USvsHate through our voting forms. With local educators, we also have hosted various public gatherings on joining the project, documented with ethnographic field notes. Teachers and students have joined interviews and focus groups (Mishler, 1991) voluntarily after invitations to join us in shaping #USvsHate's design (Barab, 2014; Penuel *et al.*, 2011). For this paper, we used three years of interviews and focus groups with teachers, informal surveys and focus groups with participating youth, and teacher/student backstories offered to explain submitted messages.

### **Sample population and data collection**

Pilot participants in 2017–2019 included 12 San Diego area districts, 53 teachers and 427 students who submitted anti-hate messages to contests, with more than 3,300 students participating overall. In our pilot year, we interviewed 18 teachers, who taught at traditional K12 public schools and public charters, located in small and large, racially, politically and socioeconomically diverse school districts throughout our region. We conducted 10 student focus groups, with 30 students of diverse backgrounds participating across Grades 6–12.

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Educator interviews focused on experiences of instruction, successful and “difficult moments” in lessons and messaging, and supports needed to discuss these issues at school. Interviews were held largely in person, during prep periods, after school, and on weekends, and lasted about 1 h each. In focus groups, students discussed experiences of hate, lessons and messaging. We also asked questions like “Do you feel there is a place for addressing these kinds of topics in school?” and “What do you think about the anti-hate messaging piece of the project?” Focus groups were held during students’ advisory class period, lunch period and after school, lasting 40–60 min.

Throughout 2019–2020, in the national #USvsHate pilot hosted by Learning for Justice, 44 educators submitted student work to contests and reported an estimated 3,280 students participating. With the same general protocol above, we interviewed 27 of those educators on Zoom, from politically diverse K12 public, private, charter and religious schools, in suburban, urban and rural communities across the USA. The pandemic made it challenging to arrange permission for students to participate in focus groups; we made up the gap in student data by analyzing over 250 of the backstories students submitted with their messages (“tell us about the teaching and learning behind this message!”) and by analyzing responses about the project on our winter 2020 and spring 2020 youth voting forms, in which 341 students participated anonymously. All data were collected by the authors, known to participants as #USvsHate codesigners.

### Data analysis

Utilizing grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998), data analysis focused first on understanding participants’ general experiences with #USvsHate, for program-improvement insights and as a window into more specific challenges and possibilities for anti-hate teaching and learning (see also Pollock and Yoshisato, 2021, 2022; Pollock *et al.*, 2022). We used discourse analysis techniques piloted in studies on race talk (Pollock, 2004; Pollock *et al.*, 2010) to explore repeated themes. We noted a specific trend in participants’ discussions: teachers and students expressed that #USvsHate messaging offered something different from typical teaching practices and classroom experiences. Keeping in mind this noted trend, we then began more focused coding (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) to explore what participants said was different. Through this process, we found participants alluding to movement beyond previously experienced practices inviting student thinking, dialogue and participation – what we came to call *next steps*.

Initial data analysis showed that the next step most participants attributed to #USvsHate was inviting and amplifying more student voice on issues of bias and injustice. Without prompting, teachers focused on how #USvsHate unusually invited students to creatively message to the public their demands for more just treatment of others. Students also discussed the importance of lifting their own voices more publicly and hearing the voices of peers inside and outside classrooms. We went back to the data to code more specifically for types of such references to inviting and lifting student voices against bias and injustice. We finally identified four *invitations* of student voice in the #USvsHate project deemed useful by both adult and student participants:

- (1) An invitation to comment personally on improving society.
- (2) An invitation to lift such voice in any creative form.
- (3) An invitation to speak to a (promised) broader public audience for such perspectives.
- (4) An invitation to join a collective “us” to improve society together.

In the following section, we present data organized into the four invitations participants described. It is important to mention that we do not share this data to imply that all #USvsHate messages were fully informed, empowered or deeply “critical” or to claim that #USvsHate produced more critical consciousness. Participants indicated that the project’s invitation to students to speak creatively to a potentially public audience about improving society along with a collective “us” seemed to invite students to share what they felt ready to say – perhaps a next step toward deepening students’ critical consciousness skills (Seider and Graves, 2020).

## Findings

### *Invitation 1: to comment personally on improving society*

Data highlighted how participating educators often already tended toward inclusive and antibias teaching. One teacher in Southern California exclaimed, “It was kind of a miraculous moment when we found #USvsHate. . .because we’ve been doing so much of this work all year already.” In reflecting on her students’ winning submission, another teacher said #USvsHate was newly “inspiring” and offered “validation” for the work she was already doing. Many noted further that current events (2017–2020) fueled their commitment to inviting youth to envision an improved society. Teachers named harms to groups including anti-immigrant laws, police brutality, threats to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) rights, and peers repeating “slurs about people” and engaging in “outright bullying” about identities, as current events increasing urgency. Still, some teachers also told us explicitly that with #USvsHate, they were teaching for the first time on these issues, particularly in communities where such topics were often deemed taboo (Pollock *et al.*, 2022) – or taking their teaching on these issues one step further.

Whether seasoned or new to such work, many participants indicated explicitly that #USvsHate offered a *next step* – an invitation to youth to join others in openly countering hate, bias and injustice through more publicly speaking up, both in class dialogue prior to message making and through message-making itself. Several teachers called this invitation “a breath of fresh air,” even despite anxiety that, as a Pennsylvania middle school teacher put it, “you could get yourself into huge amounts of trouble if you express a political opinion related to some of those beliefs.” Teachers also noted how #USvsHate invited new dialogues in class for the first time. One California community college instructor put it this way about inviting a dialogue with students on their draft messages:

The border patrol is very present in my community, so I thought let’s try out #USvsHate [. . .] What I didn’t expect was it was going to be a healing space for students. Many students felt validated *when they started to say anything they wanted to say around racism, sexism, and what they’ve been living in without a space to talk about it*. Students were also asking questions to the [peer] presenters in class.

One elementary teacher leader bluntly stated that #USvsHate provided her and colleagues an opening for topics that otherwise “would just not be discussed in public school.” A high school student expressed a common take that “doing the project” of #USvsHate messaging newly invited sharing of students’ actual beliefs, where typically in school, “no one ever asks” about supporting various groups:

When you meet someone, you don’t really understand what they feel for certain topics unless you specifically ask them, and *no one ever asks*, ‘What are your feelings on LGBTQ people?’ [. . .] But [. . .] once you do a project on this, you understand that there’s a difference between what they say in a social group, and what they actually believe.

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Participants also emphasized that #USvsHate's invitation to discuss injustice before making messages "encouraged" student voice. As one participant said on our voting form, "One thing I liked was how the project encouraged the class to have a meaningful conversation about the injustices and inequality that many people still face every day."

As noted above, we cannot claim all such dialogues were well-executed [2]; participants simply said repeatedly that they valued them. In describing message-sharing, students also mentioned newly "hearing" or "seeing" raw responses and different perspectives on improving society, not typically invited in classrooms. For example, a ninth-grader from Southern California noted:

I think it was just kind of cool to see everyone's sort of different perspective and how they all think [...] because there was a lot of race, police violence, LBGTQ+, all that. I just thought that was very interesting to see from different people's perspectives, and just, how they view these different issues in our world.

A middle school teacher from Alabama musing on how "The students are very proud of their work" ("A lot of them took time on it. I was taken aback by how much students did seem to get out of it") recalled a student saying unusually, "I really care about this." The teacher reasoned this was because "students don't often get time to talk about those topics in a productive way."

Participants indicated that the overall invitation to comment personally on improving society opened doors to student voices not yet heard on such issues. As noted next, participants also indicated how the invitation to amplify anti-hate student voices in creative and original messages added a next step to typical school experiences: students with perspectives ready to be shared or under construction could do so in newly visible ways.

*Invitation 2: to lift voice in any creative form*

After an art teacher showed students the #USvsHate website, a ninth-grader immediately made a painting directly condemning US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (see [Appendix, Figure A5](#)). The message's wording ("they didn't see") felt designed to push thinking of un-seeing viewers in our border region. We thought long about this example, as it demonstrated some students' readiness to share powerful counternarratives ([Delgado Bernal, 2002](#)) without any teacher instruction.

Some students marginalized in their own school communities readily crafted counternarratives to share in creative form. A high school teacher from Pennsylvania said her students, all of whom "had IEPs" (Individualized Education Plans to support learning differences), wanted so much to create their message about school belonging and exclusion that they attempted to complete a class video while separated in quarantine. Upon hearing that school would be remote indefinitely, she said, "They were like, 'our video isn't done!' I mean, they were *crushed*." She described students with social anxieties who rarely spoke in class, newly motivated to speak up on camera to reject stereotypes.

#USvsHate encouraged teachers to share entries locally and to invite students to review and supportively critique others' multimedia messages. Teachers described gallery walks and hallway display activities allowing students to see and discuss one another's work. Many students referenced the moment of "seeing" peers' messages in class as an important aspect of the project inviting student voice beyond typical assignments written only for teachers. One high school humanities teacher described class motivation to figure out how to "send a message in any medium, to join a public conversation with other people." This teacher had already been supporting inquiry related to "what's going on with the U.S. and Mexican border. Separation of families at the border. Detainment at the border"; she

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encouraged students to create art installations, asking them, “What message would you like to add to the broader conversation about America [...] How are you going to send it?” (see [Appendix, Figure A6](#)). In her interview, the teacher noted pointedly that while she was already willing to engage such questions and support students to imagine public viewers, #USvsHate offered a specific next step to actually lift voices creatively beyond her classroom to the “real-world”: it was a chance to “give kids the opportunity to have real-world audiences” for their ideas in any medium, via a “platform that gives them a voice.”

Much creative message-making also stayed in classrooms, as we limited submissions to five per teacher per contest. Yet teachers noted that envisioning a public audience for creative work still seemed to inspire students. One first-grade teacher in California described how after students read *The Color of Us* ([Katz, 1999](#)), she invited all students to “share how they would like to describe their skin” and to make “their own self-portraits and [add] their skin color descriptions. They celebrated the different skin tones we have in our classroom and gained an understanding of how to have respectful conversations about race” ([Appendix, Figure A7](#)). In considering #USvsHate’s broader forum, she explained that the visual messaging activity invited students to envision their voices eventually educating both classmates and “others” beyond the classroom:

We can speak up and let others know how it feels to be described in certain ways. Because my goal is for them to feel empowered in talking about how they identify their skin color and then also *letting others know* in the future.

Relatedly, students said that experiencing peers’ creative production – what [Seider and Graves \(2020\)](#) might call “youth teaching youth” – motivated their learning. Once posters of students’ winning images were produced “physically” for school walls, for example, some said, peers “looked at” them “every day,” prompting critical thinking. As two high schoolers in different regions put it,

I think [the posters] make a difference [...] if you actually look at it, and read it and make it known that it’s there, then I feel like it would make a difference. Cause I look at that one every day.

Seeing it physically in the classroom – especially because [peer’s] poster is right in front of me every day – you can just have that reminder of how to be more open-minded to certain topics, especially if they cause controversy.

Further, a seventh grader explained how the visibility of different media ignited conversations with school peers and family at home:

[Students] see the sticker and it gets passed out more [...] and it spreads[...] You have the anti-hate one, you put it on your water bottle, and more people come to see it, like, “Oh what’s this?” and you try to explain. [...] I have the anti-hate poster on my wall. When my family members come over, they see my wall, like, “Oh what’s this?” Then we explain it, in either Spanish or English.

#USvsHate creative productions “spread” into different settings in varying ways. In the case of [Appendix Figure A1](#), “Being Mexican,” for example, whose creator chose to remain anonymous, a student indicated in one focus group that they did not know a peer in their own school had made this striking painting, a contest winner. Still, their poster was displayed at the school and further spread online via the district’s public Twitter account. Other students also proactively amplified their own #USvsHate creations inside their classrooms and schools, indicating the importance to youth of creating messages in new media to reach school peers. As an example, one elementary school student proactively printed and distributed copies of his own #USvsHate sticker for his entire classroom. The

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creative act led to the teacher submitting his message to our national contest, leading to further multimedia production described later in this article (ranging from a video on [usvs hate.org](http://usvs hate.org) to a giant reproduction of his sticker on the wall of his superintendent; Appendix, Figure A8).

#USvsHate's creative message invitation thus offered a platform for amplifying student voice first inside the classroom, through the promise of possibly amplifying creative voices to viewers, readers and listeners outside the classroom. Participants also noted how the explicit invitation of *public* anti-hate messaging supported students to amplify their voices beyond single classrooms' typical discourse boundaries, into their schools overall (see Section 3) and beyond to a broader collective (see Section 4).

*Invitation 3: to speak to a promised broader public audience*

An art teacher in Southern California described putting all of her students' #USvsHate messages directly into her school's hallways to "get the conversation going" across the public audience of the "entire campus." She said school administrators indeed then gathered to analyze students' perspectives to determine future project themes departments should focus on:

Our school has a very large visual presence among our community as far as projects displayed on the walls, clubs available, the student government [ . . . ] Being an art teacher I wanted to do it in a visual way. I have 130 students and 130 posters hanging up around the entire campus, middle and high school side. Really positive propaganda to get the conversation going.

Some teachers also spoke explicitly of how a promise of schoolwide viewing was "motivating" for students. An elementary teacher in California described the power of "knowing that their messages were going to be seen":

The most motivating part of it was *knowing that their messages were going to be seen around campus* [ . . . ] when they can visualize how their message is going to be displayed, it was more motivating for them to clearly create their posters and be artistic with them.

Another teacher from the same school noted that having messages that were "seen" and "read" schoolwide was "liberating" and "powerful":

It's been liberating for some of these kids. Every day they're walking through the halls, seeing these [anti-hate messages]. Some teachers stop their group as they walk by and read them. It's been powerful.

While we cannot prove such #USvsHate displays were locally transformative social action, students seemed to approach public youth-made messages in their schools as important next steps to insisting on belonging. In a Kansas middle school, an educator described how much a "diversity leadership" club she advised "wanted to spread the message" schoolwide:

*We wanted to spread the message* of unity and love in a time of turmoil and unrest. Our students presented to every class in the school, doing multiple hands-on activities about unconscious bias and action steps. We surveyed the students anonymously to set an action plan to address unconscious bias in our school. We then had all students in the school submit #USvsHate work as a culmination of all we had done throughout the year.

The teacher was clear that the "time of turmoil and unrest" had already been prompting students to begin these actions before the group "found" #USvsHate. The educator noted that #USvsHate's invitation to "whole school" anti-hate messaging added a next motivating vehicle for student voice, even as plans were eventually thwarted by the 2020 pandemic:

Some students and I were just looking [online]. And I showed them when I saw the #USvsHate. And I said, “[...] should we do this with our group? Should we do it with the school?” And they said, “we want to do it with the whole school.” So we did it with the whole school. And we got hundreds of submissions. And then the students voted on the top three, and there were some tough choices, [...] But our plan was that when we came back [we would] post all of the submissions [on walls]. And that would be what you would see on a wall. #USvsHate [submissions]. When people walked into our school, that was our plan.

Participants also indicated that experiencing youth voice amplified across the public audience of “whole schools” could spark new adults’ motivation to participate, including in initially less receptive environments. One first-grade teacher in Southern California teaching bilingually in a self-described “conservative” neighborhood convinced her principal (who at first found #USvsHate messages by other schools’ students too “mature”) to let her show her students’ bilingual video against bullying to the entire faculty. Her schoolwide sharing sparked faculty dialogue about the need for anti-hate work, as the perpetrator of a recent well-known hate crime had grown up in the district. As this teacher put it to other teachers in a public gathering, while her administrator had at first found “some topics [...] inappropriate to discuss,” after seeing her presentation, more colleagues at school were insisting now that “we need to come together and figure out ways to address these topics” – a first step, perhaps, to allowing students to “address” issues. One partner teacher she brought into the work became a contest winner and then a public champion of the project to other teachers. This school (and its K-4th graders) continued to produce #USvsHate messages on issues ranging from playground bullying to disability inclusion to George Floyd’s murder and the need for accurate pronouns.

While examples here highlight how students amplified their voices beyond single classrooms into “whole schools,” participants noted that messages amplified in schools could also lead to spread beyond schools into broader public learning spaces. As one (anonymous) educator reported on our Spring 2021 voting form:

The students are actually stopping to look at the posters we have displayed in our hallways. Our public library representative was in our school and saw the work. The public library in town is now hosting a month of our #USvsHate images in their gallery for the town to see!

Participants emphasizing such examples of student voices amplified beyond schools into the broader world (Section 4) also emphasized the importance of connecting students to a broader collective “us” participating in the work. Indeed, as noted next, this invitation to join a broad collective of students lifting voices against hate together beyond any single classroom or school was core to the project’s very title.

*Invitation 4: the idea of joining a collective “us” improving society together*

An art teacher from Missouri noted the power of envisioning this collective “us”:

This whole #USvsHate really opened up a dialogue and it was in very simple terms. [...] There wasn’t any pedagogy and fancy, fancy talk, research talk. It was just [...] *It’s us versus all the hate.*

Purposefully collective aspects of the project (such as the process of inviting all participants to vote on “finalist” messages) invited a sense of collective action, in part by putting student voices from other communities in front of peers [what [Seider and Graves \(2020\)](#) might emphasize as “youth teaching youth”]. One K-3 teacher from California summed this up as “a huge benefit”:

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One of the things my students loved was voting for the winners. It exposed them to the anti-hate ideas from other students in different places and of different ages and opened up new opportunities for discussion in the classroom. When we entered the contest, that wasn't on my mind – but it turned out to be a huge benefit.

Participants said the contest's digital amplification of winning entries also positioned student work as joining a collective anti-hate community, nationally and beyond. For example, a fourth-grade teacher tweeted video footage of her students screaming with excitement upon learning of their winning entry, saying, "My [students'] reaction to the unveiling of the #usvs hate contest winners! Thrilled to share our message," with a globe emoji. To her, the tweet captured their excitement at "sharing our message" and being heard. She told us she made a world map in her classroom populated with dots showing her students everywhere retweets had come from.

The #USvsHate practice of producing posters and stickers of various winners and sending them back to participating classrooms also amplified student voices directly into other schools, a move participants indicated could broaden the sense of "us" participating. A 10th-grade student from Southern California noted that such visible messages created by students elsewhere were "making a difference" because they were daily "reminders" of the broader community asking for "open minded" behavior.

Some teachers noted that because students knew their messages were actually being seen by a broader collective outside of class, this offered teachers the ability to shape their own classroom climate through reminders of the collective anti-hate community. A fourth grade California teacher expressed:

[. . .][if] my kids started being mean to each other after the project, I was able to refer to the video they had made as an anchor for their behavior and ask each other to stay having integrity. *I pointed out that other students took cues and made similar videos, so shouldn't they stick to their words about how to treat each other?* So, it became an anchor for the entire year.

Participating students and teachers also amplified #USvsHate student voices to a collective community of "us" using social media. A school in North Carolina used Twitter to promote a schoolwide "Unity Week," including five days of actions they tagged as #USvsHate, and publicly celebrated their new student-created "safe space" club. Schools tagged #USvsHate when posting on schoolwide efforts on holidays like Martin Luther King day or when celebrating individual students' creations. Through Twitter and Facebook, teachers, schools, districts and interested organizations also explicitly encouraged educators and schools to engage with the project, often when resharing student #USvsHate work. A California high school teacher shared pictures of students examining #USvsHate posters with a caption publicly thanking the project for the posters. Also reaching out to a potential collective "us," one teacher from New Jersey shared her student's digital artwork on Instagram, while a nonprofit organization from Nevada tweeted a video featuring a student's narrative condemning xenophobia. An elementary school in Southern California shared a video on Instagram that was created by a student during quarantine and submitted to the contest.

Students noted that digital amplification and proactive, purposeful "sharing" across a broad collective of peers ("everyone" and "us") was the prime amplification mechanism of their generation:

[. . .] (grade 9): Cause everyone's on [social media] right now, you know, yes, people might walk in here and be like, "Look at that poster," and find it interesting. But if it's on their phone and people keep sharing it, you're gonna obviously keep seeing it pop up and pop up.

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On our voting forms, posters, stickers, Instagram and the project's website remained top choices for a mechanism of amplifying winning messages proactively to the collective. Students also posed for photos for a collective community on our website, showing physical creations initially displayed for collective #USvsHate engagement on school walls and doors and then beyond.

Students who won contests experienced the full invitation to publicly share, to a broader participating collective, a creative perspective on improving society. For example, one group of elementary teachers chose several #USvsHate lessons to teach together because "Our class wanted to build community, and we saw a need to address identity and stereotypes; students felt they didn't have a voice at school or a safe place to have discussions." After a series of lessons, students made posters and poems and "Lastly, students wrote a speech/TED Talk." As described by one teacher, a student (a contest winner) had named what she "want[ed] to talk about":

[. . .] the kids were talking about things that are important to them, what they identify with [. . .] [one student said] "all I want to talk about are women's rights and inequalities." [. . .] It was a very powerful connection.

As the teacher then noted excitedly, the student "was selected to speak in front of the entire school and then was selected to speak at the district regarding her topic [Gender Equality]." Eventually, her TED talk was also featured on the #USvsHate website, having been chosen as a finalist by voting youth participants – demonstrating further amplification of ideas about "rights and inequalities" by and to a collective "us" beyond the classroom.

Other cases demonstrated how a message's amplification beyond classrooms could have ripple effects engaging a collective (and intergenerational) anti-hate "us." The student who printed his message as a sticker for his entire class (see Section 2) was chosen as a "finalist" in our fall 2020 contest. We then invited him to make a video "backstory" explaining his message ("we are the ones who can save this country"), which we highlighted on [usvshate.org](https://usvshate.org). The student then was featured on his district's website and in a state newsletter. We later learned from the student's mother that the superintendent created framed copies of the message for his district office wall and for the student himself as the artist. Most provocatively, the teacher told us that the district now was, for the first time, actively amplifying LGBTQ support activities – a next step she attributed to #USvsHate.

Some ripples of youth voice also engaged parents to support and even fund collective work. One Southern California counselor described how student excitement and the anti-hate messages themselves motivated parents, who then contributed extra funding for related activities via the school's Parent-Teacher Association:

Once we did the #USvsHate lessons, parents were also excited about that. And I reached out to parents [. . .] who had kids that submitted some really nice posters and stuff, and the parents were really excited about it and the kids were excited about it, too. They thought it was a really good project and good things that they were learning. So they were all in for it, too.

Some examples also suggested critical thinking sparked across a collective. Another teacher from this school noted approvingly that while LGBTQ supports were already commonly discussed in their setting, students were being catalyzed to ask new questions about race and immigration by an #USvsHate message on the wall – "Being Mexican Is Not a Crime" (Appendix, Figure A1). The spread of this same winning message around our very large region and beyond indicated it was potentially sparking thinking in many places. We saw it featured in community organizations, on university dorm windows, as Facebook profile pictures, and in public demonstrations for immigrant rights. Another student's spoken word poem on anti-Asian racism won our contest, then was amplified in a schoolwide assembly

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and a blog post we wrote after the Atlanta massacres. Our blog, including her poem, was retweeted by the National Education Association.

In smaller ways, without “winning” our contests, some educators described how #USvsHate invited and then amplified student voices demanding inclusion that would not have otherwise been heard at all by the collective. A middle school teacher from the South chose to submit a message that otherwise might not be validated locally:

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I would say that one of the submissions I sent in probably would not have been selected by students because I do teach in a very, um. . . evangelical area. Um, and so students have different perceptions, particularly about sexual orientation. So, one of my submissions from a student was about LGBTQ rights, and I felt like it was a very strong submission.

Given her location, the teacher typically invited student voice on such “rights” in ways “not to be public [. . .] just shared with me.” This message, submitted anonymously, was seen by viewers far beyond. In various unexpected ways, then, #USvsHate’s next-step messaging invitation amplified already-critical student voices with something ready to say.

### Discussion and conclusion

We emphasize again that while participating youth spoke of being challenged to “think” more than usual about societal issues, we do not yet have evidence that #USvsHate seriously deepened critical consciousness in individuals or across participants. We have, most often, repeated statements of critical voices newly heard. In calling #USvsHate efforts a potential *next step* for inviting youths’ development of critical consciousness, we must iterate that we cannot say whether the students’ shared perspectives came *from* #USvsHate activities. Rather, we say that #USvsHate at its root invited and motivated those perspectives to be shared. Our own next research is exploring whether and how the project functions to develop critical consciousness skills for some young people – or does not.

We emphasize, too, that not all student messages made and amplified locally in #USvsHate were particularly thought-provoking. Alongside many powerful statements of equal human value and incisive commentaries on particular forms of hate, we also saw fairly banal calls for “kindness” and being “equal” (Pollock and Yoshisato, 2022). Yet, such calls initiated voices for inclusion that otherwise might be silenced altogether. And in today’s bitterly divided society, it seems all such calls are needed (Pollock *et al.*, 2022). We continue to explore the power of even such baseline amplified student voice to *begin to change* minds, or initially deepen critical thinking, on key social issues.

In acknowledging further that just inviting *more* youth voice is not always inherently beneficial, we have stayed attuned to other project limitations. For example, we have considered whether the project’s call for messaging might distract attention from other forms of youth voice and social action emphasized by scholars (e.g. speaking to public audiences about concrete projects improving society or schools) as if making a public poster or video is “enough.” Indeed, teachers sometimes indicated that #USvsHate messaging was the *only* student voice they envisioned inviting to respond to social problems. As one winning teacher whose students made incisive public messaging about national border policy noted:

It’s not like the school itself is leading some kind of political action, nor are the students at a point where they are organized enough to do something, and this is why I like #USvsHate. I can do a lot in my classroom in terms of picking the right materials and getting [students] talking. I have a really hard time thinking about “What do we do next?” and how to lead students towards taking concrete actions out in the world.

Critics might thus understandably question whether such school-based messaging activities are transformative. Still, [Seider and Graves \(2020\)](#) note that the school community represents a meaningful social world to young people; successful activism in this social world “serves as evidence for youth that larger political systems can be influenced by their activist efforts as well” (179).

Even so, we often ask ourselves how much #USvsHate’s version of amplified youth voice matters in transforming both schools and society. Research makes clear that the most transformative pedagogies occur over time in classrooms ([Sleeter and Zavala, 2020](#)), and that student social action can extend far beyond school-based imagery and dialogue ([Cammarota and Fine, 2008](#)). Still, participant narratives about the importance of public messaging have kept us considering such messaging as a *next step* that can begin to engage youth in envisioning and shaping a more just and inclusive society, school and classroom.

We also stress that not all voices calling for inclusion were successfully amplified in #USvsHate. We discuss elsewhere ([Pollock et al., forthcoming](#)) two cases where specific messages angering hostile parents were taken down by anxious administrators in two communities (one message called for LGBTQ inclusion and another insisted on human rights for immigrants). We, thus, emphasize the motivating force of publicly and collectively inviting and amplifying student voices on improving our society, rather than suggesting that in all local cases, calls for more just treatment of others *were* successfully amplified. And again, in considering such examples, we wrestle with a basic ethical understanding: doing nothing to try to speak in such climates would itself reinforce denigrating sentiments.

As efforts to restrict educators’ ability to teach for inclusion at all rage nationally ([Pollock et al., 2022](#)), finally, we remain attuned to how our increasingly polarized national context makes amplifying student voices on improving society both increasingly essential and, potentially dangerous. From #USvsHate’s beginnings, we have chosen to mask students’ full names and schools for student safety. The fact that students are motivated to lift their voices even if they are not personally celebrated as “findable” winners perhaps strengthens presented evidence on powerful invitations beyond the competition.

We add that today, school mechanisms for inviting students to discuss more just and compassionate treatment of others are particularly under fire – and increasingly crucial. Critics today are arguing that projustice and proinclusion conversations should be restricted and “banned” from schools, lest some students experience unwelcome “discomfort” in them ([Pollock et al., 2022](#)). We instead note positive emotions expressed above by both message-makers and student audiences: excitement, inspiration and validation as student voices demanded that all be valued.

Throughout our data, then, both student and educator participants commented on the next step offered by #USvsHate’s basic invitation to lift “anti-hate” student voice so that other youth can hear it. As we found in this paper’s analysis, our respondents called #USvsHate a next step prompting initial discussion and public visions for a more inclusive society. We emphasize that often, educators do not invite any such collective efforts to directly combat “isms” in schools. Indeed, since students’ rights to speak on contested issues of inclusion and inequity are more protected in US schools than teachers’, this work has implications for *enabling* educators’ teaching about hate, bias and injustice in contested classrooms today, by motivating students to speak up themselves.

1. In sharing our findings, we name participants' location only when doing so can fully protect their anonymity. We urge readers to explore [usvsbate.org](http://usvsbate.org) to understand the broad range of anti-hate messages produced in the project.
2. During the study period, only one negative teaching experience was raised during a youth focus group: a substitute teacher misgendered a transgender student "really loudly in front of the entire class" during an #USvsHate activity. Nonetheless, when asked about the potential for harm during #USvsHate lessons, the student reasoned that "I feel like that could've happened even without the project happening."

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**Figure A1.**  
High school student

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**Figure A2.**  
High school student

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JME

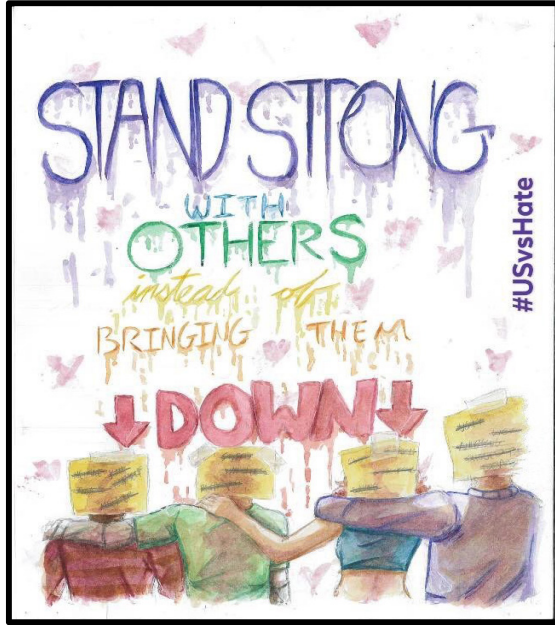


Figure A3.  
High school student

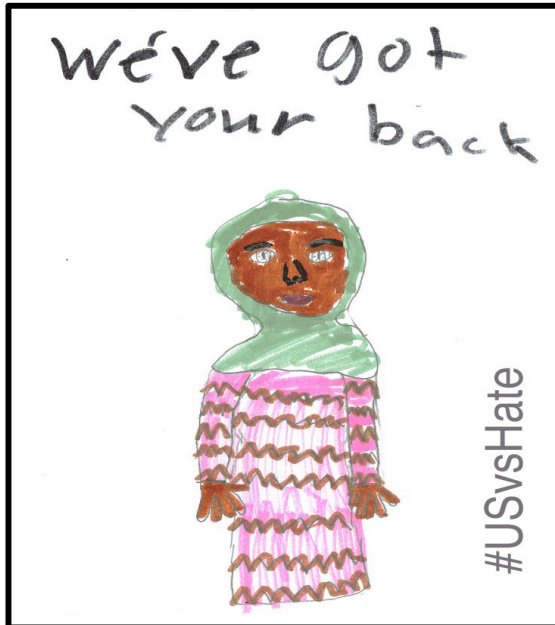


Figure A4.  
Elementary student

Public  
anti-hate  
messaging



Figure A5.  
High school student

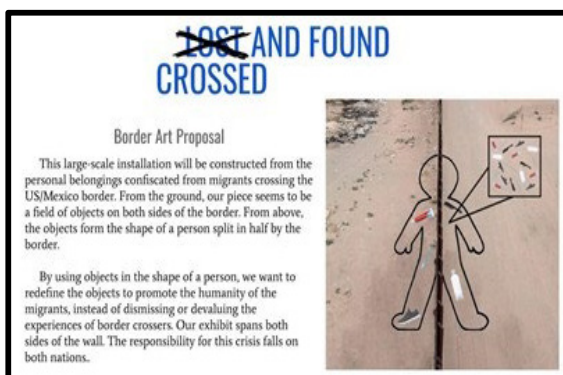


Figure A6.  
High school student



Figure A7.  
Elementary students



**Figure A8.**  
Elementary students

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