Democracy & Education

Agreement and Disagreement in Teachers' Talk

Facilitative Design of Deliberation in Norwegian Initial Education

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Abstract

This article investigates the roles of the terms *agreement* and *disagreement* in teachers' talk in Norwegian Grades 1–4 classrooms. Through an exploration of what teachers said and did when they used these terms, five different themes were identified in the teachers' talk. The teachers tended to use the terms in relation to the process of discussion, the outcome of these discussions, and nuancing the idea of the nature of this outcome; as a function in conversation; and how agreement and disagreement are valuable in different ways. The key finding across these themes and patterns was that the lessons tended to be oriented toward consensus. This is problematized in relation to exploration and elaboration of perspectives, which is crucial for deliberation.

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Introduction

Processes of deliberation are often understood as crucial for the functioning of democratic society and as educationally fruitful spaces for democratic experiences in classrooms, as the ability to listen to and weigh different viewpoints to reach informed decisions about what to do is "at the heart of democratic decision-making" (Journell, 2023, p. 2). The role of consensus in classroom deliberation, however, has been debated. On the one hand, proponents of deliberative democratic theory uphold the ideal of seeking consensus. Samuelsson (2016, 2018), building on the premise that students must learn the skills and values necessary to participate in deliberation, argued that consensus "becomes an integral part of both the educational practice and the educational aim" (2018, p. 1). This is because the desire to reach an agreement facilitates students' experiences of being "part of a collective-will formation process" (2016, p. 3). On the other hand, agonistic-democratic scholars problematize the way the deliberative framework denies the "constitutive nature of disagreement" (Ruitenberg, 2010b, p. 372), arguing that a focus on reaching consensus tends to curtail conflicts and exclude certain perspectives (e.g., Lo, 2017; Tryggvason, 2018). As such, it is often argued that making space for disagreement is a more fitting educational aim.

While educational researchers and philosophers have their perspectives on agreement and disagreement, it is another matter how teachers talk about and use these terms while facilitating deliberation in classrooms. This is important, as language use and meaning are often assumed to be intimately connected (see, e.g., Wittgenstein, 1953). How students understand agreement and disagreement in relation to deliberation might therefore be assumed to be influenced by how related terms are used in

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classroom discourse and what role they play in relation to classroom deliberation. Classroom deliberation has received attention in the literature; although, as Nishiyama et al. (2023) pointed out, little is known about the role of facilitators. The younger the students, the more important facilitation becomes because "vulnerable participants . . . may need a more involved approach to encourage them to speak up and participate equally" (2023, p. 3). Additionally, young children should not be assumed to be familiar with the phases and moves of deliberative argumentation (Lind et al., 2023).

As such, the aim of this article is to explore what teachers say and do when they invoke terms of agreement and disagreement in Norwegian initial education (Grades 1–4). This might support a greater understanding of the connections between these terms as they are used in the classroom and notions about their role in deliberation and facilitation of such processes. This is important, as research has demonstrated that exploration and elaboration of perspectives are important in an initial education context (Abendschön, 2017; Dias & Menezes, 2014; Hauver et al., 2017; van Deth et al., 2011), but that the disagreement this potentially leads to presents both specific challenges (Beck, 2003) as well as opportunities (Tväråna, 2018). To this end, I explore a specific aspect of facilitative design—namely, how teachers design classroom discourse.

The first section explores the role of consensus and disagreement in citizenship education and the role of facilitation when it comes to creating space for deliberation. In the second section, I present the research design, discussing how I selected sequences for closer analysis and applied the procedures of summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) in my search for patterns across the dataset. In the third section, the findings are presented according to five themes. In the fourth section, I discuss these findings in relation to citizenship education—specifically the importance of exploring and elaborating perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The Ideal of Consensus in Deliberation

While consensus can play various roles and perform different functions in democratic theory (Ottonelli, 2019), it is often debated and applied in relation to citizenship education as an ideal outcome for deliberation. As an ideal outcome, it rests upon a presupposition of some kind of inherent human rationality that flourishes under ideal conditions, sometimes conceptualized as the unfolding of communicative rationality in an ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1996) or the acceptance of the burdens of judgment in an environment of reasonable pluralism (Rawls, 1993). In relation to citizenship education, consensus as an ideal outcome implies that classroom deliberations should aim for agreement on the problems under discussion.

This position has been criticized from at least two perspectives: that too much is expected of the deliberating agents or their nature is misconstrued (see, e.g., Rienstra & Hook, 2006) and that the realization of the outlined ideal conditions is unrealistic (see, e.g., Devenney, 2009). Following political philosophers such as Mouffe (2000), Young (2002), and Ranciére (2004), several authors have argued that the ideal of consensus is therefore untenable or educationally undesirable. Backer (2017) problematized how processes of consensus-building are couched in metanarratives that guide what is legitimate and sensible to say during discussions. He therefore upheld "questioning for its own sake, tension, and *aporia* rather than consensus, compromise, or decision-making" (2017, p. 5) so that these metanarratives could be disturbed and possibly disrupted if necessary, instead of being uncritically perpetuated. In response to similar issues, Lo (2017) argued that deliberation focused on consensus can disempower marginalized students and that consensus-seeking "may circumvent the very power structures that students should confront or challenge" (p. 5). Therefore, she concluded that agonism should be introduced into deliberation by giving students opportunities to engage with difference and conflict and guiding them into conversations characterized by negotiation and transformation.

These positions align with Ruitenberg's (2009, 2010a) proposals for radical democratic citizenship education, which emphasize educating political adversaries with the capacity for disagreement rather than fostering students' capacity for political and moral reasoning. This entails recognizing that "disagreement is a passionate affair" (Ruitenberg, 2010a, p. 42) and, accordingly, that the orientation toward disagreement must be facilitated by a prioritization of passion, affect, and imagination (Backer, 2019, p. 127). Indeed, Sætra (2021) demonstrated the important role of emotions in starting and sustaining discussions, since it matters whether students care about an issue or not.

Learning to handle difference and disagreement is an aim of the Norwegian curriculum. The core curriculum states that all "participants in the school environment must . . . ensure that there is room for collaboration, dialogue and disagreement" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 10) and that students must "learn to deal with conflicts of opinion and respect disagreement" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 16).

Nevertheless, there are indications that the quality of argumentation improves when the goal is to reach consensus (Felton et al., 2009; Garcia-Mila et al., 2013; Mercer, 2000). This is typically explained by an observed correlation between consensus-seeking and patterns of argumentation that support the exploration and elaboration of perspectives. Backer (2019) pointed out the agonists' discussion problem—namely, that while their philosophy might be different, their pedagogical recommendations are not necessarily different from the deliberators. Harell (2020), for instance, reminded us how disagreements are "simultaneously a condition for and challenge to democratic deliberation" (p. 1), as they are crucial for the educational value of classroom deliberation. Accordingly, both sides agree that the exploration and elaboration of differing perspectives during discussions is a good thing. Ambrosio (2019) therefore upheld consensus as a productive goal since not trying to reach or not even hoping for consensus defeats the purpose of understanding one's adversaries in the first place. While not eliminating our motivation to explore the nature of our disagreements, the lack of such a purpose certainly diminishes it.

In response to these debates, there have been attempts to nuance the notion of consensus. To show how pluralism and consensus can be reconciled, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2006) outlined different types of consensus. Accordingly, there can be a preference consensus (agreement on what should be done), an epistemic consensus (agreement on the impact of actions), or a normative consensus (agreement on the values that should predominate). They further argued that these have meta-counterparts. For instance, one might recognize the legitimacy of the values under dispute, accept the credibility of beliefs regarding impact, and agree on the nature of the disputed preferences—even though one does not agree on what to do. There need not be agreement regarding all these dimensions of consensus for discussion to have moved us forward, and agreement on their meta-counterparts is sometimes sufficient. Following this cue, the ideal of consensus has figured differently in citizenship education, either as a regulative aim (Samuelsson, 2018) worthy of striving for, even though it might not be reached, or as a meta-consensus (Nishiyama, 2019), where the focus is not on reaching a universal consensus but rather on achieving a consensus on the degree to which participants can accept each other's perspectives.

Facilitation and Classroom Discourse

Nishiyama et al. (2023) acknowledged issues related to consensus-seeking and therefore argued that the quality of deliberation in many cases must be underpinned by the role of facilitators, which does not "compensate for, but supports and enables, citizens' deliberative competencies" (p. 10). A facilitator helps groups improve the deliberative process and supports the participants in their deliberations. In classrooms, this task typically falls to the teacher.

Nishiyama et al. (2023) argued that facilitation involves two facets that can compensate for weaknesses in each other. First, facilitation as *technique*. This refers to the actions of the facilitator during deliberation, such as the modeling of norms and the different ways in which these norms are actively encouraged and supported, as well as judging when and how to intervene based on observation and assessment of the dynamics in the group and between individuals. Second, facilitation as *design*. Nishiyama et al. (2023) referred to this as the development of structured activities, tools, and processes that support deliberation by providing "discursive scaffolding and structure to the task at hand" (p. 9). As such, they argued that facilitative design can include things such as a set of questions, ways of structuring and mixing groups, and sets of guidelines or ground rules. Facilitative design is especially important in the classroom as it supports peer talk when the teacher is not present. Facilitative design could also be argued to include dialogue goals, which connects to the question of why one should argue in the first place (Schwarz & Baker, 2017, p. 78). Walton (1989) distinguished different types of dialogue according to their goals, arguing that they typically differ regarding the types of dialogue moves that are made. Schwarz and Baker (2017) therefore argued that one way of eliciting argumentation between students in the classroom is to give them instructions about what kind of dialogue they are expected to engage in before starting a discussion.

Accordingly, given the role of consensus as an outcome—or dialogue goal—of deliberation, it matters how the related terms of *agreement* and *disagreement* are used and discussed by teachers during classroom talk. The teacher's use of the terms fills them with content—for example, by answering the following questions: What does it mean to agree or disagree? Why is agreement or disagreement important or valuable? How do we reach an agreement? What should we do if we disagree? The answers to these questions are especially significant in relation to young children since it can be assumed that they do not have much experience with these kinds of terms and the dialogue processes that they are related to. In addition, there is also some evidence indicating that the way in which terms of agreement and disagreement are employed in the classroom by the teacher makes a difference. For instance, Dahl (2022) demonstrated that teachers encouraging disagreement tend to have a positive impact on the students' development of self-efficacy for disagreement, while Lind et al. (2023) showed that a focus on agreement in classroom deliberations can sometimes lead to a rush for consensus resulting in patterns of peer talk that undermine the exploration and elaboration of different perspectives.

Methods

This study reused data from a design-based (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012) research project on critical thinking in Norwegian primary education[1] aimed at developing educational models for critical thinking. The project was carried out at two primary schools in an urban area in Norway and consisted of three cycles in which teachers and researchers worked together to develop lessons to promote critical thinking. We generated video data from two cameras, one focusing on the whole class and synced with a microphone on the teacher and the other focusing on a group of students and synced with a tape recorder on their table. Both cameras were kept stationary during the recording.

The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, and we followed the ethical standards of the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees (2022). Accordingly, the participants signed a consent form informing them about the project and stating that it was possible to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, all participants were anonymized.

This study builds on video data from all three cycles of the research project, reused for the purposes of this article. As such, this study is based on data from the lessons of seven different teachers of students aged 5–10 years in Norwegian first to fourth grades and teaching Norwegian, English, social science, or science. The data corpus consisted of video data from 18 lessons transcribed in full using NVivo 12. While the goal of the lessons was to develop the students' critical thinking skills, I reused the data to investigate how the teachers used the words *agreement* and *disagreement*. In the search for patterns across the dataset, I applied the procedures

1 For more information on the project, see: https://www.oslomet.no/en/research/research-projects/critical-thinking-primary-education.

of summative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), to understand the contextual use of these words.

Data Reduction

A summative content analysis begins with the identification and quantification of certain words or content in a text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). As such, the first step in the data reduction was to search for the words *agree/agreement* and *disagree/disagreement* across the data corpus, excluding lessons where no form of these words was used. This left me with 13 lessons, each lasting between 60 and 120 minutes. In total, this amounted to roughly 18 hours 10 minutes. The lessons were generally a mix of whole class conversations and collaborative peer talk where the teacher moved between groups to offer guidance.

The second step was to identify relevant sequences within these lessons for closer analysis. The criterion was that the word *agreement* or *disagreement* was used and that it was uttered by the teacher. Thus, the sequences typically started with the teacher using these words during classroom talk, task instructions, or guidance of group work. There were some exceptions to this. These were the cases when the teachers' use of the words referred to something a student had said in an earlier turn. In these cases, I also included what the student said as part of the selected sequence. The sequences ended when the topic changed, typically by the teacher introducing another question or issue, asking the students to begin the assigned task(s), or moving on to another group. Following this second step, I was left with 58 minutes of video data. The length of the sequences varied from 8 seconds to 4 minutes 17 seconds, with an average length of 46 seconds. See Table 1 for an overview of the data-reduction process.

Table 1. Overview of the Data Reduction[2]

	Data Corpus	First Step	Second Step
First Grade	5 lessons (420 mins)	5 lessons (420 mins)	41 sequences (34 mins)
Second Grade	2 lessons (150 mins)	1 lesson (60 mins)	5 sequences (3 mins)
Third Grade	5 lessons (390 mins)	2 lessons (270 mins)	15 sequences (11 mins)
Fourth Grade	6 lessons (400 mins)	5 lessons (340 mins)	15 sequences (10 mins)
Total	18 lessons (1360 mins)	13 lessons (1090 mins)	75 sequences (58 mins)

Summative Content Analysis

A summative content analysis goes beyond the counting of words to the latent level (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I aimed to examine the underlying meanings and usage of *agreement* and *disagreement* in teachers' talk by investigating what they said and did when these words were used.

Findings from such an approach are limited by its focus on some aspects and some sequences of the situation under investigation, leaving others unaccounted for. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) suggested demonstrating credibility by showing that "the textual evidence is consistent with the interpretation" (p. 1285). I approached this limitation by accounting for more evidence to support my interpretations, by taking a multimodal approach to communication. This entails seeing communication as occurring in and through more than one modality, systematically including nonverbal elements of communication during analysis (Norris, 2019). Teaching has indeed been described as a multimodal orchestration (Bourne & Jewitt, 2003), making an embodied view of communication important when researching teaching.

This made transcription an important phase of the analysis, as the choice of which modes of communication to transcribe, and how, makes a big difference. Multimodal transcription brings certain modalities of an event into focus in certain ways and omits others. The modality I focused on in addition to the verbal was the teachers' actions—more precisely, the teachers' gestures, movements, pointing, gaze, pauses, emphases, elongations, and use of different material resources. The function of the nonverbal modalities in my analysis was to support or challenge my interpretations and to note where the modalities seemingly contradicted each other, discussing why that might have been so.

Accordingly, I performed a multimodal transcription[3] of the lessons, at the same time familiarizing myself with the data and noting ideas, which helped formulate several tentative codes. I proceeded by coding the material using these initial codes as starting points, iteratively refining them. Following this, I ended up with 17 codes collated into six potential themes. During this first round of coding, I also kept an open code for the sequences that I was unsure of how to categorize to avoid straightjacketing them into ill-fitting codes.

Following this, I conducted a second round of coding, further refining the codes and patterns. This was done on the level of both the coded extracts (going through all the excerpts collated into each code, one by one) and the entire dataset (going through the whole dataset once more). As a result, several codes were collapsed into each other, and some were added. Finally, I ended up with 13 codes collated into five themes. The codes were not mutually exclusive since one instance of the words could often be taken to imply different meanings at the same time—for example, where the talk of the outcome was typically intertwined with talk of the nature of the process. See Table 2 for an overview and description of the codes.

Results

Overview

There were some general tendencies worth noting. First, the words were used significantly more in first grade than in the higher

2 Numbers are rounded to nearest minute. The number of sequences does not correspond to the number of times the words *agree* and *disagree* were used, as the words were sometimes used several times during each sequence.

3 See the appendix for the transcription notation.

Table 2. Overview of Patterns (codes) and Themes

The Process	
As a collective process	The teacher emphasizes agreement as something a group reaches together; a social process where the whole group must interact in some way.
As an individual process	The teacher emphasizes agreement as an internal, mental process (e.g., as the result of individual deliberation).
As a challenging process	The teacher talks about the process of reaching consensus as challenging.
The Outcome	
Agreement as the goal	The teacher emphasizes agreement as the goal, orienting the task toward consensus.
Disagreement as acceptable	The teacher describes or concedes disagreement as an acceptable outcome when and if agreement proves too difficult.
The Object (of Agreement and Disagreement)	
What	The teacher emphasizes the product of deliberation—that is, what the students have decided upon.
Why	The teacher emphasizes the reasoning for decisions (e.g., "Why did you choose this over that?").
How	The teacher emphasizes the process of deciding and how to reach consensus.
As Function	
Elicitation	The teacher elicits elaboration and/or exploration of perspectives by invoking the term "agreement" or "disagreement" (e.g., "Do you agree with this?").
Review	The teacher uses agreement in review of what has happened during the lesson (e.g., "Is everyone in agreement?").
Recognition	The teacher uses agreement in recognition of contributions (e.g., "I agree with that").
Valuation	
Agreement as valuable	The teacher explicitly portrays agreement as something valuable for its own sake.
Disagreement as valuable	The teacher explicitly portrays disagreement as valuable for its own sake.

grades, with the occurrences in first grade accounting for 104 out of 160 of the total occurrences. Second, the number of occurrences differed greatly. *Agree* appeared 142 times in the dataset, while *disagree* appeared only 18 times. Accordingly, *disagree* did not appear in all the identified patterns.

The Process

The teachers tended to talk about agreement and disagreement in relation to the process of reaching an answer to the task at hand. The first pattern I present in relation to this theme is how the teachers tended to talk about agreement as a collective process, as something that a group reaches together, hinting that the process of reaching an answer is not finished before everyone in the group agrees. See Table 3 for a sequence from a first-grade lesson illustrating this pattern.

Table 3. Consensus as a Collective Process

1	**Teacher**	a:re you guys ready?	Teacher approach group
2	**Students**	yes	Children responding in choir
3	**Teacher**	the who:le group is ready?	Teacher gestures a circle
4		(.) <u>are</u> you ready to tell how	over the table
5		you are feeling now?	
6	**Jacob**	yes	
7	**Teacher**	yes (..) then we will move	Teacher moves a partition
8		this a bit (.) are you ready	so that the class can see
9		Eva?	the group
10	**Eva**	no I don't know	
11	**Teacher**	should you spend some	Teacher moves back to the
12		more time talking about it?	group
13	**Sofia**	we ha:ve talked about it	
14	**Teacher**	yes, but <u>not</u> if Eva does not	Teacher gestures toward
15		know (.) in that case you	Eva
16		have not talked about it (.)	
17		so then you must talk a <u>bit</u>	
18		more	

It should be noted that the word *agree* (or a variation) does not appear here, but since the students were explicitly asked to agree when the task was introduced, it is implied when the teacher asks if they are ready. In the excerpt, we see students claiming that their group has collectively reached an answer and that they are therefore finished with the task. When the teacher interrogates this claim, however, it becomes apparent that one of the students is not in agreement, prompting the teacher to ask them to continue talking. In this pattern, the teachers often emphasized the collective sense of reaching an agreement multimodally by gesturing a circle above the group table when explaining that the whole group is to agree. We see an example of this in the excerpt above, with the teacher also elongating the word *whole,* emphasizing the collective. The collective essence of reaching an answer is also commonly emphasized with the plural sense of *you.*

One of the teachers also talked about agreement as an individual process—something you become with yourself. This was typically talked about as a preparation for "real" consensus—the collective kind—in the sense that the students were asked to first think for themselves and decide upon their answer before reaching a collective decision in groups. This hints at deliberation not only as a process that happens within a group

but also as a mental process, where the individual weighs reasons to arrive at a decision.

The process of collectively reaching an agreement was talked about by the teachers as something potentially challenging or difficult to achieve. Several reasons were mentioned by the teachers. See Table 4 for an excerpt from a third-grade lesson, where the teacher mentions prioritization as a challenge, considering the number of possible perspectives that might emerge in a group context.

Table 4. Consensus as Challenging

1	**Teacher**	we kno:w how difficult it	Teacher emphasizes the beat
2		can be to agree: when one	of the syllables, nodding
3		must prioritize (.) okay? (.)	along
4		what will be a bit fun now	
5		(..) that is for me to go:	
6		around to the different	
7		groups (.) and see (.) how	
8		you have been thinking (.)	
9		and whe:re it often takes	
10		the longest time is where	
11		there are a lot of opinions	
12		(..) right?	

We see the teacher multimodally reinforcing the challenging nature of reaching an agreement, giving it extra emphasis by nodding along to the syllables of the words and elongating some key words. Other teachers mentioned that reaching consensus can be difficult when there are feelings involved or if the problem takes the form of a dilemma. When it comes to disagreement, one teacher talked about how disagreeing can be difficult and that one sometimes needs to be brave to voice dissent. While not all the teachers explicitly described consensus as challenging, several emphasized that something must actively be done to achieve it. Reaching a collective agreement does not happen by itself, and it requires practice. What needed to be done differed in the teachers' accounts but tended to revolve around the exploration and elaboration of perspectives.

The Outcome

The second theme identified was related to the outcome. Indeed, the most common finding in the lessons was that the goal of the discussions was to reach agreement. This pattern emerged in two related ways. First, the teachers explicitly asked the students to agree when they presented the tasks. The excerpt in Table 5, from a first-grade lesson in which the class has read a picture book about a sheep and a turkey and are to discuss how these two characters feel after the event, illustrates this pattern.

Table 5. Agreement as the Goal

1	**Teacher**	now you must loo:k at (.)	
2		each other's (.) and then you	
3		must eh tell why you have	
4		chosen what you chose to	Teacher gestures toward the
5		each other at the table (.)	individual task sheets,
6		and then you must try to	gestures a circle above the
7		agree about o:ne (.) o:ne	table, moves toward the
8		new one that the who:le	center of the classroom
9		group agree on (. . .)	
10		Sebastian (.) now the who:le	
11		table that are sheep (.) agree	
12		on o:ne that you can talk (.)	
13		about in common as I will	
14		intervie:w you later (.) and	
15		you must agree: about (.)	Teacher holds up new task
16		o:ne such (.) regarding how	sheet, showing it to each
17		the turkey feels now you	group
18		must tell each other wha:t	
19		you think	

Prior to this excerpt, the students worked individually. They are now to present their individual answers to their group and then discuss and agree on one answer. This is stressed through emphasis and repetition. As in the pattern related to the collective nature of consensus, the teacher gestures a circle around the table, signaling both a joint process and a joint outcome. This kind of multimodal reinforcement was also common when the teachers asked the students to agree. In another lesson, the same teacher repeatedly said that cooperating means reaching an agreement, leaving little doubt as to what successful cooperation entailed.

Furthermore, the orientation toward consensus was identified during evaluations of group work. Typically, the teachers went around evaluating the group work, checking whether they were finished by asking a variant of the question "Do all of you agree?" While doing this, the teachers tended to remain standing, not bending down to the height of the students. This can be interpreted as implying readiness to move on to the next group and showing little patience to wait and listen to different perspectives.

This does not mean all lessons could be classified as consensus oriented. In one lesson, for instance, the teacher explicitly widened the possible outcome by allowing more than one answer from the group. Generally, however, the explicitly expected outcome of the lessons was that the groups would agree on one answer. But the instructions on how to do this were often lacking.

The process of reaching agreement tended to be explained vaguely in terms related to the exploration and elaboration of perspectives, but the specifics of how such explorations and elaborations were to be enacted in the group discussions were largely left to the students.

Sometimes, reaching an agreement was not possible. When this was the case, the teachers tended to retreat on their earlier stated goal of consensus and construe disagreement as an acceptable outcome. Consider the example in Table 6, taken from a first-grade classroom.

Table 6. Disagreement as Acceptable

1	**Teacher**	let's see (.) then (.) no some	Teacher moves toward the
2		groups they must practice a	center of the classroom
3		agree:ing and I will say o:ne	
4		thing (..) and that is wait for	Teacher shushes, moves
5		a bit Ella you can continue	toward the blackboard
6		soon (.) if you are not able	
7		to agree (.) it is okay if you	
8		glue: one that not everyone	
9		agrees on Leo (.) but the:n	
10		you must tell why you think	
11		it should be there	

We see the teacher commenting that some of the groups struggled to reach an agreement. The teacher accepts this but emphasizes that in these cases, the students must at least give reasons for their differing opinions. This criterion was typical. One of the teachers additionally brings this theme to the societal level, saying that it is okay to disagree about things in society.

The Object of Agreement (and Disagreement)

The third theme demonstrates how consensus orientation was typically expressed in relation to different objects of agreement—that is, what the students were asked to agree about. As such, this theme nuances the identified consensus orientation. Three different objects of agreement were identified: agreement on what, why, and, to a significantly lesser degree in this dataset, how.

There were differences between the phases of the lessons. In the phase where the teachers presented the task and explained what was to be done, agreement on why was more common, in the sense that the teachers tended to ask the students to listen to each other's reasonings and agree on one answer based on what they thought was the best reason. During the evaluations, however, the teachers tended to focus on what the group had decided upon rather than their reasons for choosing this or that. The question of why tended to enter first, when what had already been decided upon or when the process of deliberation seemed to be going well. Similarly, when the teachers listened to the groups' answers in whole-class conversations after the discussions had finished, there was mainly a focus on what the groups agreed on, while the reasons for their choice were seldom discussed. Consider the example in Table 7, from a whole-class conversation in a second-grade classroom after the groups had finished discussing.

Table 7. Agreement on What

1	**Teacher**	what does he do what do	Teacher standing next to
2		you think he is doing?	group table
3		(..)	
4	**Samuel**	he is trying to stop the	Teacher nods, moves to next
5		family	student
6	**Teacher**	what do you think he is	
7		going to do next?	
8	**Gabriel**	I was thinking I would think	
9		also to stop the family	
10	**Maria**	stop the family	Teacher moves to next
11	**Teacher**	you are very much agreed	student, walking around the
12		on this mhm	table
13	**Maria**	to stop the family	
14	**Teacher**	okay let's hear what	
15		happens next	

When it comes to the how, its relative absence is what is most interesting. As mentioned, the teachers tended to give vague or no instructions on how to explore and elaborate perspectives, leaving this to the students. Accordingly, the students tended to use a variety of strategies. Even though some of these could be argued not to support the processes of exploration and elaboration, the teachers tended to accept them. This can be taken to imply that the goal of reaching a consensus was seen as more important than how it was achieved.

Interestingly, disagreement was seldom talked about with a similar level of nuance. There was seemingly little interest from the teacher when it came to what exactly the source of the disagreement was—that is, whether the group disagreed about what, why, and how.

As Function

The words *agreement* and *disagreement* sometimes performed specific functions in a conversation, in the sense that the usage of the words performed a role or filled a purpose. In this theme, the words were typically used by teachers to bring the lesson, argument, or conversation further.

The most common function of the word *agreement* was as a prompt for eliciting alternative perspectives. This pattern typically occurred when a student or a group had elaborated on one

perspective during evaluations, followed by the teacher asking some variant of the question "Does everyone agree with this perspective?" Consider the example in Table 8, from a second-grade classroom.

Table 8. Agreement/Disagreement as Elicitation

1	**Teacher**	are you in agree:ment here	Teacher moves gaze to
2		or? (..) are you completely	group, moves gaze between
3		agree:d the whole group?	individual students, points
4		(..) did you choose one?	to one of the boys' task sheets,
5	**Benjamin**	eeh	sits down next to him

Here, we see the teacher checking for perspectives in the group by first asking the whole group if the case is that they agree or whether there are alternative perspectives in the group. It is notable how the teacher's gaze moves around the table, prompting each individual student to voice their perspective. Eventually, the teacher focuses on Benjamin, sitting down to explore his perspective. In this example, we see the teacher taking the time to explore alternative perspectives. In other examples of this pattern, however, there were some multimodal indications for varying patience in this regard, such as the relatively brief amount of time the teachers allowed for students' reactions to prompts of elicitation before they moved on. Notably, there was only a single case in which one of the teachers explicitly asked, "Does anyone disagree?"

Agreement was also used in situations of review. Sometimes, this pattern emerged as a checkpoint to move on. That is, if the students accepted the suggested consensus or if everyone asserted the same thing, the lesson could move on. The example presented in Table 7 illustrates this pattern. Here, the teacher has been exploring perspectives in the classroom regarding what might happen next in the story they are currently reading together. We see the teacher commenting that the students agree with each other, in the sense that they give the same answers to what might happen next, prompting the teacher to conclude that they can move on in the story. At other times, the pattern emerged in the context of reviewing what a class or group had agreed upon earlier. The earlier agreement was then typically contrasted with a new perspective or information that emerged during the lesson, which would then need to be explored and elaborated, potentially making it necessary to modify the earlier agreement.

In the third pattern of this theme, *agreement* is used in recognition of contributions. This pattern emerges in two ways. First, as a simple recognition of something as a good answer, where the teacher states a variant of "I agree with you" and moves on. Second, as a recognition of partial agreement with a students' perspective, where the student elaborates on a perspective that the teacher recognizes as a good answer but wants to develop further. Consider the example in Table 9, from a whole-class conversation in a third-grade classroom, where the teacher is exploring the perspectives in the classroom.

Table 9. Agreement as Recognition

1	**Teacher**	you need something to drink	
2		(.) but then I ask you (.) do	
3		we have to drink from	
4		plastic bottles to be able to	
5		drink? because I totally	
6		agree that water to drink is	
7		really important but does it	
8		have to be in a plastic	
9		bottle?	
10	**Students**	no	Children responding in choir
11	**Oliver**	I tried to tell them the same	
12		thing but I was not able to	
13		explain it	
14	**Teacher**	no but I agree that to drink	
15		and especially water is	
16		really important	

Here, we see the teacher recognizing the students' contributions by indicating partial agreement. As was typical in this pattern, the teacher's recognition is followed by "but" to bring in nuances or to help the student better formulate their answer. Notably, the teachers never said anything akin to "I disagree with you" in the dataset.

Valuation

Perhaps paradoxically, given the tendency for the classroom discourse to be oriented toward consensus, between the two terms investigated here, only disagreement was explicitly valued during teachers' talk. Consider the example in Table 10, from a whole-class conversation in a first-grade classroom, where the teacher is exploring the answers that the groups have agreed on.

Table 10. Disagreement as Valuable

1	**Teacher**	you have not reached an	
2		agreement that is interesting	
3		let me hear that is good	
4		(.) I think it is really good	Teacher nods approvingly
5		that there are some that	
6		do not agree	

Here, we see the teacher commenting on disagreement in one of the groups regarding which answer to choose by stating that it is

"really good" that some groups disagree. As in the pattern generally, however, it is not made clear why disagreements are valuable. When it is made clear, it is argued that one can learn from difference—for example, that encountering different perspectives is "interesting" or that they make one think.

While it might be argued that agreement is indirectly valued by the fact that it is often the stated goal of the group discussions, it was never explicitly valued by the teachers. One case deviated from this general picture, in a situation where the teacher was commenting on a students' contribution. While the valuation of agreement was not explicit, agreement was given a certain pragmatic value as it was formulated as a premise for acting.

Discussion

These findings reveal nuances in teachers' use of the terms *agreement* and *disagreement* and notions about their role in classroom deliberation. Particularly noteworthy was the teachers' tendency to orient the tasks toward consensus, typically in the sense that the groups were to collectively agree on answers. This was indicated by how the term *disagreement* seldom occurred in the dataset, but more interestingly, it was evident in the identified patterns and themes. This was indicated by how agreement was typically presented as the expected outcome of the discussions, with disagreement only entering as an acceptable outcome when agreement proved too difficult to reach. The consensus orientation was also indicated by the way agreement was given certain functions in the teachers' talk. First, in the sense that its role during review of perspectives in the classroom indicated agreement as the point where the lesson could proceed. Second, in the sense that its role in recognizing students' contributions made the teachers' agreement become something worth striving for. Notably, disagreement was never given similar functions in the teachers' talk. Accordingly, expressing disagreement may have become more difficult for the students than it could have been, since dissenting would entail complicating and potentially delaying the stated goal of the lessons. If that is the case, it might be argued that a consensus-oriented classroom discourse might not present the most fruitful educational context for exploring and elaborating perspectives. The teachers did try to elicit perspectives, but notably, they tended to do so by asking whether everyone agreed rather than asking if anyone disagreed. One possible consequence of the consensus orientation therefore seems to be that disagreement and difference are not given optimal chances to emerge in the classroom discourse. Considered from both the deliberative and the agonistic perspective, this is not beneficial for citizenship education. Both traditions agree that the exploration and elaboration of differing perspectives is a necessary condition for deliberation.

Paradoxically, considering all this, the teachers tended to explicitly value disagreement, while agreement was not talked about in a similar manner. Of course, this does not necessarily imply a value-action gap, as it could simply be that institutional pressures, such as time restraints, put limitations on what the teachers felt they could do. Indeed, one of the obstacles to enacting classroom deliberation identified by Tammi (2013) was the considerable time consumption.

All of this is not meant to imply that the goal of consensus is unimportant or unfruitful in educational processes aimed at facilitating deliberation. Even democratic discussions must have some sort of closure, because society needs some degree of stability and sedimentation (Tryggvason, 2019). Previous research has indicated that consensus-seeking is often correlated with higher-quality argumentation in the classroom (Felton et al., 2009; Felton et al., 2015; Garcia-Mila et al., 2013; Mercer, 2000; Rapanta & Christodoulou, 2022), and consensus-seeking is also often seen as a crucial feature of deliberation in classrooms (Englund, 2006). Additionally, focusing on eliciting difference and disagreement introduces other challenges, as expanding "the range of perspectives often involves conflict" (Camicia, 2020, p. 1). This is especially true in an initial education context (Beck, 2003).

It is worth keeping in mind how Dewey (1922/1983) reminded us that deliberation becomes irrational at the point where "an end is fixed, a passion or interest so absorbing" that deliberation "is warped to include only what furthers execution of its predetermined bias" (p. 198). Accordingly, it is pertinent to ask whether consensus-seeking can become so absorbing that the exploration and elaboration of perspectives suffer during classroom deliberation. Not only is it crucial to make space for this for the sake of the quality of deliberation, as it is by encountering difference and disagreements that the views of the participants are potentially transformed (Harell, 2020), but it has also been demonstrated that encouraging disagreement has a positive impact on students' development of self-efficacy for handling such encounters (Dahl, 2022).

However, making space for difference and disagreement is often found to be difficult during deliberation (Boswell, 2021; King, 2009; McMillian & Harriger, 2002; Nishiyama et al., 2023), particularly when the consensus orientation is strong and when the students are young (Lind et al., 2023). The literature points to several possibilities for educational practice in this regard. Stitzlein (2012) highlighted the importance of cultivating the skills necessary to engage in dissent. Patel (2023) considered how teachers can make space for dissent by actively introducing new perspectives, listening actively to dissent, and promoting democratic decision-making and social action. Lind et al. (2023) suggested a more explicit instructional design.

The possibilities emerging from this analysis are relatively subtle compared to these suggestions. Considering facilitative design (Nishiyama et al., 2023), and the dialogue goals in particular (Schwarz & Baker, 2017), it becomes clearer why the roles of agreement and disagreement in teachers' talk are worth taking into account. It is instructive to see Nishiyama et al. (2023) arguing that facilitative design can contribute "to structure conversations in the absence of a facilitator" (p. 9), making this dimension of facilitation especially important in the classroom, as it helps structure peer talk when the teacher is not present. Considering that small-group discussions without the presence of the teacher have been shown to promote the contestation and sharing of opinions (Howe & Abedin, 2013; Teglbjærg, 2024), the importance of facilitative design for deliberation, especially with regard to the exploration and elaboration of perspectives, is therefore obvious.

My analysis points to the imperative of being sensitive to the roles of agreement and disagreement in teachers' talk. Specifically, it highlights the importance of introducing disagreement in the different observed patterns and themes to allow more space for difference to emerge. This echoes the recommendations from the agonistic perspective of Ruitenberg (2009, 2010a) as well as the recommendations from earlier research on citizenship education in an initial education context (Abendschön, 2017; Dias & Menezes, 2014; Hauver, 2017; van Deth et al., 2011).

Something the teachers did, which is crucial, was to talk about how disagreement can be valuable. This was also pointed out by Nishiyama et al. (2023) when they argued that framing disagreement and difference in such ways "may allow students to engage with curiosity rather than seeing it as a personal attack" (p. 7). Ideally, this should be supported by the teachers' talk in the other identified themes and patterns. Sometimes, it might be fruitful to frame the outcome of group activities as disagreement and difference. If the aim of eliciting perspectives from the students is to explore and elaborate alternative perspectives, then it might sometimes be more fruitful to check for disagreement rather than agreement. If difference does emerge, it might be fruitful to nuance and discuss the nature of the disagreements regarding their what, why, or even how. Furthermore, recognizing the sources of students' disagreements might make it feel more worthwhile for students to dissent. Finally, it might be worth revisiting earlier disagreements during review, considering what might have changed during the lesson.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored what teachers say and do in relation to their use of the terms *agreement* and *disagreement* during lessons in Norwegian initial education. When considering facilitative design of classroom deliberation (Nishiyama et al., 2023), this becomes important to take into account. I found that the way these words were used and what the teachers did in relation to their use could be related to several different patterns collated under five overarching themes. Namely, the teachers tended to use the terms in relation to the process of discussion and the outcome of these discussions and to nuance the idea of the nature of this outcome; as a function in conversation; and in talk about how agreement and disagreement are valuable in different ways.

There are some limitations. First, as most of the data was from a first-grade context, it is not obvious to which degree the findings are transferable to the other grades investigated. There is reason to suspect that they are, however, as Norwegian initial education teachers typically follow their students through Grade 1–4, meaning that the first-grade teachers in my data teach the same students in second grade next year, and so on. Further, the data was generated for another study, and the results could have been different if the design had focused on agreement and disagreement. While this is most likely the case and a more in-depth view of teachers' use of the terms might have been possible, it had the benefit of making the observed situations more authentic. Last, while the findings are not generalizable to populations, they are transferable to similar situations. They invite teachers at all grade levels to reflect upon situations where they invoke notions of agreement and disagreement in the classroom.

While the main contribution is conceptual in the sense that the analysis highlights the terms *agreement* and *disagreement* and nuances notions of their roles in relation to classroom deliberation, some implications for educational practice have been suggested. The key finding across these themes and patterns has been that the lessons tended to be oriented toward consensus. I have argued that this can be problematized in relation to exploration and elaboration of perspectives. One suggestion emerging from my analysis is to be sensitive to how the terms agreement and disagreement are used in teachers' talk. Given the relative absence of the term *disagreement* in my dataset, this particularly entails creating space for disagreement in the different themes identified in this analysis.

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Ancillary materials

Transcription Notation

_	emphasis
:	elongation
(.)	short break, 1 second or less
(. . .)	longer break, length indicated by number of dots, each dot representing approximately 1 second
[ ]	overlapping speech, speech within brackets are spoken simultaneously as the bracketed speech in the following or preceding line, left bracket represent start of interruption, right bracket represent end of interruption
@	laughter, number of @ indicates length
x	not possible to hear what the speaker said, number of x indicates length of the utterance