

---

# Democracy & Education

---

## Education for Deliberative Democracy and the Aim of Consensus

*Martin Samuelsson (Bergen University College)*

---

---

### **Abstract**

The aim of consensus is essential to deliberative democracy. However, this aim has also been frequently criticized. In this article, I present two different forms of criticism against consensus in democratic education. The first, articulated by scholars of education for democracy, claims that the aim of consensus fails to account for the conflictual nature of democracy and thereby disallows disagreement and dissensus. The second, formulated by classroom practitioners, argues that it disrupts the pattern of communication in classroom discussions. I nevertheless attempt to defend consensus on both accounts by arguing that it is a multifaceted concept that allows for different types of agreements and disagreements to coexist and therefore will stand in the way neither of pluralism nor of dissensus. It also will not necessarily foster undesirable patterns of communication in classroom discussions.

### **Submit a response to this article**

Submit online at [democracyeducationjournal.org/home](http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home)

### **Read responses to this article online**

<http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol26/iss1/2>

**T**HE VERY DEFINITION of the word *democracy* is “government by the people.” In a democratic society, people with different preferences and different beliefs are expected to collectively make decisions regarding their shared society. Such decisions should, according to proponents of deliberative democracy, largely be based on public deliberation. By placing public deliberations at the heart of democracy, the political order can be justified, they argue. However, they also argue that the political order should be justified to everyone living under its laws (Chambers, 2003). Deliberative democracy is, therefore, often conceived of as operating with a consensus-driven form of democracy. However, scholars who question the deliberative conception of democracy have frequently criticized this aspect.

Deliberative democracy has been widely discussed in political philosophy the last decades, to the point that some scholars even talk about a deliberative turn (Dryzek, 2002). Naturally, deliberative democracy has also been more and more frequently suggested as the aim of democratic education. In a review of the field of education for deliberative democracy, Samuelsson and Bøyum

(2015) argued that there is an overarching pedagogical agreement in this field: Future citizens (should) learn the skills and values necessary for deliberative democratic participation by participating in deliberative democratic situations. By this line of reasoning, consensus becomes an integral part of both the educational practice and the educational aim. It becomes a part of the educational practice based on the logic that if future citizens are to practice at democratic deliberation in, for example, classroom discussions, consensus needs to be a part of those discussions (Englund, 2006; Samuelsson, 2016). It becomes a part of the educational aim in virtue of the fact that the ability to participate in discussions striving for consensus is seen as a necessary skill to master (Samuelsson, 2016). However, as deliberative democracy has been transferred to the educational context, the aspect of

---

MARTIN SAMUELSSON is an assistant professor at Bergen University College, Norway. He has mainly investigated questions related to an education for deliberative democracy.

consensus has again been criticized, this time by educational scholars. They argue that consensus dismisses all possibilities for pluralism and dissensus and is therefore an unfit ideal for democratic education. Furthermore, during fieldwork for a research project I conducted, I found that teachers with lengthy experience in leading classroom discussions were also very resistant to the idea of striving to achieve consensus in classroom discussions.

However, in this paper I defend consensus as an aim both in democratic education and in classroom discussions. My main argument is that consensus is both a regulative idea to guide us and a multifaceted concept that on its own does not dismiss all possibilities for disagreement and, therefore, should not be considered problematic as an aim for democratic education or classroom discussions. Thus, even though consensus is derived from the deliberative conception and that aiming for it in democratic education might first and foremost serve a deliberative purpose, I argue that it nevertheless should be considered unproblematic to those favoring other conceptions of democracy as the aim of democratic education. Before mounting this defense, however, I give a brief presentation of deliberative democracy and its ideal of consensus, followed by an account of some of the scholarly criticism. Next, I provide a short description of the empirical study from which the pedagogical criticism is drawn and outline the main points of criticism. Finally, I formulate and present the defense for consensus, which I base on Dryzek and Niemeyer's (2010) typology of consensus, and discuss how this nuanced formulation may be used to address some of the criticism it has been facing in democratic education.

### **Deliberative Democracy and Consensus**

No conception of democracy has been more thoroughly discussed during the past three decades than deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy, broadly defined, is any conception of democracy that places public deliberations at the core of democracy (Bohman, 1998). A public deliberation is a process in which free and equal citizens give defensible reasons, explanations, and accounts for laws they wish to impose on their fellow citizens (Held, 2006). In this process, citizens and their representatives to the government are expected to argue for their own perspectives while at the same time carefully listening and responding to counterarguments made by others, regardless of who makes them (Fishkin, 2009). Thus, according to this view, the democratic process is, or at least should be, a process of social cooperation with the aim of communicatively reaching a collective decision about "what to do," rather than a competitive process in which fixed preferences battle against each other (Chambers, 2003).

Theories of deliberative democracy have generally been critical of democracy as merely a practice of voting followed by majority rule. According to these theories, majority rule is insufficient when it comes to democratic legitimacy (Bohman, 1998) because it enforces democratic decisions as the will of the "winners" rather than as the will of the people. Indeed, it is possible to argue that it actually coerces a portion of the population into submission rather than treating them as fellow citizens in a democracy. Therefore, theories of deliberative democracy argue

that democratic decisions are legitimate if, and only if, they are the object of a free and reasoned agreement among equals (Cohen, 1989, p. 22). However, a legitimate political order is not only one that is justified through a process of reason-giving but also one that is deemed justifiable by everyone living under its laws (Chambers, 2003). Consensus is, therefore, embedded in this understanding of democracy as an underlying ideal, because, if every citizen should be able to accept the outcome of the decisions, and/or the reasons for them, the democratic process needs to aim toward some kind of understanding of consensus.

Early accounts of deliberative democracy contain the conviction that it is possible to achieve an actual consensus. Contemporary theories, however, have modified this ideal slightly, but most still hold that discussions should be oriented toward consensus even if it is not always obtainable (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). This redefines consensus as a regulative idea, an aim to strive for, rather than an endpoint always to be reached. By aiming toward consensual agreements, citizens and their representatives are encouraged to seek solutions across different belief systems (overlapping consensus) (Rawls, 1987), to use arguments other reasonable citizens can accept (reciprocity), and to use arguments accessible and applicable to everyone affected by the decision (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). This will solve some moral disagreements simply by making people better informed. However, some moral disagreements are more persistent, as are, for example, moral disagreements over incompatible values, to which there are no simple rational superior facts or arguments available. In such cases, the deliberative process can result in a deadlock that would require a vote, or compromise, to break the tie (Habermas, 1998; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Yet even in such cases, the process of deliberation is valuable because it helps clarify what the disagreement is about, helps citizens and representatives to understand the problem better, makes them acknowledge the moral position(s) of the opposition, and ultimately, increases the possibility that the final decision will be accepted. Furthermore, contemporary theories of deliberative democracy also emphasize that the decisions made are always temporary and that the issues are always open to further investigation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004).

Despite the modification of consensus into a regulative idea, however, it is still one of the most frequently criticized aspects of deliberative democracy. The most insistent criticism comes from the perspective of radical pluralists, a notion favoring the confrontational nature of democracy (see, for example, Mouffe, 1996, 1999, & 2000). According to this perspective, consensus is problematic because it conceals informal oppression and precludes any real opportunity for democratic disagreement. Furthermore, radical pluralists argue that deliberative democracy's formulation of consensus often coincides with the interests of those in power and that if one continually strives for consensus, the views and interests of marginalized people will be excluded from democratic discourses (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). Therefore, by placing consensus at the center of democracy, one leaves the most fundamental and essential aspects of democracy—disagreement and confrontation—out of the equation and deprives people of being

democratic subjects. Based on arguments such as these, critics argue that consensus, rather than being a desirable democratic characteristic, is a symptom of a dysfunctional society laden with social pressure, conformity and marginalization.

### Education for Democracy and Consensus

We now turn to the field of education for democracy where there are several scholars arguing for deliberative democracy as the aim of democratic education and for the placement of reason-giving skills, listening skills, and values such as reciprocity at the center of such an education (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). However, there are also critical voices questioning aspects of the deliberative conception. They often base their criticism on the radical, pluralistic view, and they quite frequently question the aim of consensus. Thus, the same objection that is found in the field of political philosophy is also found in the field of education. One such example is Ruitenberg (2010):

*Mouffe and Rancière agree that the currently dominant framework of deliberative democracy does not sufficiently recognize the constitutive nature of disagreement. The deliberative conception of democracy and democratic citizenship emphasizes rational deliberation leading to political consensus. For Mouffe and Rancière, however . . . consensus means erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life. (p. 44)*

Ruitenberg was skeptical of using deliberative democracy's idea of consensus as an aim for democratic education on the basis that (rational) consensus diminishes any real possibility for disagreement. By focusing on consensus, the essential conflictual nature of democracy is erased, and she therefore argued that consensus is unfit as an aim of a democratic education. One finds a similar example of an argument against consensus in Biesta (2011):

*The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passion from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs . . . The democratic subject, so we might say, is the one who is driven by a desire for democracy or, to be more precise, a desire for engagement with the ongoing experiment of democratic existence. (p. 151)*

In this article, Biesta (2011) was hesitant about the aim of consensus on the basis that it can disrupt other vital aspects of democracy such as passion and "a desire to engage with ongoing democratic processes" (p. 151). According to this argument, striving toward consensus can inhibit the democratic process (of disagreement) and thus should not be the aim of democratic education. Instead, Biesta presented an alternative aim for democratic education and a pedagogical practice to go with it:

*The political subject is not so much the producer of consensus as that it is the "product" of dissensus. It is not, therefore, that education needs to make individuals ready for democratic politics; it is rather that through engagement in democratic politics political subjectivity is engendered. (p. 150)*

Instead of teaching future citizens specific skill sets used to reach rational consensus, a democratic education should focus on

fostering "the desire to engage in democratic politics" (Biesta, 2011, p. 150), by letting individuals participate in practices of disagreement and dissensus.

These two articles are perhaps the most explicit examples of how critical scholars within the educational field argue in terms of deliberative democracy's ideal of consensus (for other examples, see Griffin, 2012; Ruitenberg, 2009; Waghid, 2005). Their criticism is (often) rooted in the view of radical pluralism, and their arguments are therefore the same as those found in the field of political philosophy; the only difference is that they are now used to argue against the aim of democratic education.

### Classroom Discussions and Consensus

Having shown how scholars of education for democracy argue against consensus as the aim for democracy and democratic education, I now turn to teachers' criticism against consensus as an aim of (democratic) classroom discussions.

#### Empirical study

During the spring and autumn of 2014, I collected data for a research project investigating "education for deliberative democracy." Proponents in the field of education for deliberative democracy commonly assume that the skills necessary for deliberative participation, such as the ability to make arguments and give reasons, to listen to others, and so on, while at the same time being part of a collective will formation, are (best) learned through participation in democratic deliberation (Samuelsson & Bøyum, 2015). According to this argument, through participating in democratic deliberation, people will have the opportunity to participate in democratic deliberation and thereby become gradually and increasingly competent at it. Consequently, a main point of interest in this project was to conduct in-depth investigations of classroom discussions.

I visited three different schools located on the west coast of Norway. I accompanied one teacher at each school for approximately two weeks, observed their classroom practices, conducted formal interviews, and was involved in informal conversations. In addition, I conducted one formal interview with a fourth teacher, but without observing his classroom practices. The four teachers all taught various subjects, and they were all located at schools with different profiles. Susan, a teacher for over fifteen years, was teaching psychology, English, and religion to upper secondary students at a parochial school with a moderate degree of ethnical diversity. Evelyn was teaching English, social science, and math to students in grade six to nine at a school with a large degree of ethnical diversity and was engaged in activities related to the student council. Margaret, in contrast to the other three teachers, was the head of her own class, a fifth-grade class, and thus conducted all of her teaching in that class, involving numerous subjects such as math, English, Norwegian, religion, and social science. Finally, Patrick, whose classroom I did not visit, was teaching at several different schools, at various grade levels, and in various subjects. None of the teachers were familiar with deliberative democracy prior to participating in this study. This came as no surprise since deliberative democracy as a concept is absent from

everyday conversations in Norway, as well as in newspaper articles and public politics. Furthermore, even though the Norwegian national curriculum includes democratic competence as an explicit aim, the deliberative conception is absent there as well (Samuelsson, 2013). The most important aspect in relation to this article, however, is that these teachers were all interested in democracy and education, and they were highly experienced in leading classroom discussions.

During the interviews, the central characteristics of democratic deliberations, and thus also for deliberative classroom discussions, were topics of conversation. The specific formulation used during the interviews was that of Englund (2006), which states that a deliberative (educative) discussion is one where (a) different views confront one another and arguments for them are articulated, (b) there is a tolerance and respect for the concrete other and participants listen to each other's arguments, and, finally, (c) there are elements of collective will formation, a desire to reach consensus or at least a temporary agreement.<sup>1</sup> The pedagogical assumption is that by participating in classroom discussions following these criteria, students will have the opportunity to practice making arguments, giving reasons, listening to others, and so on, while at the same time being part of a collective will formation process that strives toward agreement, and by this, gradually become more and more competent at democratic deliberation (Samuelsson, 2016, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> Given the teachers' experience, I was interested in listening to their thoughts of having classroom discussions structured around this ideal.

### *Pedagogical Criticism of Consensus*

The four teachers were all positive to the idea of structuring classroom discussions around the deliberative ideals of (a) reason-giving (b) and reflection. However, they all expressed considerable resistance to the idea of having (c) classroom discussions aim at reaching consensus. In their opinion, aiming at consensus in classroom discussions was fraught with serious difficulties. Margaret said:

*The teacher should not be evaluative. That is the hardest part, to actually hold back and to stop yourself from giving positive feedback when the students are saying something "really good." You want to, to say, "Very good, that is interesting," but you have to hold back and let the discussion flow among the students. That can be challenging, but if you want a safe classroom climate where the students really listen to each other, then aiming at consensus can be a tricky thing, it really can.*

1 For a more thorough discussion concerning these criteria, see Samuelsson (2016).

2 A common criticism of deliberative democracy is that public deliberations often lead to extreme and polarized opinions (Sunstein, 2000). However, as argued in Samuelsson (2016), the fact that real-life deliberations are challenging only emphasizes the need for an education for deliberative democracy. Furthermore, many argue that (public) schools are the ideal site for conducting such an education because, among other things, they contain a great diversity of opinions (Englund, 2006; Hess, 2009).

Margaret presented an argument against consensus based on her experience that it can negatively affect the classroom climate. According to Margaret, striving for consensus would have to involve the evaluation of students' opinions, which often creates an atmosphere in which students are afraid to express themselves. Furthermore, it also makes it more difficult to get them to listen to each other, and in the end, it may be difficult to establish a natural flow in the discussion.

Patrick argued against consensus on a similar ground: that it changes the pattern of communication in undesirable ways. However, he presented an alternative explanation for why. "If a classroom discussion aims at reaching consensus, students will be preoccupied with trying to get their way. If a classroom discussion is supposed to end with consensus, or come to a conclusion, it means that it can have winners." In his experience, this fact makes students alter their approach and instead of listening and responding to each other, they end up trying to win an argument. The discursive pattern is thereby changed into a form of competition rather than one characterized by curiosity and respect.

Evelyn argued that having classroom discussions aim at consensus can force students into agreements:

*(INTERVIEWER) You said that everybody has to be able to have an own opinion (in a classroom discussion), but how does that relate to the aspect of trying to reach a collective will formation?*

*(EVELYN) That can be difficult . . . I do not want to force anyone in the classroom to agree that "this" is the only right thing . . . I think it is important that those who reserve the right to disagree should be given time and space to reflect on why they disagree but not be forced into making decisions then and there . . . I cannot really picture how those two are related because for me, in a classroom discussion, it is not a matter of life and death whether everybody agrees or not. I think agreement is difficult to achieve and striving for it only makes the discussion artificial.*

According to Evelyn, consensual agreement is rare in classroom discussions and because of this, having discussions end with consensus implies that some form of coercion has been used. She went on to explain why forcing students into agreements is problematic in classroom discussions:

*I have students whose families are from countries where homosexuality has been banned. These students need to be allowed to have, and express, these opinions in a classroom in Norway. It is a big responsibility on my part that, as their teacher, even if I disagree with them, to provide them with the same opportunities for verbal expression as anybody else. I also have to make sure that they do not feel trampled on because of these opinions, because they are so young and they should not be burdened by the opinions they are carrying with them . . . I think that can be a pretty horrible thing in that age, to feel that others are laughing at you.*

Similar to Margaret, Evelyn argued that there is a problematic side to consensus, that striving for it has to involve challenging and valuing student opinions. She said this deprives some students—mainly those with unpopular opinions—of the opportunity to express themselves and that one needs to prioritize making students feel secure in classroom discussions. Furthermore, she explained that by challenging students and their opinions, and by forcing some of them to give theirs up in order to come to agreements, she would risk having students feel trampled on and would wind up placing them under emotional strain.

Susan, the teacher at a parochial school, contested the aim of consensus in a similar way:

*(SUSAN) It is definitely within a framework of respect but there is not a will formation per se.*

*(INTERVIEWER) Is it more an exploring of differences?*

*(SUSAN) It is an exploration, exactly, but never consensus, because I think that means to compromise and I am not going to compromise. I have spent a lot of time reading, being at school myself, thinking, and talking and I am not going to just throw that out to compromise. But I don't expect them to compromise either, to give up something they hold dear just because it is against what the majority believes.*

Susan expressed her skepticism toward the idea of having classroom discussions aim at consensus based on the view that consensus means to compromise. Compromising in classroom discussions is problematical, because in her view, it involves asking students to give up something they “hold dear.” She went on to explain the kind of negative consequences this might have:

*(SUSAN) You know, here at a religious school, are you for or against abortion? We actually had a woman here from Oslo and she was talking from a Christian point of view about the protection of the unborn and the students were already confrontational after half an hour . . . None of them liked her, whether they were for or against. They thought she was close minded, that she was rude and so on . . . I realized that you have to back off and respect the students and that woman wasn't doing that.*

For example, if as a teacher she tried to convince her students to agree with her beliefs, she would likely provoke a confrontational response. Subsequently, this could cause the students to lose respect for her. In her opinion, a teacher leading a classroom discussion should instead back off and respect the students and their opinions and not try to convince them to give those up.

The four teachers interviewed, all experienced in leading classroom discussions, presented pedagogical reasons for not aiming at consensus in classroom discussions. First, aiming at consensus can negatively affect the discussion itself. It can make it more difficult to get the students to express themselves, to get them to participate verbally, and to get them to really listen to each other. Thus, it can create undesirable patterns of communication. Second,

aiming at consensus can also have undesired consequences beyond the context of a specific discussion, such as creating emotional strain in students, making them give up ideals, and making them lose some respect for the teacher.

### **Defending the Aim of Consensus**

So far, I have presented two types of criticism against consensus in democratic education. The first, coming from scholars of education for democracy, criticizes consensus as a democratic ideal and thus as an aim for democratic education as well, on the grounds that it fails to account for the conflictual nature of democracy and thereby disallows disagreements and dissensus. The second type, coming from classroom practitioners, criticizes consensus as a goal for classroom discussions because it alters the pattern of communication in undesirable ways and may have negative effects on the students. In this final section of the paper, I will articulate a defense of consensus on both accounts.

Scholars in education for democracy in their criticism of consensus ground their rationale in radical pluralism. They argue that by striving for consensus, one disallows disagreements, suppresses voices and opinions of marginalized people, and instead promotes the interests of those in power. Therefore, they argue that a democratic education should instead be based on the conflictual platform found in radical democracy and focus on teaching people how to live and cope with ongoing disagreements. By this shift in focus, they argue that their notion of democratic education better preserves the essential democratic aspects of pluralism, inclusion, and disagreement, and is thus more suitable as an aim for democratic education.

As an initial response to this criticism, one might posit that, based on the understanding that democracy is about making decisions together regarding a shared society, there has to be more to democracy than purely disagreement, confrontation, and disruption. Therefore, to focus solely on variants of dissent makes little sense (Dryzek & Niemeyer 2010, p. 93). Secondly, as Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) argued, theories of radical democracy cannot promote unregulated forms of disagreement but also have to structure their ideas around some standards of regulation that control what is allowed and considered appropriate in public communication. Without such standards, “anything would go,” and for example, any substantive position would be worthy of the respect of others. However, this makes radical democracy open to the same criticism leveled at deliberative democracy and its ideal of consensus: imposing restrictions on moral positions and citizens. For example, anyone who fails to express “the desire for a particular mode of human togetherness” argued for by Biesta (2011, p. 141) would have to be regarded as “undemocratic.” Thus, it is not only deliberative democracy and its ideal of consensus that excludes certain types of citizens, behavior, and positions from democratic participation. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the criticism coming from scholars favoring the radical pluralistic view is slightly misplaced. However, their criticism of deliberative democracy and consensus have been more broadly accepted in the educational field than in the field of political philosophy, in which the defense presented above is frequently recurrent (see, for

example, Erman, 2009; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Knops, 2007), and therefore, to present this defense in an educational context might be considered relevant.

### *Defending Consensus as an Aim of Democratic Education*

Based on the short discussion above, the more important question to ask is not whether a certain conception of democracy is for or against consensus or dissensus, since both are inevitable elements of any conception of democracy, but rather how to formulate a notion of consensus that takes pluralism, dissensus, and disagreement seriously. Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) made one such attempt in their typology of consensus. In this typology, they distinguished three different types of consensus: *normative*, *epistemic*, and *preference* consensus. Normative consensus refers to agreement on the values driving the decision process. Epistemic consensus refers to agreement on how particular actions relate to different values in terms of cause and effect, while preference consensus refers to agreement on the actual decision of “what to do.” Let us look at an example of what these types may look like in a classroom discussion.

The following example is from a discussion that took place in Margaret’s fifth-grade classroom. The class was planning a party and discussed various aspects of it, such as the time and date, possible activities, and what to eat and drink. Using the question of what to eat and drink as a starting point, I will elaborate further to show what the three different types of consensus could have looked like had the discussion gone that far. A preference consensus would mean an agreement on what food to serve, for example, tacos. If the class had agreed that tacos was the preferable food to serve, preference consensus would have been reached. A normative consensus, on the other hand, would imply an agreement on the value level. For example, what is the most important feature of the food? Is it that it tastes good or that it is inexpensive? On the other hand, maybe the most important values pertaining to the food to be served at a party for thirty twelve-year-olds are instead that it is easy to prepare, serve, and eat. Agreement on these types of questions would indicate normative consensus. Located in between these two positions is epistemic consensus. This would imply agreement about causal relations, for example, between a desired value and a suggested alternative. If the argument had been made that the food should be easy to prepare, serve, and eat, would tacos satisfy that objective? Maybe pizza would be easier to eat and, therefore, if that value was preferred, would be a better alternative. But then again, maybe tacos would be easier to make in large quantities? An epistemic consensus would mean an agreement regarding this type of “factual” question. The position taken earlier in the article is that democratic deliberations ultimately are about reaching agreements on how to act. Thus, the goal would be to reach a preference consensus and agree on what food to serve. However, a preference consensus does not necessitate a normative or epistemic consensus. The students do not have to reach a consensus on all levels in order to make a decision on what food to serve. If they had reached a preference consensus and decided to serve pizza, they would still have been allowed to disagree about the values underlying that choice (normative disagreement) and/

or what values that choice would fulfill (epistemic disagreement). In fact, according to Sunstein (1995), that is usually how people make decisions based upon deliberations. They value arguments and facts differently but are nevertheless able to agree on a course of action (what he called *incompletely theorized agreement*).

To make this typology more complex, Dryzek and Niemeyer (2010) added a “meta” counterpart to each type of consensus. Consensus at the meta-level means recognition of the legitimacy of the different positions: that they are seen (by the participants) as reasonable, credible, and valid. A *normative meta-consensus* means an agreement regarding the different values present in the discussion and that they are seen as reasonable basis from which to argue. *Epistemic meta-consensus* refers to agreement on the credibility of disputed beliefs and of their relevance to the issue at hand. For example, different participants can disagree on which alternative best corresponds with a certain value, but a meta-consensus of the epistemic kind means that they all agree on the credibility and relevance of the relations being discussed. Finally, *preference meta-consensus* relates to the different possible outcomes and is reached when there is an agreement on the number of choices and/or the validity of the different ways that those choices can be structured.

Returning to the example of what food to serve at the fifth-grade class party, had the class agreed that, for example, the aspects of price, taste, and how easy it is to make, serve, and eat were all reasonable and important values to take into consideration, a normative meta-consensus would have been reached. Furthermore, had they settled and agreed that the most important value was the easiness in relation to preparation, serving, and eating (reached a normative consensus at the simple level) and then moved on to discuss different types of food that possibly could fulfill that value and agreed that both the alternatives of pizza and tacos could do that, meaning they are both relatively easy to prepare, serve, and eat, an epistemic meta-consensus would have been reached. Finally, a preference meta-consensus would have been reached had they all, for example, agreed that the (only) available alternatives to choose among were in fact pizza and tacos. Even though the typology becomes more complex with the inclusion of the meta-level, its main function remains rather uncomplicated: to help structure the ongoing disagreement and to keep the discussion productive in a deliberative sense. By reaching consensus at the meta-level, participants are able to keep the discussion productive in their search for a conclusion. In addition, focusing on consensus at the meta-level means making fewer demands on participants and is thus an additional way to address seriously the challenging aspects of pluralism, dissensus, and disagreement.

How does Dryzek and Niemeyer’s (2010) typology help us defend consensus as an aim in democratic education? Ruitenberg (2010), for example, expressed the view that “a strive for (political) consensus means erasing the contestatory and conflictual nature of the common life.” Thus, to use consensus as an aim in democratic education is problematic because students could fail to learn how to have and to allow others to have different opinions, coexist with people with different values, and participate in ongoing processes of disagreement (also emphasized by Biesta, 2011). However, as

shown with the typology, consensus does not mean that continued disagreement is deemed impossible. A preference consensus does not necessitate a normative or epistemic consensus. Thus, many different forms of disagreements can exist after a preference consensus has been reached. Furthermore, adding the underlying view of consensus as a regulative idea, rather than an endpoint needed to be reached, it can also exist merely in the form of an aim to be striving for. This combination of consensus as a multifaceted concept and as a regulative aim shows that it is possible for consensus and dissensus to coexist and that neither consensus nor deliberative democracy is in conflict with pluralism or disagreement. On the contrary, disagreement lies at the very foundation of deliberative democracy and is what fuels the need to have a discussion in the first place, because if there is no disagreement, there is no reason to have a discussion. Furthermore, striving toward consensus does not mean that the aspects of pluralism and continued dissensus are not taken seriously either. The emphasis on trying to solve moral conflicts with the use of discussions is rather an explicit attempt to try to handle pluralism seriously (see, for example, Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). By encouraging citizens and representatives to seek solutions across different belief systems and to use arguments other reasonable citizens can accept, deliberative democracy argues for an increased acknowledgment of different moral positions. Furthermore, a preference consensus reached and a decision made is always temporary and an issue discussed is always open to further investigation (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004). Continued disagreement is, therefore, always possible, even after a decision has been made. Consequently, I argue that deliberative democracy and its ideal of consensus are both suited as aims in democracy and democratic education and that neither constitutes a threat to pluralism and dissensus.

### *Defending Consensus as an Aim in Classroom Discussions*

The more important question, though, in relation to the pedagogical assumptions embedded in this article, is the implications of the typology for the aim of consensus in classroom discussions. How will this typology answer the criticism raised by classroom practitioners, that consensus as a goal in classroom discussions creates several unwanted side effects, such as undesirable patterns of communication and emotional strain in students? Furthermore, is it possible to outline any pedagogical implications that will benefit the further discussion about education for deliberative democracy?

The answer to the first question is, on the surface, rather straightforward and has already been given: consensus is a multifaceted concept that, on its own, will not eliminate all possibilities for disagreement. However, if we use the typology and look at this criticism in greater detail, the answer is much more complex. First, the concern that consensus may cause emotional strain was raised by Susan and Evelyn based on the interpretation that striving for consensus implies having students give up their life values: “Students should not have to compromise and give up something they hold dear just because it is against what the majority believes,” and “They should not have to be burdened by the opinions they are carrying with them or risk having others

laugh at them.” These teachers described a concern for having classroom discussions strive toward normative consensus at the simple level, or of trying to make all students agree on the values presented in the discussion. However, bearing the typology in mind, we can see that to strive for consensus does not have to mean to strive for agreement regarding values. Instead, for example, it could mean to strive for what has been termed preference consensus.

Using the same example as earlier to again illustrate this point, the fifth-grade class could have reached a preference consensus and agreed to serve pizza, without having reached a normative consensus. Some students could have favored this choice because they thought pizza tasted good while others may have favored it because they thought it would be the easiest food to serve. Thus, they could have agreed on what to do (preference consensus) without having agreed on the reasons for that choice (normative consensus) and consequently, a normative disagreement would still be possible. Thus, it is fully possible for a classroom discussion to strive toward consensus without having students give up their values, and thus, avoid causing emotional stress.

Granted, this example is less complex and controversial than the discussions the teachers are skeptical of conducting: These students are not expected to give up, or compromise, their values of life. However, it is perhaps precisely this insight the typology can provide. In a deliberative sense, democratic discussions are ultimately about making decisions about “what to do.” Thus, why someone prefers one alternative to another is, strictly speaking, irrelevant, while reaching an agreement about which alternative to choose is not. Therefore, in a deliberative educative sense, it might be more suitable to strive for a preference consensus because that would allow students to practice at the type of consensus deliberative democracy is most interested in reaching. Hence, the typology shows that it is possible to strive for consensus in a classroom discussion without causing emotional strain, but it also allows us to outline a pedagogical implication: Perhaps the preferable consensus to strive for, in a deliberative educative sense, is preference consensus.

The other main concern the teachers had with consensus was that it might negatively alter the pattern of communication in the discussion. Both Patrick and Margaret expressed this concern and argued that the (other) essential aspects of a good classroom discussion, such as reason-giving, reflection, listening, cooperation, and so on, would be difficult to achieve if consensus was set as an aim: “If you want a safe classroom climate where students really listen to each other, then aiming at consensus can be a tricky thing,” and “Consensus makes students alter their approach and instead of listening and responding to each other they end up trying to win the discussion.” At the core of this criticism is a similar interpretation of consensus as that found in theories of radical pluralism, proclaiming that consensus leaves little or no room for any kind of disagreement. This interpretation is imbedded in both Patrick and Margaret’s quotes and can be rephrased: Consensus makes students focus on finding the right answer as given by the teacher, and consensus makes students become preoccupied with trying to get everyone to agree with their point of view. Hence, to answer

this criticism is, once again, to answer the question of whether it is possible to strive for consensus while at the same time preserving the aspect of disagreement. At the same time, though, the challenges voiced by Patrick and Margaret are challenges deserving of serious and lengthy discussions, to which the answer given above, about having classroom discussions aim at a preference consensus, is unsatisfactory.

To address Patrick's and Margaret's concern, we can turn to the meta-level of the typology. The main function of the meta-level is to help structure the ongoing process of deliberation and to keep the discussion productive in a deliberative sense. Thus, if the deliberative discussion is failing, it is always possible to take a step back and instead of focusing on the decision, try to understand (and possibly agree on) the different values and positions used in the discussion and their relevance to the problem at hand (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010). One can apply this principle in a classroom situation as well. If a classroom discussion has turned into a competition and the students are preoccupied with trying to win it, it is always possible to take a step back. By taking a step back and instead having them elaborate on the values and positions being discussed (a normative meta-discussion), or having them discuss the relevance of those positions to the issue at hand (an epistemic meta-discussion), or trying to get them to agree on the relevant alternatives (reaching a preference meta-consensus), it might be possible to get them to start listening to each other's arguments again. Thus, by delaying the decision-making process and instead focus on the meta-level, the concerns raised by Patrick and Margaret could be avoided.

However, we can also use the meta-level to redefine this problematic situation as a possible deliberative learning situation. Aiming at meta-consensus makes participants focus on understanding and acknowledging different viewpoints, and encourages them to seek agreements across their differences. Thus, turning to the meta-level when a classroom discussion has turned into a competitive and conflictual discussion can provide students with a learning opportunity of how to turn a dysfunctional discussion into a productive democratic deliberation. Furthermore, once they have (re)established the deliberative pattern of communication, they can (again) gradually begin to move in the direction of a preference consensus or a meta-preference consensus. However, it is important to remember that not all disagreements are solved with deliberations. Sometimes a vote or a compromise is needed. Yet in a deliberative educative sense, one should not turn to these methods of decision-making too early. That would deprive the students the opportunity to practice turning the conflictual discussion into a deliberative discussion, and of how to use arguments presented in a discussion to accept an outcome determined by a vote or compromise. Thus, the meta-level of the typology allows us to defend consensus against the concern that it might cause undesirable patterns of communication. However, it also allows us to identify a potential deliberative learning situation, one where students are presented with an opportunity to practice turning a dysfunctional discussion into a productive democratic deliberation.

To conclude the defense of consensus against the second type of criticism in democratic education, the one claiming that it is unfit as a goal for classroom discussions, we can again turn to Dryzek and Niemeyer's (2010) complex and nuanced formulation of consensus and argue that it is (fully) possible to strive for consensus in a classroom discussion without subjecting students to emotional stress and without having to give up the essential elements of reason-giving and reflection. Furthermore, we can also use the typology of consensus to outline two possible pedagogical implications—that preference consensus is perhaps the most important type of consensus to learn how to strive for in a deliberative sense and that a conflictual classroom discussion can be seen as a potential (deliberative) learning situation.

## Conclusion

The aim of consensus is essential to deliberative democracy. However, this aim has also been one of the most frequently criticized aspects within the field of political philosophy. Furthermore, as the idea of deliberative democracy has been transferred to an educational context, the aim of consensus has again been a target of criticism. In this article, two types of educational criticism against consensus have been presented: one criticizing it as an aim for democratic education on the grounds that it fails to account for the conflictual nature of democracy and thereby disallows disagreement and pluralism, and the other criticizing it as an aim in classroom discussions based on the idea that it affects classroom discussions in negative ways. I have refuted both objections.

The defense of consensus presented in this article is structured around the idea that consensus is a regulative idea and a multifaceted concept that allows for different types of agreements and disagreements to coexist in harmony with one other. Based on this idea, I argue that it is fully possible to strive for consensus in democratic education without dismissing all possibilities for disagreement, dissensus, or pluralism. Furthermore, it is also fully possible to strive for consensus in classroom discussions without risk causing emotional stress, without losing the essential discursive tools of reason-giving, listening, and reflection, and without demanding that students give up their values. However, I do not argue that every classroom discussion must strive for consensus. There are, of course, other types of discussions valuable in a democratic educative sense, but my conclusion is still that consensus should be regarded neither as a problematic aim in democratic education nor in (democratic) classroom discussions, even to those valuing disagreement and pluralism.

## References

- Biesta, G. (2011). The ignorant citizen: Mouffe, Rancière, and the subject of democratic education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 30(2), 141–153.
- Bohman, J. (1998). Survey article: The coming of age of deliberative democracy. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 6(4), 400–425.
- Chambers, S. (2003). Deliberative democratic theory. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 6, 307–326.

- Cohen, J. (1989). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In A. Hamlin & P. Pettit (Ed.), *The good polity: Normative analysis of the state* (pp. 17–34). New York, NY: Basil Blackwell.
- Dryzek, J. (2002). *Deliberative democracy and beyond*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Dryzek, J., & Niemeyer, S. (2010). Pluralism and meta-consensus. In J. Dryzek (Ed.), *Foundations and frontiers of deliberative governance* (pp. 85–118). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Englund, T. (2006). Deliberative communication: A pragmatist proposal. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 38(5), 503–520.
- Erman, E. (2009). What is wrong with agonistic pluralism? Reflections on conflict in democratic theory. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 35(9), 1039–1062.
- Fishkin, J. (2009). *When the people speak: Deliberative democracy & public consultation*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Griffin, M. (2012). Deliberative democracy and emotional intelligence: An internal mechanism to regulate emotions. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 31(6), 517–538.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. (2004). *Why deliberative democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *Between facts and norms: A contribution to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Held, D. (2006). *Models of democracy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Hess, D. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom. The democratic power of discussion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Knops, A. (2007). Agonism as deliberation: On Mouffe's theory of democracy. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 15(1), 115–126.
- Mouffe, C. (1996). Democracy, power and "the political." In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and difference: Contesting the boundaries of the political* (pp. 245–256). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism. *Social Research*, 66(3), 745–758.
- Mouffe, C. (2000). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism. *Political Science Series*, 72, 1–17. Accessed at: [https://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw\\_72.pdf](https://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw_72.pdf)
- Rawls, J. (1987). The idea of an overlapping consensus. *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 7(1), 1–25.
- Ruitenberg, C. (2009). Educating political adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and radical democratic citizenship education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28(3), 269–281.
- Ruitenberg, C. (2010). Conflict, affect and the political: On disagreement as democratic capacity. *In Factis Pax*, 4(1), 40–55.
- Samuelsson, M. (2013). Deliberativ demokrati i den norska skolan—Ger lärare uttryck för deliberativa uppfattningar när det kommer till demokrati och demokratiutbildning? [Deliberative democracy in the Norwegian school—When it comes to democracy and democratic education, do teachers express deliberative ideas?]. *Utbildning och Demokrati*, 22(1), 47–63.
- Samuelsson, M. (2016). Education for deliberative democracy. A typology of classroom discussions. *Democracy and Education*, 24(1), Article 5.
- Samuelsson, M., & Bøyum, S. (2015). Education for deliberative democracy: Mapping the field. *Utbildning och Demokrati*, 24(1), 75–94.
- Sunstein, C. (1995). Incompletely theorized agreements. *Harvard Law Review*, 108(7), 1733–1772.
- Sunstein, C. (2000). Deliberative trouble? Why groups go to extremes. *The Yale Law Journal*, 110(1), 71–119.
- Waghid, Y. (2005). Action as an educational virtue: Towards a different understanding of democratic citizenship education. *Educational Theory*, 55(3), 323–342.