

**Agentic Engagement:
Transcending Passive Motivation**

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Abstract

Agentic engagement refers to people's active contribution to the environment in which they function to make it more supportive for themselves. In the context of education, where agentic engagement has been studied almost exclusively, it refers to students' active contribution into the flow of instruction they receive in order to enrich the instruction for themselves and their peers. People who use agentic engagement realize that they can help to propel their own growth by seeking support that leverages their inner motivation. Focusing on existing scholarship within education, theory and research suggest that this agentic form of engagement is uniquely proactive, collaborative, and constructive, predicting desirable outcomes for both student and teachers. Benefits of agentic engagement likely generalize to other contexts. However, siloing across subfields of psychological research has meant that it has yet to be applied beyond education. In this overview, I review the origins and theoretical underpinnings of agentic engagement and review existing research on links with outcomes. Next, I assess the promise of agentic engagement for addressing challenges people face in a variety of contexts in order to encourage de-siloing. I also review obstacles to realizing the promise of agentially engaging, including the behaviors of those in positions of authority who receive and respond to agentic engagement and the characteristics of those who would seek to use agentic engagement. Finally, I discuss possible future directions the research on agentic engagement might take as we seek to better understand how it works and how to leverage its potential.

Public Significance Statement

This paper advances our understanding of the agentic engagement construct and its dynamic role in motivation. The focus on the paper is on reviewing the origins of and evidence for agentic engagement and assessing its promise for addressing challenges that people face in a variety of contexts.

Keywords: agentic engagement, engagement, agency, motivation, autonomy, autonomy support

Agentic Engagement: Transcending Passive Motivation

Introduction

People are routinely faced with the challenge of supporting the motivation, engagement, and well-being of others across a multitude of contexts, including within parenting, education, work, healthcare, and friendship or romantic relationships. Ideally, those in a role of supporting seek to understand and draw on the inner motivation of those they seek to support, recognizing that everyone has their own unique set of interests, values, preferences, prior experiences, and goals that serve as their wellspring of inner motivation that propels growth and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Teachers and parents ideally leverage inner motivation so that their students and children are readily engaged in the process of learning and developing new skills (e.g., Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Vasquez et al., 2015). Managers and doctors strive to tap inner motivation so that supervisees and patients are engaged in their work tasks or the process of ensuring good health (Slemp et al., 2018; Hagger & Protogerou, 2020). And in the personal realm, ideally, people connect with the inner motivation of their friends and romantic partners in order to maintain their friends' or partners' well-being and the quality of the relationship (Ratelle et al., 2013; Deci et al., 2006).

These people know that high quality engagement, that is, active involvement in an activity or goal (Christensen et al., 2012), is essential to people attaining valued outcomes, including accomplishing a goal, learning a new skill, or maintaining one's health and relationships. They know that engagement is the key pathway by which we bring about desired outcomes for ourselves (Lei et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2009). However, challenges often emerge because those providing support do not always draw on others' inner motivation when trying to

engage them in the pursuit of goals and growth. And likewise, people do not always advocate to make their inner motivation known to those who could support their motivation, engagement, and other outcomes.

Classrooms provide a relevant example of this (Reeve, 2009). Classrooms tend to reflect a (flawed) philosophy of learning in which information and planning flows almost exclusively from teachers to students (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2024), allowing teachers to often remain unaware of and instruction disconnected from students' inner motivations. Likewise, many students do not share information about their inner motivation, keeping their interests, values, preferences, and goals hidden from teachers, in part because the classroom context is usually very teacher-centered (e.g., Howe & Abedin, 2013). The result is that many students may not be realizing all their potential because they are not very engaged in school and only become less engaged across grade levels (e.g., Hodges, 2018).

Agentic engagement refers to people's active contribution to the environment in which they function to make it more supportive for themselves. In the context of education where agentic engagement has been exclusively studied, agentic engagement refers to students' active contribution into the flow of instruction they receive, typically through behaviors such as asking questions or communicating preferences and suggestions in order to enrich the instruction for themselves and their peers (Patall et al., 2019; Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2022). Agentic engagement in other contexts is likely to look quite similar, with people collaboratively communicating to make their preferences known and understood by those who are in a position of supporting them, including parents, healthcare providers, managers, friends, administrators, or other leaders. Although it is a construct that has only recently been proposed (Reeve & Tseng, 2011, Reeve, 2013), it builds from a long history of theory and research in psychology that has

emphasized the importance of peoples' active and agentic participation in their own learning, health, and life outcomes (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Makitalo, 2016; Skinner, 1996). The construct reflects the notion that people have the capacity to act as agents, even in contexts like school, work, or the doctors' office where they find themselves in a subordinate role. Moreover, it reflects the notion that when people go beyond passively responding to the intended motivation support of others in their environment and instead participate in shaping the support they receive, they function better (e.g., Patall et al., 2019; Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2022). Agentic engagement allows people to collaborate with those who would support them to reach important goals, ensuring that they have what they need to be successful and thrive.

In this article, I focus on the potential utility of understanding and fostering agentic engagement in various contexts, highlighting the evidence from education where it has been most studied to discuss this potential. I will begin by contextualizing agentic engagement within a broader history of theory and research in psychology focused on agency, motivation, and engagement. Next, I review research on agentic engagement and assess its promise for improving outcomes in education and other contexts to which it could potentially be applied. Finally, I discuss possible future directions the research on agentic engagement might take as we seek to better understand how it works and how to leverage it to improve people's lives.

Agency and Agentic Engagement in Psychology

Agency is an important construct in psychology, long emphasized as critical to learning, development, psychological functioning, and life outcomes (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Brandtstadter & Lerner, 1999; Harré & Gillet, 1994; Helgeson, 1994; Judge & Bono, 2001; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996; Makitalo, 2016; Martin et al., 2003; Skinner, 1996; Vella-Brodrick et al, 2023; Welzel & Inglehart, 2010). With connections to research traditions within social,

personality, education, health, and organizational psychology, as well as other areas of social science, agency has been defined in numerous ways and labeled with many terms. However, at its core, agency most typically reflects people's belief, capacity, and motivation to influence and transform the social world and their own outcomes, with an agent being someone who intentionally asserts this capacity, attempting to influence his or her own functioning and life circumstances (e.g., Bandura, 2006; 2018). From social cognitive perspectives on efficacy and goal oriented behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011) and perspectives on psychological needs (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017) to models of successful aging (e.g., Schulz & Heckhausen; Smith et al., 2000) or field observations of effective classroom learning behavior (e.g., Fiedler, 1975; Koenigs et al., 1977; Skinner et al., 1990), theory and research in psychology has frequently converged on the finding that successful and healthy people in Western cultures generally believe they can act to influence their own outcomes and act accordingly within and sometimes beyond the bounds of their social positions. For example, a greater sense of efficacy and agency to bring about desired outcomes in general, as well as in specific contexts like school or the workplace, is associated with greater academic achievement, educational persistence, job satisfaction, job performance, and life satisfaction (e.g., Brown et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2013a, b; Judge & Bono, 2001). Likewise, a sense of agency to influence outcomes predicts long-term psychological well-being as people age (e.g., Smith et al., 2000; Vella-Brodrick et al., 2023).

In the classroom, students sometimes assert their agency by leveraging their inner sources of motivation and engaging in ways that change the conditions for their learning. Indeed, research in educational contexts has made it clear that teachers and students mutually influence what each believe, feel, say, and do in the classroom (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Sameroff, 2009), with

students primarily influencing teachers with *engagement* (or *disengagement*) that draws out more supportive (or more controlling) interaction styles from their teachers (e.g., Jang et al., 2016; Patall et al., 2016; 2018; Pelletier et al., 2002; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Traditionally, scholars have conceptualized engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes behavioral (e.g., effort attention and participation), emotional (e.g., interest, enjoyment, and other positive emotions), and cognitive components (e.g., regulation of goal pursuit) (Ben-Elmehrik et al., 2018; Fredricks et al., 2019). However, building on extensive evidence on the importance of agency and the reciprocal causation that occurs between teachers and students, as well as between people in other interpersonal settings, Reeve and colleagues (2011; 2013) proposed that students' also can engage agenticly in order to recruit the support they need from instructors and transform what their teachers say and do. In the classroom, this form of engagement involves students acting as agents to proactively, constructively, and collaboratively influence the flow of instruction they receive and help create a learning environment that is more supportive for themselves. While the effects of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement on teachers' practice tend to be inadvertent, agentic engagement is a deliberate pathway by which students influence the environment (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Patall et al., 2019).

Beyond the classroom, agentic engagement can be conceived similarly, as people intentionally, proactively, constructively, and collaboratively acting to leverage their inner motivation as they engage in ways that make the support they receive better suited to their needs. Agentic engagement is behavior and can take a variety of forms. Typically, it has been operationally defined (e.g., Reeve, 2013) by expressing questions, preferences, values, goals, interests, and opinions and making requests for resources and adjustments so that activities are more interesting, valuable, or personally relevant. But, whatever the behavior or context, agentic

engagement involves intentional reflection on what one needs to thrive and initiation of action to regulate and shape the environment and the support of others to better meet those needs. Agentic engagement is associated with but diverges from constructs like self-efficacy, perceived control, and locus of control (e.g., see Skinner, 1996 for an overview of related construct definitions) in that is defined more by the behavior of acting to change one's environment to suit the self, rather than merely the belief that one can be effective in executing particular behavior or bringing about certain outcomes. It is aligned somewhat with aspects of self-regulation in the context of learning or goal pursuit (e.g., e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011), as much like self-regulation, agentic engagement involves intentional, reflective, self-initiated processes for regulating one's goals and experience while pursuing them. It also has some similarity with concepts sometimes labeled as personal or primary control, proxy control, and secondary control (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Rothbaum et al., 1982), which are defined typically as responses to threats to control, including by mobilizing one's own skills to try to make the environment fit one's wishes (primary or personal), compelling others with power to act on one's behalf to produce an outcome (proxy), or changing one's own plans and wishes (secondary). However, in contrast to all of these constructs, agentic engagement is a particularly reciprocal or collaborative form of regulating in interpersonal spaces, reflecting an individual's effort to initiate a process in which interaction partners engage in a series of "dialectical transactions" meant to shape a supportive environment that leverages the initiators' inner motivation in the pursuit of mutually agreed upon goals (Reeve, 2013).

The Role of Agentic Engagement in Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamics of motivation, engagement, and well-being. From this perspective,

high quality motivation, engagement, learning, and well-being emerge when people experience that their basic psychological needs for autonomy (e.g., sense that actions emanate from the self), competence (e.g., sense of mastery), and relatedness (e.g., sense of mutual caring with others) are satisfied. Environments and interactions that facilitate peoples' goal engagement and psychological well-being are those that support these needs and avoid being indifferent to or actively thwarting them. In particular, whether in a horizontal relationship (e.g., where one person has more authority like a parent) or vertical relationship (e.g., friendship), those in a position of supporting the motivation of others do this best by adopting an autonomy supportive style marked by openness and strategies (e.g., offering choices or collaborative decision-making, perspective-taking, other-attuned information or advice, providing meaningful rationales) that center the perspectives, interests, preferences, values, and goals of those they seek to support (e.g., Deci et al., 2006; Grolnick et al., 1991 Patall & Zambrano, 2019). They also refrain from controlling styles and strategies (e.g., directives, suppression of others' perspective, guilt induction, controlling rationales, contingent approval) that prioritize their own perspectives and pressure others to think, feel, or behave in only certain preferred ways (e.g., Aelterman et al., 2019; Padilla et al., 2015; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2010). Broadly, perceived autonomy support has been linked positively and control negatively to a variety of desirable outcomes across different contexts and types of relationships, including, for example, psychological need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, engagement, life, school, and job satisfaction, well-being, achievement, better relationship quality, prosocial behavior, and physical health (e.g., see Ryan et al., 2022 for an overview). Within the context of education, where engagement has been a core focus, extensive longitudinal and experimental evidence suggests that teachers' autonomy support enhances all four forms of students' engagement, including agentic, whereas control

enhances disengagement (e.g., Assor et al., 2002; 2005; Cheon et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2016; Patall et al., 2018; 2019).

In this framework (see Figure 1), the unique function of agentic engagement is to provide a mechanism through which people self-regulate their own need satisfaction, and in turn, motivational well-being both directly, by acting with autonomy, and indirectly, by attempting to shape the environment to support their needs (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020). Like other forms of engagement, agentic engagement emerges out of need support in the environment, and in turn, subsequent experiences of autonomy, competence or self-efficacy, relatedness, and the motivation toward pursue personal growth (e.g., Jang et al., 2016; Matos et al., 2018; Patall et al., 2019; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reeve et al., 2020b). However, agentic engagement also requires an agentic mindset and believing in one's own empowerment or capacity to bring about change in the environment (e.g., a sense of personal control; Skinner, 1996) and in turn, desired personal outcomes (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Patall et al., 2022a; 2022b). Agentic engagement is less likely to emerge in a controlling compared to a supportive or neutral context. However, when it does occur, it helps to shift the context by making others more aware of one's interests, goals, preferences, and suggestions. Ideally, agentic engagement provides a pathway to help bring interaction partners together to be more in synch, reciprocally constructive, and mutually supportive, rather than in conflict with each other (e.g., Reeve & Shin, 2020).

Evidence on Conceptual and Predictive Validity of Agentic Engagement

To date, research on agentic engagement has been exclusively conducted within the context of education to understand interactions between teachers and students, particularly adolescent and emerging adult students. The quantitative research conducted has demonstrated

that agentic engagement is a distinct form of engagement, having modest correlations with the other engagement components, separating from them in factor structures, and uniquely predicting outcomes like achievement even after accounting for other components of engagement (e.g., Mameli & Passini, 2019; Patall et al., 2019; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve et al., 2020a). Qualitative and observational evidence also supports the validity of the agentic engagement construct (e.g., Montenegro, 2019; Zambrano et al., 2022; 2023). For example, focus groups and interviews with racially diverse high school students in urban U.S. schools have revealed that, across gender and race, students recognize the agentic engagement construct in a variety of behaviors that they or their classmates use, though rarely (e.g., Manzuoli et al., 2019), and believe it to have multiple important purposes, including to elicit motivation and learning support from teachers, to support one's own motivational experience, and to help create a more supportive classroom environment for the entire community of learners (Zambrano et al., 2022). Focus groups with teachers have similarly revealed that they too recognize the importance of the agentic engagement strategies for supporting student learning and teacher planning, but feel students rarely enact them (Zambrano et al., 2023).

The bulk of the evidence on the role of agentic engagement in educational outcomes has been correlational or longitudinal, with most research focusing on adolescents and emerging adults across countries with diverse educational systems and cultures (e.g., Korea, U.S.A., Peru, China). More recently, experimental and field intervention research has also started to emerge. This evidence suggests that agentic engagement predicts three broad categories of outcomes. Namely, agentic engagement supports 1) a more motivationally supportive environment, 2) need satisfaction, and 3) enhanced functioning, including adaptive mindsets, overall engagement, motivation, and learning.

First, longitudinal research suggests that agentic engagement uniquely transforms teachers' behavior to create a more *motivationally supportive environment* over time (e.g., Jang et al., 2023; Matos et al., 2018; Patall et al., 2019; Reeve, 2013; Reeve et al., 2020a). Agentic engagement positions teachers to adjust their instruction, making them more aware of students' needs, goals, interests, and preferences and therefore, more able to calibrate their instruction to support student motivation and learning. For example, Matos and colleagues (2018) found in longitudinal research with Peruvian university students that reciprocal relationships existed between students' engagement and autonomy support. Instructors' early semester perceived autonomy support predicted increases in students' end of semester behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and agentic engagement. But, only early semester agentic engagement predicted later autonomy support. Using intensive longitudinal daily data with racially diverse U.S. high school science students (Patall et al., 2019), my research group found that students' agentic engagement on a given class day predicted an increase in perceived autonomy support from their science teachers since the prior class day. Across the instructional unit, students' agentic engagement predicted an increase in perceptions that teachers incorporated students' interests into lessons and provided meaningful rationales for activities in class, which in turn predicted an increase in students' need satisfaction and other engagement outcomes by the end of the unit. However, the correlates of agentic engagement were not exclusively desirable; perceptions that teachers suppressed student perspectives also slightly increased on days when students reported being more agentially engaged, suggesting that agentic engagement can backfire.

Second, students' agentic engagement also contributes to students' subsequent *experiences of need satisfaction* (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Reeve et al., 2020b; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Patall et al., 2019; 2022b). Agentially engaged students are cued into what is most interesting or

valuable about their learning experiences and act to leverage their motivation, doing things that support their interests, develop their competence, connect to others, or accomplish their goals. Similar patterns of relationships have been found across ability levels (e.g., Shogren et al., 2019) and across various countries, including for the example, the U.S. (Patall et al., 2019), Korea (e.g., Reeve et al., 2020b), Italy (Mameli & Passini, 2019), China (Reeve & Tseng, 2011), and Iran (Maralini et al., 2018). For example, in the context of an intervention training secondary school physical education teachers to use autonomy support, Reeve and colleagues (2020b) found that Korean students' agentic engagement predicted an increase in need satisfaction, along with greater autonomy support, over the course of the school year. Likewise, agentic disengagement predicted more need frustration and less autonomy support across the year. In sum, agency seems to be a pathway to having need satisfying experiences. However, whether support for need satisfaction occurs independently of changes in the environment has yet to be disentangled.

Finally, given the relationships between agentic engagement, the learning environment, and need satisfaction, it should come as no surprise that agentic engagement has also been linked with students' *effective functioning* more broadly, including increases in behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement and greater academic progress (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Reeve et al., 2020a; Patall et al., 2019). For example, my research group found that students experienced an increase in their behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, both on a daily basis and over the course of a six-week unit, as a function of engaging more agentially (Patall et al., 2019). Across two longitudinal studies with Korean secondary students, Reeve and colleagues (2020a) found that agentic engagement predicted students' end of course achievement and academic progress, while emotional and cognitive engagement did not. Students who engage agentially catalyze their own desired outcomes.

Along these lines, research suggests that agentic engagement has the potential to be self-sustaining. Not only does it support more positive environments, need satisfaction, and learning experiences that are likely to reinforce its use in the future, it also *reinforces an agentic mindset* or belief that one has the power to influence the motivational quality of the environment and one's experience in it. For example, in one study with urban U.S. high school science students who were majority Latino and Asian, my research group found that students' reported use of agentic engagement earlier the semester predicted an increase in their agentic mindset later in the semester, controlling for their prior mindset. However, this relationship was not equivalent across students of all achievement levels. In particular, the relationship was strongest for higher achieving students.

Agentic Engagement Experiments and Interventions

Beyond this correlational and longitudinal evidence, limited experimental and intervention evidence has also provided preliminary support for the potential benefits of agentic engagement. Reeve and colleagues (2021) provided initial proof of concept in two laboratory-based experiments with Korean university students in a teacher education program. In these studies, participants were assigned to either a teacher or student role and both agentic engagement and autonomy support were manipulated. Participants in the teacher role were randomly assigned to be autonomy supportive or not and provide corresponding directions. Participants in the student role were randomly assigned to be agentially engaged or not. Those in the agentic engagement condition were provided recommendations on using agentic engagement behaviors to change the environment. Results indicated that participants in the agentic engagement training condition used more agentic engagement behavior, had a more autonomy supportive teaching and learning environment, and experienced greater autonomy

need satisfaction and interest according to both participant reports and observer ratings. They were also rated by observers as more engaged overall, but did not experience greater self-reported engagement or skill development and did not have higher rated performance.

Similarly, in an attempt to provide causal evidence on agentic engagement in authentic classrooms (Patall et al., 2022b), my research group explored whether an agentic orientation could be cultivated through a brief, online intervention for university students and the benefits of such an intervention in three randomized field experiments with college students in psychology or introductory natural science courses. In all three experiments, students were randomly assigned to either 1) an agentic orientation intervention, 2) an alternative intervention, or 3) an inactive control. The agentic orientation intervention delivered a 30-minute, self-paced, online program at the start of the semester and encouraged students to view their motivational experiences in class as malleable and responsive to agentic behaviors that they were provided information on and encouraged to use. Results showed that the agentic orientation intervention had benefits for students. Students receiving the intervention at the beginning of the semester later expressed a greater agentic mindset compared to participants in the other conditions, and in turn, reported greater in-class engagement, need satisfaction, personal interest in the subject, intentions to take additional similar courses, and perceptions of instructors' autonomy support. However, the intervention had few direct effects on end-of-semester outcomes. We concluded that to strengthen those direct effects, it was important for future interventions to provide more training on specific behavioral strategies for agentic engagement.

Collectively, the initial evidence has provided preliminary support for a variety of benefits of agentic engagement. It has also suggested that future research should focus on

uncovering the conditions that can lead to stronger effects, the range and duration of benefits, and conditions under which backfire effects might occur or be avoided.

The Promise of Understanding and Cultivating Agentic Engagement Across Domains

Psychological theory and initial research evidence suggest that agentic engagement is a malleable lever for changing the support that people receive, as well as their subsequent motivation and other learning, health, and social outcomes. Indeed, the presence of agentic engagement in horizontal or vertical interpersonal relationships and organizations would seem to represent a very high level of functioning in which people are reflective and communicative about their own needs, are supportive and responsive to the needs of others, and work to be synchronized with others in their goal pursuit. Unfortunately, we understand very little of how agentic engagement might function in contexts outside of education, as it has yet to be studied in other contexts. However, agentic engagement is likely an important component of high functioning relationships across a variety of contexts and understanding it positions researchers to provide better guidance. Moreover, if the research in education is any example, it would seem that agentic engagement can be relatively elusive. As such, there are opportunities to consider how cultivating agentic engagement might be one tool that can be used to address problems related to disengagement in a variety of contexts.

Take the context of education as an initial example. In the U.S. and other countries, we continue to see chronic student disengagement that increases with school level (e.g., Wang & Eccles, 2012; Hodges, 2018; Patall et al., 2024). Results from a recent Gallup Student Poll (Hodges, 2018) across 5 million surveys of students in the 5th to 12th grade suggested that only 47% of students reported being engaged. By 10th grade, only one-third of students reported being highly engaged. The situation is likely most dire for U.S. students of color, as we continue to

contend with persistent racial and income disparities in academic success (e.g., Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2008; McDonough, 2015; Reardon, 2013) that reflect a history of racism, social stratification, and unequal access to high-quality motivation and learning support (Goldhaber et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2018; Murdock, 1999).

Until recently, self-determination theorists have primarily suggested that one key solution to these sorts of problems was to focus on the environment and those in roles of authority, particularly the teacher (e.g., Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Patall & Zambrano, 2019; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Indeed, scholars have come a long way in creating and testing autonomy supportive interventions that effectively help educators become more need supportive, efficacious, and satisfied in their roles, as well as support students' learning, motivation, and social outcomes (e.g., Reeve & Cheon, 2021; Su & Reeve, 2011). Continuing to encourage the adoption of autonomy supportive practices remains a critical need in education. However, agentic engagement also plays an important role in understanding how chronic disengagement can be addressed. Students dynamically shape their own learning and thus, they benefit from learning environments that support their goals, interests, and purpose for learning (i.e., supports for autonomy and agency), provide guidance that helps them make connections to and build on prior experiences (i.e., supports for competence), and makes them feel that they belong in the community (i.e., supports for relatedness) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). While teachers can (and sometimes do) provide these kinds of supports based on their own guesses about what students are thinking or feeling, support will be improved by regular input from students themselves. Over time, a regular cycle of students agentially engaging and teachers responding to those efforts with good faith changes to instruction should improve the capacity of both to support each other emotionally, cognitively, and structurally. In

this way, students' agentic engagement is posed to provide critical input for shaping educational environments that are need supportive and mitigate concerning levels of disengagement.

However, beyond being informative to teachers' attempts to support students, agentic engagement provides students with a collaborative tool for resilience when educational experiences are not sufficiently aligned with their needs and can even be a tool of resistance and self-realization (e.g., Peach & Mathews, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2021). Promoting agentic engagement in education settings encourages students to authentically define and express who they are and collaboratively solicit and co-construct the instruction they need, rather than passively accepting instruction that is not serving their needs. Students report that agentic engagement does not just serve themselves as individuals, it serves as a prosocial tool to support their class community as well (Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Zambrano et al., 2022). To the extent that many educational outcome disparities reflect failures to *equitably* prioritize students' perspectives and needs in the education process, encouraging a culture of agentic engagement creates an opportunity for students to highlight their collective needs and communally amplify the perspectives of students who have been historically marginalized.

Building off this example in education, it is important to recognize that less than ideal engagement and well-being is not just a problem for students and teachers. Recent research has indicated that approximately 1 in 4 workers across a variety of workplace settings report a lack of interest, motivation, and engagement in their work (APA, 2021). The Gallup 2023 State of the Global Workplace report indicated that 44% of respondents reported a lot of stress, up from 36% in 2012. Not surprisingly, stress, burnout, and disengagement have consequences for employers and employees, with 2 in 5 workers reporting the intent to change jobs in recent years (APA, 2021). Similarly, a lack of engagement is a problem in the context of healthcare. For example, up

to 30% of new prescriptions for medication are never filled and medication is taken as directed only 50% of the time (e.g., Mohiuddin et al., 2019). Low levels of patient engagement have become particularly problematic as the number of people living with chronic diseases that need ongoing management continues to increase (e.g., Snyder & Engstrom, 2016). And within the domain of parenting, a recent survey (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023) indicated 76% of U.S. parents are somewhat to extremely concerned about their children's mental well-being, depression, and anxiety, a concern that mirrors declining levels of mental health among children and teenagers (Geiger & Davis, 2019). However, many of those parents indicated they might solve this problem by being controlling, with nearly half (45%) of parents self-identifying as overprotective (Minkin & Horowitz, 2023).

As in the education context, self-determination theorists have suggested that one effective solution for improving the quality of workers' motivation, patients involvement, and childrens' well-being is for managers, health care providers, and parents to reduce their tendency to rely on controlling strategies (e.g., external contingencies, pressure, guilt) and adopt a more autonomy supportive style (e.g., Entwistle et al., 2010; Gagne et al., 1997; Richer & Vallerand, 1995; Vasquez et al., 2015). Indeed, promising interventions recognizing the importance of supporting autonomy have emerged across these domains. For example, research has suggested that training managers to use more autonomy supportive strategies leads to greater autonomous motivation and workplace engagement among the workers they supervise (Hardre & Reeve, 2009). Smokers who are randomly assigned to autonomy supportive treatment experience greater autonomous motivation and feelings of competence and in turn, greater medication use and tobacco cessation compared to patients assigned to a community care treatment (e.g., Williams et al., 2006). And similarly, children whose parents participate in autonomy supportive interventions report more

positive affect and are rated by observers as more engaged compared to children whose parents do not participate in autonomy support training (e.g., Froiland, 2011; Cleveland & Morris, 2014).

However, research has yet to be conducted on the role of agentic engagement in these relationships and whether agentic engagement on the part of workers, patients, or children, (among other roles) can improve the quality of their relationships, enhance the support they are provided, or have benefits for motivation, engagement, productivity, and health. I suspect that if conducted, research across other contexts would reveal agentic engagement to have a similar range of benefits as has been found in education. Some research has already alluded to the value of understanding agentic engagement across a variety of domains and the potential power of cultivating it. For example, self-determination theory framed research has found interest and enjoyment at work to be related to workers' experiences of empowerment, that is, their sense that they are influential, in control, and competent at work (e.g., Gagne et al., 1997). Likewise, other research has linked greater productivity to the participation of workers in the decision making and manager selection and evaluation across a wide range of organizations (e.g., Levin, 2006). Research within the healthcare domain not specifically focused on a self-determination theory perspective also points to the importance of patient empowerment (i.e., defined as the capacity to better their situation), with efforts to enhance patients' agency through education or encouraging communication being linked to better health outcomes (e.g., Snyder & Engstrom, 2016) and in particular, interpersonal agency (e.g., obtaining desired outcomes through strategic interactions with others) being linked to well-being in adults across the lifespan (e.g., Smith et al., 2000).

However, missing in the research on the dynamics of motivation and engagement across these contexts is an exploration that goes beyond support for others' autonomy or beliefs about having control and autonomy, to also exploring the role of workers', patients', and childrens'

intentional, proactive strategies for guiding the support they receive to suit their own needs. Given the research within education, we might expect this future research to reveal that, although more rare than we might like, workers, patients, and children with especially desirable outcomes are those who agentially engage with the trusted others who shape their settings and support their outcomes. Moreover, given precedent research, we can expect that cultures, contexts, strategies, and interventions that actively encourage individuals to routinely agentially engage by reflecting on how their circumstances can be improved and then acting purposefully and collaboratively to bring about an environment in which their motivation and engagement (and that of those around them) is supported will have benefits across a variety of contexts.

Challenges and Considerations

Despite its potential to bring about psychological, performance, and health benefits, there are, of course, challenges associated with agentic engagement to consider as well. First, many people may not feel comfortable engaging agentially in the very settings that agentic engagement is likely to be most helpful. Take students in the context of education as an example. Because instruction in most classrooms is relatively dominated by teachers, many secondary and tertiary students are not comfortable with being agentially engaged and activate it more rarely than other forms of engagement (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Manzuoli et al., 2019; Zambrano et al., 2022). Qualitative research with students and teachers reveals that agentic engagement is relatively rare for a number of reasons, including students' personalities, existing beliefs and motivation, academic and behavioral background, social roles, and especially, teachers' encouragement or discouragement of agentic engagement with their strategies and in communication (e.g., Montenegro, 2019; Zambrano et al., 2022; 2023). Many of these antecedents are likely to apply to other domains as well.

Research suggests that a variety of beliefs and dispositions are antecedents to agentic engagement. In particular, research suggests that people are more likely to engage, generally, when they have higher dispositions for agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and proactive coping (e.g., Bakker et al., 2015; Gan et al., 2007; Qureshi et al., 2016) and are more likely to agentially engage, in particular, when they have a greater disposition toward collaboration and self-expression tendencies (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Datu et al., 2018). People's self-efficacy, agency beliefs, and growth mindsets are also likely to be critical antecedents to behaving agentially, as believing in one's capacity to execute a behavior and influence outcomes, as well as believing in the malleable potential of the environment and in turn, one's experience and skill development, constitute the underlying rationale for acting agentially (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Chen et al., 2015; 2020; O'Keefe et al., 2018; Thoman et al., 2019; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). In particular, people's mindset for agentic engagement or the extent to which they believe that motivation and the environment can be changed to be more motivating, are particularly important (e.g., Patall et al., 2022b; Shin & Reeve, 2020). For example, intervention research with college students suggests that training students to adopt an agentic mindset leads to greater endorsement of an agentic mindset and, in turn, greater agentic engagement behavior and other benefits (e.g., Patall et al., 2022b). This all suggests that agentic engagement may come more easily to some people than others depending on their personality and beliefs. While some beliefs (e.g. mindsets) are readily influenced, many personality traits (e.g., extroversion) are relative stable and enduring (e.g., Bleidorn et al., 2021). Moreover, acting agentially may not be perceived as well-aligned with other personal characteristics, values, and social pressures among women and people of color, whose socialized ways of interacting may emphasize communion and interdependence more so than agency and individualism (e.g.,

Boykin, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2002; Sczesny et al., 2019). Along these lines, female students have been found to agentially engage less than male students in Italy (e.g., Molinari & Passini, 2018), though intervention evidence in the context of college science classes has suggested similar (or slightly more advantageous) benefits for women and students of color (Patall et al., 2022b).

Other research highlights the importance of the context. Most proximally, people are more likely to agentially engage if they are already experiencing need satisfaction, a sense of competence, and autonomous motivation (i.e., motivation for behavior founded on interest, personal goals, and values) (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Michou et al., 2023; Sokmen, 2019). But, these experiences are often supported (or thwarted) by the environment and by the autonomy supportive (or controlling) strategies used by people who are in positions of authority (e.g., Aelterman et al., 2019; Patall & Zambrano, 2019; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Autonomy supportive styles encourage agentic engagement directly, as well as indirectly through need satisfaction and motivation (e.g., Michou et al., 2023; Patall et al., 2019; 2023; Pineda-Baez et al., 2019), whereas indifferent and controlling interaction styles increase need frustration and agentic disengagement (Cohen et al., 2020). In fact, some research has explicitly demonstrated the greater importance of context for promoting agentic engagement relative to personal dispositions and beliefs (Michou et al., 2023). Thus, a key challenge for encouraging agentic engagement is that those in positions of authority, like teachers and managers, or even parents, are sometimes not autonomy supportive (e.g., Reeve, 2009; Minkin & Horowitz, 2023) and may not encourage agentic engagement (e.g., Montenegro, 2019; Zambrano et al., 2022; 2023). Over time, people who are consistently provided with autonomy support in anticipation of or in response to agentic engagement are likely to use more of it and see themselves as collaborators with others,

including teachers, managers, parents, and healthcare providers, as they persist through challenges together (Reeve & Jang, 2022). While agentic engagement is not entirely dependent on context (e.g., Reeve et al., 2021; Patall et al., 2022b), it seems to be difficult for people to overcome persistent, oppressive environments. In such a context, even those who initially agentially engaged are likely to stop doing so (e.g., Reeve et al., 2020b).

Finally, for people with identities that are often marginalized, including Black and Latino people, people from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, and lower achievers, agentic engagement may sometimes represent risky behavior. On the one hand, agentic engagement can support a sense of empowerment among often marginalized people and facilitate better alignment of the environment with their identities, needs, and values. However, on the other hand, people with marginalized identities may worry that agentially engaging may confirm negative stereotypes others have of them and their group (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; Shapiro & Williams, 2011; Steele et al., 2002). For example, a Black worker may worry that expressing some preferences could be interpreted by others as hostile or disrespectful, consistent with negative stereotypes that portray Black people as aggressive (Ferguson, 2000) or a Latino student might worry that asking questions could be interpreted by others as a lack of ability or intelligence, in line with negative ethnic stereotypes (Jackson, 1995). These concerns are not unfounded. Our research with urban high school science teachers serving primarily students of color suggested that teachers' deficit perspectives and stereotypes were a barrier to responding supportively to the agentic engagement of students with marginalized identities or a history of low achievement (e.g., Zambrano et al., 2023). Moreover, some of our longitudinal research with urban high school science students of color has revealed that adaptive predictive relationships between students' agentic mindsets, agentic engagement, and perceptions of their teachers'

autonomy support primarily emerge for high and not low achieving students and low more so than high stereotype vulnerable students (i.e. students who expressed less compared to more concern about having negative experiences due to their race or ethnicity) (Patall et al., 2022a). As such, it is important to explore how racial, ethnic, and other social stereotypes can be barriers to agentic engagement, and how such barriers can be overcome.

Future Directions and Broader Application for Agentic Engagement

Research on agentic engagement within educational settings is in its infancy and research in other domains has yet to be initiated. As such, much more work needs to be done to better understand the nature, function, antecedents, consequences, and circumstances of agentic engagement as we consider how it might be leveraged to improve people's outcomes across a variety of settings. The roles of personal characteristics and beliefs, including personality, existing motivation, prior performance, behavioral conduct, racial or cultural identity, socioeconomic background, gender norms, and peer roles have yet to be thoroughly explored in research, although there is reason to believe they are important. Likewise, agentic engagement has also been primarily explored among adolescents and emerging adults. Given that gaining greater autonomy, agency, individuation, and independence are key developmental tasks during adolescence (e.g., Eccles et al., 1993; Erikson, 1968), agentic engagement is likely to be particularly meaningful during this period. However, a critical question for future research is the extent to which agentic engagement functions similarly among younger and older people. In addition, better understanding whether, how, and when agentic engagement can "backfire" is also a top priority. Currently, we have little understanding of which, how, or when people in roles of authority are non-responsiveness to agentic engagement attempts or the extent of the consequences of being dismissive and suppressive of agentic engagement.

As for whether agentic engagement is relevant outside the context of the classroom, the prior discussion should make apparent that it is. Recently, education research on agentic engagement has started to move beyond the immediate classroom context. For example, some research on agentic engagement has started to explore its role for supporting students' capacity to adapt to new challenges as they prepare to become professionals in workplaces (e.g., Peach & Mathews, 2011) and its importance for Black college students' persistence in higher education despite limited institutional support (e.g., Choi et al., 2023). However, as previously discussed, agentic engagement is likely to have meaningful implications for parenting, workplace dynamics, healthcare, and interpersonal relationships, with better parent-child, employer-employee, healthcare experiences, friendships, and romantic relationships likely to emerge in the presence of agentic engagement. This seems to be a foregone conclusion, given the ancestry of agentic engagement in more general social, developmental, clinical, and cognitive psychological theories of agency and motivation that emphasize the importance of agentic beliefs and behavior (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Martin et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Skinner, 1996) and the alignment with perspectives on self-regulation (e.g., Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011) and growth, developmental, or strategic mindsets across various contexts (e.g., Chen et al., 2015; 2020; O'Keefe et al., 2018; Thoman et al., 2019; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Still, it remains a question for future research as to the extent to which the specific construct of agentic engagement has similar functions in settings outside of education and how it can be leveraged most profitably within other contexts.

In particular, a critical direction for future research is to explore effective interventions and training related to agentic engagement. Prior interventions have been relatively brief, focusing primarily on persuading students of the benefits of agentic mindset and encouraging

corresponding behavior with examples (e.g., Patall et al., 2022b). It falls to future research to explore what agentic engagement interventions might look like for people in other roles or in other contexts, who should be the target of intervention (e.g., managers and/or supervisees; healthcare providers and/or patients), and whether interventions might produce both short- and long-term benefit across a variety of outcomes (e.g., relationship quality, supportive environment, well-being, motivation, engagement, performance, health). Given the reciprocal nature of motivation support and agentic engagement, interventions that target actors in multiple roles are likely to have the greatest promise.

Finally, given the particular challenges that people from marginalized identities face, it is critical that future research focus on actively seeking out their understanding of and experiences with agentic engagement (e.g., DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014). Historically, engagement research, at least within education, has not sufficiently attended to power dynamics, inequities in conditions, or marginalized identities (e.g., Quaye, Harper, & Pendakur, 2019). Attending to these issues in research on agentic engagement is important for having a complete understanding of agentic engagement and is especially critical for informing training that will be well-aligned and culturally responsive to the needs of people with marginalized identities.

Conclusions

I began this overview of agentic engagement by noting that people bring with them many resources for motivation, learning, and growth. Yet, a theme of this article is that growth does not happen without intentionality. With this overview of the theory and research on agentic engagement, I hoped to illustrate both the promise and challenges associated with agentic engagement. I hope that researchers and practitioners within education and beyond can build on

this promising line of research as we seek to better understand agentic engagement and its application.

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Figure 1

Model of the Function of Agentic Engagement

