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To cite this article: Johnmarshall Reeve & Stephanie H. Shin (2020) How teachers can support students' agentic engagement, *Theory Into Practice*, 59:2, 150-161, DOI: [10.1080/00405841.2019.1702451](https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1702451)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2019.1702451>



Accepted author version posted online: 18 Dec 2019.
Published online: 04 Feb 2020.



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How teachers can support students' agentic engagement

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ABSTRACT

Agentic engagement represents students' constructive contribution into the flow of instruction they receive, as students express their interests and offer their input. It is a purposive, proactive, and reciprocal type of engagement that is integral to promoting important student outcomes (e.g., learning, achievement), but its essential purpose is to recruit greater autonomy support from the teacher. We first highlight the different ways that teachers typically respond to student displays of agentic engagement (i.e., support, indifference, or control). We then recommend that teachers adopt an autonomy-supportive motivating style that will allow teachers to become increasingly in sync with their students as agents. Thus, the purpose of the article is to explain how teachers might best support students' agentic engagement during classroom instruction.

All students have interests, goals, and dreams. To be intrinsically motivated and to embrace intrinsic growth strivings is simply a part of the human motivational architecture (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Sheldon & Corcoran, 2019). When teachers support students' expression and pursuit of their personal interests and goals, students become increasingly engaged in classroom learning activities.

Sometimes students will express their dreams and aspirations publicly in the classroom. They tell the teacher what they are interested in, and they ask the teacher for classroom opportunities to pursue their dreams. Other times, however, students do not do this. They instead prefer to keep their inner motivations to themselves and unknown to the teacher. This tendency toward motivational privacy makes sense if students get the message that their teachers and peers are not always open and accommodating to such expressions of personal interest.

Some teachers do appreciate and enthusiastically encourage students' personal strivings, and these teachers willingly adapt the flow of their instruction to incorporate students' input and suggestions. In a foreign language class, a student says he would like to learn about not only the language but also about the nation, culture, and values of the people who speak the language, and the teacher says, "Yes" or "Okay," and bends the lesson accordingly. Other teachers, however, neglect, dismiss, or simply remain unaware of students' privately-held motivations. These teachers do not ask "What are you interested in?" and "What do you want to learn about?" Instead, they rather unilaterally announce the lesson plan for the day (e.g., "learn 20 new vocabulary words") and then provide the instruction that best attains that instructional goal. While this instruction may

be competently presented and delivered, it nevertheless proceeds in a unilateral way that reflects only the teacher's goals and priorities. Too often, such instruction has little or no relevance to students' personal interests and goals. Still other teachers outright suppress students' expressions of their personal motivations. They send the message that personal motivations are inappropriate for—or even counterproductive and antagonistic to—the teacher's lesson plan. They tell students to set aside these aspirations (e.g., “We don't have time for that.”), and to be more responsible (e.g., “Do the assignment; you need to take this lesson more seriously.”). In such classrooms, personal motivations are silenced.

Agent, agency, and agentic engagement

An *agent* is someone who intentionally influences his or her functioning and life circumstances (Bandura, 2006). In the classroom, *intentionally influencing one's functioning* means contributing constructively into one's own learning, developing, and performing, while *intentionally influencing one's life circumstances* means changing the conditions that affect one's learning, developing, and performing, including the opportunities and resources that are available to oneself. By changing the environments in which they live and function, people gain greater capacity to change their lives for the better (Bandura, 2002, 2006). Being an agent requires both motivation (agency) and action (agentic engagement).

Agency is motivation. It is the student's desire, intention, and sense of purpose to produce intentional and strategic changes in one's functioning and in one's surrounding environment. Agency motivation emerges out of students' self-efficacy beliefs, psychological needs (i.e., for autonomy, competence, and relatedness), and personal growth strivings (Shin & Reeve, 2020). Believing confidently in one's capacity to produce and attain desired outcomes (self-efficacy; Bandura, 1997), desiring volition and self-endorsement in one's behavior (autonomy psychological need; Ryan & Deci, 2017), and pursuing ongoing personal growth and development (personal growth initiative; Robitschek, 1998) constitute the motivational lifeblood to being an agent.

Agentic engagement is action and behavior. Agentic engagement is students' constructive contribution into the flow of instruction they receive; it is what students say and do to create a more motivationally supportive learning environment for themselves (Matos, Reeve, Herrera, & Claux, 2018; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). The opposite of such classroom initiative is passivity (i.e., agentic disengagement), as the student simply and passively receives and accepts “as it is” whatever instruction, events, and circumstances happen to come his or her way. By offering suggestions, communicating preferences, and giving voice to their inner motivations, students are intentionally and proactively trying to personalize and otherwise enrich both what is to be learned and the circumstances under which it is to be learned.

In the same way that behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement are types of engagement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012), agentic engagement is also a (fourth) type of engagement—but it is a uniquely proactive and reciprocal type. With behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, the teacher offers a learning activity (e.g., a book to read, a homework assignment to complete) and students react by showing more or less effort, more or less enthusiasm, and more or less strategic thinking while working on the activity. With agentic engagement, the student speaks up and shows personal initiative in a proactive and reciprocal way.

Proactively, agenticly-engaged students take action before and during a learning experience begins by making suggestions, offering input, and expressing preferences. In doing so, the student's hope is that the provider of the learning environment (i.e., the teacher) will take his or her suggestions to heart to then bend (i.e., adjust, calibrate) the lesson in a direction that becomes more relevant to the student's interests and goals. When the teacher announces that the day's lesson will be on the solar system, the agenticly-engaged student might ask the teacher if she will address the question as to whether life on Mars is really possible. To the extent that the teacher appreciates the engagement-generating potential of this expression of interest and does adapt the lesson to speak to it, then it becomes significantly more likely that the student will find the day's lesson to be interesting and personally relevant.

Reciprocally, agenticly-engaged students seek a pattern of teacher-student interaction that features reciprocal causation, which means that what the teacher says and does during instruction transforms what the student says and does and also (and equally) that what the student says and does during instruction transforms (e.g., changes, alters, improves, enriches) what the teacher says and does (Sameroff, 2009). In the context of agentic engagement, the student is trying to work collaboratively with the teacher to foster a more motivationally supportive learning environment and teacher-student relationship, one that becomes more able to create need-satisfying, interest-relevant, and personally-valued learning experiences for the student.

Overall, agentic engagement is a student-initiated pathway to (a) improve one's learning, developing, and performing, and (b) render learning activities (and the learning environment more generally) more motivationally supportive. Table 1 provides a dozen examples of what student expressions of agentic engagement might look and sound like in the classroom.

Why is agentic engagement important?

Agentic engagement enables two key outcomes—improved student functioning and improved learning circumstances. Agentic engagement predicts students' learning, skill

Table 1. Illustrative examples of students' classroom expressions of agentic engagement.

Function of the Agentic Engagement	Illustrative Student Quotation
Let the teacher know what you want.	"I want to learn how to paint."
Let the teacher know what you are interested in.	"I am interested in Stonehenge."
Express a preference.	"Reading Shakespeare is nice, but I would prefer to watch the movie version. May we do that?"
Offer input.	"Could we practice this language in a real setting, and not just memorize note cards?"
Make a suggestion.	"A trip to the computer lab would be helpful; could we do that?"
Offer a recommendation.	"Can we start with a demonstration?"
Ask for a say in what to do and how to do it.	"May we work with a partner?"
Generate options.	"I would like to add a drawing to my essay; may I do that?"
Ask "why?" questions.	"Why do we need to wear these safety goggles?"
Ask a question to help you learn.	"I don't get it; why is the periodic table arranged in these columns and rows?"
Ask for support and guidance.	"Could you show me how to do this?" "Could you give an example?"
Ask the teacher for needed resources.	"Could we have a little more time?"

development, and classroom performance (i.e., grades; Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Agentic-ly engaged students function (i.e., learn, develop) better than do agentic-ly disengaged students. It is also an especially good predictor of whether the learning environment changes over time to become more motivationally supportive (i.e., to accommodate to students' needs and goals). In a series of studies, we assessed how agentic-ly engaged students were at the beginning of the class to test the hypothesis that students' agentic engagement would, over time, bring out greater autonomy support from their teachers. These studies were all longitudinal in design, and the consistent finding was that the more students displayed agentic engagement in the classroom, the more autonomy-supportive their teachers became toward them (Matos et al., 2018; Reeve, 2013; Shin & Reeve, 2020).

Agentic engagement does not always work. Its effectiveness depends on one key classroom factor—namely, how responsive the teacher (or learning environment more generally) is to the student's initiative. When teachers are responsive to students' input and suggestions, reciprocal causation is likely to occur and the teacher and student become increasingly in sync with each other. When teachers are not responsive, however, unilateral causation is likely to occur (teachers influence students, but not vice versa) and the teacher and student become increasingly in conflict with each other. In the latter case, the student's agentic engagement may even “backfire” to bring out the ire of the teacher (e.g., “Stop your complaining, interrupting, and back-talk; you are distracting the whole class.”). This idea that student-initiated agentic engagement can move the teacher and student toward synchrony vs. toward conflict brings up the important question of the teacher's motivating style.

A teachers' motivating style: autonomy supportive, indifferent, and controlling

A teacher's motivating style refers to the “interpersonal tone” (Reeve, 2016), “orientation toward students” (Deci, Schwartz, Sheinman, & Ryan, 1981), or “basic attitude” (Aelterman et al., 2019) he or she relies on when trying to engage students in learning activities. Such a style ranges from one that is highly respectful of students' perspectives and initiatives (autonomy supportive) through a neutral style (indifferent) to one that is strongly prescriptive over and insistent about what students should think, feel, and do (controlling).

Teacher autonomy support is the delivery of instruction through an interpersonal tone of understanding and support (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002; Reeve, 2009, 2016). With an autonomy-supportive motivating style, the teacher adopts the students' perspective, asks students what they want and prefer, and incorporates students' input and suggestions into the ongoing flow of instruction. When autonomy supportive, teachers provide students with a steady flow of opportunities for volitional action—ones that encourage students to seek out information and learning activities that are relevant to their interests and personal goals. In practice, autonomy support involves a cluster of intercorrelated and mutually-reinforcing instructional behaviors, including taking the students' perspective, vitalizing students' psychological needs during instruction, providing explanatory rationale for teacher requests, acknowledging and accepting students' expressions of negative affect, relying on invitational language, and displaying patience (Reeve, 2016).

Teacher indifference pays little attention to students' needs, goals, and concerns (Bhavsar et al., 2019; Cheon, Reeve, Lee, et al., 2019). Indifferent instructional behaviors include negligence or inattention to students' inner motivational resources (e.g., "My teacher is unresponsive to my opinions"; "My teacher is indifferent to how I feel"; Bhavsar et al., 2019). Teachers usually adopt an indifferent motivating style either because they are paying so much attention to their own needs, concerns, and priorities (e.g., material to be covered, need to maintain classroom discipline)—or because they prioritize their goals, concerns, and priorities over those of their students. Teacher indifference can be a benign approach to instruction, as it often occurs simply because the teacher is unaware of or unresponsive to students' needs and priorities. As a motivating style, it neglects, ignores, or asks students to "set aside" their interests while instruction proceeds—often competently (but unilaterally)—in a way that is disconnected from and unrelated to students' preferences and personal interests.

Teacher control is the delivery of instruction through an interpersonal tone of pressure that pushes students to think, feel, and behave in teacher-prescribed ways (Reeve, 2009). With a controlling motivating style, the teacher takes only his or her own perspective, tells students what to think and do, and applies an increasing amount of pressure until students comply with the teacher's prescriptions (Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, & Roth, 2005; Bartholomew, Ntoumanis, Ryan, & Thogersen-Ntoumani, 2011; Reeve, 2009). It involves a cluster of intercorrelated and mutually-reinforcing behaviors, including taking only the teacher's perspective, suppressing students' psychological needs during instruction, uttering directives without explanation, countering and trying to change students' expressions of negative affect into something more acceptable to the teacher, relying on pressuring language (e.g., "you should," "you have to"), and pushing for immediate compliance, typically by using intimidation tactics (e.g., yelling), conditional regard (e.g., shaming, contingent reinforcement), and compliance-contingent extrinsic rewards (e.g., "If you do *x*, then I will give you the reward."). With teacher control, the application of pressure—by a stern facial expression, loud tone of voice, and "have to" and "or else" language that is intermixed with threats of punishments or offers of contingent reward—is used to suppress and override students' personal motivation so to bring students' intentions and behaviors under the teacher's control.

Teacher-provided autonomy support is a strong and reliable predictor of students' classroom motivation and functioning. In our own research, for instance, we have shown that after teachers participate in a workshop-like intervention to learn how to become more autonomy supportive during instruction, their students show all of the following gains in adaptive motivation and functioning as well as all of the following declines in maladaptive motivation and functioning: increased classroom engagement, conceptual learning, skill development, academic achievement, performance, prosocial behavior, positive self-concept, and emotional vitality (Cheon, Reeve, & Moon, 2012; Cheon, Reeve, & Ntoumanis, 2018; Cheon, Reeve, Lee, et al., 2019; Cheon, Reeve, & Song, 2016; Cheon, Reeve, & Song, 2019; Jang, Reeve, & Halusic, 2016) and decreased amotivation, classroom disengagement, antisocial behavior, problematic peer relationships, and emotional exhaustion (Cheon et al., 2016; Cheon et al., 2018; Cheon, Reeve, Yu, & Jang, 2014).

Pairing students' agentic engagement with teachers' autonomy support

How a teacher's motivating style mixes together with students' motivation and agentic engagement can be seen in [Figure 1](#). As illustrated, the teachers' motivating style affects the student's motivational experience (the arrow on the bottom of the figure labeled "promotes"), as autonomy support promotes students' motivational satisfaction, indifference promotes motivational dissatisfaction, and control promotes motivational frustration. Students' motivational state then forecasts their high (from satisfaction), low (from dissatisfaction), or non-existent (from frustration) agentic engagement (the arrow on the top of the figure labeled "shapes the extent of").

Following the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), we make the assumption that students enter each classroom with a rich repertoire of inner motivational resources, including intrinsic motivation, psychological needs, interests, curiosity, goals, and values. Such motivations give rise to greater agentic engagement (Shin & Reeve, 2020). And any boost in students' agentic engagement tends to lead teachers to offer greater autonomy support (Matos et al., 2018; Reeve, 2013). As represented by the triangle of an interconnected relationship in [Figure 2](#) (i.e., the three boldface directional arrows), teachers and students become increasingly in sync with each other when autonomy support fuels greater autonomous motivation, autonomous motivation fuels greater agentic engagement, and agentic engagement brings the triangle to a full circle to fuel greater autonomy support.

If the teacher is indifferent to students' inner motivational resources, however, students will tend to keep their motivations to themselves, experience mostly motivational dissatisfaction, and their engagement tends to slip into disengagement (Cheon, Reeve, Lee, et al., 2019). Under these conditions, little that students do in the classroom is able to pull greater autonomy support out of their teacher. The teacher-student relationship dissolves into two independent actors, as what students do affects little change in what teachers do.

If the teacher is controlling, students tend to experience motivational frustration. Students may enter the classroom with a rich repertoire of inner motivational resources, but the controlling teacher suppresses these motivations so to override them (e.g., "Put that paper away; pay attention to what I am showing you; do what you are supposed to do."). Under these conditions, the teacher promotes only compliance—not engagement, and the suppression of students' motivation and agentic engagement in turn does little to pull any autonomy support out of the teacher. Instead of being in sync, the teacher-student relationship deteriorates into conflict (me vs. you).

How teachers can support students' agentic engagement

If you watch carefully to what happens when a teacher tries to motivate his or her students to engage in a learning activity, the first thing you will notice is a tone of voice accompanied by gestures and utterances that enable you to infer that teacher's motivating style, at least at that particular time. Soon thereafter, you will notice that the student begins to react to the teacher's style with an engagement-disengagement response. Within a few minutes, the reciprocal vs. unilateral quality of the teacher-student relationship will become apparent (the two become in sync, remain independent, or slip into conflict).

One scorecard to diagnose the quality of the teacher-student relationship is the extent to which the two are in sync vs. in conflict (Reeve, 2015). When in sync, the student acts on his or

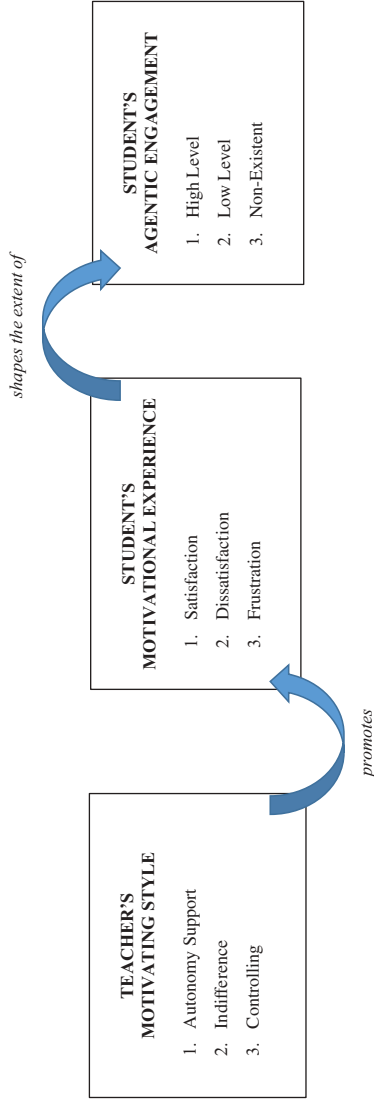


Figure 1. How a teacher's motivating style catalyzes vs. impairs students' motivation—and hence shapes the extent of agentic engagement.

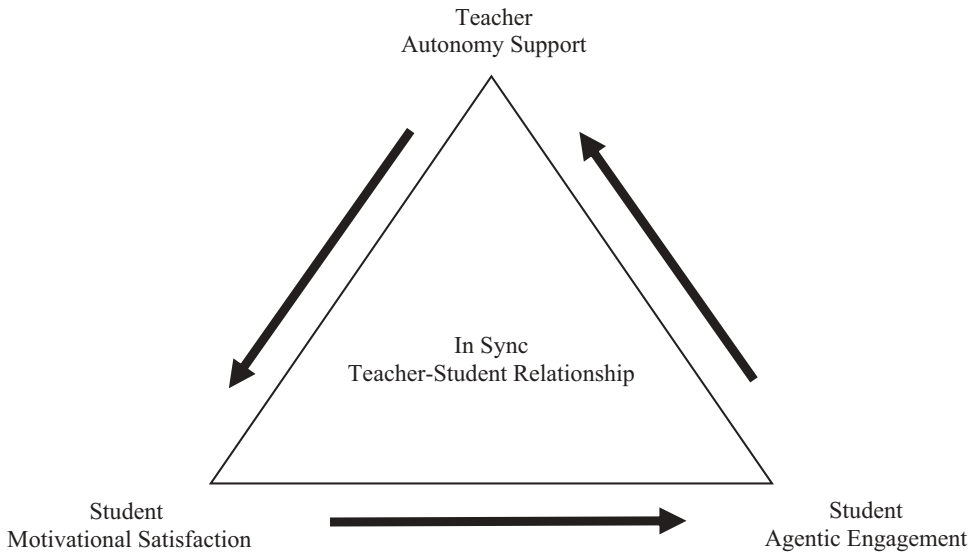


Figure 2. Relationship elements that forge teacher-student synchrony.

her autonomous motivation to volitionally engage in and benefit from the learning activities the teacher provides while the teacher, in turn, provides instruction in a motivationally supportive way. The teacher and student as interaction partners come together and benefit each other. They join forces to move the student toward a higher-quality motivation and engagement and the teacher toward a higher-quality motivating style (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). It is not all “teacher supports student,” because the teacher also introduces new goals and new strivings for the student to internalize. For instance, for the student who has little personal motivation to read a recommended book or follow a classroom rule, the teacher will introduce the school-valued goal or way of behaving and support the students’ acceptance (i.e., internalization) by taking the student’s perspective, providing a rationale to explain the personal benefit to the student of the book or rule, acknowledge any negative affect associated with the recommended goal or behavior, and display patience until the student can generate volitional motivation for the requested course of action. A constructive reciprocal causation emerges. Over time, the 2 become motivational and environmental assets for each other.

In conflict, however, interaction partners move apart, oppose, and undermine each other. The student shows amotivation and disengagement in response to the teacher’s controlling motivating style, and the teacher tries to compensate with destructive motivational tactics (e.g., shaming, conditional regard, intimidation). Such teacher-student interaction introduces destructive motivations into the student’s self-structure (e.g., introjections), which in turn prompts the teacher to adopt a harsher, more controlling, and domineering motivating style toward the student, etc. Over time, the 2 become motivational and environmental liabilities to each other.

Autonomy-supportive teaching represents highly skilled teaching, and we have conducted numerous interventions to help teachers learn how to become more autonomy supportive toward their students (Cheon et al., 2012; Cheon et al., 2016; Cheon et al.,

2018; Cheon, Reeve, & Song, 2019). Learning the skill of autonomy-supportive teaching is worthwhile because it is the catalyst that forges an ideal “in sync” teacher-student relationship. Through autonomy support, teachers encourage students’ autonomous motivation, which sparks their agentic engagement. And when students’ display such autonomy-infused agentic engagement, then teachers tend to respond in kind with a more autonomy-supportive motivating style toward those students (e.g., [Figure 2](#)).

But just as teachers can learn to become more autonomy supportive, we suspect that future research will show that students too can become the catalyst to a more synchronous teacher-student relationship. Students can become catalysts by learning how to let the teacher know what they want, need, and are interested in (as per [Table 1](#)). So, we would encourage teachers to keep a sharp eye out for student-initiated expressions of agentic engagement. When it occurs, we suggest that teachers appreciate it deeply and actively support it.

In conclusion, the answer as to how teachers can support students’ agentic engagement is to adopt a significantly more autonomy-supportive classroom motivating style. In general, this means asking students what they want, listening to what they say, being responsive to students’ input and suggestions, and appreciating the engagement-fostering potency of students’ interests, goals, and personal strivings. More specifically, when we conduct our autonomy-supportive intervention program (e.g., see Cheon, Reeve, & Song, 2019), we help teachers learn how to integrate the following six instructional behaviors into a coherent autonomy-supportive motivating style: take the students’ perspective, vitalize students’ psychological needs during instruction, provide explanatory rationales for teacher requests, acknowledge and accept students’ expressions of negative affect, rely on invitational language, and display patience. When teachers learn how to do this at the beginning of the year (as per their participation in a teacher-focused workshop), their students respond by showing week-by-week gains in their agentic engagement during classroom instruction with that teacher (Reeve & Cheon, 2020).

As can be seen in both [Figures 1 and 2](#), we do not actually recommend teachers try to promote students’ agentic engagement directly. That is, there is no directional arrow from teacher-provided autonomy support to students’ agentic engagement in either figure (this relation is instead mediated by students’ motivational satisfaction). Rather, we recommend teachers focus on appreciating, vitalizing, and supporting students’ motivational satisfaction during the delivery of their instruction. When teachers learn how to do this, students’ agentic engagement will naturally follow through, as engagement is essentially the publicly observable expression of students’ underlying and privately held motivational states (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). More practically, teachers can look to how agentially engaged students are during instruction as a tell-tale sign that students’ personal motivations are being deeply involved and satisfied during the learning activity. The extent of students’ classroom agentic engagement is like a thermostat on the wall that tells the teacher not the temperature in the room but, rather, the extent of students’ motivational satisfaction.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Additional Resources

1. Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1, 164–180.

As educational psychologists, we limit our discussion of student agency to classroom-based agentic engagement. In this conceptual article, Bandura provides a broader perspective on human agency to discuss how people intentionally improve their own functioning and proactively transform their life circumstances for the better.

2. Reeve, J. (2013). How students create motivationally supportive learning environments for themselves: The concept of agentic engagement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105, 579–595.

This article introduced the concept of agentic engagement. It provides a definition for agentic engagement along with numerous classroom-based examples. The article includes a questionnaire to measure students' self-reported agentic engagement, and it provides empirical evidence that students' agentic engagement predicts both student achievement and changes in teacher-provided autonomy support.

3. Cheon, S. H., Reeve, J., & Song, Y.-G. (2019). **Recommending goals and supporting needs: An intervention to help physical education teachers communicate their expectations while supporting students' psychological needs.** *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 41*, 107–118.

To help teachers learn how to become more autonomy supportive toward students, this article overviews a teacher-focused, workshop-based intervention. It identifies what autonomy-supportive instructional behaviors are, and it provides empirical evidence on the benefits of greater autonomy support. The article shows how teachers can offer a motivating style that is both highly structured (i.e., recommending teacher-valued goals) and highly autonomy supportive (i.e., supporting students' psychological needs).