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WHAT DOES AGENTIC ENGAGEMENT LOOK LIKE IN CLASSROOMS, AND WHEN IS IT SUCCESSFUL? A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract

Research on agentic engagement—students' proactive contributions to instruction—has attracted increasing attention. While prior studies underscore its relevance for students' achievement, well-being and teacher support, many aspects of agentic engagement remain unclear. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine students' perspectives on the concept of agentic engagement and the factors that determine its likelihood and success. We conducted focus groups with 17 university students who reflected on their high school experiences of agentic engagement. Using thematic analysis combining deductive and inductive approaches, we found that the current conceptualisation of agentic engagement may be too narrow. Students reported that agentic engagement often included group-based behaviours outside classroom settings, some of which were aimed at avoiding learning. Additionally, key factors such as student personality, class dynamics and teaching styles were found to affect both the occurrence and effectiveness of agentic engagement. These findings offer important insights for refining the concept and suggest practical implications for teaching and future research.

Keywords: *agentic engagement, focus groups, teaching styles, qualitative study*

INTRODUCTION

Students' role in initiating effective and motivating instruction has been receiving growing attention, as students are increasingly considered active co-creators of the educational process. Indeed, students provide their teachers with feedback and input on their goals and interests, ask for clarification and additional learning materials, thus assisting their teachers in providing the best possible instruction (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). All of these behaviours are encompassed in the construct of agentic engagement, which can be defined as students' constructive contributions to the flow of the class (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). While the construct has been gaining more traction, many important questions remain unanswered. Specifically, the majority of research has focused on the association between teachers' teaching styles and students' agentic engagement, disregarding important questions about the construct's conceptualisation (Mameli & Passini, 2018; Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2021), antecedents (Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2021) and impact (Patall et al., 2022). Thus, the aim of this study is to examine students' perspectives on the concept of agentic engagement and the factors that determine its likelihood and success.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF AGENTIC ENGAGEMENT

Agentic engagement was proposed by Reeve and Tseng (2011) as a new component of student engagement, in addition to behavioural, cognitive and emotional engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Behavioural engagement refers to students' involvement in learning (e.g., attention, effort), cognitive engagement relates to students' use of deeper learning strategies, while emotional engagement reflects the prevalence of positive over negative emotions when students are learning (Reeve, 2013). Compared to these three components of engagement, the authors highlight the unique transactional and constructive nature of agentic engagement (Matos et al., 2018; Reeve, 2013). Unlike the other components, which primarily represent a path to better student academic outcomes, agentic engagement mainly serves as a path to greater teacher support (Reeve, 2013). Specifically, by providing the teacher with information about their interests, goals and preferences, students steer the teacher to better support those needs (Jang et al., 2024; Matos et al., 2018). The authors presume that these attempts to recruit teacher support are individual classroom behaviours focused on support for learning. This is clear from the items of the Agentic Engagement Scale (AES), the operationalisation of agentic engagement proposed by the authors (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). For instance, an item from the AES states, "During class, I ask questions to help me learn." Hence, this item and other items from the AES describe behaviours enacted by individual students who are asking for individual help in learning during class.

However, some previous studies emphasise that such a description does not capture students' approaches well. These mainly qualitative studies show that students describe agentic engagement as group behaviour (Petričević et al., 2022; Zambrano et al., 2021, 2022). Moreover, not only do students often approach teachers in groups, but their requests do not necessarily take place during classes; rather, they may be made before or after classes, or by using e-mail or anonymous notes (Zambrano et al., 2021). Additionally, some Croatian findings suggest that students might use agentic engagement as a way to avoid learning rather than learn more, as agentic engagement is positively associated with surface-level learning strategies (Rovan, 2024). Hence, the current conceptualisation of agentic engagement may disregard some key aspects of agentic behaviour (Mameli & Passini, 2018), so further studies are needed.

FACTORS DETERMINING THE LIKELIHOOD AND SUCCESS OF AGENTIC ENGAGEMENT

The majority of previous research on agentic engagement has focused on its relationship with teaching styles, i.e., teachers' approaches and behaviours towards students. When teachers are open to students' perspectives, give them choices and attune their teaching to students' needs, in other words, when teachers are autonomy supportive (Reeve & Cheon, 2021), this creates a context that makes it possible for students to ask questions and enact their engagement agentically (Jang et al., 2024). At the same time, when students proactively voice their interests and needs in the classroom, this gives teachers the opportunity to take them into consideration and be more autonomy supportive (Jang et al., 2024). So far, there is strong support for this positive reciprocal relationship between agentic engagement and autonomy-supportive teaching (Jang et al., 2024; Matos et al., 2018).

However, in comparison to the attention that this reciprocal relationship has drawn in research so far, other potential predictors of agentic engagement have been disregarded. There has been a lot of speculation that personality, student background factors (Jang et al., 2024; Patall et al., 2019; Reeve & Tseng, 2011) and class dynamics (Reeve et al., 2025) could play a significant role in agentically engaged behaviour. However, only a few studies have examined these factors, showing that students' proactive personality, autonomous motivation and higher GPA also shape their levels of agentic engagement (Michou et al., 2021; Patall et al., 2022). Therefore, there is a need for a more comprehensive investigation of student- and class-related antecedents of agentic engagement (Zambrano et al., 2021).

Additionally, some research suggests that students' agentic engagement will not always result in more support from the teacher. For instance, Patall and colleagues (2022) found that there was a significant positive correlation between agentic engagement and autonomy-supportive teaching only for students with a high GPA and a White racial background. Hence, it is plausible that the success of an agentic request depends heavily on both student and teacher char-

acteristics (Zambrano et al., 2021). Similarly, a recent study showed that this success will also depend on the characteristics of the request, such as the style in which students communicate their requests (Flamant et al., in preparation). Thus, there is a need to investigate the factors that affect the effectiveness of students' agentic engagement (Patall et al., 2022).

PRESENT STUDY

The overview of the literature clearly demonstrates the need to further investigate agentic engagement. Specifically, based on our review, the aim of this study is to examine students' perspectives on the concept of agentic engagement and what they believe are the factors that determine its likelihood and success. In order to further operationalise the aim, we formulated three main research questions, with the first question additionally nuanced through four subthemes:

1. What behaviours do students perceive as agentic engagement in classrooms?

1.1. What is the content of students' agentic requests?

1.2. Which students usually initiate requests?

1.3. By whom are the requests conveyed?

1.4. How are they conveyed?

2. What factors impact the likelihood of students becoming agentically engaged?

3. What factors make their agentic requests successful?

Currently, the majority of studies use quantitative methods and almost exclusively rely on the AES as a measure of agentic engagement (Reeve et al., 2025). Such methods do not enable researchers to answer certain research questions (Lynch et al., 2020), especially when it comes to the definition of agentic engagement and students' broader views on it. Hence, to answer our research questions, we utilised a phenomenological design, as it is an appropriate method to gain deeper insights into the meaning of agentic engagement (Zambrano et al., 2021).

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were 17 psychology students (3 men) from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. The average age of the participants was 19.29 (SD = 0.85). As the participants were asked about their high school experiences, we recruited only

first-year university students to ensure that the topic was still salient to them. All participants completed high school education in Croatia, with 14 students graduating from a gymnasium programme and 3 students graduating from a vocational programme.

Procedure

We conducted two focus groups (Nfg1 = 11; Nfg2 = 6) in February 2025. Participants were recruited through the Department of Psychology of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb.. First-year students received an invitation to participate in the study, with a detailed explanation of the study aim and procedure. Those who were interested were assigned to one of the two focus groups based on the time that suited them best.

We took care to abide by the ethical research principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Before the start of the focus groups, participants were given additional information about the aim of the study, the procedure and their rights. Participants signed informed consent forms. The focus groups lasted between one hour and an hour and a half. Participants received course credit for their participation, as part of their faculty's requirement to participate in studies.

Both authors were present during both focus groups, one as a moderator and the other as a scribe. The focus groups were also recorded to facilitate the transcription process. A set of questions was prepared for the group interview (Appendix A). We first asked students what engagement generally meant to them and then steered the discussion toward agentic engagement by asking about their efforts to influence the flow of instruction, assessment or other school-related activities to better align with their preferences. We emphasised that our primary interest was in their experiences with this particular form of engagement. After establishing the main focus of the discussion, one subset of questions focused on contextual characteristics that led students to request something from their teachers, as well as on which teacher and student characteristics made such requests easier. Another subset of questions focused on teacher reactions to student requests and the conditions under which agentic requests were (un)successful. At the end, we asked for their opinions on what facilitates students' agentic engagement and what obstacles they see to such student behaviour. After each focus group, the moderator made analytic notes.

Analytical strategy

The analysis followed the steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first step, both authors read through the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the content and identify all the statements that answered a particular research question. In the second step, using a mix of inductive and deductive approaches, we grouped the statements into specific codes and provided a name and description for each code. The codes were organised into themes and subthemes, and these were discussed by both authors until the final version was reached. In the final step, we determined the frequency of each code.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis for each research question can be found in Tables 1–3. The tables contain information on all codes that were mentioned at least three times. The findings for each research question are discussed alongside the results.

Research question 1: What behaviours do students perceive as agentic engagement in classrooms?

The first research question was analysed through four subthemes (Table 1). The first subtheme addressed the content of students' agentic requests. The analysis revealed that the types of content most often discussed were changes to exam dates, oral exams or other assignments. This code appeared more than twice as frequently as the next most common code, which involved students requesting changes to teaching methods (e.g., asking for more interaction, quizzes, etc.). Other types of agentic requests included making decisions related to school events—graduation trips, excursions, prom nights, Christmas fairs and similar activities; requests for changes in teacher behaviour that students found unpleasant or unfair; and seeking additional learning opportunities, typically through asking questions or requesting revision classes. A slightly less frequent code referred to teachers themselves creating opportunities for agentic engagement by seeking feedback on some aspect of their teaching.

The second subtheme explored typical initiators of agentic behaviour. Students most frequently discussed agentic engagement initiated by the whole class and, less frequently, by a smaller group or individuals. Students reported that decisions about whether to engage were usually made democratically, typically via polls in class WhatsApp groups, as noted by P6FG2: "Usually, we first did a poll in a class group, like on Messenger, to see if the majority was even in favour". However, they acknowledged that such decision-making is not without difficulties. In particular, "louder" students – generally described as academically weaker – were said to pressure the rest of the class to agree to changes that suited them or to act independently of the wishes of the rest of the class, as P4FG2 highlighted: "Mainly, it was always the same people insisting on moving [exams] or changing something, while others simply stayed on the sidelines. In the end, the louder ones prevailed because the others wouldn't say anything".

The third subtheme focused on the communication channels through which agentic requests are made. Students reported approaching teachers both during class and outside class through online channels—mostly via e-mail, Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp.

Finally, the fourth subtheme concerned the people conveying agentic requests to the teacher. Students emphasised that choosing the right representative was considered a strategic decision, often discussed in detail among peers. They reported that this role was often taken by the class president or another student whom the class considered likely to succeed in

convincing the teacher. These were usually students seen as exemplary in the subject, as emphasised by P11FG1: "We would choose someone who participated the most and for whom we saw that the teacher gave good feedback". Alternatively, P10FG1 noted, socially skilled students – often extroverted boys described as "charming" – were selected: "...we always had a group of guys who were so charming that no one could refuse them or get mad at them. So, it was always that same group that went to ask." Furthermore, in some cases, students would rely on an adult to approach the teacher with their request. Usually, they would enlist the help of their homeroom teacher or school counsellors. Students used this strategy more often when dealing with more serious requests, such as addressing a teacher's behaviour, or when they assessed the teacher as less flexible and approachable, as P2FG2 explained: "...when the teacher was the problem, like the one who took it out on us, then we would go to the homeroom teacher or the school counsellor...".

Our results confirm the current conceptualisation of agentic engagement (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Voicing their learning preferences and asking for more guidance from teachers were among the wide range of agentic requests described by our participants.

At the same time, our participants reported a broader range of agentically engaged behaviours than those captured by the current conceptualisation and the AES (Reeve, 2013; Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Specifically, students highlighted the collective nature of agentic engagement and the important role of classroom dynamics in shaping these behaviours. This finding is in line with studies that have speculated on the importance of classroom-level processes (Reeve et al., 2025; Zambrano et al., 2021).

Students' academic success and grades, as well as charisma, seem to have a considerable influence on both their decision to initiate an agentic request and their choice of who should communicate it on behalf of the group. Additionally, many requests focused on non-learning matters (e.g., graduation trips) or aimed to reduce workload. Although non-learning matters may not strictly fall under agentic engagement since they do not concern the flow of instruction (Reeve, 2013), future research should examine them, especially since teachers tend to be more receptive to suggestions not associated with teaching (Klepić, 2021). This type of engagement may therefore offer rare and important opportunities for students to exercise agency and voice in school. Moreover, our findings on agentic requests aimed at reducing workload align with previous studies in Croatia suggesting that agentic engagement is associated with a surface approach to learning (Petričević et al., 2022; Rovan, 2024). While Reeve (2013) defines agentic engagement as a means to enhance learning, it is worth considering that avoiding or delaying schoolwork – especially in a system that significantly burdens students – might represent both an expression of students' agency and a constructive approach to learning. Specifically, having more time to learn or deciding to take a deep approach to only a few subjects could be considered a more productive way to learn overall. Therefore, future studies should investigate whether these behaviours also represent a form of agentic engagement.

Table 1

Results of the analysis for the first research question: What behaviours do students perceive as agentic engagement in classrooms?

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Content of the request	Request for a change to an exam or a deadline	Students requesting a change in the date of an exam or oral exam, or a deadline for a task.	44	"...a request for postponement, most often it was for a required reading or some seminar paper." (P2FG2)
	Request for a change in the teaching method	Students requesting a change in teachers' teaching methods, lesson content and grading.	19	"...for example, more interaction, quizzes, pictures, or similar things." (P9FG1)
	Making decisions about school events	Students deciding on aspects of school trips, graduation dances, Christmas markets, projects and other school-related events.	13	"The only time we really participated was when we were choosing the destination for our graduation trip." (P1FG1)
	Request for a change in teacher behaviour	Students requesting a change in teachers' approach towards or in unfair treatment of students.	12	"...he said he didn't like his approach because he was strict." (P3FG1)
	Requests for additional learning opportunities	Students requesting additional explanations or repetition of certain lessons.	10	"We asked that teacher, more or less right before graduation, if there was any way we could make up for the material we hadn't covered." (P6FG1)
	Teacher-initiated feedback	Students offering feedback on a teacher in a teacher-initiated survey or conversation.	6	"We had anonymous evaluations after each semester. We gave feedback to the teachers, rated them, said what we liked and what we didn't." (P2FG1)

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Initiators of a request	Entire class	The class in its entirety or the majority of the class making a request, usually after a democratic vote.	38	"In our case, decisions were mostly made based on the majority. So, if the majority agreed on something, then we would take it to the teacher." (P5FG1)
	Smaller group of students	A smaller group of students making a request.	15	"And when it was about situations in smaller groups, those people would agree and make arrangements directly with the teachers." (P1FG1)
	Individual students	Individual students making a request.	13	"We achieved very good results on the test after that exercise, and that was my suggestion." (P9FG1)
Mode of a request	In person	Students making a request in person during or after class.	9	"...if there was a, you know, milder teacher, they would try to persuade him during class." (P11FG1)
	Online	Students making a request online, using e-mail, Teams, WhatsApp, etc.	8	"In most cases, we solved things through email." (P7FG1)
Person making a request	Teacher or a member of staff	A teacher or school counsellor making the request on behalf of all students.	18	"...someone older had to intervene, we couldn't solve it on our own." (P6FG2)
	Class representative	A student previously chosen as class president making the request on behalf of all students.	12	"In our case, this was most often handled by the class president." (P6FG1)
	Model student	A student who is academically exceptional in a specific subject or favoured by a specific teacher making the request on behalf of all students.	6	"Every year we would delegate one person, the one who was the best in that subject." (P2FG1)
	Charismatic student or extroverted student	A student or a group of students perceived as extroverted, self-assured and/or charming making the request on behalf of all students.	6	"...and for geography, I particularly remember four guys that the teacher adored, and they always somehow managed to persuade her." (P8FG1)

Research question 2: What factors impact the likelihood of students becoming agentically engaged?

In examining the factors contributing to the likelihood of students voicing their agentic requests, we identified a range of teacher-, student- and system-level influences (Table 2). The frequency analysis indicated that teachers are key to facilitating or deterring agentic engagement. When students perceived a teacher as receptive to feedback, they were encouraged to engage. Conversely, when they perceived a teacher as likely to reject a request, they would be less inclined to approach them. Interestingly, their perceptions were based not only on the class's experience but also on advice passed down from previous generations of students, as P6FG2 explained: "We hear from older students. They tell us: with that teacher you can't arrange anything, you can try, but you probably won't achieve anything."

In addition to teacher characteristics, students cited student personality traits and academic motivation as factors influencing agentic engagement. They described more extroverted and self-confident students as more likely to engage than more introverted and less confident peers. Students associated these personality characteristics to some extent with academic success. Specifically, they claimed that "louder" individuals were often the ones with lower academic success, while the "quieter" ones tended to achieve better grades. This observation mainly stemmed from the nature of a typical agentic request, which concerned the postponement of examinations. Hence, among others, P7FG1 explained that academically weaker students had a stronger interest in postponing assessments and were therefore more motivated to speak up: "I think that often the ones who would skip classes and postpone [exams] were the types who didn't put in much effort." Beyond extraversion and grades, another student characteristic mentioned was a lack of interest and apathy. Students cited a sense of helplessness as a reason for not engaging agentically.

Related to this, students identified beliefs about the education system as a factor reducing agentic engagement. They viewed the education system in Croatia as rigid and resistant to change, which made them feel that even if they voiced requests, little could be achieved, further increasing their apathy.

To conclude, our findings are consistent with both theory and empirical evidence that emphasise teachers as the main facilitators of agentic engagement (Jang et al., 2024). However, consistent with earlier qualitative studies (Petričević et al., 2023; Zambrano et al., 2021, 2022), student factors such as personality traits, academic performance and motivation also play an important role. Contrary to previous research (e.g., Petričević et al., 2023; Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2021), our results suggest that less motivated and lower-achieving students may be more likely to engage agentically – likely due to their greater interest in postponing exams, a dominant form of agentic behaviour observed in this study. Additionally, our findings emphasise the importance of contextual factors, such as characteristics of the educational

system, in shaping agentic engagement. As previous studies suggest, when teachers are constrained by institutional demands, they have less time and flexibility to respond to students' needs (Pelletier et al., 2002). Thus, increasing teacher autonomy may be a crucial step in fostering students' agentic engagement.

Table 2

Results of the analysis for the second research question: What factors impact the likelihood of students becoming agentically engaged?

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Teacher factors	Perceived likelihood of a teacher accepting or dismissing a request	When students perceive a greater likelihood of a teacher accepting their requests, they are more likely to be agentically engaged.	40	"And we generally knew which professors would change, which ones wouldn't, and which ones we would succeed with." (P5FG2)
	A teacher seeking suggestions or feedback from students	When students have experienced a teacher seeking their suggestions and feedback, they are more likely to be agentically engaged.	7	"Sometimes we weren't even aware of what we could actually do because no one told us what was possible. Especially if we didn't have a teacher telling us, 'Here's a survey, evaluate me and tell me what you would like to change.' If that's not there, then you're pretty much stuck." (P1FG1)

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Student factors	Level of extraversion and/or self-assurance	Extroverted and self-assured students are more likely to be agentically engaged. Introverted and self-doubting students are less likely to be agentically engaged.	17	"...people who had more self-confidence. As in, they knew the teacher liked them and that they knew what they were talking about, that the teacher cared, that they had some confidence, and believed that what they had to say would be heard and accepted by the teacher [...] And then they would approach the teacher with that mindset." (P1FG1)
	Disinterest and apathy	Students who are apathetic or feel helpless are less likely to be agentically engaged.	11	"...you know what your position is in school, and your place is not to go and suggest things that come to your mind or what you'd like or what would make it easier for you to learn or what kind of atmosphere you'd prefer." (P1FG1)
	Academic success	Students with lower academic success are more likely to be agentically engaged.	5	"In our case, the situation was that those who had good grades never raised their hands." (P3FG2)
Other factors	Characteristics of the educational system	Students' perception of the educational system as inflexible and deficient makes them less likely to be agentically engaged.	5	"I think all these reforms and everything we try to do here can only reach a certain level, and after that, changes are needed that can't be implemented, at least not at this level." (P1FG1)

Research question 3: What factors make their agentic requests successful?

When considering the factors that determine whether an agentic request would be accepted, students identified a number of key teacher-, student- and request-related factors (Table 3). They again emphasised the crucial role of teachers, in particular their flexibility, accessibility and openness to feedback. They identified teachers' tendency to react negatively, teachers' disinterest and a history of negative experiences as factors associated with lower success.

In addition to teacher traits and behaviours, students also indicated that their own characteristics influenced the likelihood of a positive response to their agentic requests. The most commonly mentioned personal characteristics were effort, extroversion and self-confidence, as well as politeness. Students also reported that teachers were more inclined to accept requests from students they favoured or students who performed better academically. Thus, although students who frequently made agentic requests – particularly those aimed at postponing assessments – were often described as less academically motivated or less academically successful, teachers appeared more receptive to suggestions from motivated and high-achieving students.

Beyond individual characteristics, the nature of the request itself emerged as a determinant of the success of agentic requests, primarily in terms of its content. Students agreed that teachers were more likely to accept their input regarding school events, such as a graduation trip or dance, as P6FG2 emphasised: "Our homeroom teacher left all the choices to us and even said […] that she didn't want to decide where we would go—it's our trip, after all". They also consistently reported that teachers were unlikely to accept requests about their behaviour, as reflected in P1FG1's quote: "I think in our case, it was even worse because even when teachers insulted or humiliated students, nobody really reacted much—especially after a while". Thus, when addressing a teacher's behaviour, students usually sought the intervention of the homeroom teacher or a school counsellor. Their opinions varied when it came to the likelihood of a teacher accepting input on their teaching methods or changes to exam dates:

"From the beginning, you know you can't change a teacher. That's a fixed position. In interacting with teachers, you realise very quickly that you can't really change anything. The most you can do is ask to move an exam date." (P1FG1)

"They were more willing to accept requests to introduce something interactive into lessons—like quizzes or workshops—than other types of changes." (P9FG1)

Overall, the content of students' agentic requests reflected their perceptions of what types of requests were realistically likely to be accepted. This is supported by the overlap between the most frequently mentioned types of requests (Table 1) and those that students believed teachers were most willing to consider. Students also noted that teachers were more likely to accept requests that they considered legitimate, timely and direct.

In conclusion, autonomy-supportive teaching seems to be a crucial determinant of agentic engagement success, as suggested by previous empirical studies (Jang et al., 2024; Michou et al., 2021; Patall et al., 2022). Nevertheless, students reported that teacher behaviours indicative of a neglecting or controlling style might also play an important role. In line with previous studies, we also found that teachers are more receptive to agentic requests from academically successful students and from those who communicate in a more acceptable style, that is, in a polite and autonomy-supportive manner (Flamant et al., in preparation; Patall et al., 2022; Zambrano et al., 2021). One area that has received relatively little attention in the literature but emerged as important in this study is the role of the request topic and its perceived legitimacy and timeliness. Flamant and colleagues (in preparation) suggest that when teachers perceive the topic of the request as being within a domain appropriate for students to offer input, they are more likely to accept the request and perceive it as legitimate. Hence, teachers might believe that extracurricular activities are the students' domain, while teaching methods, class organisation and teacher behaviour should not be commented on by students. This is in line with a study focusing on teachers' beliefs about student participation rights, which showed the same (Klepić, 2021). However, this hypothesis should be further researched in the context of agentic engagement.

Table 3

Results of the analysis for the third research question: What factors make their agentic requests successful?

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Teacher factors	Level of flexibility	Students are more likely to be successful in their requests if the teacher is more flexible about the exam schedule, methods, etc.	26	"I think that some professors simply didn't want to change; some did, and that was that." (P3FG2)
	Negative reactions	Students are less likely to be successful in their requests if teachers are prone to reacting with anger, spite, etc.	23	"So, for us, it was also that the professor knew we shouldn't comment because it would only cause worse consequences for us." (P10FG1)
	Accessibility	Students are more likely to be successful in their requests if the teacher is more agreeable.	22	"And with them, it was possible to have a conversation, ask them anything, and it was really pleasant to be with them in class." (P2FG1)
	Indifference	Students are less likely to be successful in their requests if teachers are indifferent and disinterested.	14	"And then there are simply professors who don't care." (P3FG2)
	Openness to feedback	Students are more likely to be successful in their requests if teachers are more open to feedback.	11	"But there was one young teacher who came and was approachable because she was the only one who gave us some questionnaires to evaluate, like we do in college, so we could give her suggestions. And we actually wrote them, and she accepted them, which was incredible, really great." (P5FG2)
	Negative perception of or history of conflict with the class	Students are less likely to be successful in their requests if the teacher perceives the class negatively.	4	"... even if you ask something, even if you try to change their mind, you can't, and then they look at it differently and keep making comments." (P3FG2)

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Student factors	Diligence	Students who put more effort into a subject are more likely to be successful in their requests.	8	"Maybe those students who raise their hands more often. The professor might have given them more opportunities or made a change for them earlier." (P6FG2)
	Charisma	Students who are extroverted, self-assured and/or charming are more likely to be successful in their requests.	7	"That's why they were much more extroverted people who were really good at – in a nice way – putting forward something that actually worked." (P5FG1)
	Politeness	Students who are perceived as polite are more likely to be successful in their requests.	7	"…and then the tone would change, it wouldn't be normal, but more aggressive, a bit stronger, as if demanding something. Then the professor would hear that and wouldn't be as inclined." (P1FG2)
	Teacher's favourites	Students who are perceived as teacher's favourites are more likely to be successful in their requests.	4	"The favourites always had the best results." (P1FG1)
	Academically successful students	Students who are more academically successful are more likely to be successful in their requests.	3	"I think in our case, it was more that they would respect the opinion of the students with better grades in that subject than those with worse grades..." (P4FG2)

Category	Code	Explanation	Frequency	Representative quote
Request factors	Topic of the request	When the request concerns a topic acceptable to teachers, students are more likely to be successful in their requests.	15	"Well, I think maybe professors would get more offended if we complained about their teaching methods because they would take it more personally […] and they might be more likely to change the exam date because it's easier to move the exam than to change the whole learning method." (P6FG2)
	Perceived legitimacy	When the request is perceived as legitimate by teachers, students are more likely to be successful in their requests.	6	"...this was the case with some professors. One professor was really good to us, and then when we still asked him for an extra point or something, he really had outbursts, he was angry with us." (P4FG2)
	Timeliness of the request	When the request is made in a timely manner, students are more likely to be successful in their requests.	5	"...everything would rely on the principle of contacting the professor on time." (P6FG2)
	Direct requests	When the request is made directly to the teacher, students are more likely to be successful in their requests.	3	"...we solved things face to face in front of the professor because it was easier to persuade the teacher that way." (P10FG1)

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Overall, this study confirms and extends the current understanding of agentic engagement by revealing forms and strategies not previously captured by the existing framework. It seems that students often engage collectively and by voicing non-learning-enhancing requests, such as rescheduling exams or organising events. While autonomy-supportive teaching remains key, student characteristics (e.g., academic success, motivation) and contextual elements (e.g., institutional constraints, request topic) also significantly influence both the level of engagement and its success.

However, when interpreting these findings, several limitations of the study must be considered. Primarily, the research was conducted on a homogeneous sample of psychology students, the majority of whom were academically successful during their high school years. As a result, their perspectives may not reflect those of a more diverse student population. Additionally, as first-year university students, participants may have been subject to recall bias when reflecting on their high school experiences. It is also important to note that these participants attended high school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to online learning may have affected both their opportunities for agentic engagement and the forms that such engagement could take, potentially limiting the generalisability of the results.

Despite these limitations, our study offers several directions for future research. The current conceptualisation of agentic engagement may require revision in light of findings from recent qualitative studies (e.g., Petričević et al., 2022, 2023; Zambrano et al., 2021, 2022). Behaviours that are collective in nature, take place outside the classroom or are not directly focused on learning have been largely overlooked, yet may constitute meaningful forms of agentic engagement. Second, future research on the antecedents and moderators of agentic engagement should adopt a broader perspective, examining a wider range of teacher-, student- and context-related variables such as personality traits, academic motivation, classroom dynamics, characteristics of the education system and characteristics of the requests themselves. Finally, future research should diversify the methods used to investigate agentic engagement, with an emphasis on more studies that use qualitative methods, as such methods offer new and deeper insights into the concept of agentic engagement.

Our findings also have practical implications. First, teachers and schools should attend to collective agentic actions as meaningful expressions of student agency and could create more formalised channels (e.g., structured feedback systems, a greater role for student councils, student-led school campaigns) that legitimise and productively harness collective agentic engagement. In addition, our results indicate that not all students are equally successful in their agentic requests, with academically successful or highly motivated students being more likely to initiate agentic contributions and to do so effectively. If teachers are to create equal opportunities for all students, they need to proactively include less confident or lower-achieving stu-

dents. This can be achieved through modelling appropriate forms of requests, explicitly teaching how to voice concerns constructively and normalising student input as part of classroom culture. Such practices may help prevent agentic engagement from becoming an opportunity accessible only to already advantaged students. Furthermore, schools should examine policies and administrative practices that unintentionally limit responsiveness to student agency (e.g., rigid regulations). As part of their professional development, teachers could be trained to respond to both learning-focused and non-learning-focused agentic requests. Such teacher practices would foster a climate in which agentic engagement is not only encouraged but also meaningfully integrated into both instructional and school-level decision-making.

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PROAKTIVNA UKLJUČENOST UČENIKA U RAZREDU I ŠTO JU ČINI USPJEŠNOM – KVALITATIVNI PRISTUP

Sažetak

Istraživanja o proaktivnoj uključenosti učenika – proaktivnim ponašanjima kojima učenici direktno doprinose nastavi – dobivaju sve veću pozornost. Iako su prethodne studije naglasile njezinu važnost za postignuće i psihološku dobrobit učenika, te nastavnički stil pružanja podrške autonomiji, mnogi aspekti proaktivne uključenosti i dalje su nejasni. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je stoga ispitati perspektivu učenika o pojmu proaktivne uključenosti te čimbenike koji određuju njezinu vjerojatnost i uspješnost. Proveli smo fokusne grupe sa 17 sudionika koji su se prisjećali svojih srednjoškolskih iskustava vezanih uz proaktivnu uključenost. Korištenjem tematske analize, kombinirajući deduktivni i induktivni pristup, utvrdili smo da je trenutačna konceptualizacija proaktivne uključenosti potencijalno preuska. Sudionici su izvijestili da proaktivna uključenost često uključuje grupna ponašanja izvan učionice, od kojih su neka čak usmjerena na izbjegavanje učenja. Dodatno, ključni čimbenici poput osobnosti učenika, dinamike u razredu i stila poučavanja nastavnika utječu i na pojavu i na uspješnost proaktivne uključenosti. Naši nalazi nude važne uvide za proširenje ovog pojma te upućuju na praktične implikacije za nastavu i buduća istraživanja.

Ključne riječi*: proaktivna uključenost; fokusne grupe; nastavnički stilovi; kvalitativni pristup*

APPENDIX A

Guide for the focus groups

Introductory questions on agentic engagement

1. Were you actively engaged in classes at school? What does active participation in class mean to you?
2. Did you have ideas about how to improve a class or an examination, or how to make something related to school easier for students? Can you give a few examples?
3. Did you ever try to actively engage in classes or school in order to put those ideas into practice? What did that look like? In which cases—lectures, exams, oral assessments, school facilities, organisation of trips?
4. How often did you share some of your interests or wishes related to school with teachers? Can you share specific examples with us?

Students' approach to teachers

5. We are interested in some details related to cases when you tried to influence matters directly related to teaching. Which aspects of teaching did you mostly try to influence? Teaching methods, attitudes towards students, grading methods, agreements about oral exams/tests…?
6. Who was involved in such situations, and how did you approach the teacher?
7. Did your approach differ depending on the teacher? What distinguished those teachers, and how did you approach them?
8. In your experience, were some students more inclined to approach teachers in such situations? If yes, which students?

Teachers' reactions

9. How did teachers react to your requests? Were they inclined to make changes in their work?
10. Did reactions differ depending on your approach to the teacher? In what way?
11. Were some teachers more inclined to react positively or negatively to your requests? Which ones?

12. Did reactions differ depending on which aspect of teaching you were trying to influence? For example, teaching methods, attitudes towards students, grading methods?

13. Did teachers respond better to the requests of some students than others? To whose requests did they respond more positively, and to whose less so?

Conditions needed for easier student engagement

14. What do you think would make it easier for more students to engage in class in a way that constructively tries to influence what the teacher does?

15. What would you say are the main obstacles to this?

16. Is there anything else you would like to say about the topic that we did not ask you?