Agency and Choice in Girls' Education

RESEARCH BRIEF | February 2025

WHAT ARE AGENCY AND CHOICE?

Agency is defined as an individual's ability to make "purposeful choices" and, even further, "what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important."[1]

Why is agency in the classroom especially important for girls and young women?

Though more scholarship needs to be done in this area, foundational research shows that agency:
- Increases student engagement[2]
- Is directly related to empowerment (some research simply defines empowerment as increased agency)[3]

As students develop agency, they must understand how and when to exercise their agency, as well as how to respond when others give feedback on their choices.
- Early opportunities for developing agency prepare girls and young women to make future informed decisions confidently.
- One model suggests that increased agency leads to three main shifts in power for girls and women, which in turn has lasting impact on their futures[4]:
  - **Power to:** her capacity to make her own decisions
  - **Power within:** her self-esteem and self-worth
  - **Power with:** the power of girls and women coming together for support or collective action

These shifts are what Hewitt strives for when providing opportunities for agency in specific parts of our school such as action research; affinity and alliance spaces; clubs; and our 4th grade leadership class, 8th grade capstone projects, and signature upper school research program, Extended Inquiry.

What does agency look like for girls in the classroom?

- Research has measured agency across many dimensions such as autonomy, voice, self-efficacy, decision making, self-confidence, and empowerment.[5]
- Agency can be expressed via **decision-making**, **leadership**, or **collective action**.[6]

What are some common misperceptions about student agency in the classroom?

Myth
Agency means teachers give over all control to the students in the classroom.

Truth
Agency requires significant scaffolding, guidance, and support from educators.

Myth
Agency means there is no accountability.

Truth
Students choose how they show their learning, but they still must meet clearly articulated learning objectives.

Myth
Agency makes the teacher's role less important.

Truth
Student agency requires educators to shift power dynamics, thereby creating more engaging and equitable learning experiences.

How does Hewitt create opportunities for agency in the classroom?

Research has mostly focused on how to measure agency and the long term impacts of students having agency, rather than on strategies to increase agency[7]. **At Hewitt, we are filling a gap between research and practice.** Most conversations around increasing agency in the classroom highlight student choice practices such as project-based or inquiry-based learning as well as opportunities for identity formation and expression.[8] In order for any learning experience to be a true opportunity for agency, it must involve students choosing elements of what they study (**content**), how they study it (**process**), and how they exhibit their learning (**product**). One of the many ways we offer Hewitt girls agency is through our signature upper school program, Extended Inquiry.

AT HEWITT by Academic Dean and Educator Dr. Elizabeth Brennan

"Extended Inquiry projects offer a unique opportunity for students to get curious and take initiative. Girls decide for themselves how their project will evolve in content, process, and product, which is the very definition of opportunity for agency."

The Extended Inquiry (EI) program is a unique learning opportunity only offered at Hewitt. Through EI, we encourage students to extend their learning outside of the classroom and develop their research skills by proposing and carrying out an independent research project. The program, designed by our own faculty, is scaffolded so that it is accessible to any student who has the interest and time to complete the project. Projects across grades 9 and 10 must connect to concepts students are studying in one or two of their courses. The 18-month project for 11th and 12th graders allows students to attempt to answer a question they are genuinely curious about with the support of the upper school faculty. In 11th grade, students complete a 12-16 page literature review of current scholarship. As they put multiple authors and viewpoints into conversation with one another, students learn that their question, thesis, and ideas about their topic may change as they dig deeper. In grade 12, students are asked to contribute original research to their fields, thereby using their voice not just to reiterate what is already known but to add new knowledge to the conversation.

Each student who completes an EI project has a faculty mentor who provides guidance, offers feedback, and helps the student stay on track. In addition to their mentor, students often work with faculty who have specific expertise (e.g. English Teacher Miriam Walden did a creative writing workshop for five seniors; students who chose to conduct interviews learned how to create an interview protocol with Center Director Dr. Daron Cyr and how to code their interviews with math teachers Dr. Elizabeth Brennan and Dr. Benjamin Dickman). When students present their work at the end of the project, they are the expert in the room, engaging with questions from faculty and students.

The EI process can be transformative, and students often go well beyond the minimum source and page requirements because they are genuinely interested and invested in this work.

Hewitt's signature Extended Inquiry program addresses several factors research has identified as critical to the development of **leadership skills**[9] in girls and provides opportunities for **agency** and **voice** by:

- Offering scaffolded choice around research content and design
- Supporting communication and interpersonal skills through mentorship, feedback, and presentations
- Requiring critical reflection and analysis of sources, data methods, and findings

EI projects offer a unique opportunity for students to get curious and take initiative. Girls decide for themselves how their project will evolve in **content**, **process**, and **product**, which is the very definition of opportunity for agency.Recent EI projects have included *An Examination of Medical Art: How Ethics in Medicine Have Influenced Medical Illustration*, which featured a student rendering new medical drawings; *Gut Health: The Mind-Gut Connection*, which led a student to create a gut-health cookbook; and *Distorted Realities: Mental Illness in Horror Writing and Its Influence on Perception*, which culminated with a student writing her own horror story.

AT HEWITT by Student Researcher Leia Karczmer '25

"Having come to Hewitt in 9th grade, I was exposed to a kind of intellectual freedom I had never experienced before. The ability to pursue what truly interested me was something I had never been able to take advantage of before."

Having come to Hewitt in 9th grade, I was exposed to a kind of intellectual freedom I had never experienced. The ability to pursue what truly interested me was something I had never been able to take advantage of before. Over the years, I have watched Hewitt's EI program evolve and improve, and it has been inspiring to see it grow into such a robust and dynamic opportunity for students.

In 9th grade, I completed teacher-focused projects in both Latin and physics. It was a great way to begin my research journey and get a good foundation before completing less directed research. For example, in 9th grade, I was very interested in the connection between infrastructure and government. So, I decided to do an EI project connected to Latin class on Roman aqueducts—and Roman infrastructure in general—and their role in fostering loyalty to the Roman Empire.

In 10th grade, sticking with the water theme, I focused my EI on the Flint, Michigan, water crisis. Titled *Crisis on the Flint: An Exploration of Where it All Went Wrong*, the project connected U.S. history and chemistry. I was able to take an interdisciplinary research approach by delving into the science behind lead poisoning and corrosive pipes and the public and governmental disaster response.

In 11th grade, I shifted my focus to the social sciences after joining Hewitt's signature Youth-Led Action Research class. My EI that year, completed in both history and science, explored the concept of groupthink from neurobiological and historical perspectives. The science portion gave me a foundation for understanding decision-making, helping me grasp why individuals sometimes make choices that are not in their best interest. This understanding was applied to the digital age, as I examined phenomena like the Ice Bucket Challenge and the Cinnamon Challenge as modern-day examples of groupthink. My project, *The Dynamics of Groupthink: Exploring Conformity and Decision-Making in the Digital Age*, allowed me to connect historical theories with events that resonated with my peers.

In 12th grade, I built on the foundation of research I synthesized in 11th grade to create my own contribution to the field. I designed my own psychology experiment on groupthink!

Throughout my journey with EI, I have been supported by incredible mentors, teachers, and peers who were interested in my projects and eager to help me succeed. As I look ahead to college, I feel confident that Extended Inquiry has equipped me with the skills to design and complete my own research, synthesize information, and present my findings to an audience while helping me further develop my voice as a scholar.

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2   Ibid

3   Ibrahim, S., & Alkire, S. (2007). Agency and empowerment: A proposal for internationally comparable indicators. Oxford development studies, 35(4), 379-403.

4   Gates, B., & Gates, M. (2017). A Conceptual Model of Women and GirlsEmpowerment. Foundation/Prashant Panjiar.

5   Ogunbiyi, B. O., Bingenheimer, J. B., Baird, S., & Vyas, A. (2024). Measuring adolescent girls' agency. Journal of Adolescence; Zimmerman, L. A., Li, M., Moreau, C., Wilopo, S., & Blum, R. (2019). Measuring agency as a dimension of empowerment among young adolescents globally; findings from the Global Early Adolescent Study. SSM-population health, 8.

6   Gates, B., & Gates, M. (2017). A Conceptual Model of Women and GirlsEmpowerment. Foundation/Prashant Panjiar.

7   Ibid

8   Dabrowski, J., & Marshall, T. R. (2018). Motivation and Engagement in Student Assignments: The Role of Choice and Relevancy. Equity in Motion. Education Trust.

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