

Texts and Engagement

BY ALFRED W. TATUM, Ph.D.

KidsTextMatch, Inc., a new engineering startup, is finalizing its algorithm to match all kids with texts that will engage them based on four conditions that the engineers have weighted across more than a billion data points and preconditions. This was not possible ten years ago, but data science is quickly becoming the new curriculum matchmaker after six years of rigorous research and training examples that use decision trees and categorization based on the most comprehensive synthesis of research focused on children's text choices and preferences. The algorithm uses a sophisticated probability formula that informs major search engines that match consumers with products. The award-winning algorithm is revolutionizing text selection so that teachers can match students in highly diverse classroom environments with books that engage them.

An algorithm to match kids with texts does not exist yet, but teachers and researchers have been trying to identify the best texts to engage students for more than a century. KidsTextMatch, Inc. is a fictional startup. Identifying texts that engage students will always involve some element of guessing and gambling. There will be times when all students in a classroom love the text selection, while other times will be a complete miss for a large number of students.

TEXT SELECTION FOR STUDENTS

Half a century ago, Chall (1967) analyzed text features and the nature of tasks posed by the texts for young readers. Her research stimulated a body of research that examined readability and decodability to support young readers and frameworks for leveled texts (Adams, 1990; Hiebert, 1999). Researchers continue to give attention to matching readers to texts or finding the right texts for beginning and struggling readers (Mesmer, 2008; Hiebert and Sailors, 2009). In their edited volumes, a wide range of topics that include readability formulas, Lexile levels, vocabulary control, leveling systems, and text-analysis tools are discussed. Implications for developmental, instructional, linguistic, and genre considerations are provided. For example, Kim and Snow (2009) offer suggestions for modifying texts for English language learners through simplification and elaboration. Duke and Billman (2009) discuss characteristics that make informational texts more difficult or



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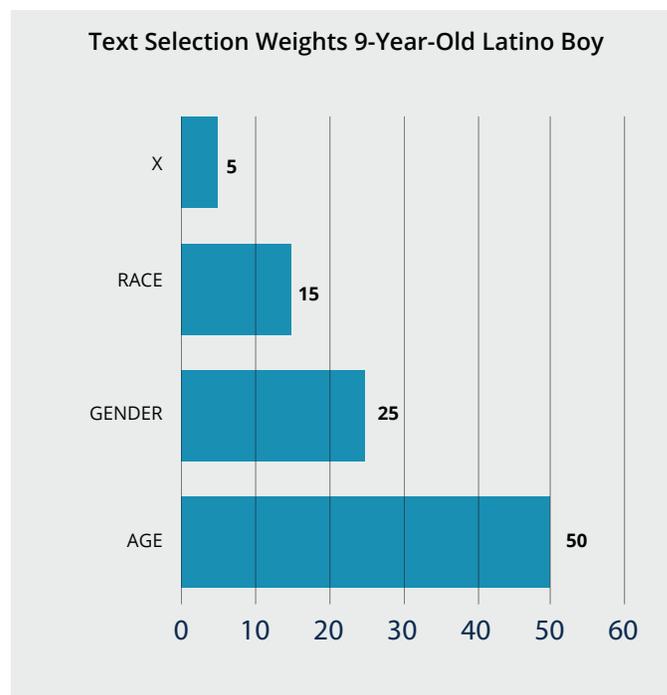
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less difficult for beginning readers. More recently, there is a growing debate focused on leveled texts versus challenging texts and the benefits, limitations, and concerns of both text types (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). This research serves as the backdrop of the student-centered perspective I offer to discuss text and engagement.

STUDENT-CENTERED PERSPECTIVE ON TEXT SELECTION AND ENGAGEMENT

Imagine that your goal is to identify texts to engage nine-year-old Latino boys. Three identities are prominent. They are nine. They are boys. They are Latino. However, it is not clear which identity or identities are not present. Represent the unknown with “x.” The four dimensions can now be used as a starting point to select texts. However, it is not clear how each of the identities are weighted. Will the boys enjoy texts more heavily weighted toward their age, their gender, their cultural identity, or the “x”? The first chart below captures the four dimensions with assigned weights. Charts 2 and 3 have more dimensions with assigned weights that can inform text selection and students’ engagement with texts. Each also has the unknown “x.”

Chart 1: Four Dimensions for All Latino Boys



This first chart suggests selecting boy texts because the boys enjoy texts more aligned to their developmental identity and gender identity. The focus on students’ race is smaller. And it is difficult to account for the “x.” For example, the “x” could represent the boys’ interests in science.

Chart 2: Latino Boy from a Two-Parent Household: Good Reader

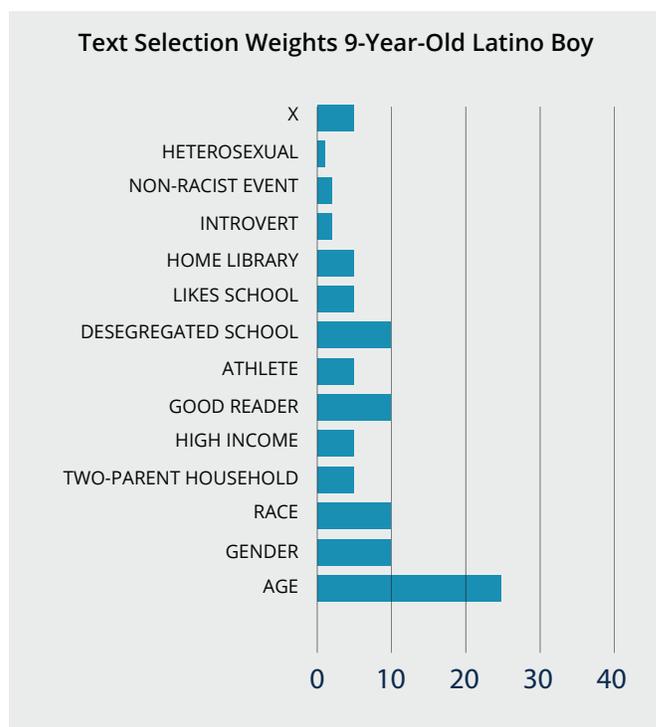


Chart 2 captures more dimensions or identities that were not captured in the four-dimensions chart. While age, race, and gender are heavily weighted, the boy's engagement with texts may also be informed by his identity as a good reader from a two-parent household with a home library. He also enjoys school and has not experienced any overt racist events. He reads cultural literature in his home library, and he loves science. It may be appropriate to provide him with challenging and complex texts appropriate for his grade level without any modifications.

Chart 3: Latino Boy from a Single-Parent Household: Struggling Reader

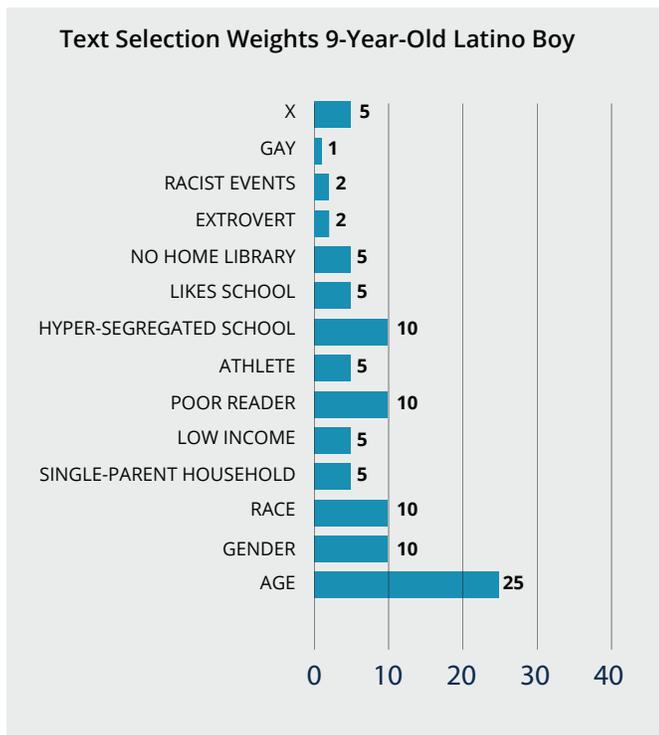


Chart 3 provides different dimensions or identities that were not present in charts 1 and 2. This Latino boy has experienced overt racist events and attends a hyper-segregated school in a low-income community. He is a poor reader and is experiencing the onset of teasing because of his sexual identity. Each of these identities can increase his interests in texts that discuss racial and gender identities. However, his engagement may be limited by his ability to comprehend the text independently because of his struggles with reading.

While there are similarities among all the nine-year-old Latino boys, attempting to select texts based on age, gender, and racial identities may lead to overfitting that does not capture the complex relationships between

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students and their engagement with texts. This is one of the reasons why it is challenging to recommend the best texts for boys, girls, struggling readers, non-struggling readers, ELLs, or other simple classifications that do not exist in isolation.

Selecting texts that nurture students’ reading, writing, and academic and personal development in a classroom with multiple student identities is one of the most challenging and rewarding aspects of literacy instruction. However, it is a challenge that requires serious attention to increase students’ engagement and ensure that students have a meaningful literacy exchange that involves the teacher, other students, and texts (Tatum, 2014).

PATH TOWARD EFFECTIVE TEXT SELECTION AND ENGAGEMENT

For more than a decade, I have proposed that the following two questions be asked as a starting point for selecting texts: Out of all the texts in the world, why do we want to place this text in front of this student at this time? Will students be well-served by the text? While researchers have answered these questions to account for students’ academic identities, developmental identities, reading identities, cultural identities, gender identities, and linguistic identities (Brozo, 2010; Duke, 2000; Tatum, 2005; Tatum, 2011), it has become clear that effective mediation is the key for engaging students across a wide range of texts that allows students to access the texts through one or more of their multiple identities. This is true for fiction and nonfiction texts.

IDENTIFYING CRITERIA FOR SELECTING TEXTS

Consideration for students' multiple identities and a clear conceptualization for the roles of literacy development are the starting point for selecting texts. A second consideration is using texts to broker relationships with students. A few summers back, an 11-year-old student wrote the following as part of his application to enroll in a summer literacy institute designed to use texts to nurture students' writing:

All my life I have never been anything more but a trouble making boy. I was always the one that got in the most trouble throughout my family. In my entire life I never had my time to shine. Everyone around me was happy and joyful but not me. I was by myself in a cold world. I always tried my best at everything but my best wasn't good enough.

I know no one in the world liked me because every time I walked in a room people looked at me like I was wanted for murder. Most people tell me that I will be locked up with the real bad boys but truly I would love that because most of the bad boys I talked to know how much it hurts to be left out or forgotten.

Should text be selected to honor his culture identity, developmental identity, gender identity, personal identity, community identity, or economic identity? Is the goal of the text selection to have him move deeper into his current circumstances or move him away from the circumstances? Should I select texts that highlight characters who have experienced similar circumstances so that he finds relevance in the texts? Do I select contemporary texts or will canonical texts engage him? Is it more appropriate to use fiction or nonfiction? Does his reading ability dictate the text selections and accompanying instructional practices? The answer is all of the above. Fortunately, each text selection does not have to meet all criteria. Establishing a litmus test for text selection that honors students' complex identities will increase engagement opportunities by allowing students to experience texts from their identities that carry the most weight during particular reading experiences. Below is a sample litmus test:

- Will students be well-served by "this" text?
- Will students be able to access the text through one or more of their identities?
- What makes this text essential or useful?
- Out of all of the texts in the world, why this one for students in this time and space?

“Text selection must be complemented by supporting students' access to the text at the word level, sentence level, or conceptual level.”

- Will I love to rush in to teach this text?
- Will this text allow me to find out more about me as I find out more about my students?
- How can this text be appropriately paced to engage students?
- What is the appropriate starting point for this text?
- Is "this" a considerate and challenging text?
- Does this text lend itself to academic excellence and identity development?
- Will this text have staying power?
- Will this text restore confidence in literacy instruction?
- Does the text serve as a writing and language coach?

MOVING BEYOND THE TEXT SELECTION DEFAULT

Two major defaults for text selection are adversely affecting or limiting students' engagement with a wide range of texts across the disciplines. They are: (1) narrowing text selection based on students' culture, and (2) selecting texts based on students' reading levels. Both can be problematic and miss the mark because they fail to account for other factors and identities that stimulate students' engagement with texts. A key to moving beyond the text default is starting with the premise that all text types belong to all students. This requires a clear conceptualization for roles of texts. For example, texts can be selected to nurture social and scientific consciousness in developmentally appropriate ways. Third-grade students may enjoy reading nonfiction texts about boogers and germs as much as they enjoy fiction texts about *a young girl who learns to code to solve mysteries*. Text selection must be complemented by supporting students' access to the text at the word level,

sentence level, or conceptual level. While important for struggling readers, this is also true for non-struggling readers who are introduced to new topics.

IN SEARCH OF CUMULATIVE RESULTS

Effective and engaging text selections should be assessed by the cumulative results, not individual texts. A reflective teacher discards the texts that do not engage students and builds on those that do. This allows teachers to build a cache or library of engaging texts over time for students to select from. The building of the cache begins with wide reading across the disciplines while thinking about students' identities and the anticipated benefits of the texts. It is also

important to observe for the unanticipated benefits that texts yield for the students and teacher. Engaging students with more texts that lead to positive experiences in classrooms increases the likelihood of student engagement. Teaching can be the "x" factor. It is the combination of powerful texts and powerful teaching that engages students. This is the award-winning algorithm that already exists.

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