

# Beyond Leveled Readers: Finding Engaging Books to Support Beginning Readers

María G. Leija  
Miriam Martinez  
Samuel DeJulio

The University of Texas at San Antonio

## Abstract

*Teachers of beginning readers have choices in the books they select. A careful look at the features of books provides an informed basis for choosing books that engage young readers. In this article we share insights from a comparative content analysis of leveled readers and Geisel award books that can motivate children to read and prepare them for entry into the world of authentic children’s literature. We end the article with descriptions of diverse award winning and honor books that can be used in interactive read alouds with beginning readers and provide recommendations for preparing for an interactive read aloud using one of the books.*

**Keywords:** beginning reading, Geisel Award, text selection, text features

## Introduction

Teachers of beginning readers know the importance of getting the right books into their students’ hands—books that both motivate children to read and prepare them for entry into the world of authentic children’s literature. We begin by briefly discussing each of these important goals. We then share the results of an analysis we conducted of two kinds of books for beginning readers—leveled readers and books recognized by Geisel Award committees as high-quality books for beginning readers.

### Books that Motivate Children to Read

Beginning readers need to read! The more they read, the better they read (Allington, 2003; Anderson et al., 1988). Reading helps to solidify basic reading competencies and fosters the fluency needed as children move into more complex texts. One way of achieving this goal is through repeated readings (Dowhower, 1994). A second way of ensuring that children have much needed experiences reading is through wide reading (Allington, 2014). This suggests the importance of using authentic literature to extend reading opportunities beyond the core reading programs, and authentic literature with strong storylines and interesting characters that readers care about are the ones young readers are most likely to want to read—and then to reread.

### Books that Prepare Children for the World of Authentic Literature

Picturebooks typically provide beginning readers entry into the world of authentic literature, and the picturebook is a distinctive, multimodal format in which “... text and pictorial narrations accompany each other, alternate, and intertwine” (Schwarcz & Schwarcz, 1991, p. 5). This

means that while story information is conveyed through the verbal text, critical story information is also conveyed through visual text—and sometimes only through the visual text. So, in reading picturebooks, young readers must have the tools they need to “read” visual text, just as they need tools to read verbal text.

Learning to read visual text involves learning to read semiotic codes that illustrators use in telling stories, codes such as color, line, positionality, and perspective (Moebius, 1986). Further, creators of contemporary picturebooks often use an additional system for conveying meaning—manipulations of typography, which can include the use of colored, bold or italicized fonts, and the distinctive layout of typography. Lambert (2015) has described these typographical manipulations as “semiotic resources” (p. 40). So, it is important to ensure that beginning readers have ample opportunities to learn how to read both the verbal and visual text so they will be prepared to read picturebooks independently.

### **Commonly Used Resources for Beginning Readers**

Allington and McGill-Franzen (2021) note, “...commercial core reading programs seem designed to continue to offer quite limited opportunities to engage in reading” (p. 232). Further, there are criticisms of the kinds of reading materials that are offered by core reading programs. In particular, most core reading programs in the United States include leveled readers that are often used by teachers for guided practice with students or as texts that students can read independently. In spite of their popularity, educators have noted that leveled readers lack engaging qualities and do not support children in learning grapheme-phoneme relationships. The latter critique is supported by research findings showing that the levels of leveled readers tend to correlate to the amount of text, rather than the decodability of text (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2005). This critique is sometimes accompanied by calls to replace leveled readers with decodable readers, which in spite of similarly unengaging stories, do support children in learning phoneme-grapheme relationships. In the current Science of Reading movement, some schools and districts have reportedly moved away from leveled readers. However, there is little indication that leveled readers will disappear, and decodable texts are limited in their aim and practicality outside of simply learning to decode words.

An additional high-quality resource that teachers can include in their programs is authentic children’s literature, such as Geisel Award books. The Geisel Award is given annually by the American Library Association, to the author and illustrator of the most distinguished book that supports the beginning reader (American Library Association, n.d.). Each year the award committee typically names honor books as well the winning book. Although there are a considerable number of awards for picturebooks (e.g., Tomás Rivera, Coretta Scott King, Orbis Pictus) the Geisel award is specifically focused on books for beginning readers.

### **What We Did**

To better understand the features of leveled readers and Geisel books—and the ways in which they can potentially support the goals of teachers—we analyzed 22 first grade leveled reading books in the Savvas My View Literacy (2020) series and 22 Geisel Award winners and honor books. All the books we included were designated at the first-grade level based upon the

Fountas and Pinnell leveling system (D-I). Working collaboratively to identify features of the books in the two text sets, we found distinctive differences between the two types of books—differences we believe to be important in light of the two goals we have discussed. The details of this content analysis are reported elsewhere (DeJulio, Leija, & Martinez, 2022). In the following sections, we present these differences and reflect on their significance in selecting books for beginning readers.

## What We Discovered

In the following sections we first discuss story features of the leveled readers and Geisel texts we analyzed. This is followed by a discussion of findings related to the visual text of these books. We conclude with recommendations for selecting and engaging young readers with diverse texts to further extend reading opportunities in the classroom.

### Story Features with the Potential to Foster Repeated Reading

Although the leveled reading books we analyzed tended to have more text (both in terms of total words and words per page), the Geisel books offered elements that could encourage a child to reread the books. In particular, interesting plots and memorable characters are story features with the potential to engage readers and promote wide reading. We first discuss our findings related to these key story features.

#### *Plot Features of Leveled Readers and Geisel Books*

For both text sets we analyzed, the most commonly used plot structure was a problem-solution structure. We found that 77% of the Geisel books were structured as problem-solution narratives, compared to 50% of the leveled readers. However, there were dramatic differences in the plot features of the two text sets. Geisel books were often filled with humorous plot events (73%) and story details (95%). For example, in *A Pig, a Fox, and a Box* (Fenske, 2015) readers see a game of hide-and-seek gone awry as each of Fox's attempts to hide results in unexpected outcomes—such as Pig sitting on the box in which Fox is hidden and inadvertently flattening both the box—and Fox. By contrast, we identified humorous plot events in only 9% of leveled readers.

Many of the Geisel books also tended to offer plot twists (91%) with the potential to pull readers in. In *I Broke My Trunk* (Willems, 2011), Elephant tells Piggie the story of how he broke his trunk. It wasn't by lifting Hippo with his trunk. Or by lifting Hippo and Rhino with his trunk. Or by lifting Hippo, Rhino, Hippo's sister and her piano. No, Elephant broke his trunk by tripping and falling as he hurried to tell his friend Piggie about his remarkable lifting feats. While such plot twists were common in Geisels, we found plot twists in only 23 % of leveled readers. Elements such as humor and plot twists can motivate children to read not only to learn what happens in the story, but also to reread in order to relive entertaining moments found throughout the book.

## ***Characters in Leveled Readers and Geisel Books***

The quality of characters in a story can work in tandem with the plot to engage readers. Well-developed or round characters can make readers care about what happens to them; they are more likely to empathize or sympathize with the characters. Such characters can offer connections to the reader, regardless of whether the characters outwardly appear to share a great deal in common with the reader. To judge whether or not characters were round, we looked at their personalities, their emotional responses, and whether or not they changed and grew as a consequence of their experiences. Based on the five-point scale (1=minimal roundness; 5=extremely round) we devised, we found that the Geisel books tended to contain rounder characters. One example of a round character (level 4) is Otto in *Go, Otto, Go!* (Milgram, 2016). Though Milgram uses minimal text in the book, it is evident that the robot, Otto, misses his family as he gazes at their picture and looks through a telescope, apparently in hopes of seeing them. This clearly establishes Otto's motivation for building a rocket to reach his family. Yet when his rocket-building endeavor fails, Otto is embraced by a loving group of friends. This outcome makes Otto's acceptance of his "new family" completely believable. Although 32% of the main characters in Geisel books scored at level 4 and 23% at level 5, only 5% of the main characters in leveled reading texts scored at level 4 and none scored at level 5.

One area in which we found characterization in both text sets lacking was in terms of the ethnic diversity. The Geisel books contained very few human characters (27%). The majority of the books featured animal (77%) or other nonhuman (e.g., robots) characters (23%). Of the few Geisel texts that did include human characters, most of the main characters (80%) were White. The leveled reading books, on the other hand, generally focused on human characters (82%). Additionally, there was considerable diversity in the racial representation of the characters. Only 52% of the main characters were White. Even so, we found the diversity of the characters to be superficial, being represented only in the illustrations. The "diverse" characters were drawn with different skin tones; however, cultural elements were rarely represented in the story itself. Furthermore, because the characters tended to be one-dimensional (i.e., less round), they offered few opportunities for readers to connect with them beyond outward appearance.

### **Role of the Visual Text**

In the Geisel readers we analyzed, the visual text often played a central role in telling the story, while illustrations in leveled readers played a decidedly secondary role. For example, important character information was conveyed only through illustrations in 68% of the Geisels compared to 18% of the leveled readers. We found a similar pattern for plot development. In only 5% of leveled readers were plot events conveyed *only* through visual text. In the Geisels, the visual text played a far more prominent role with key plot events being conveyed only through illustrations in 82% of the Geisel readers. For example, in *Good Night Owl* (Pizzoli, 2016), it is bedtime, but Owl cannot settle in for a good sleep because of the noise he hears repeatedly. Unable to identify the source, Owl becomes increasingly frustrated—to the point of tearing his house apart. Unlike Owl, readers are in on the book's joke because illustration after illustration reveal the source of Owl's problem—a squeaky little mouse who is never mentioned in the verbal text. It is through opportunities to read books like *Good Night Owl* that children

become attuned to the importance of carefully attending to the visual text in picturebooks, as well as the verbal text.

### ***Manipulation of Visual Codes***

The illustrators of contemporary picturebooks often utilize two important systems for conveying meaning in crafting visual text—the manipulation of visual codes and the creative enhancement of typography. Visual codes, which include color, line, size, and positionality (Moebius, 1986), are tools that illustrators use to convey important information. For example, to emphasize the importance of a story event, an illustrator might use the code of size by zooming in on a pictured event. We saw this type of manipulation to call attention to a decisive event in *Don't Throw It to Mo* (Adler, 2016). Mo is the smallest member of his football team, and members of the opposing team are convinced he has butterfingers. So, when Mo runs deep, opposing players don't even bother running after him. But then, on the final play of the game, Mo runs deep, jumps high, and catches the ball. The illustrator zooms in for a close-up of Mo making the winning play, thereby emphasizing the importance of this climactic scene.

In a similar fashion, an illustrator can signal a change in a character's emotional state through the manipulation of color. We identified such a shift in color used very effectively in *I Want My Hat Back* (Klassen, 2011). Scenes in the initial pages of the book play out in front of a nondescript beige background as Bear asks animal after animal if they have seen his missing hat. Then, when Bear realizes that Rabbit is the one who has taken his hat, the background color shifts to an intense red signaling Bear's outrage over the theft of his hat.

In our analysis we found that the illustrators of Geisels made frequent use of tools such as zooming and color shifts, thereby providing beginning readers with opportunities to learn how illustrators develop stories visually. By contrast, the illustrators of the leveled readers used such tools infrequently, hence limiting young readers opportunities to learn about ways illustrators convey important meanings through visual codes.

### ***Manipulation of Typography***

The manipulation of typography is yet another system through which picture book illustrators convey meaning. For example, illustrators might use italics or bold fonts, or they might manipulate the size, color, and layout of typography—manipulations that can convey important story information. While we found few such manipulations in leveled readers, the illustrators of Geisels frequently manipulated typography for diverse purposes.

An example of these creative uses of visual text is evident in the illustrations of *We Are Growing* (Keller, 2016), the winner of the 2017 Geisel award. The book's visual text is integral in telling this story about blades of grass that discover they are growing—and doing so in decidedly different ways. For example, one blade discovers he is the tallest; another realizes he is the curliest, while yet another blade of grass notices he is the silliest. On one page of the book, readers see an important story event—the emergence of a dandelion. It is only through the visual text that readers learn about this event; we see a somewhat amazed blade of grass topped by a large, yellow dandelion. The significance of the story event is signaled through manipulations of typography and color. For example, we see the word “Pop!” written in huge, colorful, curving letters high above the head of the blade of grass. The reactions of the surrounding blades to this

event are also conveyed only through the visual text as they lean back from the dandelion in amazement. These reactions are underscored on the facing page with responses written in oversized letters with words like “dandelion” and “weed” italicized for further emphasis. By contrast, the calm acceptance by the dandelion of his friends’ reactions to this new state of affairs is signaled through words written in smaller, non-italicized letters.

### Final Thoughts

Unlike the leveled readers, the Geisel books we analyzed had numerous features that can entice beginning readers to read and re-read. Given this, we believe that Geisel books deserve a prominent place in classrooms serving beginning readers. Teachers can promote Geisels by introducing them to their students, making them available in the classroom library, and setting aside time each day for independent reading. We believe teachers will have to do little beyond that to promote the books. Geisels “sell” themselves.

Yet despite the many appealing features of Geisels, we did identify one notable limitation. In large part, these books do not offer children opportunities to engage with diverse characters, and it is essential for young readers to see the diversity of our world in the books they read. Students of color need many opportunities to see themselves represented in books (Bishop, 1990). In addition, books written by and about people of color can also provide opportunities for students to look through windows and see other cultures (Bishop, 1990).

While diverse picturebooks are increasingly available in the United States (Cooperative Children’s Book Center, n.d.), finding diverse literature that beginning readers can read independently can be challenging. One way to address this problem is by using *interactive read alouds* to introduce beginning readers to diverse picturebooks that they would likely find too challenging if read on their own. In Table 1, we include descriptions of some diverse award winning and honor books that can be used in interactive read alouds with beginning readers. Each of these titles has the kinds of engaging features we identified in our analysis of Geisels.

Interactive read alouds can serve to scaffold books for children and provide a space for dialogue (Wiseman, 2011). By first experiencing a book just beyond their reading level with the support of a teacher, children can then return to read the book independently. When teachers feature books with diverse (and engaging) characters in interactive read alouds, this serves as a means of also opening the world of diverse literature for the independent reading of beginning readers. In Table 2, we provide eight steps for preparing for an interactive read aloud of *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* (Quintero, 2019), one of the books we describe in Table 1. In steps 3 and 4 we highlight engaging features (visual images, devices, and typography) found in authentic literature but not in leveled reading books.

In light of the limitations of beginning reading programs and the leveled readers that are mainstays in these programs, authentic literature, such as Geisel readers, offers beginning readers opportunities for learning and engagement that are not offered in leveled readers. We believe classroom libraries stocked with accessible, high-quality authentic literature, such as Geisel books, is one way of getting engaging books into children’s hands. A second way is by making diverse picturebooks accessible through interactive read alouds. With the right books and the use of carefully planned interactive read alouds (see Table 2), teachers of beginning readers can promote both wide reading and the rereading of books.

**Table 1.** *Diverse Children’s Literature*

Book Title	Summary	Award(s)	Visual Text	Typography	Diversity
<i>Just a Minute: A Trickster Tale and Counting Book</i> (Morales, 2003)	When Grandma Beetle opens her door to find Señor Calavera has come for her, she cleverly outsmarts the “deathly skeleton” as she continues her party preparations.	Tomás Rivera Book Award Mexican American Pura Belpré Award	Señor Calavera’s emotions are revealed through visual text.  Vivid colors are in sync with the story’s playful mood.	The numbers 1-10 in English and Spanish are written in all caps and larger font.	The visual text is filled with details associated with Mexico (e.g., papel picado, piñata).
<i>Alma and How She Got Her Name</i> (Martinez-Neal, 2018)	Alma, a Peruvian child, believes her name is too long—until her father explains the family ties reflected in her name.	Caldecott Honor  Ezra Jack Keats Award	Illustrations feature the relatives after whom Alms is named. Visual details show what each one loved to do.	Some of the many ways text is manipulated include shifts in font size, color, and layout. The text within the illustrations indicate that Alma is a bilingual (Spanish and English) speaker. For example, when Alma shares that she too is an artist, all of her drawings have Spanish labels.	The book is also available in Spanish. In the English version, Spanish is featured throughout the verbal and visual texts Alma’s relatives are all positioned in a positive light.
<i>My Papi Has a</i>	Every day after work, Daisy and	Tomás Rivera Book	Endpapers establish the	Onomatopoeia words are	The book is also available

<i>Motorcycle</i> (Isabel Quintero, 2019)	her father ride through their neighborhood on her father’s motorcycle.	Award Pura Belpré Honor Award	setting of the story, and details of the neighborhood are depicted in the book’s illustrations. Readers also learn a great deal about character reactions and character relationships through illustrations.	integrated into illustrations. Speech bubbles appear in some illustrations.	in Spanish. Numerous details signal the story is set in a Mexican American neighborhood. Signs throughout the town are in Spanish. Special relationships are named in Spanish (e.g., abuelito).
<i>My Two Border Towns</i> (David Bowles, 2021)	Each Saturday a boy and his dad go to Reynosa, Mexico, for their weekend errands—and to help their friends, refugees that cannot enter the U.S.	Tomás Rivera Book Award ALSC Notable Children’s Books	Illustrations contain many visual reminders of what border towns look like (e.g., signs in Spanish).. The U.S. port of entry is beautifully illustrated with cultural markers such as the flag.	The size, color, and font of text are manipulated throughout the story. Spanish text is predominantly used in illustrations	This book is also available in Spanish. In the English version, the author code switches in Spanish. The story provides a glimpse into what it is like to cross the U.S./Mexico border and experience a day in one of the United States’ twin towns.
<i>Thank You, Omu!</i> (Mora, 2018)	When Omu makes a delectable red stew, the smell repeatedly entices	Caldecott Honor Coretta Scott King Illustrator	Mora’s collages give readers views of Omu’s lively urban neighborhood.	Important words are highlighted through typographical manipulations	This book is available in Spanish. Omu’s neighborhood



	members of the community to her door. Each time Omu shares her stew—until there is none left for her!	Award		such as words written in all caps. Each time someone knocks on Omu’s door, the words “KNOCK, KNOCK” appear as part of the illustration.	is filled with people from diverse cultural groups.
<i>Saturday</i> (Mora, 2019)	Saturdays are special days for Ava and her mother, but this Saturday nothing seems to go right.	Boston Globe-Horn Award for Picturebooks	Endpapers display a calendar with each day crossed off except for Saturday. This square of the calendar is starred and features the words “Puppet Show.”  Emotional responses to disappointing events are conveyed through illustrations. The concluding story event is shown <u>only</u> through an illustration.	Important words are highlighted through typographical manipulations. For example, the first sentence of the story is written in standard font, except for the word “Saturday” which is hand-lettered in purple and written in all caps.	Ava and her mother are African American.
<i>Hair Love</i> (Matthew Cherry,	Zuri, an African-American child,	New York Times Bestseller	Through the visual text, we learn about	“Perfect” is written in italics for	The text provides a counter

2019)	wakes up and starts brainstorming how she will fix her hair for her special event. Through trial and error, and a hair video tutorial Zuri finds online, her father is able to fix Zuri's hair perfectly before mom comes home.	CCBC Choices	Zuri's father's experience with fixing her hair. As he tries to fix her hair, a rubber band flies off her hair, bounces off of the spray bottle, and hits him in the eye. Zuri uses her i-pad to show her dad a hair tutorial, her dad follows the steps to create the perfect hairstyle for Zuri.	added emphasis. Onomatopoeia is included in the verbal text and is emphasized through the use of colorful capital letters with exclamation marks.	narrative to the ways in which African-American dads are often portrayed.
<i>Milo Imagines the World</i> (de la Peña, 2021)	Observing his fellow passengers on a long subway ride, Milo imagines each one's life and draws what he imagines. Yet when the boy in a suit exits the subway at Milo's stop and walks to the very same place as Milo, he realizes you cannot always judge people just by looking at them.	<i>Kirkus</i> Best Book of the Year Hornbook Fanfare	Milo's childlike drawings are integrated into Robinson's illustrations throughout the book. The change in Milo's thinking is revealed through these drawings.	Onomatopoeia associated with Milo's drawing is italicized (e.g., <i>clop clop clop</i> ).	Milo and his sister are African Americans, and the subway on which Milo travels is filled with a diverse array of individuals.

<p><i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story</i> (Maillard, 2019)</p>	<p>This is a celebration of fry bread and culture. The verbal text is filled with sensory images and beautiful metaphors: “Fry bread is shape,” “Fry bread is sound.” An author’s note elaborates on each statement about this traditional Native American food.</p>	<p>American Indian Youth Literature Award  Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal</p>	<p>The illustrations are filled with people—children and adults—joining together to make, eat and celebrate fry bread.</p>	<p>Each double page spread begins with one of the metaphors (“Fry bread is flavor”) written in large, red capital letters. Some of the metaphors are also laid out on a curve that aligns with the many rounded shapes filling the illustrations.</p>	<p>Front and back endpapers are filled with the names of Native American tribes.</p>
<p><i>Watercress</i> (Andrea Wang, 2021)</p>	<p>Wanting to be like her American peers, a young girl is embarrassed when the family stops by the roadside to gather watercress. It is her mother’s story of a childhood in China that enables the girl to appreciate the food the family has gathered.</p>	<p>Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature  Caldecott Award  Newbery Honor Award</p>	<p>Scenes representing the parents’ childhood memories of China are signaled by subtle shifts in the color palette.</p>	<p>Typography is laid out in a straightforward way in this story.</p>	<p>The text references the parents’ experiences in China and their nostalgia for watercress, a food of their childhood.</p>
<p><i>Bilal Cooks Daal</i> (Aisha Saeed, 2019)</p>	<p>Early in the day, Bilal’s father invites him to help prepare dinner. Bilal invites his</p>	<p>Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature  Notable</p>	<p>Endpapers are colorfully decorated with ingredients used to prepare daal.</p>	<p>Labels for ingredients are written in different size fonts and colors, as are</p>	

	friends to join him in preparing daal. At the end of the day, Bilal and his friends enjoy eating the soup they made.	Social Studies Trade Books for Young People	As Bilal answers his friends' questions about daal, he has a visual thought bubble that includes a picture of a pot with soup in it. A bag labeled daal (lentils) and two dishes that have rice on them, daal, and naan next to them. When Bilal selects the type of daal he would like to cook, shelves that are lined with different colors of ingredients are illustrated. He selects the yellow jar labeled chana.	onomatopoeia words. Some of the dialogue is written in large colorful font for emphasis.	
<i>A Big Mooncake for a Little Star</i> (Grace Lin, 2018)	Little Star's mother tells her not to eat the newly made mooncake, but the temptation proves to be too great for Little Star.	Caldecott Award Charlotte Zolotow Award	Clues in the endpapers foreshadow an important event.  Through the use of zooming, the illustrator signals	Shifts in the layout of text reflect the movements of Little Star.	The Mid Autumn Moon Festival inspired Grace Yin's fanciful story.  There is also a Chinese version of the book.

			important events and ultimately signals that the story may actually be about the phases of the moon.		
<i>Drawn Together</i> (Minh Le, 2018)	A boy's visit with his grandfather portends to be disappointing at best—due to a language barrier. Yet when the boy and his grandfather pull out their art supplies, the two find their own way of communicating.	Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature  Charlotte Huck Award	Illustrations convey critical information about character emotions and the world the boy and grandfather create together through art.	Dialogue bubbles contain the boy's words written in English and the grandfather's words written in Vietnamese characters. Important words in the narration are written in all capital letters.	The style of the grandfather's art clearly signals an Asian culture.

**Table 2:**

Preparing an Interactive Read Aloud with *My Papi Has a Motorcycle*

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Step 1: Consider the cultural background of listeners.	The book is about a Mexican American family living in a distinctly Mexican American city. The book is accessible for students who spend time with their dads and/or are interested in motorcycles.
Step 2: Practice reading aloud.	Important step for non-fluent Spanish speakers.
Step 3: Analyze the visual images and devices.	Number of notable visual features worth highlighting during the read aloud: endpapers provide a panoramic view of the setting and foreshadow an important event; signs, establish the cultural setting; illustrations, convey character relationships and emotions.
Step 4: Analyze the typography.	Speech bubbles, onomatopoeia words, and signs appear in Spanish and/or English.
Step 5: Identify key vocabulary.	“Celestial, justicia/justice, and immigrants,” can initiate conversations about the nature of Mexican American communities.

Step 6: Develop questions.

What special experiences does Daisy have with her papi? How are they like your family experiences?  
What changes happened in Daisy's city?  
Have you noticed any changes within our city/town?

Step 7: Implement the read aloud.

Stop to discuss visual images, typography, key vocabulary and to invite discussion.

Step 8: Make the book accessible.

Place the book in the classroom library to encourage independent reading.

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Dr. María G. Leija is an Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio. She examines how teachers integrate children’s literature to support students’ academic success. In addition, her work examines how teachers effectively create bidirectional spaces between home and school.



Miriam Martinez is Professor of Literacy at the University of Texas at San Antonio where she teaches children’s literature courses. Her research includes content analyses of children’s literature and investigations focused on the nature of children’s literary meaning-making. She currently serves as one of the ILA representatives on the board of the United States Board of Books for Youth.



Samuel DeJulio is an Assistant Professor of Literacy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. His research includes literacy teacher preparation, content analyses of children’s literature, and historical literacy research. He currently serves as Historian for the Literacy Research Association.