Increasing Middle School Reading Motivation: Preliminary Results from a 3-year Mixed Methods Study

By Erin Bailey, Ed.D., Reading Is Fundamental
Julie Meredith, Ph.D., Kathleen Miller, and Jennifer Bitzer, Policy Studies Associates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This research conceptualizes literacy as an act of agency through a 3-year transformational literacy program for 140,000 middle school students in 78 middle schools located in 10 large urban cities with the highest reading achievement difference between Black students and white students. The Middle School Family Literacy Initiative (MSFLI) expands on Reading Is Fundamental's (RIF) research-backed Books For Ownership model to support literacy among a critical cohort of students. This program aims to (1) engage middle school students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, (2) integrate current models, theories, research, and components of literacy education for middle school students with specific attention dedicated to interdisciplinary literacies, multiliteracies, multimodal and digital literacies, and culturally responsive and sustaining literacy pedagogies and (3) explore the connections between adolescent reading motivation and engagement with reading achievement and academic outcomes.

METHODS

We designed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study to evaluate the program's effects on reading motivation and reading achievement.

In years one and two, we sought to answer questions: (1) How do students describe their engagement with the program, and (2) What do the years one and two survey data show about any changes in the value students place on reading and in their perceptions of themselves as readers?

MAJOR FINDINGS

Quantitative

- Year One: Across all grades, small increases in students' self-concept and value of reading between fall and spring (Table 1).
- Year Two: Across all grades and both scales, significant increases between fall and spring (Table 2; *effect size* = 0.8 SD for self-concept and value, $p < 0.05$).
- 8th Grade: Particularly large growth in scores for 8th graders during the 2023-24 school year (Table 3).

Qualitative

Finding 1) Students had expanded access to books and exposure to new genres.

Finding 2) Students shared books with family members and took pride in reading.

Finding 3) Students increased their self-concept and value of reading.

*Finding 4) Students self-initiated engagement and social activities.*

SIGNIFICANCE

Providing choice, access, and engagement opportunities for the middle school students involved in this study serves as a launching point for activating student-initiated literacy practices and reading joy. Much of literacy research has been focused on the cognitive processes and skills of reading; however, factors outside of students' cognitive skills potentially play an important role in reading achievement. Unfortunately, reading motivation and engagement decline in middle school grades for students in urban schools. Furthering our understanding of the role of motivation in adolescent readers will help inform instruction and intervention for this critical group of students.
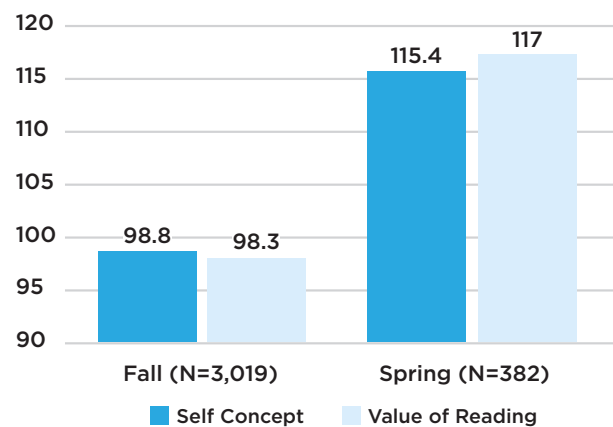
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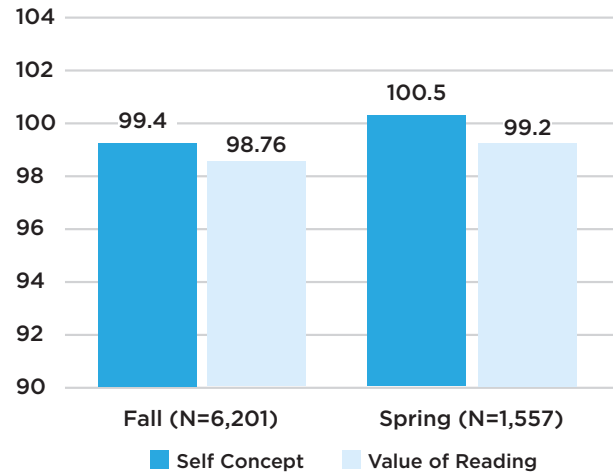
Table 2. All students Fall 2023 and Spring 2024
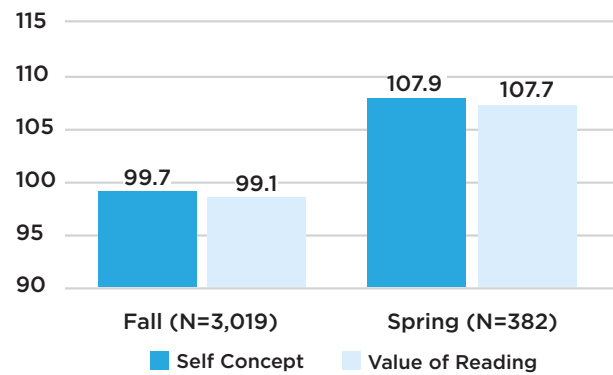
Table 3. 8th Grades Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

PURPOSE

This research conceptualizes literacy as an act of agency through a 3-year transformational literacy program for 140,000 middle school students in 78 middle schools located in 10 large urban cities with the highest reading achievement difference between Black students and white students. The Middle School Family Literacy Initiative (MSFLI) expands on Reading Is Fundamental's (RIF) research-backed Books For Ownership model (see Lindsay, 2010) to support literacy among a critical cohort of students. This program aims to (1) engage middle school students and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, (2) integrate current models, theories, research, and components of literacy education for middle school students with specific attention dedicated to interdisciplinary literacies, multiliteracies, multimodal and digital literacies, and culturally responsive and sustaining literacy pedagogies and (3) explore the connections between adolescent reading motivation and engagement with reading achievement and academic outcomes.

PERSPECTIVES

The MSFLI program specifically focuses on activating joy through culturally and historically responsive literature (Vlach et al., 2023) by providing middle school books that are inclusive of diverse races and ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, social classes, religions, family structures, abilities, and the intersections of these identities. Drawing from literature on reading motivation and engagement (see Guthrie & Wigfield, 2024 for comprehensive review), we define joy as frequency, motivation, and engagement in reading with a goal to explore the connection between reading joy and reading achievement.

MOTIVATION

Reading motivation is "the relatively stable readiness of a person to initiate particular reading activities" (Schiefele et al., 2012, p. 429) and research aligns reading motivation with reading achievement (e.g., Becker et al., 2010; Cartwright et al., 2016; Toste et al., 2020). Reading motivation is a multidimensional construct that has been defined through various terms (e.g., reading attitudes, Petscher, 2010; competency beliefs and goal orientations, Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; intrinsic and extrinsic, Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997) that have been used to operationalize and measure it (Conradi et al., 2013; Toste et al., 2020). Tied to several theories on the relationship between self-perceived competence and value, in this research we focus on two constructs: value of reading and self-concept of reading. Within this framework, value of reading includes the value students place on reading and reading-related activities and self-concept of reading includes students' self-perception of their competence in reading. Gambrell et al. (1996) found that students who have personally relevant reasons for reading and perceive themselves as competent readers will read more frequently and there is a direct correlation between reading frequency and reading achievement.

PROGRAM DESIGN

This intervention was designed to enhance motivation and, as a result, reading achievement for middle school students living in historically marginalized communities through increasing book choice, access, and engagement.

CHOICE

Students increase their engagement towards tasks when allowed to make learning choices (Schunk, et al., 2013). Specifically, when students self-select reading materials, they are more likely to read voluntarily (Krashen, 2004) and develop intrinsic motivation to read (Fisher & Frey, 2018). Furthermore, students are more engaged readers when the books and characters are relevant and relatable (Sciurba, 2014; Sleeter, 2008). For the MSFLI program, we focused on choice in two distinct ways.

First, RIF's literacy content team selected middle grade books and grouped them by monthly theme (e.g., January is wellness which promotes both mental and physical well-being) and ensured that books aligned to student-selected topics gathered through focus group data (e.g., relationships, sports, fantasy/sci-fi) within each theme (see e.g., Appendix A). Second, the middle school educators at the 78 participating schools selected from the book collections to ensure that the curated books met the student interests and reading levels of their specific school community.

ACCESS

Access to reading material, particularly printed books in the home, is strongly correlated with academic achievement (Evans et al., 2010; Lindsay, 2010; Neuman & Celano, 2001). While book ownership and choice provide a strong motivation to read, Neuman (2017) found that increased access to books alone does not increase literacy skills. Book ownership needs to be supplemented by a systemic, targeted set of strategies and activities to ensure that literacy development proceeds apace (Kim & White, 2008). Therefore, the MSFLI provided not only books but also motivational activities for students (e.g., vocabulary puzzles and games) and support materials for teachers and families (e.g., discussion guides, vocabulary scaffolds). As choice and access to books and resources rise, so does engagement.

ENGAGEMENT

Middle school students are engaged and motivated when the learning tasks provide discussion opportunities that are not teacher-centric or mediated by a question-response style. A meta-analysis of 800 studies demonstrated that having classroom and group discussions has a strong effect size (0.82) on student learning (Hattie, 2009). For example, Dill and Boykin (2000) also found that when Black students engaged in collaborative learning environments, in which they were given opportunities to discuss texts in elaborate ways increased their recall of stories as well as their enjoyment and desire to participate in future activities increased. Students' talk about text deepens motivation and understanding (Richardson, 2010; Strom, 2014). Book clubs and literature circles provide self-guided opportunities for students to talk about texts. When peers and trusted adults make book recommendations, students increase their independent and voluntary reading (Fisher & Frey, 2018).

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Book talks are a method for introducing books to students and giving them opportunities to discuss books freely and have demonstrated positive impacts on reading attitude, self-efficacy, and time spent reading outside of school (Wozniak, 2011). This was one way that the MSFLI created opportunities for student engagement; however, results from years one and two, detailed subsequently, highlight ways that students also initiated their own engagement methods.

Choice, access, and engagement increase students' motivation and frequency for reading. Independent reading volume impacts overall reading achievement (see Mol & Bus, 2011). The MSFLI is grounded in choice, access, and engagement to drive student confidence and motivation, and ultimately increase reading frequency and performance by providing support resources for students, educators, and families.

METHODS

We designed a quasi-experimental, mixed-methods study to evaluate the program's effects on reading motivation and reading achievement. The study uses qualitative and quantitative data from students to: (1) Track changes in students' perceptions of reading and their literacy skills over time, and (2) Compare the reading achievement of program participants with a matched comparison group of students (year three).

In years one and two, we sought to answer questions: (1) How do students describe their engagement with the program, and (2) What do the years one and two survey data show about any changes in the value students place on reading and in their perceptions of themselves as readers?
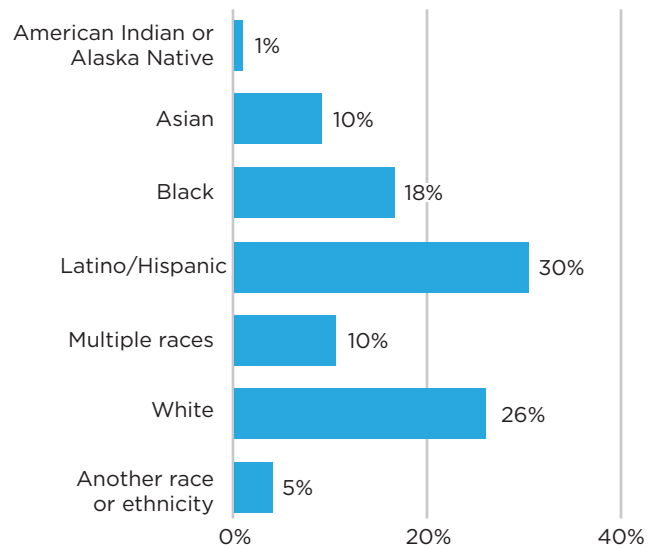
DATA SOURCES

Quantitative data included the Adolescent Motivation to Read Profile (MRP-A) pre- and post-surveys. Originally field-tested and published by Gambrell et al. (1996), the MRP-A measures the value students place on reading and their self-concept as a reader (Malloy et al., 2013). With the items identified by Pitcher, et al. (2007), we calculated scaled scores for students' value of reading and self-concept as a reader from the fall 2022, spring 2023, fall 2023, and spring 2024 survey data. We used factor analysis with post-estimation regression predictions to generate scores for each scale for each student who completed the survey. We then rescaled the resulting scores so that the scores would have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 10. Scores ranged from 80 to 120. Factor analysis confirmed Cronbach's (1951) alphas of 0.83 (self-concept) and 0.87 (value of reading). These alphas are slightly stronger than those reported in Malloy, et al. (2013).

From year one, 6,201 students in 25 schools responded to the survey in fall 2022 and 1,598 students in 14 schools responded in spring 2023. From year two, 3,019 students in 29 schools responded to the survey in fall 2023 and 382 students in 14 schools responded to the survey in Spring 2024. In both years, we observe the number of student responses declining between fall and spring administrations. We remain confident in the results despite the lower spring response rate; across sites, the schools included in the study are very similar in demographic and other socioeconomic characteristics, and we do not see evidence in the school-level data to suggest that the non-response was related to any school-level factors.

While the 10 cities for the program were identified based on the highest reading achievement difference between Black students and white students, the racial demographics of the students who participated in the study are Hispanic (30%), white (26%), and Black (18%) (see Table 1 for full race/ethnicity demographics). Analysis and reporting of increases in motivation to read based on racial and ethnic demographics is outside of the scope of the current paper and will be included in year three analysis.

Table 1. MSFLI Participants' Race-Ethnicity

Race-Ethnicity	Percentage
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	10%
Black	18%
Latino/Hispanic	30%
Multiple races	10%
White	26%
Another race or ethnicity	5%

In the third year of the study, we will use standardized reading assessment data across groups of participating students and non-participating comparison students selected using a two-stage (school-level, student-level) matching process to evaluate the program's impact on reading achievement. However, that analysis is outside of the scope of the current paper.

In years one and two, qualitative data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with students via Zoom. Qualitative data was analyzed using Atlas. ti software to code focus groups on key themes including students' enthusiasm about reading, their engagement in the program, and their reading preferences. Inter-rater reliability across three coders was over 90 percent accurate.

RESULTS

Analyses of year one and two data from focus groups with students and student surveys indicate that the program is associated with increases in students' perceptions and reports of their own reading. For example, on the spring 2023 MRP-A administration, students reported higher rates of confidence in reading (e.g., more confidence in reading aloud, increases in their ability to figure out words they don't know) and increases in their interest in reading (e.g., they read when they have free time, they appreciate receiving a book as a present, they recommend books they enjoyed to a friend).

QUANTITATIVE

In year one, across all grades, we found small increases in students' self-concept and value of reading between fall and spring (Table 2). Specifically for grades 7 and 8, we found a score difference of between 0.5 and 1.3 points (Tables 3 and 4). These differences translate to effect sizes of between 0.05 and 0.13.

Consistent with year one findings, students' scores on the MRP-A self-concept as a reader and value or reading scales increased significantly in year two. Across all grades and both scales, the increases between fall 2023 and spring 2024 were significant (Table 5; effect size = 0.8 SD for self-concept and value, $p < 0.05$).
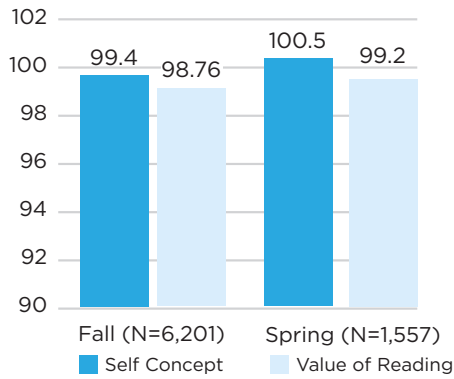
Table 2. All students Fall 2022 and Spring 2023

	Fall (N=6,201)	Spring (N=1,557)
Self Concept	99.4	100.5
Value of Reading	98.76	99.2

Table 3. Self-Concept and Value Scores 7th Grade

	Fall (N=1627)	Spring (N=390)
Self Concept	99.6	100.9
Value of Reading	99.8	100.4
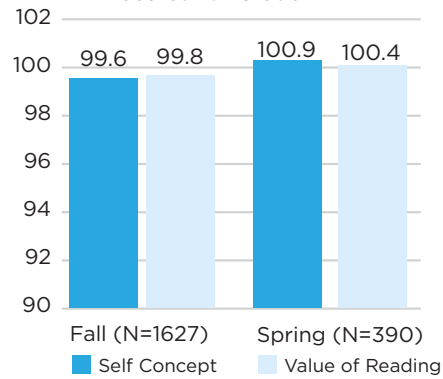
Table 4. Self-Concept and Value Scores 8th Grade

	Fall (N=2,240)	Spring (N=521)
Self Concept	99.4	100.6
Value of Reading	98.7	99.1
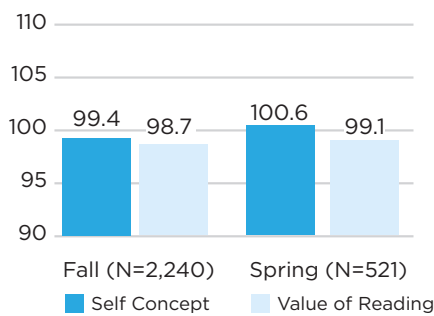
Table 5. All students Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

	Fall (N=3,019)	Spring (N=382)
Self Concept	99.7	107.9
Value of Reading	99.1	107.7
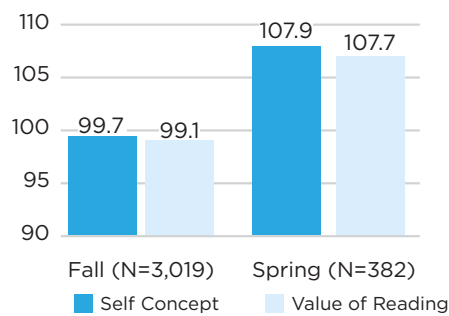
Though the impacts on students in all grades were significant and positive, we observe particularly large growth in scores for 8th graders during the 2023-24 school year (Table 6). Eighth graders scores increased by 16.7 points on the self-concept scale and by 18.7 points on the value of reading scale between fall 2023 and spring 2024 with effect sizes of 1.7 SD for self-concept and 1.9 SD for value.

Specifically, we wanted to understand the programmatic impacts on students' perceptions of reading as a social activity and reading as an individual activity. In year one focus groups with students and coordinators, we heard that students were joining with friends to select the same book to form book clubs and to participate in other social reading activities with their friends. To understand students' attitudes towards reading as a social and as an individual activity, we analyzed additional MRP-A subscales measuring the value of social and individual reading. Students' scores increased significantly on both scales, with a slightly greater increase on the reading as a social activity than on the scale that measured the value of reading as an individual activity (Tables 7 and 8). Effect sizes were 0.9 SD for reading as a social activity and 1.6 SD for reading as an individual activity.
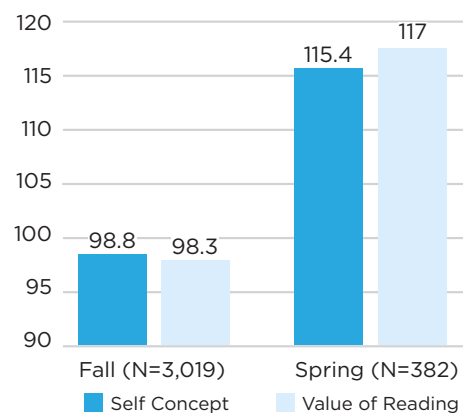
Table 6. 8th Graders Fall 2023 and Spring 2024

	Fall (N=3,019)	Spring (N=382)
Self Concept	98.8	115.4
Value of Reading	98.3	117

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Table 7. Reading as a Social and Individual Activity

	Social activity	Individual activity
Fall (N=3,019)	99	99.2
Spring (N=382)	108.2	115.4
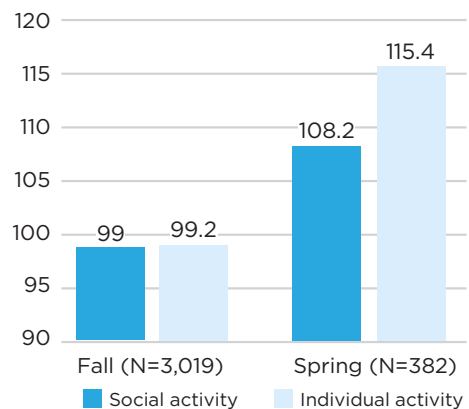
Table 8. Change in value of reading as social activity and individual activity

	6th graders	7th graders	8th graders	All students
Change in reading as a social activity	8.9	7.5	19.9	9.3
Change in reading as an individual activity	6.4	6.7	16.9	7.6
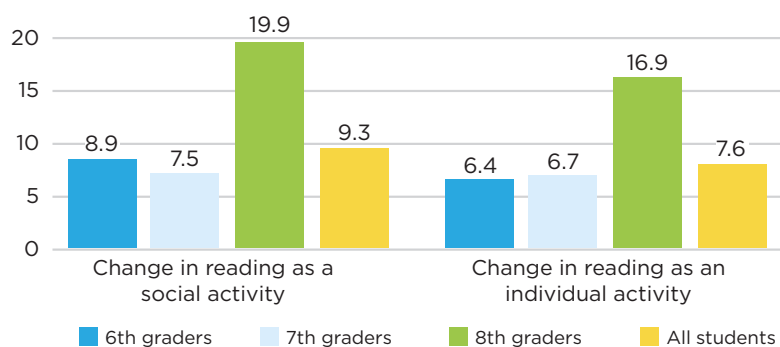
QUALITATIVE

Finding 1) **Students had expanded access to books and exposure to new genres**. One student shared, "I feel like people who don't have access to books other than in their school media center or their public library near them, it's kind of nice to have books in your house that you always have access to and you can constantly read over them…I think that's really awesome that people just get to take home books, that it's free." Consistent with the literature on student choice and relevance, students looked for books they could relate to, "The book that I got was about a girl that was in seventh grade, and she was trying to find her way during seventh grade, and she was struggling kind of. I love that book because I can relate to it because I'm also in seventh grade, and it took me a moment to get into the gist of things, so reading that book made me comfortable." In addition to finding relevance in texts, students also explored new genres. One student explained, "I think that this program should continue because there are a lot of students who tend to read the same genre over and over again, and I think it's better for people to expand their mindset and read more different genres of books."

Finding 2) **Students shared books with family members and took pride in reading**. One student talked about the role books play in English language development, "Sometimes I give some of my books to my cousins in El Salvador so that they can improve their English and I think it's really helping them." Another student shared, "I read the books because I have siblings that I can read to and I love to see their reactions to their books."

Finding 3) **Students increased their self-concept and value of reading.** In addition to the MRP-A results indicating increases in both these areas, students spoke of the benefits of being able to re-read books when they owned them–improving their reading skills and aiding their comprehension and understanding. One student explained, "[My reading has improved] because they make you want to read at home and reading more helps you get better."

Finding 4) **Students self-initiated engagement and social activities**. Consistent with quantitative findings about student increases in value of reading as a social activity, through focus groups we found that students self-initiated reading activities. For example, in one of the participating schools, students jointly selected a book with the specific intent of reading the book in a peer-lead book club. This also included leveraging pre-existing groups such as student government and honor societies to create events for book distribution.

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SIGNIFICANCE

This research extends the positive findings on reading motivation, including instructional methods and students' self-initiated engagement activities. As explored through the literature reviewed, there is significant research on the importance of student choice and self-selection of texts as well as opportunities to discuss texts in ways that are not teacher-directed. One unique finding in the preliminary results of this study is the ways in which students self-initiated reading engagement activities including taking pride and sharing books with their families. Providing choice, access, and engagement opportunities for the middle school students involved in this study serves as a launching point for activating student-initiated literacy practices and reading joy. Much of literacy research has been focused on the cognitive processes and skills of reading; however, factors outside of students' cognitive skills potentially play an important role in reading achievement. Unfortunately, reading motivation and engagement decline in middle school grades for students in urban schools (Unrau & Schlackman, 2006). Furthering our understanding of the role of motivation in adolescent readers will help inform instruction and intervention for this critical group of students.

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WELLNESS BOOKLIST

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The Ash House
Author: Angharad Walker
Horror, Grades 3-7

Esperanza Rising
Author: Pam Muñoz Ryan
Relationships, Grades 6-8

Hello Universe
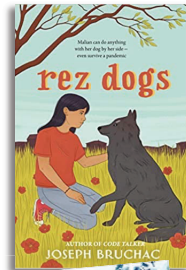Author: Erin Entrada Kelly
Friendship, Grades 3-7

The Magical Imperfect
Author: Chris Baron
Fantasy/Sci-Fi, Grades 4-7

Marshmallow & Jordan
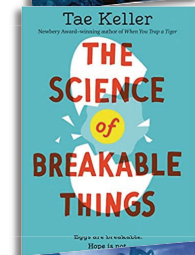Author: Alina Chau
Sports/Gaming, Grades 4-6

Rez Dogs
Author: Joseph Bruchac
History, Grades 3-7

The Sea in Winter
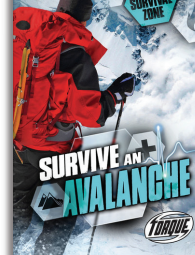Author: Christine Day
The Arts, Grades 3-7

The Science of Breakable Things
Author: Tae Keller
STEM, Grades 3-7

Storm Horse
Author: Nick Garlick
Adventure, Grades 3-7

Survive an Avalanche
Author: Patrick Perish
Nature, Grades 3-7

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until **every child** reads

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