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**School years, summer holidays
and the reading achievement gap**

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Abstract

The present study examined the impact of children's socioeconomic backgrounds on the development of their reading and reading-related skills, over two school years and two summer breaks. The 136 children in the study were from six Auckland primary schools and represented a cross-section of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The study tested three theories of differential school year gains and summer losses in language and literacy: literate cultural capital theory, Matthew effects theory, and faucet theory.

All children were assessed at five test points. The first test point was at school entry, in Year 0. Children were assessed on alphabet and vocabulary knowledge, phonemic awareness, high-frequency word reading, and graded word reading. The four subsequent test points were at the end of Year 0, the beginning and end of Year 1 and the start of Year 2.

The results showed that the high-decile groups started school with greater levels of reading-related skills and high-frequency word reading skills than the low-decile groups. Generally, the gap in reading-related skills persisted and widened over the duration of the study.

In terms of graded word reading ability, a disparity became apparent in the second school year. By the end of the study, the highest decile group were reading at a reading age of about two years above their lowest decile counterparts. During the two school years, all decile groups made gains. However, these gains between groups were uneven at points, contributing to the reading disparity. Over the summer breaks, while some decile groups made gains in reading, others lost ground, by as much as 50% over one summer compared to what they had gained the previous school year.

The findings of the study supported all three theories to varying degrees and at different test points. The literate cultural capital theory was supported in that pre-reading skills at school entry determined reading progress. Faucet theory was supported in graded word reading ability in the first school year and over both summers. Matthew

effects were noted in word reading trajectories over the second school year and in reading-related skills over the period of the study.

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