On July 29th, 2021, Fintan McCarthy and Paul O’Donovan, from Skibbereen Rowing Club, won gold medals in rowing for Ireland at the Olympic Games in Tokyo. These same rowers also won medals at the previous Olympics and also in recent World Rowing Championships. Their West Cork club came under close scrutiny. Was there something in the water down there in Skibbereen? When asked to explain the remarkable achievements, their coach highlighted the importance of having an ideal river close at hand and the high participation by locals in the sport. Put simply, you are unlikely to produce rowers without a river. Success was attributed to the availability of the appropriate resources and the motivation for participation through the activity of enthusiastic role models.

Parallels can be drawn between this story and the challenges in learning to read and write for our primary school children. Language and literacy are the fundamental foundation to our children’s expression of themselves, their ability to communicate and central to building relationships with others. As children grow up, literacy becomes the key to unlocking their potential as learners and is their doorway to active and meaningful contribution to their community. Using the aforementioned rowing analogy, to succeed in reading, children need the ideal conditions from the outset. You are unlikely to nurture literacy in the absence of reading material. The home environment provides the foundation for early literacy and plays a prominent role in the development of children’s attitudes towards learning, self-concept, and reading skills. Where books are readily available in the home, where parents read to or with their children from an early age, and where there is a high level of verbal interaction, reading development is more likely to be nourished than a home environment where such features are absent. Conversely, without the proper resources and the motivational impact of exposure to modelled reading behaviours and participation in early literacy activities, children very often struggle with learning to read and write.

Recent assessment of reading achievement in our primary schools, confirms that disadvantage and poor literacy outcomes are intrinsically linked. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is a comprehensive assessment of fourth grade students’ reading literacy achievement which provides internationally comparative data on how well children read. Results for Ireland in this assessment in 2016 found that pupils attending primary schools designated as disadvantaged, have significantly lower average reading achievement scores than their counterparts in non-designated schools. Significantly, it found that pupils in urban disadvantaged schools possessed fewer books, spent less time reading outside school, and had engaged less frequently in early literacy activities with adults in their home.

The solution to this problem frequently and justifiably focuses on the instruction we offer our pupils. Decades of educational research confirm the importance of teacher knowledge to the quality of literacy instruction offered to students. As chairperson of an Urban DEIS Band 1 school, I am acutely aware of the importance of recruiting the best teachers who can offer top quality literacy instruction to our students. However, we cannot address this problem at school alone. The term ‘cultural capital’ has been used to conceptualise the influences of families, and the communities in which they are embedded, on children’s academic development. Parental involvement in a child’s literacy education is of paramount importance in terms of reinforcing what is learned in the classroom through assisting with homework, encouraging reading and providing essential encouragement. Every home needs an ideal river. Therein you will find something in the water.

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