



# Reading with a Granny

Maarit Laurento

*Maarit Laurento, Division Education, City of Somero, Finland*

## Abstract

*Reading with a Granny* (RwG) is an innovative program designed to address the decline in students' reading habits by fostering a love for books through active participation. Geared toward 3rd and 4th graders, this two-phase remote initiative pairs students with a *Reading Granny* — a retired teacher who guides them in reading aloud. The program is supported by a team of seven dedicated *Reading Grannies*, guided by an experienced project leader. The *Reading Grannies* are experienced educators with a strong background in reading instruction, providing supportive and personalized feedback to young readers. The reading sessions take place remotely four times a month, each lasting 20 minutes. This flexible and time-efficient format makes the program both convenient and rewarding for teachers and students alike. Following the reading sessions, students create book reviews or short videos to be showcased on the RwG website. The program aims to enhance reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. RwG's adaptable framework allows it to be implemented in diverse educational settings worldwide. Case studies from international RwG projects will be presented, including two initiatives at Athens Finland School and one at Limassol Finland School, involving students aged 7–14. Notably, some participants were third-generation Finns with limited exposure to the Finnish language in their daily lives.

**Keywords:** declining reading; reading aloud; reading remotely; senior teachers; easy to scale

## 1. Introduction: Reading with a Granny

As newer and increasingly dynamic forms of communication vie for the attention of young people, traditional reading has, for many, lost the appeal it once held. The fast pace of digital media and the instant gratification it offers often overshadow the slower, more reflective nature of reading. Nevertheless, the ability to read effectively remains an essential foundational skill; critical not only for academic success, but also for lifelong learning and active participation in society.

Recognizing this challenge, the *Reading with a Granny* (RwG) initiative seeks to reignite students' interest in reading by providing meaningful and engaging experiences that transcend the classroom. Through intergenerational learning, where students read with and interact with older adults, the program fosters a deeper understanding of texts, promotes empathy, and strengthens social connections. At the same time, it supports the development of key literacy skills: enhancing reading fluency, deepening comprehension, and broadening vocabulary. By combining educational goals with enriching human interaction, RwG provides a holistic approach to cultivating a lifelong love of reading in today's youth.

Research shows that young people who read books in their free time have a vocabulary that is 26% richer than those who don't read, and up to 42% better among those from homes that prioritize reading and books (UCL Institute of Education). A middle school student who reads regularly on their own is likely to know between 50,000 and 70,000 words, while a peer who reads little may only know around 15,000. However, even modest amounts of reading can make a significant difference. According to Finnish PIRLS data, children who read for just 30 minutes a day outside of school demonstrate notably higher reading skills than those who read less (Leino et al., 2023, 86; PIRLS 2021). There are concerns about a decline in reading skills, with evidence suggesting a deterioration in both comprehension and engagement with reading. This trend is observed in various age groups and across different countries (Clark et al., 2024; Kuhfeld et al., 2023; Tamez-Robledo 2025; Vinterek et al., 2020).

According to the PISA 2022 results, Finnish students' literacy remains above the OECD average, with an average score of 490 compared to the OECD average of 476. However, this represents a significant decline of 30 points since 2018. Furthermore, a persistent gender gap was observed; girls scored an average of 513 points, while boys scored 468, resulting in a 45-point difference. Additionally, the proportion of low-performing readers is notably high. 28% of boys and 14% of girls failed to reach proficiency level 2 in reading. (OECD, 2023.)

The decline in reading enthusiasm has been attributed to various factors, including the rise of social media and video games, as well as shifts in educational practices, such as the adoption of open learning environments and increased digitalization. Additionally, the impact of smartphones on students' attention spans and ability to focus has also been identified as a contributing factor.

Preserving or even enhancing the value of reading demands collective effort from society as a whole. It is not solely the responsibility of teachers or families, but of everyone. While parents play a crucial role in the early development of a child's reading skills, a child is shaped by 'the whole village' (Leino et al. 2023, 90). The RwG Project explores how community involvement, particularly through the involvement of senior educators from the third sector, can support and strengthen the development of reading skills.

## 1.1 Methodological Background

The pedagogical aim of the *Reading with a Granny* Project is to enhance reading skills, improve comprehension, and expand students' vocabulary (Laurento 2024). In addition, the project seeks to inspire and motivate students to read more, fostering a love for books and strengthening overall literacy through the practice of reading aloud. We believe that reading aloud is not just an individual task, but a communal experience, where the reading granny listens attentively and provides positive, constructive feedback. *Honest feedback is crucial. Children pay close attention to what their Reading Grannies say, and it helps move their reading forward,*"says Reading Granny Liisa.

The RwG approach is not entirely new, but rather a modified version of an existing idea, adapted to be simpler and more accessible. The *Reading Grandmas and Grandpas* project has been running in Finland since 2012, developed by the Niilo Mäki Institute in collaboration with the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. In this model, volunteer *reading grandmas* and *grandpas* visit schools to support children in grades 2–6 who need extra help with reading. In South Africa, a similar literacy development intervention was implemented to enhance primary school students' reading and comprehension skills, particularly in learning a second language (Stewart & Modiba, 2019). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the *Reading with Granny* initiative promotes literacy among primary school children by encouraging reading in a care home setting at Prospect House.

In the RwG Project, virtual interaction has been integrated with the traditional practice of reading aloud. Digital technology, however, is not the goal itself but serves as a tool for connection. This approach allows schools to easily engage in reading aloud sessions, even across distances of tens or thousands of kilometers.

In the RwG sessions, the dialogue revolves around the book, its characters, and events. Even in a remote setting, the conversation flows naturally and effectively. *When we connect remotely, the child doesn't have to worry about reading aloud in front of others or fear being judged by classmates,*"says Reading Granny Mirja. Emmi Jäkkö, executive director of the Finnish Reading Center, believes that reading aloud could be key to addressing children's declining reading skills: *A major issue is that reading is often a solitary activity. Through reading aloud, children's reading experiences can become more communal.*"Together with their *Reading Granny*, students explore the meanings of words, discuss plot twists, and often share a good laugh at the quirky antics of the book's characters.

Read-aloud sessions conducted at school are a highly effective instructional method for developing a wide range of cognitive skills (Batini et al., 2018; Håland et al., 2021; Sajid & Kassim 2019). For example, reading aloud helps students' reading comprehension, reading motivation, and reading fluency (Ceyhan & Yildiz 2021; Hudson & Test, 2011; Toews et al., 2021).

### 1.1.2 Benefits of the RwG Project

The beneficiaries of the project extend beyond the students to include the *Reading Grannies* themselves. After retiring from long teaching careers, they have the opportunity to continue honing their skills and sharing the valuable knowledge they've accumulated over the years. According to the *Reading Grannies*, participating in the project allows them to stay connected to children's literature and the school environment, keeping their passion alive even after their professional careers have ended.

In a typical classroom setting, teachers often face time constraints that make it challenging to listen to each student read aloud on an individual basis. However, the *Reading with a Granny* project addressed this gap by offering students significantly more dedicated reading time (often exceeding an hour) with the undivided attention of a *Reading Granny*. This one-on-one interaction not only provides a rare opportunity for students to practice fluent reading in a supportive environment but also fosters confidence, motivation, and a deeper engagement with the text.

For teachers, RwG serves as an effective method of differentiation. While some students are engaged in reading sessions with senior volunteers – that is, the *Reading Grannies* – the teacher can focus more intensively on instructing and supporting the remaining students in the classroom. This parallel structure optimizes classroom time and allows educators to better meet the diverse learning needs of their students. In this way, the RwG project enhances both the quality and equity of reading instruction.

Initially, remote RwG meetings were a practical solution due to COVID-19, but soon additional benefits of digital technology were discovered. While schools often struggle to find quiet, private spaces for one-on-one reading, the cloud offers unlimited room. The students read at school, while the *Reading Grannies* read at the library. At first, the *Reading Grannies* were hesitant about meeting students solely through digital platforms. They worried that real, meaningful interaction wouldn't be possible through a screen. However, after the very first session, their perspectives shifted completely. *Even though remote reading seemed like a strange and ineffective idea at first, it has worked. We were wrong,* 'says Reading Granny Olla-Riitta. Reading Granny Pirjo adds, *Surprisingly, we can have great contact with the student when it's just the two of us. We always end up having so much fun together."*

Additionally, the RwG model is time-efficient for both the *Reading Grannies* and the schools, while also providing the grannies with valuable opportunities for social interaction. For the students, the digital platform itself has served as a motivating factor, helping them practice their virtual communication skills. The project has also encouraged retired teachers to become more comfortable and confident with digital technology. *We've learned a lot about the digital world, even though I once thought an old dog couldn't learn new tricks,* 'says Reading Granny Kaarina.

## 1.2 The Model

The RwG model has been implemented in elementary schools in Somero, Finland, encompassing a total of ten RwG sets. Class sizes ranged from 15 students at village schools to 22–26 students in larger schools. Depending on the event, six to seven *Reading Grannies* participated in the sessions.

Each RwG set takes about a month to complete. Reading sessions occur once a week, typically over four to five weeks. Each session spans two lessons, with the schedule coordinated in advance with the teacher. The teacher divides the class into six or seven groups, depending on the number of available *Reading Grannies* (3–5 students per group), and prepares a reading agenda for each session.

In every reading session, both the student and the *Reading Granny* have a copy of the same book. During the two-lesson session, each student spends approximately 15–20 minutes reading with their assigned *Reading Granny* (in a class of 24 students with six *Reading Grannies*). Students and grannies use the school's Chromebooks and headphones for these virtual sessions. Between lessons, the *Reading Grannies* enjoy a coffee break, offering them an opportunity to socialize, exchange ideas, and reflect on the sessions. This has become a valuable and meaningful social moment for the grannies.

Students select their books from the library, school, or home, with an emphasis on children's and youth literature as well as hobby-themed books. They may also choose from a pre-approved list, and their selections are shared with the project leader, who coordinates with the library to ensure the *Reading Grannies* receive the same titles. The teacher sends the lesson plan and reading schedule to the project leader, who then arranges the library space and ensures that all required devices and refreshments are in place.

Once the RwG sessions are completed and the books have been read, students write book reviews and/or create book videos. These are then uploaded to the RwG website, which is managed by the project leader (Laurento, 2022). This allows students to read each other's reviews and use the site for reading recommendations in other classes. In addition, the books are linked directly to the library's online catalog, allowing readers to borrow them easily.

To conclude the project, live events such as forest trips, picnics, and Christmas parties are organized. After getting to know one another virtually, students and *Reading Grannies* finally meet in person—often as old friends. The *Reading Grannies* have become meaningful figures to the students, who frequently greet and hug them in the street or in shops. For some students, especially those whose own grandparents live far away, the *Reading Grannies* fulfill the role of surrogate grandparents. The intergenerational connection is both meaningful and impactful for students and grannies alike.

### **1.3 Scaling the Model Across Borders**

With remote connections, distance is no longer a barrier. The model works just as effectively whether the *Reading Granny* and the student are across the street or thousands of kilometers apart. From the outset, international expansion was a key goal. To support this, the project secured EU funding through the *Learning from the Extremes* initiative, which aims to encourage rural schools to make more efficient use of digital technology in education.

In 2023, the *Learning from the Extremes* Summer School was held in Greece for the tenth time, focusing on how rural schools can become dynamic learning hubs. The event in Marathon brought together 140 educators and school developers from ten EU countries, including Finland, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Cyprus. The RwG project was well received at the seminar, leading to new partnerships with European educators. Additionally, we launched our first international collaboration with the Athens Finland School.

There are over a hundred Finland Schools around the world, operating on Saturdays. In an increasingly international world, a strong linguistic and cultural identity serves as an essential foundation for both resilience and well-being. While Finnish language and culture are taught at these schools, they emphasize that they cannot be solely responsible for developing Finnish language skills. Instead, the Finland Schools aim to support and expand the Finnish spoken at home, enriching students' vocabulary. The RwG method offers a valuable tool for practicing Finnish and enhancing vocabulary. Moreover, the *Reading Grannies*' extensive teaching experience helps preserve and transmit cultural traditions—an essential focus of the Finland Schools. The international interaction also provides *Reading Grannies* with a fresh perspective on the modern school environment.

### 1.3.1 RwG International Projects

In the autumn of 2023, we conducted RwG sessions with Finnish students in Athens, aged 7–14. Some of the students were third-generation Finns who rarely heard Finnish in their daily lives. The RwG project was implemented in the same manner as in Finland: *Reading Grannies* listened to the students in the library as they read at the Finland School in Athens, occasionally discussing word meanings and text content. "The connection with the students developed just as it did in our previous reading sessions," said *Reading Granny* Maarit. The RwG collaboration with the Athens Finland School was repeated in spring 2025, yielding similar results. The students continued to practice reading with the *Reading Grannies*, enhancing their vocabulary and improving their text comprehension skills.

A similar project was conducted with the Limassol Finland School in Cyprus in spring 2025. The students were aged 8–14. Again, some were third-generation Finns who did not use much Finnish in their everyday lives. The project aimed to strengthen their connection to the Finnish language and culture by providing them with the opportunity to practice reading with the *Reading Grannies*. Through this interaction, the students not only improved their reading skills but also gained confidence in using Finnish, especially in expressive and meaningful contexts.

Our experiences in Finland, Athens, and Limassol have been highly successful, and the upcoming RwG sessions will be held with the Madrid Finland School in Spain in autumn 2025.

Since similar Saturday schools also exist in other countries, supporting the development of skills in students' mother tongues, the RwG model is scalable to other contexts as well. It can be adapted to different educational systems and cultural settings, providing valuable one-on-one reading support and promoting literacy through meaningful intergenerational interaction.

### 1.4 Teachers' Views

Before and after the first reading events in 2022, students took reading tests administered by a special education teacher. The initial test results showed a modest improvement in both reading comprehension and technical literacy. However, due to resource limitations, we were unable to continue the testing process as planned. As an alternative, we administered a brief survey to the teachers involved in the project in Finland, Greece, and Cyprus. Teachers' views on RwG indicated that the project was highly beneficial not only for the students, but also for the teachers, as it provided additional support for reading instruction, allowed more individualized attention for students, and enabled teachers to focus on the rest of the class without interruption.

It was appreciated that the lesson could continue as usual for the rest of the class while some students read in a separate classroom with the *Reading Granny*. This allowed teaching to proceed uninterrupted, ensuring that no student missed out on instructional time.

*"It was nice that the lesson could be held as usual for the other students at the same time while some students were reading in another classroom."*

— Teacher 1

When students had the opportunity to read one-on-one with the *Reading Granny*, they could do so at their own pace, free from the pressure of reading in front of their peers. This created a more relaxed and supportive environment that helped build their confidence and focus.

*“When each student got to read one-on-one with the Reading Granny, they were able to read at their own pace without feeling pressured by the presence of other students.”*

— Teacher 2

Each student was given a text that matched their individual reading level and had ample time to read. They received personal attention and guidance, such as tips on how to read more expressively. This individualized support not only made the sessions engaging but also contributed to noticeable improvements in their reading fluency.

*“Each student was able to read a text suited to their own level and had a sufficiently long reading time. They had personal contact with the Reading Granny and received some guidance, for example, on how to make their reading more expressive. The students’ reading fluency improved.”*

— Teacher 3

We also observed that students were highly motivated by the fact that they were able to finish reading an entire book—something we can take into account when guiding them in the book selection process. Students often tended to choose books that were too difficult, but with the help of the librarian, we were able to select books they could successfully complete during the one-month reading project.

## **2. Conclusion: Literacy - the Key to the Future**

In the future, literacy will encompass much more than the ability to read and comprehend texts—it will require proficiency in multiliteracy. Today’s students constantly engage with a wide range of media, from traditional books to digital platforms and mobile apps. The ability to interpret, produce, and critically evaluate information is becoming increasingly essential. Multiliteracy involves understanding and creating meaning across a diverse landscape that includes books, digital media, social platforms, and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and misinformation. In this multi-layered reality, the skills to navigate, assess, and make sense of information are vital for active participation in society.

To build strong multisensory and multimedia literacy, a solid foundation in basic literacy is essential. The ability to evaluate, use, and create texts in a complex web of meanings will always depend on a confident command of traditional reading skills—skills that are ultimately cultivated through the practice of reading.

The *Reading with a Granny* model is a simple, accessible concept that blends the timeless value of reading aloud with modern virtual interaction. While digital technology is not the core of the model, it serves as an effective tool that allows the project to scale from local classrooms to international communities. Regardless of where or how it happens, reading remains a universal key—to language, to understanding, and to the future.

### **Acknowledgements**

The Reading with a Granny Project has been funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education through the *Internationalization in Basic Education* program, as well as by the EU’s *Learning from the Extremes – Schools as Learning Hubs of the Rural Community* initiative.

## References

- Batini, F., Bartolucci, M., and Timpone, A. (2018). The Effects of Reading Aloud in the Primary School. *Psychology and Education*, 2, 111–122.
- Ceyhan, S. and Yildiz, M. (2021). The effect of interactive reading aloud on student reading comprehension, reading motivation and reading fluency. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, 13(4), 421–431
- Clark, C., Picton, I., Cole, A., and Oram, N. (2024). Children and young people's reading in 2024. National Literacy Trust.
- Hudson, M.E. and Test, D.W. (2011). Evaluating the Evidence Base of Shared Story Reading to Promote Literacy for Students With Extensive Support Needs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 36, 34–45. <https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.36.1-2.34>
- Håland, A., Hoem, T.F., and McTigue, E.M. (2021). The Quantity and Quality of Teachers' Self-perceptions of Read-Aloud Practices in Norwegian First Grade Classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 1–14 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01053-5>
- Kuhfeld, M., Lewis, K. & Peltier, T. (2023). Reading achievement declines during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from 5 million U.S. students in grades 3–8. *Reading and Writing*, 36, 245–261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-022-10345-8>
- Laurento, M. (2022). Reading with a Granny Project <https://sites.google.com/edu.somero.fi/lukumummit/etusivu>
- Laurento, M. (2024). Ääneenlukemisen ilo ja hyöty yhdistyvät Lukumummien lukupäivissä. "The Reading with a Granny Project Combines the Joy and Benefits of Reading Aloud". *Onnimanni*, 4, 25–28.
- Leino, K., Sirén, M., Nissinen, K., and Puhakka, E. (2023). Puoli tuntia lukemista. Kansainvälinen lasten lukutaitotutkimus (PIRLS 2021). "Half an Hour of Reading: International Children's Literacy Study". Tutkimuksia 37. *Koulutuksen tutkimuslaitos/Finnish Institute for Educational Research*.
- OECD. (2023). PISA 2022 results: Factsheets – Finland. OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/publication/pisa-2022-results/webbooks/dynamic/pisa-country-notes/6991e849/pdf/finland.pdf>
- PIRLS 2021: ruotsinkielisten koulujen neljäsluokkalaisten lukutaito samalla tasolla suomenkielisten kanssa. "PIRLS 2021: The Reading Skills of Fourth-Grade Students in Swedish-Speaking Schools Are at the Same Level as Those of Finnish-Speaking Students." <https://www.jyu.fi/fi/uutinen/pirls-2021-ruotsinkielisten-koulujen-neljasluokkalaisten-lukutaito-samalla-tasolla-suomenkielisten>. University of Jyväskylä, 2023.
- Prospect House. Reading with Granny champion literacy skills among local school children. <https://www.prospecthousemalpas.co.uk/reading-with-granny-champions-literacy-skills-among-local-school-children/>
- Sajid, M. K. M., and Kassim, H. (2019). The Effects of Reading Aloud Strategies on text Level Difficulties, Reading Proficiency and Reading Comprehension Skill. *International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics (IJLEAL)*, 9(1), 85–97. <https://doi.org/10.15282/ijleal.v9.788>.

Stewart, S. L. and Modiba, M. (2019). The Reading Grannies. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education* 8(2): 147–172.

Tamez-Robledo, N. (2025). Reading Skills Are in Sharp Decline. Rescuing Them Won't be Easy. *EdSurge*. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2025-02-06-reading-skills-are-in-sharp-decline-rescuing-them-won-t-be-easy>

Toews, S. G., McQueston, J., and Kurth, J. A. (2021). Evaluation of the Evidence Base for Shared Reading to Support Literacy Skill Development for Students with Extensive Support Needs. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 46(2), 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15407969211008531>

UCL Institute of Education. <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MCS6-Briefing-01-What-influences-vocabulary.pdf>

Vinterek, M., Winberg, M., Tegmark, M., Alatalo, T., & Liberg, C. (2020). The Decrease of School Related Reading in Swedish Compulsory School – Trends Between 2007 and 2017. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(1), 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2020.1833247>