

„Surrounded by Heritage“

Integrating Local Heritage Culture Into Education Strategy and Action Plan



2025

Interreg



Co-funded by
the European Union

Estonia – Latvia

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Võru County Development Center, 2025

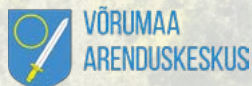
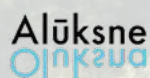


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Introduction

The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the local language and culture among children and young people in Old-Võromaa, Setomaa, Suitsi and Maliena regions.

The strategy is designed in the framework of Estonian-Latvian cross-border cooperation project “Surrounded by Heritage – Contemporary and innovative heritage culture teaching solution for municipal schools and kindergartens”, which is co-financed by Interreg VI-A Estonia-Latvia Programme 2021–2027. The project involves collaboration between four cultural spaces – **Old-Võromaa, Setomaa, Suitsi ja Malenian** (the cultural spaces can be explored in [chapter 6](#)). Project partners are Development Centre of Võru County, Võro Institute, Seto Institute, Aluksne Municipality, Kuldiga District Municipality and Suitsi Cultural Heritage Foundation (Chart 1). The project runs from September 2024 until the end of 2026.

The aim of the project is to raise awareness of the local language and culture among children and young people in Old-Võromaa, Setomaa, Suitsi and Maliena regions. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to increase the visibility and perceptibility of the local language and culture in educational institutions. Enriching the everyday learning environment with elements of local heritage culture and language allows young people to connect with their cultural heritage in a natural way, without the need for additional lessons.

The project began with a study to map the current situation and will conclude with an analysis of the impact of the pilot implementation. The strategy developed in cooperation with educational institutions is based on the results and conclusions of the pilot study. During the project, four strategy meetings were held with the heads of pilot institutions, teachers, and local education officials, as well as four project meetings with representatives of the partner organizations. The strategic process was advised by educational psychologist Grete Arro, museum curator Kristi Paatsi, and architect Kadri Klementi. To understand successful practices and draw inspiration from effective existing models, study visits were conducted in all four cultural areas, as well as inspiration trips to other regions and local trips to introduce culture within participants’ home regions. The strategy-based activities are being piloted in 7 schools and 7 kindergartens (one school and one kindergarten from each participating municipality) in Estonia and Latvia.

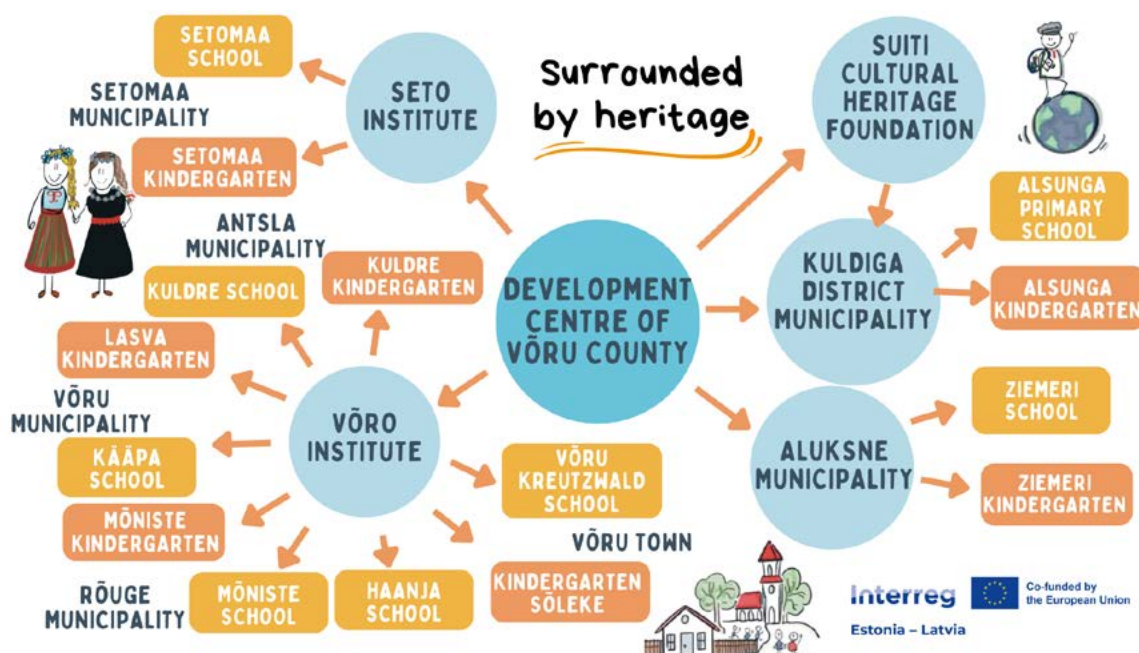


Figure 1. Project partners and pilot institutions

1. Pilot study

In the autumn of 2024, a study covering four cultural spaces was conducted in pilot schools and kindergartens to map the current state of heritage education, attitudes toward heritage culture, and the needs of teachers and students. **The study sample included:** teachers from the project's pilot schools and kindergartens, as well as students from the third stage of basic school (grades 7–9) in the pilot schools. **The study was carried out in two parts:** Quantitative study – a survey conducted via Google Forms (September 2024). A total of 314 students and 197 teachers responded to the questionnaire; Qualitative study – focus group interviews with students and teachers (Oct–Nov 2024)

1.1 Common findings from the study across the four cultural spaces

The analysis of the study results revealed that the main needs and interests are similar across the four cultural spaces, which provided a strong foundation for developing a common strategy for integrating heritage culture. The differences between the cultural spaces mainly stem from the length of experience in integrating heritage culture, the availability of teaching materials, and cultural differences. More detailed results of the current state of heritage education in each cultural space, as well as the study's findings for each cultural space, can be explored in [chapter 7](#).

The analysis of the study results revealed that the main needs and interests are similar across the four cultural spaces, which provided a strong foundation for developing a common strategy for integrating heritage culture.

Common needs of teachers in four cultural spaces:

- ✦ time to reflect on and plan the integration of local culture into teaching;
- ✦ knowledge of the local culture;
- ✦ well-organized teaching resources and accessible learning materials;
- ✦ support from the local government and community;
- ✦ a school leader who values local culture and serves as a strong leader.

Common interests of students in four cultural spaces:

- ✦ a desire for adults to speak the local language with them;
- ✦ a desire to see local culture in public spaces;
- ✦ experiential learning, without pressure;
- ✦ local foods, nature, patterns, music;
- ✦ interest in participating and contributing to the design of the learning space;
- ✦ exciting places in their home area and family stories;
- ✦ understanding the need to learn about own culture.

What learning materials are lacking?

- ✦ materials related to celebrating year-round and folk calendar holidays;
- ✦ playful learning materials, board games;
- ✦ movement games, singing games, and nursery rhymes;
- ✦ short videos and audio materials in the local language;
- ✦ short videos and pictures about important local cultural sites and customs;
- ✦ themed worksheets in the local language;
- ✦ crafting ideas and instructions related to local culture;
- ✦ methodological materials, e.g., lesson plans;
- ✦ an online platform for learning materials, where it would be easy to find resources.



2. Strategic goals for integrating local culture

The implementation of the strategy for the integration of indigenous cultures will also follow the Action Plan for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The strategy for integrating native culture is based on the Estonian “National Curriculum for Basic Schools”¹ and the “National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions”². Estonian National Curriculum for Basic Schools establishes as the first general competence cultural and value competence: “to perceive and appreciate one’s connection with other people, society, nature, and the cultural heritage of one’s own and other nations /.../, to value human, cultural, and natural diversity /.../,” (section 4 subsection 4 clause 1). Cultural identity is highlighted as a cross-cutting theme of the curriculum, which “aims to develop students as culturally aware individuals /.../ and who value their own culture and cultural diversity and are culturally tolerant and cooperative,” (section 14 subsection 3 clause 4).

The same regulation grants schools the opportunity, when developing their school curriculum, to take into account the specific characteristics of the school and the local community, the wishes of school staff, parents, and students, as well as the available intellectual and material resources (section 24 subsection 2). In addition, the school has the right to “change the list of compulsory subjects and topics of the national curriculum (including merging and restructuring subjects) and change the lesson plan, ensuring that students achieve the general competences, learning outcomes, and educational and educational goals set out in the national curriculum by the end of the school level,” (section 15 subsection 5).



The National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions stipulates that “learning and educational activities should primarily be linked to local people, nature, and institutions. Objects and phenomena being studied should be explored in their natural environment,” (section 7 subsection 2). A core principle of implementing learning and educational activities is valuing Estonian cultural traditions and considering the specificities of other cultures (section 4 subsection 1 clause 10).

In Latvia, the acquisition of cultural heritage is an important part of students’ education, integrated into both preschool and primary school curricula to foster a sense of belonging to one’s culture, promote national identity, and respect for diversity. According to the national basic education standard (Regulation No. 747, 27.11.2018)³, cultural heritage is integrated as an interdisciplinary element and a key component of education. Cultural awareness is included in various subject areas – cultural understanding and self-expression in the arts, social and civic education, languages, design and technology – to provide students with opportunities to develop a comprehensive understanding and form attitudes based on respect for their own and other cultures.

¹ “National Curriculum for Basic Schools,” approved by Regulation No. 1 of Estonian Government on 6 January 2011.

² “National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions,” approved by Regulation No. 87 of Estonian Government on 29 May 2008.

³ “National basic education standard,” approved by Regulation No. 747 of Latvian Government on 27. November 2018 <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/303768-noteikumi-par-valsts-pamatizglitiba-standartu-un-pamatizglitiba-programmu-paraugiem>



“The student is interested in learning languages, understands the role of the Latvian language and minority languages in shaping national identity and preserving cultural and historical heritage; has a developed sense of national, historical, and civic awareness and an understanding of social and economic processes; the student engages practically, evaluates and interprets various forms of creative expression, learning to understand cultural differences and develop their own cultural identity, experiences cultural events in person, gaining emotional and aesthetic experiences and developing personal cultural needs, participates in the preservation of cultural heritage and the transmission of traditions.” (Point 7.1)

The Preschool Education Guidelines (Regulation No. 716, 21.11.2018)⁴ emphasize the recognition and development of national identity and cultural values through play-based activities, hands-on experiences, and festive traditions.

In Setomaa, the goals and action plan for the integration of local culture are linked to the inclusion of Seto leelo on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity⁵, which emphasizes the participation of young people in the transmission of heritage. The implementation of the strategy also follows the action plan for rescuing and developing intangible cultural heritage.

In Suitsi region the strategic plan and action plan for integrating local culture is defined by UNESCO Suitsi Cultural Space Rescue and Development Plan for 2021-2024⁶, where the 3rd action line is: inclusion of the intangible cultural heritage topics of the Suitsi cultural space in the content of formal and non-formal education programs; including training of specialists and educators and community involvement in the creation and implementation of such programs.

⁴ “Preschool Education Guidelines,” approved by Regulation No. 716 of Latvian Government on 21.November 2018 <https://likumi.lv/ta/id/303371-noteikumi-par-valsts-pirmsskolas-izglitiba-vadlinijam-un-pirmsskolas-izglitiba-programmu-paraugiem>

⁵ UNESCO. (2008). Seto Leelo, Seto polyphonic singing tradition. Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/seto-leelo-seto-polyphonic-singing-tradition-00173>

⁶ Association “Ethnic Culture Center “Suitsi””. (2021). Suitsi Cultural Space Rescue and Development Plan for 2021-2024. <https://suitsi.lv/glabšanas-un-attistibas-pasakumu-plans-2021-2024-gadam/>



The strategic goals and principles of the project have been formulated in cooperation with all project partners and pilot institutions. The short-term goals are aimed to be achieved with the support of project activities by the end of 2026, laying a solid foundation for achieving more extensive long-term goals.

2.1 Short-term goals (2026)

VISIBLE AND TANGIBLE

1. Educational institutions have a clearly visible and perceivable identity rooted in local culture:

- ✦ local culture and language are integrated into the daily life of pilot institutions;
- ✦ elements of local culture are experienced through various senses in the spaces of pilot institutions;
- ✦ elements of local culture in the learning space are created together with children and young people and resonate with them.

DAILY AND NATURAL

2. Teachers are confident and natural in integrating local culture into everyday life:

- ✦ both teachers and students have increased awareness of local culture and feel joy and motivation to participate in local cultural activities;
- ✦ a well-organized teaching resource library for local culture has been created for all age groups;
- ✦ pilot institutions actively use the materials created during the project;
- ✦ support from the Seto and Võru Institutes and the regional network helps teachers in integrating local culture.

TOGETHER WITH COMMUNITY

3. Schools and kindergartens have close cooperation with local organizations and the community:

- ✦ regular communication, cooperation, and joint events with local organizations and community members;
- ✦ community members regularly participate as guest teachers;
- ✦ schools and kindergartens actively participate in local events and holidays, and regularly visit local farms, museums, institutions, and historical sites.



2.2 Long-term goals (2030)

1. The best practices for integrating local culture have expanded to other educational institutions and cultural spaces.

GOOD PRACTICE
IS EXPANDING

- ✦ conclusions have been drawn from the piloting, and the strategy has been updated;
- ✦ there is growing interest in the experiences of pilot institutions and in integrating local culture, and other educational institutions have adopted the strategy's recommendations;
- ✦ networking with other schools and kindergartens that preserve local culture has become more active, both nationally and internationally.

2. The community's expectations and interest in integrating local culture have grown

INTEREST IS
GROWING

- ✦ a survey conducted among parents shows positive attitudes towards local culture education;
- ✦ parents are motivated to choose schools and kindergartens where local cultural heritage is taught;
- ✦ the community is active and open to collaborating with educational institutions.

3. The preservation of local culture and the transmission of traditions to future generations is systematic and continuous:

SYSTEMATIC AND
CONSISTENT

- ✦ a strategic plan, division of roles, and action plan for passing local culture to the next generation have been developed at the county and local government levels;
- ✦ local culture is present in the daily lives of children from kindergarten through to high school.

2.3 Prerequisites for transmitting heritage culture

The prerequisite for the sustainable transmission of heritage culture is that students and teachers perceive it as an inviting opportunity, not an obligation. Imposed culture does not take root, as the human psyche cannot tolerate pressure. When controlled motivation is used consistently (e.g., performing, seeking recognition, inducing guilt, competition), a person's autonomous motivation fades. It is important that students and teachers do not perceive the transmission of local culture as pressure or obligation, but as an inviting opportunity.

The development of autonomous motivation can be supported by creating opportunities to fulfill three basic psychological needs – relatedness, competence, and autonomy⁷. Supporting these basic needs is the foundation of natural and effective learning, helping ensure the sustainable transmission of culture, so that children and young people continue to value their local culture as adults.

⁷ Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Self-determination theory: A macrotheory of human motivation, development, and health. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne*, 49(3), 182–185. doi:10.1037/a0012801



Psychological basic needs



Young person's

thoughts: "But what if my friends aren't into this local culture stuff? Or what if they think it's ridiculous?"



RELATEDNESS = I feel valued, needed, and cared for. It is the need to experience close and trusting relationships. I feel a sense of belonging with others and want to contribute to the group myself.

How to support relatedness:

- ✦ Try to be supportive, warm, and caring in every situation;
- ✦ Look at the situation from the learner's perspective;
- ✦ Create a sense for the learner that no matter what happens, they won't be "cast out of the group";
- ✦ Make the learner feel respected, and that their ideas and contributions are welcome.



COMPETENCE = The need to cope effectively with one's environment. A sense that I can develop new skills and knowledge, and that I am capable of handling challenging tasks. A feeling that I know what is expected of me, how to achieve it, and where to seek help and guidance when needed.

How to support competence::

- ✦ Clearly show that you are there to help the learner succeed;
- ✦ Ensure the learner knows what is expected of them, how to achieve it, and where to ask for help;
- ✦ Give tasks that focus on step-by-step improvement;
- ✦ Provide meaningful feedback that guides what to do next to improve. The learner's own reflection is essential.



AUTONOMY = "I want to do this". The need to have control over what happens in one's own life. A sense that I make my own choices and understand why I do what I do. I can offer ideas and solutions, and there is genuine interest in my thoughts. I can be myself and be respected as such.

How to support autonomy:

- ✦ Help the learner see the activities as valuable to them; offer meaningful choices — activities should not feel pointless;
- ✦ Allow the learner to come up with their own solutions and ideas; see them as a thinking individual;
- ✦ Patiently follow the learner's pace of learning (learning is a very slow process);
- ✦ Accept and welcome the learner's negative emotions.



Young person's

thoughts: "But what if the local culture activities don't challenge me— what if they're too easy or too difficult?"



Young person's

thoughts: "But what if the local culture activities don't speak to me and lack a meaning that resonates with me?"



2.4 Core values and principles for integrating local culture into education

INTEGRATION

Local culture activities are integrated into other learning activities and programs (e.g., schools promoting movement, green schools, bullying-free schools, etc.)

EVERYDAYNESS

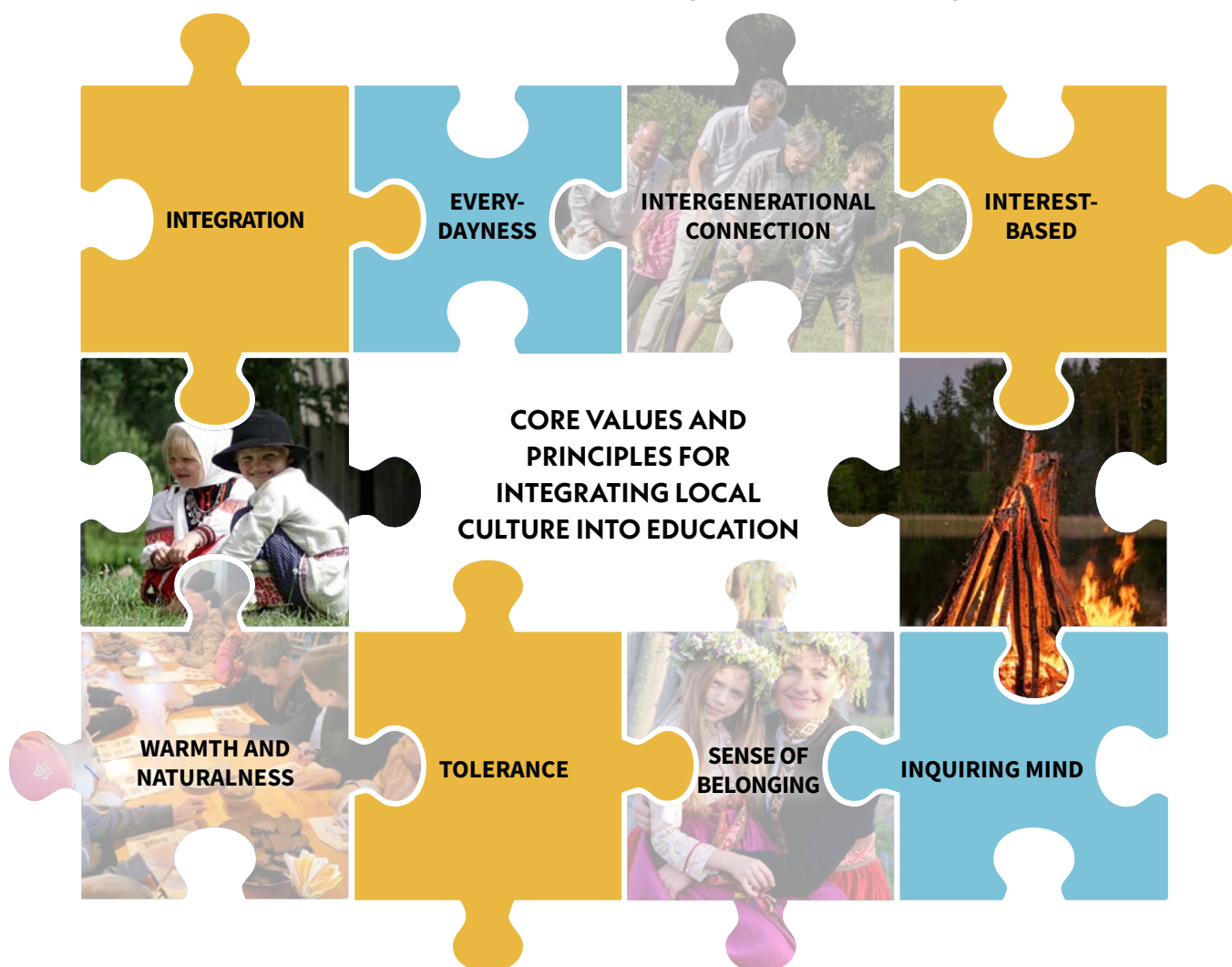
Local culture is a natural part of life. It's not about teaching local culture, but living it and passing it on.

INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTION

Experiencing local culture is important for bringing generations together, with adults setting an example.

INTEREST-BASED

Local culture education should be connected to children's interests and offered through various opportunities for participation, rather than being forced.



WARMTH AND NATURALNESS

Children and teachers create and maintain the warmth and naturalness of local culture within the learning space.

TOLERANCE

At the core is the awareness and understanding of one's roots and the valuing of differences.

SENSE OF BELONGING

It's important to maintain and enhance the sense of belonging for children, teachers, and parents. The school and kindergarten are a community where no one is excluded.

INQUIRING MIND

Every teacher can be a local culture teacher if they take on the role of an investigator alongside the student. Local culture is understood in dialogue with students, and openness to different interpretations is encouraged.



3. Guidelines for integrating local heritage culture

Local culture is broader than just language, traditional singing, dancing and clothing.

Local culture contains much that is perceptual and invisible, which we can pass on naturally through everyday activities, relationships, and stories.

Conscious place identity building is the foundation of a sense of security.

Discussing the differences between local and global culture or between local and distant ways of life helps both children and adults to make sense of local culture and shape their own identity. An open and inviting cultural space allows for the support of self-definition through dialogue between old and new inhabitants, shaping place identity, and creating a sense of security.

A safe, native language environment invites people to speak the language.

A safe and supportive native language environment encourages people who are not fully confident in their language skills to speak. A living language is constantly evolving. By encouraging everyone to try speaking, make mistakes, and allowing them to play with language and joke around, we send the message that the language belongs to the speakers. It's important to create a sense that everyone feels good in a native language environment, as language skills grow the fastest through speaking. Creating an early native language environment for young children helps them naturally acquire language skills.

Local culture is a regional way of life, from mushroom picking to heating the sauna, from meaningful places to human relationships.

Even "I am not this" is part of building identity.





Changing habits requires a conscious decision and determined effort. If you are used to speaking to children in Estonian but would actually like to speak in the local language, simply wanting it won't be enough to overcome automatic behaviour. You need to clarify why it is important to you. Reminders can help: for example, a sign saying "Use local language with children!"

The transmission of local culture happens naturally, vitally, and every day.

Children learn the most from what they see adults doing on a daily basis. According to a study conducted within the project, teachers perceive local culture as warm, natural, growing, joyful, and fluid. However, teachers note that the local language and culture are rarely used in formal settings. As a result, we unknowingly deprive children and young people of a sense of belonging and place identity, signaling to them that local culture belongs to celebrations, not to everyday life. As adults, we need to realize that it is up to us to bring the naturalness and warmth of local culture into everyday school, kindergarten, and work environments.

Local culture creates a sense of belonging and supports mental health.

Belonging to a community can create a sense of care and value for every child and adult, supporting their mental and social health. Therefore, it is important to ensure that no one feels excluded or foreign. An open and inclusive local culture does not require having local roots; instead, it allows everyone to learn, make sense of, act, and create together. Activities related to local culture can support children and young people in coping with mental and social health challenges.

Making crafts supports concentration, while dancing and playing instruments support self-regulation.



We are all creators and transmitters of local culture.

Experiential and natural local culture education offers adults, youth, and children the opportunity to engage with life-relevant topics that speak to them. It is important that children and young people experience adults as role models in participating in local culture and have the chance to become creators and shapers of culture themselves. A safe, dialogical, manageable, and simultaneously challenging local culture education encourages effort in participation and creation, supporting the emergence of interest. Local culture education should start as early as possible so that it becomes a natural part of children's lives, allowing them to experience their role in the culture's transformation and development.

Local culture should not be like a glass Christmas ornament that a child is not allowed to touch or play with. If local culture is only taken off the top shelf for special occasions, it will not become a meaningful part of everyday life, but remain a museum piece.



3.1 Recommendations for integrating local culture for educational institution leaders

Create a comprehensive and well-thought-out plan for integrating local culture, which involves all members of the educational team in its creation and implementation. A good plan does not burden teachers with additional responsibilities but allows them to bring more of their own cultural story into the learning environment.

Encourage teacher initiative and collaboration in integrating local culture, by creating a safe and inviting space for joint discussions on local culture.

Strengthen the core group of leaders for integrating local culture, by recognizing teachers' competencies in local culture and supporting initiatives related to local culture.

Create and make visible teaching materials and tools that promote local culture. Visible and tangible local culture and language in the learning environment encourage adults to pass on local culture to children and spark children's interest in it. Local culture and language-promoting materials should be used consistently in the learning process to help children develop connections and meaning with them. Educational tools and games about local culture used daily by children should offer opportunities for creative use and group activities, and should be periodically exchanged to maintain interest.

Reconsider and transform the use of learning spaces from the perspective of integrating local culture. Local culture is passed on through communication and experience, and the learning space is formed by the interaction of people and activities. Therefore, educational institutions need to consciously create spaces where children and adults can spend informal time together. The whole institution should be considered and rethought from the perspective of different users (e.g., noticing what is at the child's eye level or where communication happens best). Local culture should be brought to places where children and young people spend most of their time. A good learning space should be easily adaptable for different activities and should allow for a variety of learning environments to support learning and retention. In a powerful learning space, both children and teachers feel comfortable.

Teaching materials come to life when accompanied by human contact.

In an effective learning environment, there could be:



“campfire”, where people can gather around;



“cave”, where one can retreat for privacy;



“stage”, where creativity can flow freely;



“heart”, where life happens and paths intersect.



Take a child's-eye view of the classroom, what's at the child's eye level and where the children congregate.

Design learning spaces together with children, as things created together are more meaningful, generating more interest, excitement, and engagement. When children have made something with their hands, they will take better care of it. Opportunities should be created for children to interpret, play with, deconstruct, and breathe life into local culture from their own perspective. Through mutual learning, questioning, debating, dismantling, and rebuilding, children will form a deeper relationship with local culture and their role within it. Dialogue is essential, where teachers and adults openly listen to what local culture means to young people and encourage them to interpret and further develop it.

Involve the community in integrating local culture and expand the learning space beyond the classroom, to immerse children in local culture, nature, and people. The school and kindergarten should be the heart of local life and as open as possible to the community. Shared activities and events create a sense of ownership and belonging, fostering a connection between children, teachers, families, and community members. Stories brought into the learning space that speak of children's relatives and local people resonate and strengthen the connection with culture and the community.

Be bold advocates for local culture, by speaking about successful practices of integrating local culture into teaching. By sharing experiences, you can inspire future leaders of local culture.



3.2 Recommendations for the local government

Preserve and value hyper-local identity, in order to highlight the small, distinct cultural spaces within each municipality and their unique characteristics.

Trust a small community and support the preservation of place identity, so that people feel valued, seen, and heard, and recognize the importance of their contribution.



Be a role model in the transmission of local culture, by understanding local culture together with officials and bringing out the local uniqueness in the everyday work of the municipality and in public spaces.

Bring the topic of integrating local culture into discussions. To explore with educational institutions how they are progressing with integration, to offer support, mentorship, networking opportunities, and assistance with applying for funding.

Strengthen the preservation of place identity in educational institutions, as it creates a sense of belonging and security, keeps people rooted locally, and helps both young and adult residents grow strong local roots.

3.3 Recommendations for the community

Foster willingness to cooperate with educational institutions and local governments on all topics related to the content of education, so that schools and kindergartens become the heart of the community.

Encourage people from educational institutions and local governments to participate in local events and activities in order to collaboratively shape local culture and place identity.

Involve teachers from educational institutions in shaping the local way of life and mindset by offering cooperation opportunities, joint activities, and supporting teachers' sense of belonging to the community.



4. Idea bank

SEE 	HEAR+SEE 	SMELL AND TASTE 	TOUCH 	EXPERIENCE 
Local language is visible in the space (door signs, timetable, proverbs, student diary, calendar, posters, riddles, basic vocabulary).	Speaking in local language/dialect (with children, teachers, parents etc).	Preparing and tasting traditional foods in class or workshop.	Local crafts workshops.	Involving grandparents, collecting stories.
Local language picture dictionaries on the walls (food, folk costumes, tools, farm life, alphabet, etc.).	Local music during breaks.	Local foods on the menu (connected to the folk calendar).	Handicraft patterns in the form of puzzles or drawings.	Following the folk calendar – local songs, dances, games, foods, and customs.
Map of the region on the wall indicating culturally significant places.	Introduction and trial of traditional musical instruments.	Introduction of traditional food preservation methods (drying, fermenting, salting, pickling, smoking, etc.).	Dressing dolls in folk costumes.	Local songs and singing games during breaks.
Exhibitions about local people, stories, activities, and places (including cultural and educational history, local customs, legends, fairy tales).	Listening to fairy tales and legends in the local language (recordings or, even better, a live storyteller).	Collecting gifts from nature with children (medicinal plants, mushrooms, berries, birch juice, etc.).	Puzzles and board games in the local language and about local culture.	Participation in local events with children.



SEE 	HEAR+SEE 	SMELL AND TASTE 	TOUCH 	EXPERIENCE 
Folk costumes displayed at events and valued.	Short videos about local calendar holidays and customs.	Planning visits together with the children. The children plan what to bring as a treat.	Local handicrafts in the learning space that can be touched and used.	Visiting local places (cultural and natural), sharing local legends.
Highlighting local traditions/holidays.	Animated films in the local language.	Growing food in the kindergarten or school garden.	Exhibition of old dolls where children can play with them.	Teaching old games to children (both indoor and outdoor games).
Using local patterns and colors in the classroom.	Starting the day with a local folk song or a song in the local language.	Tasting local foods/berries/ fruits/products.	Museum play corner (children can play with old items).	Involving and visiting community members (meetings with interesting locals who share their connection to local culture).
Reading corner in the local language.	School bell with local music.	Preserving the culture of bringing treats. Every child and teacher brings something to share.	Weaving rag rugs with children.	Student exchange between schools in different cultural environments to notice and understand one's own culture and identity (including international exchanges).
Friendly messages in the local language on the walls.			Traditional musical instruments freely available in the learning space.	Experiencing local lifestyle – visiting farms, doing farm work, forest walks, picking berries and mushrooms.
Local language feedback "thermometer" on the wall and verbal feedback from the teacher in the local language.			Comfortable, easily movable furniture with local patterns in shared areas.	Frequent cooperation with museums.
				Sharing and discussing family stories and origins.



5. Action plan

Short term goals for pilot institutions (2025–2026)

Abbreviations: VAK – Võrumaa Development Center, SI – Seto Institute, VI – Võro Institute, ANP – Aluksne district municipality, KNP – Kuldiga district municipality, SKM – Suiti Cultural Heritage Foundation

ACTIVITY	WHO WILL DO IT?	WHEN?
1. Educational institutions have a clearly visible and perceptible identity shaped by their heritage culture.		
1.1 Creating heritage culture visuals in collaboration with children and the community (e.g., signs and displays in their local language, local patterns and colors in spatial design).	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
1.2 Bringing local music into the everyday life of educational institutions (e.g., school bell, folk songs, dances, instruments).	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
1.3 Integrating local food traditions into education (e.g., festive dishes, food workshops, local food in the menu, experimenting with local recipes).	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
1.4 Integrating the local way of life and place-based stories into education (e.g., introducing children to local customs, farm work, seasonal cycles, and traditional tales).	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
2. Teachers are confident and natural in integrating heritage culture into the everyday life of educational institutions.		
2.1 Developing an action plan for integrating heritage culture and empowering a leading core team to implement it.	Management of pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
2.2 Creating a web platform for a heritage culture learning resource bank (to systematize and make existing teaching materials accessible) for Setomaa and Võromaa teachers.	VAK, VI, SI	2025
2.3 Creating heritage culture teaching tools and materials.	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM	2025
2.4 Conducting a teacher training program (to inspire teachers, deepen the understanding of heritage culture, and strengthen collaboration).	VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM	2025



ACTIVITY	WHO WILL DO IT?	WHEN?
2.5 Organizing inspirational trips for school managers and teachers.	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP	2025
2.6 Organizing study trips for teachers (to explore their own cultural space and learn from the experiences of other educational institutions).	VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM	2025
2.7 Meetings with pilot institutions to support the implementation of changes (to bring teachers together, support piloting, provide feedback, and analyze results).	SI, VI, KNP, ANP, local municipalities in Võru county	2025
2.8 Maintaining a regional network and organizing gatherings between educational institutions that integrate heritage culture.	VI, SI, VAK, local municipalities in Võru county	2025–2030
3. Schools and kindergartens have close cooperation with local organizations and the community.		
3.1 Mapping local organizations, artisans, and community members and involving them in the integration of local heritage culture.	Management of pilot institutions, VI, SI, SKM	2025/2026 school year
3.2 Participating in the local way of life, visiting significant places and traditional events with children (e.g., study trips to farms, sacred sites, and nature; taking part in village fairs, community festivals, and collective work gatherings).	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year
3.3 Organizing local heritage culture events in cooperation with families, the community, cultural bearers, and educational institutions.	Pilot institutions	2025/2026 school year



Long-term goals – 2030

Abbreviations: VAK – Võrumaa Development Center, SI – Seto Institute, VI – Võro Institute, ANP – Aluksne district municipality, KNP – Kuldiga district municipality, SKM – Suiti Cultural Heritage Foundation

ACTIVITY	WHO WILL DO IT?	WHEN?
4. The best practices of integrating local culture have expanded to other educational institutions and cultural spaces.		
4.1 Developing and implementing a communication plan to achieve the goals of the strategy (sharing best practices in the media and promoting the strategy more broadly).	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM, local municipalities in Võru county	2025/26 school year
4.2. Integrating new educational institutions into the network of education providers that incorporate local heritage culture.	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM, local municipalities in Võru county	2026/27 school year
4.3 Organizing an education forum to share experiences of integrating local heritage culture with other educational institutions and cultural spaces.	VAK, KNP, ANP, local municipalities in Võru county	2026 November
4.4 Local heritage camps and study trips to explore other cultural spaces and to reflect on one's own identity (both in Estonia and abroad).	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM	2027, 2028
4.5 Cooperation with other cultural spheres, as well as with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture, to promote the teaching of local culture.	VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP, SKM, local municipalities in Võru county	2025–2030
5. The community's expectation and interest in integrating local culture have increased.		
5.1 Bringing local heritage culture into the spotlight, reflecting on it, and promoting it within local municipalities to serve as a role model in passing on local culture.	Local municipalities in Võru county, VAK, KNP, ANP	2025, 2026
5.2 Keeping the theme of local heritage culture prominent and prioritizing it. Highlighting the unique characteristics of cultural spaces and advocating for the preservation of place identity at both national and local levels.	Local municipalities in Võru county, VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP	2025–2028
5.3 Valuing, supporting, and empowering communities that preserve place identity.	Local municipalities in Võru county, VAK, VI, SI, KNP, ANP	2025–2028
5.4 Conducting a survey among parents to explore the community's attitudes and expectations regarding local heritage education (to be linked to the annual parent satisfaction survey).	VI, SI, VAK, KNP, ANP, SKM	2025–2030



ACTIVITY	WHO WILL DO IT?	WHEN?
6. The preservation of local culture and the transmission of traditions to future generations is systematic and continuous.		
6.1 Analyzing the pilot implementation, updating the strategy, and disseminating it.	VAK, VI, SI	2026
6.2 At the county and municipal levels, there is a strategic plan, a division of roles, and an action plan for preserving and transmitting local culture.	VAK, KOV-id, VI, SI	2026
6.3 Supporting continuous cooperation between local museums and educational institutions.	Pilootasutused, VI, SI	2025–2030
6.4 Opening Võro and Seto language preschool groups in all municipalities of the county.	VAK, KOV-id, VI, SI	2025–2030
6.5 Finding funding opportunities to promote the integration of local heritage culture in educational institutions (follow-up projects, supporting local heritage education, and additional pay for teachers using the local language).	VAK, KOV-id, VI, SI	2025–2030



6. Cultural spaces

Seto cultural space

The Setos are an ethnic group whose historical homeland is located in southeastern Estonia, extending into the territory of the Russian Federation. Today, Setomaa is divided between two countries, with the Estonian side's Seto villages unified into a single administrative unit – Setomaa Municipality – since 2017. Due to its borderland location and historical developments, the Setos have preserved their unique cultural traditions, which distinctly set them apart from the rest of Estonia.

Many Seto customs and rituals are closely connected to the church calendar.

The cultural and religious identity of the Setos is strongly linked to Orthodox traditions, differentiating them from the predominantly Lutheran Estonians. In Setomaa, it is customary to follow the older Julian calendar, which causes many church holidays to fall 13 days later than in the rest of Estonia. As a result, several folk calendar holidays are celebrated twice. Many Seto customs and rituals are closely tied to religious feast days and the ecclesiastical calendar, carrying forward a heritage that spans centuries. The Seto language belongs to the South Estonian language group, alongside Võro, Tartu, and Mulgi language. Unfortunately, the number of Seto speakers has significantly declined in recent decades, as younger generations no longer acquire the language as their native tongue. Despite the concerns and efforts of the community, Seto remains classified as an endangered language today.

One of the most renowned expressions of Seto culture is Seto leelo – a polyphonic folk singing tradition that was inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2009 due to its uniqueness. Seto leelo is not merely a form of singing but an essential part of the people's identity and continues to hold a central place in community events today.





Vana-Võromaa cultural space

Vana-Võromaa is known for its strong cultural identity, which is expressed through language, music, dance, storytelling, handicrafts, folk costumes, sauna traditions, and a lifestyle in harmony with nature. The carrier of this cultural identity is the Võru language, which has been spoken in this region for at least two thousand years. Efforts to preserve and revitalize the Võru language and local culture are visible in local media, educational activities, and cultural events (such as the Võru language Uma Pido festival, the counting of smoke saunas to collect the traditions of Vana-Võromaa, and so on).

An important institution supporting the regional language and culture is the Võru Institute. Founded in 1995, the institute focuses on the research, preservation, and promotion of the Võru language and culture. The institute produces educational materials, supports the teaching of the Võru language in educational institutions, and publishes books and dictionaries. It collaborates with schools, universities, and cultural organizations to strengthen regional identity. The Võru Institute plays a key role in preserving and passing on the local language and culture to future generations. Thanks to the institute's continuous work, the Võru language, which was suppressed during the Soviet era, is once again gaining respect among the locals. According to the latest census, around 100,000 people understand Võru, with approximately 34,000 living in Võru County, and about 11,000 in the city of Võru.

The cultural space of Vana-Võromaa consists of eight distinct but closely connected parishes. Most of the inhabitants of Vana-Võromaa have local roots, and as a result, the hyper-local place identity of the current indigenous population is very strong, expressed in, for example, communication networks, language peculiarities, and various local traditions. The development of place identity and cultural differences has been strongly influenced by natural conditions and the shaping of a lifestyle and survival skills in harmony with these conditions. Therefore, for the people of Vana-Võromaa, everyday activities and phenomena—such as potato harvesting, sauna visits, or the land and forest thickets—remain important and deeply rooted sources of local culture.

For the people of Vana-Võromaa, the local nature and way of life are meaningful, soulful sources of their heritage culture.



Suiti cultural space

The Suiti are an ethnic group residing in the western Kurzeme region, specifically in the parishes of Alsunga, Gudenieki, and Jūrkalne. They are well known in Latvia for their rich and distinctive cultural heritage, which includes vibrant folk costumes, unique vocal drone (bourdon) singing, a distinct local dialect, traditional cuisine, and unique wedding customs. Their cultural traditions also encompass folk songs, bagpipes, other traditional musical instruments, as well as characteristic dances and melodies that have been documented and revived in recent decades.

The Suiti cultural space is included in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

Predominantly Catholic, the Suiti have historically lived in a region largely composed of Lutherans. Their religious differences led them to isolate themselves from surrounding communities, which helped preserve their cultural identity for centuries. However, this unique heritage now faces significant threats due to population decline, globalization, and other challenges. Recognizing the need for urgent preservation, UNESCO included the Suiti Cultural Space on its List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2009.





At the heart of the Malenian identity is the Malenian language; Malenians are associated with absurd humor and cheerfulness.

Malenia cultural space

Nowadays, Malenia is the name given to the place where the Malenian people live – the Vidzeme people, who are speakers of the Malenian or Malenian variant of the deep Latgalian dialect of the Upper Lands dialect. Since 2022, Malenija has been recorded with this meaning on the map attached to the Historical Lands Law, but on January 10, 2024, this name was also officially approved by the Latvian Language Expert Commission, indicating that Malenia covers almost the entire Aluksne municipality, the eastern part of Gulbene municipality and the northeastern part of the current Smiltene municipality. It is the Malenian speech that is the central concept that connects the views, lifestyle, environment and history of Malenia. The name of malena and Malenia in the Latvian cultural space is most associated with humor and satire, with cheerful, seemingly wrong, frivolous and strange, but not evil, actions that cause confusion and frivolous attitudes among the residents of the surrounding municipalities.

There are not many special and/or distinctive elements in the traditional culture of Malenia that could be directly linked to a specific identity. Malenia folk costumes are modest in terms of both color and ornamentation, there are no large brooches, bright scarves, as well as the splendor of the red color - gray-brown horizontal stripes with “hidden” checks are visible on women’s blouses, as well as small red and black or blue and black checks, as well as vertical stripes. White blouses for women, black bodices and white long skirts for men during festivals are dominant; but there are also variants.

7. Current situation of heritage culture teaching and survey results

Seto cultural space

As part of the 2024 education reform, all schools and kindergartens in Setomaa Municipality were merged into three institutions. Following the reform, the municipality officially operates two schools – Setomaa School and Setomaa Gymnasium – and one kindergarten, Setomaa Kindergarten. Both Setomaa School and Setomaa Gymnasium are under the leadership of a single director, and teachers are shared between them. One of the core values of these institutions is the preservation and transmission of the Seto language and culture. Additionally, Setomaa Music School offers students the opportunity to learn traditional musical pieces and folk instruments.

In the case of heritage and language learning, the problem is the availability of teaching materials.

For primary school students, heritage studies is a mandatory subject that naturally integrates the teaching of both the local language and culture. However, there is no separate Seto language class in the school curriculum. Heritage studies are taught once a week from grades 1 to 7, with each lesson lasting 45 minutes. The content of these lessons is determined by the subject teacher, as there is no fixed curriculum for this course. At the gymnasium level, 10th-grade students have the option to take heritage studies as an elective course.



Currently, Setomaa Kindergarten has an outdoor learning group at its Värskä location, where teachers communicate with children in Seto language daily. This group places special emphasis on passing down Seto culture, celebrating traditional folk calendar holidays, and visiting Värskä Church during major religious festivities.

Over the years, numerous teaching materials have been developed for Seto language and cultural education. Today, all relevant materials are housed in the library of the Seto Institute in Värskä. Digital learning materials are available on the Seto Institute's website. However, the accessibility of learning resources remains a challenge. Many



printed materials have run out of stock, and reprinting is not always feasible. Additionally, research conducted as part of our project revealed a lack of suitable materials for children – many existing resources are either too complex or not well-suited for young learners who do not hear Seto daily. Most materials are produced on an ad-hoc basis through enthusiasm-driven and project-based initiatives, making it difficult to ensure consistent quality and long-term sustainability.

For years, the Seto Institute has coordinated the creation and publication of suitable textbooks for language and cultural education. In addition, different authors have also self-published Seto-language fiction. Language-learning publications, such as “Seto keele teejuht” (Seto Language Guide), are useful for adult language enthusiasts seeking to deepen their knowledge of Seto, but their complexity and structure make them unsuitable for younger learners. The Seto Institute has also organized youth camps for several consecutive years, targeting high school and undergraduate students. These camps focus on introducing Seto culture and collecting local heritage and memories.

In the autumn of 2024, we conducted written surveys and interviews with teachers and students from Setomaa schools. A total of 23 school and kindergarten teachers responded to the survey, and 2 focus group interviews were conducted with 5 teachers. Among students, 50 participated in the electronic survey, and 6 took part in 2 focus group interviews. The aim was to understand teachers’ and students’ attitudes toward heritage education. The findings revealed that teachers hold a positive attitude toward local culture, and students are interested in learning more about their regional heritage. The student interviews highlighted that the most intriguing topics for them were the local language, nature, history, and food culture. Meanwhile, subjects like handicrafts and music, which are already well-represented and widely taught in Setomaa, generated less interest. The prevailing view among young people regarding Seto language learning was that it should occur naturally, alongside other activities, rather than through formal instruction.

Students expect adults to speak to them more in the local language.

Vana-Võromaa cultural space

There are 27 general education schools in the cultural space of Vana-Võromaa, about half of which have also organized Võro language and culture teaching in one way or another. Since the schools have been merged, it is currently difficult to get an overview. For example, the main building of Põlva School actively teaches Võro language and culture, while the Mooste, Vastse-Kuuste and Ahja locations of the same school do not teach heritage culture. Kääpa School and the largest school in the region, Võru Kreutzwald School, have taken important steps towards integrated teaching of the Võro language. The Võro Institute and the Estonian Cultural Endowment have so far supported the teaching of Võro language and culture, but this support is too scarce for consistent activities.

The language nest methodology is being used in 15 kindergarten groups in Vana-Võromaa.

The language nest methodology is used in preschool institutions, where Võro language is studied in a group one day a week. Under the leadership of the Võro Institute, a large number of teaching materials have been developed for both kindergartens and schools, including the Helüait repository of audio recordings, many new children’s songs and pictorial teaching materials that teachers can adapt to their narrower cultural space.



The topics that interest students the most are the local language, nature, history, and food culture.

In September-October 2024, a questionnaire survey was conducted among students and teachers of schools and kindergartens in Võru County in the third stage of schooling. 266 students and 162 teachers responded to the questionnaire. Focus group interviews were conducted with the volunteers who responded to the questionnaire in order to specify and expand the results of the quantitative study. The main results of the study are as follows: 1) The main contact with the Võro language in the immediate vicinity of the responding students is their grandparents, of whom 37.5% use the Võro language often and only 14.4% never use it. 2) Language contact is also important with teachers, who have been heard using the Võro language by about half of the children, and 16.5% of respondents confirm that teachers do this often. 3) The role of parents in language contact is slightly lower than that of teachers, neighbors and distant relatives, only a small minority of respondents speak Võro with friends of the same age (3% often, 13% rarely). From these results, it can be concluded that the role of the school in passing on one's own culture, and especially the language, is also important.

Suiti cultural space

Various organizations dedicated to preserving Suiti cultural heritage—including municipalities, NGOs, and national authorities—are actively working to ensure its transmission to future generations. Currently, there is only one educational institution in the Suiti region – Alsunga Art Primary School, which also includes preschool groups as well as music and art programs. As a result, it serves as the most important educational center for Suiti cultural heritage, promoting the integration of Suiti culture into the curriculum. For educational purposes, the school uses the book “Suitu novada mācība”, published more than 10 years ago, along with other supplementary materials. However, the existing learning resources are insufficient. For approximately 10 years, the school has offered extracurricular classes called “The Studies of Suiti Culture”, introducing children to various elements of Suiti cultural heritage. Following the recent education reform, the content of these lessons has been incorporated into different subjects, and the integration of Suiti culture into the curriculum now relies primarily on the enthusiasm of individual teachers. The surrounding environment of the school and preschool buildings (in front of the buildings, in hallways, and classrooms) includes some Suiti cultural elements. However, they are insufficient, and several need to be restored. The school hosts the children's folklore group “Suitini” where children are taught Suiti songs, dances, and traditions.

School is by far the most important learning centre for cultural heritage, where the integration of culture into the curriculum is a central objective.



Various activities are also carried out by Suiti NGOs, including organizing summer camps on Suiti traditions, hosting workshops, publishing children's books, and more. In the autumn of 2024, a survey of students and teachers was conducted at Alsunga Art Primary School, along with focus group interviews, aiming to assess their attitudes and knowledge about Suiti culture. The survey involved 18 teachers and 28 students (all 7th–9th grade students), as well as 6 students and 6 teachers in the focus group interviews. The results of the survey indicate that while Suiti culture is most often described as natural, warm, and joyful (more than 50% of the respondents), there is still a lack of knowledge about most elements of Suiti culture. In the case of students, low motivation is also a factor - on average, more than 60% admitted that they are not interested in learning more about various elements of Suiti culture. A fairly large portion of teachers (an average of 36%) and students (46%) admit that they rarely encounter Suiti cultural elements in their daily lives or within the learning process in the school. Most interactions with Suiti culture have taken place at public events such as celebrations and festivals.

A key challenge is students' low interest in learning about local culture.



To more successfully integrate Suiti cultural elements into the school curriculum, more than 76% of the teachers have expressed a need for knowledge, teaching materials, and more time.

However, teachers have many ideas on how to improve this process and what teaching materials and environmental improvements would be necessary. Students have also mentioned specific activities that could spark their interest in Suiti culture.

Malenia cultural space

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the recognition and awareness of the identity of Malenia as a territory of Northeastern Vidzeme has developed in particular. This has been facilitated by scientific and popular science publications about the talents and characteristics of the Malenians, about the history and harsh living conditions, but especially about the Malenian dialects. The popularization of the Malenian identity has been promoted by the establishment of the Creative Malenians association in 2010 and the three Malenian language camps it organized (in 2020 and 2022 in Marin-



Since the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a significant increase in awareness of Malenian identity.

kalns, in 2023 in Korneiti), as well as the creation of the main exhibition “The World of the Malenian” at the Jaunlaicene Manor Museum and the “Worldwide Malenian Festival” organized by it in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The popularization of the Malenian identity has also been promoted by the Malenian dances staged by the Aluksne dance group “Jukums”, the events of the Jaunlaicene folklore group “Putnis” and the Ziemei folklore group, as well as three films: “One Day with the Malenian people” (2012), “Another Day with the Malenian people” (2022) and “Bārta: Malēnija” (2022). Interest in Malenian and its inhabitants is also promoted by the recognition of this cultural space in the Historical Lands Law.

Currently, Ziemei Primary School is working to revive the Maleni culture, traditions and language. We are at the initial stage, planning to introduce visual, audio and folklore-themed events that will be interesting to students and teachers. There are no educational institutions in the immediate vicinity that have introduced and are working on the introduction of cultural and historical heritage in the school environment.

Teachers need additional knowledge, teaching materials, and time to integrate heritage culture into their teaching.

The results of the survey of teachers and students, as well as focus group interviews conducted in the fall of 2024 on Maleni culture, indicate that the Maleni language is cold and artificial. In the case of students, low motivation is also a factor. Respondents often noted that they rarely/never encounter elements of Maleni culture in everyday life or in the learning process at school. Little interaction with the Maleni language has occurred in contact with ancestors (grandparents).

In order to better integrate Malenian cultural elements into the school curriculum, most teachers have expressed the need for knowledge, teaching aids and more time to familiarize themselves with the materials and prepare for lessons. Teachers have ideas on how to improve this process and what teaching materials and environmental improvements would be needed. Students have also mentioned specific activities that could spark their interest in Malenian culture (creating visual and audio materials, cooking, etc.).

