



Behind the Scenes of a **LITERACY CONFERENCE**

Reflections from the Baltic Sea Conference in Estonia

By **Meeli Pandis** and **Zoi A. Traga Philippakos**

i **N THE CONTEXT** of rapidly evolving educational needs and growing linguistic diversity across Europe, literacy professionals benefit immensely from platforms that foster knowledge exchange, networking, and collaboration. The Baltic and the Federation of European Literacy Associations (FELA) European Conferences on Literacy have become two such critical spaces that promote literacy research, practice, and collaboration for both. These events not only bring together educators, researchers, and policymakers within the European continent, but also create opportunities to co-develop strategies for improving literacy practices across varied disciplines and sociocultural contexts.

Why we organize

Organizing a literacy conference serves multiple purposes. First, it provides a platform to highlight regional literacy initiatives and showcase national achievements in education.

Second, it strengthens regional and International networks among professionals, enabling collaboration that often extends beyond the event itself. For the organizer, it is a chance to contribute to the field at a macro level by influencing discourse, guiding professional priorities, and fostering new partnerships. For the organizing association, it is a major challenge as well as an opportunity to grow in terms of leadership competencies and new memberships.

This also allows for highlighting one's country and education system. Estonia, for example, is known for its high OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, and there is still plenty of room for cultural exchange in education.

How to make it work

Making a literacy conference “work” requires meticulous planning, inclusive programming, and thoughtful facilitation of dialogue across languages and cultures. In the case of the Baltic Sea Conference, success was ensured through a clear thematic focus, a balance of academic and practitioner voices, and the integration of both regional and international perspectives. FELA’s structure—rooted in pan-European collaboration—added a valuable comparative dimension that allowed for the cross-pollination of ideas.

It all starts from a vision. Organizers should discuss how the conference will look; what to include, refine, or reimaged while drawing from past conference experiences; and how to enrich the participant experience beyond the formal program. Every conference should include professional scholarly exchanges and opportunities for learning about educational practice, culture, and sightseeing, combined with moments of discovery and genuine surprise.

At the Baltic Sea Conference, a social program was offered, which included visits to schools and museums, an outdoor learning pre-conference in Narva, an immersive nature walk, and even cold water swimming in the Baltic Sea with a sauna.

Conference highlights

An organizers’ duty is to find plenary speakers who are not only high-level professionals, but inspiring speakers with new ideas on a given topic. Our speakers included:

- **Indrek Park** from the Department of Linguistics at Indiana University’s College of Arts and Sciences, who talked about the importance of indigenous and endangered languages.
- **Maria Deskur** from the Polish Universal Reading Foundation, who shared how collaboration can make literacy the key to shaping the future of resilient citizens.
- **Paavo Leppänen** from the University of Jyväskylä, who discussed how digital and online literacy pose challenges for learners with neurodevelopmental disorders.
- **Ally Sangster** and **Irene Bews** from Adventurascotland, who presented possibilities for using outdoor education to support speech development and language learning.
- **Aleksandr Žedeljov**, an Estonian composer, who shared a personal perspective on how musical structures and narratives connect to literacy learning difficulties.
- **Piret Päär**, a storyteller, who revealed that stories are invisible threads connecting us across time, place, culture, ethnicity and age—and how sharing is the best practice.

Suggestions and next steps

As we reflected on the success of the Baltic Sea Conference, several recommendations for organizers emerged. Encouraging collaboration during and after the conference in

the form of research projects, joint publications, and other initiatives deepened impact. Given the multilingual nature of Europe and the world, more emphasis could be placed on ensuring presentations and materials are accessible to diverse language groups. Future conferences could also include more voices from students and practicing teachers, whose lived experiences often bring valuable context to academic discussions.

Further, while in-person interaction remains invaluable, hybrid options could widen participation and accessibility, especially for those with travel constraints. Establishing follow-up webinars, publications, online forums, and mentoring programs linked to conference themes can continue to sustain professional development.

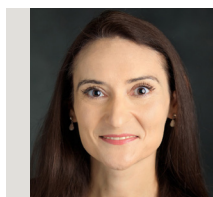
Final thoughts

The Baltic Sea and European Conferences on Literacy stand as powerful examples of how educational events can move beyond information exchange to become transformative professional experiences. For organizers, they are platforms of influence, innovation, and organizational growth. For participants, they offer inspiration, knowledge, new contacts, and a sense of belonging to a wider literacy community. As we look to the future, strengthening these spaces—through inclusivity, sustainability, and collaboration—will be key to advancing literacy across Europe and beyond. ■

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