



Popular Opinion Leader (POL) model *for*  
*community based prevention of bullying*



## **Introduction**

Eirene is an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership in School Education project which aims to improve the ability of the school education system to react to the bullying phenomenon and to involve the main actors that rotate around the school system in tackling this negative behavior at an educational level.

Therefore, the specific objective of the project, is creating methodology to update teachers' competencies by offering them a set of specific laboratories (based on the Applied Theatre), as a specific tool to tackle bullying. Furthermore the project aims at actively involve the local communities (parents, associations, Institutions etc.). The goal is to create an active and participated web to tackle bullying efficiently. Lastly the projects aims at offering teachers and students, some basic strategies on the use of audio/video programs to design brief awareness campaign on bullying negative effects.

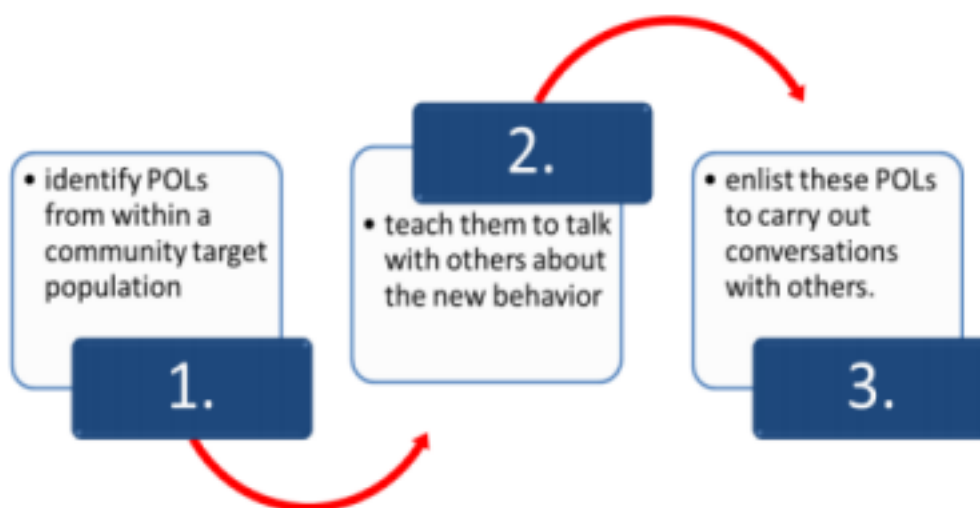
The project is going to develop a Methodology to tackle Bullying in the Educational Field and an e-learning course on the design and production of small social media campaigns.

The project is coordinated by the state high-secondary school Istituto Magistrale Statale Giordano Bruno from Italy. The partnership includes also the Vocational Education and Training provider Consorzio Roma from Italy, Karalius Mindaugas Vocational Training Centre from Lithuania, the Community Art Resource Centres "The Playhouse" from UK, the school Szkoła Podstawowa w Jankowie Przygodzkim from Poland, Action Synergy and the 3rd general lyceum (GEL) of Corfu from Greece and the School of Technologies, Innovation and Creation (ETIC) from Portugal.



### Presentation of the model

POL is a model that identifies and trains naturally popular and well-liked people in a community to function as educators of their social networks to achieve effective and sustainable behaviour change. POL is based on the idea of the "social diffusion theory" that new behavioural trends can be established when enough popular people whose opinions are valued by others are actively seen and heard to endorse a new value. Opinion leaders are people whose opinions and beliefs lead the views of others, they are about 10 - 15 % of any population.



The messages come to community members from people they personally know and like, from their own friends who become role models and change makers.

## 1. Background and evidence on the model

The POL methodology has been elaborated by the Center for AIDS Intervention Research (CAIR), Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA. Originally POL was developed as community-based intervention for HIV prevention. POL is based on an advanced and scientifically-proven form of peer education among young MSM (man who have sex with men).

POL has been implemented in different contexts and communities and has proven its effectiveness undoubtedly. The CAIR team reports that this low cost intervention has been shown to result in behavioural risk reduction among gay men, women, adolescents, and other populations.

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The first evaluation of the POL intervention was carried out in the USA with men who visited gay bars in 1989. CAIR reports that there was a 30% reduction in the percentage of men who had any unsafe sex and a 35% increase in condom use. The same pattern was found in a total of seven U.S. cities where the study took place.

The POL program was next adapted for use with women living in apartments in poor neighbourhoods in 18 U.S. cities. Before and again one year after the POL intervention was conducted, all women living in all the apartments were surveyed about their sexual behaviour. The results show that they became less likely to have unprotected intercourse and more likely to use condoms - condom use increased by 50%. They improved their HIV knowledge, greater perceived risk for AIDS, increased condom keeping, and more condom use discussion by women with their male partners.

## 2. Adaptation of the model within EIRENE

The current adaptation of the POL within EIRENE entails the introduction of three new aspects:

Thematic extension. For the purposes of the EIRENE project POL will be adapted for use on the topic of bullying, with focus on changing the community norms and the attitudes towards bullying in schools.

The POL intervention is assigned to use the natural communication peer channels within the community and to present to the young people alternative perspectives towards the issue. For

achieving this it utilises methods, informed by the power of social diffusion and group–dynamic theories as vehicles to foster the desired behavioural change. This approach seems to be very appropriate since traditional education interventions do not show good effects due to the natural resistance of the minority group members to the external pressure and cultural influences from the majority society.

Focus on specific target group. POL will be introduced to all target groups: students / parents / teachers & school administration.

Evaluation of the intervention. Being initially intended for reshaping the risky sexual behaviours in community setting, the evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention should be modified according the new application of the method.

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### 3. Theoretical framing of the theme

#### **Main principles when building intervention in schools.**

**Cultural competence.** Understanding the existing cultural differences without criticizing the practices in the community – building a capacity to understand, recognize, respect and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds.

**Integration of the knowledge about the cultural norms and dynamics into the intervention.** It is crucial to the success of the intervention to gain the support of the communities' gatekeepers – local leaders, key informants and to work together with them. Crucial for planning the intervention is to collect knowledge regarding the cultural norms of the community and the acceptable behaviours etc.

**Using and developing the resources of the community.** Informal communication channels in the community are the most effective and quick way to disseminate information within school. For this reason, the POL foresees young people from the community with strong leadership potential to be prepared for peer educators and to be actively involved in disseminating the bullying prevention message within their own social networks.

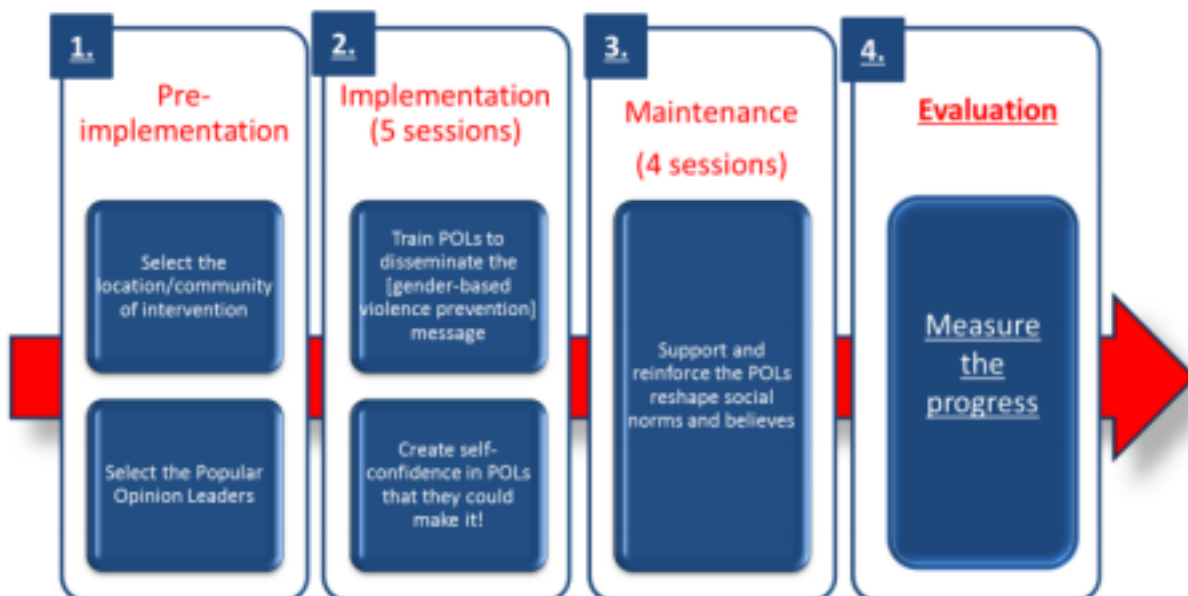
**Group training.** The experience of the Health and Social Development Foundation shows that working in groups (12-15 participants) selected on grounds of similar characteristics is the most effective way to work for changing attitudes and for life-skills building. A study by the Norwegian Center for the Study of Violence and Traumatic Stress states that this type of

programs are among the most effective preventative interventions for dissemination of knowledge about the causes and consequences of violence and coping strategies.



#### 4. Components of the intervention

POL as community-setting intervention is intended to turn the spotlight on awareness raising, sensitization towards factors that increase risks of bullying, such stereotypes and role prescriptions, change of attitudes and competence building of young students to prevent inequality and violence.



The POL intervention includes four phases of implementation, each of them featuring own goal

and structure.

#### **4.1 Pre-implementation**

The background rationale of POL is to use the resources of well-structured community and important facilitating factor for its implementation is identifying the community structure, communication channels, and the key gatekeepers. POL will then build on and integrate the ongoing approaches of community work and outreach, mediators, peers.

The main purpose of the pre-implementation phase is to identify a sub-group within the community that could be involved in the intervention and to select the POLs, who could be empowered to influence the change.

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##### **4.1.1 Identification of sub-group within the community**

Planning for this stage is very important especially for teams and organizations with no experience in the particular community, where the intervention is planned to take place. In this case the preliminary exploration of the situation (about three months) is crucial to the successful planning of the intervention. Usually there are three classical research methods applied to conduct this preparatory phase of the realization of POL methodology: observation, focus groups and/or key informants interviews.

Steps :

1. Select the location/community of intervention
2. Gain the support of key community people
3. Learn about the community norms and attitudes

Venues for reaching young POLs: those are neighbourhood locations where young people meet and gather together, coffee places, schools, clubs (where they go out to have fun).

The aim of the observation is to map the places where young people gather together, and their activities, interactions, habits. An important aspect of the observation is that it provides information who are the natural opinion leaders in the community and their social networks.

**Access to the target population.** It is important that the observation is conducted in manner that does not intimidate the subjects of observation, and does not make them feel threatened. For this purpose it is recommended that the observation is conducted by/or together with representatives of the same community.

**Knowledge about the community norms and attitudes.** An important step before planning the intervention is collecting reliable information about community norms, perceptions and attitudes related. This information is needed, in order to have practical material for creating realistic exercises such as case studies and role plays, but also for the facilitator to be prepared what kind of attitudes he/she would meet and have to deal with during the group work with the POLs.

The reliable information could be collected through focus groups and/or key informant interviews. Depending of the level of knowledge about the concrete community both methods could be applied or if the case only one to be chosen for the purposes of collecting information.

Steps:

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1. Specify what kind of information is needed for planning the intervention
2. Conduct one focus group with representatives of the same target group
3. If needed conduct interviews with key informants from the community on the same topic. Plan at least three interviews, if needed conduct few more unless the information reported will start to be repeated.

#### **4.1.2 Selection of the Popular Opinion Leaders**

The second key task, crucial to the successful implementation of POL methodology is the selection of the natural popular opinion leaders. Five approaches can be used for the purposes of the selection:

1. Recommendations of the community leaders or gatekeepers;
2. Observations made in the venues;
3. Information based on prior programs your organization have conducted in the community;
4. Advice or surveys of target population members to find out who is most popular;
5. Key



informants interviews.

How to recognize the POLs? POLs are those members of the target population who:

- Spend a lot of time talking with other peers
- Are popular among others in the target population
- Are trusted by their friends and peers
- Are likely to be listened to by peers when they give advice

#### **4.1.3 Competence required for conducting POL groups.**

Since the goal of the work is a profound change and building communicative and social skills, the facilitators` team needs to include at least one professional experienced in group work (psychologist, clinical social worker, education professional with experience in facilitation group work processes).

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#### **4.2 Implementation**

The main tasks of this phase are:

1. To train POLs to disseminate the bullying prevention message
2. To create self-confidence in POLs that they could make it!

The main goal of the training with young POLs is to make them think and act out of the box of the expectations and to provide them with alternative behaviours (different from violence against the partner) and reactions in order to adequately respond to the public expectations directed to them. Those personal achievements and insights are expected to be reached during the first, “personal development” part of the sessions. The second part of the session is directed to the development of communication skills that will enable the POLs to disseminate the message in their social networks with the presumption that this would influence the social norms and the attitudes.

#### **Content of POL Training sessions**

## **Session 1. Empowerment of the leaders and group cohesion**

Goal of the session: The goal of the session is to empower the POLs and to provide information about the project and its goals and to create good cohesion within the leaders` group. To also introduce the bullying topic.

The empowerment of the leaders is a crucial element not only for the successful implementation of the intervention, but also for the motivation of the young leaders to participate in the training and to work for the change of the norms in the school. Since the intervention is planned to happen within few months and requires active involvement of the leaders this is a very important task to be accomplished.

Additional complication for the motivation of the young people is that very often they do not understand the issue as problematic and they believe that being aggressive, violent or dominant is a part of the role in the community.

The hierarchy within the group is a very important aspect of the group dynamic. In order to achieve good group cohesion and good confidence within the group, the first session should be directed to achieve those two important goals.

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Core messages:

1. You are selected because your opinion matters to your friends
2. You can make the difference
3. The group is a safe place where you can discuss different topics and try to do new things

## **Session 2. The face of violence**

Goal of the session: To increase the awareness of the young leaders regarding the topic of violence and bullying.

Through the exploration of the violence topic the group is generating the frame of the community norms regarding bullying that need to be changed due to the intervention.

The diversification of the manifestations of the violence exceeds its definition and lighten very important but difficult to recognize aspects of the violence such as emotional/psychological

violence and sexual violence.

A very important aspect of the work in the second session is introduction of the topic with the individual conversations and the individual role of the leaders for changing the community norms regarding bullying. In the frame of the second session the POLs are invited to make their first communication skills exercise on disseminating the anti-violence message in the community.

Core messages:

1. Violence is a learned behavior
2. There are different types of violence
3. Violence does not equal physical aggression only

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### **Session 3. Understanding the cycle of violence**

Goal of the session: To build intention for change

The session is built on two essential elements - to help the POLs understand that violence is a learnt behaviour that usually is reproducing models observed in the family or in the immediate environment of the student. Those models are important part of the behavioural repertoire of the young people who do not have other examples for successful implementation of the social expectations attributed to the gender role expectations. The cycle of violence represents the relation between the mechanisms of power and control (violence) used against the young people in the past or in the present and his/her own violent reactions.

The second key task of this session is to identify the networks of the natural leaders by listing the names of the friends on a sheet of paper. Every POL will be expected to talk and to disseminate the information learnt during the sessions with every single person included in his personal contact list and to report back in the group about the reactions and comments made by them during those conversations.

Core messages:

1. Violence is a learned behavior
2. Bullying is based on society expectations
3. Being violent doesn't equal being masculine or dominant

#### **Session 4. Violet (flower) and violence**

Goal of the session: Planning the change

The session is built on two essential elements – working on planning the change with focus on thinking and reacting “out of the box” of the socially declared expectations.

During first part of the session the participants should be enlightened how to achieve the change by planning non-violent behaviour intentionally and be aware of alternative reactions and role models.

The second part of the session contains communication skills building block. The facilitators are demonstrating to the group how to start and to develop conversation on the topic. The

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participants exercise by couples how to communicate planning the change message with their peers.

Core messages:

1. There is a way to express emotions in non-violent way
2. Each person in his life has experienced aggression/violence directed against him/her - we all know how the victim feels
3. Being violent shows weakness, not force/strength
4. Aggression/rage could be controlled

#### **Session 5. SMART**

Goal of the session: Emotional intelligence and self-control as manifestation of success

The session is built on two essential elements – working on planning the change with focus on non-violent behaviour (expressing emotions in a positive way and anger control) and building communication skills of the POLs.

During first part of the session the participants should be enlightened how to achieve the change by planning non-violent behaviour intentionally and be aware of alternative reactions and role models. In the frame of the session, under the guidance of the facilitators the POLs explore together in what situations bullying occurs, is there and what is the relation between emotions and violence, and discuss what are the positive/negative emotions and how they could be expressed.

The second part of the session contains communication skills building block. The facilitators are demonstrating to the group how to start and to develop conversation on the topic. The participants exercise by couples how to communicate planning the change message with their peers.

Core messages:

1. There is a way to express emotions in non-violent way
2. Being violent shows weakness, not force/ strength
3. Aggression/rage could be controlled

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## **Session 6. The advertisement**

Goal of the session: change of attitudes

The session aims to encourage the POLs to continue working for changing the attitudes against bullying in their social networks by helping their friends to adopt new, alternative behavioural patterns in their relationships based on the respect and appreciation.

Core messages: 1. Each one of us could make the change



### **4.3. Maintenance**

This phase of the intervention contains 4 supporting sessions (with duration 1 hour and a half) with main task to support and reinforce the POLs reshape social norms and beliefs.

The core element for the maintenance section is to support and reinforce successive waves of Opinion Leaders to help reshape social norms against bullying.

The supportive sessions have place every month after the end of the main training, and aim to support the POLs in their mission. The group gathers together – the POLs share their experience and the challenges they have met when talking with their peers about the topic.

The structure of the session is very similar to the sessions from the implementation phase but focuses only on the reporting of the conversations conducted with the friends from the social network - main challenges and estimated achievements of each one of the POL during the period, and suggestions how to improve the conversations in order to optimize the effect of the intervention.



#### **4.4. Evaluation**

The main task of the evaluation phase is to measure the progress. The effectiveness of POL is measured by qualitative and quantitative methods.

The quantitative evaluation comprehends the scope and the intensity of the intervention.

During the implementation period the participants are required to talk with their friends on the topics of intervention.

The quantitative indicator for successful implementation is the number of the conversations with the members of the social networks for the period.

Qualitative evaluation regards the change in two components:

- For change in the behaviour – during the intervention the leaders report about the conversations they have had with their friends regarding the change of the behaviour, which is indicative about the change in the networks.
- The group dynamics - during intervention and supervision sessions a professional analysis is done for the progress of the group as a whole and for each one of the participants individually.
- “Trainer logs” will be filed-in by the group facilitators, reflecting the main development of group process and dynamic. The trainer logs will be developed and used as all for the purpose of the project’s internal evaluation