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Hikikomori, relational fragility and inclusive education: an exploratory study on student teachers' representations within the Italian school inclusion model

Hikikomori, fragilità relazionale e inclusione scolastica: uno studio esplorativo sulle rappresentazioni dei corsisti in formazione nel modello italiano di scuola inclusiva

Call

The phenomenon of hikikomori, understood as prolonged voluntary social withdrawal, represents an emerging educational challenge that calls into question the capacity of schools to recognize and respond to new forms of relational, emotional and social vulnerability. Within the Italian inclusive school system, this phenomenon may be interpreted not as a diagnostic category, but as a possible condition requiring educational attention, in line with the bio-psycho-social perspective of the ICF and the broader framework of Special Educational Needs. This exploratory study investigates the representations of 452 student teachers enrolled in a university specialization programme for educational support. The research aimed to explore their level of awareness of hikikomori, their perception of the phenomenon as a possible educational need, and the inclusive teaching strategies considered most appropriate for supporting students experiencing social withdrawal. Data were collected through an adapted questionnaire inspired by previous instruments used to investigate teachers' knowledge of educational difficulties and were analysed through descriptive and exploratory procedures. The results show a marked discrepancy between the widespread awareness of the phenomenon and the lack of specific training on the topic. Participants tended to interpret hikikomori mainly through relational and contextual factors, such as bullying, cyberbullying, lack of psychological support and distrust in school relationships. They also expressed high agreement with inclusive strategies based on personalization, expressive workshops, small-group activities, multimodal approaches and the valorisation of students' interests. Conversely, lower agreement emerged for distance learning and home-based learning, suggesting the need to avoid interventions that may unintentionally reinforce isolation. The study does not aim to generalize its findings to the broader teaching population, but to offer an exploratory contribution to the debate on teacher education, inclusive didactics and emerging vulnerabilities. The findings highlight the need to strengthen initial and in-service teacher training on prolonged social withdrawal, within a pedagogical framework grounded in shared educational responsibility, class council collaboration and the Italian model of school inclusion.

Keywords: Hikikomori, Special Educational Needs, italian school inclusion model, relational fragility, teacher education

Il fenomeno hikikomori, inteso come ritiro sociale volontario e prolungato, rappresenta una sfida educativa emergente che interroga la capacità della scuola di riconoscere e affrontare nuove forme di vulnerabilità relazionale, emotiva e sociale. Nel quadro del modello italiano di scuola inclusiva, tale fenomeno può essere interpretato non come categoria diagnostica, ma come possibile condizione meritevole di attenzione educativa, in coerenza con la prospettiva bio-psico-sociale dell'ICF e con l'orizzonte dei Bisogni Educativi Speciali. Il presente studio esplorativo indaga le rappresentazioni di 452 corsisti iscritti a un percorso universitario di specializzazione per le attività di sostegno didattico. La ricerca ha inteso esplorare il loro livello di consapevolezza rispetto al fenomeno hikikomori, la sua percezione come possibile bisogno educativo e le strategie inclusive considerate più adeguate a sostenere studenti in situazione di ritiro sociale. I dati sono stati raccolti attraverso un questionario adattato da strumenti precedentemente utilizzati per indagare le conoscenze dei docenti su specifiche difficoltà educative e sono stati analizzati mediante procedure descrittive ed esplorative. I risultati evidenziano una marcata distanza tra la conoscenza diffusa del fenomeno e la mancanza di una formazione specifica sul tema. I partecipanti tendono a interpretare lo hikikomori soprattutto attraverso fattori relazionali e contestuali, quali bullismo, cyberbullismo, assenza di supporto psicologico e sfiducia nelle relazioni scolastiche. Inoltre, manifestano un elevato accordo verso strategie inclusive fondate sulla personalizzazione, sui laboratori espressivi, sul piccolo gruppo, sugli approcci multimodali e sulla valorizzazione degli interessi degli studenti. Al contrario, emerge un minore consenso verso la didattica a distanza e domiciliare, suggerendo la necessità di evitare interventi che possano involontariamente consolidare l'isolamento. Lo studio non intende generalizzare i risultati alla più ampia popolazione docente, ma offrire un contributo esplorativo al dibattito sulla formazione docente, sulla didattica inclusiva e sulle vulnerabilità emergenti. I risultati sottolineano la necessità di rafforzare la formazione iniziale e in servizio sul ritiro sociale prolungato, entro una cornice pedagogica fondata sulla corresponsabilità educativa, sulla collaborazione del consiglio di classe e sul modello italiano di inclusione scolastica.

Parole chiave: Hikikomori, Bisogni Educativi Speciali, modello italiano di inclusione, fragilità relazionale, formazione docente

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1. Fragility of the self and social withdrawal: understanding the Hikikomori phenomenon in the contemporary educational context

The social isolation that emerged during the Coronavirus pandemic has made the phenomenon of hikikomori particularly evident and widespread, bringing it to the forefront of contemporary educational and scientific debate (Bagnato, 2022). Originally born and developed in Japan, this phenomenon has gradually spread to numerous international contexts, to the point where it now constitutes an intercultural reality. In Italy, in particular, a growing number of cases are being recorded, making a systematic investigation of the issue and its educational implications increasingly urgent (Lancini, 2019).

The phenomenon occurs within a society characterized by profound transformation processes, in which dynamics of acceleration, competitiveness, and productivity emerge as the primary parameters of individual recognition. In this scenario, individuals are required to meet increasingly high performant standards, in a context marked by precariousness, uncertainty, and constant exposure to social judgment. This condition contributes to what can be interpreted as a progressive disintegration of the community fabric and a consequent fragility of the ego, understood as difficulties in building a stable identity, making decisions, and establishing meaningful relationships (Bauman & Raud, 2025).

The rapid development of contemporary social and cultural processes reduces the scope for individual reflection, hindering the ability to process experiences and experiences. In this context, personal identity cannot fully develop without engagement with others, since it is precisely in relationships that individuals build their sense of self. However, when trust is lacking – in oneself, in others, and in society – we witness a progressive relational closure that can lead to extreme forms of voluntary social withdrawal (Da Re & Perulli, 2025).

It is precisely this crisis of confidence that characterizes many young hikikomori, who often appear disillusioned with a social, family, and educational system perceived as incapable of embracing their fragilities and valuing their unique characteristics. From this perspective, social withdrawal cannot be interpreted solely as an individual choice or a form of deviance, but must be understood within a broader framework, attributable to a bio-psycho-social model, in which individual, relational, and contextual dimensions interact in a complex way (Da Re, 2025).

In light of these considerations, the present study does not aim to provide a clinical or epidemiological analysis of hikikomori, nor to generalize its findings to the broader teaching population. Rather, it seeks to explore how a specific group of student teachers enrolled in a university specialization programme for educational support represents the phenomenon of prolonged social withdrawal, its possible connection with educational vulnerability and the inclusive strategies considered appropriate in school contexts.

This focus is particularly relevant because teacher education represents a crucial space for developing interpretative, relational and didactic competences in relation to emerging forms of student fragility. From this perspective, hikikomori is not considered as a fixed diagnostic label, but as a complex condition that challenges schools to reflect on participation, belonging, educational responsibility and the construction of inclusive learning environments.

Preventing this phenomenon is essential to limit the spread of social isolation and combat the risk of dropping out of school. However, where timely intervention is not available, social reintegration requires synergistic collaboration between family, school, local services, and experts, in a spirit of shared educational responsibility (Lancini, 2019).

In this context, the role of teachers – especially of special education teachers – takes on strategic importance. They are called upon to promote attentive and non-judgmental listening, to build inclusive learning environments, and to foster the development of positive relationships, countering exclusion and marginalization. From this perspective, the classroom must be a welcoming and meaningful space, where every student can feel recognized and valued, beyond competitive pressures (Da Re, 2025).

Some Italian regions, such as Piedmont and Emilia-Romagna, have already launched initiatives to monitor and address the phenomenon, in collaboration with the Hikikomori Italia association. However, the growing number of cases reported in other regions, such as Puglia, highlights how the phenomenon rep-



resents a true educational emergency at the national level, requiring systematic, informed interventions based on solid pedagogical foundations.

2. Hikikomori: definition, characteristics, and diffusion of a global phenomenon

The phenomenon of hikikomori arose and spread in Japan in the late 1980s, in a context characterized by strong social pressures linked to economic progress and cultural models based on productivity, efficiency, and a strong sense of group belonging. In this context, adherence to collective expectations and the fulfillment of one's duties prevailed over individual fulfillment, resulting in dynamics of self-inhibition and denial of one's identity.

In response to these pressures, a growing number of young people have begun to engage in forms of voluntary social withdrawal, isolating themselves within their homes and gradually cutting off all contact with the outside world. This condition, which can last for long periods, is often accompanied by feelings of loneliness, shame, and guilt, representing an extreme form of response to an environment perceived as excessively demanding and judgmental.

The term hikikomori, composed of the Japanese verbs *hiku* ("to pull") and *komoru* ("to withdraw"), literally means "withdrawing into seclusion" and describes a condition that primarily affects adolescents and young adults who choose to isolate themselves from society for extended periods. The phenomenon received its first scientific recognition thanks to the studies of psychiatrist Tamaki Saitō, who in 1998, with the publication of *Hikikomori: Adolescence without End*, outlined its main characteristics, highlighting its high incidence among adolescents, especially males (Ferrarese, 2025).

Subsequent studies have contributed to defining hikikomori as a predominantly social and cultural phenomenon, rather than a psychiatric pathology. Despite its absence in the DSM-V, the phenomenon has recently been included in the DSM-5-TR (2022) among the emerging conditions linked to specific cultural contexts, recognizing its complexity and relevance (Panetto, 2025). This framework emphasizes the need to adopt a bio-psycho-social perspective, capable of integrating individual, relational, and contextual dimensions.

Confirming this complexity, recent studies conducted in Asian contexts highlight the importance of an accurate clinical assessment, aimed at identifying any psychiatric comorbidities and understanding the impairments in cognitive functions and social interactions, in order to prepare appropriate interventions (Amendola & Teo, 2025). However, as underlined by Crepaldi (2019), voluntary social withdrawal can be interpreted as a response to the excessive pressures for achievement typical of contemporary societies, without necessarily leading to a clinical diagnosis.

The guidelines developed in Japan identify some fundamental criteria for defining the phenomenon: prolonged social withdrawal for at least six months, refusal of school or work activities, and the absence of primary psychiatric pathologies that could explain the condition (Aguglia, 2010). These criteria help distinguish hikikomori from other forms of psychological distress, while highlighting its multifactorial nature.

Behaviorally, hikikomori adopt a highly withdrawn lifestyle, characterized by prolonged periods spent at home, altered circadian rhythms, and a drastic reduction in social interactions. Relationships are often replaced by forms of digital communication, which simultaneously represent a channel of contact with the outside world and a potential factor for further isolation. In this sense, social withdrawal can be interpreted as a defense mechanism against a perceived hostile context, in which the individual experiences a growing fragility of the ego and difficulty recognizing themselves (Gatta, 2025; Rizzo, 2025).

Currently, the phenomenon can be considered a global reality, widespread in several economically developed countries and closely linked to the socio-cultural changes of modernity. Recent studies have highlighted the presence of cases in numerous European contexts, including the Netherlands, Norway, France, Hungary, Finland, and Switzerland (Amendola, 2023), confirming its intercultural dimension. Further re-



search based on systematic literature reviews underscores the importance of shared diagnostic tools for a better understanding of the phenomenon (Zhang et al., 2025).

The manifestation of hikikomori varies depending on the cultural context. While in Japanese society the phenomenon is part of a collectivist logic, in which social role prevails over individual identity, in the Italian context it occurs within a highly individualistic society, characterized by competitive dynamics and increasing pressure toward self-realization. In this scenario, others risk being perceived not as relational resources, but as a point of comparison, fueling feelings of inadequacy and isolation.

In Italy, the phenomenon began to emerge in 2008, particularly among adolescents in middle and high school, a stage of life characterized by profound identity changes. In this context, factors such as bullying, academic failure, and difficulty integrating into peer groups can contribute to triggering social withdrawal.

A significant role in raising awareness of the phenomenon has been played by the Hikikomori Italia Onlus Association, founded in 2017 by Marco Crepaldi, which has promoted information, awareness-raising, and support activities aimed at young people, families, and professionals. Through digital platforms and discussion forums, the association has helped build a nationwide support network. Estimates indicate between 60,000 and 100,000 cases in Italy, making Italy one of the Western countries most affected by the phenomenon (Crepaldi, 2019).

The growing prevalence of Hikikomori highlights the need for an integrated and systemic approach, involving family, school, local services, and the educational community, in order to understand and address a condition that represents one of the most significant expressions of the emerging fragilities in contemporary societies.

3. Between individual and context: risk factors and dynamics of social withdrawal

Studies conducted on the risk factors associated with the phenomenon of hikikomori highlight the presence of multiple and interconnected variables, attributable to demographic, family, social, and cultural dimensions. Among the most frequently identified factors are gender – with a male predominance – age, with a higher incidence in adolescents between 15 and 19 years old, and social class, which indicates a more significant spread of the phenomenon in economically developed contexts, particularly in the middle and upper classes. Additional relevant factors include family structure and the presence of bullying experiences, which, especially in the school environment, represent significant risk factors (Crepaldi, 2019).

However, these factors cannot be interpreted deterministically, as they act differently depending on the individual, cultural, and temperamental characteristics of the subjects. Not all individuals exposed to similar conditions develop forms of social withdrawal, confirming the complex and multifactorial nature of the phenomenon.

The main interpretations identify among the causes of social withdrawal pressures arising from family and social expectations, difficulties in attachment processes, particularly in the relationship with the mother figure, and a growing distrust in interpersonal relationships, often fueled by experiences of exclusion or bullying and by a school system perceived as rigid and standardized. From this perspective, social withdrawal can be interpreted as an adaptive response to a perceived unwelcoming context, in which the individual experiences a progressive fragility of the ego and a difficulty in recognizing oneself (Da Re & Perulli, 2025).

The higher incidence of the phenomenon among men can also be traced to the persistence of cultural models and gender roles that place high expectations on men in terms of personal, professional, and social fulfilment. At the same time, an underestimation of the phenomenon among women cannot be ruled out, as a greater degree of domestic involvement can be culturally interpreted as less deviant behaviour (Cerutti et al., 2021).

A particularly relevant element concerns family dynamics. In contexts characterized by overprotective parenting styles, based on care models excessively focused on the need for protection, dependent rela-



tionships can develop that hinder the process of autonomy. In Japan, this dynamic is described through the concept of *amae*, which indicates a relationship in which the individual passively relies on parental care, while simultaneously developing ambivalent feelings of dependence and suffocation (Aguglia et al., 2010).

These dynamics significantly impact the development of so-called “developmental tasks”, as defined by Havighurst (1948). In particular, the difficulty in achieving emotional independence from parents compromises the construction of emotional autonomy, while social isolation limits bodily and relational experience, impacting the ability to accept and effectively use one’s body. Furthermore, the rejection of a shared value system can hinder the development of an ethical conscience and a stable value orientation (Wenxin et al., 2006).

The role of the peer group and the school environment appears equally central. A sense of belonging and the perception of social acceptance are fundamental elements in building identity. Experiences of bullying or exclusion can contribute to reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and distance from the group, fueling the process of withdrawal. In many cases, hikikomori exhibit highly sensitive characteristics and interests that are not aligned with those of their peers, elements that can make integration into social contexts more difficult (Mazzetti, 2020).

The role of digital technologies also fits into this framework in an ambivalent way. The use of the internet and digital devices does not in itself cause social withdrawal, but can serve as a compensatory tool for relational support, allowing individuals to maintain contact, albeit mediated, with the outside world. At the same time, excessive use can contribute to consolidating isolation, further reducing opportunities for direct interaction and fueling fear of social judgment. Some experiences, such as the use of video games for exploratory and narrative purposes, have shown potential in fostering an initial reconnection with the outside world (Castelpietra et al., 2021).

In light of these elements, the phenomenon of hikikomori must be interpreted as a systemic issue, involving not only the individual, but also the family, the school, and the broader social context. From this perspective, the need to move beyond a focus on individual blame emerges, moving toward a culture of educational responsibility, in line with the bio-psycho-social model.

The lack of univocal therapeutic protocols highlights the need for personalized and integrated interventions. Available evidence indicates that group psychotherapy can foster the creation of safe relational contexts, while active family involvement is essential to supporting the process of change (Aguglia et al., 2010). In particular, it appears necessary to promote educational practices based on non-judgmental listening, respect for individual time, and the reduction of social pressure.

In this context, schools play a central role not only in prevention but also in building inclusion pathways. They are called upon to be environments of well-being and growth, capable of enhancing individual potential and promoting processes of self-determination. Only through a conscious and systemic educational approach is it possible to effectively respond to one of the most significant expressions of ego fragility in contemporary societies (Sagliocco, 2025).

Furthermore, schools should be conceived as relational and participatory communities, where learning is not limited to cognitive development but extends to emotional, social, and identity dimensions. In such environments, the quality of relationships becomes a key factor in preventing isolation and fostering a sense of belonging. Teachers, therefore, are required to adopt reflective and responsive practices, capable of recognizing early signs of withdrawal and activating personalized and inclusive strategies.

In this perspective, educational action moves beyond a compensatory logic and becomes transformative, aiming to re-engage students in meaningful learning experiences and social interaction. This implies the design of flexible and student-centered learning environments, where diversity is valued as a resource and where each learner can find space for expression, recognition, and participation within the school community.



4. Hikikomori, Special Educational Needs and the Italian model of school inclusion

The interpretation of hikikomori within the educational field requires particular attention to the specific characteristics of the Italian school system. In international contexts, the expression “Special Education” may refer to models based on separate settings, specialist interventions or categorial approaches to disability and difficulty. The Italian model, however, is historically grounded in the principle of school inclusion and in the presence of all students within ordinary classrooms, according to a systemic and community-based vision of education (Marsili et al., 2021).

Within this framework, the concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN) does not correspond to a clinical diagnosis or to a fixed category of students (Arcangeli et al., 2020). Rather, it identifies a pedagogical and didactic area of attention that allows schools to recognize situations of difficulty, even temporary or not formally certified, and to activate personalized educational responses. The Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012, drawing on the bio-psycho-social perspective of the ICF, emphasizes that every student may experience special educational needs for physical, biological, psychological, social or cultural reasons (Ianes & Demo, 2021). Therefore, the category of SEN must be understood as a flexible interpretative and planning tool, not as a labeling device (Ianes et al., 2020).

From this perspective, hikikomori should not be simplistically classified as a Special Educational Need in a diagnostic sense. Rather, prolonged social withdrawal may be considered a condition that raises specific educational concerns, especially when it affects participation, school attendance, relationships with peers and teachers, and the construction of a meaningful learning experience (Nepi et al., 2013). The pedagogical question is not whether hikikomori constitutes a formal category of SEN, but how schools can recognize the educational implications of social withdrawal and design inclusive, personalized and non-stigmatizing responses.

This clarification is essential in order to avoid a specialist or delegating interpretation of the phenomenon. In the Italian inclusive school model, inclusion is not the exclusive responsibility of the teacher specialized in educational support (Balenzano, 2025). It concerns the whole class council, curricular teachers, school leaders, families, local services and the broader educational community. The teacher specialized in educational support acts as a resource for the entire class context, promoting co-planning, mediation, accessibility and inclusive didactic strategies, but cannot be considered the only professional responsible for students’ inclusion (Astudillo et al., 2025).

In this sense, hikikomori challenges the entire school community. It requires shared educational responsibility, early recognition of relational fragility, collaboration between school and family, and the construction of learning environments capable of gradually restoring participation and belonging. The issue is therefore not merely compensatory, but pedagogical and systemic: the school is called upon to create conditions in which students experiencing withdrawal may progressively re-enter meaningful educational relationships (Magni, 2025; Menichetti et al., 2025).

5. Hikikomori and school: revisiting the phenomenon from a Special Educational Needs perspective

5.1 The school as a space for interception and educational responsibility

The phenomenon of hikikomori represents a significant challenge for the contemporary education system, which must confront emerging forms of vulnerability that profoundly question pedagogical models and teaching practices. From this perspective, schools can play a crucial role both in identifying early signs of social isolation and in developing educational pathways capable of supporting at-risk students (Wong, 2020).

In light of ongoing social transformations, voluntary social withdrawal can be interpreted as an ex-



pression of broader ego fragility, which develops within contexts characterized by performance pressure, competitiveness, and the progressive disintegration of community bonds. In this scenario, schools are called upon to rethink themselves as educational communities, capable of promoting inclusion, belonging, and well-being, transcending models focused exclusively on performance (Ricci, 2008).

This requires adopting teaching strategies aimed at reducing performance and competitive pressure, encouraging a more balanced approach that takes into account the emotional dimension of learning. In this sense, the growing focus on emotional literacy and the development of life skills, recognized as fundamental for the holistic development of the individual, is particularly important. Stress management, problem-solving skills, and interpersonal skills are, in fact, essential elements for authentic, meaningful, and transferable learning across diverse life contexts (Piceci, 2019).

This research, developed within the Special Education Laboratory of the Anthropology Area of the Specialization Course in Educational Support at the University of Foggia, fits into this framework.

The study aimed to investigate teachers' and pre-service teachers' level of awareness of the phenomenon of prolonged social withdrawal, their perception of it as a potential Special Educational Need, and the teaching strategies considered most appropriate to promote learning and inclusion among these students.

From a regulatory perspective, the Ministerial Decree of December 27, 2012, does not explicitly include voluntary social isolation among the categories of Special Educational Needs. However, the preamble emphasizes the importance of the ICF (International Classification of Functioning) diagnostic model, which considers the individual as a whole, from a bio-psycho-social perspective.

This model allows for the identification of a student's SEN without rigid classifications, recognizing that each student may exhibit, either continuously or temporarily, special educational needs of a physical, biological, psychological, or social nature, to which schools are required to respond through personalized interventions.

From this perspective, SEN should not be understood as classification labels aimed at categorizing students, but as flexible and inclusive pedagogical tools, useful for recognizing and addressing situations not explicitly covered by the legislation, such as in the case of Hikikomori.

This interpretation allows educational action to be guided toward a culture of responsibility and care, capable of identifying new forms of vulnerability and promoting paths of genuine inclusion (Dell'Erba et al., 2023).

5.2 Research objectives and hypotheses

This study aims to investigate the representations of student teachers enrolled in a university specialization programme for educational support regarding the phenomenon of prolonged voluntary social withdrawal, commonly referred to as hikikomori. More specifically, the study explores: (1) participants' level of awareness of the phenomenon; (2) their perception of hikikomori as a possible condition requiring educational attention within the broader framework of Special Educational Needs; (3) their representations of inclusive teaching strategies, multimedia tools and personalized assessment methods that may support students experiencing social withdrawal.

The exploratory hypothesis is that, although participants may show a general awareness of hikikomori as an emerging phenomenon, they may lack specific training and structured pedagogical tools to translate this awareness into inclusive educational practices. The study therefore seeks to identify possible training needs within teacher education, with particular reference to the Italian inclusive school model.



5.3 Research design and methodology

The study was conducted within a university specialization programme for educational support at University of Foggia, and adopted an exploratory quantitative design, aimed at investigating participants' representations, declared knowledge and attitudes regarding hikikomori as an emerging educational issue. The research does not aim to establish causal relationships or to produce generalizable conclusions, but to identify descriptive trends and possible training needs within a specific teacher education context.

The sample consisted of 452 participants enrolled in a university specialization programme for educational support. The sample was non-probabilistic and based on convenience criteria; therefore, it cannot be considered representative of the broader population of Italian teachers or prospective teachers.

The group was characterized by marked socio-professional heterogeneity. Participants differed in terms of professional position, years of school experience, school level of reference, disciplinary background and prevailing teaching role. This aspect is relevant for the interpretation of the results, since the study does not refer to a homogeneous group of teachers, but to participants enrolled in a common training pathway for educational support.

With regard to professional position, the sample included fixed-term teachers, tenured teachers and participants not currently teaching but intending to enter the teaching profession.

The distribution of school experience shows that the sample included participants with no previous teaching experience, participants with initial or intermediate teaching experience, and participants with more consolidated professional trajectories. The school level of reference was also heterogeneous, although upper secondary school was the most represented level. The disciplinary profile of the group was mainly concentrated in the humanities, linguistic and scientific-mathematical/STEM areas, while the prevailing teaching role included curricular teaching, educational support teaching, mixed experiences and participants with no current teaching role (Table 1).

This internal diversity confirms the need to interpret the findings with caution. The data should be read as descriptive and exploratory trends emerging within a specific teacher education context, rather than as generalizable evidence concerning the broader teaching population.

As reported in Table 1, the heterogeneity of the samples constitutes both a relevant feature and a methodological limitation of the study. On the one hand, it allows the research to explore representations developed by participants positioned differently with respect to the teaching profession. On the other hand, it prevents the results from being attributed to a homogeneous professional category and limits the possibility of generalization.

The questionnaire was adapted from the instrument developed by Valenti, Rattà and Palumbo (2015), originally designed to investigate teachers' knowledge of Specific Learning Disabilities. The adaptation process consisted in reformulating the items in relation to the phenomenon of hikikomori and in introducing specific dimensions concerning voluntary social withdrawal, possible educational needs, inclusive teaching strategies, use of digital and multimodal tools, and assessment practices.

The instrument consisted of 53 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The items were grouped into thematic dimensions: knowledge of the phenomenon, perception as a possible Special Educational Need, perceived causes of social withdrawal, representations of students experiencing withdrawal, teaching strategies and assessment practices.

Since the questionnaire was adapted for the purposes of this exploratory study, the results should be interpreted with caution. Although the internal consistency values were high, further studies are needed to validate the instrument on larger and more differentiated samples.

Data analysis was conducted through descriptive and exploratory procedures. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for socio-demographic variables and for selected questionnaire items. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each thematic dimension in order to identify general response trends.

Internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's alpha for each dimension. The values obtained, ranging from 0.853 to 0.940, indicate good to excellent internal consistency. However, given the explora-



tory nature of the study and the non-probabilistic sample, these values should be interpreted as preliminary evidence of scale coherence rather than as definitive validation of the instrument.

No inferential generalization was pursued. The analysis was intended to provide a descriptive picture of participants' representations and to identify possible areas for future research and teacher training.

Variable	Category	%
Gender	<i>Female</i>	85.5
	<i>Male</i>	14.5
Age	<i>36-45</i>	33.6
	<i>46-55</i>	32.7
	<i>Other age groups</i>	33.7
Professional position	<i>Fixed-term teacher</i>	47.3
	<i>Not currently teaching but intending to teach</i>	30.9
	<i>Tenured teacher</i>	21.8
Years of school experience	<i>0 years</i>	26.7
	<i>1-5 years</i>	28.3
	<i>6-10 years</i>	22.7
	<i>More than 10 years</i>	22.3
School level of reference	<i>Primary school</i>	11.7
	<i>Lower secondary school</i>	23.8
	<i>Upper secondary school</i>	49.2
	<i>Not currently in service</i>	15.2
Disciplinary area	<i>Humanities</i>	41.5
	<i>Scientific-mathematical/STEM area</i>	20.5
	<i>Languages</i>	7.3
	<i>Artistic-musical/motor area</i>	24.5
	<i>Other/not applicable</i>	6.2
Prevailing teaching role	<i>Curricular teaching</i>	30.5
	<i>Educational support teaching</i>	19.4
	<i>Mixed curricular/support experience</i>	34.9
	<i>No current teaching role</i>	15.2
Prior knowledge of hikikomori	<i>Yes</i>	88.2
	<i>No</i>	11.8
Specific training received	<i>No</i>	94.5
	<i>Yes</i>	5.5

Table 1 – Socio-demographic and professional variables useful for interpreting the sample



5.4 Study results: representations, causes and educational strategies

Data analysis made it possible to identify the main tendencies in the representations expressed by the participants regarding the hikikomori phenomenon. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the non-probabilistic composition of the sample, the results should be interpreted as descriptive trends within a specific training context, rather than as generalizable evidence concerning the broader teaching population.

In particular, they allowed us to outline a detailed picture of participants' perceptions of the Hikikomori phenomenon, highlighting their level of knowledge, interpretations of the phenomenon, and the teaching strategies deemed most effective.

First, the sample data (Table 1) suggest a high level of familiarity with the phenomenon: 88.2% of participants stated they had already heard of hikikomori. However, this knowledge was not accompanied by structured training, as 94.5% of the participants stated they had never participated in specific training activities on the topic in schools. This data highlights a significant discrepancy between the cultural diffusion of the phenomenon and the professional preparation of teachers.

Dimension	N item	Average	SD	Alpha
SEN perception	7	3.79	0.60	0.940
Causes of the phenomenon	8	3.24	0.62	0.895
Student performances	18	3.10	0.55	0.853
Teaching strategies	10	3.60	0.58	0.892

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics by dimension

The analysis by dimension (Table 2) highlights medium-high mean values in all areas investigated, with high levels of internal consistency (α between 0.853 and 0.940). In particular, the dimension relating to the perception of the phenomenon as a possible Special Educational Need presents the highest mean value ($M = 3.79$), followed by the dimension relating to inclusive teaching strategies ($M = 3.60$). The values relating to knowledge of the causes of the phenomenon ($M = 3.24$) and student representations ($M = 3.10$) are lower.

Causes of social withdrawal	Average	% agreement (4-5)
Bullying e cyberbullying	3.96	64.5
Lack of psychological support	3.69	52.7
Distrust in school/teachers	3.33	49.1
Limited ICT use	2.68	29.1

Table 3 – Main perceived causes of social withdrawal

Regarding the causes of social withdrawal (Table 3), participants attributed greater importance to bullying and cyberbullying ($M = 3.96$), the lack of psychological support at school ($M = 3.69$), and distrust in the educational system ($M = 3.33$). Conversely, less weight was attributed to the limited use of digital technologies ($M = 2.68$), suggesting a reading of the phenomenon that is more oriented towards relational and contextual dynamics.



Strategy	Average	% agreement (4-5)
Inclination-based activity	4.25	80.9
Expressive workshops	4.07	71.8
Small groups	4.02	69.1
Gamification	4.00	68.2
Visual thinking	3.96	70.9
Multimodal checks	3.92	66.4
Home learning	2.31	25.5
Distance learning	2.12	20.0

Table 4 – Teaching strategies considered most effective

Teaching strategies (Table 4) represent the area with the highest level of consensus. In particular, practices based on personalized learning, such as the integration of activities consistent with student inclinations ($M = 4.25$), the introduction of expressive workshops ($M = 4.07$), and work in small groups ($M = 4.02$), are most widely shared. High consensus is also recorded for the use of innovative methodologies, such as gamification ($M = 4.00$) and visual thinking techniques ($M = 3.96$).

On the contrary, strategies such as home learning ($M = 2.31$) and distance learning ($M = 2.12$) are less shared, highlighting a greater propensity towards inclusive approaches within the classroom context rather than alternative or replacement solutions for school attendance.

Finally, the data suggest a non-stigmatizing portrayal of the Hikikomori student: no participant rates their cognitive abilities below average, while 38.2% rate them above average. Furthermore, 95.5% of the participants believe that, through targeted and integrated educational interventions with the support of family and local services, it is possible to help overcome the condition of isolation.

5.5 Interpreting the results: between ego fragility and educational responsibility

The findings suggest that the participants involved in the study possess a widespread, although mostly informal, awareness of hikikomori. This awareness must be interpreted in light of the heterogeneous composition of the sample, which included participants with different professional positions, levels of school experience, school contexts, disciplinary backgrounds and teaching roles. This orientation, highlighted by the average values for the dimension related to the perception of SEN (Table 2), is consistent with the bio-psycho-social approach of the ICF model, recalled by the Ministerial Directive of December 27, 2012, which encourages schools to intervene even in the absence of formal clinical diagnoses, when significant psychological and social difficulties emerge (Certini & Di Stefano, 2023).

However, a first particularly relevant element concerns the discrepancy between knowledge of the phenomenon and professional training: while almost all trainees declare awareness of the phenomenon (Table 1), there is a substantial lack of structured training programs. This data suggests that cultural diffusion of the topic does not automatically translate into educational competence, highlighting the need for systematic strengthening of initial and in-service training (Scagliocco, 2025).

The gap between prior knowledge of the phenomenon and the lack of specific training represents one of the most significant results of the study.

A second significant element concerns the predominantly relational and contextual interpretation of the phenomenon. Participants, in fact, attribute greater importance to factors such as bullying, lack of psychological support, and distrust in the school system (Table 3), confirming the importance of an interpretation of social withdrawal that transcends individualizing and pathologizing approaches. From this



perspective, the phenomenon of hikikomori can be interpreted as one of the most evident expressions of ego fragility in contemporary societies, closely connected to educational, relational, and cultural dynamics (Di Paola, 2025).

The portrayals of hikikomori students that emerged from the survey are consistent with this interpretation. The profile outlined by the participants is characterized by traits of vulnerability and suffering, rather than negative or stigmatizing connotations. This finding appears particularly relevant, as it indicates a pedagogical disposition oriented toward understanding and caring, rather than judgment, and constitutes a fundamental basis for developing inclusive educational interventions.

In line with these representations, the results relating to teaching strategies (Table 4) highlight a high level of consensus towards inclusive, flexible, and personalized approaches. The most widely shared practices – such as the valorization of student interests, the use of expressive workshops, and small-group work – refer to a conception of teaching as a relational and transformative space, capable of reactivating processes of participation and belonging. These orientations are consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and with a vision of learning as a situated, meaningful, and accessible experience for all (Porcelli, 2020).

Conversely, the lower consensus for distance learning and home-based learning suggests a tension in interpretation: while these approaches may be useful tools in specific situations, they also appear to be perceived as solutions that risk consolidating withdrawal, rather than counteracting it. This finding raises important questions about the need to design interventions that don't simply "reach" isolated students, but rather guide them on a gradual journey toward community reconnection (Triberio, 2017).

Overall, the results highlight how future special education teachers demonstrate a significant openness to inclusive and innovative educational models, but at the same time require more structured theoretical and operational tools to address complex phenomena such as hikikomori. From this perspective, the role of schools as a space of educational responsibility emerges strongly, called not only to impart knowledge but to build meaningful contexts in which students can identify with themselves and develop their life plans.

5.6 Pedagogical implications: towards an inclusive and relational school

The research conducted highlights significant pedagogical implications, both theoretically and operationally, helping to redefine the concept of school inclusion in light of new forms of youth hardship, such as voluntary social isolation. These forms of vulnerability, in fact, elude traditional classifications and require a more dynamic, relational, and contextual interpretation of the concept of Special Educational Needs, in line with the bio-psycho-social perspective of the ICF model (Ianes et al., 2024).

The study's findings show how participants tend to interpret the phenomenon of hikikomori not in a pathologizing manner, but rather as an expression of complex fragilities, linked to the relational dimension and the educational context. This understanding represents a fundamental step toward a pedagogy of understanding and care, capable of recognizing fragility not as a limitation, but as a starting point for building knowledge and relationships (Moretti, 2010).

From this perspective, the need for teacher training that integrates not only technical skills but also emotional, relational, and planning emerges strongly. The lack of specific training on the phenomenon, despite widespread awareness, highlights the need for more structured training programs capable of supporting teachers in understanding and managing new forms of distress.

The role of the teacher specialized in educational support should be understood within a systemic and collaborative perspective. In the Italian inclusive school model, this professional figure does not act as the sole person responsible for inclusion, but as a resource for the entire class and school community. The educational response to prolonged social withdrawal requires the involvement of curricular teachers, the class council, school leaders, families and local services. Therefore, the pedagogical challenge posed



by hikikomori concerns the whole school system and calls for shared responsibility, co-planning and inclusive didactic cultures (Gallo, 2026).

The teaching strategies most widely shared by participants – based on personalization, the valorization of interests, and the use of active and multimodal methodologies – suggest the need to rethink learning environments in a flexible and welcoming way. In particular, the shift toward practices that foster active participation and cooperative work highlights the importance of rebuilding a community dimension to learning, understood as a space for connection, belonging, and meaning.

In this sense, the pedagogical challenge is not simply to “reach” the student who is withdrawing, but to create the conditions for them to gradually reconnect with the school community, through respectful, gradual, and meaningful processes. Building a school capable of “seeing” even what is invisible means recognizing the invisible forms of hardship and transforming them into educational opportunities, restoring a sense of belonging to those who have stopped seeking it (Filippone, 2025).

5.7 Research as a formative and generative tool: perspectives and didactic innovation

The opportunity to design and conduct empirical research within the university specialization programme for educational support represents a particularly important learning experience, as it allows for the integration of theoretical reflection, educational sensitivity, and methodological rigor in a professionalizing context. In this specific case, the study was conceived and developed within the specialization program, starting from an authentic question, rooted in educational practice and oriented towards understanding the emerging phenomenon of hikikomori.

The research, rooted in a concrete educational concern and a sense of pedagogical responsibility, highlights how initial training can be configured not only as a space for acquiring skills but also as a context for generating knowledge. In this sense, the research process fostered the activation of critical and reflective thinking, capable of questioning the educational reality, actively engaging students, and contributing to scientific and professional debate (Filippone & De Carlo, 2025).

From a methodological perspective, the questionnaire construction, the adaptation of a validated instrument, and the data collection and analysis phases were carried out independently, with the support of the academic tutor. This process allowed for direct experience with the main phases of empirical research, strengthening participants’ analytical, design, and interpretative skills.

From this perspective, research is configured not only as a cognitive device, but also as a tool for professional and personal empowerment, capable of promoting awareness, responsibility, and the capacity for action (Marigliano et al., 2023). The experience thus demonstrates the effectiveness of the university programme for educational support not only as an enabling process, but also as a space for intellectual and ethical-educational growth, in which training is intertwined with the production of knowledge and the development of reflective professionalism.

In light of the results obtained, significant research development opportunities emerge, encompassing multiple levels of investigation, consistent with the biopsychosocial model and the need to respond to new forms of educational vulnerability.

A first area of development involves expanding the research sample, extending the survey to include in-service teachers of various types (curriculum, support, and school educators), as well as school principals and SEN representatives. This expansion would allow for a more systematic and comprehensive mapping of the perception of the Hikikomori phenomenon in this experimental study, offering a broader and more representative understanding of the educational practices implemented.

A second level of investigation concerns the design and testing of specific teaching interventions, based on multimodal and digital approaches, to be empirically validated through longitudinal studies. From this perspective, lanes’ (2023) point appears central, according to which schools often tend to preserve consolidated teaching models through rigid application, neglecting the need for individualization and per-



sonalization of learning paths. On the contrary, the findings of the study highlight the importance of flexible teaching strategies, geared towards student needs, motivation, and learning styles.

In this regard, multimodal and innovative teaching methodologies play a strategic role. The use of digital and creative tools, such as Learning Apps, sketchnoting, and platforms like Storyboard That, promotes active, motivating, and meaningful learning, enhancing students' expressive potential. In particular, storytelling – even in its digital form – is a highly relevant pedagogical tool, as it fosters the construction of personal and collective identity and allows students to process complex experiences related to isolation, loneliness, and marginalization.

From this perspective, the integration of technologies should not be seen as a simple instrumental support, but as an opportunity to create inclusive and participatory learning environments, in which authentic engagement processes can be activated. Techniques such as sketchnoting, for example, allow for the integration of logical-rational and creative dimensions, enhancing attention, memory, and comprehension through multimodal languages.

A further development involves designing specific training programs for teachers, aimed at enhancing the skills needed to address the phenomenon of hikikomori in a conscious and structured manner. These programs could be accompanied by an impact assessment on perceptions, teaching practices, and strategies adopted in the classroom, helping to bridge the gap that has emerged between knowledge of the phenomenon and professional training.

Finally, it seems particularly important to integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches through the analysis of students' narratives and experiences. The use of tools such as interviews and focus groups would allow us to delve deeper into the reasons for social withdrawal and identify the conditions that facilitate its overcoming, giving voice to those directly involved.

Overall, this study should be understood as an exploratory contribution to the pedagogical reflection on prolonged social withdrawal within the Italian inclusive school system. The results highlight the importance of recognizing emerging vulnerabilities without reducing them to diagnostic labels, and of strengthening teacher education in order to support inclusive, collaborative and non-stigmatizing educational responses. In this perspective, the challenge posed by hikikomori concerns the whole school community and calls for shared responsibility, relational care and the construction of meaningful learning environments capable of gradually restoring participation and belonging.

5.8 Limitation of the study

The study presents some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample was non-probabilistic and composed of participants enrolled in a university specialization programme for educational support. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader population of Italian teachers or prospective teachers.

Second, the sample was internally heterogeneous in terms of professional position, years of school experience, school level of reference, disciplinary area and prevailing teaching role. This heterogeneity allows the study to explore a plurality of representations, but it also prevents the findings from being attributed to a clearly homogeneous professional category.

Third, the study is based on self-reported data collected through a questionnaire. The responses therefore reflect participants' representations and declared attitudes, rather than observed teaching practices. Further research should integrate qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups and classroom-based observations, in order to deepen the understanding of how teachers actually recognize and address prolonged social withdrawal in educational contexts.

Finally, future studies should adopt a more structured sampling strategy and compare different subgroups, such as curricular teachers, teachers specialized in educational support, teachers with different levels of experience, and teachers working in different school levels and disciplinary areas.



6. Rethinking the school as an educational community

The phenomenon of hikikomori represents one of the most complex and silent expressions of contemporary youth distress, raising profound questions for education and training systems. In a social context characterized by growing demands for visibility, performance, and adaptation, voluntary social withdrawal can be interpreted as an extreme form of resistance or a quest for recognition, which directly challenges the educational responsibility of schools.

Within this framework, the research – developed within the TFA Support Program at the University of Foggia – has highlighted two key findings. On the one hand, there is growing awareness among prospective teachers regarding the phenomenon and its connection to the area of Special Educational Needs; on the other, there is a significant willingness to adopt inclusive, flexible, and personalized teaching strategies, geared toward valuing differences and student well-being. At the same time, the results demonstrate a gap between knowledge of the phenomenon and structured training, underscoring the need to strengthen training programs from a theoretical and practical perspective.

Furthermore, the pedagogical dimension of the research is intertwined with the formative and professional dimension, highlighting how future teachers are able to develop a reflective and critical perspective on the transformations of the educational context. In this sense, the work takes on a transformative value: it not only produces knowledge, but also promotes awareness and contributes to the construction of an educational culture based on care, listening, and inclusion.

In light of the findings, the need to rethink schools as educational communities, capable of recognizing and embracing even the most invisible forms of vulnerability, becomes increasingly evident. Inclusion, from this perspective, cannot be reduced to a technical or regulatory response, but must be configured as a relational and planning process, based on the construction of meaningful contexts in which every student can find space, meaning, and opportunity.

In conclusion, the contribution of this research lies in proposing a pedagogical interpretation of the Hikikomori phenomenon that, transcending reductionist and categorical logic, values the relational, communal, and transformative dimensions of education. It is in this direction that schools can play a decisive role: not only in combating withdrawal, but in creating the conditions for each student to return to being an active part of a learning community, rediscovering recognition, belonging, and a sense of purpose.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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