

# RECONNECT

## Empowering Teachers and Students to Support Hikikomori Reintegration

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### Work Package 2 - Comparative and Interpretative Analysis of National Focus Groups

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# Introduction

Within Work Package 2 (Teachers and Peer Adolescents Training Curriculums), six national focus groups were conducted across five participating countries: **Italy (two separate consultations), Romania, Austria, Spain, and Ireland**. In total, more than eighty-five professionals took part in the consultations, representing a wide range of roles within the educational and youth support systems.

Participants were selected in accordance with the methodological guidelines of the project and included three main professional profiles: teachers and vocational training staff working with adolescents aged 14– 19, psychologists and school counsellors providing psychological support within educational contexts, and educators or other professionals supporting young people in educational, social, or training environments. **This composition ensured that the discussions incorporated complementary perspectives from professionals directly involved in the educational, psychological, and social dimensions of adolescent support.**



The focus groups were organized with a specific strategic purpose: to provide the qualitative knowledge base necessary for the development of the WP2 training curricula. In particular, they aimed to identify the concrete challenges, professional needs, and competence gaps experienced by teachers and school professionals when dealing with adolescents at risk of social withdrawal or hikikomori. **The insights collected through this process are intended to inform the design of both the Teacher Training Curriculum and the Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum**, ensuring that the training materials developed within the project are grounded in the real experiences of practitioners working in schools and youth services.

Beyond this practical objective, **the consultations also responded to a broader contextual need**. Across Europe, schools and educational services are increasingly confronted with students showing forms of social disengagement, psychological distress, or progressive withdrawal from school participation. However, professional responses often remain fragmented, unevenly distributed across territories, and frequently dependent on the initiative of individual teachers or local services. In this context, the focus groups provided an opportunity to explore how social withdrawal is currently perceived, interpreted, and addressed within different national educational and welfare systems.

The discussions were therefore conceived not simply as consultative exercises aimed at gathering operational suggestions, but as structured qualitative inquiries into the professional cultures surrounding the phenomenon. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their everyday practices, implicit theoretical assumptions, institutional constraints, and existing intervention models. **Particular attention was devoted to identifying early warning signals**, institutional barriers to intervention, gaps in professional preparation, and areas in which additional training could strengthen the capacity of schools and educational professionals to respond effectively.

The national reports were subsequently examined through cross-thematic comparative analysis in order to identify recurring patterns, contextual specificities, and structural vulnerabilities emerging across the different countries. Rather than presenting a simple aggregation of national findings, this document offers an interpretative synthesis that highlights both convergences and differences among the participating contexts.

By bringing together these perspectives, **the report establishes the conceptual and empirical foundation for the strategic development of the WP2 training curricula.** The insights generated through the focus groups will guide the identification of key competences, learning objectives, and thematic modules to be included in the Teacher Training Curriculum and the Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum, ensuring that both outputs respond to the concrete needs expressed by practitioners across the European educational landscape.

## Focus Group Participants

**Teachers**

**Tutors and School Coordinators**

**School Psychologists and Counsellors**

**Educators**



# 1. Social Withdrawal as a Relational and Systemic Response

Across all participating countries, social withdrawal is described as an increasingly visible phenomenon among adolescents. However, an initial observation emerging from the focus groups concerns the relatively limited level of conceptual familiarity with the term hikikomori among many professionals. While participants were generally aware of the basic characteristics of the phenomenon — particularly the tendency of adolescents to isolate themselves in their bedrooms and spend long periods engaged in online activities such as gaming — the broader psychological, relational, and systemic dimensions of social withdrawal were often less clearly articulated. **For many participants, the term functioned more as a descriptive label associated with isolation and excessive digital use than as a structured framework for understanding a complex developmental condition.** This observation reinforces the need for the training curriculum to begin with a dedicated section clarifying the conceptual foundations of hikikomori and differentiating it from other forms of school disengagement or adolescent distress.

**A clear convergence nevertheless emerges in how professionals interpret the observable pattern of withdrawal.** Withdrawal is rarely framed as deliberate defiance or oppositional behaviour. Instead, it is understood as a progressive and often silent process shaped by emotional vulnerability, relational disconnection, and sustained social pressure.

Professionals consistently refer to adolescents struggling with anxiety, diminished frustration tolerance, depressive symptoms, and pervasive feelings of inadequacy. **In several contexts, the post-pandemic period is perceived as having intensified pre-existing fragilities, contributing to reduced resilience and greater difficulty in social and academic reintegration.** Many participants describe students who remain physically present in school while emotionally withdrawn, internally overwhelmed, and increasingly unable to tolerate relational exposure within evaluative environments.



**A recurring interpretative thread conceptualises withdrawal as a protective strategy.** When academic expectations, peer judgement, family tensions, or social comparison become overwhelming, retreating into isolation may represent an attempt to regain control and reduce perceived psychological threat. In this sense, social withdrawal can be understood as an adaptive response to environments experienced as emotionally unsafe or excessively demanding.

This perspective reframes the phenomenon not as simple school refusal, but as a breakdown in the adolescent's perceived capacity to remain relationally exposed under sustained pressure. **It also reinforces the need for a systemic rather than exclusively individual approach.** Social withdrawal should not be addressed solely as a characteristic of the student, but as a phenomenon emerging within relational, institutional, and cultural ecosystems. Effective responses therefore require coordinated adjustments at multiple levels, including classroom climate, school organisation, family engagement, and interprofessional collaboration. Focusing exclusively on the individual risks overlooking the structural conditions that contribute to withdrawal patterns.

**In this sense, social withdrawal can be understood as an adaptive response to environments experience as emotionally unsafe or excessively demanding.**



Within this systemic framework, schools may need to reconsider rigid attendance models and explore the creation of protected internal spaces that allow students experiencing significant distress to remain connected to the educational environment even when full classroom participation is temporarily not possible. Such spaces can function as transitional environments, preserving continuity of learning while reducing exposure to overwhelming social demands. The objective is not to legitimise avoidance, but to prevent complete disengagement by offering structured, supervised alternatives within the school setting.

If withdrawal functions as a coping mechanism embedded in broader systems, training must extend beyond attendance enforcement and behavioural correction. Educational professionals require competences in emotional regulation support, resilience-building, shame-sensitive communication, and identity development. Schools must also strengthen relational safety and mitigate chronic performance pressure. A relational and systemic interpretation of social withdrawal therefore constitutes the cornerstone of the WP2 training architecture.

## **Schools must also strengthen relational safety and mitigate chronic performance pressure**



## 2. The Digital Environment: Between Amplifier and Engagement Bridge

The digital dimension emerges as a structurally embedded component of contemporary adolescent life and occupies a central role in all national consultations. **Professionals consistently refer to excessive screen exposure**, reliance on online interaction, social comparison through social media, and digital forms of bullying as factors that may intensify withdrawal patterns. Digital environments are frequently described as progressively replacing embodied social encounters and reinforcing avoidance of emotionally demanding situations.

At the same time, digital spaces are not external to adolescent development; they form integral arenas of identity construction, peer recognition, and belonging. **This dual role explains the ambivalence observed across countries.** While some professionals express caution toward educational video games or gamified approaches—particularly when young people already spend extended periods online—others recognise their potential as low-threshold engagement tools capable of reaching students who resist direct adult intervention.

The European picture is therefore characterised by complexity rather than contradiction. Digital environments may function both as amplifiers of isolation and as structured bridges toward reconnection. **Their impact depends less on the medium itself than on the conditions of use.** For WP2, this carries clear methodological implications. Digital tools should neither be dismissed as inherently problematic nor embraced as autonomous solutions. Their value lies in intentional design, relational mediation, and integration within broader reintegration pathways. When embedded within supervised and socially oriented activities, digital engagement may facilitate gradual re-exposure to relational contexts. When left unstructured, it risks reinforcing avoidance patterns. The central challenge for WP2 is how to ensure that digital components support relational growth rather than substitute it.

### 3. The Invisibility of Non-Disruptive Distress

A significant cross-national insight concerns the relative invisibility of certain at-risk students within school systems. Professionals repeatedly emphasise that adolescents who are quiet, compliant, and non-disruptive often remain undetected for extended periods. Because they do not interfere with classroom management or challenge authority, their progressive disengagement may not attract attention until absenteeism becomes pronounced or withdrawal has consolidated.

This pattern reveals a structural blind spot within institutional routines. **Educational systems are primarily organised around the management of visible disruption, overt conflict, and measurable academic decline.** Internalised distress evolves more silently. Emotional flattening, gradual social retreat, psychosomatic complaints, and subtle withdrawal from peer interaction rarely trigger immediate response. Consequently, intervention often occurs when avoidance patterns are already entrenched.

**Distinguishing normative adolescent introversion from emerging isolation further complicates early recognition.** Without appropriate conceptual frameworks, educators may interpret early warning signs as temporary mood variations rather than indicators of escalating withdrawal. For the Teacher and Peer Training Curriculums, this underscores the importance of strengthening early detection competences. Training must enhance the capacity to recognise subtle behavioural shifts and intervene before disengagement stabilises. Sensitivity to silent vulnerability should be regarded as a central preventive competence.



## 4. Structural Gaps and Fragmented Collaboration

**Across all participating countries, multidisciplinary cooperation is described as indispensable in addressing social withdrawal.** Teachers, school psychologists, social workers, counsellors, and external services are consistently recognised as essential actors within a comprehensive support system. Yet a gap persists between the endorsement of collaboration and its operational reality.

National reports depict intervention ecosystems that often remain structurally fragile. **Coordination frequently depends on individual initiative rather than institutionalised design**, and effective interventions may rely on personal commitment instead of systemic reliability. Case discussions may lack continuity, roles are not always clearly delineated, and communication between schools and external services can remain informal or reactive. Long waiting times for specialised assessment, insufficient staffing, and administrative rigidity further constrain timely action.

**Multidisciplinary cooperation is described as indispensable in addressing social withdrawal.**



The challenge therefore lies less in professional motivation than in the absence of operational frameworks capable of translating collaborative intentions into sustainable practice. **Without shared protocols, defined referral pathways, and regular interdisciplinary reflection spaces, support risks inconsistency and overreliance on individual resilience.**

For WP2, this implies that training must extend beyond individual skill acquisition. Participants should be equipped with tools for strengthening collaborative structures, clarifying responsibilities, and implementing structured case review processes. Moving from informal networking to operational coordination is essential for ensuring coherence and long-term effectiveness.



## 5. Teacher Vulnerability and Emotional Sustainability

The focus groups consistently highlight not only adolescent vulnerability but also the strain experienced by educators. Managing prolonged and complex cases of social withdrawal exposes teachers to sustained emotional pressure. Many report feeling insufficiently prepared to address difficulties that extend beyond conventional pedagogical responsibilities.

Supporting students who progressively disengage often generates frustration and uncertainty. **Institutional expectations regarding academic performance and classroom stability may intensify this pressure.** Large class sizes, administrative demands, and limited access to structured supervision further constrain educators' capacity to provide consistent support.

When professional strain remains unaddressed, intervention efforts risk becoming reactive or prematurely withdrawn. **In several contexts, participants explicitly refer to emotional exhaustion associated with long-term withdrawal cases.** The cumulative impact of repeated exposure to resistance and limited systemic backing may erode confidence and sustainability. Prevention therefore depends on the psychological sustainability of those delivering it. Training programmes must incorporate reflective practice, boundary awareness, emotional regulation strategies, and supervision models alongside conceptual knowledge. Strengthening the interface between educational and family systems is central to sustainable prevention.



## 6. The Family Dimension and Boundary Challenges

Family dynamics emerge across all participating countries as decisive factors in the development and persistence of social withdrawal. Professionals describe situations in which parents appear overwhelmed, uncertain, or emotionally fatigued in response to escalating school refusal or digital overexposure. **Families may experience difficulty maintaining consistent boundaries regarding routines, screen use, and attendance.** In some cases, overprotective or conflict-avoidant patterns may inadvertently reinforce withdrawal.

These dynamics are understood within broader contextual pressures, including economic strain, time scarcity, social comparison, and unresolved relational difficulties. **Social withdrawal frequently unfolds within family systems already under stress.** Parental responses may oscillate between anxiety, denial, accommodation, and attempts at control, resulting in inconsistent strategies.

Engaging families is widely recognised as essential yet complex. Resistance to intervention or minimisation of difficulties may delay coordinated action, while constructive parental involvement can significantly support reintegration. **Addressing social withdrawal therefore requires systemic engagement that acknowledges the interdependence between school and family environments.**



For WP2, this highlights the need to equip professionals with structured communication competences for working with parents. Training should address assertive yet empathetic dialogue, management of defensive reactions, and collaborative planning processes that clarify roles and expectations. Strengthening the interface between educational and family systems is central to sustainable prevention.

## 7. The Role of Peers in Reintegration

Across all national consultations, peers are recognized as pivotal actors in prevention and reintegration. During adolescence, horizontal relationships carry particular emotional significance, and signals from classmates may be perceived as less threatening than those from adults. Within peer relationships, opportunities for recognition and belonging can support gradual reconnection.

Inclusive classroom climates and **emotionally supportive group dynamics** are therefore identified as protective factors. Reintegration is understood not solely as an individual return to routines but as a relational reconstruction of belonging within the peer group.

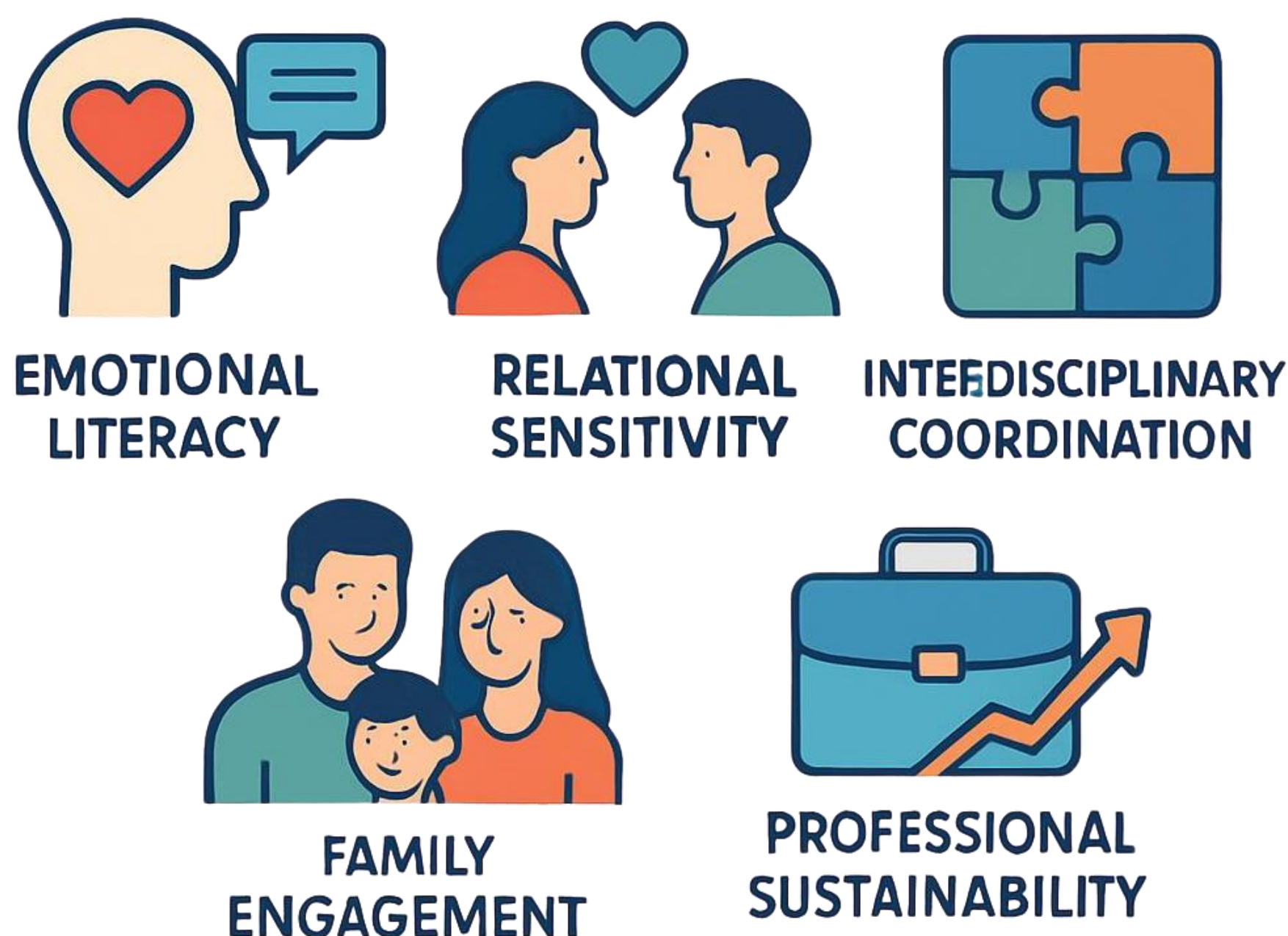
**Peer involvement, however, requires structure.** Without preparation, initiatives may lack consistency or blur boundaries. Adolescents need guidance to develop empathy, active listening, emotional literacy, and conflict mediation skills, alongside clarity regarding limits and referral responsibilities.

The Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum should therefore provide a balanced framework that cultivates relational competences while clearly defining ethical boundaries and shared responsibility with adults. **Sustainable peer engagement depends on a broader school culture grounded in psychological safety and inclusion.**

## 8. Strategic Orientation for WP2

**The comparative analysis confirms that social withdrawal is a multifactorial and transnational phenomenon.** Despite variations in educational systems and welfare structures, professionals across countries describe converging patterns of vulnerability, institutional fragmentation, and relational strain. A shared structural gap emerges in the absence of harmonised protocols and systematically developed training pathways capable of equipping schools to respond preventively and coherently.

Within this context, Work Package 2 assumes strategic significance. The development of the Teacher Training Curriculum and the Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum represents an opportunity to articulate a structured framework for early identification, relational intervention, and coordinated reintegration. *Effective prevention cannot be reduced to attendance monitoring or behavioural management; it requires strengthening institutional competences in emotional literacy, relational sensitivity, interdisciplinary coordination, family engagement, and professional sustainability.*



Particular attention should also be given to students who have already disengaged from formal schooling. For these cases, reintegration cannot be immediate or total, but must follow gradual and carefully structured pathways that balance academic expectations with emotional readiness. Gradual reintegration models—based on phased attendance, personalised pacing, and coordinated multidisciplinary support—are essential to avoid retraumatisation and renewed withdrawal. **WP2 should therefore incorporate both conceptual principles and practical tools that guide schools in designing progressive re-entry strategies rather than expecting abrupt returns to standard routines.**

By integrating systemic prevention, protected transitional arrangements within schools, and structured reintegration pathways into a coherent pedagogical architecture, WP2 constitutes not merely a training initiative but a structural investment in the preventive and restorative capacity of European school systems. The objective is to address not only visible manifestations of disengagement but also the relational and emotional processes that precede and sustain withdrawal. In doing so, RECONNECT contributes to advancing a coordinated, resilient, and forward-looking European approach to the prevention and gradual reintegration of socially withdrawn adolescents.

# Conclusion

The European synthesis of national focus groups confirms that social withdrawal represents a complex and multidimensional challenge for contemporary school systems. Despite contextual differences, participating countries share common vulnerabilities, structural gaps, and emerging needs for more coordinated and preventive responses.

The analysis conducted within Work Package 2 provides a clear foundation for the development of the Teacher and Peer Adolescents Training Curriculums. By translating cross-national insights into structured training architecture, RECONNECT strengthens the capacity of educational institutions to recognise early warning signs, foster relational safety, and support gradual reintegration processes.

This report therefore marks a transition from analytical exploration to pedagogical design, positioning WP2 as a strategic component in enhancing the preventive resilience of European school communities.

# Annexes

## 1. RECONNECT Project - Template National Focus Group Report

### RECONNECT Project

Work Package 2: Teachers and Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum

Template – National Focus Group Report

Country:

Partner Organization:

Date and Place:

Moderator(s):

Number of Participants:

Participant Profiles (Code/Initials & professional role):

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2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_
9. \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_
11. \_\_\_\_\_
12. \_\_\_\_\_

### 1. Focus Group Overview

Short description of the Focus Group (location, format, duration, atmosphere).

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## 2. Key Findings

### a. Current Context and Challenges:

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### b. Existing Practices and Gaps:

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### c. Professional Competences and Needs:

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### d. Cooperation and Recommendations:

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### 3. Conclusions

List 3–5 most relevant insights to inform the development of the Training Curriculums.

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### 4. Additional Notes

Optional reflections or observations.

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## 2. RECONNECT Project – Guidelines for the implementation of national focus groups

### RECONNECT Project

Work Package 2: Teachers and Peer Adolescents Training Curriculums  
Guidelines for the Implementation of National Focus Groups

### 1. Purpose of the Document

This document provides shared guidance for all RECONNECT partners on how to organize, conduct, and report Focus Groups (FGs) in their respective countries. The FGs represent the first activity (A2.2) of WP2 and are essential to update and expand the needs analysis carried out during the application phase.

Their results will serve as the foundation for developing two key project outputs:

- **Teacher Training Curriculum (TTC)**
- **Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum (PATC)**

## 2. Objectives of the Focus Groups

The Focus Groups aim to:

- Update the findings of the initial needs analysis conducted during the project's application phase.
- Identify the specific needs, challenges, and skill gaps among teachers, psychologists, and school professionals when dealing with students at risk of social withdrawal or hikikomori syndrome.
- Collect qualitative data on mental health awareness, early intervention strategies, and inclusive school practices.
- Provide a qualitative basis for the creation of EU-wide Training Curriculums that address these needs effectively.

## 3. Target Groups

Each partner will organize one national Focus Group (with the exception of Italy, which will organize two). Each Focus Group will include between 10 and 12 participants, resulting in a total of at least 60 participants across the EU.

Participant profiles should include:

- Teachers (from secondary schools or vocational education), as well as tutors and coordinators from vocational training programs for young people aged 14–19.
- Psychologists and school counsellors.
- Educators or other professionals supporting adolescents in educational or training contexts (ages 14–19).

Participants should have direct experience with adolescents facing social withdrawal, mental health challenges, or risk of early school leaving.

## 4. Organisation and Logistics

- Number of FGs: 1 per partner country (2 in Italy)
- Duration: Approximately 2 hours
- Format: In-person preferred; online acceptable if required
- Facilitation: 1 moderator + 1 note-taker
- Language: Native language of the participants
- Recording: Recommended (with informed consent)



- Confidentiality: Guarantee anonymity; no personal data should appear in the report

Before implementation:

- Have participants complete the Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form provided by the WP2 Leader, in compliance with GDPR and national laws.
- Choose a comfortable, neutral space conducive to open discussion.

## 5. Focus Group Procedure

1. Welcome & Introduction (10–15 min)
  - o Explain the aim of the project RECONNECT and the specific role of the Focus Group.
  - o Emphasize confidentiality and the importance of honest, open input.
2. Participant Introductions (10 min)
  - o Each participant briefly introduces their professional background and experience with students.
3. Main Discussion (80–90 min)
  - o Use the guiding questions below to structure the discussion.
  - o Encourage dialogue, not consensus — all viewpoints are valuable.
4. Wrap-up (10–15 min)
  - o Summarize key insights.
  - o Invite final comments and thank participants.

## 6. Guiding Questions

### Section 1 – Current Context and Challenges

1. What are the main challenges faced by teachers and school professionals when dealing with students at risk of social withdrawal or hikikomori?
2. Have you observed changes in students' mental health or social behaviours in recent years?
3. What early signs indicate that a student might be at risk of isolation or disengagement from school?

### Section 2 – Existing Practices and Gaps

4. What types of strategies, programmes, or tools currently exist in your school or region to address these situations?



5. Which approaches work well, and where do you see major gaps or limitations?
6. How do schools collaborate with families and external professionals in these cases?

### Section 3 – Professional Competences and Needs

7. What kind of competences do teachers and school professionals need most to effectively support these students?
8. In your opinion, what competences or personal qualities should young people have in order to effectively support peers at risk of social withdrawal?
9. Are there specific training topics that would help you better manage these situations (e.g. emotional literacy, communication with families, peer mediation)?
10. What do you think about the idea of using an educational video game to help students at risk of social withdrawal re-engage socially or emotionally?

### Section 4 – Cooperation and Recommendations

11. How could cooperation between teachers, psychologists, and other school professionals be improved?
12. What kind of support or EU-level resources (e.g. training, materials, networks) would be most useful for your work?

## 7. Data Collection and Analysis

After the Focus Group:

- Review notes and recordings; identify main themes, needs, and key quotes.
- Organize findings under the four thematic sections.
- Avoid any personal identifiers.
- Complete the National Report using the provided template.

## 8. Expected Outputs

Each partner must deliver:

- 1 National Focus Group Report in English (2 for Italy)
- A list of participants (using initials or professional role only)
- Signed Participant Information Sheet & Consent Forms (to be collected and sent to the WP2 Leader, in compliance with GDPR and national laws)
- (Optional) Audio transcript, if compliant with privacy laws P2 (Hikikomori Italia)

ETS) will then:

- Summarize all national reports into 1 EU-Level Report (approx. 30 pages)
- Identify common learning outcomes and competences
- Use these findings as the basis for developing the Teacher and Peer Adolescents Training Curriculum

## **10. Submission Details**

Deadline: 31 January 2026

Submission to: [marco.crepaldi@hikikomoriitalia.it](mailto:marco.crepaldi@hikikomoriitalia.it)

## **11. Contacts**

For questions or methodological support:

WP2 Leader: Hikikomori Italia ETS (Italy)

Email: [info@hikikomoriitalia.it](mailto:info@hikikomoriitalia.it)

Role: Coordination of FG guidelines, analysis, and EU report synthesis