



# Hikkikomori' : New Approach of Hope

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## **‘Hikkikomori’ - New Approach of Hope**

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### **ABSTRACT**

I initially became aware of this phenomenon from a book entitled ‘*Shutting Out the Sun - How Japan Created its own Lost Generation*’ by Michael Zielenziger. [Vintage Press] The dedication is for a young Japanese, Kenji. At present there maybe over one million others like Kenji, in Japan. “What do we do when half the population is *hikikomori*?” asked one speaker in the book. The literature I have seen would seem to offer little by way of answer, not yet much real hope. With this urgency in mind I have decided to present this paper.

I have received a mound of disparate information which I have tried to lay out in this paper. I have pulled key quotes out, importantly including what the *hikikomoro* themselves say. What they ask (and alas which, modern education rarely gives them) is actually covered by my earlier research, that into ‘kids that don’t fit in.’ It may also offer hope to *hikiknomori*. It is entitled *Democracy Reaches the Kids*. Considerations of the theory underpinning such a programme have already appeared in *Kobe Journal, etc. passim.*] I also sent this framework curriculum to likely the highest panel of peers in the USA. They judged it, and sent it back together with the US “extraordinary” visa. {On the US government website they state the qualifications for such an award: they offer as example the Nobel Prize.} Therefore, I think, we can take heart that *Democracy Reaches the Kids* is fundamentally sound and practically workable.

### **Part One**

*I take the liberty of going through the following paper; this kindly sent to me by the KHJ. I have underscored items which dovetail with my own*

*research into school system failure. The conclusions I developed can help in the difficulties presented by the hikikomori phenomenon. Some paraphrasing, quotes in 12 Point.*

## **Hikikomori - A Dynamic Systems Theory Perspective** by Alan Fogel, University of Utah and Mastoshi Kawai, Mukogawa Woman's University.

The scale of the problem '*Hikikomori* comprise about 20% of all male adolescents and about 1% of the population of Japan.' [pp. 206]

'The conventional way to understand this problem is to assume that it resides within the child and to alleviate the problem we need to find a way to change the child to fit in more with social expectations.'

'... who leave school for long periods are not otherwise diagnosed as schizophrenic or depressed' - Miiki (2002)' pp.207

Moving sufferers in together with other *hikikomori* has been undertaken in some cases, 'often against their will.' Both Kondo (2001) and Yoshikawa and Murakami (2001) describe *hikikomori* as a problem within the family system, rather than simply a problem with the youth. 'We have written that *hikikomori* needs to be understood from a dynamic systems perspective.' (Fogel & Kawai, 2006)

Concerning self isolation in their rooms, etc. the authors ask, 'Can these problematic consensual frames be changed?' And they suggest 'the system of relationships must change ... and that means stepping outside the familiar frame ... Bridging frames are useful to help make a developmental transition between existing and emerging frames. Typically, bridging frames contain elements of both the existing and emerging frames ... and have the purpose of allowing people in a relationship to "try out" new ways.' [pp. 2008]

The authors noted that: 'Children and their parents were also under intense stress during times of entrance examinations, in which a child's identity depended upon passing or failing.'

The authors talk of the comradeship that can be found on the net. Internet companions can be more available than any real person to these 'adolescents who are typically shy, sensitive and intelligent ... *Hikikomori* is a closing of the border of the child's world to outsiders. With a small bridge to the outside world via the internet.'

In the US families 'actively encourage school return.'

## Part Two

### “The Mystery of the Missing Million”

*Comment on the BBC film, which was also shown on Belgium television.  
(Some punctuation, added).*

Sarah Hyde UK:-

“I agree, that the education system can be partly responsible for the problem.”

Micheal Kingham, academic for 34-years:-

An ocean out there. “The potential for 40% of the population (given the right circumstances and triggers) to become psychotic.”

Michael Z. Kruszynski, UK:-

“To call this behaviour uniquely Japanese is utterly naïve, shortsighted”  
{ Apparently, entrenched in Italy, growing in Germany, that land of the eternal student. }

Anon UK:- a *hikikomori*:-

“There is nothing wrong with my seclusion ... if I became a monk, would that be a problem?”

Michael Vaughan tells of his half-Japanese relative:-

“A bright, intelligent and lively boy became very withdrawn.” (He came through it.)

Anon UK:-

“I wanted to know the meaning of life ... am only fit for cabbage brain jobs, even though I have a university degree.”

James UK, age 3, taught himself history, world affairs, science, etc., all through books and television.

“I only found I wasn’t being myself.”

Dr. Erica Warner, Chartered Clinical Psychologist:-

“My own son had locked himself away for the past two or three years.”

Anon UK:-

“Not encouraging their kids to be themselves marks the greatest failure of Japanese parents.”

Helen Hamilton, UK:-

TV and or PC in the bedroom - “We only went there at night to sleep. Perhaps today the child is being conditioned to live in their room - literally!”

Eliza, UK:-

“Cleared out everything, other than a mattress and a table where he eats all his food.”

James, UK:-

“There needs to be more awareness, and subsequent education. To help young people cope with the changing world.”

**Comment:**

**BBC film 'The Mystery of the Missing million' [Found on the Internet]**

A Graduate student studying history at CSU, Stanislaus:-

“The sense that one is forced to behave under a suffocating series of prescribed rules, and the sense that withdrawing from these expectations is the only way to survive.”

James - an Australian, a former teacher in Japan:-

“Wow! What’s going on with the Japanese school system? The whole idea of cram schools is insane, children at age 12-year shown in the docu should not be exposed to that sort of emotional and physical strain. If that had been me at 12/15 I would have crawled into my room and locked the door too! How many of these young people are ‘bucking’ the system and trying to strike out on their own, to find some of their own individuality?”

“One more frightening aspect of Japanese culture found during my teaching experience is that most young people don’t have big dreams or aspirations. They are content with mediocrity. For example you ask 16-years old that their dream job is and more than likely they will answer an office worker. One major problem with Japanese education system is that the students never get chance to use their imaginations, creativity or analytical skills. At school all they need is an excellent memory to succeed.”

I surveyed this myself. {Meegan}. I asked the Japanese student classes this: “It is said that Japanese students have the smallest spirit among any others in the world.” This, in most countries would, I guess, be considered outrageous and indeed insulting. Not in Japan. Majorities, reaching up to the high 80s agreed with the statement!

A former *hikikomori* boy wrote and said:-

“Love exchange texts all day.”

Sada:-

“Materials were already prepared. We had a house, car, PC so what else should we buy? Of course people work not only for money, but it seems to me true, that money encourages the working. What kind of dream can children have in such circumstances? That is the reality that Japanese society is encountering now.”

“*Hikikomori* does not start as mental illness, but with time it is just as debilitating. Other cultures use drugs. To cope with their dissatisfaction of society ... As well as ease of access to any sort of information without leaving room. I sympathize with the *hikikomori*, the word is aspects of a terrible place and those that don’t fit in would naturally want to withdraw.”

Danish Human Arts student at Roskilde University:-

“The Japanese education system and Japanese society and culture on the whole play a very important role.”

Kenneth:-

“I think that self system communication classes should be mandatory at high school.

It is our societal obligation to prevent such terrible occurrence.”

Renae:-

“Chaotic atmosphere of everyday life, rapidly consuming people and their lives. The hunger for material possessions is becoming increasingly disturbing. The young are taught by their parents that to have money is to be successful. If we have then power to build the present then we can shape the future, the potential is endless provided we keep our eyes and hearts open.”

Lotus:-

“I believe that if we fail at school or anything that modern man is based on, there is nothing to fall back on at all.”

### **Part Three**

*In the following book; I have referenced items which seem to dovetail with my own research, that being into school system failure. The conclusions I developed can help, I believe, in the difficulties presented by the ‘hikikomori’ phenomenon. Some linking words are mine, underscore of certain words are also mine indicated by 14 Point.*

### **‘Shutting Out the Sun - How Japan Created its own Lost Generation’ by Michael Zielenziger [Vintage Press] This book is dedicated to Kenji**

Masahisa Okuyama is founder of the *Hikikomori* Support Association (KHJ). He has been battling for years to bring attention to this tragedy. Alas, the official response has been poor. He received a letter containing this appeal:-

“Desperately searching for a way to rejoin society - seeking “a single ray of light” to help open the door.”

Mr. Okumura says this:-

“They are only too aware that good old Japan will never come back. When anyone’s child can become a *hikikomori*, it’s a scary time.” [pp. 42] Mr. Okuyama went round the bureaucracies to get help; he says of them; “There is hardly any place for improvisation, for compassion, or for commonsense. They keep running on automatic pilot. We need more black ships!” [pp. 46] *Hikikomori*: intelligent, isolated and alone. “Barricade themselves inside their room ... rather than attempt to engage with a society they feel denies then any expression of self.” [pp.11]

Kazuki Ueyama - *hikikomori* of Kobe - “*Hikikomori* kids don’t have a way out.” ‘If you demonstrate “reason” or “logic” that differs from the group, “it is very dangerous. You could be killed for it.” [Japanese journalist - pp 291] Kenji - 34-year old (20-years of self isolation): [pp.289] Kenji gave this gloomy observation of being Japanese; ‘He

could point to no adult who had grown up to be “free,” to become what they wanted.’

Jun (aged 28) *hikinomori* who cycles through the Tokyo night without purpose: “Why should I be studying so hard to pass these entrance exams? I just wanted to sit down and study ... (Kantian philosophy) That’s not something I should do in class, is it?” [pp. 26]

Taka (aged 24) *hikinomori* who says he had studied so hard for a high school exam that he “burned out” at age 15 ... I looked around and said, “Why do I have to be like they are?” [pp. 32] Hiro *hikinomori*: Hiro found classes so easy they bored him. He ‘had tested very high on intelligence tests,’ mother said. Hiro recalls, “I’d go to *juku* at four and come home every day around ten at night. I didn’t have the physical stamina ... One teacher said I needed ten days sleep to get what other students got in one night” ... ‘He was weary from the accumulated years of *juku*, tests every Sunday and other activities like swimming and tennis.’ Meanwhile, father a usual salaryman, and thus out most nights on extra work or *required* to socialise with clients, he accused mother, Keiko “of sabotaging Hiro’s education.” [pp. 35] “I remember one time yelling at her (mother) and saying ‘I am not going to be your robot anymore.’ I threw my pencil box out of the window. She pushed me so much ... she ruined my youth.” [pp. 36]

*Hikikomori* ‘... often beat their elderly parents with anything lying around - a baseball bat, a hammer. Attacking a parent has become one of the most common forms of domestic violence in Japan.’ pp. 43

Monbusho 2003 “English Abilities is an extremely important issue for the future of our children and for the further development of our country.” [pp. 282] “Half-baked methods to get its people to master foreign languages.” [pp. 277]

D. Mizusawa specializes in alcohol addiction. “Our society says; ‘Don’t make a mistake. Don’t take a risk. Don’t take responsibility. Just go along with the others and prognosticate.’ That’s the culture.” [pp. 217] Hokkaido University researchers: “Children are worn-out dishrags.” [pp. 203] Yukio Saito set up Japan’s first suicide hotline. “It isn’t just the *hikikomori*, as a people we Japanese are socially withdrawn.” [pp. 200]

Hiroyuki Itsuka (author) “Japanese today do not know who they are.” On group suicide made up of strangers met in web chat rooms: “They think it is an extension of a game in cyberworld.” [pp. 198]

Kazuhiro Keitoku (56) a vice manager of a bank, a gentle man wanting to help, it is said. He took on the principal’s role of a Hiroshima elementary school. He would greet the pupils in the morning, reviewed homework and often stayed until late at night. He proposed “to take the students mountain climbing on a fine day so that they could experience nature beyond the confines of their classroom.” The teachers union said that the hectic 5-day-a week calendar left no time for frivolous expeditions. Then there was the business of the government wanting the flag and national anthem which the left leaning union detested, and so on. It was after planting a school flower garden that he returned, attached a rope to a handrail and hanged himself. His note read: ‘I’m sorry that I have caused trouble for many people because, an incapable person, was appointed principal.’

Mariko Bando, government minister says, “(*Hikikomori*) might be an organic response to prosperity, that young people are too coddled and spoilt to seize the moment.”

Shigesato Takahashi, Chief demographer for the National Institute for Population and Social Security Research: ‘His statistics depict young Japanese as distressingly isolated and lonely. More than half of unmarried men between 18-34 report no sexual relationships, friendships or even casual companionship with woman.’ [pp. 182]

Masahiro Yamada - sociologist: concerning the infantilization of adult Japanese. “Many people think there is nothing else to life than to chase money and live the affluent life style ... In order to fill the void all (we Japanese) can do is read *manga*, take trips abroad or go shopping.” [pp. 155] Vuitton bags: ‘A direct expression of the modern Japanese to find identity.’ [pp. 151]

Bullying is international, ‘but in Japan it is surprisingly intense and widespread.’ [pp. 51] School sets the stage as it were.

Koh Tanaka was elected to the Diet. He was bullied. “I was not allowed to hold my own opinions.” [pp. 53]

Monbusho: “2% of high school students never show up for class.’ ‘In 2002, more than 131,000 children, including nearly 3% of all junior high school students simply did not attend school at all.’ pp. 80

The Ministry of Health finally, in 2003, brought themselves to make their first *Hikikomori* guidelines. First off - ‘No motivation to participate in school.’ Even as recently as early 2004 no peer reviewed journal had published any research on the nature of this malady, nor any rigorous field studies into its causes been disseminated. [pp.76]

Those from within the Japanese culture cannot alone answer this problem. Foreign perspective can give answers. Tamaki Saito, a leading clinician on *hikikomori*, notes they; “really live in a parasitic state.” [pp. 60] ‘Unlike Koreans, for young Japanese there is no drafted military service. [pp. 66]

Nobuyuki Minami, a non-academic and outside the education system, has been trying to help deep seated *hikikomori*. “They looked at adults telling them ‘You have to study hard or you won’t be successful,’ and the kids just didn’t trust it. They didn’t believe it. This is when *hikikomori* started -- which is something most people, especially officials in the Education Ministry, simply don’t understand.” [pp. 81] “When you look closely, what they are seeking is community. They are seeking friends.” [pp. 81] ‘In Minami’s neighbourhood, he told me, one *juku* sent its students home at three in the morning and another class started at four.’ [pp. 81] Watanabe: “However, such “perfect” children have proven ill-equipped to parent their own children ... Outwardly they look as though they have very good control,’ but they create households in which nurturing expressions of love or real conversations are totally absent.” [pp. 84] Three folk trying to grapple with the *hikikomori* phenomenon; Sadatsuga Kubo, Dr. Hisako Watanabe of Keio University and Mr. Minami ... ‘They recognize that these lost young adults can prosper only in open, flexible and a trusting environment -- precisely the sort of surroundings modern Japan tries to undermine. [pp. 92] “In most of the cases the children are fine.” [pp. 86] “They are far more mature than ordinary school children.”



She believes that ‘offering *hikikomori* an chance to build attachments with others at their own pace, and slowly creating networks of trust, represents the first step in eroding self-imposed isolation.’ [pp 87]

Mr. Minami: ‘*Hikikomori* sought refuge of their own bedrooms because they were far more sensitive and intelligent than their average classmates.’ [pp. 98]

*Hikikomori* - ‘Desperate to free themselves from the country’s rigid educational pattern, they know if they choice the risky personal route and flee into the sunshine, they will be doubly punished. Shunned by the school from which they have withdrawn, they likely will find no other group willing to accept them. They feel certain that few strangers will reach out to help them find a new path. And shorn of social context these *hikikomori* have precious little identity to fall back on ... They are practically invisible.’ [pp. 142]

‘... Never having been taught to think critically, and lacking any social mechanism that would allow them to rebel, all to many of these young - those in their twenties, thirties and forties are, like the *hikikomori*, finding ultimately self destructive ways to detach from society.’ [pp. 145] “From Minami’s perspective, these “troubled” kids are actually less troubled than many of their parents and teachers.” [pp. 78]

## Zeroing in on the Problem - ANSWERS

### ‘*Hikikomori*’ - A New Approach Answers

Dr. Yuichi Hattori, a Japanese psychologist tells us:- “The main cause of the problem (*hikikomori*) comes from the suppression of the individual. Eventually, they become defeated, emotionless zombies. Developing a “false front” or front personality is essential for young children if they are to survive within the rigid Japanese education system.” [pp. 72] ‘Yet parents who are desperate, demoralized and shame-filled flock too any treatment that offers even a glimmer of hope.’ [pp. 76] *Hikikomori* sought refuge of their own bedrooms because they were far more sensitive and intelligent than their average classmates.’ [pp. 98] and *Hikikomori*: intelligent, isolated and alone. [pp.11] “... rather than attempt to engage with a society they feel denies then any expression of self.”

Denial of individual identity is seen as a root cause. This is born out in the case of Shigei, who when aged 14 was shunned had refused to join the school basketball club. By age 16, Shigei had withdrawn from school for good.

“I couldn’t find my own identity.” [pp. 33] “When doctors look only at biological symptoms and give me drugs they don’t solve the problem ... The environment is the underlying cause.” [pp. 77]

I believe that we must absolutely give these sensitive people the environment he said he needs. In other words another way, a way out of the maze.

Dr. Watanabe believes that:-

‘Offering *hikikomori* an chance to build attachments with others at their own pace, and slowly creating networks of trust, represents the first step in eroding self-imposed isolation.’ [pp 87.] “When you look closely, what they are seeking is community. They are seeking friends.” [pp. 81] *Hikikomori* - ‘Desperate to free themselves from the

country's rigid educational pattern, they know if they choose the risky personal route and flee into the sunshine, they will be doubly punished. Shunned by the school from which they have withdrawn, they likely will find no other group willing to accept them. They feel certain that few strangers will reach out to help them find a new path.' [pp.142]

The children are not usually suffering mental problems, it is said.

"In most of the cases the children are fine." [pp. 86]

"Troubled" kids are actually less troubled than many of their parents and teachers." [pp. 78.]

Nobuyuki Minami, a non-academic and outside of the education system says this, "These kids have been rejected by the school culture which forces everyone to be the same. But each kid is unique, each one of them is different. I don't want to do anything to damage that. I don't want to suppress them at all, so that puts me at odds with the traditional Japanese culture ... The kids who come here are those who have been rejected by those schools." [pp.77]

## Conclusion

### *The canary in the mine shaft*

*Hikikomori* is not just a phenomena of Japan, though in sheer numbers it leads; similar problems are emerging around the world. Such places as (my own) Great Britain, but also in the Asian *tigers* of Hong Kong and South Korea. I am not surprised by this. My studies of education systems worldwide postulates that the increasingly standardized, globalized education systems, are themselves key. They increasingly become more piece meal, more abstract and getting further and further from the overwhelming majority and the reality they face, day by day.

Wither, the full blown planetary crisis we are now in: does schoolwork with - the children of all our futures - deal in any meaningful way with that? Does it have even the space to, what with all those tests, etc. Time to even think to prudently prepare them for a radically different future, which all this portends?

The *hikikomori* have given-up on the present way, that of forced study. It is patently not working for all kids, and is falling down all over the world. These *hikikomori* are making a protest with their very lives. It is a cry out for another way, one which acknowledges their identity.

If we can give them an environment where they can prosper, be themselves, and not face a barrage of non-useful information, or being labelled a freak, or worse.

Are not the children who react different to all this, those who take their own life, really making the same point as the *hikikomori*? And also, these children are not usually suffering mental problems. Dr. Watanabe in the book text says:- “In most of the cases the children are fine.” [pp. 86] “Troubled” kids are actually less troubled than many of their parents and teachers.” [pp. 78] ‘We are arguing that the “problem” is not “in” the child but rather “in” the system of communication.’ (*Fogel & Kawai*) And I would argue education is a prime system of communication.’ Is it not possible, that the ultra sensitive, intelligent *hikikomori* are the canary in the mine shaft?

Here is Kaz Ueyama, a local *hiki*-boy from Kobe:- “I couldn’t find any motivation to attend class. Why do I have to go to school where I’m not allowed to pursue my own intellectual interests, like history and philosophy, but have to memorize dates and names for college entrance exams?” [pp. 54] “*Hikikomori* kids don’t have a way out ... To survive in Japan you have to kill off your own original voice.” [pp.57] He discovered on the web, sites concerning post-traumatic stress disorder. Did Kaz diagnose himself as PTSS? “Doomed to failure” and so have withdrawn from society, which in fact “set them up for failure” wrote James Young on the internet. And the perfidious agent is, I maintain, the education system. And anyway, why does an individual, unique and gifted, need a mass system at all, when based on the lowest common denominator of all? Why does accepted wisdom always advocate an eventual return to the system. As in ‘It is essential in all forms of bridging the child feels safe and protected.’ pp. 213 THE PAPER The authors suggest ‘The fourth level of Japanese bridging frames – the return to school.’ pp. 214 ‘It is the family and school which sets the agenda’

These lost young adults can prosper only in open, flexible and a trusting environment. This is recognized as implicit in my own research.

If we bring all the commentary together certain similarities become more clearly apparent. Broadly, we can consider these environment and identity. ‘The goal is to find ways of creating supportive, appropriate relationship that allow for personal and societal growth and development ... in order to create school environments for the next generation of Japanese children.’ [pp. 216]

## **A Blueprint for a Way Forward**

This long term research focuses on engaging Youth - all of them - by using their talents, skills, abilities often unique to each. I would set up a programme that would harness this, the power of youth and youth dreams, to haul them out, step by step, from the darkness. The programme will be a trajectory to education, good citizenship and yes, a happier life.

My early finding found that it is the system itself which (for some) works against children identity and environment. These - those that do not fit in – are run over like a trawler churning up the seabed of their childhood, flattening their young lives. *Democracy Reaches the Kids* does the opposite to this. A simple alternate curriculum, a framework, whereby ‘the kids that don’t fit in’ are given a clear alternate route to education, too success.

### Identity

‘If the child is allowed to play a role in developing solution the child is more likely to make a commitment in the eventual resolution.’ pp.215

*Democracy ...* allows the individual student to decide when (and where?) you will study? Who will be your teacher? How much time to spend or none at all. Subjects, they select. Of course society DOES have certain requirements, expectations. These subjects have been suggested, and after they are explained, honestly, and still a kid wants to abandon something, not ready till later then so be it. it is their democratic life after all. However, these are smart people for the most part, and other things can be done first, and if you change your mind ....

### Environment

Those from within the Japanese culture cannot easily address this problem. Japanese culture, may be a factor for this social problem, an outsider is in a better position.

First, do we necessarily need to be in “school?” As the saying goes, ‘the whole world is my oyster.’ Much can be done from an isolated bedroom. Education is just getting information into a persons head, where and how, and whereby is not an issue. One could gain an education based on the Internet alone, as some have done. In this they just need a qualifying authority. A sort of Open University, as pioneered in GB. But we can go a step further: not

arbitrary subjects selected by tradition and by some faceless entity, but ones own private studies and leanings. All has value.

We can proceed with *Democracy* ... a trail programme, set up in Kobe. I postulate the setting-up of a loose framework which would give the spirit of 'community,' using a mostly empty building on the campus. A core task will to be bolster local/national culture. As said, 'Japan will never lose its long history.' [pp. 216] In western approach there is more input from the child and more room for the child's autonomy some sort of challenge is presented too the withdrawn. (*Fogel & Kawai*) Say this: 'At the first level of Western bridging frames some type of challenge is presented to the child who is withdrawn.' [pp. 214] I suggest a much bigger bridge, wider. Examples I read included the Shikoku shrines, adventure, using tents. At any rate always an open environment. 'It is essential in all forms of bridging the child feels safe and protected.' [pp. 213]

'At the second level of Western bridging frames the child is asked to articulate his fears, concerns.' Open, 'mutually respectful, accepting produce a sense of relieve in the child because of being understood at a deep emotional level.' [pp.215]

At a special *Hikikomori* meeting in Seoul, 2008, they spoke of the terrible need to avoid the isolation of affected families. This is urgent and should be confronted at the earliest. I stand ready to immediately take this into the field and begin in earnest the great and sensitive task of creating a safe environment for these intelligent young Japanese and also give hope to the families. It only remains for the model to be set-up and running. I have no doubt that from reading the literature that *Democracy Reaches the Kids!* can have a positive, potentially galvanizing effect on the dynamics surrounding the *hikikomori* phenomena. We can then take the terrible, heartrending pressures off the families. Let's begin in Kobe!

Once again these children may re-enter the sunlight.

*With thanks to Mr. Masahisa Okuyama, founder of the Hikikomori Support Association (KHJ) Sato for the material including Fogel and Fukae campus, the old KUMM. Author Michael Zielenziger and Vintage Press and the BBC.*