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The Causes of Youth Extremism and Ways to Prevent It in the Educational Environment

The article sketches the main theoretical approaches that account for the phenomenon of youth extremism. It compares the theoretical description of the causes of extremism to the opinions of specialists in its prevention in the educational environment. It explores the limited nature of perceptions that a leading role is played by ideology in the formation of extremist behavior and emphasizes the inadequate effectiveness of preventive measures that consist solely of cultural and educational measures. A number of directions of preventive work in educational organizations are proposed.

Youth extremism is one of the topics that are being widely discussed in the scientific and pedagogical community. The fact that there are fewer adolescent skinheads in the schools and on the streets does not allay anyone's worries. Youth extremism has

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been held in check thanks to the efforts of law enforcement agencies, but it is still waiting for an opportunity to raise its head. Many schools and institutions of higher learning, along with bodies of educational administration, are putting together special plans to prevent extremism, creating task forces and conducting a variety of preventive measures. However, the effectiveness of such measures is naturally subject to doubt [1, p. 119]. One difficulty faced by the organizers of preventive work is that educators and the administrations of educational organizations lack a full understanding of the essential nature of youth extremism and its root causes. A survey t we carried out in Moscow in 2013, of fifty specialists in the prevention of antisocial behavior on the part of adolescents and young people found that practitioners are in need not only of specific recommendations and work technologies (58.6 percent of the total number of respondents) but also of an understanding of the nature of extremism, its causes and manifestations (45.6 percent), see Figure 1).

Why have the practitioners' needs not been met? To a large extent this is due to the fact that (1) this problem has only begun to
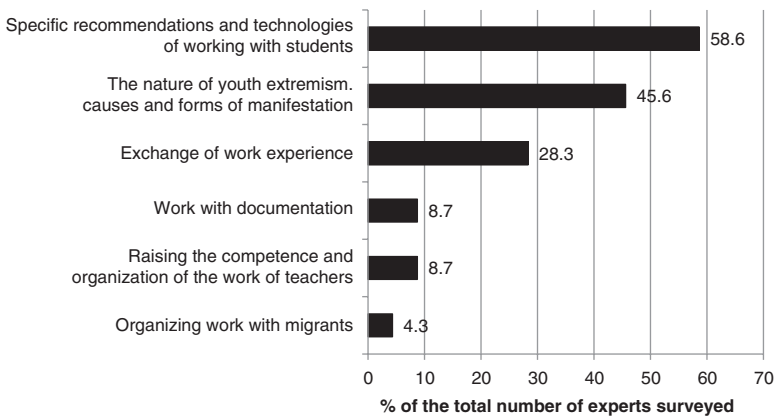

Figure 1. **The Need for Information on the Part of Active Participants in the Prevention of Youth Extremism in Order to Organize Effective Preventive Work** (on the basis of content analysis of the answers of 50 experts in response to a question about the desired content of a methodology manual)

be dealt with relatively recently in this country's science. A contributing cause is the complexity of efforts to reflect upon the experience of preventive work and the conversion of scientific theories into applied models. As happens so often in the social sciences, a precise approach to filling the concept and term of extremism with content has yet to be formulated. The current interpretation of youth extremism is so broad that it includes terrorism and "binge drinking," or even simply refusing to go to school [2, p. 41].

In the Soviet scientific literature, youth movements of an extremist orientation were not discussed. On the one hand, this was due to the dominating ideology: in Soviet society the existence of such phenomena was not acknowledged (in other countries these were classified as manifestations of the class struggle and the evils of capitalism). On the other hand, the efficient work of civic and political youth associations; the extensive control of the school environment, everyday life and leisure activities; the absence of any real freedom of speech; and the effective work of the law enforcement agencies did not permit the spread of radicalist tendencies, although a few mass fights by young people based on ethnicity grounds did occur [3].

At the end of the 1980s, the existence of groups of young people with radical sentiments became more noticeable, and scientists began to describe these phenomena. A series of articles came out about "the informals"; researchers were worried about the aggressiveness of many of these groups. By the late 1990s the problem of violent street gangs of young people and political radicalism began to be described as "extremism." In time, a generalized interpretation of extremism was formed: the promotion and use of extreme means (violence first and foremost) to achieve certain goals. In existing definitions of extremism the emphasis is placed specifically on the extreme character and radicalism of solutions and the harshness of the measures. The boundaries of this extreme character and the content of the actions depend on the specific cultural and historical conditions, which are determined by social law. Strictly speaking, extremism means

the disruption of the kind of order which Max Weber called the state's monopoly on violence: in every specific case it is the state that determines what extremism is. An understanding of the causes of young people's extremist behavior would make it possible to conduct preventive efforts in an educational organization in a more purposeful and effective way. Analysis of the current literature makes it possible to single out some causes of extremist behavior by youth.

The first cause attributes youth extremism to certain *essential traits* of that age: young people's urge for romanticism, their striving to be actively involved and to overcome obstacles. It was S. Hall who broadly defined youth as the period of "storm and stress," and L.S. Vygotskii focused on *"the dominant of romanticism,"* a young person's propensity toward taking risks, seeking adventure, and pursuing social heroism [4, p. 37]. While this creates favorable opportunities for upbringing and education, a striving for "boldness" and "originality" can lead to antisocial acts. Another characteristic of youth, which Vygotskii has called *"the dominant of effort,"* characterizes young people's propensity toward resistance, toward overcoming obstacles, a propensity that in peacetime and in a benign urban environment is most often manifested as protest against the authority of education and upbringing. It may be that this is the place to seek the cause of the failure of upbringing measures based on trying to "scare" school and college students about the negative consequences of extremist behavior.

Young people's unsatisfied quest to "rush headlong into things" may take the form of getting involved in an actual movement, such as reckless sport competitions, dances, travels, races, and participation in civic movements. Workers in education must keep in mind that young people in general have a pronounced urge to *seek a variety of new sensations.* At times this urge is so powerful that a person will takephysical or social risks just to experience such sensations. This propensity accounts for the popularity of many activities young people are drawn to, in particular extreme forms of sports [5]. But while extremist sports today generally require costly equipment and a lot of preparation,

taking part in acts that are against the law, such as brawls by soccer fanatics or racist attacks, make it comparatively easy for an adolescent to get the "adrenaline rush" he seeks.

And so, we can agree with Iu.A. Zubok and V.I. Chuprov, who say that the extremist type of behavior is immanently typical of young people [6, p. 38]. However, as a property of youth, extremism may be manifested in different ways. In the case of a stable society, on the group level and the individual level, as a rule extremism takes more or less publicly acceptable and socially regulated forms. If forms of this kind are not accessible to young people, or for some reason do not satisfy them, the urge to be actively involved in "extreme" forms remains unrealized. In the opinion of E. Erikson, an unsatisfied urge to be actively involved can lead to protest behavior and outbursts by young people [7]. And if society (in particular as represented by schools and higher educational institutions) does not provide the conditions necessary for the fulfillment of that urge, adolescents' and young people's energies will find an outlet in random, uncontrolled mass movements, which often are accompanied by unmotivated violence.

Under today's conditions of social changes and uncertainty, latent youth extremism has a tendency to transition into antisocial forms of behavior [2, p. 38]. School and college students whose urge to be actively engaged and to pursue romanticism cannot be satisfied by traditional social institutions become easy prey for extremist organizations, which promise "a life filled with heroism and adventure, a life of sacrifice, a proud and strong life and a heroic death," see *Short Course of the National Bolshevik Party* [Kratkii kurs NBP], 2006.

Unfortunately, in contrast to extremist movements, in the current practices of preventive work the "extremist" character- istics of the phase of youth are hardly taken into account. For example, only 17 percent of the experts surveyed named these characteristics among the causes of extremist behavior (see Figure 2).

A second cause of the wide prevalence of extremist attitudes among school and college students consists of the problems related
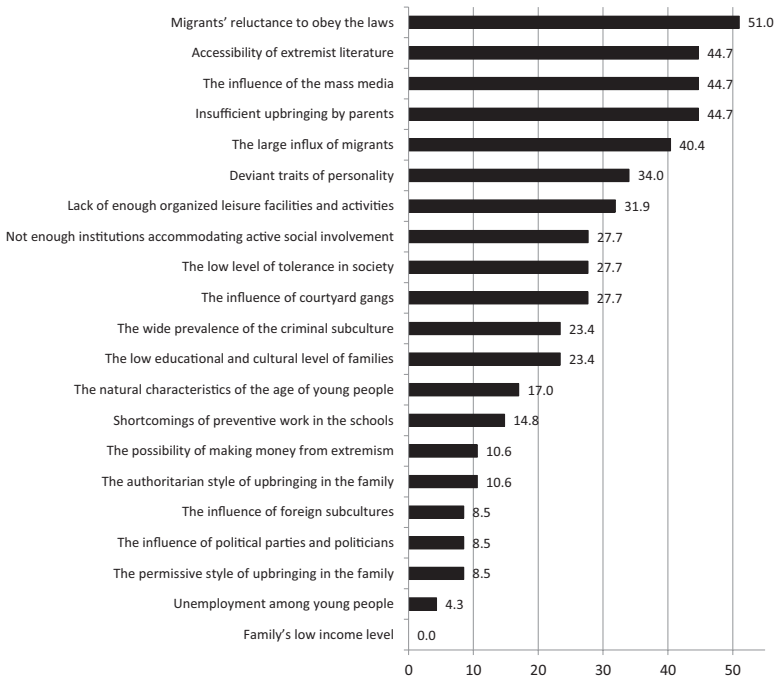
Figure 2. **Experts' Assessment of the Causes of Extremist Behavior Among Young People** (the results of a survey of 50 specialists in the prevention of youth extremism, as a % of those who answered the question)

to *the search for identity.* In the opinion of Erikson, the age of youth and young adulthood is, in general, built around the crisis of identity, which consists of a series of social, individual, and personal choices [7]. However, an individual's crisis of identity be separated from social crises. The rise of youth extremism in Russia at the end of the 1990s coincided with the large-scale social transformations in which a majority of the categories by means of which an individual defines himself and his place in society seemed to have lost their value. Opposition to the norms and values of society follows from the concept and term of extremism itself. From this point of view, the extremism of youth groups is a response to the natural crisis of identity of young people and to the simultaneous change of values in Russian society.

Extremist identification is linked to young people's ignoring of society's norms and values, and to the quest for other norms and values that differ substantially from those that are socially accepted. It is this process that triggers the creation of extremist gangs. A common way to create extremist gangs is to look for a hostile group. The fundamental principle has been expressed this way by B.F. Porshnev: "every opposition unifies, every unification opposes, the measure of opposition is the measure of unification" [8, p. 14]. It does not matter whom the unity is against, whether against a different nationality or against the fans of a different sports team.

By taking an extremist position toward a different nationality or a different religious group, the adolescent or young adult reinforces his own conception of self. According to G. Tajfel's theory of social identity, an individual is inclined to rate his own group favorably and thus boost his self-esteem. The easiest way to do this is to find criteria of comparison that are favorable to his own group. It is not always the case that these criteria can be found independently, and educators do not always succeed in presenting them to students. Then young people's need for a positive identity is realized as a propensity to "rip out of context" particular historical or scientific facts and to put their trust in pseudoscientific theories (first and foremost racist theories).

Disdain for other cultures and other social groups, which leads to xenophobia and extremism, is not a consequence of inadequate acquaintance with these groups and their cultures. The causes of the disdain, which can turn into enmity, must be sought in the individual's sense of a threat to his self-esteem and the assessment of the social groups to which he belongs. If the individual's family, school, peer group, and society as a whole do not give him favorable criteria of comparison, he may obtain them by looking for and finding other, "unworthy" social groups for comparison. In this way the threat to people's self-esteem leads to the manifestation of hostile feelings toward other people, as has been demonstrated in a number of experimental studies [9, pp. 31–44]. We have to agree with O.V. Khukhlaev: the widespread "festivals of national culture" and "folkdance"

concerts are not solving the problem of the spread of xenophobia and extremism among young people [1]. Judging from the mechanisms of the formation of extremist thinking as examined above, festivals of this kind will, at best, shape people's neutral attitude and lead to mockery, or, at worst, increase the sense of threat and, accordingly, negative attitudes.

A third cause of youth extremism can be attributed to the formation of an *authoritarian personality* complex: a propensity toward unwavering respect for authorities within a group, excessive concern with matters of status and power, stereotypical judgments and assessments, and intolerance toward uncertainty. To a large extent, the traits of the authoritarian personality predetermine a propensity toward extremist behavior. The blame for the upbringing of that kind of authoritarian personality belongs to the authoritarian family and the authoritarian school.

The authoritarian personality, according to T. Adorno's theory, is characterized by a striving to punish violators of accepted norms. When an individual becomes convinced that there are people who deserve to be punished, he finds an outlet in which he can redirect his aggressive impulses and, at the same time, consider himself to be a moral person [10, pp. 54–57]. It is most often the case that adolescents choose as their targets people of a different race, nationality, or religion, people who are marginalized (homeless persons, drug addicts), who hold different political views or even different tastes in music and sports. And if the authoritarian individuals, or the authoritarian social group as a whole, express their approval of that aggression, it may take the form of actual violence against the "outsiders." Extremists do not perceive their opponents as normal human beings, and for this reason they feel that they are morally justified, and they do not feel any compassion for their victims.

Another prominent trait of the authoritarian personality is the value placed on power and a position of strength, which leads to a higher level of nationalist attitudes among young people and is linked to hostility toward the representatives of different nationalities [11, p. 102]. It is the job of the education environment to instill in students and college students an

immunity toward traits of the authoritarian personality such as stereotyping, rigid thinking, excessive emphasis on motives of power in human relations, and a propensity to look at people and social groups in the categories of "weak versus strong."

Sadly, traditionally the ethnos of Russia has been characterized by the authoritarian style of thinking and upbringing. The changes in the past three decades made our political system more democratic, and pedagogy by directive from above has been replaced officially by the pedagogy of cooperation. However, authoritarian positions are still too strong on the level of the actual interaction between the teacher and the taught within the framework of Russian secondary and higher education.

A fourth cause of extremist behavior is rooted in the society's dominant culture. Even though a key feature of a modern "civilized" society is the formal rejection of violence, the *culture of violence* in society, including the education environment, still persists, is given justification, and serves as a powerful factor that fosters extremism. The phenomenon of the culture of violence is linked to authoritarian tendencies, and it is based on recognizing violence as a social value, as a foundation of social status, and as a means of solving problems. It is in this paradox that we find one of the chief difficulties in the prevention of extremism. Extremists' firm belief in the value of violence is not a manifestation of some special, "deviant" thinking. It is merely an extreme degree of agreement with the value of violence, one that is characteristic of the majority. Extremists are distinguished by their more open and obvious inclination toward forming the image of the enemy and their firm conviction of the usefulness not of covert violence (e.g., banning, expelling, and oppressing), but of direct physical violence.

It is the family, the groups of peers, and the mass media that are the most responsible for forming the culture of violence. Also of considerable importance are the history course in school, with its emphasis on violence; the replacement of civil and patriotic upbringing with militarized events; and the personal position held by the teachers who emotionally approve the stereotype of the "real man" who is able to "give as good as he gets." Language is an important manifestation of the culture of violence and the

provocation of extremism. We do not mean just the language employed in the mass media and the "abusive language of the public square." It has been found that teachers frequently resort to metaphors of violence, thus shaping a climate of confrontation in students' image of the world [12, p. 16]. It looks as if harmless metaphors such as "a rap on the knuckles" or "knocking some sense into your head," as used in pedagogical parlance, reinforce the students' notion that violence is one of the possible ways to resolve social problems.

A fifth cause corresponds to the condition of deriving a propensity toward extremist behavior from unfavorable social and economic conditions and people's dissatisfaction with their position. From the standpoint of J. Dollard's and N. Miller's theory, aggressive extremism is of a social nature, and its source is seen in the state of *frustration* that builds up in young people, ensuing under conditions that prevent the attainment of a desired goal. Accordingly, the financial problems of the family, unemployment, and lack of opportunity for social advancement against the background of insistent advertising and the mass media's continual demonstration of the values of consumption and success, all lead to frustration. A natural consequence of frustration is aggression. If a young person is not able to act aggressively against the sources of his frustration (his school, his parents, organizations, and so on)—because of anticipated negative consequences—then he has to hold his aggressive impulses in check. And this restraint, in and of itself, is a source of additional frustration. This "restrained aggression" has a tendency to be "displaced"—to be directed at some other target, one that is "innocent," such as migrants, the homeless, and so on.

It needs to be noted that not a single one of the experts surveyed named the low income of the family as a cause of youth extremism (see Figure 2). Frustration can be caused not so much by objective factors such as lack of well-being but, instead, by expectations that are too high. For example, as a result of comparing one's own social position and living conditions with that of other people, a sense of *relative deprivation* develops. The more a person has, the more strongly he envies others who have

more. For this reason, young people who are relatively well off manifest dissatisfaction with their position in society. Young people may blame their own "unenviable volition" on external circumstances (unfair laws, the wrong kind of civic and social structure, and so on). Riots in the street, demonstrations, pogroms, terror, and rebellion all constitute the arsenal of means resorted to by social groups that feel deprived in their attempts to quickly and irreversibly "restore justice" [13].

Thus, the causes of extremist behavior have many facets and cannot be seen as the result of just one or two factors. It is cause for concern to note that the experts whom we surveyed believe that the causes of extremism are to be sought first and foremost in the presence of a large number of migrants, their behavior, and the influence of an extremist ideology (see Figure 1). This means that the active agents of preventive work are inclined, on the basis of their own interpretation, to follow what they consider "common sense," and to blame external phenomena instead of deeply rooted causes of extremism.

There can be no doubt that the broad prevalence of extremist ideas in materials on the Internet and in song lyrics, and so on, also play a role. However, young people's extremist behavior is more likely to be excused by the corresponding ideology rather than being based on it. In order to understand extremism, it is more important that educators not study its ideology (often primitive and confused), but, instead, the reasons young people accept such extreme ideas and ways of behavior. Our analysis shows that extremism cannot be accounted for simply as a "shortcoming" of upbringing, because in a number of cases the established system of upbringing work in educational organizations can even encourage extremism. In the practice of preventive work the emphasis is placed on education, but it is not possible to combat extremism with methods of education alone.

It needs to be kept in mind, of course, that on the one hand it is society as a whole that is responsible for extremist behavior to a considerable degree. On the other hand, in their attempts to satisfy their own particular needs young people very often construct

extremist situations on their own [14, p. 67]. Nonetheless, our analysis of the causes of youth extremism makes it possible to assert that the educational organization also has substantial preventive potential that has not yet been put into action.

When it comes to the content of preventive measures, for the most part they relate to interethnic discord, and here, as Khukhlaev has pointed out, we can discern an astonishing sameness of the technologies used and the extremely weak link between these technologies and the results [1, p. 119]. It is no accident that 40 percent of the experts surveyed commented on the merely formal character of measures and bureaucratism in preventive work. Developing the kinds of social and pedagogical technologies of prevention that are effective on the whole spectrum of possible causes of extremism remains an urgent and relevant task. Our analysis of current research and the experience gained in the work make it possible to suggest the basic features of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of extremism in the educational environment.

First and foremost, the prevention of extremism has to be directed toward teaching both students and teachers to unconditionally reject violence as a value and as a means of solving problems. Of key significance in this regard is the position of teachers as they explicitly or implicitly express that position. The condemnation of any forms of violence, no matter what excuse there may be, must be reflected in both school textbooks and teachers' manner of speech. What is vital in this regard is a comprehensive negative attitude: allowing the possibility that violence can be useful and justified leads to the formation of the notion that the use of violence can be permitted to solve social problems. Workers in education have to instill the culture of nonviolence, the basic principles of which are these: the rejection of any monopoly on power, authority, and truth; a readiness for changes, dialogue, and compromise; a critical analysis of one's own behavior for the purpose of ruling out and preventing an opponent's hostile position [15].

As far as possible, it is essential to eliminate even indirect aggressiveness in the vocabulary of teachers, to keep in mind that

even in a figurative form (sometimes as a joke) aggressive vocabulary forms a psychological mood. "Eradicating extremism ruthlessly, with a hot iron" is not the most effective approach to preventing it.

It is also essential to develop the students' skills of conflict-free interaction. This is not necessarily confined to the skills of ethnocultural interaction: experiencing nonviolent ways to resolve situations of conflict on the interpersonal level leads to the generalization of nonviolent propensities of behavior. A great deal has been done along these lines in the past few years, in secondary schools, but current studies have confirmed that the problem of conflicts in school remains an urgent one.

The next fundamental task in regard to the prevention of extremism in the educational environment should be that of inculcating tolerance [*tolerantnost'*] in teachers and students. Interpreting tolerance literally as toleration [*terpimost'*] (a readiness to tolerate or put up with something or someone), a frequent interpretation, is not accurate. A disposition to "put up with" something that is alien, not right, and not acceptable, cannot effectively prevent an extremist worldview and extremist behavior. Tolerance has to be understood as a deeper quality of the individual, one that reflects a willingness to accept a diversity of views of the world and the possibility of looking at a problem from differing points of view. In other words, tolerance consists of the ability to see the world and its phenomena without classifying them unequivocally as "correct" or "incorrect." School textbooks and the teacher's explanation of the world should not be oversimplified and set in stone. In the natural sciences and, even more so, in the social sciences, there are not very many truths that are universally recognized. There is always room for discussion and debate, for contradictions and inconclusiveness; it is not right to think that this is "over the heads of children." Training the students' minds to be tolerant, developing their urge to explore in the process of their learning activity [16], can be seen as one of the most important elements in the prevention of extremism.

It is essential that the educational environment do as much as possible to fully satisfy people's need for a positive social

identity. Since a negative attitude toward other social groups is the result of a negative perception of one's own social group, the prevention of prejudice against any other social groups (e.g., migrants) has to begin by shaping people's positive attitude toward their own social group and toward the history and culture of the people and the region. Pride in one's own learning collective, in one's own district and city, has to mark the starting point for a positive sense of identity and for blocking any mechanism of "looking for enemies."

At this point we need to bear in mind the widely prevalent error that consists of using seemingly convenient markers of positive social identity such as examples of confrontation (which the "grandstand patriots" are so fond of doing). "We are better because we beat them" is not the most successful variant of patriotic upbringing. Patriotic upbringing should not consist of merely the military patriotic aspect (e.g., competitions of singing in the ranks and disassembling and assembling machine guns). Working on the prevention of extremism has to focus on the true meaning of patriotism, which is love for one's country and one's people, pride in belonging to one's own society, rather than distrust of others.

A great deal depends on the state of the economy and other conditions of the macro-environment, but even an educational organization can have an influence on the degree of deprivation that leads to aggressive extremism. The teacher's correct choice of examples in the historical and modern perspective can enhance the adolescent's subjective satisfaction with his own position and show the positive dynamic of the social group to which he feels he belongs. Vocational guidance work can shape the student's vision of his personal prospects, and a nonformal attitude toward putting together the student's portfolio can enhance his self-esteem and sense of effectiveness.

Meeting the need for self-respect plays a major role in the prevention of extremism. It is well known that teaching by directive from above increases the deprivation of this need, whereas interacting by way of dialogue leads to the formation of an optimal social outlook. Pedagogical rudeness (which the

teacher considers a parental admonition) gives rise to frustration that is capable (although not necessarily suddenly) of turning into aggression against some more convenient target. Fostering cultivated pedagogical interaction and the teachers' skills of interaction in difficult situations of interpersonal interaction ought to be the focus of constant concern by the administrations of educational organizations.

Putting down initiative, exploratory activity, and "constructive aggressiveness" (an urge to learn and change the world, to pursue creative self-realization) leads to the manifestation of destructive aggression. Well-functioning "social lifts" [*lifty*] for young people who are socially involved, engaged in sports and creative endeavor, and the development of the institution of volunteering, and so on, can serve as an essential resource for the prevention of extremism.

An area of the prevention of extremism that is traditional is education [*prosveshchenie*, enlightenment], the formation of cultural competence (ethnic, religious, etc.). It can be stated confidently that these should not be the main direction, much less the only direction, in the prevention effort. In addition, enlightenment should not consist of nothing more than simply providing information about the characteristics of other social groups. The goal should not be to "reeducate" adolescents who hold extremist views, in the course of discussions about ideas. Their ideas are obviously illogical, and sometimes they do not have any definite views. It is also necessary to take account of the effect of group polarization: public examination of the problem strengthens the group's predominant tendency. It is obvious that ethnocultural competence, for example, should not be shaped by telling stories about ethnic characteristics but, instead, by developing real skills of interaction in the ethnocultural environment. In this regard it is not enough to include members of different social nationalities in a study group or classroom; what is needed is to organize successful activity that is interesting to the young people and they can do together [17].

In preventive work it is useful to use books, videos, and Internet resources to form the values of tolerance, nonviolence,

and multiculturalism. Unfortunately, this resource has not been adequately understood in the pedagogical environment. For example, out of the fifty experts we surveyed, supposedly specialists in the prevention of extremism, only twenty-one, or 42 percent, could name any works of art that are important in preventive work. It is obvious that educational organizations ought to compile lists of recommended films, books, and other materials for preventive work outside of classes. It is also possible to use another means of prevention of extremism such as getting adolescents and young people involved in independent research work, such as preparing abstracts and writing essays and competitive science projects relating to issues of social interaction and multicultural competence.

The vital role in the prevention of youth extremism has to be played by educational organizations. The traditional methods of prevention are not known for their effectiveness, and the stereotypes of "common sense" do not always give a true representation of the nature of extremism. Understanding the root causes of young people's extremist behavior makes it possible to ensure a comprehensive approach, to significantly expand the traditional list of preventive measures, and to suggest a number of effective areas in the prevention of extremism.

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