



The Role of Literary Texts in Relation to The Development and Respect of The Child's Identity

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Abstract: Identity is a very complex structure. There are many aspects of identity and those start to form and develop in early childhood. This study explores specific age-related characteristics of children which influence the forming and shaping of different layers of identity and points out the important role that legislature and various social environment factors have in this process. Special attention is dedicated to the positive influence that preschool teachers and institutions have and to a range of possibilities that literary texts offer in this whole process. Concrete examples illustrate how complex semantic structure of a literary text can initiate conversation about different layers of identity. The advantages of this kind of work are numerous and are reflected in the fact that the development and the strengthening of the identity is approached from an integrative standpoint, given the fact that we are simultaneously working on children's speech development through reading activities and literary text analysis. The main implication of this study is 1) the need for conducting future research with the aim of identifying literary texts which, apart from their aesthetic quality, also possess semantic potential as a tool for learning about identity and 2) further work on strengthening the competences of preschool teachers so that they can integrate activities directed towards development of the child's identity in all the areas of their educational activities within preschool institutions and carrying them out with continuity.

Keywords: child, speech development, literary text, child's right to identity, preschool education, preschool teacher.

Introduction

Respecting the right to identity enables human beings, despite their individuality, to feel accepted by others. If we derive the aspects of identity from the semantic range of this Latin word (*identitas*), we will obtain two meanings between which there is seemingly no semantic congruence. The first meaning conveys "sameness", total agreement and equivalence, whereas the second one represents "a number of characteristics which make one person different from all others" (Klajn and Šipka, 2008, p. 491). The term collective identity is derived from the first meaning and it is established based on the criteria which are the same or identical for everyone, such as race, religion, nation, gender and the like; on the other hand, the term individual or personal identity is derived from the second meaning of the word. It is necessary to integrate personal identity with group identity and this human need to receive guidance, to belong and to have own identity represents one of the distinctive characteristics of human personality (Jerotić, 2002). Problems arise when there is discrepancy between the collective and the personal, especially in the cases when personal identity is not consistent with what is socially acceptable, what offers the feeling of safety and stability, because every society, if it wants to survive, "must shape the character of its members in such a way that they want to do what they basically have to do" (From 1977, p. 224). In the area of personal, social and political determination, there may occur separation between different roles that form personal identity. In this case, social existence actually represents their alignment (Milivojević, 2011). Within individual psychological area, this inner feeling of conflicted roles may lead to identity crisis. The problem can additionally be heightened by the fact that there is generally insufficient tolerance towards anything that differs from the elements which define a group or make it self-distinctive, such as a language, religion, sexual or political orientation, etc. In relation to this, a term ethos of conflict appears. It is defined as "a set of social beliefs related with a violent intergroup conflict" (Međedović and Petrović, 2021, p.

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347). Apart from that, the focus on collective identity within multi-ethnic communities is also observed from a perspective of a majority-minority relationship (Kartag-Odri and Simović-Hiber, 1996). We must also take into consideration the fact that primordial principles related with the belief that national identity is something fixed and permanent have been widely criticized, like the one stating that a person can declare themselves "a member of the human race" or change national identity depending on a broader social setting (Milošević Đorđević, 2003, p. 130). Therefore, "identity is not fixed or singular, but multi-faceted and reflects a range of social, cultural and political influences" (Cooper, 2014, p. 281). All of this indicates that identity is, in fact, a very complex structure, i.e., that there are different aspects of identity, some more visible and some less, therefore, in scientific literature, we talk about layers of identity. Those are related with "gender, ethnic origin, nationality, race, immigration status, religious beliefs, socioeconomic status, skills, etc." (Vranješević, 2019, p. 14).

Vladeta Jerotić points out that identity depends on maturity and that "the main question posed is how much do people actually achieve it throughout life" (Jerotić, 2002, p. 73). Identity acquisition is a process that starts in early childhood. Jelena Vranješević, referring to previous studies, states that children, from an early age, "start to shape their own identity, acquire values and form opinions and preferences related with differences based on gender, ethnicity, race, class, religion, growth impairment or disabilities" (Vranješević, 2019, p. 15). Wrong guidance during this process, as well as disrespect of identity can have far-reaching consequences when it comes to identity development, and vice versa, positive guidance and incentives, as well as the respect of identity in early childhood represent some of the key factors of a versatile identity development. For that reason, in this study, we are going to discuss the importance of the child's right to identity and on the role that literary texts play in the process of the child's identity development and in raising awareness regarding the importance of respecting it, while, at the same time, taking into consideration the uniqueness of the child's personality.

The importance and the role that literary texts have in developing and respecting children's identity is elaborated and analysed in this study. This is a theoretical research that consists of two parts. Special characteristics of the child's growth and development which influence the forming of various layers of identity are analysed in the first part of this study, as well as the legislature which provides special protection to children, given the fact that they belong to a particularly vulnerable category, which also covers the protection of identity and incentives for its development through support from institutions and education system from an early age. In the second part of the study, special characteristics of literary texts written for children which can incentivise conversations about various layers of identity are analysed. A semantic analysis of Ljubivoje Ršumović's poetry for children is conducted for the purpose of identifying such layers. Two poetry collections of this author were analysed in this study (Ršumović, 1979; Ršumović, 2012), and the reason why he was chosen for this study is the fact that Ljubivoje Ršumović has marked "the spirit of an entire literary epoch" in Serbian literature for children (Opačić, 2011, p. 33). The aim of this study is to point out the semantic potential not only of this kind of poetry, but of children's literature in general as an important tool for learning about identity.

Development and Respect of Identity at an Early Age

Self-awareness is an experiential construct that appears in early childhood; "at an early age, as early as when they are 18 months old, children already have a clear idea of their own different and unique identity" (Stojanović, 2016, p. 55). By the age of two, many children start to recognise some of their main characteristics, such as gender, age (they know that they are children, not adults) (Vasta, Haith and Miller, 1997, p. 497). The first form of learning is learning by imitating (mimicking) because, at that point, external perspective dominates. Children form opinion (image) of themselves based on what the others are saying about them, which is why it is very important that those descriptions be positive. Development of self-awareness plays a key role in building relationships with others because "the way they see themselves, children also see others" (Brković, 2011, p. 187). Robert Selman's model of the development of the child's self-awareness (Selman, 1980) suggests that early childhood is a period when a child starts to develop self-awareness.

During this period, the child "differentiates psychological states from behaviour and believes that thoughts can control actions" (Vasta, Haith and Miller, 1997 p. 489). This occurs between the ages of 2 and 7. According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, this period is characterised by spontaneous interindividual feelings (affection, sympathy and antipathy) and social relationships of submission to adults (Piaget and Inhelder, 1978). Opinions are pre-operationalised because children use representations, due to symbolic and semiotic function. Even self-evaluation is too positive during this period (Butler,

1990, p. 201). Later on, as the child grows, it diminishes and so, the question of the influence on child development leads to important connection of developmental and social psychology, at a conceptual level (Pomerantz and Newman, 2000). The results of some recent studies are encouraging because they suggest that professionals included in the institutional protection of children aged 3 or less are aware that their identity is developed in this period and that it is important to understand and respect differences among children, their families and communities. Nonetheless, there is the need to improve the work in these areas (Dermendzhieva, 2019).

At the age of six, children start to talk about less visible traits of their personality, such as emotions and they base descriptions of themselves on social comparisons to other children. They even start valuing the information obtained in this way. Moreover, "believing that one is competent or capable of handling a particular task, can be highly motivating" (Cole et al., 1999, p. 459). Erroneous upbringing at this age can have serious consequences on further development of personality because "difficulties during one developmental period contribute to specific difficulties in a succeeding period, resulting in increasingly broad areas of dysregulation over time" (Lyons-Ruth and Brumariu, 2021, p. 32). Consequences can be manifested through various forms of asocial behaviour or through lack of self-esteem and self-confidence because, positive sense of identity is crucial for the child's development (Pulido-Tobiassen and Gonzalez-Mena, 1999). Many developmental changes in this period are caused by cognitive, socio-cognitive and socio-contextual factors (Higgins and Parsons, 1983), which is why many studies explore the role that peers, parents, preschool teachers and educators, as well as everyone else within the child's immediate environment play in the process of personality development (see Bridgett et al., 2016; Brown et al., 2009; Cassidy, 1988; Harris, 1995; Hay, 2005; Hoffman, 1989; Kochanska, 2001; Papadopoulos, 2021; Parke and Buriel, 1998; Pomytkina et al., 2021; Stojanović, 2016; Kursch, 2017; Wilkinson and Marrett, 1985).

Apart from the importance of forming a positive image (opinion) of themselves for the development of their identity, children also need to feel safe at an early age, they need to trust and develop positive feelings towards people around them. Such endeavours are also recognized and regulated by law, which is why children, as especially vulnerable category, are provided with special protection in the Republic of Serbia, regulated by legislation on various levels, starting with The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Ustav Republike Srbije, 2006), through Family Law (Porodični zakon, 2005), and all the way to the laws which regulate the fundamentals of preschool, primary school and secondary school education system (Zakon o predškolskom vaspitanju i obrazovanju, 2010; Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2017). This is a form of legal protection also regulated at international level. One of the most important international treaties which regulates children's rights is The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (The Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted at the 44th UN General Assembly on 20th November, 1989.). Article 8 of the Convention states that States Parties undertake to "respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference" (Zakon o ratifikaciji Konvencije Ujedinjenih nacija o pravima deteta, 1990). The Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by its State Parties. Based on the reports handed in by the State Parties, the Committee concluded that there is insufficient information regarding the child's rights implemented in early childhood, which is why General Comment no 7 (Opšti komentar br. 7, 2005). Article 4 of the General Comment no 7 defines early childhood as period before the age of 8, whereas Article 5 requires that young children be respected as persons in their own right and recognized as active members of society. In this regard, Martin Woodhead points out that we should not see early childhood as a period for investment opportunities in terms of exploiting human capital, because "the rights of the child are not fully realized if our understanding of children is based on the evaluation of the level that the child reached on his/her way to achieving the maturity, the rationality, the responsibility, the autonomy and the competence of an adult" (Vudhed, 2012. p. 59). On the same note, The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that State Parties include human rights education within early childhood education and within early childhood education programmes (see article 33, Opšti komentar br. 7).

At the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the Republic of Serbia, a new concept of The Fundamentals of the Preschool Education System Programme was created – Years of Ascent (Pravilnik o osnovama programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2018). It is a concept based on "contemporary theoretical knowledge of childhood, learning and development of children at an early age", which means that the child is seen as "a unique and whole being", "as a person with unique abilities and equal rights to have his/her uniqueness recognized and respected", and preschool is seen as a place of democratic and inclusive practice which "respects gender, cultural, health and any other kind of diversity and develops sensitivity to discrimination (gender, cultural, social, national origin discrimination...), where special attention is paid to the inclusion of children belonging to more vulnerable groups" (see Pravilnik o osnovama

programa predškolskog vaspitanja i obrazovanja, 2018, p. 2, 6, and 9). Such endeavour requires changes within educational paradigms, which is why the contemporary competences of preschool teachers are based on the values of respecting a democratic and an inclusive approach to preschool education which respects differences, the child's rights, develops social and cultural identity and the sense of belonging through participation within peer community, preschool and local community and promotes democracy, solidarity, activism, creativity, well-being and personal fulfilment of the child ([Pravilnik o Standardima kompetencija za profesiju vaspitača i njegovog profesionalnog razvoja, 2018, p. 46](#)). Therefore, we should work on these values in our daily educational practice. We have seen that they are based on respecting the rights of the child as a citizen, and one of the fundamental rights is, in fact, the right to identity. Jelena Vranješević, referring to [Derman-Spark \(2004\)](#), points out that respecting various aspects of identity makes it possible to view diversity as an opportunity to learn and develop, because in the environment in which diversity is respected "a) every child feels that they belong to the group, b) every child feels that their personality is respected, and finally c) children learn from each other with joy" ([Vranješević, 2019, p. 14](#)). It is the responsibility of the preschool teacher to create such a stimulating environment and to use every opportunity to encourage children to express their personality freely and without fear of ridicule. "It is important to appreciate the distinctive ways in which children express their identity through friendship, play and many forms of social interaction" ([Cooper, 2014, p. 281](#)), and one of the ways to implement this in practice is through the use of literary texts.

The Role and the Importance of Literary Texts in Relation to the Development and Respect of the Child's Identity

The use of literary texts as a language paradigm in relation to the development and respect of the child's identity originates from the fact that literary texts, apart from their aesthetic effect, also have "much broader significance within human experience, primarily as a catalyst for active support of the development and education" ([Petrović, 2011, pp. 157–158](#)). Jovan Ljuštanović points out that contemporary prose and poetry for children are inspired with the idea "of a free, self-aware child, of a child as an active participant, not only within his/her small child's world, but also within family, school, and even society itself" ([Ljuštanović, 2012, pp. 177](#)). Children's authors do not underestimate the child's personality, but rather address children as equals, not from the perspective of what the child will become but from the perspective of the child as a person that he/she is, and, at the same time, through the content of their literary work they reveal "the deepest meaning of life" to the child ([Smiljković, 2019, p. 101](#)). Therefore, it is necessary to make the most of the numerous potentials that children's literature possesses, such as "play, humour, silliness and the miraculous" because this is a form of artistic creation which "bursts with stimulative energy" ([Milinković, 2014, p. 529](#)). Apart from that, "literary texts for children have to be interesting and engaging, to motivate over and over again with their unexpected and dynamic action and to stir up the reader's curiosity by the principal of 'what happens next'" ([Stakić, 2014a, p. 247](#)). Literary works written for children incentivise imagination and creativity because children become engrossed in the created reality and they identify with the characters. This engrossment and this identification play an important role in the identity development process because the development and the strengthening of the identity must be rooted in the child's real life ([Warin, 2011](#)). All this, in fact, creates excellent grounds for preschool teachers/educators to initiate conversations about issues and problems which are related to different aspects of the child's identity.

It is the responsibility of preschool teachers/educators to select literary texts whose topics and motifs will initiate and motivate this interaction for the purpose of awakening children's potential to strengthen their personality and self-esteem. Apart from that, literary texts must match interests and abilities of the child in accordance with his/her age because, "the child's age is a critical criterion whether the literary text will be accepted or not" ([Stakić, 2014a, p. 244](#)). One of the characteristic of children age 5 to 7 is that they show interest for the imaginary and fantastic world of fairy tales. Experiences incentivised by literary texts are "naïve and stimulated by unconditional faith in what is being presented with the artistic world of the literary text" ([Stakić, 2014b, p. 147](#)). Children in this age group also like stories with animals, as well as humorous or silly lyric poems whose lyrical subjects are – children. An important advantage that lyric poems have is that they are short and they hold the child's attention, and at the same time, they transmit messages in a way that the child can understand them. One of the reasons for this may be the fact that poets neither underestimate nor overestimate the personality and the potential of the child, but rather accept the child as he/she is at a given moment of the development process. The perfect illustration of this are the following verses taken from Ljubivoje Ršumović's poem "The Message" ("Poruka"): "You

must observe a child / But don't stand in their way / The sooner you start treating them as a person / The sooner a person they'll become" (Ršumović, 2012, p. 14). Similar literary texts can be a starting point for conversations on various issues and problems related to the development and the respect of the child's identity. This requires great effort, hard work and expertise on the part of preschool teachers/educators due to the fact that it is crucially important to conduct a thorough research of the semantic layers of literary texts written for children for the purpose of finding those whose layers of meaning can incentivise conversations about different layers of identity, while respecting and taking into consideration age criteria.

Therefore, the first and probably the most important thing that a preschool teacher/educator must do is to identify and select literary texts which possess semantic potential as a means of learning about identity. We are going to illustrate this using the example of the right of the child to have a name which is a constituent part of personal identity. Children become aware of their name at an early age, but it is also important that they understand the importance of the very act of giving a name as something that singles out the individuality of what we really are. Ljubivoje Ršumović's poem "In the Field Where Jackdaws Live" (U polju gde čavke čavče) (Ršumović, 2012) is simply perfect for this because its poetic structure contains narrative elements of a story about a little ant who was born amidst millions of yellow ants: "In the field where jackdaws live/ Surrounded with thick grass / A little blue ant was born / Amidst millions of yellow ants" (Ršumović, 2012, p. 99). Children will understand the little ant's request which he made addressing the adults and demanding to be given a name, because the name denotes not only its right to exist, to live, but also a way in which it singles itself out as a person: "Ants have better things to do / You were born blue, so what? / But the little ant decisively replied / EXCUSE ME, BUT I WANT A NAME" (Ršumović, 2012, p. 99). The little ant in the poem also demands that its date of birth be recorded because it wants to celebrate its birthday. Birthdays are also an important topic for children because they represent a very special day when the child was born and the day when he/she is the centre of attention. Visible manifestations of attention and love that the child receives on this occasion – are important because they reinforce the feeling of self-esteem. Furthermore, "early friendships and positive relations with peer groups appear to protect children against later psychological problems" (Hay, 2005, p. 4).

Apart from this poem, many other Ljubivoje Ršumović's poems are excellent for initiating conversations on different layers of identity, such as gender, sense of belonging (to family, social group, nation), origin and the like. We have chosen this author as a perfect example because he is "among children, one of the most popular contemporary poets" (Stakić and Maričić, 2019, p. 478) and because there is literally no child in Serbia who cannot sing or recite verses from some of his poems ("Wolf, Wolf, You Lazybones" ("Vuče, vuče, bubo lenja"), "We Went to Africa" ("Išli smo u Afriku"), "The Bogeyman" ("Babaroga"), "Ten Angry Pirates" ("Deset ljutih gusara"), ("The Mouse Caught the Flu") ("Miš je dobio grip"), "The Stick Has It Easy" ("Lako je prutu") and many others). Apart from all that, literary theorists point out that his literary work "Bukvar, which teaches and nurtures, is an irreplaceable tool for developing humanism, veracity, solidarity, self-confidence, optimism, tolerance and self-criticism" (Petrović, 2019, 326). The results of previous studies of his literary work show that Ljubivoje Ršumović's literary creation makes it possible to focus on "diversity within the domains of gender and on finding ways to overcome gender stereotypes" (Purić and Čutović, 2019, p. 464).

Some of the verses from Ljubivoje Ršumović's collection of poetry are identified in Table 1: Let's Grow (Hajde da rastemo) (Ršumović, 1979) and Speak Your Mind (Što na umu to na drumu) (Ršumović, 2012). Those can be an excellent starting point for preschool teachers/educators to initiate conversations with children about different layers of identity.

Table 1
Semantic potentials of Ljubivoje Ršumović's poetry as motivators for learning about identity

Identity layers	Ljubivoje Ršumović's poetry	
	Poem	Verses
Giving a name	<i>In the Field Where Jackdaws Live</i>	"And they gave him a name / Without feast, without celebration / So the little ant cried again / I want this day to be a matter of (public) record, so write it down" (2012, p. 99).
	<i>Tell the Bird That It's a Bird</i>	"Tell the Bird That It's a Bird / Nightingale / Sparrow / Falcon / Woodpecker / Tell the river that it's a river / Danube / Sava / Tisa / Una" (1979, p. 117).
	<i>Announcement</i>	"I'm as handsome as my uncle / And as smart as my aunt / I wonder who created me like this / That's all they worry about" (2012, p. 31).
Gender	<i>Mom and Dad are Arguing</i>	"She is AS BEAUTIFUL AS HER MOM / But he is AS SMART AS HIS DAD / The voices are raised / And then the argument starts, even the war" (2012, p. 35).
	<i>Let it Rain</i>	"Let it rain, it'd be good for me / So that I can grow up by autumn / So that I can get married / Exclaimed this robust boy / Called Milan" (1979, p. 26).
	<i>Grandma and Grandpa Sitting on a Bench</i>	"Grandma and grandpa are sitting / On a bench in Kalemegdan park / And talking about dates and agreeing that / Dates are pretty silly" (1979, p. 90).
	<i>If Anyone Asks</i>	"If anyone asks / Why I'm on a diet / It's because I love this girl / More than anything in the whole wide world" (2012, p. 24).
	<i>Cows look after their calves</i>	"Cows look after their calves / protect them from anyone who wishes them harm / Goats protect their kids, hens protect their chicks / Everyone protects the ones they love" (1979, p. 77).
	<i>Announcement</i>	"I am my auntie's angel / My granny's pride and joy / My grandpa's colossus / the spitting image of my father" (2012, p. 31).
Family and family ties	<i>Storks don't deliver brothers</i>	"One beautiful day / Mommy came home with a big smile on her face / Straight from the maternity ward / As if it were nothing / And right away said my mother / I'VE BROUGHT YOU A BROTHER" (2012, p. 33).
	<i>Mother</i>	"We asked the doggy and the kitty / All of them said something pretty / Mother, that's love as gentle as a beautiful dove / Mother, that's light in the middle of the night" (2012, p. 40).
Belonging and unity (friendship)	<i>Song about Friendship</i>	"Our kingdom welcomes / Any royalty / Because, there's no crown or throne / More beautiful than friendship" (2012, p. 20).
	<i>Friendship</i>	"Everyone should know / What friendship means / Together, we're more beautiful / Together, we're much stronger" (2012, p. 18).
	<i>What Is It</i>	"What is it that's pulling me back / To the place where I was born, to my hometown / To the place where my brothers live / To the land upon which my father walks" (2012, p. 138).
Origin and nationality	<i>Homeland is defended with beauty</i>	"Homeland is defended with rivers / and with fish in the water / And with a tall slender spruce / That grows in freedom" (1979, p. 124);
	<i>Elephant</i>	"His grandad is an elephant / His dad is an elephant / His uncle is an elephant / His cousin is an elephant / And his brother is an elephant / So, what is he then" (1979, p. 74).
Social position	<i>Wolf, Wolf, You Lazybones</i>	"In school he's never seen / He knows nothing about art or sculpture / In a museum, he's never been / He despises culture" (2012, p. 95).
	<i>This is a poem about a king</i>	"This is a poem about a king / Who fell in love with a laundress / At the time of the nights / When they loved until their last fights" (1979, p. 104).

Apart from poetry, as it has already been stated above, many other types of literary texts can initiate conversation about numerous issues related to growth and development, even identity problems which children normally face. In this way, these texts can raise awareness regarding the child's right to identity, which, in itself, represents a very good way of developing and strengthening personality. Moreover, the advantages of this kind of work are visible and are backed up by the fact that educational part of the work is integrated with the development of speech – reading and text analysis at preschool level contribute greatly to the expansion of the child's vocabulary, to morphological and syntax development, and they also incentivise aesthetic potentials in children, their future reading habits and affinity for their mother tongue and literature in general.

Conclusion

The significance of the results obtained through research, regarding early childhood development, has been recognised and the professional opinion of educators and experts who work on educating children about the importance of various types of influence on identity development is accepted and included within legislature which regulates preschool education not only in The Republic of Serbia but also worldwide. It has been acknowledged that the encouragement of self-confidence, self-esteem, talent, optimism and joy of living constitutes important segment of early childhood development, and it is now crucially important to put theoretical endeavours into practice and implement activities directed towards the strengthening of the identity in all aspects of educational activity within preschool institutions. Literary texts represent one way of achieving this because, their semantic potential can be a motivational factor when it comes to learning about identity and can be very important for the child's development and also for raising awareness, from an early age, about the importance of respecting the right to identity of every human being.

The advantages of this kind of work are reflected in the integration of identity development with other areas of educational work at the preschool level, especially with the speech and language development of the child. This is the reason why it is necessary to identify literary texts which, apart from satisfying age and aesthetic quality criteria, also possess the semantic potential as a tool for learning about identity. It is also necessary to provide teachers with support so that they can strengthen methodical competence and then continuously implement such integrative activities. That represents the main educational implication of this study. In conclusion, the strengthening of identity at preschool level influences the quality of life later on because "a sense of self is a resource for coping and managing our social experiences" (Warin, 2011, p. 20) and "early childhood program can foster children's self-esteem and build the foundation for future relationships with others" (Raburu, 2015, p. 95). Therefore, the importance of this topic prompts the need for further research in this area.

Acknowledgements

The paper was created as part of the project Teaching and Learning: Problems, Goals and Perspectives, No. 179026, implemented by the Faculty of Education in Užice, and funded by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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