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**Gabrijela B. Grujić<sup>1</sup>**

**Gorana G. Lapčević<sup>2</sup>**

**Vanja Z. Đorđević<sup>3</sup>**

University of Belgrade, Faculty of Education, Belgrade, Serbia

## **PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN PRESCHOOL: READINESS FOR PARTICIPATION AND BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT**

**Abstract:** This study examined parents' attitudes toward the importance of physical activity in preschool, their readiness to participate in physical education activities, perceived barriers to involvement, and preferred forms of cooperation with preschool teachers. The study was conducted on a sample of 50 parents whose children attend the "Čukarica" Preschool in Belgrade, using a structured questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests. The results showed that parents expressed strongly positive attitudes toward the role of physical activity in children's health, motor development, and psychosocial well-being. However, their actual participation was conditioned by personal opportunities, motivation, educational level, and organizational conditions within the preschool. The most frequently reported barriers were lack of time, unsuitable activity schedules, and feelings of insecurity, while the most encouraging forms of cooperation were short, well-organized, and enjoyable activities, such as family sports days, movement workshops, and eco-walks. Activities led by preschool teachers were rated more favorably than those involving external sports specialists. The findings indicate the need to develop diverse, accessible, and flexible models of cooperation that strengthen family-preschool partnership and promote greater parental involvement in preschool physical education.

**Keywords:** physical education, questionnaire, parental involvement, preschool teacher

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1 gabrijela.grujic@uf.bg.ac.rs , <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2083-5606>

2 gorana.lapcevic@chartwell.edu.rs /

3 vanja.prazina@gmail.com /

## INTRODUCTION

Physical activity represents a fundamental component of healthy growth and development in early childhood. In addition to its effects on physical health and motor competence, regular movement contributes to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (Malina, Bouchard, & Bar-Or, 2004). Early childhood is a critical period for the formation of lifelong habits related to movement, play, and an active lifestyle, which are shaped primarily within the family environment and subsequently reinforced through institutional education (Bala, 2007; Džinović, Martinović, & Kojić, 2018). Preschool institutions play an important role in providing structured and developmentally appropriate physical activities (Bala, 2007). However, the effectiveness of institutional programs depends to a large extent on the continuity between preschool practices and family support at home. Previous studies have shown that parents' attitudes toward physical activity, parental modeling, and parental involvement in educational activities are significant predictors of children's activity levels and motor development in preschool settings (Janković, 2011; Džinović, 2019).

Contemporary pedagogical approaches therefore emphasize the partnership between families and preschool institutions as a prerequisite for high-quality early childhood education. Parental involvement in preschool physical education may take multiple forms, including participation in joint activities, collaboration in planning and evaluation, and support for physical activity in the home environment (Vandell, Simpkins, & Wegemer, 2019). Such involvement is associated not only with children's higher engagement and positive attitudes toward movement, but also with stronger family-school relationships and a more positive educational climate (Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011).

Despite the recognized importance of family and preschool cooperation, empirical evidence indicates that parental participation in organized preschool activities is often limited (Vandell et al., 2019). Commonly reported barriers include lack of time, work obligations, organizational constraints, and feelings of insecurity regarding personal competence for active participation (Pavlović, Breneselović, & Krijak, 2014). Moreover, there is a lack of studies that simultaneously examine parents' attitudes, readiness for participation, perceived barriers, and preferred forms of cooperation specifically in the domain of preschool physical education.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to examine: (1) parents' attitudes toward the importance of physical activity for children's development; (2) their readiness to participate in the planning and implementation of preschool physical education activities; (3) perceived barriers to their involvement; and (4) preferred forms of cooperation with preschool teachers. By identifying key facilitators and obstacles, this study aims to provide empirical evidence relevant for strengthening family-preschool partnerships in early childhood physical education.

## METHODS

### 2.1. *Study Design*

A cross-sectional descriptive survey design was employed to examine parents' perceptions and experiences related to involvement in preschool physical education activities.

### 2.2. *Participants*

The study sample comprised 50 parents whose children attended a public preschool institution (PU "Čukarica", Banovo Brdo facility) in Belgrade, Serbia. With regard to educational attainment, 28% of the parents had completed post-secondary education, 24% had completed secondary education, and 24% held a master's or doctoral degree. A smaller proportion had completed higher education (16%), while 8% had completed primary education.

Overall, the sample exhibited a heterogeneous educational structure, enabling the analysis of parental attitudes across different socio-educational backgrounds..

### 2.3. *Instrument*

Data were collected using an author-developed questionnaire comprising four scales: i) Attitudes toward the importance of physical activity (6 items), ii) Readiness for participation (6 items), iii) Barriers to participation (6 items), iv) Preferred forms of cooperation (6 items). Questionnaires were distributed to parents through preschool teachers and collected within two weeks. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (ranged between :  $\alpha = 0.81$  and 0.88). These values indicate satisfactory reliability for all subscales.

### 2.5 *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20.0). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize parents' responses. To examine differences in attitudes according to independent variables, independent-samples t-tests were conducted. The level of statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Results are presented in tables and interpreted in relation to the stated hypotheses and relevant findings from previous literature.

## RESULTS

This section reports findings on parents' (a) attitudes toward the importance of physical activity for preschool children's development, (b) readiness to participate in the planning and implementation of preschool physical education activities, (c) perceived barriers to involvement, (d) preferred forms of cooperation, and (e) suggestions provided in the open-ended question. Results are structured according to the study objectives and are presented in tables and figures.

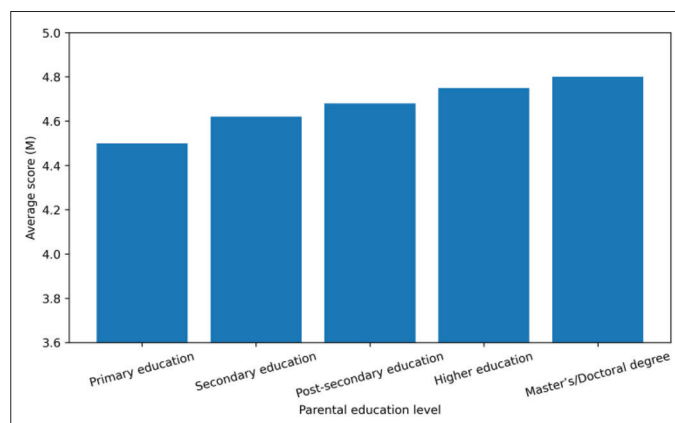
3.1. Parents attitudes toward the importance of physical activity for children's overall development

Parents reported consistently high agreement regarding the importance of physical activity for children's health and development (M = 4.56-4.82; Table 1). The highest agreement was observed for the impact of physical activity on children's health and immunity (M = 4.82, SD = 0.41), followed by its role in psychosocial development (M = 4.70, SD = 0.52). High scores were also recorded for the importance of early motor development and the negative consequences of insufficient physical activity.

**Table 1.** Parents attitudes towards the importance of physical activity for child development

No	Statement	M	SD
1	Regular physical activity and play positively affect the child's health and immunity	4.82	0.41
2	Physical activities promote the development of the child's self-confidence and social skills	4.70	0.52
3	Early development of motor skills is important for later success in sports and school	4.65	0.55
4	Educators play a significant role in fostering a positive attitude toward movement in children	4.56	0.63
5	A lack of physical activity in early childhood can negatively affect the child's development	4.60	0.57
6	Physical activities in preschool contribute to the overall development of the child's personality	4.68	0.49

Parents with higher educational attainment reported slightly higher scores, particularly regarding the pedagogical role of preschool teachers. A statistically significant difference was observed for this item,  $t(48) = 2.11, p = 0.04$  (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Parents' Attitude Scores toward the Importance of Physical Activity by Educational Level

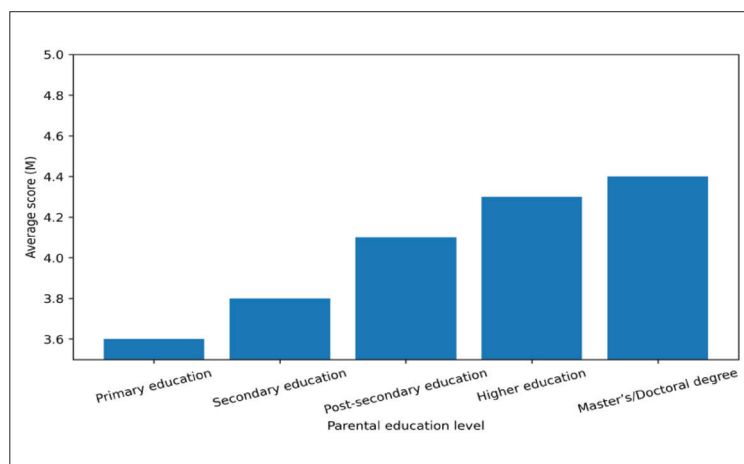
### 3.2. Parents readiness to participate in planning and implementing physical education activities

Parents demonstrated moderate-to-high readiness to participate in preschool physical education activities ( $M = 3.76-4.34$ ; Table 2). They expressed the greatest willingness to engage in activities organized by the preschool, while lower scores were observed for more demanding forms of involvement, such as participation in planning and time commitment.

**Table 2.** Readiness to participate in the planning and implementation of physical education activities

No	Statement	M	SD
7	I am willing to participate in the planning of sports and recreational activities in kindergarten	3.82	0.88
8	I like to propose ideas for movement and outdoor play activities	4.05	0.79
9	I look forward to opportunities to participate in activities organized by the kindergarten with my child	4.34	0.61
10	I am willing to dedicate time for joint physical education workshops	3.76	0.92
11	I want to collaborate with teachers in designing content that will motivate children to be active	4.12	0.74
12	It is important to me that my voice is considered in creating the physical education program	3.95	0.83

Parents with higher educational attainment reported greater readiness for active participation. A statistically significant difference was observed for collaboration with teachers,  $t(48) = 2.27$ ,  $p = .03$  (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Level of Parents' Readiness to Participate in Physical Education Activities by Educational Level

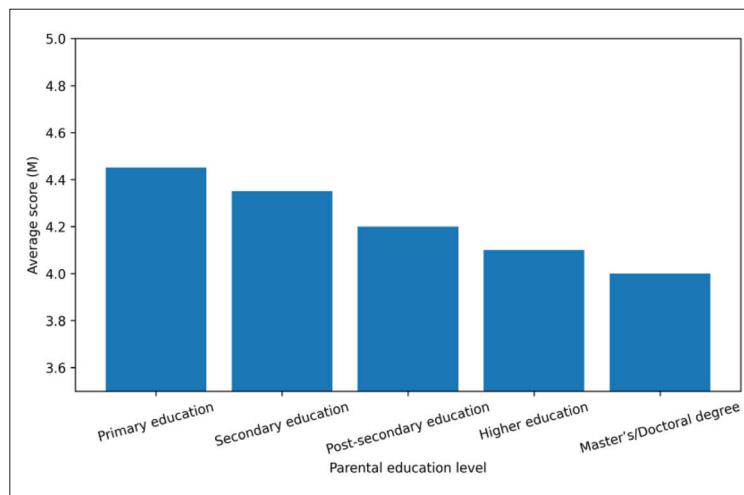
### 3.3. Barriers limiting parental involvement in physical education activities

Time-related constraints emerged as the dominant barriers to parental involvement (M = 4.40-4.48; Table 3). Parents also reported issues related to scheduling and insufficient information, while feelings of insecurity were moderately expressed. Financial and logistical factors were rated as less important barriers.

**Table 3.** Barriers to parents participation in physical education activities

No	Statement	M	SD
13	My work obligations often prevent me from participating in kindergarten activities	4.40	0.79
14	Lack of time is the main barrier to my participation in joint physical activities	4.48	0.73
15	I do not have enough information about when and how the activities are organized	3.76	0.90
16	Sometimes I feel insecure because I think I don't have enough skills to participate	3.34	1.02
17	Financial or organizational constraints (equipment, transportation, costs) limit my participation	2.86	1.15
18	The activities are sometimes organized at times that don't suit me.	4.02	0.84

Differences in perceived barriers by educational level were described as modest: parents with higher education more frequently emphasized the need for clearer and more timely communication, whereas parents with lower education somewhat more often reported insecurity about their competence. These differences were not statistically significant (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Barriers to Parents' Involvement in Physical Education Activities by Educational Level

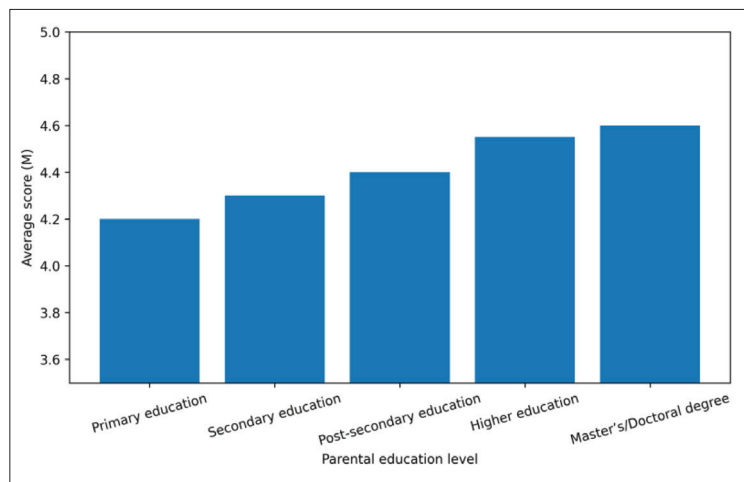
### 3.4. Preferred forms of cooperation and activities

Parents showed a clear preference for short, well-structured, and easily accessible activities ( $M = 4.12-4.56$ ; Table 4). Activities led by preschool teachers and those requiring minimal preparation were rated most favorably. Family-oriented activities, such as sports days and movement workshops, were also highly valued, while activities involving external experts received slightly lower ratings.

**Table 4.** Methods of Implementing Dance and Physical Activities in the Educational Process

No	Statement	M	SD
19	I prefer activities that last up to one hour and do not require special preparation	4.56	0.63
20	I look forward to Family Sports Days in the kindergarten yard or park	4.48	0.67
21	Movement and dance workshops at kindergarten are an interesting way to participate together	4.42	0.70
22	I would like to participate in walks, eco-activities, and spending time in nature with my child	4.28	0.76
23	It is easiest for me to participate when activities are led by teachers and well organized	4.50	0.65
24	Activities in cooperation with parents who are sports professionals or coaches make the program more attractive	4.12	0.82

Differences by parental education level were observed in the type of activities preferred. Parents with higher educational attainment reported higher mean scores for educational workshops and developmentally oriented activities, whereas parents with lower educational attainment reported higher preference for simple, recreational forms of participation. As shown in Figure 4, mean preference scores increased with parental education level, with the highest values recorded among parents with higher and Master's/Doctoral education (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Parents' Preferred Forms of Cooperation by Educational Level

### 3.5. *Open-ended responses: what would increase parents' participation?*

A total of 46 parents (92%) responded to the open-ended question regarding what would encourage greater participation. The most frequently mentioned suggestion was more flexible scheduling (afternoons/weekends; 39%). This was followed by the need for better and timely communication regarding the content and timing of activities (30%).

Parents also suggested offering more attractive and engaging activities (e.g., obstacle courses, dance, games; 26%) and shorter, simple activities lasting up to one hour (22%). Additional suggestions included encouragement from teachers (15%), inclusion of the wider family (siblings, grandparents; 11%), and the involvement of external experts such as coaches (9%).

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined key dimensions of parental involvement in preschool physical education, including parental attitudes, readiness for participation, perceived barriers, preferred forms of cooperation, and factors that may facilitate greater engagement. Overall, the findings indicate that parents strongly recognize the developmental importance of physical activity, show a generally positive readiness for cooperation, but face substantial practical constraints, primarily time-related, that limit their actual involvement.

### 4.1. *Parents' recognition of the importance of physical activity*

A central finding of this study is the uniformly high level of parental agreement regarding the importance of physical activity for children's health, motor development, and psychosocial functioning. Mean scores above 4.5 across all attitude items indicate a stable and strongly positive perception, consistent with previous research (Malina et al., 2004; Džinović-Kojić, 2011).

Parents with higher educational attainment expressed significantly stronger recognition of the pedagogical role of preschool teachers, which aligns with studies linking parental education with greater awareness of developmental and educational processes (Janković, 2011; Pavlović Breneselović, & Krnjaja, 2017). From a socio-cultural perspective, this supports the view that adults play a mediating role in shaping learning environments and modeling health-related behaviors (Hu, Wu, & Kong, 2022). Parental recognition thus represents a necessary foundation for effective family-preschool partnership.

### 4.2. *Readiness for participation: willingness versus initiative*

Although parents reported moderate to high readiness for participation, they were more willing to join already organized activities than to assume an active role in planning or initiating programs. This suggests that parental involvement is shaped not only by motivation, but also by perceived role boundaries and self-efficacy.

Parents appear to view preschool teachers as primary experts responsible for program design, while their own role is perceived as supportive rather than co-constructive, a pattern also reported in

earlier studies (Epstein, 2011; Larocque et al., 2011). Higher-educated parents showed greater readiness for active participation, likely due to higher perceived competence and communication skills. These findings highlight the importance of the institutional climate: teachers' invitations, communication style, and structuring of activities can substantially influence the level and form of parental engagement.

#### *4.3. Barriers to involvement: time as the dominant constraint*

The most consistent barrier identified in this study was lack of time and work-related obligations. These two factors received the highest mean scores among all perceived obstacles. This finding replicates a large body of research showing that time pressure is the primary constraint on parental involvement in contemporary societies (Pavlović, Breneselović, & Krnjaja, 2017; Larocque et al., 2011; Epstein, 2011). Conversely, financial constraints were rated as the least relevant barrier, suggesting that material resources are not the main limiting factor in this context. Instead, the results point to a structural mismatch between institutional schedules and family time patterns. Activities organized during working hours or early mornings systematically exclude a large proportion of working parents, regardless of their motivation. Differences by educational level were modest but theoretically meaningful: higher-educated parents emphasized communication issues, whereas lower-educated parents more often reported insecurity about their own competence. This pattern supports the idea that different social groups face qualitatively different barriers—informational versus psychological—which requires differentiated strategies of support. Based on current findings it seems that increasing parental involvement is not primarily a matter of increasing motivation, but rather of organizational redesign: flexible scheduling, diversified formats, and systematic communication.

#### *4.4. Preferred forms of cooperation: simplicity, structure, and familiarity*

Parents clearly preferred activities that were short, well-organized, and conducted in familiar settings. The highest-rated items referred to activities lasting up to one hour, family sports days in the preschool yard or park, and teacher-led workshops. This preference for simple and time-efficient activities reflects the realities of contemporary family life and supports earlier findings that parental involvement increases when participation requires minimal preparation and low logistical complexity (Epstein, 2011; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004). Interestingly, collaboration with external sports experts was rated lower than teacher-led activities. This suggests that relational trust and familiarity with preschool teachers may be more important motivators than professional specialization. Parents appear to value emotional safety, informal atmosphere, and existing relationships more than technical expertise. Differences by educational level further indicate that higher-educated parents value activities with a stronger educational component, whereas lower-educated parents prioritize recreational and relational aspects. This finding underscores the need for diversified program models that combine educational and recreational elements to address heterogeneous parental expectations.

#### 4.5. *What would increase participation: convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings*

The open-ended responses strongly converged with the quantitative results. Flexible scheduling, better communication, short and engaging activities, and teacher encouragement emerged as the most powerful facilitators of parental participation. This convergence strengthens the internal validity of the study. It also confirms that parents limited involvement is not due to low interest, but to structural and organizational constraints that can be modified at the institutional level (Hornby & Lafaele, 2023). The expressed desire to include the wider family (siblings, grandparents) is particularly noteworthy, as it points toward the potential of intergenerational models of participation, which remain underexplored in preschool physical education research.

#### 4.6. *Theoretical and practical implications*

From a theoretical perspective, the results support partnership models of preschool education that conceptualize parents and teachers as complementary agents in children's development (Epstein, 2011). They also align with socio-cultural theories emphasizing joint activity as a core mechanism of learning and development (Hu et al., 2022).

From a practical perspective, several implications emerge:

- Preschool institutions should prioritize flexible scheduling, including late-afternoon and weekend activities.
- Communication should be systematic, timely, and multimodal (digital platforms, weekly notices).
- Activities should be short, simple, and well-structured, with a strong emphasis on joint parent-child participation.
- Teachers should actively empower parents with lower education through encouragement, clear instructions, and positive feedback.
- Program design should integrate both educational and recreational components to address diverse parental expectations.

#### 4.7. *Limitations and future directions*

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single preschool institution, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied exclusively on parental self-report, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Third, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inference. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and objective measures of actual parental participation. Further studies could also examine the effects of specific intervention models aimed at increasing parental involvement in preschool physical education.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the present study demonstrates that parents strongly value physical activity in preschool and express willingness to participate, but that their involvement is primarily constrained by time-related and organizational barriers. Educational level shapes both perceptions and forms of participation, indicating the need for differentiated support strategies. By adapting schedules, improving communication, and designing accessible activities, preschool institutions can significantly strengthen family–preschool partnerships in the domain of physical education.

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**Gabrijela B. Grujić<sup>4</sup>**

**Gorana G. Lapčević<sup>5</sup>**

**Vanja Z. Đorđević<sup>6</sup>**

Univerzitet u Beogradu, Fakultet za obrazovanje  
učitelja i vaspitača, Beograd, Srbija

## **PERSPEKTIVE RODITELJA O FIZIČKOJ AKTIVNOSTI U PREDŠKOLSKOM UZRASTU: SPREMNOST ZA UČEŠĆE I PREPREKE ZA UKLJUČIVANJE**

**Sažetak:** Ovo istraživanje ispitivalo je stavove roditelja o značaju fizičke aktivnosti u predškolskom uzrastu, njihovu spremnost za učešće u aktivnostima fizičkog vaspitanja, uočene prepreke za uključivanje, kao i preferirane oblike saradnje s vaspitačima. Istraživanje je sprovedeno na uzorku od 50 roditelja čija deca pohađaju Predškolsku ustanovu „Čukarica“ u Beogradu, primenom strukturisanog upitnika. Podaci su analizirani korišćenjem deskriptivne statistike i t-testa za nezavisne uzorke. Rezultati su pokazali da roditelji izražavaju izrazito pozitivne stavove o ulozi fizičke aktivnosti u zdravlju dece, motoričkom razvoju i psihosocijalnom blagostanju. Međutim, njihovo stvarno učešće uslovljeno je ličnim mogućnostima, motivacijom, obrazovnim nivoom i organizacionim uslovima u okviru predškolske ustanove. Najčešće prijavljene prepreke bile su nedostatak vremena, neadekvatni termini aktivnosti i osećaj nesigurnosti, dok su najpoželjniji oblici saradnje bili kratke, dobro organizovane i zanimljive aktivnosti, poput porodičnih sportskih dana, sportskih radionica i eko-šetnji. Aktivnosti koje vode vaspitači ocenjene su povoljnije u odnosu na aktivnosti koje uključuju spoljne sportske stručnjake. Nalazi ukazuju na potrebu razvoja raznovrsnih, dostupnih i fleksibilnih modela saradnje koji jačaju partnerstvo porodice i predškolske ustanove i podstiču veće učešće roditelja u fizičkom vaspitanju dece predškolskog uzrasta.

**Ključne reči:** fizičko vaspitanje, upitnik, uključenost roditelja, vaspitač

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4 gabrijela.grujic@uf.bg.ac.rs , <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2083-5606>

5 gorana.lapcevic@chartwell.edu.rs /

6 vanja.prazina@gmail.com /