



Transformational leadership and its relationship with socio-emotional and moral competencies in pre-service teachers

Mercedes Álamo & Daniel Falla*

Universidad de Córdoba, Córdoba (Spain)

KEYWORDS

Leadership
Social-emotional
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Future teachers

ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that transformational leadership favours innovation, change and involvement towards improvement and problem solving, generating an atmosphere of respect and tolerance, it is considered ideal leadership in the educational sphere. Furthermore, socio-emotional and moral competences are essential for school leaders and teachers. However, there is a gap about what kind of socioemotional and moral competences can be related to a transformational leadership style in future teachers and that could be relevant information for university education, which is the purpose of this research. For this *ex post facto* quantitative survey research, a sample of 395 prospective teachers (81.3% female and 18.7% male) between 17 and 63 years of age ($M = 21.08$; $SD = 3.49$) was used. Statistical analyses included Student's *t*-test and linear regressions. Results showed high scores in transformational leadership and a high degree of social-emotional and moral competencies. Significant gender differences were found, with girls having higher scores. Relationships were found between self-management and motivation, social awareness and prosocial behaviour, responsible decision-making and moral emotions with transformational leadership. The practical implications of these findings are discussed and concluded by pointing out the importance of working on and promoting.

El liderazgo transformacional y su relación con las competencias socioemocionales y morales en futuros docentes

PALABRAS CLAVE

Liderazgo
Competencias
socioemocionales
Emociones morales
Equipos directivos
Futuros docentes

RESUMEN

Los estudios han evidenciado que un liderazgo transformacional favorece la innovación, el cambio e implicación hacia la mejora y resolución de problemas, generando una atmósfera de respeto y tolerancia y considerándose un liderazgo idóneo en el ámbito educativo. Asimismo, las competencias socioemocionales y morales son esenciales en los líderes y docentes de los centros escolares. Sin embargo, existe una brecha sobre qué tipo de competencias socioemocionales y morales pueden relacionarse con un estilo de liderazgo transformacional en futuros docentes y que podría ser una información relevante para la formación universitaria, siendo este el propósito de este trabajo. Para esta investigación *ex post facto* de corte cuantitativo a través de encuesta se contó con una muestra de 395 futuros docentes (81.3% mujeres y 18.7% hombres) entre 17 y 63 años ($M = 21.08$; $DT = 3.49$). Los análisis estadísticos incluyeron la prueba *t* de Student y regresiones lineales. Los resultados mostraron puntuaciones elevadas en liderazgo transformacional y un alto grado en competencias socioemocionales y morales. Se hallaron diferencias significativas en sexo, de forma que las chicas presentaron puntuaciones más altas. Se encontró relación entre la autogestión y motivación, conciencia social y conducta prosocial, toma de decisiones responsables y emociones morales con liderazgo transformacional. Se discute las implicaciones prácticas de estos hallazgos y se concluye señalando la importancia del trabajo y fomento de las competencias socioemocionales y morales en futuros docentes dentro de su formación universitaria para favorecer un liderazgo transformacional que facilite una mejor dirección en los centros educativos.

* Corresponding author: Daniel Falla. Departamento de Psicología, Universidad de Córdoba, Av San Alberto Magno, s/n, 14071, Córdoba, Spain. daniel.falla@uco.es

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Changes in schools are driven by people with leadership skills, as they are able to exert a certain influence on the organisation, management and even the teaching-learning process (Moreno-Casado, 2021). In schools, the figure of the leader has always been linked to the figure of the school principal, whose aim is to guide teachers to achieve specific objectives (Çalış & Büyükkakıncı, 2019). However, teacher leadership should not be limited exclusively to managerial roles, but should be present among all educational agents (Olmo-Extremera et al., 2023). In this context, leadership style, i.e., the behavioural pattern that characterises a leader (Dubrin, 2015) and which, therefore, is accepted in the school, will determine the lines of action and the culture of a school (Traver-Martí et al., 2021).

The transformational leadership theory proposed by Bass (1995) established three leadership styles: transformational, transactional and *laissez-faire*/passive-avoidant. Specifically, the transformational leadership style is one of the most prevalent in educational management (Martínez-León et al., 2020), as it is conducive to change and innovation (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018). This leadership style is characterised by the fact that it incites change and inspires, i.e., it encourages followers to achieve extraordinary results (Robbins and Coulter, 2007). Thus, a transformational leader involves the group, generating trust and respect, and stimulating the generation of new proposals and ways of solving problems, making them see the relevance of the work completed as well as their future projects, with the aim of improving the group's performance (Bass & Riggio, 2005). These leaders are respected (Moreno-Casado et al., 2021), and they encourage teachers' self-motivation (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018) and favour team performance (Firmansyah et al., 2022) and adaptation to diverse contexts and cultures (Sun et al., 2017).

The aim of this study was therefore to take a more detailed look into this style of leadership in the field of education and to find out which socio-emotional and moral competences (SEMCs) are displayed by prospective teachers who are studying for a degree in Primary and Early Childhood Education and who perceive themselves as having this type of leadership. Knowing this information may provide a useful insight for the transversal training of university education students, given that in the future they will have to exercise teaching leadership in the classroom and/or in schools. Likewise, strengthening the competences related to a transformational leadership style in university education could contribute to an improvement in educational quality and greater success in schools.

Transformational leadership in the field of education

As mentioned above, transformational leadership is one of the most common leadership styles in education (Kırkıç & Balcı, 2021), and the study by Zhang et al. (2022) shows that in-service teachers have high scores in this style. According to previous studies, there are no significant differences in terms of gender in relation to leadership style (Chávez Santos & Chauca Valqui, 2020). However, other studies such as that of Martínez-León et al. (2020) show that the number of men and women in a group belonging to work cooperatives focused mainly on

the educational sphere may lead to differences in terms of leadership style.

With regard to the management position held by teachers in schools, the study by Zhang et al. (2022) found significant differences, with teachers holding administrative positions scoring higher than teachers who do not hold any position in management. In the same study, it should be noted that school principals scored lower than teachers with administrative positions. However, so far, we know little about prospective teachers, despite the fact that it is these professionals who will dictate the future lines of educational action in schools.

Social-emotional and moral competences (SEMCs) in prospective teachers

Social-emotional competences are defined as a set of skills that give human beings the ability to express, regulate and understand their thoughts, emotions and behaviours in everyday situations with others, while enabling people to adapt to changing situations (Schoon, 2021). They are therefore essential for coping with rapid social change. These competences are divided into four: self-awareness, self-management, and motivation, social awareness and prosocial behaviour, and responsible decision-making (Zych et al., 2018). Following Durlak et al. (2015), self-awareness focuses on the ability to recognise one's own emotions, goals and values and how this can affect behaviour depending on the contexts in which it takes place. Self-management refers to the individual's ability to manage emotions and behaviours in different situations that facilitate motivation and the achievement of one's goals. Social awareness focuses on the ability to understand the emotions of others in different contexts, while prosocial behaviour is the individual's ability to establish interpersonal relationships within social norms and communication skills. Finally, responsible decision-making focuses on the ability to make choices taking into account multiple options, while considering one's own and others' well-being.

On the other hand, moral competences can be defined as the ability to make a quality moral judgement in a given context, or the use of a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired through experience and interaction with people (Haidt, 2003). In this context, moral emotions are of a socio-cultural nature and include guilt, pride and shame (Álamo, 2020). Likewise, they are internal and highly cohesive capacities, acquired through the continuous development of ethical values that result in stable, consistent and integral responses (Morales-Sánchez & Cabello-Medina, 2015).

SEMCs must be taken into account for good educational management given their negative relationship with personal, social and academic problems (Llorent, González-Gómez et al., 2020). Indeed, it has been shown that these competences are key to improving teaching practice, as well as guaranteeing quality education (Gimbert et al., 2021). Furthermore, for teachers, SEMCs are a protective factor against stress and burnout (Ansley et al., 2021).

While it is true that SEMCs are important for education professionals, not enough importance is given to the training needs

in this area, as they focus only on administrative and evaluation aspects (Jovanovic & Dimitrijevic, 2021). Further study is therefore needed, as it is a key factor not only for improving social interactions and academic aspects (Aldrup et al., 2022), but also for strengthening management teams and achieving a positive atmosphere in schools (Ortega-Ruiz & Zych, 2016). To achieve this, it is therefore necessary to know the levels of SEMCs in prospective teachers who are embarking on their initial training.

The previous research includes a study carried out by the University of La Rioja with 105 students of the Degree in Primary Education, which shows the importance that future education professionals attach to socioemotional competences that they do not possess and that can be acquired or improved through training (Valdemoros-San-Emeterio & Lucas-Molina, 2014). In the same study, no significant differences were found as regards gender, as in the study by Zych et al. (2018) and Herrera-Granda et al. (2022). In contrast, the study by Romero-García et al. (2022) found significant differences between men and women, where women scored higher than men in socioemotional competencies.

Relationship between social-emotional and moral competences and transformational leadership

Considering that socioemotional competences benefit group participation, social relations and personal well-being (Kyrö-Ämmälä, 2019), it is essential to stress the emotional factor in the teaching leadership of educational agents (Gento, et al., 2020). In this way, the study by Zacher et al. (2014) supports the relationship between leadership skills and socio-emotional competences, making it clear that they are more important for a principal than technical skills such as planning and control (Keil et al., 2013). Specifically, leaders who employ the transformational leadership style display greater skills in socioemotional competencies than in other styles (Mindeguia et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study by Tian et al. (2022) shows that transformational leadership positively predicts teachers' social-emotional competencies. Therefore, effective leaders are those who know how to manage their emotions, recognise the feelings of others, foster motivation, empower their subordinates and establish trusting relationships in order to succeed (San Lam & O'Higgins, 2012). Among them, those with high social-emotional competencies are able to cope with adverse situations, do not oppose change and achieve a greater degree of support among their followers because they build trusting relationships among members of the group (Hannah et al., 2016). However, there have been no studies which explore specifically which SEMCs are related to transformational leadership style in prospective teachers, which is the overall aim of this study.

Hypotheses of the study

Following the literature review, the following hypotheses were considered: the first one maintains that females will score higher on transformational leadership style than males. The second one sustains that women will score higher on SEMCs

than men. The third one maintains that SEMCs will positively influence transformational leadership.

Methodology

Participants

We used non-probabilistic convenience sampling, leaving a sample of 395 students from the University of Córdoba in Spain. The ages ranged from 17 to 63 years, with a mean age of 21.08 years ($SD = 3.49$). There was a higher proportion of females participating –81.3%– compared to males, with 18.7%. The university students came from the following years: 1st (21.5%), 2nd (24.1%), 3rd (24.3%), and 4th (30.1%). The distribution by degree was as follows: Early Childhood Education (50.6%) and Primary Education (49.4%) (see Table 1).

Instruments

A questionnaire was used which included the socio-demographic variables of gender, age, degree and year. To measure transformational leadership style, we used the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire* (MLQ) developed by Bass and Avolio (1995). This scale measures transformational, transactional and passive/avoidant leadership. However, for this study, we employed the transformational scale composed of 20 5-point Likert-type items (1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*), obtaining good reliability ($\alpha = .88$). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) showed an excellent fit: ($S/B\chi^2 = 332.46$; $df = 170$, $p < .001$; $NFI = .98$; $NNFI = .98$; $CFI = .98$; $RMSEA = .05$, $90\% CI = 0.041-0.057$).

We also used the *Social and Emotional Competencies Questionnaire* (SEC-Q) created by Zych et al. (2018), consisting of 16 items with a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This questionnaire presented good reliability both on the overall scale ($\alpha = .87$) and for the four dimensions: self-awareness ($\alpha = .83$), self-management and

Table 1
Descriptive results of the sample

Study sample	<i>n</i> = 395
Gender	
Women	81.3% (<i>n</i> = 321)
Man	18.7% (<i>n</i> = 74)
Age	<i>M</i> = 21.08 años (<i>SD</i> = 3.49)
Degree	
Early Childhood Education	50.6% (<i>n</i> = 200)
Primary School Education	49.4% (<i>n</i> = 195)
Study year	
1st year	21.5% (<i>n</i> = 85)
2nd year	24.1% (<i>n</i> = 95)
3rd year	30.1% (<i>n</i> = 96)
4th year	30.1% (<i>n</i> = 119)

motivation ($\alpha = .69$), social awareness and prosocial behaviour ($\alpha = .77$), and decision-making ($\alpha = .80$).

Finally, we used the *Moral Emotions Scale* (Alamo et al., 2019), which can be used together with the (SEC-Q) (see Caballero-Cobo & Llorent, 2022), and consists of five statements on the different moral emotions of guilt, regret, pride and shame. It uses the same Likert-type scale, with five response categories, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Good reliability was found for this study, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .77. The CFA with the five dimensions confirmed an excellent fit: ($S/B\chi^2 = 281.80$; $df = 179$, $p < .001$; NFI = .98; NNFI = .99; CFI = .99; RMSEA = .04, 90% CI = 0.029-0.046).

Design and procedure

This was a quantitative, non-experimental study with an *ex post facto*, descriptive, inferential, and correlational approach, in which the survey was used as a data collection tool. The procedure we adopted began by conducting a questionnaire on Google Forms, which could be completed online. Subsequently, we contacted teachers who taught in these groups, as well as the students, to explain the aim of the study and the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki on anonymity, confidentiality, and the use of information for scientific purposes followed by the study. The questionnaire was completed in September 2022 in person in the classroom via the link created and lasted approximately 10 minutes. However, before completing the survey, the students had to sign an informed consent form, which was included in the questionnaire form itself.

Data analysis

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was carried out with EQS 6.2 to test the psychometric properties of the scales used, while Cronbach's Alpha was used for reliability. The data obtained were processed with SPSS software version 26, and the variables described were analysed by calculating the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis coefficient of the scores obtained for the items.

To check for differences by sex, Student's t-test was used, after performing Levene's test to check the asymmetries of the variances and then Cohen's d to calculate the effect size. In addition, we used Pearson's bivariate correlations to study the

associations between the variables analysed. Finally, we conducted linear regressions with the intro method, taking transformational leadership style as the dependent variable and the different SEMCs (self-awareness, self-management and motivation, social awareness and prosocial behaviour, responsible decision-making and moral emotions) as independent variables, while controlling for gender and age. Before performing the regression analysis, we checked the model validation assumptions (linearity, homoscedasticity, normality, independence of residuals, and non-collinearity).

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis obtained by the prospective teachers in their self-perception in transformational leadership style, as well as in SEMCs: self-awareness, self-management and motivation, social awareness and prosocial behaviour, responsible decision-making, and moral emotions. The data showed that the students displayed a high degree of transformational leadership, as well as higher scores on moral emotions compared to the other social-emotional competencies.

As regards gender, significant differences were noted, with female students showing higher scores on transformational leadership style than their male counterparts, with a low/moderate effect size ($d = .32$). Similarly, Student's t-test values indicated that there were also significant differences between men and women on moral emotions ($t = 2.62$, $p < .01$) in favour of women, with a low/moderate effect size ($d = .43$). In contrast, no differences were found in the other social-emotional competencies (see Table 3).

Bivariate correlations revealed that transformational leadership style was significantly and directly associated with all SEMCs, with values ranging from $r = .30$ to $r = .49$. Likewise, there was a positive association between all the dimensions that constitute the SEMCs, with values ranging from $r = .19$ to $r = .53$ (see Table 4).

Table 5 shows the results found in the linear regression for transformational leadership style. In model 1, the variance explained was 2%, while in model 2 it was 36%. The results have been analysed taking model 2 as a reference, because it had a higher percentage of explained variance. In this model, a direct and significant relationship could be seen between transfor-

Table 2

Descriptive statistic of transformational leadership and socioemotional and moral competencies

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Transformational Leadership (1-5)	4.61	.34	-1.28	1.98
Self-awareness (1-5)	4.14	.70	-.53	-.19
Self-management and motivation (1-5)	4.26	.64	-.71	.09
Social-awareness and prosocial behavior (1-5)	4.44	.48	-.86	.39
Decision-making (1-5)	4.10	.78	-.67	-.23
Moral emotions (1-5)	4.62	.48	-1.61	2.51

Note. *M* = Arithmetic means; *SD* = Standard Deviations.

mational leadership style and self-management and motivation ($t = 3.65$, $p < .001$), social awareness and behaviour ($t = 4.09$, $p < .001$), responsible decision-making ($t = 2.91$, $p < .01$), and moral emotions ($t = 5.75$, $p < .001$). The Durbin Watson test for the presence of autocorrelation in the regression residuals gave a value of 1.836.

Discussion

A number of studies have pointed out how the transformational style has important advantages for bringing about improve-

ment and innovation in schools, achieving greater involvement of professionals, as well as in the construction of a participative, collaborative, and positive coexistence (Schoch et al., 2021). However, certain aspects of educational leadership have yet to be addressed (Tintoré & Gairín, 2022). For example, we do not know what scores students in primary and pre-primary grades obtain for this type of leadership and which SEMCs are related to high scores in this leadership style. This information could be key in initial university training, as the SEMCs that are most closely related to this leadership style could be worked on with prospective teachers.

Table 3

Distribution of transformational leadership and socioemotional and moral competences by gender

	Men		Women		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Transformational leadership	4.52	.40	4.63	.33	2.102	.038*	.32
Self-awareness	4.23	.66	4.12	.70	-1.232	.22	.16
Self-management and motivation	4.34	.59	4.24	.65	-1.171	.24	.16
Social-awareness and prosocial behavior	4.42	.49	4.44	.48	.467	.64	.04
Decision-making	4.21	.72	4.07	.79	-1.373	.17	.18
Moral emotions	4.45	.61	4.65	.43	2.622	.01**	.43

Note. *M* = Arithmetic means; *SD* = Standard Deviations; *t* = Student-t-test; *d* = Cohen's d.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Bivariate correlations between transformational leadership and socioemotional and moral competencies

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Transformational Leadership					
2. Self-awareness	.30**				
3. Self-management and motivation	.37**	.53**			
4. Social-awareness and prosocial behavior	.49**	.48**	.46**		
5. Decision-making	.37**	.36**	.37**	.43**	
6. Moral emotions	.46**	.23**	.19**	.47**	.29**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 5

Regression model between transformational leadership and socioemotional and moral competencies

	Model 1		Model 2			
	β	<i>t</i>	β	<i>t</i>	Tolerance	VIF
Gender	-.13	-2.49*	-.10	-2.32*	.948	1.054
Age	.05	.96	.05	1.26	.983	1.017
Self-awareness			-.01	-0.25	.633	1.580
Self-management and motivation			.19	3.65***	.649	1.542
Social-awareness and prosocial behavior			.22	4.09***	.567	1.763
Decision making			.14	2.91**	.743	1.346
Moral emotions			.27	5.75***	.745	1.342
<i>R</i> ²	.02		.36			
<i>F</i>	3.39*	31.23***				

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

The results obtained show that university students in Primary and Early Childhood Education score high marks in transformational leadership style, as was found in the study by Zhang et al. (2022) with active teachers, although their sample was highly heterogeneous as regards age and was made up predominantly of women. Martínez-León et al. (2020) also found high scores for this type of leadership in work co-operatives predominantly focused on the educational field. However, this paper adds to our knowledge about prospective teachers who have not been assessed so far and who self-perceive themselves as having high scores. Although future research should evaluate other leadership styles to obtain a more accurate view of how prospective teachers perceive themselves, the fact that the scores are high for the transformational style could be positive, since education in the future must address contemporary phenomena such as diversification or pluralisation and will therefore require transformational leadership in order to foster a respectful atmosphere in which intergroup coexistence is facilitated and the teaching operation is managed effectively (Bolívar, 2021).

In relation to differences due to gender, women were perceived as having more transformational leadership than men, as in other studies (Lee & Park, 2020). Therefore, the first hypothesis was confirmed. This finding could be due to the fact that women tend to be more concerned about both individual and collective problems than men (Nash et al., 2017), which could favour greater involvement of the teaching professionals and the establishment of a climate of respect and trust, which are essential characteristics of transformational leadership. Also, prospective teachers present a high degree of socioemotional competences, which confirms the findings of previous studies (Llorent, Zych et al., 2020). Thus, primary and pre-primary students perceive themselves as having the competences to cope with adverse situations in the classroom, resolve conflicts, mediate to deal with students' learning difficulties, and promote inclusion, as well as carrying out planning and management tasks.

Hypothesis two was partially confirmed. Although a study by Zych et al. (2018) with university students in Primary and Early Childhood Education Degrees shows that women scored higher than men only in social awareness and prosocial behaviour (albeit with a low effect size), it also included students from other degrees such as Computer Science and Mechanical Engineering, which could explain these discrepancies. On the other hand, Romero-García et al. (2022) also found low effect sizes in favour of women in most of the socioemotional competencies in prospective secondary school teachers. More studies and larger sample sizes are needed to obtain more conclusive results. In this study, however, no such differences were found in social-emotional competences. Nevertheless, we did find differences in moral emotions, where women had higher scores. These results are in line with a recent study with prospective teachers where it was found that women have less civic moral disengagement (Cabrera-Vázquez et al., 2022), so they could exercise greater moral competence. However, more research is needed on moral competencies, as these are key to the construction of inclusive education.

Finally, the present research revealed that there is a direct relationship between transformational leadership style and the socioemotional competence of self-management and motivation, prosocial awareness and behaviour and responsible decision-making, as well as moral emotions, which means that hypothesis three can be accepted. In other words, these competencies are related to this leadership style, so that a high development of these competencies was associated with the performance of a more transformational leadership. Mindeguia et al. (2021) and Zacher et al. (2014) found that people who use this leadership style are capable of transmitting their emotions, as well as fostering positive feelings among their followers. Moradi-Korejan and Shahbazi (2016) also noted that transformational leadership was inspirational and motivational, while Sun et al. (2017) indicated that it was conducive to adapting to diverse contexts and cultures. Therefore, it seems reasonable that this way of understanding and executing leadership in education is positively related to these SEMCs. However, this research confirms the existing relationship, which may be valuable information for competence training programmes for future educational leaders.

This work has some limitations that should be taken into consideration. The sample size is small and from a specific region of Spain, so further studies with larger samples and even from different regions or countries may provide more robust, generalised information, in which cultural variables are taken into consideration. We should also stress that the results of the inference tests and the effect size were low, probably due to the higher proportion of women than men, which could give rise to a possible type I error. On the other hand, as a future line of research, work could be carried out to measure SEMCs in in-service teachers and see if there are differences between the two groups. Likewise, we could analyse the other management styles (transactional and avoidant-passive) that have not been explored in this study, or find out whether these results vary according to the degree or course the university students are taking, which may be relevant information for university training programmes. Finally, only the questionnaire was taken into consideration as an evaluation instrument, which, although being able to provide us with valuable information, may have certain risks such as social desirability. Therefore, future work could focus on other types of instruments that collect qualitative data, such as interviews or focus groups, thus enriching the possible findings.

Conclusions

To sum up, this study examines the influence of socio-emotional competences (self-awareness, self-management and motivation, social awareness and prosocial behaviour, and responsible decision-making) and moral competences on the perception of transformational leadership style of prospective teachers, as the leader's ability to inspire, motivate and create commitment to common goals is crucial –even more so now in an age of new, more inclusive and pluralistic education. This work has highlighted the need to promote SEMCs in order to foster transforma-

tional leadership which emphasises emotions and values, and drives towards higher levels of morality. At the same time, it aims to go beyond factors of self-interest, in the quest for equitable, sustainable education. In short, it reveals the need to provide training programmes for prospective teachers that focus on SEMCs in order to build a fairer, more ethical leadership style which helps to foster inclusive, quality education.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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