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Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (part II): further insights from primary school pupils' social attitudes

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ABSTRACT

The present research aims to extend findings from a recent study in which a large sample of primary and secondary school pupils was asked to choose a hypothetical classmate they would invite to share five different activities. Results demonstrated that a visible disability represents a barrier for social participation and involvement. In the present study, we investigated how the expression of a gesture of solidarity modulated participants' attitudes. Moreover, unlike the previous study, in the present one, the responses from pupils with and without disability were scored separately. The findings strongly support the notion that a visible disability generates pity and motivates a tendency to protect, but only very seldom are typically developing children attracted by the idea of becoming a good friend of a peer with disability. While pupils with disability tended to consider the choice of a peer with disability a realistic option in all situations, for pupils without disability the choice of a peer with disability was a sort of forced choice when related to a gesture of solidarity and good-will, but only an abstract possibility in the social and sport activities.

KEYWORDS

Social attitudes disability

gender

ethnicity inclusion

Introduction

A lot of the worldwide effort over the last decades in the promotion of rights of people with disabilities (United Nations 2006; Vislie 2003) are now resulting in an increasing tendency to integrate students with disabilities and other special educational needs (SEN) into mainstream schools, instead of separating them in special schools as was usually done in the past.

The rationale behind this choice is that a steady interaction with typically developing (TD) peers should, on one side, help children with disabilities to develop more appropriate social competence skills (Garrote, Dessemontet, and Moser Opitz 2017) and, on the other, promote the reduction of disability-related stereotypes and increase tolerance towards diversity (Maras and Brown 2000; Staub and Peck 1995).

Notwithstanding the clear and authoritative statements of principle and the work undertaken by different countries to support inclusive education, access to mainstream school remains difficult for many students with disabilities, especially with regard to social participation. A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2017) found that students with disabilities have a higher risk of social exclusion than their TD peers. Consistently, many studies have demonstrated that for children with SEN, particularly those with behaviour problems and intellectual disabilities (Van Mieghem et al. 2020), it is not easy to be accepted by their TD peers (de Boer et al. 2014; Koster et al. 2010; Smoot 2004).

Indeed, the attitudes of TD peers towards classmates with disabilities or other diversities (e.g. ethnicity) are one of the key issues for the success of inclusive settings. In turn, such attitudes depend on personal and environmental factors (de Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert 2012, 2014; Spörer et al. 2020). As argued by de Boer and colleagues (2013), students who have an increased level of knowledge and understanding about disabilities have more positive attitudes towards students with SEN. In particular, TD students with previous experience with disability, for instance having a disabled relative, are more prone to accept their peers with SEN (Dell'Anna, Pellegrini, and Ianes 2021). Gender also plays an important role, with girls showing more positive attitudes than boys (de Boer et al. 2013; Gonçalves and Lemos 2014).

The situation is similar in terms of attitudes of peers towards students with other diversities, such as ethnicity and gender. A systematic review of 82 studies (Kågesten et al. 2016) regarding the gender attitudes of adolescents from several different countries demonstrated that students commonly have stereotypical or inequitable gender attitudes shaped mainly by parents and peers. Regarding ethnic diversity, Nishina and colleagues (2019) highlighted the relevant role of opportunities to interact with students from different ethnic groups as a way to enhance positive cross-group attitudes. This point received further validation in a very recent study by Bell and colleagues (2021) who examined the relationship between interpersonal affect and intergroup attitudes among

adolescents in American multi-ethnic schools: the students who like at least one cross-ethnic classmate have positive attitudes towards that entire ethnic group.

We recently raised the question of how pupils' attitudes towards diversity are modulated by factors related to the individual who is 'diverse' (i.e. for gender, ethnicity, or the presence of disability) as well as to the social activities in which pupils are involved (Nepi et al. 2021). To address this issue, a large sample of primary and secondary school pupils was asked to choose a hypothetical classmate they would invite to share five different activities. The hypothetical classmate ranged from: same gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity (SG); other gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity (OG); same gender pupil of the prototypical racial minority (RM); same gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity using a wheelchair (D). Activities included: an outdoor, highly motor demanding activity; an indoor board game; a purely social activity; a scholastic activity; and a gesture of solidarity and good-will. Results were straightforward: while a visible disability is effective to gain sympathy and elicit pity, it represents a barrier for social participation and involvement. Responses from pupils with and without disability were collapsed together in the study, leaving unaddressed the question of whether these attitudes could be modulated by the presence/absence of disability. Furthermore, consistent with the principle that studies under different conditions may produce different outcomes (Avramidis et al. 2017), the results from such a study might depend on the instrument used. In particular, notwithstanding participants were clearly informed that each question stood alone, the possibility that the presence of an item explicitly related to a gesture of solidarity and good-will (i.e. to give your extra snack to a classmate who forgot theirs) modulated participants' attitudes cannot be ruled out.

In the present study, carried out on a completely new sample of participants, we investigated how the expression of a gesture of solidarity could have influenced pupils' responses by asking half of them to complete a five-item questionnaire with the item 'snack', while the other half completed a four-item questionnaire without the item 'snack'. Furthermore, we

decided to make the activity in which physical disability may significantly interfere with participation more challenging (a team of only two players in the present study as opposed to a multiple team in the previous one). Finally, in the present study, the responses from pupils with and without disability were scored separately to give us the opportunity to evaluate the role of disability on pupils' attitudes.

Method

The study was approved by the school ethics committee and carried out according to the Declaration of Helsinki guidelines. Students participated with parental consent.

Participants

A total of 351 pupils, aged eight to 10 years and in 15 different classes (five classes for each grade from third to fifth) in two ordinary Italian primary schools who expressed willingness to participate, were enrolled in the study. According to the rules of the Italian educational system, at the time the research was carried out, the pupils were eight years old in the third grade, nine in the fourth grade and 10 in the fifth grade. The presence of pupils from various ethnic groups as well as pupils with disability was substantially similar across the different classes which allowed us to collapse data from single classes.

Regarding gender composition, in each grade, there were a few more males than females (i.e. third grade: 43 F, 47 M; fourth grade: 67 F, 69 M; fifth grade: 60 F, 65 M). However, the different ratio of male and female students was not significant on a Chi Square test ($p = 0.969$).

Regarding ethnic composition, about 80% of the students were Italian, 12% were from Eastern Europe and 5% were from North Africa. The remaining students were from various different ethnic backgrounds (i.e. South American, Chinese, etc.). In terms of disability, each class contained at least one pupil with a Physician's Statement of Disability (either cognitive and/or sensory-motor); but only 14 of them (four females and 10 males) were eligible for enrolment in the study (three pupils had a disability too severe to prevent their participation) and all of them were presented with the five-item version of the questionnaire.

Instruments

A properly devised questionnaire (Nepi et al. 2021) served as the instrument for data collection. Given that we aimed to investigate whether the presence of an item explicitly related to a gesture of solidarity and good-will (i.e. to give your extra snack to a classmate who forgot theirs) could have modulated participants' attitudes, about half of the total TD participants (171 pupils, 87 females and 84 males) were presented with a five-item questionnaire that included the item 'snack', while the remaining 166 pupils (79 females and 87 males) were presented with a four-item questionnaire without the item 'snack'.

Independently from the number of items, there were female and male versions of the questionnaire. In both, the four/five hypothetical situations were presented in a randomized order across participants. The five questions were as follows:

Sport for teams of two players: You are looking for a partner to form a team to participate in students' championship of beach volley/tennis/table tennis or any other sport played by teams of two players. Which one would you ask to be your partner? (This was the only difference with the questionnaire used in Nepi et al.2021: a multiple treasure hunt team in that study, a team of only two players in this one).

Going out for a pizza: Your parents have allowed you to go out for a pizza with a friend. Which one would you invite to have pizza with you?

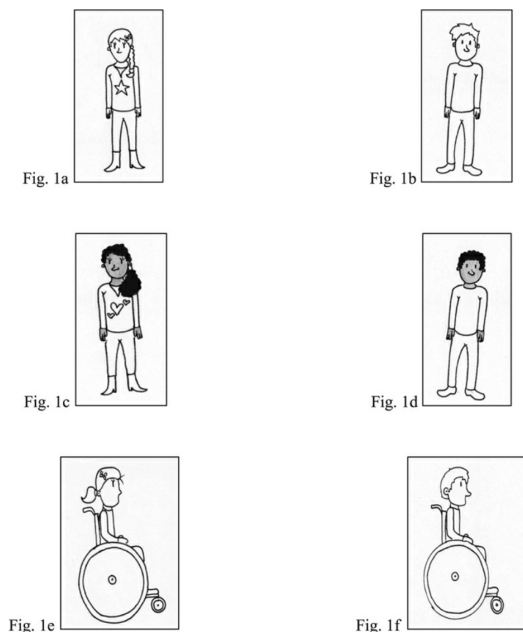
Snack: Today four classmates of yours forgot their snack. By chance, you have two snacks. Which classmate would you give your extra snack to?

Board Game: It's raining. Time to play a board game with a friend. Which one would you invite to play with you? Study: You can invite a classmate to do homework together. Which one would you ask to do homework together?

For each item, participants were asked to mark with an X the icon representing the hypothetical companion he/she would have invited to share that experience with.

Figure 1 shows the set of alternative choices of the female and male versions of the questionnaire: same gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity (i.e. Caucasian), labelled for brevity as Same Gender (SG); other gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity, labelled Other Gender (OG); same gender pupil of the prototypical racial minority (i.e. Black), labelled Racial Minority (RM); same gender pupil of the most prevalent ethnicity sitting in a wheelchair, representing a physical disability, labelled Disabled (D).

Figure 1. The set of alternative choices of the female and male version of the questionnaire.



The order of the icons within each row was counterbalanced across items and questionnaires.

The questionnaires were administered by one of the authors in a single-class session. The classroom teacher was available to assist any pupil who needed help reading or completing the questionnaire, while students with disabilities could benefit from the assistance of their support teacher. Before filling out the questionnaires, the pupils were informed that participation was not mandatory, and they could withdraw at any time.

Moreover, students were clearly told that each question stood alone and that there were no right or wrong answers, and that they would not be required to justify their choices.

Finally, a particular emphasis was put on the fact that all the data collected would be kept confidential. None of the pupils refused to take part in the study or dropped out of it.

Results

Consistently with findings from our previous research (Nepi et al. 2021), also in this study, the observed data were significantly different from theoretical expectations ($p < .001$ on a Chi-Square distribution): SG was the most preferred choice in all situations, except snack, in which D was the most preferred choice (see Tables 1 and 2 for details).

Table 1. Four items questionnaire. Contingency table. Observed frequencies. Females (n. 79) vs. Males (n. 87).

	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
SG	50.6	62.1	65.8	64.4	n.p.	n.p.	26.6	54.0	27.8	58.6
OG	17.7	9.2	10.1	14.9	n.p.	n.p.	16.5	9.2	17.7	12.6
RM	29.1	24.1	15.2	10.3	n.p.	n.p.	16.5	17.2	29.1	13.8
D	2.5	4.6	8.9	10.3	n.p.	n.p.	40.5	19.5	25.3	14.9

Table 2. Five items questionnaire. Contingency table. Observed frequencies. Females (n. 87) vs. Males (n. 84).

	Sport		Pizza		Snack		Board Game		Study	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
SG	52.9	47.6	58.6	47.6	20.7	23.8	35.6	50.0	37.9	39.3
OG	20.7	22.6	17.2	19.0	11.5	17.9	21.8	13.1	19.5	31.0
RM	25.3	26.2	19.5	19.0	9.2	21.4	21.8	10.7	32.2	17.9
D	1.1	3.6	4.6	14.3	58.6	36.9	20.7	26.2	10.3	11.9

To investigate the possibility that the presence of an item explicitly related to a gesture of solidarity and good-will influenced the participants' responses, we entered the frequencies observed in the two experimental groups of participants (i.e. those who filled out the five-item questionnaire vs. those who filled out the four-item questionnaire) in a 4×2 contingency table and did the Chi-Square calculation. The mean percentage of D choices was a bit higher among participants who did not answer the item 'snack' (16% vs. 11%), but the difference was not significant.

In view of the above, for subsequent analyses, the data from the two groups were collapsed. Table 3 shows the overall performance of male and female pupils (obviously, the

overall performance on the item 'snack' corresponded to the participants' performance on the five-item questionnaire).

Table 3. Overall data. Contingency table. Observed frequencies. Females (n. 166) vs. Males (n. 171).

	Sport		Pizza		Snack		Board Game		Study	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
SG	51.8	55.0	62.0	56.1	20.7	23.8	31.3	52.0	33.1	49.1
OG	19.3	15.8	13.9	17.0	11.5	17.9	19.3	11.1	18.7	21.6
RM	27.1	25.1	17.5	14.6	9.2	21.4	19.3	14.0	30.7	15.8
D	1.8	4.1	6.6	12.3	58.6	36.9	30.1	22.8	17.5	13.5

To analyse the influence of the factor Gender, we entered the responses of females and males for each of the five activities in a 4 × 2 contingency table and did the Chi-Square calculation. While no significant difference emerged regarding preferences to Sport and Pizza items, significant differences were observed for the other three items. In particular, for the Board Game item [$X(1, N = 337) = 9.124, p = .0277$] males chose SG much more than females [$X(1, N = 337) = 8.629, p = .0347$], with the sole difference of OG option, chosen more frequently by males than females. For the purpose of our study, however, the most interesting result was the significant difference found regarding the Snack item [$X(1, N = 337) = 11.237, p = .0105$]. Indeed, although both groups of participants tended to privilege D as the recipient of the gesture of solidarity and good-will, this preference was much more evident among females (58.6%) than males (36.9%). Finally, to raise the issue of whether the pupils' attitudes could be modulated by the presence/absence of disability, the results from participants with disability were compared with those from their TD peers. Although the unevenness in the size of the two sample groups (14 vs. 337) made a quantitative analysis meaningless, some observations are still possible. As shown in [Table 4](#), pupils with disability tended to choose the D option more frequently than TD peers in all the situations, except Board Game and, even more interestingly, Snack.

Table 4. TD vs. SEN. Contingency table. Observed frequencies. TD (n. 337) vs. SEN (n. 14).

	Sport		Pizza		Snack		Board Game		Study	
	TD	SEN	TD	SEN	TD	SEN	TD	SEN	TD	SEN
SG	53.4	71.4	59.1	50.0	22.2	21.4	41.8	57.1	41.2	35.7
OG	17.5	7.1	15.4	7.1	14.6	35.7	15.1	14.3	20.2	14.3
RM	26.1	7.1	16.0	21.4	15.2	7.1	16.6	7.1	23.1	28.6
D	3.0	14.3	9.5	21.4	48.0	35.7	26.4	21.4	15.4	21.4

Discussion

The results from a recent study on pupils' attitudes towards disability, racial minority and other gender were quite conclusive (Nepi et al. 2021). They demonstrated that in a context of full inclusion pupils' attitudes are not modulated at all by ethnic factors and only scarcely by gender. Rather, even primary school pupils have developed a finely tuned sense of 'what works in which situations' so that the decision of which hypothetical companion to involve in different activities mostly depends on the activity itself (Schaffer 1996).

In that study, however, it was possible that the presence of an item explicitly related to a gesture of solidarity and good-will (i.e. to give your extra snack to a classmate who forgot theirs) modulated participants' responses. Furthermore, responses from pupils with and without disability were collapsed together, leaving the question whether these attitudes could be modulated by the presence of disability unaddressed. In an effort to overcome these unresolved issues, we carried out the present study.

First of all, we compared the responses of the participants who filled out the questionnaire with the item 'snack' (i.e. the five-item questionnaire) with the responses of those who filled out the questionnaire without the item 'snack' (i.e. the four-item questionnaire). Although the participants who filled out the four-item questionnaire were slightly more prone to involve D peers in the remaining four activities (see Tables 1 and 2), such a difference was not significant. Thus, the results suggest that the possibility to express a gesture of solidarity played only a marginal role in TD pupils' attitudes.

Once again, for both female and male participants (see Table 3 for details), SG was the most preferred choice in four out of five activities, whereas D was the least preferred choice in three out of five activities (sport, pizza and study), but the second most preferred and the most preferred choice in the board game and snack item, respectively. Even more interestingly, in the D choice for the snack item females outnumbered males by a ratio of 1.5:1. The explanation for this female advantage is not unique. On one side, consistent with

previous findings (de Boer et al. 2013; Gonçalves and Lemos 2014), these results can be taken as further support of female advantage in attitudes towards diversity. On the other side, the possibility that the donation of a snack might be a mere gesture of pity, cannot be ruled out.

Taken together, the findings of our studies strongly support the notion that a visible disability generates pity and motivates a tendency to protect, but only very seldom are TD children attracted by the idea of becoming a good friend of a peer with disability (Guralnick et al. 2007). Actually, while the non-choice of the child in the wheelchair in the sports and, to some extent, in the study activity (in the primary school pupils' experience, motor disability is often associated with a cognitive impairment) can be seen as logical and necessary, the non-choice of D for going out for a pizza is a reliable indicator that children with disabilities are poorly socially included. One could argue that this conclusion is – to a certain extent – contradicted by the fact that D is often chosen as a mate for a board game. However, the differences between the two activities are evident in terms of sharing confidence and proximity. While it is possible to play a game with a completely unrelated person, it is almost inconceivable to choose to spend dinner time with a person not linked by an affective bond.

The fact that such a pattern of results was observed among Italian pupils enrolled in a context of full inclusion, where interactions between pupils with disability and their TD peers are a very common experience, casts serious doubt on the belief that the more inclusive the setting, the greater the acceptance of students with disability. Indeed, it is now widely accepted that further and more in-depth studies are necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the full inclusive model (Amor et al. 2019; Cottini and Morganti 2016; lanes, Demo, and Dell'Anna 2020; Van Mieghem et al. 2020).

A final point deserves consideration. Keeping in mind the appropriate caution needed when interpreting results from such a small sample of participants, the present study suggests that the presence of disability plays a relevant role in modulating children's attitudes towards disability. Indeed, although the D choices were – quantitatively speaking – substantially the same among pupils with and without disability (see Table 4), the pattern was very different from a qualitative point of view. While for pupils without disability the D option was a sort of forced choice in the snack situation, but only an abstract possibility when choosing a mate to go out for a pizza, pupils with disability tended to consider the D choice a realistic option in all situations (although to a lesser degree for the sport item).

Conclusion

We are fully aware that our study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample of participants with disability was relatively small, thus preventing the possibility of a quantitative analysis of their results. Second, the fact that participants were clustered in classes should have been accounted for by using a multilevel modelling approach, but the small number of clusters involved would have made these

estimates inaccurate (Maas and Hox2005). However, despite these limitations, our study provides valuable insight into primary school pupils' attitude towards disability. We concluded our previous paper by citing the movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, arguing that it is very likely that children up to adolescence will invite a same-gender classmate to dinner, but not a classmate with disability. Now, in light of findings from the present study, we should rephrase it: it is very unlikely that children up to adolescence will invite a classmate with disability to dinner, unless they too have a disability.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s[Q2]). **ORCID**

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