

# Friendship and Disability: A Study on Representations of Disabled and Normotype Classmates

Giulia Savarese

Department of Medicine and Surgery, Unoiversity of Salerno  
Baronissi, Italy  
Email: Gsavarese [AT] unisa.it

---

## ABSTRACT—

**Objective:** understand between the representations of disabled and non-disabled children and pre-adolescents regarding friendship between disabled and normotype classmates.

**Sample:** 100 children and pre-adolescents aged from 6 to 12 years.

**Tools and procedure:** The drawing test of friendship designed by Bombi et al. and the Moreno's Sociogram Test.

**Results:** There are different ways to represent friendship between the disabled and normotype peers, depending on whether one possesses a disability or not.

*In fact, for the disabled students interviewed, the very fact of standing next to a classmate is a source of well-being; sharing activities, then, induces positive emotions. Normotype students, instead, seem to experience the relationship with a disabled companion in a rather emotionally distanced way.*

**Keywords—** friendship, disability, classmates, representations

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Friendship is characterized by affection, trust and emotional support, which are essential factors to the development of interpersonal skills.

Social relationships with peers are crucially important, and the more adequate they are, the more they will encourage an efficient development of the personality. They are important for every stage of life and especially during adolescence, when the peer group is often seen as a refuge and a place where each person is on the same level and where one can converse with others on equal terms. This aspect is even more true for people with disabilities, since they often have difficulty establishing and maintaining interactions with classmates and with adult figures. This reduces the quantity and quality of their experiences, foreboding a negative impact in the adaptation to adult life and social integration.

Normotype children generally express more negative attitudes towards classmates with disabilities; interactions are less spontaneous and intentional; there is a greater propensity to develop friendships with physically, rather than intellectually, disabled people. Literature in the field tells us that in classes in which a disabled student is placed, their normotype companions interact little or not at all spontaneously with them and avoid choosing them as a playmate or study partner. In addition, normotype children start conversations on a number of different topics, which depend on whether they are talking to peers with typical or atypical development. Other studies tell us that normotype children tend to regard "normal" peers as their friends most frequently, and if they have disabled classmates, these are unwelcome (Harrison et al. 2007; Savarese, 2009).

The presence of disabled pupils in the school is a valuable source of dynamic relationships and interactions, which provides, in turn, an opportunity of maturation for all, from which one learns to consider and to experience diversity as an existential dimension and not as a characteristic of marginalization. Integration / inclusion, therefore, is not only understood as everybody's right to education and inclusion, but also means eradicating the risk of segregation, and taking steps to ensure decision-making powers that are similar to those of people with normal development. In this scenario, we have to consider a number of issues:

1) the relationship between the disabled and non-disabled is often characterized by compassion. The attitude of pity towards a disabled person means thinking broadly in terms of "poor boy/girl", and is a way to make the other stably inferior and subordinate.

2) Many times it is difficult to differentiate, in relations with the disabled, friendship from simple help. Friendship is the result of a personal decision that is based on the finding that there are common interests, they can share experiences

and activities, emotions and feelings. The relationships of help, on the contrary, regard the construction of specific behaviors, which are carried out in the presence of precise situations and that do not require an emotional or necessarily lasting and intense investment. Normotype people often speak of friendship with a disabled person, when instead, it is just an emotional closeness based on unilateral aid.

In the world of the disabled, on the other hand, mutual friendship is of great importance to socialization and awareness, both in the interaction with fellow disabled and with normotype children. The same disabled person can have both positive attitudes towards their peers, thus of openness and involvement in the friendly relationship, and hostile and closed attitudes (Panier Bagat, Sasso, 1995).

Until the end of the second millennium great importance was not given to the promotion of friendship among adolescents or disabled adults with mental health problems. Today, by contrast, it is possible to find even specific training for the support of those who have no friends or anyone who does not have sufficiently constructive behaviors to access the world of friendship.

The disabled person who has friends, in fact, is facilitated in accessing membership groups and expressing their rights. But the difficulty that children with mental or sensory problems find in making or maintaining friendships can not be hidden. Here, now, organization becomes important, so that parents, educators and experts in the field can give to such parties the opportunity to acquire skills needed to establish friendship, and at the same time give normotype subjects the opportunity to put in place positive and concrete acts of "support" (Turnbull, 1999; Pigliacampo, 2009).

Hence, having a group to belong to is important for everyone, but it can be complicated for the disabled person. This problem is related to the severity of the deficiency: the severely deficient subjects, in a sense, suffer minor frustration, since precisely the severity of their deficit makes their situation more definable and subject to fewer disappointments. The psychological position of less severely disabled people is halfway between disability and non-disability. Several testimonies of disabled people show, for example, how this situation in which they find themselves creates major problems that prevent an easy integration in the peer group, also causing difficulties for the possible beginning of a two-way friendship, which is tighter and more concrete. Sometimes it is the disabled people themselves who, feeling different, create a wall, a barrier that makes it difficult for other people to get close to them (Panier Bagat, Sasso, 1995).

Furthermore, they can implement negative attitudes, explained by the fact that a disabled person seems to take the same attitude toward their disability as their parents. If the parents are concerned, the child also agonizes; if the parents are ashamed of it, the child will be particularly susceptible, too; finally, if the parents consider them objectively, the child will accept it as fact, and they will not let it influence their adaptation process. The latter is important to show how the birth of a true friendship between a disabled person and a normotype individual is possible. In this case, despite the differences that can often be particularly evident from the physical point of view, a strong bond is created because there are common interests, and emotions, feelings, problems and difficulties are shared. It is foremost the individual with difficulty that, accepting their own situation, will be able to approach others more confidently, without wanting to hide their deficiency at all costs and without displaying a hostile attitude, which would lead them to isolation. It is important that the disabled person shows that they believe in their own abilities, albeit different than the others', so that the aid received will allow them to be able to enhance what they have. Only then can there be an opportunity to interact and collaborate with others, who can also become real friends. In related writing there are, in fact, experiences and testimonies of disabled people who in the course of their lives have established excellent relations of friendship with normotype individuals (Hall, 2000; Savarese, 2009).

In line with what is reported, our essay is intended to contribute, including in research, to the issue of representations of friendship (Rabaglietti et al., 2012; Xhimi, 2016), but with both disabled and non-disabled companions. The entire manuscript, including mathematical equations, tables, and figures must be prepared in electronic form and submitted as Word for Windows files. Use only fonts that come with Windows software. For the text use Times New Roman size 10. For all special characters (e.g., Greek characters) use the font **Symbol**. Line spacing is single; spacing after paragraphs is 6 pt; first line is indented .2 inches; text alignment is justified. Use carriage returns only to end headings and paragraphs, not to break lines of text. Verify the correct spelling for the final version with the Spelling and Grammar function of Word.

In the Introduction section, present clearly and briefly the problem investigated, with relevant references. The main results should be enunciated.

## **2. THE RESEARCH**

### **2.1 Objective**

Via drawings, we try to understand whether possible differences exist between the representations of disabled and non-disabled children and pre-adolescents regarding friendship between disabled and normotype classmates.

## 2.2 Sample

100 children and pre-adolescents aged from 6 to 12 years, attending two comprehensive schools in the province of Salerno (5 classes). In their classes a student with motor disability was present.

## 2.3 Tools and procedure

The drawing test of friendship designed by Bombi et. al. (1994; 1997; 2000) was used; it consists of five scales: cohesion, distancing, similarity, value, and emotional climate.

The Scale of Cohesion is a dichotomous scale which allows us to understand through the gestures, posture or actions of one or both of the subjects the degree of cohesion and interaction that exists between them.

The degree of cohesion between the figures is measured in six separate subscales: gaze, approach, common activities, proximity, common area, and union.

The Scale of Distancing measures the degree of independence and autonomy among the subjects, hence the separation.

The degree of spacing between the individuals is evaluated in six separate subscales, each of which examines graphic elements, similar to those examined in the cohesion subscales, whose expressive quality is however considered different: averted gaze, retraction, independent actions, distance, individual space, separation.

The Scale of Similarity between the figures drawn can give us information on the psychological affinity between them.

To judge the degree of similarity four aspects are examined separately, gathered by as many subscales: size, position, body, attributes.

The Scale of Emotional Climate is based on the combination of emotional states with which the drawer may have characterized each figure, thanks to mimicry, verbal expressions or symbols.

Moods attributable to each figure are gathered in four groups:

1. Well-being (joy, love, serenity, etc.), mimetically signaled by a smile;
2. Hostility (anger, threat, contempt, etc.), signaled by several indices, such as frowning, angry look, tongue sticking, etc.
3. Discomfort (sadness, fear, pain, etc.), signaled, for example, by tears, pout, rimmed eyes.
4. Neutrality, i.e. the absence of a mood in the drawing.

The Scale of Value measures the value that the artist attaches to the individuals. The reference subscales are five: occupied space, gaze line, body articulation, number of attributes, number of colours.

In terms of procedure, blank A4 sheets were distributed with the heading: 1) Draw yourself with your classmate (for disabled students), 2) Draw yourself with your disabled classmate (for non-disabled students). There followed a brief talk clarifying the drawing.

Before the drawing test, Moreno's Sociogram Test (1943; 1953) was administered, which is an indirect observation method used to analyze the position of an individual within a group, providing information about who is: isolated (the subject has no bond within the class); marginal (the presence of the subject in the classroom is not central); outcast (the subject is not positively viewed by peers); popular (the subject is recognized by many classmates, but does not necessarily have ties with them); leader (the subject most recognized by the class and with many ties).

The test was administered to the subjects in written form, with two questions which referred to the two test criteria, i.e. the affective one (question 1 "choose a classmate with whom you would like to play a game and spend time") and the functional one (question 2 "choose a partner with whom to do your homework"). The answers to the two questions have been added.

## 3. DATA ANALYSIS

No disabled pupil was chosen as "Leader" or "Popular" in the Sociogram Test. They fell into the "Isolated" or "Marginal" categories, but not into the "Outcast" category (Table 1).

**Table 1** Results of the Sociogram Test (data in %)

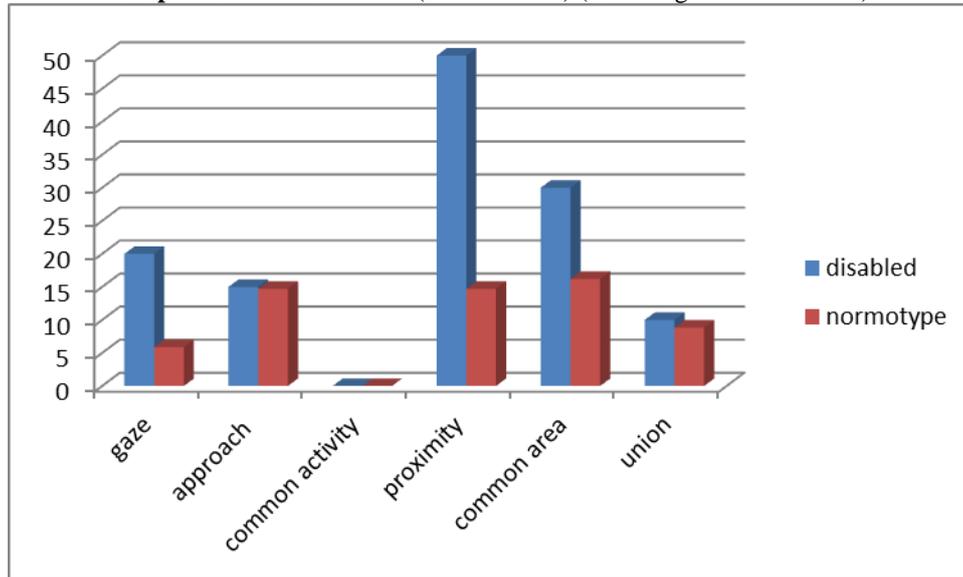
Sociogram Categories	Disabled individuals	Non-disabled individuals
Isolated	40	15
Marginal	60	40
Outcast	0	5
Popular	0	30
Leader	0	5

Both the affective (spontaneous play and free time) and the functional (school activities) criteria have highlighted choices equal to 0 on the non-disabled students' behalf. No normotype student has thus chosen a disabled classmate as a friend to play or do homework with.

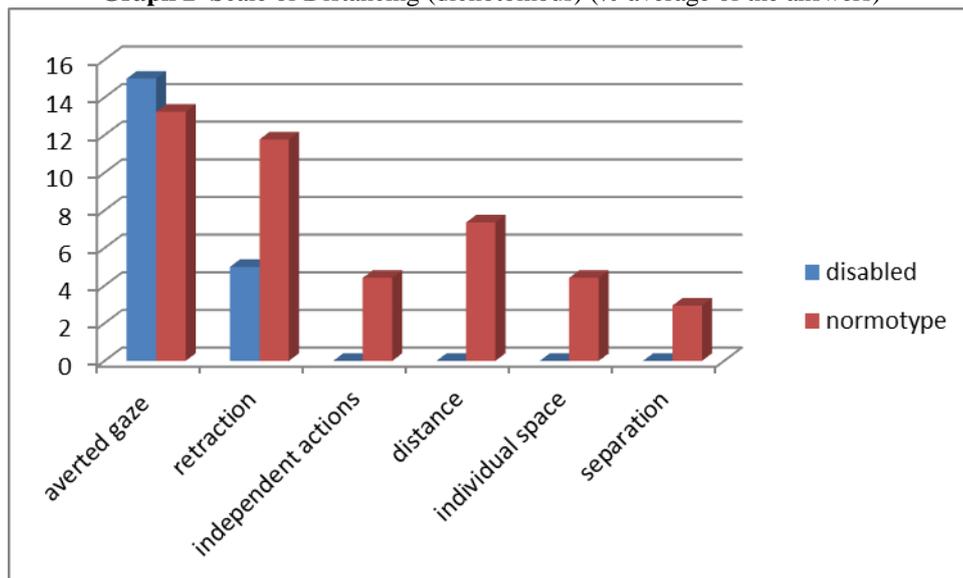
An example of sociogram is found in the appendix.

Following are the results of the drawing test.

**Graph 1** Scale of Cohesion (dichotomous) (% average of the answers)



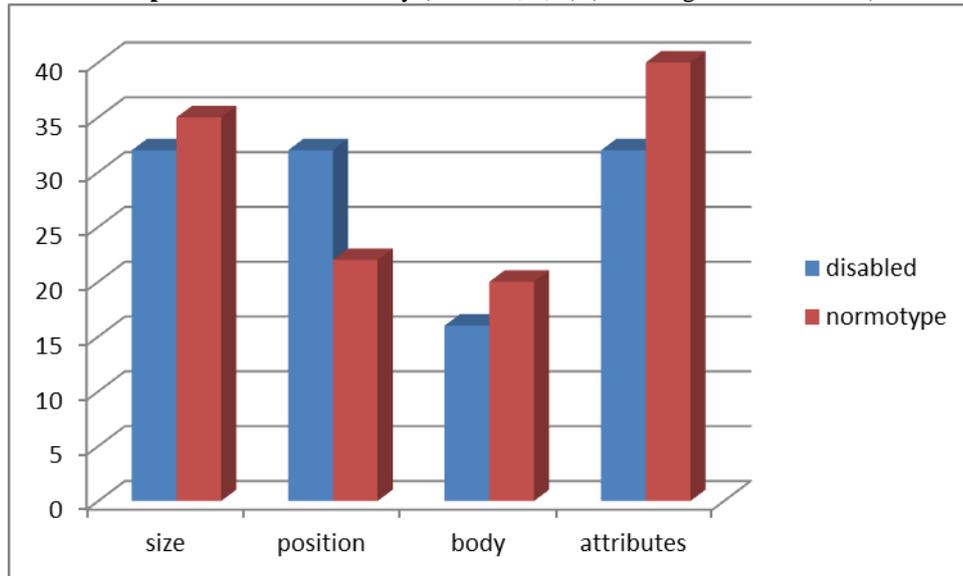
**Graph 2** Scale of Distancing (dichotomous) (% average of the answers)



Regarding the Scales of Cohesion (Graph 1) and Distancing (Graph 2), in the majority of the graphic representations, the two figures are close to each other. In the drawings by disabled people, unlike the ones by normotype subjects, the companion is not placed far away, but often it is the latter who is depicted with their arms outstretched towards the disabled, with a beaming face, characterized by a smile. Few, however, drew themselves in a shared activity with the partner, and those who did are mostly disabled.

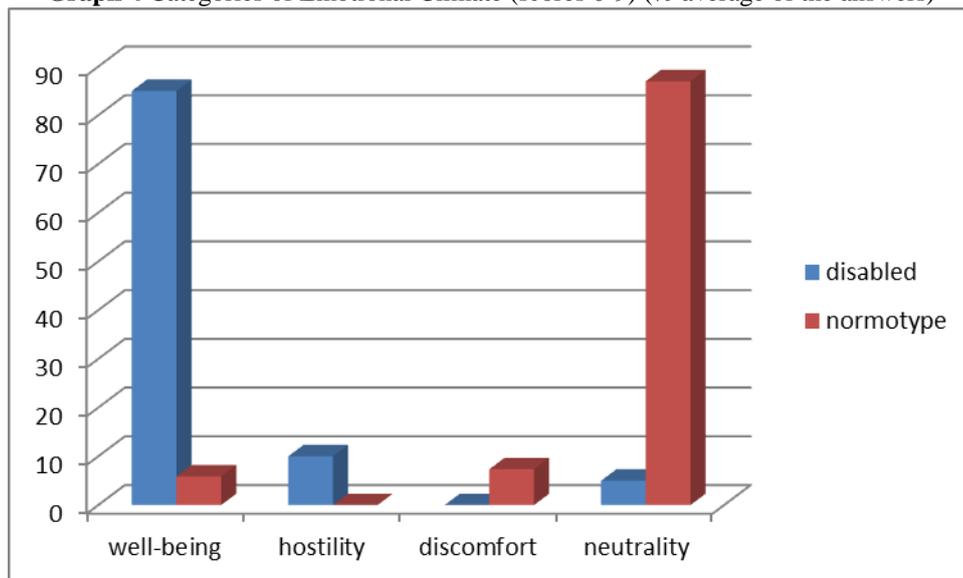
In addition, there is no union between the two figures, although there are attempts to approach. There are few drawings in which the figures move away from each other. In all drawings by children and young people with disabilities the categories of independent actions, distance, individual space, and separation are not present.

**Graph 3** Scale of Similarity (scores 0, 1, 2) (% average of the answers)



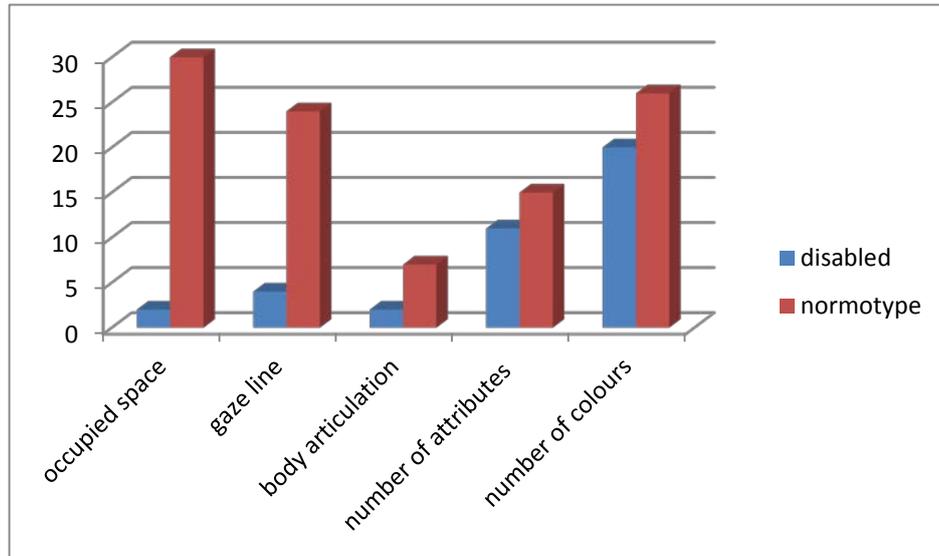
In the Scale of Similarity (Graph 3) we notice that the disabled and normotype individuals highlight differences in body dimension and in the positions assumed by the two friends pictured.

**Graph 4** Categories of Emotional Climate (scores 0-9) (% average of the answers)



As to the Emotional Climate (Graph 4), the disabled very strongly highlight their well-being within the friendship; the non-disabled, on the contrary, highlight the neutrality of the relationship.

**Graph 5** Scale of Value (scores 0, 1, 2) (% average of the answers)



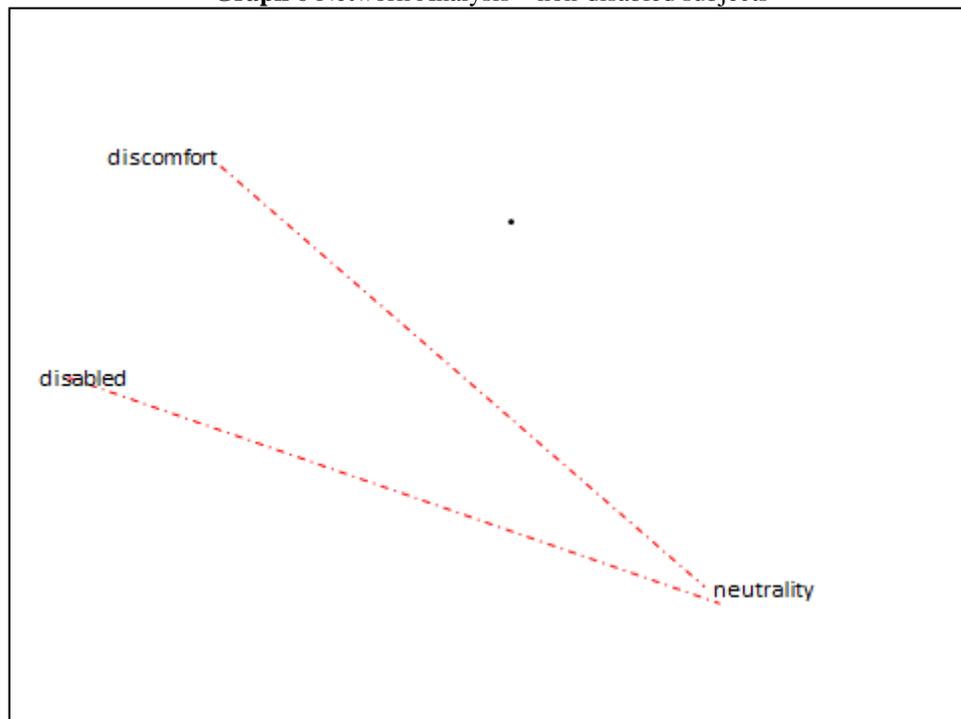
Finally, the Scale of Value (Graph 5), via the ‘occupied space’ and ‘gaze line’ subtests, shows that people with disabilities tend to draw themselves in the same space and with a gaze line corresponding to that of their partner. The number of attributes and colours, in most cases, is the same for the two figures.

These data are exactly opposite for normotype drawers.

By way of example, four drawings are shown in the appendix, two for the group of people with disabilities and two for non-disabled people, with a brief analysis of the elements analyzed by the drawing test and present in graphic representations of the respondents.

To understand what the individuals had drawn, the drawing test was followed by a short recorded, and later transcribed, interview. This transcript was subjected to a text analysis, through the use of T-Lab 9.1 software. In particular, we used the Network Analysis procedure, to understand what were the most used words (occurrences) by the disabled and non-disabled people and how they were used in combination with other words (co-occurrences).

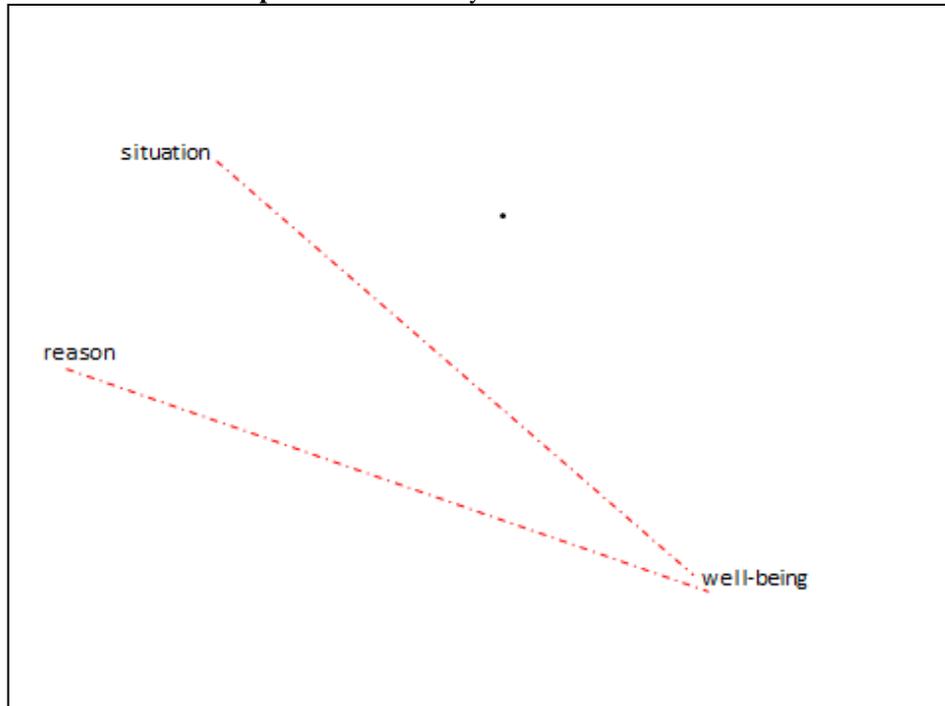
**Graph 6** Network Analysis – non-disabled subjects



For non-disabled individuals, the most used headwords in the conversation fall into the "neutrality" category. In the Network Analysis, the headwords that co-occur with them are those that fall into the "disabled" and "discomfort" categories (Graph 6).

Normotype children and adolescents, when describing their drawing, emphasize the diversity connected to the disability and the fact that there might also be a relational discomfort in a relationship which is not, however, significant for them (given the prevalence of neutrality ).

**Graph 7** Network Analysis – disabled individuals



For persons with disabilities, however, the most used headwords fall within the "well-being" category. In the Network Analysis, headwords co-occurring with them are those that fall into the categories "situation" and "reason" (Graph 7).

Normotype children and young people, when describing their drawing, highlight well-being in the friendship, even if they are aware that the results often depend on motivational and situational variables.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Our data show that there are different ways to represent friendship between the disabled and normotype peers, depending on whether one possesses a disability or not.

These data are consistent with the literature on the subject, according to which, in classes where a disabled student is placed, normotype companions interact little or not at all spontaneously with them and avoid choosing them as a playmate or study partner. This fact, in our study, is evident by the results of the sociogram tests.

For the drawing test, then, normotype respondents present graphic representations of friendly partners with less cohesion, greater interpersonal distance and emotional climate, which is neither of well-being, or discomfort, but neutral, as if they did not give value or importance to the relationship that they are experiencing. The figures drawn don't look at each other's face, are often back to back and do not conduct any shared activities. Normotype students, therefore, seem to experience the relationship with a disabled companion in a rather emotionally distanced way.

In contrast, the disabled respondents, in their way of drawing themselves or drawing the others, do so without evidencing any kind of relational problem with normotype peers; indeed what frequently emerges, as we have seen, is a state of well-being, of serenity and sharing of the same space and places, ranging from the classroom (among desks and teachers), to the open air (among flowers, trees and grass). Seeking eye contact, smiling (there often is just a simple line, sometimes a marked section), reaching one's arms out toward each other, show that disabled children desire to socialize, to relate, and be friends with normotype classmates. Sometimes it is the colour itself which is used in the drawing, that denotes a serene and comfortable climate, suitable to foreshadow the existence of a good, friendly relationship. Evidently, for the disabled students interviewed, the very fact of standing next to a classmate is a source of well-being; sharing activities, then, induces positive emotions.

Clearly, we are in the presence of two completely opposite representations between the two groups interviewed. This, in our opinion, is even more serious when you consider that, often, children and disabled children do not have an informal peer group, so the school group remains, for the most part, the only peer context in which to create friendship.

#### **4. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

Many Italian schools, from pre-school age, for some years have now started to create programs, which are intentionally meant to increase social skills and capabilities of positive interactions in friendships, even toward disabled peers. Integration / inclusion, therefore, is not only understood as everyone's right to education and inclusion, but it also means eradicating the risk of segregation, taking steps to ensure that people with greater difficulty receive suitable support, participation levels, and decision-making powers similar to those of normotype subjects (Nota et al. 2007; Savarese, 2009). The primary objective remains the building of "inclusive" relationships based on the task of putting all parties on the same level and enabling them to be reflected in the identity of their group. Secondly, it should facilitate the building of networks of friendships, in which we include both the context of the relationship, and the structure of the network, both the physical location, and the open space where the friendship takes place. To promote the development of a network of friendships, proximity, opportunity to interact, and knowledge, the development of pro-social skills is necessary; these include empathy, help, conflict resolution, loyalty, and difference appreciation (Ianes, Tortello, 1999; Savarese, 2009).

#### **5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The source of funding for all authors is "Legge 5/2007 – Savarese – Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Salerno" and "Farb – Savarese – Department of Medicine and Surgery, University of Salerno".

#### **6. REFERENCES**

- Bombi, A. S., & Pinto, G., Making a dyad: cohesion and distancing in children's pictorial representation of friendship. «British Journal of Developmental Psychology», 12(4), 563-575, 1994
- Bombi, A. S., & Pinto, G., Le relazioni interpersonali del bambino. Roma, Carocci, 2000.
- Hall, L. J. et al., A follow-up study of the peer relationships of children with disabilities in an inclusive school. «The Journal of Special Education» 34.3, pp. 114-126, 2000.
- Harrison, L. J., Clarke, L., & Ungerer, J. A., Children's drawings provide a new perspective on teacher-child relationship quality and school adjustment. «Early Childhood Research Quarterly», 22(1), 55-71, 2007.
- Ianes, D., & Tortello, M., La qualità dell'integrazione scolastica. Trento, Erickson, 1999.
- Lancia, F. (2015), T-LAB 9.1. Sito internet [www.t-lab.it](http://www.t-lab.it).
- Moreno, J. L., Sociometry and the cultural order. «Sociometry», 6(3), 299-344, 1943.
- Moreno, J. L., Who shall survive? N.Y., Beacon House Inc., 1953.
- Nota, L. et. al., La facilitazione dell'integrazione, in Soresi S., Psicologia delle disabilità. Il Mulino, Bologna, 2007.
- Panier Bagat, M., Sasso, S., L'altra crescita, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1997.
- Pigliacampo, R., Il nuovo Dizionario delle disabilità, dell'handicap e della riabilitazione. Milano, Franco Angeli, 2005.
- Pinto, G., Bombi, A. S., & Cordioli, A., Similarity of friends in three countries: A study of children's drawings. «International Journal of Behavioral Development», 20(3), 453-469, 1997.
- Rabaglietti, E., Vacirca, M. F., Zucchetti, G., & Ciairano, S., Similarity, cohesion, and friendship networks among boys and girls: A one-year follow-up study among Italian children. «Current Psychology», 31(3), 246-262, 2012.
- Savarese, G., Io e il mio amico disabile. Milano, Franco Angeli, 2009.
- Turnbull, A. et al., Parents' facilitation of friendships between their children with a disability and friends without a disability. «Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps», v. 24 n. 2, pp. 85-99, 1999.
- Xhimi, H. Y. S. A., Modeling student cohesiveness by waving the Sociometric Test with the Picture Apperception Value Test. «International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research», 2(1), 40-54, 2016.