

## The fairy tale as a therapy tool: an experience with the multidisabled blind\*

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### Abstract

This paper describes our clinical experience based on a fairy tale workshop carried out with a group of multidisabled blind children. It aims at showing how the huge communicational potential of the fairy tale can be helpful non only to the children taking part in the workshop but also to the team members involved. As a mediator of symbolization processes, the fairy tale appeals to the emotions that are not immediately accessible to thought and, thanks to its simple language, can reach the listeners' inner world. In this perspective, the pleasure shared by the group members (both children and team members) becomes a precious ally for the establishment of a "narrative bond": the fairy tale helps explaining also traumatic facts and events of life. In the situation reported here it becomes the fabric on which institutional life gets organized.

**Key words:** child, play, fairy tales, thought, school operators

In this paper we will discuss the use of the fable in the clinical and therapeutic domain and describe our experience in relation to it. Our reference model is the one introduced in France by Dr. Pierre Lafforgue (1995). It aims at employing the huge representational potential of the fairy tale to help children consider the events of death and life they cannot easily explain. Thanks to its own narrative structure (widely analyzed and deeply studied by several authors – first of all Propp [1966, 1972]), the fairy tale represents a very precious ground for providing credible answers to the numberless questions children ask themselves. At the same time, it does not saturate their eagerness to know; rather, it enriches and stirs it. Exactly like dreams, it is an inexhaustible source for the unconscious (1).

Even if from different theoretical and clinical perspectives, other authoritative studies (Bettelheim, 1975; Kaës, 1996; Fè D'Ostiani, 1998) have point out that the child can find in the fable the original "signifiers" able to organize experience into a comprehensible and meaningful object.

According to Lafforgue, like a sort of good food, the fairy tale feeds the child's mental functions and growth potentialities helping him/her overcome the anguish provoked by the gaps of thought and by the emotions that have no representation as it is typical of most autistic and psychotic mental states.

In order to be successful, a workshop based on the fairy tale must create a *narrative bond*, that is, all the components of the group – both adults and children – must feel holden in a *mind skin* containing their emotions and "grafting" them onto the plot of the tale, thus providing them with a representational means. As Lafforgue himself

strongly stresses, it is important that the team members themselves take part in the group, expressing their childlike part: they must be able to enjoy “the story-telling”. This attitude can help them get closer to the children’s group and provide them with some useful keys to understand the fears that listening to the fairy tale triggers. This attitude evokes the function of maternal reverie and makes the boundaries between inner world and external reality flexible; in this way, it creates a *potential space* for individual and group growth. In line with these aims, Lafforgue underlines the importance of holding intervision sessions, involving the adults’ group at the end of each session, in order to integrate their personal assessments and give continuity to the experience. Such sessions can be compared to a sort of historical “narration” of the group ensured by the observer in his/her capacity of alert and constant witness of what happens in the group.

In an article published some time ago in this periodical, S. Messeca (2006) reported her experience with a group of four children aged from seven to ten, whose clinical picture ranged from autism to psychosis(2).

We will leave aside the detailed report of her experience – our readers can refer to Messeca’s book itself to read it – to confine ourselves to highlighting some of the points described by Messeca which we ourselves could partly experience and develop during the project we are going to present.

1) After overcoming the initial chaos during which the children seem to be dominated by centrifugal forces, the group settles on the experience of the delimitation of inside/outside boundaries. In this regard, the resort to the onomatopoeic sound “knock knock”, representing the wolf’s threatening knocking at the little pigs’ door, is very important: as soon as the children start miming this sound, the narrative bond is established and it is possible to explore in depth the anguish of being devoured spread among the children.

2) When the moment of dramatization comes, the children appear to be trapped in a two-dimensional body functioning that keeps them stuck to the narrative contents of the fable. The children’s attitude starts changing when they are able to draw an analogy between the functioning of their body and its orifices and the wolf’s, which, during the story-telling, shows itself through threatening sounds (blowing, breaking wind, snorting, etc.) This stage corresponds to a different investment on the narrative object and an early acceptance of the roles within the dramatization (now, it becomes tolerable to be the wolf and/or a little pig).

3) Thanks to its containing function, the group forms a *mind skin* (Anzieu) that ensures the continuity of the experience. Moreover, it helps promoting the mental functions through mirroring: parts of oneself are projected on to the other, who thus becomes the theatre of one’s inner world.

As Lafforgue emphasizes, the fairy tale becomes a way to trigger thoughts; considering what Messeca reported, we could ask ourselves whether among its functions we may include the shift to the fantasies that E. Gaddini (1981) described as “fantasies of the body” to indicate the integration between sensations,

perceptions, emotions. Such an integration will encourage what will later become the activity of thought to settle through the body.

On the basis of these considerations we would like to briefly discuss our experience with a fairy tale workshop for a group of multidisabled blind children(3).

### **Group composition and choice of the tools**

The project has been going on for about three years and has involved a group of eight children aged between eight and eleven. They have all suffered from bilateral blindness and medium and high mental retardation since birth; some suffer from infantile spastic tetraparetic cerebral palsy, mostly with autistic or psychotic problems.

Of course, we needed to adjust Lafforgue's model to this particular kind of disabilities. For example, the narrative setting included new devices that emphasized the role played by listening: perceptual anchoring (through touch and sound) and a simplified version of the text (simple narrative units), which could be defined object-signifier.

When we were faced with the choice of the fairy tale, we felt *The Three Little Pigs* was the most adequate to reach the problems expressed by the children's group: though for different aetiopathogenic reasons, they all showed lack of differentiation in relation to the spaces and boundaries of the Self.

Each child had a cardboard box, a container in which he/she could find the narrative "objects" while the story unfolded: the little pigs, the wolf, the houses. Each character was identified by a physical feature or a personality trait, anyway always evoked through the sensory registry. The story-telling was "translated" by the team member supporting the child in such a way as to catch the tale meaning through different voice tonalities and at the same time amplify its rhythm. Thus, the three little pigs became three small cloth balls carrying different sensorial qualities (hard, semi-hard and soft) recalling three different personality types. The wolf could be identified in a paper mouth or in a tail/shaving brush evoking its fur. The straw house was a thin voile that could be easily blown away. The wooden house was a light plywood board. The brick house was a small wooden block and its roof was a cardboard lid with a hole representing the chimney through which the wolf sneaked in.

During the dramatization the "objects" of the disguise of each little pig kept recalling the feelings of hard, semi-hard and soft the children had met during the story-telling to suggest the greater or lesser solidity and safety of the shelters; the three houses were partly reproduced in the same way (a thin voile for the first, a plastic house for the second and two cornering walls of the room and some of the pillows used in psychomotricity for the third).

Being the children blind, drawing was replaced with clay handling in the first two years and plasticine handling in the third year. This innovation was suggested by a team member, who at the time was taking part in some occupational therapy

workshops with young multidisabled blind people. In these workshops they noticed that clay handling was particularly helpful to activate integration processes and trigger symbolization processes. A team member would put his/her hand on the patient's hand thus creating an "object" together. Such an object would later be endowed of a "life" of its own (Mastrangelo, Barbati, Gentile, Pascotto, 2001, 2005, 2007).

The basic principles of such experiences are founded on Winnicott's (1971) formulations about primitive emotional development from integrative factors: *holding, handling, object presenting*.

### **Group history**

With time, both the team and the children's group went through considerable changes, also because of a physiological turnover of the human resources available in the institution where the project was carried out. After some time and the death of a child, it was possible for the team members to process working through the intense feelings of estrangement and anguish arousing as a defense against the impact with the handicap and the fear of death related to many of the young patients of our rehabilitation centre. Thanks to its immediate language, the fairy tale could probably touch such feelings by connecting them to the threatening figure of the wolf, representing "disturbing strangeness" in this context.

Something needs to be said about the team. At first, it was formed by two psychologists, one belonging to the institution and the other external to it, one acting as conductor, the other as story-teller; by the practical assistants, by some rehabilitation therapists; and by some trainee students attending the Relational and Developmental Psychology course at Federico II University, Naples. Later on, the second psychologist dropped out and the collaboration offered by the internal workers – both rehabilitation therapists and practical assistants – of the institution increased.

### **The sessions**

It was extremely interesting for us to see how open to listening our children were while the words spoken by the story-teller were shaped into objects and the story took up new meanings according to the way each team member handed it to "his/her" child. The children reacted with small shrieks or showing excitement; some took part actively, in spite of their difficulty to be consistent with the context.

For instance, G. repeated aloud the tales he had listened to on other occasions while reaching out for his neighbour's box, almost as an evidence of his lack of space and time boundaries. Sometimes the voices would overlap; in that case, we intervened trying to bring the group's attention back to the story-teller, who actually risked to get lost among the different rhythms imposed by the guided listening of the team members. In some moments, the tale, even if simplified, appeared long and dramatic, and it was hard to keep track of the wolf's different attacks.

Thanks to a sort of magical atmosphere, some of the children seemed to suspend the self-injuring acts they usually resorted to in response to the changes in the surrounding environment. Within few weeks, we had the feeling that the capability to listen had definitely increased. Even though they were seriously damaged and some were actually exposed to the risk of death, the children seemed to catch and enjoy the emotion created by a telling voice. They seemed able to share the playful atmosphere produced by this event. In particular, at the beginning, T. showed such a high degree of anxiety and maladjustment that we were often forced to leave her outside the room to be able to go on with the workshop; then, with time, she learnt to respect the setting and used to accompany the story-telling with some anticipations of the plot when the tale aroused her underlying anxieties and anguish and her participation grew higher.

Let's read together the observation protocol of the third session of the first stage of our workshop (Fable workshop, May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005).

*... E. ... grasps my hand and first puts his hand on mine and then pulls it towards himself. Every once in a while he moves his hand to hit his face, in concurrence with my resistance. He smiles, attentively.*

*The story-telling starts; T. sings, shakes, even if much less... Her voice is lower and not bothering. E. claps his hands echoing the story-teller, helped by Daniela. L. is lying down and smiles. S. is curled up. The story-teller's voice is calm and rhythmical; it sounds more harmonious and spontaneous than in the previous sessions...The conductor makes no comments and helps Daniela with T. handing her from time to time the characters of the fairy tale . L. appears a bit more passive, pulls Monica's arm, almost tries to push her away; at one point he stretches out on his chair and anyway smiles in response to the stimuli coming from Monica.*

*T. seems calm, waiting for the sequences as Monica hands them to her; she shows to be slightly bothered by the wolf.... turns her face away focusing her attention on the cardboard ... when the three little pigs are in the third house...*

*During the dramatization Gino says that E. will be Timmy. Paola chooses Jimmy for S., Tonia chooses Tommy for L. Does T. take what is left? It's the wolf. Emilia takes advantage of a grumble of hers sounding a bit like the wolf's call (LUUU) to say yes, she will be the wolf... There is some confusion between Paola and Tonia about the house, Gino covers E. with the voile and puts the hat on his head, fanning him from time to time. E. looks a bit scared as if the disguise were a bit too intrusive for him... Maybe T. feels the same. Both liven up when the tale gets to its epilogue, when the three little pigs are in the third house. T. acts her part passively...she goes away led by Monica or, better, she is a bit dragged away.*

*At one point E. spontaneously addresses the wolf saying "Away"; instead, S. and L. seem to feel reassured in being safe in the house.*

*When the moment of handling the clay comes, T. is next to Monica, who whispers to her and touches her hands guiding them along a piece of clay ... they are making*

*the wolf....T. is sort of ecstatic, every once in a while she raises her eyes to the ceiling and then turns them down to her work.... (at the end she will say: Beautiful!). S. follows passively Paola's movements, bends his head to the left and dribbles once in a while. L.'s face is smiling while Tonia moves his hand making the wolf and kneads it in the clay. E. smiles while Gino helps him make Timmy. Water is used more relaxedly than usual. Tonia forgets to put her gloves on but she rushes to get them when Gino reproaches her. For the first time Monica does not use them. At the end, Gino washes E.'s hands and the contact with water seems to please him. Tonia takes L. away, also Paola and Monica, who says she will wash her hands in the toilet... The conclusion seems too fast, there is too sharp a separation from the previous situation: what prevails is the focus on getting washed. Can it be that the image of the dirty wolf has increased the need for feeling clean?*

In a sort of circular reaction, with time also the team members appeared less depressed and more participating as if they were holden in a hosting skin (a little brick house?) represented by the stability of the setting we had built. The setting was also influenced by the tuning existing between the two psychologists' interventions characterizing, as we have already said, the first part of the project. As the fable was told, one acted as the mouthpiece of the story while the other's voice amplified its effects.

By the end of the first year we understood how useful it was to respect and slow down the rhythm of the narrative sequences.

Thanks to G. we also perceived to what extent the group was realizing the usefulness of the setting to contain and promote the Self: we could not understand her pathological attachment to the little pigs until she herself made us understand that they were safer in the folds of her skin than in a box without an adequate lid/roof!

Before the summer break, many children showed they had introjected the expectation for the workshop and spoke of it all week long. In spite of being one of the children with the most serious relational problems, in the final sessions T. would accompany the listening of the fairy tale with comments, thus denoting a new and different quality in her investment in the experience.

As we have already pointed out, after the summer holidays of the second year some changes in the organization of the Centre activities and above all the traumatic death of one of the children resulted in a new wave of the anguish connected with the closeness to disease and handicap. This provoked a slow, hemorrhagic flight outwards.

After a year-long break, mostly spent in working through the bereavement for the death of the little patient and the events linked to it, the fairy tale workshop has recently started again with a different group: the second psychologist has dropped out but some Centre therapists (PM and Logo), three new assistants and two

observers (participants) have joined in. There has also been a partial turnover in the children's group.

Referring back to the fairy tale, as Laforgue himself invited us to do, we could say: "... *the three little pigs did not die*", or "*Red Riding Hood is rescued from the wolf's belly*": the history of the group has started again, this time with a team that is more aware of their approach to the reality of these children and more eager to test their qualities.

Let's read now the protocol reporting one of the most recent sessions. As you can see, the children's role is more active, whereas the team members' presence is more discreet and in the background. E., who was mute in the previous experience, in this session starts to show some verbal responses, which, echoing the narrator's voice ("glia") indicate his way to get hold of the emotional contents of the fable ("away"). During the dramatization, the choice of the characters freely and spontaneously involves some new children. Among them is I., who stayed aside in all the sessions held in the months before. Thanks to I., we could also understand the emotional wavering used by the group to take the distance from the narration. Finally, in handling his "shapeless" piece of clay, A. impresses in it the marks through which the character of the wolf has penetrated the devouring phantoms of his inner world. But let's give the reader the opportunity to personally ascertain what we have noticed:

*Before the story-telling starts, the team members explain to each child that they will soon listen to the story of The Three Little Pigs. Listening to the explanation of his assistant, E. says: "Good evening!", thus expressing his contentment, then he starts hitting himself slightly on the face. A. takes the hard ball to his mouth, while Ms. is silent, almost thoughtful. A. takes all the objects the assistant gives him to his mouth. When he is led to feel the house of the first pig, the voile, E. repeats: "Glia". He really seems to refer to the word "paglia" (straw), the material the house is made of. E. and Ms. are calm, they seem to be very alert, then they smile. In the meantime, A. falls asleep. Ms. bangs his hands on the wooden block, then he grabs the voile and laughs, while A. holds the hard ball while he is still sleeping. E. smiles and screams with pleasure. Ms. keeps banging his hands on the block, then he smiles and turns his head towards the psychologist who is narrating. A. gives out some slight moans, then puts a finger in his mouth, exactly his left forefinger. At the end of the tale, all the children are silent; the atmosphere is calm, getting ready for the following stage.*

*Then the group moves on to the dramatization and F. joyfully says she wants to be the wolf. Instead, A. will be the first pig and happily smiles for this. While I am writing, I look at I. and wonder if I will be able to see her take part in the dramatization before this stage of the workshop ends, that is, before the summer breaks. Only two minutes later, surprised and happy, I see I. accept to be the second pig, while Ms. will be the first. However, during the dramatization I. seems very*

*anguished because of all the sounds she hears and at one point she pushes away her assistant, who falls on the floor.*

*Also during the third part I. seems to be very anguished and restless. Instead, E. smiles holding in his hands the piece of plasticine that hardened a week ago, then grabs the soft one. As the assistant remembers, E. likes hard objects. A. holds the plasticine and smiles, while Ms. is quiet but does not handle her plasticine and visibly shows to be bothered by the contact with this material. Eventually, E. made Tommy, A. the wolf (or better, the wolf's mouth because he bit the plasticine imprinting the mark of his incisors on it), F. the wolf, instead Mn. Tommy. At first Mn. did not like the piece of plasticine that he was given because it was hard and difficult to shape. At the end of the session E., like A., seems calm. The assistant Luigi jokes with E., who says to him: "Away!"*

## **Results**

It was possible to identify three meaningful moments within this experience:

- a) the creation of a narrative bond and the consistency with the setting
- b) the existence of a different listening quality
- c) the reaction of the team members

The first two moments seem to confirm what Lafforgue stresses about being able to give the appropriate importance to the different qualities of listening in order to be able to identify possible signs of transformation inside the group. In the long, early stage of the workshop some of the children often interrupted the story-telling screaming or uninterruptedly and disconsolately crying, sometimes forcing us to take them outside the room. Their response led us to think that they were expressing feelings of primitive rivalry inside the group. As Lafforgue points out, such feelings, which Francis Tustin (1991) extensively discusses in relation to autistic children, are an evidence of the presence of phantoms loaded with the unthinkable anguish circulating in the group.

It was very important for us to realize the presence of such anguishes and consequently slow down the rhythm of the story-telling. Thus, a greater tuning between "story-teller" and "translator" was possible. When a different listening quality emerged in the group (we could notice that also because the children were less eager to grab the objects in the box than before, especially in the tensest moments of the tale), we found that mentally the children took "parts" or "characters" of the fairytale also outside the workshop room. This led us to suppose that in the group there was an initial distancing from the narrative object.

Now, let's discuss the third question. The team members have shifted from feeling perplexed at first to being cautiously involved and take an active part in the workshop.

The turning point seemed to occur when the team processed the fear to get in touch with the parts of oneself made "sick" by the daily relation with the child's handicap, which was experienced as "corrosive" and paralyzing (this fear was summed up by

the image of the clay “stuck” to the skin of one’s hands). Such a fear was partly shared in the intervision group.

In the adults’ group it was useful to connect this fear to what was at first perceived as strange, unfamiliar and therefore threatening, exactly like the wolf as it is portrayed in the fairy tale of *The Three Little Pigs*.

From this point of view, the child’s sudden death represented the most intense moment of the group’s anguishes in relation to the perception of disease as something “disturbing” and potentially “devastating”. After this event in the group there have been contrasts and feelings of helplessness and persecution that reminded the two psychologists of those emotional states Anzieu (1990) describes when he expounds his concept of “nomadic skin” *“nomadic skin”*. It was clear that, even if it was thought of as a possible event and understood by the adult mental functions in the group, the experience of death was denied and rejected. Thus, being an unprocessed traumatic event, it provoked conflicts and splits: when certain unsettled conflicts among some of the team members exploded again, the “container” represented by the setting went through a critical period and the group broke up. As Lafforgue himself suggested during a supervision meeting, on that occasion it would have been helpful to adopt narrative metaphors that could recall “passage rites” to express the positiveness of death.

As in the fairy tale the cyclical reality of life would have been explained by the introduction of the helpers arriving on the scene to rescue the characters in trouble (the Hunter in *Red Riding Hood* and Little Duck in *Hansel and Gretel*)!

Probably, such a reaction on the team members’ side was provoked by a total and unconscious identification with the children, who are exposed to the risk of imminent and deadly diseases and therefore feed the phantom of the “wolf devouring the group”.

In this light, we tried to work with the adults’ group on the importance of the movements of getting close to, and taking the distance from, the children and the narrative object. As a matter of fact, it was clear that when the story had to be dramatized, the assistants assigned to each child “got hold” each time of the same characters, thus becoming one with the children. When it was the moment to choose one’s roles, rivalries and conflicts pertaining institutional life seemed to come into play. After a deep examination of what was happening, it was proposed to take turns in the choice of the characters to dramatize, thus achieving a greater dynamism inside the group. This also allowed us to conceive roles and functions inside the team differently.

These themes were further examined in the year when the workshop was interrupted. In that period the psychologist of the institution silently but constantly monitored the assistants’ group, who were involved in the redistribution of the tasks inside the rehabilitation centre, and this led to an enhancement of their work.

The weekly meetings, carried out in small groups, encouraged them to contact their emotions and at the same time supported the “parental” and adult parts existing in

the group as well as its symbolization functions, which seemed to have been interrupted when the child died and the previous group “vanished”.

Thanks to this intervention, also the fairy tale workshop, interrupted as a consequence of the “short circuit” occurred between the world of imaginary phantoms and the reality of death, has started again on a new basis (that is, with a partly new group of children and assistants) regaining its reality of “mediating object”.

We can make some final considerations about the use of directive leadership to a greater or lesser extent in conducting the workshop. This involved the relationship with the children, who, suffering from very serious pathologies, need directive leadership, as well as the relationship with the assistants, who saw the psychologists’ directive leadership as a reassuring tool to contain their anguishes since they had received no previous training, whether psychoanalytical or of any other kind.

## **Conclusions**

Even if it is still an experimentation, this experience has proved to be useful for many reasons.

First of all, it could help the assistants develop a different approach to the reality of multidisabled children showing them a new way to take care (from diapers and the clean-dirty-clean cycle to the narrative space).

Perhaps, all this was made possible thanks to the double framework represented by the group of the adults and that of the children, to which the fairy tale seems to have given the perception of a space-time dimension.

As to the group of children, we need to underline the positive role of the experience, because it has provided them with the possibility to experiment a different sort of dependency on the Rehabilitation Centre and more generally on the adult. Moreover, it has allowed the most developed children to begin a growth process partially helping them to overcome archaic anguishes related to the Self fragmentation and to non-containment.

The fairy tale workshop confirms itself to be a useful rehabilitative tool favoring the integration processes at the basis of early symbolization experiences. The threefold structure of the device introduced by Lafforgue “provokes” and, at the same time, “contains” the surfacing anxieties that would otherwise find no expression or remain hidden in the silence of emotions. Some children “export” the emotional content of the workshop to other experiences outside. An example can be the image the parents of a girl in the group reported to us: having to face the danger of the street and of the relentless traffic, she said to her parents: “The wolf!”, thus showing the first form of association with the emotions experienced in the workshop.

Finally, some children had problems in handling plasticine and this has led us to think that the three-fold structure of the workshop – story-telling, dramatization and handling – can correspond to the different stages of the genesis of the Object Relation as Winnicott (1991) summed them up. Therefore, we suggest our readers to

view these three moments as the shift from the fusion with the narrative object to a “subjective use” of the tale and, finally, to an early differentiation from it.

## Notes

1) In the workshops based on the fairy tale carried out at Bordeaux’s *La Pomme Bleu*, the Day Centre where Dr. Lafforgue was Health Manager for a long time, groups of psychotic and autistic children (already following other rehabilitation programs and individual psychotherapy) get together to listen to some of the best known popular fables such as *The Three Little Pigs*, *Red Riding Hood*, *Hansel and Gretel*. The setting of the workshop is rigorous. It is divided into three moments: at first, the fairy tale is told, then it is dramatized. and finally it is represented through drawing. The space is well-defined (a wide room where each of the three different activities takes a specific space). The team includes several people: apart from the story-teller, the conductor and the observer, there are other adults taking care of the children’s group, helping them with their tasks and connecting them to the context.

2) The group was led by a team of four people – three psychotherapist psychologists and a rehabilitation therapist; at the same time, another psychologist led a discussion group formed by the four children’s parents. In the children’s group three fables were told: *The Three Little Pigs*, which required quite a long time at the beginning of the group history, *Red Riding Hood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. The choice was not fortuitous: it reflected the different moments of the group history, ranging from when the group entered into the narrative bond and the mind skin was built to when the first differentiations between inner world and external reality in each child surfaced. External reality emerged in particular through the onset of the anguish of being devoured and therefore abandoned related to the end of the experience.

3) The workshop has been carried out in the Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind of Martuscelli Institute, Naples (Italy). We want to take this opportunity to thank its Health Manager, Dr. G. Pittaluga, and the Board of Directors of the Institute in the person of the Chairman S. Sportelli. We are also grateful to all those who have made this experience possible and to the children belonging to the group.

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\*Parts of this paper are been presented in previous situations : cfr M. Foa, R. Gentile *Esperienze di laboratori fiaba a Napoli, Comune di Napoli, Museo Pan, 28.10.05*; R. Gentile *Il Laboratorio fiaba con un gruppo di bambini ciechi pluriminorati* Centro Studi Fondazione Istituto Antoniano, Ercolano, Napoli 13.10.2007

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