

## **The experience of a group-tale**

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### **Abstract**

The experience of the group-tale is carried out in two elementary schools of the city of Lione in France. It is basically a participation modality inspired by Pierre Lafforgue's methodology, but its model is based on the requirements of the two groups and the conductors' experience.

The objective of the groups-tale is to help children who present difficulties regarding to the learning process and are inhibited on the relational plan. The observation technique is of qualitative type, the method is psychoanalysis.

A "group-tale" includes dynamics for which the group becomes an active system to receive, to figure and to contain. That can happen thanks to the mediation processes of which the tale is carrier: identification, symbolizing, figuration and control of thoughts.

**Key Words:** group- tale, identification, symbolizing, figuration, control of thoughts.

### **Introduction**

The experience of the group-tale takes place in two elementary schools in the town of Lyon, France. It's a modality of intervention of the "Reseau d'Aide" of these schools, influenced by Pierre Lafforgue's methodology, but modelled on the needs of the two groups and the experience of the conductors.

The objective of the group-tale has the purpose of helping children presenting difficulties connected with learning, inter personal relations, familiar relations and the relation with the institution itself. In this particular case we had to do with children attending the primary grade, reported by their teachers because of their difficulties in learning and inhibited from a relational point of view.

The group-tale are two and each is made up of three children, a psychologist, a re-educator and me with the role of observer. The technique of observation is of qualitative type, the method practiced is psychoanalytic. In child psychoanalysis, this method consists in a direct and participating observation.

The elements I take into account of concern the setting, the children's behaviour, group phenomena, the comments about the drawings on the children's side and my perceptive emotional reactions. Here are some methodological methods consecutively.

### **Fairy tale and symbolical mediation**

We need to know what the function of symbolical mediation consists in and as a consequence, what the fairy tale is the bearer of in order to understand the workings of the group-tale.

A fairy tale ignores psychological motivations; the heroes' adventures develop without anything is said as to the personal reasons, which had led them to act. Thanks to this lack of motivations, a fairy tale offers a wide range of potential meanings for the listeners, who don't receive the story passively, this continues its working after having been listened.

Another feature of a fairy tale is the lack of an author. Even if it is supposed that at its beginning there must have been a creator, the deserving operation is wholly and only in the transmission, which models, enriches, transforms and adapts it to the following generations, without those who, transmit it, are aware of the new modifications. This strict rule is practiced out of any conscious will.

The workings in the elaboration of a fairy tale are the same as in a dream discovered by Freud; figuration, condensation, displacement, secondary elaboration. A fairy tale approaches a dream because it translates verbal representations into figurative representations, into visual images. The beauty of these stories is connected with the feeling which is in them, sometimes dull and changing, but they often hide masked meanings in the form of seducing and amusing images.

The temporal indetermination "Once upon a time there was" allows the access to a psychic place. When "Once upon a time there was" is pronounced, this assures that the audience will listen to a lie. But the announcement that one is going to tell a lie, in a certain sense, is the announcement that one is going to tell the truth. If poetry touches us it is because it possesses the faculty of transcending the poet's subjectivity to reach readers'. The fairy tale does the same. Its images and staging possess this power of trans-subjectivity. In this sense they are poetical. But this power is practised on a deep level, even if the story, and the narration draw attention to a superficial level. It is necessary to enable fairy tales to have time and freedom to come from the same unconscious sources of dream, the time and freedom of making the unconscious workings which are typical both of dream and fairy tale ready for the use. We cannot compare a fairy tale due to oral tradition to a story created by an individual through a writing. Certain losses (the good looking presence, the voice, the story teller's attitudes, the interaction with the audience) are irreparable. Another loss concerns the finished feature of a written text. First of all, a written text appears as a full, permeated object, in a certain sense perfect and therefore closed. On the contrary a fairy tale is open, expansive, lacunar, always imperfect, always indifferent in spoken relations it constitutes a moving object that the writing changes into a text. In the same way, the listeners of a fairy tale free themselves through a psychic elaboration, eventually, by completing gaps with elements thought by their own phantoms, being able to understand, some times, what has not been said.

Fairy tales, beyond their simple or not appearance, their amusing aims, their optimism, are tales speaking in a concealed way, of the great mysteries of human life: a child's separation from his/her parents, marriage.

If we consider so, the wonderful fairy tales are myths. But in their weaving some phantoms inter-link. Myth is characterised by its narrative development, the phantom,

caught in its plot, is hidden in a figuration , an image a scene contributing to give to the tale richness, depth, colour and darkness at the same time.

Fairy tales share with myths and legends, their particular feature of being model stories which individuals uses if they were drafts. To define a fairy tale we can say that it is a “prêt-à-porter” of a phantom on one side, the limits and referring models have been selected starting from certain fellows and certain classes of people we usually meet. On the other side, the same piece of clothing can be worn by different people and can be repaired little by little.

Representing is, therefore, a synonymous of shaping in images, words and attitudes the original phantoms of this transitional space. Representing also acquires the meaning of making present an event or an affection of the past. This can equally mean, make visible an intangible reality such as a feeling, an emotion, a wish, a thought and an intention.

A child does nothing else but to invest in a fairy tale. He/she disperses his/her libidinous energy, derives his/her violence both from hate or love as a result of roles, situations and symbolical waves. They are symbolical because they are loaded with unknown values, where censure keeps watch monitors on unmasking, by getting profit of metaphors and metonymies which had little by little inserted in the language itself. In what he does without being aware too much of it, a child constituting thus, a stage for operations thanks to which one flees from face to face from himself/herself which is Another from me to give access to the universe belonging to the Other.

Dreaming through fairy tales, means to give free expression to the need to create phantoms and discover that these pretexts, these ready texts, come from somewhere else they are common to many human beings. They don't teach us how to live, they teach without saying anything that drives for pleasure and reservations from reality are the same for every one. This quality of the fairy tale is particularly important : it consists in giving us some images. It is an evident paradox for a material which is made up only of words. But a fabric of words ,therefore the order followed in fairy tales isn't the order of ideas, coming from a theorization , from a conceptual dictionary, but it isn't even the order due to feeling, which will take time to express by using descriptions present in written literature, finally, it isn't what we can find through the method of pragmatism which will pass through explanation, demonstration direct expression of a will. No, the order followed in a fairy tale unfolds in the positive action of natural things (animals communicating with man elements and plants; actors) (witches, dragons, ogres) where in the interrupted tension of a story which is more and more developed, a main character acts( but sometimes is acted). Every image given by a fairy tale evokes other things without making the action heavier. A symbolical space opens without making any noise. Every character can thus constitute sometimes an actor in the story and represent in the fairy tale a tendency of our own being : the relations of different characters can then mean our innermost conflicts.

The tale that manipulates, symbolically, existential situations and connected needs, moves along the axis of the story in the form of every action and therefore helps the

child to follow its way. The semantic roots of the symbol used in the tale are searched in the psychological deep of a universal community, primitive magical where all has a role in everything, where all is intentional and alive, where seems that to be in force a world to the back regarding logic but where it comes put to place all that was wrongly place because of logic. Therefore a community in touch with its inner movements and its psyche's vital needs and childish experience. The child doesn't need an explanation regarding to the meaning of the fiabe also because, usually, following its intuitions and moving in a world of magical and wonder, where everything is possible, transforms a tale, a history in order to adequate it to his own needs. If particular elements make contrast with his emotional needs, the child changes them, carries them on in various way, adds particularities, gives variations to common events. Because the child is not being aware of the events, conflicts and external complexes that lives and neither of the inner fights that he engages daily, dipping himself in the tale where at the end victorious heroes and heroines come symbolically represented and personified, has the possibility to do the "transfert" for all of his needs.

The tale does not moralizes; each one, in function of his or hers own experience, can project his or hers feelings. Et is possible to identify itself temporarily with all the personages and to try the emotion, positive and negative, ambivalent of all the moments whithin the tale. This "ability to acceptance" of the tale, this attitude of being the objective of numerous projections is a resource that puts particularly in evidence the psychoanalytic approach. The tale's containing function concept has the advantage to consider the existence of one simultaneously ability to acceptance (of the anguish) and another ability regarding to transform.

## **Experience of a group-tale**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *The conductors*

Are the same ones in each of the two groups. One scholastic psychologist and one rieducator scholastic.

#### *The observer*

It is I in the making of my practice inside the school, under the guide of the scholastic psychologist.

#### *The subjects*

Three children of elementary school in each group. The information on each child, is a synthesis of what their own teachers have said, the rased (Reseau d' Aide) and all the particulars I've written in the interviews of the psychologist with the parents and in the sessions of the group-tale.

### *Duration*

The session lasts an hour, but the conductors and I gathered half hour earlier in order to organize it based on what had happened on the previous one. At the end of the hour we used an other half hour in order to analyse the session that has just finished.

### *Agenda*

In the first phase of the session we accommodate in the center of the room making a circle with small chairs. On one of these chairs a little bell or the rain stick is putted, this indicates the chair of the one who will tell the tale. My position, in this phase is in the circle like all the others and I put away paper and pencils, than, instead will be used in the phase of restitution, in which the children are seated around a table for drawing. Also in this case, I'm in the group and not outside.

### *Rules*

The children are free to absent themselves, to not speak and to not draw if they do not wish to; they are free to say or not to say the to class companions what they are doing; they are free to say what they want, but the important thing is to not be hurt; if someone is absented, no other child will occupy the place of the absent one.

### *Device*

This device corresponds to the structuring of the session in their temporal improvement.

1, *PRESESSION*: It is basically the moment prior to the session, its when children are taken out from class. At first I'd underrated the importance of this aspect, but then I've inserted it in the grid because lots of interesting situations had taken place very often.

2, *GREETING*: It's the opening phase of the session

*Time*: Controlling that starts as previewed.

*Disposition*: The chairs are located in the classroom (those small ones for children) already making a circle. I observe as the children begin to sit. My self, Jean-Marie (the psychologist) and Lydie (the rieducator), sit last.

*Presentation and rules*: The children greet themselves, their asked how they are, if they want to say anything, it is explained what has gone well or rong in the previous session.

3, *TALE*: Lydie or Jean-Marie tell the tale. They use the little bell or a rain stick at the beginning and the end of the tale in order "to open and close the history". The tales are told orally. Some tales are those known and can be found also in written versions (ex.: Grimm, Andersen), others are tales of animals (Africans tales), some times the conductors told tales that they knew because they heard them from someone else. The tales were chose based on the characteristics of the group and the problematic that emerged in the previous session.

4, *RECONSTRUCTION*: Its the moment after the telling of the tale, in which the history is reconstructed, in order to see if it has been understood by the children. Moreover there can be a discussion of any argument the children pull outside.

5, *RESTITUTION*: In this phase the children are sited around to a table, on which they can find pencils and paper to draw (or not to draw) what they want: a free topic, a passage of the tale, a personage they liked, etc...

## ARGUMENT

The course of a session in a group-tale depends on a multidimensionality of factors:

Characteristics of the members: the personality and the state in the here and now

The tale: the content and the way of telling it.

The conductors: the of leading (directive/non directive, stimulating/containing, or as Privat would say, exciting) and the actual status.

The setting: respect of every face, opening and closing, respect of the time. These dimensions constitute the time space of the group-tale, transforming it in that theatre where the children can represent their selves authentically, also in their defects, their fears, their problems.

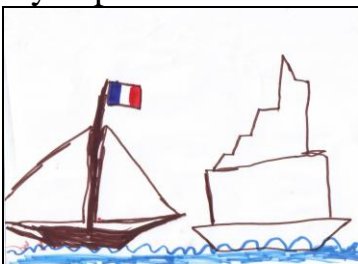
In the group-tale, stability and dimension are complementary between them. Using the metaphor of the tale they are the "Once upon a time...", is that time space, outside from reality in which one can express itself, in which the ego of the child, usually hidden from the standardizing processes that the society imposes, it is free to manifest itself without the risk of overflowing. The analysis of the two groups makes evident the great force of this container, that can be named in many various ways. Perhaps the metaphor of the history is more effective.

Over all, I would like to emphasize the importance of the symbolic opening and closing of the history through the little bell or rain stick. This was a moment of telling, in which the attention was moved towards the one speaking, in which the group assumed a shape. The closing of the tale, than announced the opening of other faces was marked by that symbolic action, also from the breaking of the tension sensed in the back atmosphere of group and that was manifested throughout a less rigid posture, a game of looks between the members, movement, speaking and smiles. In one session, the conductor forgot to do the symbolic closing, and I remained with the impression that the history was until truly open, manifesting itself in an uncontrollable outbreak of movement and words from the children, like a river that overflows when the banks brake off. On that time the history was remained opened until the next session I think, because after delivering the drawings, the children escaped to their classrooms without saluting, running in the corridors and making a lot of noise. Since that time, we haven't only gave great importance to the opening and closing and respected the time of the session, but we've also encouraged the moment of saluting. "It is necessary to take time for saluting each other" said the conductors to the children and sometimes, after the session, we went in the classrooms for greeting that child who sometimes succeeded to escape that moment by exiting a minute before.

An other element attached to the stability of the history is the respect of the agenda, of the time and the presence of all members. I have noticed some confusion, in fact, every time for one or other reason, the session began in delay. Regard to the respect of the agenda, I think that the session succeeded, when the exact time was dedicated to every phase. The children were distracted, as an example, when the phase of greeting was longer than necessary. They were more inclined to speak or make group activity after the story, perhaps just thanks to the symbolic mediation of the tale.

Above all I can assert that the tale converged the attention of the members towards the group and stimulated the birth of interesting topics, legated to the problems of these children. Finally, an other element legated to the session that harmed its development was the absences or the losses of members. For this matter, we helped them to understand these separations, trying to make clear that the absence didn't mean death and that the person absent was, however, present in our memory, like we were in the memory of that person. We tried of make them understand the importance of memories, like a beautiful experience that we can carry always with us. And, we made present the person absent, conserving in the circle its empty chair, in order to make clear to the children that the place of that person was preserved, that it also made part of the group although not being with us physically. In case of a definitive loss of one of the members, its empty chair remained for two sessions, until we've sent a letter to this person with the messages and drawings of the children. An other loss of the group has been my self. We began to tell them four or five sessions prior to my departure and was interesting to see that just in the last one or two sessions, in both groups, the children talked of the issue regarding to my role, "why she doesn't speak", "what are you writing", "where will you go", "what are you doing in Italy", then I gave back an answer to their questions, explaining that I was in the group only to observe, therefore I made part of the group, but not participating actively in the session. I have explained that because of me being apart from the group, I would remember them and as a proof, I've sent to each group postcards from Rome.

This is a child's drawing and his remark on the day in which we informed him about my departure:



Two ships indicate the place where the ogre was drowned. He underlines that the place is near the ocean and that someone will arrive; but who? Maybe the Ogre will arrive.

Other element legated to the session was the perception of the group like an entity in the moment in which the inner noise that disturbed (voluntarily or not) and provoked from the same members was finished and, instead, they were feeling distracted by

the external noises. And the group was perceived like such, when the attention of the members was turned to all that made part of it: the same members, their apparel, the look, remembering the number of times that one or the other member has been absent, the awaiting for Monday or Friday, (day in which the sitting of each group was kept ), attention to all that was present in the room. And always on regard to the session, I've noticed that the present elements in the room, like space disposition, influenced the course of it. The books, colors and games attracted them and, sometimes distracted them, they ran often to play without respecting the rule of remaining in group and making activities all together. That happened when the session was tented to break, which I'll explain latter.

On regard to the disposition of the members, there was a repetition of the division between masculine / feminine and adult / child and that often was associated with each one's experiences or needs of dependency or separation between the members. All our attempts to have a stable history were continuously came to test from the children, that succeeded to break off in unexpected ways for us, and of which we took single conscience in the successive analysis of the session. It was like if the children were testing that this "container" contained them truly.

But if I've defined the stability and dimensionality, come the coordinates space-temporals of the group - tale, I must also define the instruments used in the construction of the group. These are the rules. The rules, never imposed, but always explained, regarded respect between members, therefore not to make fun of themselves, listen to eachother, not to hit themselves; freedom to speak or not; freedom to absent themselves or to not participate in the proposed activities, but always respecting and not disturbing the jobs of others. The rules, explained every time that came violated were accepted, instead, the rare times in which had been an authoritarian attitude, the result was badly reaction, that means making feint not to hear the order, continuing to disturb or distract themselves.

A last observation about the session is the fact that the beginning of the it does not coincide with the real opening, but begins already in the moment in which we go to pick up the children from class, which demonstrated to the joy or the sadness in seeing each other (being able to express also the negative emotions) and the use of games, as hide and seek, for the joy of feeling searched and found.

Another aspect of the group-tale regards the type of communication between the members. At first a communication mediated by the conductors, then another one directed between the children. It was interesting to see how communication went backwards when interesting topics didn't emerge, it would be better saying, when it came a lack of " group presence ", that there wasn't a topic joining all members. And in such occasions the back atmosphere also changed and the feeling of separation between the members, distraction and not carrying were present. The topics that created group unity, communication, empathy and being on the same channel were fears, nightmares, family and siblings. The type of communication was oral and not oral. The richness of oral content was associated to more "creative" steps or fazes, the



greater part of oral production happened in the moment in which they draw, the not oral content was associated to mechanisms more primitive in the functioning of the group, I've used some times the pre - oral term in order to emphasize the type of communication between the members that had characteristics of imitation of movements and gestures and that was connoted from dependency living. The primitive mechanisms of group functioning, beyond of being the motor discharge and the imitation were logorrheic speaking of a child. The arguments didn't have anything to do with what it was being faced in the group at that moment and were always very "technical" e "mechanical". These arguments had fallen or treated more sporadically, as the child succeeded to express something else that the functioning of machines or elevators. And its attitude was changed by showing more attention to the group and speaking finally about himself. Always regarding to communication, was very obvious to see how this changed like a consequence of the loss of a member. One time, one of the group-tale of school V.H, loosed child and it harmed the group's functioning, provoked an equilibrium breaking, obviously bad, in the relation between the other two children.

The difficult situations that were created in the group, helped me understand its function better. I've been able very often to see how powerful were the transferal and counter-transferal mechanisms between the children, adults, or both. But taking conscience of all helped us to face and "to experiment" at the successive sessions. The conductor-father, the conductress-mother, the child-siblings, was often the transfer that took place.

Regarding to the conductors, I've often asked my self what was that differentiated their role, because they alternated the telling of the tale and lead the group using the same technique. But I've come to understand that their role was delineated and differentiated in the course of the session naturally, other than the technique used. The conductress represented the containing function, because of having a particular cure towards the setting, controlled that time and duration were respected, symbolic opening and closing, greeting to each other at the ending of session. In other words, made it so that the rules came respected at all, but without imposition. The conductor had one exciting function. He stimulated the birth of topics to which the children were sensitive, moved always their attention towards lived experiences, asking how they were, what they wanted to do or to say, what they had dreamed, which fears had provoked this or that episode. As a consequence the group was transformed in a full place of strong emotions and this was not always positive. As happened when the history broke apart and the emotions overflow from the container constructed with so much care.

For some children, then, the group experience has been demonstrated premature for their abilities to enter in contact with their own emotions. In the course of the session they improved or they were constant in their attitude, depending of each case. However, the aspect that I've found more interesting is that every child, except one, had an opposite attitude in the class and in the course of the year improved at a

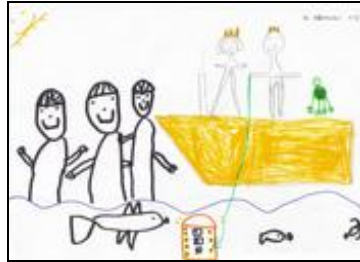
learning point of view. A child in particular, seemed to be more tolerant to the group-class than the group-tale, but after observing him carefully, I had the impression that his attention and participation was a way to escape from something else and I've confirmed it when, finally after months, he made friendship with its companion of bench, the only one with whom he spoke and because of whom got distracted very easily, what didn't make before. This child in the group-tale, hasn't spoken but two or three occasions and his drawings didn't express anything, made always the usual landscape: two or three small houses, the trees and some time a mountain.



On the contrary, the other children expressed a lot in the group-tale and a bit or nothing in class, where they had a closed attitude or made relations with companions in order to disturb or only to complain themselves.

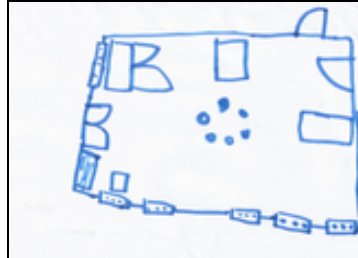
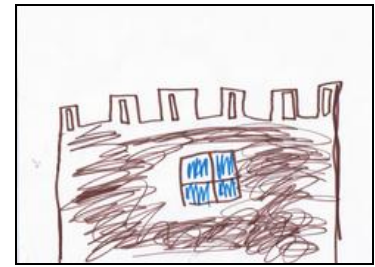
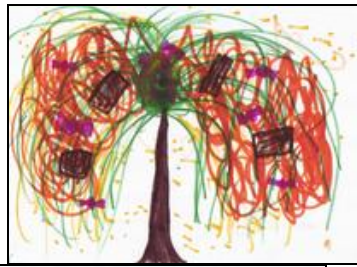
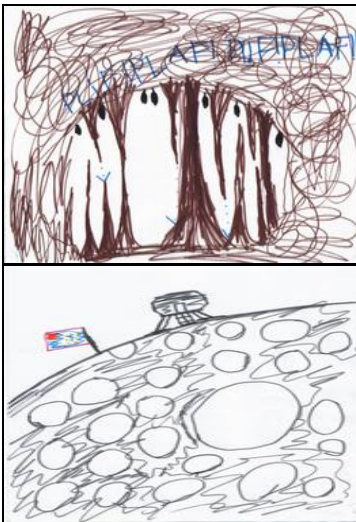
I think that one of the most important aspect of the group-tale is the symbolic content, favorite of the tale telling and of the expressiveness of drawing. A test of the effectiveness of the tale telling was the time when we read the story and showed the images of the book. This session was a failure, but it was also a way to a better understanding of the group-tale functioning. The reading of the tale provoked distraction, disturbance, complete absence of ideas at drawing and loss of group perception unit of work, as we saw everyone making what they wanted. The tale

telling, because of its content or the way it was transmitted, stimulated the birth of many topics for the drawing faze which content was symbolic, as we seen that starting from the drawings, the children were stimulated to speak their problems. Also throughout the explanation of the design we could understand something more of them. As an example, we understood with which personage of the tale they often identified themselves and a lot from that came understood, about theirs lives in the confrontation of very difficult situations, because more than once, also identifying themselves with the personage, they changed the end of the tale, not a good ending like in the tales, but one of defeat.

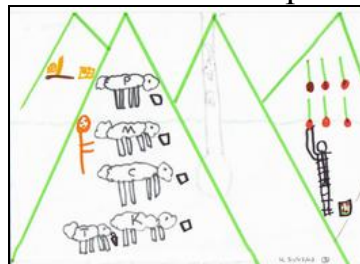


Drawings, therefore, were expression of the child's personality, drawings of a rigid way of being or tendency to represent always the same topic, or still, ones very chaotic or designs without human figures.





They represented, also, the situation on course, like a moment of the tale that had particularly importance. Some times the topic was legated to their personal lives, like the representation of the family or personages legated to it. It came to me the drawings of a child scared of the wizzard her parents visited, that had always something of spirited and fantastic or the child who represents its family like a flock of sheep guarded from the shepherd. In the occasion in which we have asked to represent the group-tale, every drawing was the representation of the real situation and the perception of the situation from child's point of view.



## Conclusions

In a "group-tale" are present the dynamics because of which the group becomes a system adapt to receive, to figure and to contain. That happens thanks to the mediation processes of which the tale is carrier: identification, symbolization, figurate and containing of thoughts. In other words, the containing function and an effective communication between the members are favorites. The group-tale becomes therefore the place and the moment tacked of their daily labors and of scholastic functions that is, in which the members can be represented and have the possibility to put in common their "ghosts", their fears, their desires, their dreams and their problems. This putting in common, that is better called "group presence" favors the affective resonance between the members.

Considering the psychological truth of the institution, the group can become an arena of transformations, a place of emotional experiences where as a member or as a group one can renegotiate the identity, can do, if the opportunity comes, an integrating experience in which the job it is not divided from the rest but attached to their creativity.

A group could work like team work, if the importance of affectivity, relationships and respect's education were considered. To abandon, therefore, logic of competitiveness, replacing it with the cooperation between members, to create a space in order to receive not only the best, but also the weaker, to favor a climate of acceptance, confidence and collaboration and understanding of the own feelings and the own emotions. That which permits the understanding of other people's affective states

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