THE ROLE OF SOCIAL IMAGE IN ENSURING THE PROTECTION OF REMIGRANT CHILDREN

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Abstract

The article draws connections between the social image of remigrant children and the social support that they receive in order to readjust when returning to the community of origin. It reviews both theoretical aspects as well as conclusions of a quantitative study regarding the image of these children and the availability of the community members to become involved in their readjustment. The study was conducted in one of the most important cities of Romania, the city of Iasi. The article presents a series of recommendations for the reduction of the negative effects of the phenomenon on the children and for facilitating their readjustment.

Keywords: social image, remigrant children, readjustment, support, protection, community

1. Introduction

Today’s society is one dominated by the preoccupation for the ensuring of wellbeing, both on a macro level (at national level or at the level of unions of states) as well as at a micro level (at the personal or family level). In the context of the globalization of resources and of opportunities, migration is considered by many as an effective strategy, a natural response which is favoured geo-politically and economically and even idealized by individuals and communities.

In order to avoid the negative effects of separation on children and on the family as a whole many parents decide to go work abroad,

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while taking their children along. Regarded as an effective solution by professionals as well, the migration of the entire family has its own limitations with regards to protecting the children, because it is conditioned by economic reasons (the capacity of the family to provide resources for living together abroad) as well as the capacity of the family members to adjust to living in another country (Luca, Foca, Gulei & Brebuleț, 2012, p.59). As a consequence, many of the children return to the country of origin, with or without their parents.

The article draws connections between social image and the social support that the remigrant children receive in order to readjust when returning to the community of origin using both theoretical aspects as well as conclusions of a quantitative study regarding the image of these children and the availability of the community members to become involved in their readjustment. The study was conducted in one of the most important cities of Romania, the city of Iasi. The topic approached relates to the theme “Family as a unit of social structure” of the Journal of Social Economy.

2. Labour migration – a positive phenomenon with negative effects

Labour migration is not a new phenomenon, nor a Romanian one. Starting with the second half of the XIXth century most European countries were confronted with massive emigration, particularly towards outside Europe. In the second half of the XXth century European countries started to become countries of destination for migrants, coming both from the inside as well as from the outside of the continent, as a consequence of the post-war need of labour force, and in connection with the colonial past. Starting with the 90’s the countries from the South of Europe became countries of destination, while some of the countries from the Centre and the East became (and some still are) source countries (or countries of origin) for workforce.

During the 2000’s the phenomenon reached new dimensions, with the expansion of the European Union through the adhesion, in a first phase, of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia (in 2004), followed by Bulgaria and Romania in January 2007. All these countries are nowadays part of the phenomenon of labour migration. Unfortunately not all of these countries, particularly the countries of origin for the migrants - Estonia, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania –
conducted researches on the effects of labour migration on the children of migrant workers. Where such studies have been conducted (Romania, Bulgaria) the conclusions are similar – the labour migration phenomenon can have serious negative consequences on children and families.

3. The effects of remigration on children

Although the migration of Romanians is not recent (dating from even before the 1989 Romanian anti-communist revolution), its effects on the children left behind or on the Romanian children who migrated with their parents and later returned to the home country were only studied in the last decade. It is about these effects that we will discuss in the following pages, starting with the main studies conducted on the subject.

3.1 The “home alone” children

The size of the phenomenon of children separated from their parents who went to work abroad was evaluated in Romania by official statistics and through the only independent study which provided estimates for the age interval 0-18 (UNICEF & Alternative Sociale, 2008). The National Agency for the Protection of Children’s Rights estimates the number of children with one or both parents working abroad as varying between 85,000 and 100,000 (according to statistics published on its own website – www.copii.ro). The independent study mentioned provides a much higher figure – over 350,000 children. Another independent research, belonging to SOROS Foundation, referring to the secondary school students, approximates the number of children with one or both parents working abroad at 175,000 (Toth, Toth, Voicu & Ștefănescu, 2007, p.8).

3.2 The remigration of Romanian children

In order to avoid the negative effects of the separation on the children and on the family in general many parents decide to migrate together with the children. The effectiveness of this option however is affected by the fact that it is conditioned economically (the capacity of the parents to provide for the entire family while living abroad) as well as on the capacity of the parents and of the children to adjust to the country of migration. As a consequence some of the children return, with or without their parents, to the country of origin.

In Romania only one study has been conducted on the situation of children returning home after an experience of migration – “The
Remigration of Romanian Children – 2008-2012” (Luca et al., 2012). The research produced an estimate of the total number of remigrant children starting from data provided by the Ministry of Education. According to the official statistics, during 2008-2012, 21,324 children returning from Italy and Spain requested to be reinstated in the Romanian education system. Based on the sample used in the study the authors estimate that the total number of remigrant children (including the ones returning from other countries) in the period mentioned is over 33,000.

The study “The Remigration of Romanian Children – 2008-2012” shows that 20-30% of the children returning to Romania present a “significant/major risk of developing a specific disorder from the prosocial spectrum: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/ inattention and peer problems (readjustment and psychological and emotional issues which will affect their subsequent development).” (Luca et al. 2012, p. 15). In absolute figures this percentage means approximately 11,000 of the children which returned during 2008-2012 and over 1,300 children every year (during the period analysed).

According to the study remigrant children consider that the support that the community provided in order to help them readjust was very reduced.

4. Social Image

„Social image” is a modality of interaction of the individual with a dominant group or with the community it aims to integrate in. In the case of children this interaction is very strong because, according to Lev. S. Vygotsky social interaction plays a fundamental role in their cognitive development: “each function in the children’s cultural development appears twice: first, on a social level and later, on an individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and later inside the child (intra-psychological)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)

“Remigration is a stressful process and in order to cope with stress individuals need a positive interaction with the social environment” (Mesure & Savidan, 2006, p. 1130). The quality of the social relations is also important, as demonstrated by the favourable effect of the stable social relations on the capacity to adjust during hostile situations. Reversely, a rupture in the social relations determines a decrease of the individual’s immunity to the challenges of
the environment. Furthermore, an isolated individual, confronted with stressful situations, loses many opportunities, compared to another with solid ties to the environment.

The environment that we are referring to in this article is the community, which is defined through three important dimensions: the geographical dimension (neighbourhood relations, social interactions in a given space), the behavioural dimension (acts of volition and practical actions), the identity dimension (on territorial criteria or on non-territorial criteria – age, gender, ethnicity, religion etc.) (Gavriluță, 2003, pp. 548-549). All three dimensions are relevant in the context of migration, since migrants go through changes that are of geographical nature, as well as identity and behavioural.

The relevance of the concept of “social image” is special because it concerns both the individuals’ identity, the manner in which they relate to the community and the way the community relates to the individuals. The concept of “identity” is present in the center of the analysis of the capacity of the individuals to adjust (who feel the need to “establish” who they are in order to be and to function), but also when speaking about the connection between the individuals and the environment they belong to or they want to belong to. We also speak of “identity” when analyzing the individuals’ resilience. According to E. Grotberg (1996), in order “to overcome adversities, children draw from three sources of resilience features labelled: I HAVE, I AM, I CAN”.

The problems of individual and cultural identity are in the centre of the difficulties met by the immigrant adolescents, particularly by the ones who “lived from an early age in the country of immigration” (Marcelli, 2003, pp. 503-509).

“Social image” influences both the individual and the community. A reciprocal positive image is ideal, because it represents the premise for obtaining “social support”. At the opposite pole, a negative “social image” may be identified as a major cause for a community’s development difficulties or for adjustment issues in the case of individuals aiming to integrate – because of a lack of “social support”. Also damaging may be a neutral social image (of people who “do not care/are not interested” or who “do not know”). “Social image” can also be profound or superficial based on the level of familiarity of the community with the specifics of the situation of the vulnerable individual or group. A superficial “social image” (a lower level of
knowledge) of the situation of a vulnerable group may be caused by the recent appearance of the risk factors, but also by marginalization.

5. Social support

One of the main factors which favour adjustment is “social support”, which manifests itself best when it facilitates the development of abilities needed for overcoming difficult moments and situations, or the development of the resilience. “Social support” (for the facilitation of the readjustment, for the development of the resilience and as a consequence for the development of the human security) depends both on the “social image” of the remigrants in the community they returned to, as well as on their will to readjust.

“Social image” influences the answer of the community to the need of support of the individuals but also the participation of the individuals to the processes of the community. Ideally – both the individuals and the community have a positive image of each other – a premise for the crystallization of the “social support”. Similarly, a negative “social image” acts as a major inhibitor of the readjustment of those looking to integrate in the community (as a consequence of the lack of “social support”) or as a catalyst of disintegration for the community, through the migration of its human resources. The actions of the individuals are determined by personal convictions but also by an interpersonal network of communications and contacts (Liu & László, 2007, p. 95); the participation or the presence of the individuals in a community is influenced by the evaluation that they make with regards to the social status of the latter. If the individuals identify a more advantageous community they have the option of replacing it (Collins, 2003 apud Şerban, 2013, p. 464). In conclusion – the way in which the individuals and the community perceive each other may determine actions through which its security may be endangered.

The positive answer of the community (the existence of the „social support”), or the negative one (the lack of “social support”), affects the capacity of the children to adjust, producing effects on short, average and long term. These effects may be positive – facilitating the adjustment of the individuals, building their personality – or negative – destructive, blocking their capacity to adjust and affecting, sometimes irremediably, their subsequent development (Luca et al. 2012, pp. 15-16).
6. Social image and the support for the readjustment of the remigrant children

The readjustment of migrants. The reverse cultural shock

An assumption which appears to be supported by common sense is that remigrants should not have difficulties adjusting or that these difficulties should be minor, negligible, because in their case the cultural elements of the community of origin, the language are well known and owned by the migrants. This assumption is shared by the community of origin and by the migrants themselves (Gaw, 2000 apud Mooradian, 2004, p.43). In reality when the individuals return to the community of origin, particularly after having spent a long period of time abroad (Luca et al. 2012, p.14) they discover that “at home” is no longer the same well-known place, and that the family and friends have changed. A “reverse cultural shock” takes place, following which, according to several studies (Adler, 1981; Storti, 2001; Uehara, 1986), the process of adjustment is much more difficult than in the case of the “initial cultural shock” (which occurs when a migrant arrives in a foreign country). In spite of that the “reverse cultural shock” is less approached than the “initial” one (Adler, 1981 apud Mooradian, 2004, p.40). Moreover, the persons who were most successful in adapting to another culture (who overcame the “initial cultural shock” of adapting to the country of emigration) have the greatest difficulties adjusting when returning home (Koester, 1984 apud Mooradian, 2004, p.43).

The “reverse cultural shock” (defined as a set of psychological and social difficulties related to the adjustment to the country of origin after a period of time spent abroad) is also known as the readjustment, reaculturation, reassimilation or reintegration shock (Mooradian, 2004, p.43). It is considered that readjustment follows certain patterns. A model used for explaining the readjustment process is that of Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) – who were among the first to study the “reverse cultural shock” as part of the adjustment process.

6.1 The readjustment of remigrant children

Most remigrant children consider that they readjusted to the Romanian social, educational and cultural space (90%), but 10% of them mention social readjustment and reintegration issues. The majority of these children declare that their emotional state is positive; still, for 16-17% of the children who participated in the research, readjustment is associated with negative moderate or severe negative
emotional states (shame, sadness, fear, abandonment feelings and anger).

The study shows that 20 to 30% of the children who return to Romania present "a significant/major risk of developing a specific disorder from the prosocial spectrum: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention and peer problems (readjustment difficulties and psychological and emotional problems which will affect their subsequent development)" (Luca et al., 2012, p. 15).

6.2 Factors facilitating readjustment

The study estimates that approximately 70-80% of the remigrant children readjust successfully to the Romanian social, educational and cultural space. From the perspective of the resilience theory (Ionescu, 2009, Grotberg, 1995), the perception of the remigrant children is that the success in their readjustment is due first of all to "individual factors (being knowledgeable about the life in Romania, self-confidence, ability to ask for help, courage, ability to make decisions, responsibility, luck) followed by family factors (care and help from the family, including from the extended family) and community factors (colleagues, neighbours, teachers)” (Luca et al., 2012, p. 15).

Factors inhibiting readjustment

Analysing the factors which inhibited their readjustment, the children who stated that they did not readjust mention as main responsible the factors of individual nature (being accustomed to the life abroad, having forgotten the Romanian lifestyle, low self-confidence, poor abilities for asking for help, for making decisions, lacking courage), followed by community factors (low levels of support from friends, of attention from colleagues and teachers) and family factors (overburdening, insufficient parental support, absence of parents).

The study quoted indicates that, in almost 30% of the cases, the children investigated were already separated from the parents working abroad before their migration abroad. „In the case of these children there is an overlap of three contexts that may include risk factors for the development of the child: the period of separation from the parents, emigration and remigration” (Luca et al., 2012, p. 26).
7. The premises of the readjustment of the remigrant children in the Iasi community

In the following pages some conclusions of a quantitative study conducted at the local level of the Iasi city are presented. The scope of the research was to explore the “social image” of the remigrant children on the positive-negative scale but also in depth, linking it with the degree of knowledge of their situation and with the availability of the Iasi citizens to offer them support, both directly, as simple members of the community and through community institutions.

The “social image” of remigrant children in the Iasi community

The social image of the remigrant child is generally a positive one, but this opinion is expressed only by a little more than half of the Iasi citizens, while the percentage of respondents who don’t have an opinion on the subject is significant (35.8%). A „bad“ or „very bad“ opinion about these children is expressed only by a small percentage of the Iasi citizens (9.5%).

The majority of those who know these children have a positive image. At the same time, the majority of those who don’t know remigrant children (46.12%) are undecided (they don’t have „a good opinion/nor a bad one“). The fact that a big percentage of those who don’t know remigrant children are undecided suggests the fact that their image is formed rationally. Consequently, it is safe to assume that the social image of the remigrant child depends on the community members’ degree of knowledge of the situation, and that a high level of knowledge determines a positive image of the remigrant children.

The high percentage of unknowledgeable respondents suggests the fact that the regular sources of information do not provide sufficient data to help creating an image (the remigrant children situation is not reflected enough in the media).

Most undecided respondents are adults (age groups 19-45 and above 45, in similar proportions). From the perspective of education – the vocational school graduates represent, along with the post-university graduate respondents, the main group of “undecided”.

The Iasi citizens have a superficial image with regards to the remigrant children, the number of those who can indicate at least one quality or one shortcoming being very small. A quarter of the respondents who believe that remigration may have negative effects on

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1 The study is part of the PhD thesis „The social Image of the Remigrant Child. Study Conducted in the City of Iasi Between 2012-2015”, Alexandru-Stelian Gulei, 2015.
children’s rehabilitation cannot name causes of this situation; the percentage of those who can name more than one cause is also reduced. Even in the case of those who do not consider that remigration creates problems to the remigrant children, only a third may provide more than one explanation for the opinion provided / may indicate more than one protective factor.

The level of familiarity with the situation of remigrant children decreases as the age of the respondents grows. However, the respondents most aware of the remigrant children’s adjustment issues are people from Iasi aged 45 and over; at the other end, the highest percentage of subjects who believe that adjustment issues do not exist are the subjects aged between 12 and 18 years old. The “social image” of the remigrant children is not influenced by the gender of the respondents.

The “social image” of the remigrant children is influenced by the level of education of the respondents, but the variations are recorded on the positive side of the spectrum. A positive image of the remigrant children is less present among university and post-university graduates than among those with secondary and high school studies. Yet, remarkably, the percentage of “don’t know/ don’t want to answer” responses is reduced, which seems to suggests an interest of the respondents with regards to the situation of the children from the target group of the study.

The Iasi city inhabitants find it easier to indicate qualities rather than needs of the remigrant children. This aspect seems to underline a positive attitude towards the remigrant children.

The image of remigrant children is an excellent one among the respondents who are either remigrant children or are the parents of/care for remigrant children, a percentage comparable to the estimates realized by the Association Sociale Alternatives study, which shows that 70-80% of these children don’t have adjustment difficulties (Luca et al., 2012, p. 15).

7.1 Social support in the Iasi community

The support of the members of the community is important because it can act in an invisible manner, thus being more efficient as it does not affect the self-esteem of children (Bolger et al., 2000; Martire, Stephens, Druley, & Wojno, 2002; Nadler & Fisher, 1986 as cited in Uchino, 2009, p. 243). At the same time, the social support is associated with the perception of needs. Almost three quarters of Iasi citizens are
aware of the fact that when returning to their country, to their community of origin (theirs or that of their parents, for those born abroad), the remigrant children meet adjustment difficulties. The most aware of these problems are those who know personally such children.

The most important deprivations noticed by the Iasi respondents with regards to the situation of remigrant children are mainly those related to individual factors (almost three quarters of the answers), followed by family factors (a fifth of the answers) and community factors (2.82%). The detailed analysis of the answers provided by the participants to the study provides an image of the remigrant children which is characterised by a great variety of gaps regarding: the support for readjustment (in general), the relationship with the family, the emotional support, the abilities necessary for readjustment, the good command of the Romanian language, the informal education, material resources or the knowledge of the Romanian life style.

The level of education of the respondents does not have a decisive influence on the perception of the adjustment difficulties, although those who believe that upon their return remigrant children should not have adjustment difficulties are more likely the secondary school, vocational school and high school graduates.

From the perspective of gender – those who consider that upon their return to the country children may have adjustment difficulties are more likely the female respondents.

One quarter of the inhabitants of Iasi consider that remigration has positive effects on the remigrant children because it develops a series of qualities. The main gains of this experience are: the development of new life skills, positive character traits and the acquisition of useful life experiences.

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (over 80%) who believe that remigrant children should not have readjustment issues say that individual factors are responsible for this outcome. A reduced percentage of them consider that the lack of adjustment difficulties is explained by the fact that remigration itself is simply not a problematic phenomenon.

A little over half of the respondents in the study consider that responsible for the adjustment issues of the remigrant children are mainly the community factors, followed by the individual and the family factors. The causes for the adjustment problems of the remigrant children are, in the opinion of the respondents, the changing of the
environment (social adjustment difficulties, not being accustomed to
the Romanian life style), school adjustment issues, the fact that they do
not have a good command of the Romanian language, the lack of
support from the group of peers and the lack of support from the family.

Most of the respondents, regardless of their degree of familiarity
with the situation of remigrant children, the gender of the respondents,
their age or level of education, believe that this category of children
should be helped, one way or another, to become re-acquainted with
living in Romania. Still, the Iasi city inhabitants who do not know
remigrant children, those aged between 19 and 45 and the post-
university graduates are more reserved with regards to the whether
remigrant children should be supported.

The majority of Iasi inhabitants who consider that the support of
the remigrant children is needed are also capable of indicating how.
They mention the support for social and school adjustment,
psychological counselling, the family support and the financial support.
Only little over 10% of the participants to the study cannot specify a
type of support.

Most of the respondents who believe that remigrant children
should be supported consider that the main persons in charge of
helping them readjust are the members of their families. Only 1.75% of
the respondents consider, voluntarily, that this responsibility may lie
with other members of the community who do not necessarily have a
family or a professional relationship with these children (the
neighbours or other members of the community).

With regards to the responsibility of the institutions for
facilitating the readjustment of the remigrant children – the
respondents who consider that remigrant children should be helped to
readjust place the school on the top position, followed at a considerable
distance by the social services (public or private, in similar
percentages), the central public institutions (the state, the government)
and other institutions (psychological services, medical facilities and the
church – mentioned once). An explanation for the high number of
respondents indicating the school as the main catalyst of the
readjustment of remigrant children compared to the social services may
be the higher level of familiarity of the respondents with this
institution. The inhabitants of Iasi don’t know very well the role of
social services and do not associate them with a positive
interaction/finality. As a consequence they prefer that the school acts as
an environment in which adjustment issues are approached and solved.

7.2 The sources of resilience of the remigrant children

The analysis from the perspective of the resilience theory, as proposed by Edith Grotberg, shows that approximately half of the inhabitants of Iasi consider that remigrant children are resilient. Thus, they already own abilities corresponding to all of the sources of resilience, particularly from those labelled “I AM” and “I CAN”.

Noticeable is that 20% of the respondents declare that they don’t know well enough specific aspects related to the situation of remigrant children to be able to express an opinion.

Most respondents (almost half) consider that the remigrant children’s own capacities, personal strengths which contribute to their resilience: an agreeable personality or temper, are loving, empathetic or selfless, proud of their achievements, autonomous and responsible, filled with hope and confidence.

Almost 60% of the respondents believe about the remigrant children that they have support networks and external resources which promote resilience: trusting relationships, role models, encouragement to be autonomous, access to education, health and safety services.

Almost half of the respondents consider that remigrant children own a series of social and inter-personal skills which contribute to their resilience in the face of the difficulties posed by the return home.

Recommendations for activating the support of the Iasi community for raising the capacity of the remigrant children to readjust

1. Given the characteristics of the social image of remigrant children in the Iasi community, as described previously, we consider that a first recommendation needs to be tied to the implementation of a series of information/awareness raising activities with regards to the situation of these children and with regards to their needs of support. These actions need to be particularly aimed at:

- adults (age groups 19-45 and over 45 years old), vocational school and post-university graduates (the main groups of “undecided”) – who should be provided with more information with regards to the situation of remigrant children in general;

- Iasi citizens who do not know remigrant children - the demographic groups which express a reserved opinion with regards to the appropriateness of support for remigrant children (the 20 to 45 age group and the post-university graduates);
- children and youth (12 to 18 years old) who should be made aware of the difficulties that the remigrant children are faced with as well as with the negative effects of these difficulties on their capacity to readjust (from the educational, cultural, social perspective) and of their strengths (aspects originating in their migration experience which may be valued.

In the design of these information, awareness raising and sensitization activities the focus must be on providing rational, rather than emotional arguments.

2. A second recommendation is aimed at making remigrant children, their caregivers and the regular members of the community with regards to the existing support resources and with regards to the responsibilities of the relevant institutions regarding the facilitation of the adjustment of the remigrant children.

3. The study highlights the fact that the inhabitants of Iasi consider that many of the adjustment issues of the remigrant children are tightly connected to the school environment, demanding a higher involvement of the institutions from the education system. At the same time only a low percentage of the respondents identify responsibilities of social services (public or private) with regards to the facilitation of the readjustment of the remigrant children – demonstrating a low level of knowledge of their role. In consequence an important recommendation is aimed at the institutions of the community who should promote their services and become more proactive in the identification and in providing support to the remigrant children and their families. The general public needs to be educated with a view to access social services for the prevention of the negative effects of remigration.

4. On a different level, that of the preparation of the community for the assessment of the potential negative effects of social phenomena on its members, as well as for preparing and making available protective factors, it is important to create early identification mechanisms of such problems as well as to educate the members of the community with regards to their own role in preventing, identifying and providing support for vulnerable groups.

5. Another recommendation which emerged from the study is related to the development of information campaigns (in all of the EU countries) aimed at the parents who migrate with their children with regards to the risks and the difficulties of remigration. The parents need
to be informed on the obligations specified by the national legal frameworks, on the risks associated with the separation of children from the parents who work abroad and with regards to the steps they need to take in order to facilitate the readjustment of the children in the country of origin. These steps refer both to formalities (obtaining information and starting procedures for re-enlisting the children in the Romanian education system, in the medical system etc.) but also to the preparation of the children for the actual return (the consultation of the child with regards to making the decision to remigrate, the preparation of the child with regards to the life in the country of origin, planning socialization activities, resuming hobbies and keeping in touch with important persons from the country of migration), observing changes in the behaviour of the child for identifying potential adjustment issues, and if the case, contacting professionals from support services.

6. With regards to the development of the capacity of the communities to support children affected by migration we recommend that teachers are informed on the situation of remigrant children in order to facilitate their school and social adjustment (provide support with the formalities for enrolling the children in the school system, ease their integration in the group of peers at school, organize training courses for recovering gaps in their school performance or for improving their command of the Romanian language, prevent school dropout, refer children who display manifestations of adjustment difficulties – emotional, behavioural, inattention or peer relations issues – to the school psychologist or to social services).

7. The situation of the children affected by labour migration needs to be known in depth by the professionals from the social services in order to facilitate the identification of potential cases, for monitoring their situation, for the development of support services for social, school and cultural adjustment and for making parents (and professionals) aware of the situation of these children and the roles that they need to fulfil.
Bibliography


