

# NATURALISTIC EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS. PARENTS' VOICE IN PARENT EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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## Abstract

The study presents some practical means for carrying out a naturalistic evaluation, a process that has resulted, for instance, in the identification of the profile of the parent educator as defined by the parents attending parent education classes as part of the program "How to become better parents", implemented by Holt Romania with the support of UNICEF Country Office. Exploring parents' voices is an advantage in naturalistic evaluation when trying to identify some essential aspects of the program. Based on the grounded theory strategy, this study explores the participants' subjective representations, being a useful source of information for future development of similar programs.

The profile of the parent educator as defined by the parents has several significant characteristics: the educator's ability to reduce power asymmetry and increase responsiveness, the importance of the educator's personal traits of character, the role of social and spatial proximity, the importance of the parent educator in personalizing the relationship with institutions etc. The results highlight the ways in which parent educator's characteristics can significantly contribute to increasing the attendance of such programs.

**Keywords:** naturalistic evaluation, parent education programs, rural area, Romania, grounded theory.

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## **1. Introduction**

Naturalistic evaluation is an evaluation strategy proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). It is assigned to the beginning of the fourth evaluation generation and focuses on the concept of negotiation. Naturalistic evaluation stresses the role of qualitative methods in the data collection process, as they are considered most appropriate when attempting to capture the complexity of programs and of the contexts in which they are run. In order to consolidate this vision of evaluation, the authors created alternative theories to positivism, supporting the process of naturalistic-type evaluations. We shall hereby present several fundamental aspects of naturalistic evaluation and the way they contribute to constructing and implementing this approach in evaluation.

## **2. Ontological, epistemological and methodological grounds**

After the emergence of the theories concerning naturalistic research and the application of the naturalistic approach in evaluation, a number of publications tried to refine the practices and methodologies used. “Naturalistic evaluation is the process through which evaluators carry out a research in order to know and understand an evaluand, so that they can then present this knowledge and understanding to others” (Hébert, 1986, p. 3). Fetterman (1986, p. 23) considers that “naturalistic evaluation is not a monolithic entity, but rather a generic term for a diversity of evaluative research types”; the author includes amongst qualitative and naturalistic evaluations the naturalistic research originated by Lincoln and Guba (1981), Patton’s qualitative evaluation methods (1980) and Fetterman’s ethnographic educational evaluation (1984), the latter being considered by the author as “the most prominent form of naturalistic evaluation” (Fetterman, 1986, p. 23). Guba (1987, p. 31) makes several remarks concerning these assertions and considers that the naturalistic paradigm cannot be accompanied by the conventional research of the positivist kind, as “naturalistic evaluation builds its meanings on the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of naturalism, these being in fundamental disagreement with those of positivism”.

In order to provide evidence as to the different, even contradictory nature of the naturalistic paradigm compared to the conventional approach, Guba analyzes (in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology) the belief system of each approach, showing them as if in a mirror (1987, pp. 32-35); in the case of the conventional positivist approach, at ontological level the realistic principle is operational, a principle according to which there is a single objective reality independent of the observer, being guided by objective causal laws, and truth consists of the facts that are isomorphic with reality; at epistemological level, the relationship between the evaluator and the evaluand is considered to be dualistic, of an objectivistic type, meaning that the researched reality is external to the individual, while the latter can remain detached from this reality, having no role and no influence in it; at methodological level, positivist methods are used, methods that aim to measure objective reality, the way it is in itself,

without taking into consideration the context or the particular situations (Cojocaru, S., 2009a); in terms of methodology, in the case of the conventional approach, the aim is to isolate the variables that can be controlled and deliberate (as is the case of quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation), to study their modification and the effects they have on dependent variables.

When supporting the naturalistic paradigm, Guba (1987) presents several principles that are in opposition with those of the positivist approach described above; the author considers that at ontological level one operates with the relativist principle, according to which there is no single reality, but instead a multitude of realities that are socially constructed and that are not guided by objective, natural laws; therefore, truth is also seen as a social construction, generated by the consensus of negotiations between individuals that interact and interpret differently the realities to the construction of which they contribute; at epistemological level, the author believes that the researcher and the subject taking part in the research are in a strong relationship, reality being created during the research process (Guba, 1987, p. 34), the researcher is unable to remain an external observer of the researched reality; subjectivism is not seen as a source of errors when analyzing reality, but rather as an essential requirement in knowing reality as it is constructed; at methodological level, the naturalistic approach uses hermeneutical strategies for researching reality in context; context is considered a fundamental and integral part of the researched reality, lending meaning and significance both to reality and to its knowledge (Biklen and Bogdan, 1986). Starting from these assumptions, Guba proposes, according to the logical model of constructing theorems in geometry, a sequence of thirteen theorems that would establish the foundation of the naturalistic paradigm and six theorems specific to the area of naturalistic evaluation, which we shall outline in the following (Guba, 1987, pp. 37-38): (1) evaluation is a form of naturalistic research, and therefore it has all its attributes; (2) evaluation produces data in which facts and values are indissolubly connected to each other; (3) responsibility is a feature of a conglomerate of trainers within a process of mutual and simultaneous influence; (4) the evaluators are subjective partners of the key informers in the process of creating evaluation data; (5) the evaluators are the ones who guide the negotiation process that leads to a consensus for the best informed and the most sophisticated constructions; and (6) the evaluation data derived from the naturalistic research have neither special status, nor legitimacy, being instead constructions that may be taken into consideration when building consensus.

The theorems that Guba proposed form the foundation of naturalistic evaluation and establish negotiation as the key concept of the fourth generation of evaluation, taking into consideration both its meanings: “the evaluation process is in essence one of negotiation with and between stakeholders, and the evaluation product is not interpreted as a number of conclusions and recommendations, but rather as an agenda for continuing the negotiation” (1987, p. 39).

### 3. Ways of using naturalistic evaluation

Starting from the analysis of the articles published in the special issue dedicated to naturalistic evaluation, *New directions in program evaluation* (Hébert, 1986; Williams, 1986; Fetterman, 1986), Guba suggests several answers to the question *How has naturalistic evaluation been used?*, by presenting four main directions in the development of the naturalistic evaluation practice (1987, pp. 27-30): (1) exploration/discovery; (2) description; (3) exemplification, (4) realization (in the sense of becoming reality), and (5) testing. As far as the explorative character of naturalistic evaluations is concerned, Guba (1987, p. 27) believes that “naturalistic approaches may be used in order to explore areas that initially seem impossible to conceptualize and in order to lay the foundations for more rigorous future investigations”; the author underlines the fact that exploration is not similar to the grounding concept (launched in 1967 by Glaser and Strauss, who started the grounded theory strategy), being only a starting point for future research (Guba, 1987, pp. 27-28).

As far as descriptive studies are concerned, Guba believes that naturalistic evaluation highlights context as a foundation of the researched reality, and in order to support this idea he uses detailed descriptions of phenomena and of the contexts in which they are manifested. When the phenomenon is studied in isolation from the context, by establishing measurable variables (as is the case of quantitative research), that particular evaluation would not accurately reflect reality; therefore, the author underlines “the qualitative methods’ capability of extracting, recording and describing processes as constructs belonging to the individuals involved in them” (Guba, 1987, p. 28). Naturalistic evaluations may also be used as alternatives to traditional approaches, in order to give details, exemplify or illustrate particular aspects of the program elements that can be captured through the analysis of particular cases (Cojocaru, S., 2008; Cojocaru *et al.*, 2011); this is the reason why particularization is considered an alternative to the generalizations obtained as a result of statistical analyses of the data collected by consulting the subjects from a probabilistic sample. The naturalistic approach yields detailed information that particularize in context certain situations and provide recommendations that can ensure the differentiation of interventions by type, intensity and frequency.

Quantitative research captures the manifestation of certain phenomena and processes, it can carry out a diagnosis of various social problems and dysfunctional situations, but it cannot provide recommendations regarding specific interventions for each different category of potential clients. The cases studied using the naturalistic approach encourage the audience to put into practice the evaluation results, because the audience is at the same time a co-participant in the construction of cases and a recipient of recommendations deriving from evaluation; it is what Stake (1978) called “naturalistic generalisation”, dealt with in detail as part of receptive evaluation. Along the same analysis, naturalistic evaluation and the way it is used in practice, also represents a method of verifying the original assumptions and of answering evaluation questions (Guba, 1987, p. 29).

#### **4. Parallel criteria of rigour in the naturalistic approach**

Naturalistic evaluation has been challenged to meet the four rigour requirements in scientific paradigms: (1) internal validity, (2) external validity and generalizability, (3) consistency, and (4) axiological neutrality. Lincoln and Guba (1986) discuss these criteria starting from the ontological, epistemological and methodological axioms of naturalistic research (pp. 75-76), appreciating that “the criteria developed by conventional and rational axioms as proper to conventional research [...] may be completely inadequate and even irrelevant for naturalistic studies (and vice versa)” (p. 76). Starting from the debate concerning the criteria of scientificity in the classical approach versus the naturalistic approach, Lincoln and Guba suggest credibility as an equivalent for internal validity, transferability as a corresponding term for external validity, dependability as similar to reliability and conformability as an analogue for objectivity (1986, pp. 76-77). In order to increase the probability of the criteria suggested for satisfying scientific rigour in the case of naturalistic evaluations, Lincoln and Guba suggest several specific techniques (1986, pp. 77-78). Thus, in order to ensure credibility, the authors recommend: extending the evaluator’s engagement through direct and intensive contact with the researched reality and with the participants in the evaluation; constant in-depth observation, triangulation of data using various sources, methods, investigators and times; analyzing negative cases; constantly checking the data collected and the evaluator’s interpretations by consulting the respondents and by taking into consideration their reactions to these data and reconstructions (p. 77). In order to ensure transferability, the authors recommend a dense description of data, taking into consideration the contextual situation and the degree of similarity of data and judgments concerning the researched realities (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p. 77). In order to fulfill the dependability and the confirmability criteria, the authors recommend consulting external auditors with no vested interest that have not been involved in the evaluation (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, p. 77).

#### **5. Authenticity – a sole criterion of naturalistic evaluation**

Moreover, Guba (1981) suggests replacing the term of rigour, used in the positivist research, with that of authenticity, consisting of five distinct techniques, the most important being observing accuracy, seen as a guarantee of balance in the detailed presentation of all constructions and of the values that underpin them through a process of negotiation that includes all the involved parties (evaluators and key informers in symmetrical power and control positions), of verification and agreement through consensus on conclusions and recommendations (Lincoln and Guba, 1986, pp. 79-80).

#### **6. Flexibility of naturalistic evaluation**

Due to the continuous incorporation of information, constructs and individual interpretations given by the participants in the evaluation process, naturalistic evaluation is characterized by a high capacity of adaptation and flexibility in the entire process, from data collection to the negotiation of conclusions and recommendations.

This flexibility of data collection process makes naturalistic evaluation preferable especially during formative evaluations because “the naturalistic paradigm is ideal especially in formative evaluations due to the possibility of changing its design in response to the new information necessary for the progress of evaluation and for improving the program” (Williams, 1986, p. 87). This does not exclude the use of naturalistic evaluation in summative evaluations, as the detailed information provided by the participants with regard to interactions, strategies, skills and actions can be extremely useful in analyzing its effects on the final status of the participants in the program. Moreover, the evaluation of program impact on the intricate complex of relationships, of interactions entailing the analysis of qualitative indicators, is viewed as more appropriate when the strategy of naturalistic evaluation is used, being richer in detailed descriptions and in analysis of the values that underpin one or another of the participants’ interpretations. Beyond the tendency to consider that naturalistic evaluation is participative, Guba and Lincoln (1989) believe that their approach in evaluation is not necessarily participative, and that the meanings are orchestrated by the evaluator through the in-depth study of context, even though “the methodology requires a close interaction between evaluator and respondent” (Ford, 1987, p. 12).

## **7. Methodological framework**

### **7.1. Research strategy**

Our research follows a research tradition called grounded theory, which aims to generate the theory for a process, action or interaction grounded on (or supported by) the subjective points of view of the participants in the research. The design of the research is qualitative, appropriate for the objectives of our research: what is the impact of parent education programs on parenting? The naturalist type of qualitative research strategy allowed analyzing the usefulness of the parenting classes held in the rural environment in the county of Iași. The county of Iași is located in the Northern-Eastern Romania. Iași is one of the poorest counties in Romania and has one of the highest numbers of children included in the welfare system (Cojocaru, S., 2009b). One of the most important premises of qualitative research is that the social world is neither stable, nor uniform, and therefore there is no single truth in the research field that could be captured in data. Qualitative data is analyzed inductively, within flexible methodological schemes, and oftentimes the data analysis stage, in which the researcher looks for shared themes and patterns, takes place at the same time as the data collection stage.

### **7.2. Limits of research**

One limit of this research concerns the representativity of the sample. We underline here that the sample is not statistically representative (indeed, we did not set out to have such a sample), as it is an analytical sample built throughout the research in relation to the relevance of the thematic axes taken into consideration. On the other hand, all subjects that took part in the research had attended the parent education

program “How to become better parents”. Only subjects from the rural environment were selected; we do not know how the experience of the parent education program is perceived by the participants in the urban environment, that is by those who have a higher socio-economic status, a higher level of education, a better social insertion etc., because the parent education program was only organized in the rural environment. Greater importance was given to parents’ points of view, than that of professionals, whose accounts or statements concerning the programs, much briefer, were used chiefly in the design of the research strategy.

## **8. Results. Parents’ voice in constructing the profile of the parent educator**

Identifying the profile of the parent educator is very important in terms of course effectiveness and its outcomes; researches on this subject have shown that the results of the program, in terms of changes in parents’ behavior, as well as in terms of parent satisfaction in relation to the contents, methods and to the program of parent education in general, depend, amongst others, on the credibility invested by the clients in the parent educator or educators. Studies have shown that in the most effective parent education programs parent educators are trained after a prior evaluation of the subjective representations of the people about the various occupations and professions dealing with child care and education (Cojocaru and Cojocaru, 2011). Our data support the thesis of the parent educator importance, as among the factors that are crucial in changing child-related behaviors (factors mentioned in the accounts given during individual interviews and focus groups) the respondents include the features and attributes of the parent educators. The evaluation studies carried out on parent education programs show that the pertinence and the efficiency of such programs are assessed depending on two criteria: the degree of appropriateness of contents to the parents’ needs (including to self-identified needs), as well as their presentation in a form that is in agreement with the clients’ disposition, that is in an accessible and credible manner (Cruse *et al.*, 1981, p. 22). The importance of program responsiveness to parents’ interests, concerns, preoccupations is mentioned very often in literature, alongside the concern that these programs do not disseminate the specialists’ preconceived (meaning “previously established”) opinions as to what the contents and the appropriate manner of delivery should be, but instead to illustrate the philosophy of parent participation in shaping the contents and the training process, as a guarantee of the final aim of the program, that of empowerment and not of mere information communication (Cojocaru, 2011). Our data support the thesis according to which the responsiveness of a program consists not only in adapting contents and methods, but also in the parent educator’s ability to be flexible in communication; the parent educator’s features identified as significant by the parents that took part in the program are described below.

The educator’s profile is related to the parent’s needs. The parents create the qualities a parent educator should have according to such criteria as: experience as a parent, proximity and responsiveness, power relations and professional background. Each of the criteria is nuanced depending on the context of each parent’s specific needs and

on the way they define parenting as the sum of values guiding parent competences. Parents define differently the parent educator position, especially depending on the way they define children's particular situations (Cojocaru, D., 2009a). When a parent views her child as a problem and is looking for a solution, as a rule the parent sees in the parent educator an expert capable of providing advice, solutions, recipes etc.

Using the word "need" instead of "desired information" or "useful information" has altered the parents' responses, meaning that they were more reserved, associating the word "need" with a perceived deficiency of the parent (Cojocaru, D., 2009b; Sandu and Ciuchi, 2010; Cuyvers, 2010). On the other hand, not using the word "need" would yield information as to knowledge, attitudes and practices, information alone can cover only a very restricted area of needs; for instance, the efforts in the domain of family planning show that information alone does not necessarily change behaviors (Cruse *et al.*, 1981). The same thing happens in parent/child relationships (Cojocaru, D., 2008). Parents taking part in parent education programs mention as most interesting especially those topics that have a pronounced practical character, the exercises carried out during the classes and those practiced between meetings. This chapter presents the results of the analyzes which focused on the identification by parents of the professional groups mostly used as data sources, as well as on the identification of the most appropriate individuals for delivering parent education courses in the community.

### ***8.1. Reducing the asymmetry of power relation and underlining responsiveness***

The assertions of the parents related to the responsiveness of the parent educator (accepted, pleasant, understanding, personal communication qualities, being from the same social proximity, using the same communication codes and having similar life experience, placing the accent on practical aspects), i.e. it is one of the criteria operated by the participants when characterizing the parent educator. This criterion stresses especially the educator's human attributes, underlining particularly the work method and the interaction style. The qualities of the parent educator are often placed by the participants in the programs in relation with the educator's identification as a resource for parents, a resource that is accessible and willing to provide support to the family. The parent educator's qualities are filtered by his/her ability to understand parents, and there is a symmetry relation generated by shared experiences in exercising parenting roles. In the exercise of parenting roles in the rural environment and the manifestation of the traditional family model, in which the mother fulfills and assumes the role of caring for, raising and educating the children, the parenting experience appears to be the main criterion for appreciating the competence of the parent educator. In the circumstances of a cultural model focusing on the mother's instrumental responsibilities, domestic activities related to caring for children are one of the forms of social motivation and recognition (Arpinte *et al.*, 2010). At the same time, these fundamental qualities of the parent educator noticed by the parents attracts attention to the fact that the educator must understand the situation of each parent and have the same standard for reading child-related experiences. What is underlined



is not the participants' ability to understand the prescriptions transmitted during the classes by the parent educator, but instead the latter's willingness to understand the participants' parenting experiences. The parent educator's credibility and authority comes from his or her quality of parent.

*The parent educator must be a parent himself/herself, must have children, must have experience, so that we have something to learn from him/her, he/she should have gone through similar experiences; he/she should live in the village, [because] if we have problems, indeed when we have problems, we go to this lady [parent educator, nurse, community social worker, author's note], we phone her, we have somebody who knows us. For instance, when I had personal problems I knew I could call her, I would always phone her or we'd meet. (S1)*  
*[He/she] should be outgoing, open, a parent, because only a parent can understand another parent's situation, he/she should have sense of humor. (S7)*

The responsive character of the parent educator is put by the interviewed subjects in relation with his/her ability to understand the participants' needs from the perspective of his/her own personal experience. Thus in terms of asymmetrical power relations, parents see in the parent educator chiefly a parent with experience and with communication qualities, capable of placing himself/herself in the position of each participant. This view supports the use of the same communication codes, in a relation of equality with each participant, mentioned in terms of understanding and openness in relation to each parent's particular experience.

*[The educator] must be able to make people understand what they're told; it's no use explaining if they do not practice. [The educator] should be calm, have the patience to explain things to all of us, to be very convincing in what he/she says, because it's no use if you talk just for the sake of talking and people don't pay any attention to you. [He/she] must be a parent, have children, otherwise they won't understand. If she's not a parent and she teaches, how can she tell me what to do when she herself doesn't have children? (S3)*

*I think that if they are parents they have a richer experience, they can speak from their own experience. (S17)*

*The parent educator must be patient; the educators must have children. (S8)*

*[He/she] should be able to understand what you're saying. Maybe it was my fault as well. I didn't know what I wanted to say and I couldn't find my words. Well, the educator would understand what I meant to say [and ask] 'Ah, is this what you meant?' Like a parent with her children. Not just being there. (S18)*

## **8.2. Human personal qualities and responsiveness**

A parent needs his/her feelings to be understood. The meetings within the parent education program are defined by the participants as experiences generated by an understanding rather than an evaluative attitude of the parent educator. The fact that

they describe a relaxed situation of interaction is an indicator of their desire of not going through a school-type evaluation situation.

*First of all [the educator] must be calm and speak openly to us, so that we can understand what's being said, and so this must be a calm and kind person... so that it can attract people. Because it's different when someone comes in and shouts, with a calm person it's different. [The educator] must be personable, so that people will come to him/her; he/she must above all be calm. I don't know what profession would be best; the important thing for him/her is to be calm. (S14)*

*What can I say about what they should be like, maybe like you, like this young lady, like the ladies that taught us, very open people, even the accent, the way they speak to people, even their looks. Some have a slightly tougher look in their eyes, but you see the kindness in their hearts. So you can see what they look like, but it's the heart that also matters. So, the accent, the way they talk, it really doesn't matter what they look like, beautiful, ugly, short, fat, thin... everything comes for the heart, from the way they speak to people around them. (S20)*

### **8.3. Stress on social and spatial proximity**

To be convincing, the educator must convey some of his/her practical experience as a parent, by making references to concrete aspects of this experience. The experiences and the examples presented by the parent educator during the meetings are more appreciated and considered appropriate if the discussed situations are closer to the participants' proximity. Proximity is considered a criterion for appreciating the parent educator's competences and it has several dimensions: a) the social proximity of the parent educator, estimated as a quality that underlines the pseudo-equality between the educator and the parents that take part in the classes, invoked via shared parenting experiences; b) educational proximity, meaning an education level close to that of the participating parents (this is the reason why parents mention the community nurse, the primary school teacher and sometimes the community social worker as the most appropriate individuals in the community for delivering parental education); c) cognitive proximity, meaning shared experiences in the community, shared information concerning certain situations in the community that everyone is familiar with; d) spatial proximity expressed directly through the parent educator's belonging to the same community as the parents.

Even when the parent educator has a higher education degree (the case of a teacher or physician, for instance), this education must not come before the quality of a parent. The expert position is diminished when parents construct the profile of the parent educator, especially in the situation when the educator does not show enough openness and responsiveness in relation to the participant's circumstances, opinions and feelings.

*The teacher from the school, the primary school teacher, even the educator from the nursery school would be good, people with an education that is. But they also must be parents in order to understand parent roles and give*

*explanations to others. If they have no children... I don't know. They must be parents themselves. Actually when I went to a parent education class for the first time there was this city girl, she had no children. We could feel she was sort of cold... she wasn't close to us. She would do her job and then leave. It was like she was reading a paper. She wouldn't stop to tell this or that person about the problems she might have come across. (S5)*

Beyond the shared character of power asymmetry reduction process, the participants create the profile of the parent educator based on their personal experience of interactions with various community professionals and on their individual needs, along with the needs of the children.

*I don't think a physician would be good, because with a physician, for example, I don't think I could be as open as with my general practitioner. Maybe a teacher would be better, because they're also good with children, but I don't know whether a teacher would be the most appropriate, they communicate more with children, they work more with children. (S1)*

Educational proximity is translated into the features of the parent educator (pleasant, understanding, straightforward, without high status etc.) that are likely to create a framework of interaction and learning that is adapted to the features of the participating parents. The process of placing high value on personal qualities is underlined to the disadvantage of the social position and of the authority of the specialists of the various community services.

*I believe that [the educator should be] somebody who could understand people's opinions, listen to them. It doesn't have to be a teacher or someone else in education, or someone with a high position... of course they should have specialized education, but they must also be liked by people... this person must be pleasant, so that people would come to see him/her... he/she should be personable and communicative..., to know how to attract the parents. Maria [the parent educator, community nurse – author's note] is very personable... and it's a very simple thing, it's not complicated. She is an uncomplicated lady... she attracted me... the way she held the lecture... or how she gave explanations... Until each of us had understood what she had set out to explain to us, she wouldn't quit. She always made practical demonstrations that would stick with us. (S9)*

Spatial proximity is underlined by parents as an attribute of the parent educator; it is stressed as a recurrent topic during the interviews. The parent educator must belong to the community, because he/she is closer to people and familiar with the realities of the community, shares the same local culture, facts that are reflected in language and behavior. Delivery of parent education courses by community educators that also meet the criteria of social, educational and cognitive proximity provide the parents with the opportunity of communicating openly about their problems, of building a relaxed framework of interaction between participants, stressing the cathartic character of

the meetings within the parent education program (Cojocaru, 2010). Thus, the parent educator should be a catalyst for the creation of a framework for self-disclosure, for the construction of a context in which the parent feels he/she is listened.

*They mustn't be from outside. I wouldn't trust someone from outside. Maybe in this situation you may have reservations, you wouldn't have the courage to tell them something, but when you know you have somebody who you know or who knows you at least a little you have a different... (S18)*

*Not someone from outside... They must be from the village. I suppose [it should be] a person from the village who is familiar with... who is well informed as to the existing problems. How shall I put it? You can imagine that a teacher who holds such a [parent education - author's note] course must be persuasive, to persuade people to come to these classes. You know what I liked best? This lady [the parent educator – author's note] has such a tender voice... her voice seemed to flow through your veins, and I can tell you her words reached the heart... she had something in her voice... you'd go to class only to listen to her talk. (S10)*

#### **8.4. The parent educator as a instrument for personalizing relationships with institutions**

The parent educator's spatial and social proximity helps the parents manage their relationship with institutions. The process of personalizing the relationship with an institution or with an authority in general comes to alleviate the fear or mistrust of authority and institutions. The fear and mistrust are even more pronounced in the case of vulnerable, marginalized or disadvantaged individuals; therefore, the parent educator is viewed by the parent as a source for facilitating his/her relationship with institutions and as a means for increasing the access to various public services. Participation in parent education classes also offers such opportunities for changing parent/institution relationships, of bringing the parent closer to institutional prescriptions and procedures. Therefore, parents who seek support in this asymmetrical relationship between themselves and institutions have one more reason to keep in touch with the parent educator and to ask for his/her support. This is most likely the reason why the parents taking part in classes have mentioned spatial proximity as a requirement for the parent educator; an individual from outside the community is less involved in solving specific situations, less accessible to parents and therefore not a genuine source of support and assistance, oftentimes the latter's interactions with the parents being sporadic and even non-existent after the parent education classes end.

*For instance, I still keep in touch with Mrs. Viorica, she has helped me very much. I have problems with my little girl and she gave me very good advices, she told me about some very good doctors in Iași, she helped me make some appointments, she was of great help, that's why I'm saying she would be very good as a parent educator. If there's an educator coming from Iași, how can you talk to somebody you don't know, I think about somebody from the village,*

*familiar with your problems, with your life, with the folks... As a nurse she knows the folks in the village. Now I remember something we did during the classes, you jogged my memory: at the end of the course we wrote some letters about what we would like to see changed in our family life, in our everyday life. (S1)*

## 9. Conclusions

The use of naturalistic evaluation has many advantages and raises many challenges. In our research we have used the strategy of naturalistic evaluation in order to identify the features of the parent education programs and to capture the clients' subjective representations. As a result of the analysis using the grounded theory model we managed to capture the features of the parent educator and his/her profile as constructed by the parents that took part in the parent education classes. The naturalistic type qualitative evaluation is one of the strategies that support the affirmation and the exploration of the participants' voices, which more often than not differ from the specialists'. The construction of the parent educator profile using authenticity as an evaluation criterion may represent a form of discovering elements of local culture and the ways these are adjusted to the new institutional prescriptions.

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