



# GOODMAN RESEARCH GROUP, INC. PERSPECTIVES

Evaluation and Research News From Cambridge, MA

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## Greetings from the President



**D**uring the mid 1970s, I was on the child development faculty at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. During that time, I had the privilege of participating in faculty training sessions being conducted by the eminent psychiatrist and family therapist, Dr. Carl Whitaker, and his colleague, Dr.

Augustus Napier. They demonstrated for us their work on conjoint family therapy, then considered a radical new field. We watched behind the one-way mirror as they worked with families who sought their help.

It was not just the identified patient (IP) in the family who was having problems, rather the entire family system. The family was engaged in an intricate dance to maintain homeostasis. By attempting to fix the IP, the whole balance in the family would be upset. In family therapy, families are forced to confront the actual process that is governing their lives. Napier went on to write the book, *The Family Crucible*, a fascinating and highly readable book about that process. I later went on to take courses in family therapy.

So what is the relevance of the above to program evaluation? This background in family systems and group dynamics has been particularly helpful to me in GRG's work. Perhaps this is because both family therapy and program evaluation are intended to improve outcomes for their participants.

Programs are created to respond to problems, whether social, educational, or economic, so an evaluator needs to appreciate the interplay of the program and its societal context. If the program is shown to be effective, the conditions for the interplay between program and larger system were ripe. Conversely, there are many reasons a program might not be effective; they might be related to broader systemic constraints, rather than the particular program's design and implementation.

There is value in taking a systemic approach to evaluation. GRG has as clients many types of organizations, all of which

are systems whose program inputs, outputs, and outcomes are affected by external forces, as well as by their own internal workings and group dynamics. A systemic approach to evaluation alerts us not just to the identification of an outcome (positive or negative) but to the possible explanations or conditions for that outcome—or lack thereof.

We at GRG strongly believe in the importance of conducting a process evaluation ("the black box"), in tandem with an outcome evaluation. A process evaluation makes it possible to go beyond the purely quantitative indicators to provide a more in-depth picture of the program's implementation. It also allows us to understand the larger context in which the program operates. Key process questions are: Is the program happening? Is the program accomplishing what it set out to do? To what extent? Is it reaching its target audience? How can the program be improved?

Process evaluation activities can take place either remotely or during planned site visits (see *The Value of Site Visits*, p. 3). Some of these activities are:

- comparing program plans with actual activities via archival and other written information,
- having program staff keep activity logs as a way of documenting participation as well as implementation,
- hearing from program staff and participants first hand through interviews, small group discussions, and focus groups.

Therefore, evaluators need to take into account the possible range of systemic influences on a program. This allows for a more thorough report to the client that provides them with a comprehensive understanding of their program.

*Irene F. Goodman*

Irene F. Goodman, Ed. D.  
Founder and President

Goodman  
Research Group, Inc.  
**PERSPECTIVES**

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG) is a Cambridge, MA-based research firm specializing in evaluation of programs, materials, and services for clients in the education, non-profit, corporate, and government sectors.

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**FEATURED EVALUATION PROJECT**

## **ZOOM**

### **The Project**

GRG conducted formative evaluation for WGBH-TV's NSF-funded ZOOM Season V science segments. GRG has been the external evaluator of ZOOM since the program's inception in 1998. After four seasons, ZOOM producers were interested in re-exploring—at this more mature stage of the program—how kids ages 8-11 years were responding to the show. Of particular interest were which segments children enjoy most and least and what they learn from viewing.

### **GRG's Approach**

GRG conducted seven focus groups of 8-11 year olds in three national sites; a primary challenge was recruiting kids. GRG met this challenge by developing eye-catching invitations in the form of flyers and sending them directly to kids who had previously corresponded with ZOOM via mail, as well as posting them at libraries and after-school organizations.

### **Results**

The focus groups revealed that children continue to associate ZOOM with learning how to do new things and that they are interested in exploring through innovation (e.g., changing variables to see what else they can learn). Most children enjoy seeing the ZOOM cast members and the variety of other "regular" kids who appear on the show.

Dr. Elizabeth Bachrach, project manager, noted: "*The evaluation reassured the producers that they're doing it right. It also provided new things to think about in terms of kids' interest in seeing even more diversity on the show.*"

## **IN BRIEF**

### **Oregon Public Broadcasting *Bridging World History (BWH)***

GRG is again working with Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB), this time conducting a formative evaluation of *Bridging World History*, a professional development series for secondary school history teachers. Funded by Annenberg/CPB, BWH seeks to provide teachers with world history content from a global and thematic perspective. The series includes 26 videos, accompanying print materials, and an interactive website.

### **Wildlife Conservation Society *Elly Jelly Looks at Marine Animals and Project PRISM***

GRG is evaluating two projects for the Wildlife Conservation Society (The Bronx Zoo). The projects are: *Elly Jelly Looks at Marine Animals*, a life science curriculum for elementary school children, and *Project PRISM*, a program that offers training to staff at small informal science institutions across the country who then deliver professional development to middle school teachers in their local area.

### **Jason Foundation for Education *Science Literacy in Education Project (SLED)***

GRG continues its ongoing external evaluation of SLED, a distance-learning project that aims to teach middle school students the literacy skills needed to read and understand informational text. The DOE-funded STAR Schools evaluation aims to inform the development of the new curriculum and uses evidence-based research methods to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum. Now in its second year, GRG is in the process of analyzing student outcome data collected using a quasi-experimental design; during this second year, GRG also randomly assigned a new group of teachers to experimental conditions in the evidence-based design, to be implemented in the final year of the project.

# The Value of Site Visits

BY ELIZABETH BACHRACH, PH.D.

## What is a site visit?

A site visit is an evaluation activity intended to gather first-hand information about a program, usually with the intent to incorporate findings with other data collected. Several types of data collection may occur during a site visit that can strengthen the overall evaluation. The visiting researcher may take the role of non-participant observer by observing without interrupting program activities. (This tends to be the common role for a researcher conducting an external evaluation.) The visitor may also be a participant-observer and take on a role in the program while observing. For example, the researcher may lead an activity or discussion with program participants.



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## How are site visits used?

Site visits are an effective way to better understand quantitative data that have been collected for other components of the evaluation. For an evaluation to be beneficial, it is essential that a researcher understand the program or policy being studied. By personally observing the program in action, the researcher can expand her understanding of the program, leading to new knowledge and perspectives.

Because a site visit can have a variety of purposes, the type of data collection is dependent upon the particular function of the visit. For example, the researcher may only intend to get a snapshot of the program in some or all of its locations. Or site visits may be used to enhance understanding of the logistics behind a program at one location, including the needs and interests of participants.

Site visits may also be an opportunity to identify and recognize unforeseen or unintended outcomes of the program, both positive and negative. Often, particular aspects of the implementation of a program don't match the program developers' intent. During a site visit, the researcher can assess how a program has been modified to suit that site's particular needs.

## When should site visits be done?

Site visits can be done at any phase of the evaluation. The timing and frequency of visits varies and is sometimes determined by the project or evaluation budget. A researcher may choose to visit the same site multiple times, or visit different sites at various points in

the program. For consistency in data, the researcher may plan to visit multiple sites at the same point in the program.

A different approach would be to schedule the site visit after some quantitative data have been collected and analyzed; then the researcher will have some sense of the program effects and can use the site visit to contextualize findings collected thus far. The researcher may also use observations about program implementation to revise future data collection tools.

## What are some other ways to use data from site visits?

Site visit data may also provide context for and add depth to quantitative data, such as surveys, and other qualitative data, such as phone interviews. Quantitative data are often collected to measure pre-post change after program participation. If statistical analyses detect no change, is it then fair to assume the program had no effect? Site visit data can help answer that question. By seeing the program in action, findings can be situated in the reality of the program at each location. Perceptions can be compared with the information gathered through other data sources.

## Any final thoughts?

The objective of a multi-method evaluation is to collect data through a variety of methods and techniques, and then triangulate the findings to present a more complete, rich picture of the program.

At GRG we always find it helpful to use mixed methods because quantitative and qualitative methods together strengthen data and give the evaluator first-hand knowledge, making findings more accurate and practically useful to program developers, program staff, and funders.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elizabeth Bachrach, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, joined GRG in January 2000. She has managed over 20 evaluations of educational programs; written proposals and evaluation plans for projects that received funding from NSF, NIH, and HHS; and she serves as internal consultant on several GRG multi-year, large-scale projects.

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## INSIDE

**Pg. 1 Greetings from the President**

**Pg. 2 Featured Evaluation Projects**

**Pg. 3 The Value of Site Visits**

**Pg. 4 GRG in the Community**

## Goodman Research Group, Inc. in the Community

### *Volunteering*

Six GRG employees read weekly to second graders as part of the literacy program, **Everybody Wins!**

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**Claire Brown** and **Maria Fusaro** volunteer every week as activity leaders for children in homeless shelters.

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For the last two years, **Irene Goodman** has been a member of the Harvard Square Design Committee, working with city staff and consultants to develop a master plan of improvements in Harvard Square.

### *Conferences and Presentations*

In April, **Colleen Manning** presented at the *National Art Education Association* Annual Convention on an interactive handheld museum guide. She also was a keynote speaker at the *Brazelton Touchpoints* Annual National Meeting.

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In May, **Elizabeth Bachrach** spoke on a panel about evaluation as a profession for career day at *Harvard University*.

This Spring, two GRG project managers presented GRG's evaluation plan at project start-ups. **Karen Peterman** presented at the IMLS-funded *PRISM* project training at the Bronx Zoo; **Jennifer Beck** gave a presentation for science museums participating in the NSF-funded *Origins* project organized by the Pacific Science Center.

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GRG convened a panel at *The American Council on Education* Conference in Atlanta last October. In keeping with the conference theme of promoting the participation and success of diversity in higher education, the panel presented a case study of the National Cancer Institute Science Enrichment Program designed to encourage underrepresented students' participation in science.

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In November 2003, three GRG staff members, **Irene Goodman**, **Colleen Manning**, and **Dreolin Fleischer**, formed a panel to present the results of three aspects of the NCI SEP evaluation at the *American Evaluation Association* Annual Conference in Reno.