

**iMOVE: SEEKING THE WAY AND NSYF YOUTH
FINAL ASSESSMENT 2013**

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EVALUATION OVERVIEW

The evaluation of the iMOVE project carried out in collaboration with the NSYF over three cycles beginning in 2011 has indicated that, overall, the project's implementation and processes have been faithful to its underlying logic model and achieved its anticipated short term outcomes. The underlying concept of the iMOVE's approach was accepted by all parties, participants and stakeholders, as interesting and appropriate to the challenges of altering the cognitive and behavioural trajectories that the youth were linked with. Its program was implemented with some modifications as required by the NSYF but it was well-received by the youths and the stakeholders (NSYF and Centre 24/7) and, despite being more limited in duration than initially proposed, yielded modest but significant - at least in the short-run - beneficial outcomes.

The issues or challenges identified in earlier evaluations were usually effectively acted upon, with the result that the third and final cycle has been considered by virtually all the parties, including the evaluation team, to be the best cycle implementation of the iMOVE model. These issues and challenges included: (a) the need to reorganize implementation so that in the shorter time available, all the youth could participate in all phases of the scripting and see their individual stories captured (objectified) in film and art as intended; (b) maintaining the NSYF's high standards of anonymity and confidentiality with respect to any video depiction of the participating youth; (c) handling the possible stress and other concerns of the youths in their "public" generation of narratives that raised recollections and reflections on sometimes painful and very private experiences; (d) issues of the orientation and training that should be provided to the mentors on their role in the project and also to allay NSYF concerns about their impact on the youth; (e) improving the planning for the implementation with NSYF officials so that the project could operate at a more predictable schedule. The iMOVE project operated in the real world, in real time, in the NSYF system, so clearly such "intrusion" has always to be negotiated and compromises always made in order to realize the significant opportunity that the collaboration provides. The NSYF commitment has been evident in allowing the "intrusion" and, as in the last

two cycles, even assisting in funding helpful changes in strategies (e.g., the animation approach). Clearly, NSYF believes in the value of the approach. Under the circumstances, the uncertainty referred to above seems likely to continue and is an accepted cost for the opportunity.

Overall, the third cycle evaluation shows that the participating youths were enthusiastic about the iMOVE program, considered that, while it was sometimes emotionally stressful, it was something that they could deal with one way or another, and that they derived much from it, especially in understanding themselves and in developing empathy and social skills. They did appear to emerge from the experience at least temporarily with a sense that they could possibly develop a more socially positive life style and avoid further incarceration.

The veteran, key participating stakeholders were quite positive about the iMOVE program and its implementation. They considered that they understood its objectives and that these objectives were realized. They identified short-term and possibly long-term implications subsequent to release for the youths and believed that the latter participated enthusiastically. There were a few challenges or issues identified and some suggestions for modest change but overall they considered that iMOVE fitted well with and adds to other programming offered by the NSYF. Aside from the three participating stakeholders, other stakeholders, whether the leadership or others, gave the program good marks. At Center 24/7, officials saw it as a good fit to their approach with the youths and were willing to share some time with it.

The participant observation by the evaluation team was congruent with participant and stakeholders views. It appeared to the evaluators that short-term, immediate outcomes for the youths, such as interest, enthusiasm, sense of accomplishment at having worked through a complex assignment, peer cooperation and cognitive enhancement, were realized. At the same time, the project consumed but a small part of the youths' time (an hour or two a week) for a short period of their lives (nine or ten weeks) so assessing its subsequent impact would depend largely on the synergetic implications for the youths' other programs and activities. Another factor could be any connections established between the involvement at NSYF and Center 24/7 and the youths' trajectories and options when released (or graduating in the case of community youths in Centre 24/7). Several youths in the NSYF sessions did refer to continuing to work on the ideas and future narratives they developed and to continue their association with iMOVE in the Halifax area.

The holistic vision of the iMOVE approach, linking its activities within the NSYF with its community-based programs that presumably could be accessed by NSYF youths upon their release to HRM, does appear significant in principle and was cited as such by some of the NSYF participants and stakeholders in their interviews. The assessment of iMOVE's two highlighted community initiatives in HRM indicated that while salient they were not significantly accessed by NSYF ex-inmates and required much more organization and resources (funding, collaborators, and volunteers) on the community side if they were to be so.

The Centerline Musical Studio initiative was assessed (with interviews and observations) and found to be a popular youth program, much appreciated by both the attending youth and the local community leaders. Though only a small number of youths (young teens) were apparently very active in the actual production of music and received much attention, all the interviewed youths indicated that they enjoyed going to Centreline, that it was "community" for them, and wished it was available more than it was. The several adult volunteers, all very credible as either mentors or technically informed about aspects of musical creation, were pleased to have the iMOVE association and considered that they could contribute to it as mentors and role models. All also held that that the initiative needed to become more structured with programming variety in order to work more effectively with the young girls, and with the bulk of participating youths who were not especially active in the musical creation. They also recognized that such expansion would require more volunteers (especially female ones) and more resources and funding. In sum, then, the iMOVE initiative in Centreline provided benefits for all participants and mentored creative opportunities for a small subset. Undoubtedly, iMOVE could provide enhanced opportunities for youth with more resources and funding which could support more organization and programming; but even as is, it is deemed by the participating youths, the volunteers and the community leaders to provide a positive alternative for the area youth. At the community level, then, it would appear that iMOVE does considerable, good work and the director is responsive to many requests but he - and he is essentially the program - is spread too thin to link up significantly with its NSYF project. Clearly the level of iMOVE involvement with the youths while incarcerated is quite modest, now basically meeting 90 minutes a week for 12 weeks with a small group of youths. The contact is made, a relationship established, and the possibility generated of continued engagement in self-awareness, empathy and skill development to allow the youths to traverse a new life trajectory. The community-based engagement for some could be

a crucial reinforcement of this development. The iMOVE approach is, and has to be, an holistic, comprehensive approach to working with high at-risk youths.

INTRODUCTION

This 2013 final report for the iMOVE initiative centered at the Nova Scotia Youth Facility (NSYF) deals with the iMOVE activity there, at the associated Centre 24/7 Learning facility outside the NSYF, and iMOVE's community re-integrative support activities for ex-inmates and other youths at high risk in the metropolitan Halifax area (HRM). This report focuses on the third cycle of iMOVE's NSYF implementation which began in March 2013 and was completed three months later. There have already been reports submitted on the first two cycles of iMOVE programming at the NSYF (Clairmont, 2011, 2012) so here only the highlights of those reports will be noted. The third cycle continued the basic format of the earlier cycles and involved similar youths and milieus but also it has been quite different in terms of its creative thrust (e.g., use of the internet) as well as how it has furthered the objectives of the programming, better engaged the young participants, and represented an enhancement of the partnership with the NSYF. More attention in this final report is also given to describing the community support activities which iMOVE has been engaged in which could compliment its NSYF work and better achieve its objectives with the troubled youth who have been its focus.

THE PROJECT CHALLENGE

As noted in previous reports, much social policy analyses, criminological research and governmental priority justice funding is increasingly and properly directed at multiple repeat offenders, gang members and at-risk youths attracted to the criminal subculture. Disproportionately, these youths are male members of visible minorities (especially Blacks and Aboriginals in urban Canada) functioning in socio-economic-disadvantage, often problem-filled families and neighbourhoods, and weighed down by the legacy and continuing reality of racism, alienation and low expectations. For many of these youths, incarceration is a frequent occurrence and the custody milieu, according to most research, strengthens gang affiliation and anti-social aspirations and behaviour. Extensive research has been carried out on the issues, possible

interventions and corrective social policies aimed at this general social problem with the goal of creating alternative opportunities, positive life choices and social supports thereby diminishing the lure and hold of the gang. Programs aimed at literacy and school attachments are often seen as crucial mechanisms of transformation and, more generally, interventions are emphasized that combine a cognitive approach (examining oneself, articulating one's experiences and alternatives,, developing greater self-awareness of one's behaviour and considering other life options) with the strengthening of protective factors such as family and other positive social support. The copious literature on the challenge has emphasized the importance of an in-depth cognitive-behavioural intervention (see the Working Bibliography).

The iMOVE project directly confronts the challenges of this general problem, focusing on youths in custody at the Nova Scotia Youth Facility (NSYF) and bringing to bear on the intervention, cognitive enhancement (i.e., increased self-awareness, understanding and empathy) through story-telling, scripting, creative artistic experience which, through externalization or objectification, facilitates a process whereby change becomes more possible if not probable, and the creation of an alternative 'family' milieu which supports desired behavioural change. Further, the project in its holistic, comprehensive approach builds upon these strategies and activities by developing community-based activities to enhance the prospects for effective societal re-integration when the youths are released from custody. The iMOVE program has been in existence for several years and has achieved a level of success in effecting positive life choices among youth either at-risk or already involved in criminally-oriented gangs. With at-risk youths in HRM, iMOVE has produced a radio program aired weekly through a Dalhousie University community campus radio station for the past three years and, in 2010-2011, also established, in collaboration with the Uniacke Square Tenants Association and the Halifax Regional Police Service, a music sound studio, Centerline Music Studio, for youth musical creativity and recordings in HRM's most well-known public housing project. Strong linkages have been formed with key organizations serving high risk youths and youths involved in criminal activity such as the Halifax Community Justice Society (centre for restorative justice programs), the Halifax Youth Attendance Centre, HYAC, (convicted youth sentenced to community programs), Second Chance (employment readiness and related programs for young ex-inmates) and Choices (programming and housing for high at-risk youths). As stated elsewhere in this document,

iMOVE: Seeking the Way strives to enhance the power to shape the future in the hands of its youth participants. The iMOVE central hypothesis has been stated as “By learning how to *tell* your story you free yourself to *write* your story”; as elaborated by the iMOVE director, “The emphasis here is on the possibility of using positive agency to shape one’s future rather than submitting to the idea that the future is fatefully locked in a grip of criminality”.

The iMOVE Comprehensive Approach : Custody and Community

In My Own Voice (iMOVE): Seeking the Way is intended to be an innovative youth directed and youth driven social media and peer mentorship program that uses radio, video film and music production as a method to engage, influence, and empower “hard to reach” young offenders. Its engagement with at-risk youths, especially but certainly not only African Nova Scotian youth, transcends specific milieus to strengthen pro-social orientations and behaviours and weaken pro-criminal attitudes and relationships. .The iMOVE program at the NSYF is described by its director as “helping youth to visualize, want and believe in the possibility of more of themselves and their lives ... an art-based program for high risk incarcerated youth 12 to 17”. As for its “best fit” to the various Department of Justice funding categories, the project team checked off “gangs, guns and drugs priority”, clearly underlying its focus on the heart of the general problem delineated briefly above. Its overall objectives are seen to be promoting smart choices, supporting treatment, and facilitating rehabilitative, imaginative collaboration. As well, an interesting feature of the approach is the conception of iMOVE as a “surrogate mobile family unit” building a sense of solidarity and support, assisted by mentors, which can counteract (be a protective factor against) negative peer groups pressures. The iMOVE activities would be education in arts, training and program development (filming, radio broadcasting, theatre production, social media, and circle dialogue). Participating youths released from custody would be linked to iMOVE’s community-based programming, furthering the prospects for their successful re-integration.

In implementing the iMOVE approach, key mechanisms, as in this project, have been individual scripting (identifying themes, “titles” and symbolic expressions), and the circle dialogue among the participants. Initially there is familiarizing / teaching youths about the “technology” and building relationships and a sense of community and support with peers and

mentors as a prelude to the participants' confidently creating and discussing scripts with respect to their past, present and possible future (e.g., life plans and where they anticipate or want to be in five years), creating their own narratives (portraits or stories) and collaborating with others in radio productions or group videos (e.g., "Walk In My Shoes", a collective video produced from the 2009 iMOVE pilot project at the NSYF). The approach draws on an increasingly widespread perspective in social science and interventionist social policy that is rooted in the assumptions of transactional analysis and the work of Steiner (1974). It combines the conventional attention to risk and protective factors with a strategy for possible, in-depth change in the participants' self-awareness and responsiveness to change, and makes reasonable assumptions about the motivation of the youth (e.g., their malleability, need for social support, drive for excitement etc).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The first iMOVE cycle completed in 2011-2012 was described in the funding proposal in the following terms: "This iMOVE project is an arts based peer mentoring program targeting youth held in custody at the Nova Scotia Youth Facility. This program focuses on strategies to assist the youth in building self awareness and social connection through personal story telling, performance art, music, film making and video editing, and social media activities. It is an innovative collaborative approach that promotes smart choices and pro-social behaviour. The program will be offered twice per annum in an intensive twelve (12) week cycle. It is anticipated that 72 youth will be enrolled in the program over the course of the three year project. The program will continue in the community for youth who are given full or conditional release from the youth facility and for other youth referred to the program from services such as HYAC and Choices (the list of referral sources continues to grow). The youth will also engage with selected iMOVE mentors who will provide support in the iMOVE activities which youth engage in, both in custody and upon release. The program will be more about process than product. It is expected that this journey of self-exploration could be life changing for incarcerated youth. The activities will include circle dialogue engaging with narrative inquiry processes, film making and editing, and social media including audio pod casting using restricted internal public address systems rather than the Internet. In addition to the intensive twelve (12) week cycle iMOVE will be a re-integrative support partner to the Nova Scotia Youth Facility whereby youth upon full or conditional release will be able to engage with their iMOVE mentors in iMOVE's community

based programming”. As noted in the 2011 evaluation, there was only one program cycle in 2011-2012 for a variety of administrative reasons; that one cycle, held at the Centre 24/7 an off-site learning program involving both NSYF and community-based youths (expelled, suspended or dropped- out from the regional school system) initiated by the NSYF some twelve years earlier, was well-received by the youth participants and the stakeholders at NSYF and Centre 24/7.

Much effort was expended in the later months of 2011-2012 considering how the second cycle might be differently organized to improve the pace of the programs in realizing most if not all youths’ scripts (i.e., stories of their past, present and future), enhance youth involvement, learning and skill development, and also ease the impact on regular programming at Centre 24/7. It was also important for legal reasons (confidentiality and anonymity) to avoid films and other media formats identifying the youth even if only opaquely or minimally. There was then a major change in the mode of implementation. An iMOVE proposal to emphasize an animation approach was accepted by – and partially funded by – the NSYF management. In this format, two professional animators were engaged as co-facilitators to assist the youths in conceptualizing, visualizing and actually creating their animated scripts which would then be filmed and then edited by the iMOVE director and these professionals. There would also be other professionals assisting in helping shape the music, sound effects and lyrics. The end products would be several animated short films which could be more publicly aired and whereby the youths could see some of their narratives objectified / externalized in the collaborative animation, hopefully with significant impact for their self-awareness, empathy and self-confidence. Another change involved scheduling. It was agreed to hold one weekly session, with non-overlapping participants, at each of the NSYF and Centre 24/7 sites rather than have two sessions at the latter as in the first cycle.

The third cycle, reported on in depth here, was also held at both sites (the NSYF and the Centre 24/7) and followed essentially the same processes, namely group circles, “breakouts” into smaller working groups, and one-on-one mentoring provided by the iMOVE team with assistance from other adults present including a minister, teacher, researcher, and youth worker. The format followed four main steps: (a) discussion and scripting for narratives of one’s past, present and

future, (b) identifying themes and titles which captured the basic story lines, (c) externalization / objectification of the stories via images / pictures accessed on-line, and (d) recording vocals for the final videos. The chief changes in the third cycle were foregoing the animation and depicting themes through selection of pictures available on-line (anonymity was maintained) and the engagement of new adult collaborators as participants and mentors.

OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTATIONS

The overall goal of the iMOVE project remained the same in all three cycles and can be summarized as “delivering an effective intervention program to high risk youths in custody and provide continuing support to them upon release”. The participation of the youth is entirely voluntary but the project’s specifics of implementation (e.g., schedule, location) have to be negotiated each cycle with NSYF authorities, the principal collaborator of the project. An ancillary project goal is “To create opportunities for the iMOVE core members to act as leaders, mentors and animators of both the in-facility and the [community-based] reintegration components of the project”. The logic model developed from the project’s initial documentation laid out a process or logic model which consists of five segments (a) GOALS – reducing recidivism, mediating personal restoration and facilitating reintegration; (b) OBJECTIVES – providing 12 week arts-based programs, partnering with NSYF, providing opportunities for participants to be leaders and mentors at NSYF; (c) MECHANISMS– youth- directed youth programming, surrogate family structure within iMOVE, story telling and communication via art, music, video, pod casting; (d) OUTPUTS – producing diverse themes / modules over the 12 week program; (e) OUTCOMES – lessen risk of reoffending, more positive life choices, reduced hold of the gangs, and new partnership linkages. A modestly re-configured project logic model, fitted to the Department of Justice’s format, was developed by the evaluator and is provided below. It specifies the project’s goals, objectives, activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, intermediate outcomes and long-term outcomes, with respect solely to the participating youths. This logic model has been adopted as the reference for the evaluation tasks. Apart from adding animation and then internet access to the activities’ first box, no change has been required with respect to the subsequent cycles.

Clearly the iMOVE project, based on previous experience in the custodial facility and in the community, has set high expectations for itself. The proposal states, “We expect to lessen the risk of re-offending for youth participants who are at risk or are involved with guns, gangs and or drug activity, and who are involved in the justice system. It is our intention that, through the various engagement opportunities which iMOVE: Seeking the Way offers these youth, they will be redirected toward positive life choices which include a return to or a re-engagement with school and a positive re-orientation to their communities; indeed, it is our hope that workforce engagement will be a concrete outcome for many of the youth who participate in iMOVE: Seeking the Way”. Highlighting the continuity of engagement with the youths beyond their incarceration, the proposal states, “We are also convinced that this combination of mentorship, arts engagement, skills building, self-exploration and community recognition and reconnection, will have the combined effect of reducing the lure of gang involvement and engagement with high-risk lifestyles which result in the negative spiral which makes these youth, especially those from African Nova Scotian communities, vulnerable to these negative choices”. With two successful cycles under its belt, that optimism seemed appropriate for the final third cycle which is evaluated here.