

Mystery Motivators

MYSTERY MOTIVATORS AND THE SUCCESS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

STUDENTS

by

James Peil

A Master's Project

Submitted in Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Science in Education  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
At the State University of New York University at Fredonia  
Fredonia, New York

Spring Term, 2014

**Project Certification Page**  
State University of New York at Fredonia  
Department of Education

CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled Mystery Motivators and the Success of Alternative Education Students by James A. Peil, Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science in Education, Curriculum and Instruction is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Robert Dahlgren  
Master's Project Advisor  
EDU 690 Course Instructor  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

5/13/2014

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Mira Berkley  
Department Chair  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

5/16/14

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean Christine Givner  
College of Education  
At SUNY Fredonia

5/20/14

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

### **Abstract**

Teachers are always looking for ways to keep their students on task with fun things that keep the students engaged. Often times, these activities will help the students not only stay on task but, learn in the process. A problem throughout classrooms in today's alternative education schools is how educators can get their students to come to school prepared for the day and ready to learn. In a recent research study involving extrinsic motivation and behavior modification in a rural Western New York alternative education school, the question sought to be answered was "Do mystery motivators improve non-residential high school alternative education students' ability to attend school with their work done, prepared for the school day without any behavioral issues?" The study took place in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade alternative education global studies classroom. Three of the nine students were used as participants in the collection of data. Due to attendance issues and behavioral problems, the data was not consistent with the literature that had been reviewed prior to the study. The significance of the results of this research study is that it is difficult to find a mystery motivator intervention that can easily be formatted to the individual needs of each student.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....Pg.3

Literature Review.....Pg.8

Methods.....Pg.23

Results.....Pg.29

Discussion.....Pg.41

References.....Pg.46

Student Consent Form.....Appendix 1

Parental Consent Form.....Appendix 2

Daily Observation Table.....Appendix 3

## Introduction

In today's classroom, there are several different types of students with different needs for their education to be effective. In recent years, there has been a push to send certain students who cannot get through the rigors of secondary education in a general education classroom to alternative education settings (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). Often times these students are not in need of or are not eligible for special education services; however, they are in need of specialized learning strategies and interventions in order to be successful in school (Lacey & Sobers, 2005). Raywid (1998) noted: "Students who succeed or shape up in such alternative schools are permitted to return to the mainstream. Not all do, and some of these schools are understood to be permanent placements. Nevertheless, the ideal is to beef 'em up and send 'em back" (p.12). With this increase in the number of alternative education students, remaining in the alternative placement, the need for qualified teachers in the field has becoming of increasing importance (Lacey & Sobers, 2005).

The number of students placed in alternative education settings is also on the rise. In 1993-1994 there were 2606 alternative schools were operating in the United States (Foley & Pang, 2006). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2000-2001, there were 10,900 alternative schools serving students in need of extra assistance (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). This is a significant increase and depicts the need for more qualified teachers in the field. Quinn & Poirier (2006) stated that, "This study provided information on five years of the programming, where both states saw increased numbers of students, especially in lower grade levels." (p. 24). With inclusion in the classroom being the push in schools, students who exhibit extremely disruptive behaviors will be sent to alternative placements, at higher rates (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). According to Quinn and Poirier (2006) "The rising numbers of youth assigned

to alternative education will increase the need for more highly qualified staff that are culturally competent to work with the students who essentially need more help than an average student in a general education setting”(p. 39). Since these are the students who are not the most driven or motivated to be in school, clearly, it would benefit this demographic the most to learn from the most qualified, best performing teachers that are available.

Keeping students engaged is a constant battle fought by every teacher who has ever stepped in front of a chalkboard. Keeping students who have trouble dealing with the day to day occurrences in school is even more trying (Lacey & Sobers, 2005). These students lack intrinsic motivation, or the internal drive to do good because that is what society expects of you (Wiest, Wong, Cervantes, Craik, & Kreil, 2001). Often times, students in alternative education are raised in the culture of poverty, where education and intrinsic motivation for education, are not seen as a priority (Payne, 2005). Through the use of extrinsic motivation, students will perform at or above standards in order to feel like they are getting something in return (Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jensen, 2001). Mystery motivators are forms of extrinsic motivation used when students have complied with teacher requests over a period of time (Musser et al, 2001). Using mystery motivators, students are checked at random intervals in order to encourage them to behave appropriately at all times. With the incentive of getting a prize by doing what the students have been asked, they will, in theory, be more likely to accomplish academic tasks and self-regulate their own behavior.

There is not much research done involving students that get to choose their rewards each time they are allowed pick something for good performance. Often times student incentives are chosen based on what the majority wants in order to please the most people. If students were allowed to choose what they were working toward, it would provide them with the opportunity

earn something they actually want and give them responsibility to choose their own reward. By allowing students to be involved in the process of recognition of their effort, they will be prone to work harder to achieve their academic goal.

This is important information because teachers are always looking for ways to keep students on task and headed toward the direction of their academic goals. With new standards at the federal and state level to be addressed, ensuring student growth becomes paramount. Atkins & Bartuska, (2010) stated that, “Students in alternative education pose a difficult challenge to educators because teachers need to have a measurable record of student progress over the course of the year in order to stay employed.” (p. 17). These students pose a particularly difficult issue in that these students have attendance issues and do not rank school high on their list of important activities. This means that these are the students who need the best teachers since they pose the biggest problems in reaching graduation.

I am interested in this topic because I would like to work in the field of alternative education. I would like to develop a background in the best techniques available to teach within this field, so when I go to interview, I can show them data on what I have done and how I will approach the job of motivating and engaging my students. The students enrolled in alternative education often times just need the right kind of motivation. (Lacey & Sobers, 2005) Teachers need to be prepared to try a number of different techniques to spark their students’ interest. When that spark is found for alternative education students, the impact on their lives and how it will affect them for the rest of their lives can be profound. Personally, I have seen when good things happen in alternative education. It becomes apparent to not only you as a teacher but, to the student, how important the education process is. This usually occurs towards the end of their

high school career when they realize how few options they really have and graduating seems like the easiest

There are several different definitions for alternative education that researchers have used. One group of researchers state “alternative education is defined as serving youth who are at risk of school failure, which includes students with disabilities”(Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). Another definition states that alternative programs vary who they cater to from at-risk youth, serving a unique curriculum or instructional model (Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, & Atkins, 2007). Many of these students come from difficult home lives and are surrounded by a culture of poverty. It is often difficult for these students to comprehend middle class cultural rules, which are practiced throughout schools in the United States today (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Often times, academic achievement is not seen as a priority to these students so keeping them motivated and prepared to learn can be difficult task.

Through the use of mystery motivators, high school alternative education students will be observed to understand whether or not they will perform to the standards set forth by their teachers, the district, and New York State. These motivators may encourage these students to do their work and come to school prepared for their classes. The study will take place at a non-residential alternative education setting in Western New York. This school houses students from all over the Northern parts of the county that the school is in that are in need of alternative education services. These students come to this setting for special needs, disciplinary, or academic deficiencies.

Students will be offered a mystery motivator, or an item with a monetary value of less than \$10 dollars. The name of each item will be put in a sealed envelope and held on to by the

head researcher. In order to earn the mystery motivator, each student must come to school on time, with any work done for the social studies class, and prepared with a writing utensil and a notebook for class work. After each day, students will be evaluated on how well they stayed within the guidelines of the study. The students must also stay within an allotted number of behavioral outbursts in order to stay eligible for the sticker to earn a motivator.

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the behavior modifications and the use of extrinsic motivation in students in alternative education settings. The study will take place in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade alternative education global studies classroom of nine students. There are seven males and 2 females. All of these students were sent to an alternative education setting from their home districts because they had trouble with the day to day rigors of the general education classroom. Data will indicate if there is correlation between using extrinsic motivators to help alternative education students to meet daily expectations of class preparedness. A daily checklist will be used as an instrument for the teacher and researcher to record the activities of the participants. After data has been collected and analyzed, it will be prepared in the form of a thesis for dissemination among colleagues.

The question to be answered through the proposed research study is, “Do mystery motivators improve non-residential high school alternative education students’ ability to attend school with their work done, prepared for the school day without any behavioral issues?” Questions similar to these have been asked by several teachers throughout the field of alternative education, as much of the research in this area has been done with behavior modification as the major focus (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). Through research and experiences of my own, I have seen the problem of laziness trending toward the forefront of alternative education. Students not wanting to do any of their work or be held responsible for any of the actions they display

throughout the school day are typical occurrences in alternative education. Students believe that they should be rewarded for doing their homework, more so than knowing that they received a good grade on their assignment (Lacey & Sobers, 2005). In order to help students strive toward their goals, a form of extrinsic motivation should be used.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Defining Alternative Education**

Students served by today's classrooms may not always find a general education environment to be the best place to get their education. Alternative education settings are places of learning that cater to a select group of students. Alternative education programs first appeared as an option in the education of American children around the 1960's, and at the time were known as alternative schools (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). Often times, students are placed in a setting that is outside of the general education population. Sometimes the setting is residential, in-house locations where students learn and live. According to Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011), "Effective behavioral practices for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) are critical. Students with E/BD are often served in alternative education (AE) settings due to behavior that cannot be supported in a typical school setting or due to court adjudication based on delinquent activity. Like other settings for students with E/BD, AE programs must utilize effective intervention practices for students to get the most out of the program and make appropriate behavioral changes" (p. 489). Other times, students will attend a separate school from the general education center in their school district that allows for more student-to-teacher individualized attention (Quinn & Poirier, 2006). There are several different definitions for

alternative education that researchers have used. The question still remains, what does alternative education really mean?

One definition of alternative education states that alternative programs vary by whom they cater to: at-risk youth, serving a unique curriculum or instructional model, focusing on gifted and talented pupils (Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, Atkins 2007). This definition is good because it encompasses every range of education there is. Essentially, if a student is doing something slightly different from what goes on in a general education school setting, it is an alternative education program. According to Quinn and Poirier (2006), “Regardless of one’s perspective, some students will move beyond the tolerance level of classrooms and schools and be referred to school exclusion and (or) alternative schools. According to the literature examining the characteristics of students in alternative programs, many students share several common traits and often are described as ‘cynical, suffering academic and behavioral adjustment problems in school, possessing antisocial attitudes and behaviors, lacking educational and/or career goals, and having problematic relationships with both family and peers’ ” (p. 1). Since there are so many different places where today’s youth are educated, these definitions for alternative education tend to be broad in order to cover every aspect of what or whom they are serving (Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivet, 2011). By doing so, the broad definition allows for several different teaching styles and non-traditional approaches to education in order to accomplish the mission.

Another definition of alternative education set forth by the Tennessee Board of Education (2005) states that, “A short term (one year or less) intervention program designed to develop academic and behavioral skills for students who have been suspended or expelled from the regular school program” (Cited in Herdon, 2008, p. 2). This definition portrays alternative

education as a place for students to come and regroup, focus on their course of study, and return to the general education population. While quite often, students will finish out their high schools careers in alternative settings, the idea is to get them up to standard and to send them back to their original school to graduate with their peers (Raywid, 1998). Raywid suggested that, “Public opinion is that the point of alternative schools is to change the student and his or her performance. Some alternative programs try to change students with a punitive orientation whereas others believe a therapeutic community is the best approach. Both approaches share an important trait: they are both seen as ideally temporary assignments” (p. 14). The above definition seems to have some good characteristics of the population served, but fails to include students who need the placement because of being categorized for disabilities. In many cases, students would benefit from such a setting because of the increased teacher-to-student ratio (Flower, et al., 2011).

Atkins and Bartuska (2010) stated that, “alternative education is defined as serving youth who are at risk of school failure, which includes students with disabilities, both learning as well as emotional” (p. 15). The students involved in the alternative education program where the research will take place most closely fit the characteristics of this definition. The school where the data will be collected for this proposed research project serves a similar clientele. Most students have severe emotional and learning disabilities combined with a lack of motivation for success in their education. For this reason, the Atkins and Bartuska definition quoted above is the most pertinent to the participants who will take place in the proposed study.

### **Who is Served by Alternative Education**

Alternative education was set up to attempt to meet student's educational, behavioral and social needs, while addressing the negative behaviors and attitudes that serve as a hindrance to the student's success in education (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Herdon, 2008; Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Without receiving effective service while in alternative education, these students most likely will continue on the path toward destructive school and life outcomes once they leave these institutions. Alternative education is used to help students who were suspended from general education programs, were placed in the school by the court, were considered at-risk of failing academically, or were displaying negative behaviors that would otherwise prevent them from succeeding in a regular classroom setting (Flower, et al., 2011). Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette (2011) noted "That is, these individuals require academic and behavioral instruction and supports in AE to improve their own life circumstances. Without effective service while in AE, these students may be most likely to continue on the path toward destructive school and life outcomes, upon leaving these institutions" (p. 490). Often times these students have learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, individualized education plans (IEP), behavior intervention plans, or any combination of the above. These students are the students who would benefit from the most from having the most qualified, experienced, and best prepared teachers available (Lacey & Sobers, 2005).

Many students in the United States are dropping out as opposed to finishing their high school education. With an increase of the number of student at risk of dropping out, a new category of students has become prevalent in the world of education. "At-risk" students are defined as "individuals whose present or predictable status (economic, social-cultural, academic, and/or health) indicates that they may fail to successfully complete their secondary education and

acquire basic life skills necessary for higher education and/or employment.” (Schlessman & Hurtado, 2012 p. 9). Alternative education is set up to serve this demographic of learners. Research has shown that alternative schools can be a positive solution to the problem of students dropping out (Schlessman & Hurtado, 2012).

Research shows that many students who are placed in alternative education settings are typically from the same four categories of students as those targeted in *No Child Left Behind*. Those subgroups are students who are low-income; from a racial/ethnic minority; have educational disabilities; or have limited English proficiency (Lacey & Sobers, 2005). These students often come from families where single parents are working, often trying to make ends meet. This many times leads to their children’s education being less of a priority than trying to make sure that the family’s basic needs are met (Payne, 2005). Many of these students have experienced an unstable family life, generational family poverty, divorce, physical abuse, and substance abuse (Olive, 2003). Olive said: “Students who are experiencing difficulties in their lives outside of the classroom are less available for academic learning and more likely to experience academic failure” (p. 98). With all of the challenges that these children face in their own lives, it seems somewhat justified for these students to display negative behaviors when faced with the challenges that schools place on students each day.

Ensuring that students get an education that is best suited to their learning needs is very important in preparation for the next step after school. Students who are served by alternative education typically do not fare well in a general education setting. By placing these students in a different setting, there has been data showing an improvement in behavior and academics (Schlessman & Hurtado, 2012). For example, in Oklahoma alternative schools have lead to better attendance, higher test scores, fewer office referrals, and less failing grades (Oklahoma

Technical Assistance Center, 2010). If alternative schools can help a select demographic of students, it should be a continued practice throughout the realm of education.

### **Increasing Enrollment in Alternative Education**

In 2000-2001, there were 10,900 public alternative schools and programs serving 612,000 students that were operating in the United States (Pang & Foley, 2006). The National Center on Educational Statistics, for the academic year 2007-2008, reported 10,300 public alternative schools and programs serving 1,292,000 students throughout the United States (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). These data indicate an increase of over double the number of students during the last seven academic years. At the same time, the number of schools educating these students has decreased by 600. Having to do more with less is a theme that is apparent all across the nation, which is why providing alternative education students with the most highly qualified teachers is more important than it has ever been (Lacey & Sobers, 2005).

Minority students have been shown to have lower percentages of graduation than their peers who are in the majority. According to Aron (2006), African American males have a high school graduation rate of 43%. Hispanic males have a little better chance but, their graduation rates sit at approximately 48%. These students are the ones who need more and better options to aid them in reaching their goals. Aron (2006) indicated that “Despite the number of school districts with such programs, survey results indicate that there does not seem to be enough alternative school and programming slots for the number of youth who require them. Fifty-four percent of school districts with such programming reported demand exceeded their capacity for services within the last three years, and 33 percent were unable to enroll new students into

alternative educational options during the 1999-2000 school year. Most districts resolved this shortfall by developing waiting lists for their programs”(p. 11). With dropout rates increasing and the number of students who are served by alternative education increasing, administrators are looking for more feasible options to bring the graduation rates of all of their students to a higher level (Aron, 2006). These alternative placements give students a different type of education that is more suited to their needs.

Budget cuts have affected children’s education throughout the entire nation. Alternative education has not been exempt from this tightening of government expenditures. With larger class sizes and less teachers to accomplish state and national standards (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010), teachers are looking for ways to help these at risk students refrain from the negative behaviors that led to the student being placed in alternative education. Researchers and educators alike have suggested that using evidence-based interventions is necessary to prevent the continuance of such negative educational outcomes. Furthermore, these alternative schools, as opposed to their home districts, are the best places suited to help these difficult students carry out their education through graduation (Flower, et al., 2011).

### **Behavior Modifications**

B.F. Skinner (1972) once said that, “Give me a child and I will shape him into anything” (pg. 567). Skinner was the founder of a concept called behavior modification where the consequences of a student’s actions could be shaped by their teacher’s responses, eventually creating the student who behaves how you want them to. Skinner also thought that in order to successfully modify the behavior, one needed to use various reinforcers that would provide the

student with positive feedback (Skinner, 1982). Teachers have always used praise and prizes and things of that nature to reward their students for a job well done. Sometimes, there are students whom teachers come across who may need more feedback or a different type of feedback than the average student. Educators over the years have been researching different types of interventions that would modify negative or unwanted behaviors in the classroom. These types of negative classroom behaviors are common characteristics of students who are placed in alternative education.

In the world of behavior modification, there is a technique that is used quite often that would fit perfectly into an alternative education classroom. A token economy is a type of “economy” where symbols or items are used as “tokens” to be used for reward that reinforce desired behaviors (Skinner, 1982). Tokens can be accrued and when enough of them are earned, the members of the token economy can trade their tokens in for something desirable that they would want. These tokens could be tickets, fake money, a note of recognition, etc. that would represent a job well done. When people who are in a token economy, they are rewarded with these items for portraying positive behaviors and actions. Skinner (1982) said: “Conversely, when the people exhibit negative behaviors or actions, the tokens will be removed, thus limiting the person’s ability to trade their token for a more desirable item” (p. 420). This type of intervention is often used in places where it would be difficult to use normal legal tender and items that can be bought at a store. These places include hospitals, prisons, and schools. The tokens have no real world value but, in these places, their value is demonstrated and used for items that are better suited to the members of the economy.

Teachers many times have had to think of unorthodox tactics in order to get through their lessons and give the students the information they needed to progress through their class.

Student misbehavior, being off task, and not focusing on the content being taught is a battle that teachers will have until the end of time. There are times when educators must think outside the box to come up with a new idea that will not only keep the kids on task but, but will enable them to self-regulate their studies. One example of this type of research based intervention is the Good Behavior Game (GBG) (Barrish, Saunders, & Wolfe, 1969). This game is a classroom based management method used to create friendly peer competition between students in the classroom (Kellam, McKenzie, Brown & Poduska, 2011). The first experiment with the GBG was done in 1969 in Baldwin, Kansas by Muriel Sanders, Harriet Barrish, and Montrose Wolfe. Children in a classroom were divided into teams. The teams competed against one another to earn a reward, which was garnered if the teams refrained from bad behavior during normal instruction (Barrish, Saunders, & Wolfe, 1969). It did not take very much time out of instruction and it was very easy to implement. At the end of the experiment, the research team saw both teams win the game most of the time. They noted: “The game had significantly and reliably modified the disruptive out-of-seat and talking-out behavior of the students” (p. 122). This game has been modified over the years and research has indicated positive behavior results and increased in attentiveness in class (Kellam, et al., 2011; Tingstrom, Sterling-Turner & Wilczynski, 2006;).

When dealing with students in alternative education, addressing negative behaviors can take up a major portion of the class. Research based interventions, like the good behavior game, have shown success in alternative education settings. One research study showed the effects of allowing at-risk students to play educational games as a reward for academic success and positive behavior (Hernandez, 2009). Eventually, the computer lab was always full during the students’ free time and they began to have tournaments against each other. These math games

provided a competitive atmosphere for the students while providing them with some autonomy for their own education. The game provided the students with the opportunity to progress through the stages at their own pace. Results indicated that giving these students the opportunity to go to the math lab to play the computer game, changed their whole outlook on education (Hernandez, 2009). Hernandez (2009) noted: “They experienced success at school, which previously was not a place where they had any sort of success. As a result, the overall atmosphere of Houston has changed for the better” (p.47). Giving the students a goal to accomplish that seems to be something outside of the realm of education, is a great way to modify behavior and motivate students to do what you want them to do on their own.

### **Are Extrinsic Motivators the Answer?**

According to the American Psychological Association (2012), extrinsic motivations are those that arise from outside of the individual and often involve rewards such as trophies, money, social recognition or praise. Students served in alternative education settings often come from homes where education is seen as a burden instead of a blessing (Payne, 2005). In order to get students motivated about doing their work, interventions using extrinsic motivators have shown results of higher academic achievement, educational autonomy, and lower instances of negative behaviors. (Hernandez, 2009; Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jensen, 2000; Tingstrom, et al., 2006). No person would go to work every day without knowing that there was going to be a paycheck for them at the end of the week. Students do not always see the benefit that their education will bring them in their future. It is the job of teachers to remind them that they are doing good work from time to time.

While much of the research throughout the field of education indicates that extrinsic motivation is something that increases a student's need for academic success, there is literature that argues against extrinsic motivation. Kohn (1999), believes that we as a society are doing a disservice to our youth by teaching them that if they do a series of actions, they will be rewarded with some extrinsic motivator, such as money or a promotion at their job. He feels that this is simply not the way that society truly works. While the incentives and motivators will work in the short term, in the long run, this approach will begin to harm the person who is controlled by what motivates them (Kohn, 1999). "The truth is that if we want our children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility and plenty of it" (Kohn, 1999, p. 384). Kohn feels that children need to make mistakes and experience life in order to learn from what happens around them.

While this theory of Kohn's does make sense, it does not seem practical for the population of students that attend alternative education schools. Since these students are often not motivated to do schoolwork in the first place, offering an extrinsic motivator may be one of the only ways to keep them focused on the task hand. Using this type of motivator will improve students overall performance. They should be able to see a difference not only in their schoolwork but, in their interactions with faculty and staff because of their increased level of engagement in academics. By adding the reward component for doing schoolwork and being engaged in class, alternative education students should try harder and put in more effort in order to gain whatever form of extrinsic motivation that they have been offered (Flower, et al., 2011).

### **Mystery Motivators**

Mystery motivators are randomized extrinsic motivation tools, used to reduce disruptive behaviors in students (Maheady & Jabot, 2012). This motivational system is designed to give students a reward that is not completely known to them, but, is something that they would want to win. (Murphy, Theodore, Aloiso, Alric-Edwards, & Hughes, 2007). After they have exhibited positive behavior for the allotted amount of time, students will be given the reward they have been striving to earn. Due to the uncertainty that students will have because of the randomized reward they will receive, the anticipation and interest in the mystery motivator, should last throughout the intervention. (Murphy et al). This intervention is different from other behavior contingencies since it deals with the entire group as opposed to the individuals who are creating the disruptions in the classroom. By involving the entire class in the intervention, teachers have more time to instruct; they exhibit roles of non-bias or not favoring certain students, and there is increased opportunity for group interaction and cooperation. (Skinner, Skinner, & Sterling-Turner, 2002).

This intervention has been used in several different forms. During a study by Kehle and Bray (2000) in a general education classroom of 23 students, three mystery motivators were displayed in front of the room for all students to see. These three motivators were directed at three students who were very disruptive and classified as Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (SED). When one or more of the three SED students were in compliance with the clearly posted classroom rules, they would earn a point. Kehle and Bray (2000) were quoted as saying that, “The class was instructed that when one or more of the boys received their mystery motivator contingent upon their compliance with the posted classroom rules, they would receive a point. After accumulating a predetermined number of points, the 3 students received their respective

mystery motivators” (p. 479). When one of the SED students had earned enough points, they would receive they motivator. When this happened the rest of the students in the class also received a reward. During the entire study, the SED students were shown to have a 50% reduction in disruptive behaviors (Kehle & Bray, 2000).

This intervention’s entire purpose is to figure out what the best course is to use to reduce unwanted behaviors. Sometimes, implementing an intervention can be time consuming and difficult for the students to understand if they are rushed through the implementation process. Mystery motivators are very simple to implement and do not use of much of the instructional time to implement this intervention (Gore & Sears, 2005). Gore and Sears (2005) stated: “During a consultation sequence, students in the program put this model into action by collaborating with classroom teachers from a large, urban school district on a behavioral intervention. The general goal of the consultation was to assist teachers in addressing instances of student behavior (individual or classroom-wide) which may not have been appropriate for the learning environment” (p. 2). Due to their ease of use and implementation, mystery motivators are used quite often. Typically, the intervention may not work in a teacher’s classroom without modifying the intervention to fit the needs of the students (Gore & Sears, 2005). Because of the flexibility and ease of use, many teachers who have to work with disruptive students use mystery motivators in their classrooms to help students stay on task.

Mystery motivators have been shown to be an effective intervention at reducing negative and disruptive behaviors in different grade levels with a wide variety of students. A study conducted at a Head Start program involving eight preschool students in 2007, used mystery motivators to promote three positive behaviors, which were: not touching other students, remaining on task, and staying properly seated (Murphy et al, 2007). The method was an ABAB

style of intervention that lasted approximately a month. Murphy, Theodore, Aloiso, Alric-Edwards, and Hughes (2007) stated “In general, single-subject designs are well suited to investigating the effects of a behavior modification plan, particularly in applied settings such as schools. This is because one is able to analyze the behavior(s) before an intervention is implemented and during the treatment itself.” (p. 55). The results of this study demonstrated that mystery motivators are an effective group contingency for reducing negative behaviors in preschoolers. (Murphy et al, 2007).

Students with emotional disorders are often very difficult students who do not comply with teacher requests and exhibit multiple disruptive actions (Tobin & Sprague, 1999). Another study conducted in 2001 used mystery motivators to reduce disruptive behaviors in emotionally disturbed students (Musser, et al., 2001). The study used mystery motivators with three African American students ages 8-10, who had serious emotional disturbances. In a study conducted by Musser, Bray, Kehle, and Jensen (2001), “The students received special education services in a self-contained classroom comprising 8 students with serious emotional disturbance. The classroom was located in an alternative school for children with serious emotional disturbance. Instruction was provided by one special education teacher and one paraprofessional.” (p. 296). The goal of the research team was to use mystery motivators to reduce disruptive behaviors such as non-compliance to the instructor, talking out, being out of their seat, playing with non-school related materials, and verbal or physical aggression. Students were given stickers during observation periods. These stickers would eventually be redeemed for the student’s mystery motivator. The results of the study indicated a substantial and immediate change in behavior (Musser, et al). After the students began the intervention, the class environment became one that

involved more learning and less behavior management. This intervention could show positive results in high school alternative education setting.

Research has demonstrated that mystery motivators have shown positive results in regards the changing negative and disruptive student behaviors (Musser, et al., 2001; Murphy et al, 2007). The studies have shown that this type of intervention can effectively reduce unwanted behaviors while not taking much time or effort to implement into the daily routine of the classroom. (Skinner, et al., 2007). Much of the research has been done involving students with emotional disturbance at a younger age. According to Musser, Bray, Kehle, and Jensen (2001), “Interventions that succeed in improving compliance with adult directives usually lead to a reduction in disruptive behaviors. Thus, the design of an economical intervention that targets compliance with rules should simultaneously reduce a wide range of disruptive behaviors.” (p. 294). Since the data has shown positive results with younger students, using mystery motivators to change the behavior of high school students in non-residential settings should be an effective intervention. Because many alternative education students have special needs and disabilities that must be attended to, mystery motivators will give the teacher the opportunity to continue to meet the needs of the students while, bringing forth a way to develop the students’ abilities to self-regulate their behavior.

The purpose of this literature review is to indicate what research is available on mystery motivators, alternative education, and behavior modification. All of these different topics make up important subsections of how the intervention should be implemented and used in the alternative education classroom. Each one of the subtopics shows different types of information that would bring out certain aspects of how to teach and what accommodations are needed to help teachers keep their students learning. By using this type of information, teachers are adding

new tricks to their arsenal, which will keep students on their toes and learning through several different styles or interventions. Through the use of research based interventions, teachers will now be able to test out new teaching techniques that will help them get the results from their students that are desired. The research project that will be outlined shows teachers in the field different approaches to behavior modifications. By allowing students the opportunity to be rewarded with something of their choosing, students should be more than willing to come to school on time, with their work done, and prepared for what the school day may bring. This research surrounding this project indicates that students should put in more effort towards their educational goals through the use of the mystery motivator.

### **Methods**

The purpose of this research study was to determine if the use of mystery motivators can help students in alternative schools come to school more prepared to learn with all of their work done. This study is using both qualitative and quantitative data for analyzing any information that is collected during the research, although the majority of the data collected will be qualitative in nature. There are two major theoretical frameworks that are driving this research project. The first framework is behavior modifications. The second major framework is intrinsic versus extrinsic motivators. The idea behind the project is to help educators in the field of alternative education to understand the best practices and techniques to ensure student success.

### **Participants**

The participants for the study were in 10<sup>th</sup> grade between the ages of 14-16, and there are seven males and two females in the class. They come from diverse backgrounds; four Latino,

three Caucasian, one Native American, and one African American. All of the students are eligible for free or reduced cost meals at school and come from a low socio-economic background. Two of the students have 504s plans for medical issues such as ADHD. Six of the students Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), as required by special education law. In the class where the research will be taking place, six of the students receive Academic Intervention Services (AIS) and other special services such as using the resource room or reading teacher to help them throughout the course of their education. Often times, these students exhibit negative behaviors that call for teachers to stop teaching and deal with student behaviors, thus shortening the amount of time teachers have for providing students with academic instruction.

Students were recruited for the study within the first few weeks of school. Informed consent was gained following a briefing to the students where they will be asked if they would be willing to participate in the study (See attached script). The researcher collected the consent forms from the students. A second form required for the parent's consent, will be attached to the student consent form and students will be asked to bring it home for signatures. Once the consent forms were returned to the research team, students were selected from the pool of dually completed consent forms for the purpose of data collection. These students from the pool were selected on their level of needing the extrinsic motivation to accomplish their educational goals.

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in a small non-residential alternative education school in a small town in Western New York. This program offers high school students in need of an alternative educational setting the opportunity to earn a high school diploma. This is a full-time, academically-oriented program meeting all State Education Department requirements for a high

school diploma. These students have been assigned to the alternative education program by their home district for disciplinary reasons, special needs in their education, or not being able to handle the everyday rigors of the world of general education (not parallel). Once a referral has been made from the home district, students and their families have a meeting to go over the rationale of choosing to go the alternative education route to make sure the students graduate. This study was conducted over approximately six weeks during the first part of the school year.

### **Design**

The overall goal of this investigation was to determine if mystery motivators are an intervention that works to help alternative education students perform to set academic standards. The research question to be answered was “Do mystery motivators improve non-residential alternative education students by getting them to school prepared for the day with their work done?” The mystery motivators are an incentive systems designed to deliver random rewards for appropriate behavior. This form of extrinsic motivation has been used throughout classrooms to help students meet academic standards (Murphy et al, 2007). They provide students that little extra “push” to perform a little better, try a little harder, and put in extra effort to gain the reward. Motivators that will be used will be chosen by the students but, they will have no idea which motivator they can get. Descriptions of the motivators will be kept in sealed envelopes until the time that a student has earned the opportunity to be rewarded for their performance. This will occur after the student has completed the criteria for earning the mystery motivator. If the success of the students continues, they will be eligible to earn a bonus motivator at the end of the study. To be eligible for the bonus motivator a student would need to achieve almost perfect scores in all the areas in which data will be collected. Students were asked to come to school on

time with any work done for social studies class. Participants had to have all materials to be prepared for the class period with their work done, pencils and notebooks ready to use, they had to behave while in class and have no major incidents in school during the course of the research study. If the students stayed within the guidelines of the study they were eligible for a mystery motivator, or a reward that is something of students choosing. The study lasted approximately six weeks.

Students were offered a mystery motivator, an item with a monetary value of less than \$10 dollars. A description of each item will be put in a sealed envelope and held on to by the head researcher. Each student once offered the motivator, had to come to school on time, with any work done for the class they are attending and be prepared (with writing utensil, notebook, etc.) for class work. Students had to have less than 5 behavior incidents per week and no major incidents throughout the time of the study to stay eligible for the mystery motivators. Major incidents included fighting, any suspensions, or any issue that would take them out of the school setting for an extended period of time for disciplinary reasons. Stickers will be given each week for staying within the criteria of the experiment. This means they must follow all of the guidelines above each day. Students will have to trade 2 stickers for 1 mystery motivator. If a student gets all six stickers they will be awarded a bonus motivator envelope, thus getting multiple rewards for good behavior and academic success. After the intervention phase is completed, students will get their motivators if they reach their goals set by the experiment and the study will conclude.

**Data Collection**

The data collection phase consisted of 8 direct observations and use of the instrument for gathering the data. The main researcher will conduct weekly observations to ensure that the study is being conducted properly and that the cooperating teacher is following the protocol of the study. On the days when the primary researcher was not in the classroom, the classroom teacher will fill out the instrument. The primary and secondary researcher will confer with each other a few times each week during the observation phase of the study. Data to be collected consisted of attendance; work completed, class participation, behaviors displayed, and eligibility for the motivator.

Students were offered a mystery motivator, an item with a monetary value of less than \$10 dollars. A description of each item will be put in a sealed envelope and held on to by the head researcher. Each student once offered the motivator, must come to school on time, with any work done for the class they are attending and be prepared (with writing utensil, notebook, etc.) for class work. Students must also have less than 5 behavior incidents per week and no major incidents throughout the time of the study to stay eligible for the mystery motivators. Stickers will be given each week and students will have to trade 2 stickers for 1 mystery motivator. If a student gets all 6 stickers they will be awarded a bonus motivator envelope, thus getting multiple rewards for good behavior and academic success. After the intervention phase is completed, students will get their motivators if they reach their goals set by the experiment and the study will conclude.

**Data Analysis**

There are a few items that will be used throughout the entire study that are paramount to ensuring the study goes smooth: the instrument and the motivational tools. The instrument is a checklist compiled by the research team. Each day, either the primary or the secondary researcher, will fill out the 8 questions on the checklist. The questions also have space provided if an incident regarding the student needs to be expanded upon. This way these data will be accurately kept and everyone on the research team will know exactly what happened. If a student displays negative behaviors that are not bad enough to warrant not being eligible for the mystery motivator, this could be explained on the checklist so nothing is left to assumption. This instrument will be the main tool used for data collection purposes.

**Limitations**

The limitations of this study included a small sample size. Only using 9 students limited the amount of data collected. In the area where the study is being conducted, there is a diverse population of people. Most of the participants in the study come from impoverished backgrounds, some rural some urban. Although these students come from different population densities, the socio-economic status is similar, once again limiting the diversity of the participants involved.

Another limitation was doing the research from a distance. The lead researcher was not the classroom teacher in the room where the research will take place. Weekly observations will be made by the lead researcher. Daily correspondence from the cooperating teacher to the lead researcher via email and text messages to keep everyone involved in the study up to date with

student information. Not being in the classroom day to day, will limit the amount of actual observation time with the students.

The purpose of this study is to gather information on the behavior modification and the use of extrinsic motivation in students in alternative education settings. Data that will be collected will include number of days homework is incomplete, number of tardies, negative behavioral information, and class participation levels. The data will indicate if extrinsic rewards in the form of mystery motivators can lead alternative education students to improve in their ability to meet common behavioral expectations.

### **Results**

This section outlines the results of the mystery motivator intervention in the alternative education school in Western New York. While the research and the literature in the subject area said that mystery motivators would help students perform better academically and improve behaviors, in the setting where this study took place, this was not the case. The data is indicative of some of the students exhibiting some improvements but, the results were not consistent. Some students worked harder than others, some did not even come to school, and all of them had some kind of issues along the way in this study. In the end, the results showed some alignment with the research available but, the data mainly showed inconsistencies for most participants involved.

During the observations for the intervention it became clear that the students involved were not really interested in working towards improving their academic performance. I spent a total

of 7 days in the classroom for the purpose of observation, dissemination of information of student performance, and ensuring that the cooperating teacher was correctly following the guidelines of the study. Most correspondence between the lead researcher and the cooperating teacher was done via email. Even though there were 9 students in the class, only 3 of them returned both consent forms, thus allowing for only those 3 students to be the research subjects. From the analysis of the data, results indicated that the students did not want to come to school, let alone participate in the study. During many of the 45-minute observation periods fewer than half of the students assigned to the class were attending class. It was also clear that students were more interested in the social aspect of school more so than improving their education. At the end of the intervention, it was apparent that students in this alternative education setting were not interested in the mystery motivator intervention after a short period of time.

**First Observation:**

During the first day of observations in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade global studies classroom, there were only 4 students in the classroom of the 9 students that were assigned to the class. The first day of the observations was to include the briefing on the intervention and the purpose for the research study. During the briefing, the mystery motivator intervention was explained to the class in detail so they could decide if they wanted to be involved in the research study. Students were also given consent forms to sign and return, as well as a consent form for their parents to sign and return. Both sets of consent forms were needed to be a participant in the study. The cooperating teacher was left with a set of forms for the other students who were not present for the original briefing. He was also given the *Daily Observation Record* so information could be shared between the cooperating teacher and the lead researcher since the lead researcher could

not be in the classroom every day. During the first observation, students were disruptive from time to time and worked hard to get their teacher to go off on a tangent. It was noted that 3 of the 4 students would have met all of the criteria of the intervention to stay eligible for the mystery motivator sticker. One student did not come to class with a notebook or a pencil. After the class was over the cooperating teacher mentioned to the lead researcher which students he thought would benefit most from the intervention. He said “Obviously, all of the students that you saw today could use an intervention like this. The problem you are going to run in to is both of the completed consent forms back from the students.”

### **Second Observation:**

During the second observation day, there were 6 out of the 9 total students. Even though most of the students were given the consent forms and the briefing by the lead researcher or the cooperating teacher, only 3 of the students ended up returning both sets of consent forms. The second observation day was the beginning of the intervention. It was fortunate that 2 of the students the cooperating teacher had mentioned would greatly benefit from the mystery motivators were able to return both sets of consent forms. During this observation, students were very rambunctious. There was one student in the classroom that would constantly make off color remarks to the rest of the class. Much of the cooperating teacher’s time was spent trying to keep this student in check. Throughout the class, the cooperating teacher continued to make mention of the mystery motivator intervention. Some of the students responded well to the prompts of not getting the motivator for the week by reverting to the tasks assigned to them. Others seemed to brush it off like it was of very little importance. One student complained to everyone “Who wants to get some dumb ten dollar prize just for doing some pointless homework? You guys are

dumb if you play that teacher's stupid game." After the class concluded, the cooperating teacher briefed the lead researcher on what had been going on during the week of class while he was not in the room. He felt that the students were starting to respond to the intervention in a positive way but he knew it was only the beginning stages. 2 of the 3 students who data were being collected on received stickers this week. The third student was not awarded a motivator due to lack of preparedness for class. While it seemed like the students were headed in the right direction, the cooperating teacher gave a warning to me. He felt like the students were going to try relatively hard at the beginning of the intervention and then they would just stop participating because they have very short attention spans.

**Third Observation:**

The third observation day was very difficult on the cooperating teacher. There were 8 of the 9 students in the room. His aide was out for the day and his consultant teacher had to help 2 of the students in another room in order to get them caught up for an important assignment later on in the week. The remaining 6 students knew there was a lack of supervision in the room and they tried to take advantage of the cooperating teacher. There were only 2 of the students in class this day that were participants in the intervention. The students were watching a movie on the Middle Ages during this class. There were 2 students in particular that would constantly make inappropriate comments throughout the entirety of the film. They would also ask questions that would be somewhat related to the topic of the lesson but, the questions would ultimately lead to the cooperating teacher answering student inquiries. By doing so, the cooperating teacher went off on a tangent, and then had to address student misbehavior, which made it impossible for the students to watch the entire film. The 2 students, who were being so

disruptive, commanded the attention of not only the entire class but the attention of the adults in the room as well. Only one of the students who were involved in the intervention was awarded a sticker toward the motivator this week. He said “I am finally getting the hang of this game you’re having us play. It can be really easy if you just stay on top of your work.” I felt like this was proof that the intervention was beginning to take hold for the some of the students. The other students were cited for attendance issues and lack of preparedness for the week and they were not awarded stickers for the week. This put all students involved in the study up to having earned one sticker towards a mystery motivator.

**Fourth Observation:**

On the fourth day of observation, it became clear that the presence of the lead researcher was affecting student performance. The cooperating teacher had mentioned that when the lead researcher was in the room, the students were better behaved and less disruptive on the observation days. He noticed that the presence of the lead researcher almost put the students into a different mindset, almost like they had to perform for a larger audience that seemed more important to them. Today there were 4 students in the room, 2 of which were participants in the mystery motivator intervention. Students were given the option to work on any back work that they owed to the cooperating teacher because they were closing in on the end of the marking period. The lead researcher was asked to help students with completing their assignments. During the period the 2 students who were involved in the intervention were working hard and trying to stay focused. The other 2 students in the room were trying to be class clowns and disrupt the entire room. They were defiantly refusing to do work and trying to make the entire class focus on them. One of the students, who was involved in the intervention, decided to move

to the hallway to do their work and not be bothered by the disruptive students. This eventually made the disruptive students stop trying to make a scene and one of the instigators eventually put his head down and went to sleep.

At the end of the class, the 2 students who were participants in the study were both awarded stickers, which they both promptly traded in for their mystery motivators. The third student was not awarded a motivator sticker due to attendance issues. “How come they get cool stuff and neither of us do?” asked one of the disruptive students. The cooperating teacher immediately replied, “Because you have not demonstrated the proper behavior and preparedness for the intervention. Once you come to class ready to work and prepared for the day, you may have the opportunity to earn a prize. Until then, you will continue to see your peers be rewarded for a job well done.” It was apparent that the students who were not rewarded were upset about not being part of the group of students who were being recognized for their efforts. After the period, the cooperating teacher and the lead researcher discussed the intervention and decided that they could see some progress in 2 of the students.

**Fifth Observation:**

Day five of the observation was a review and testing day. The cooperating teacher had mentioned to the lead researcher before the class started that he wanted to give the students a little extra review time in order to set them up for success on their upcoming unit test. He felt that the class did not understand the lessons he was teaching throughout the week as well as he had anticipated. He had actually pushed the test back a day in order to put them in a better position to pass. There were 5 kids in the classroom today, 3 of which were participants in the mystery motivator intervention. Students were using an interactive clicker game on the projector

to answer review questions. The students were relative well behaved throughout the review session. During the review session, one of the students got into an argument with the cooperating teacher and said something very disrespectful that immediately disqualified them from sticker eligibility that week. The student was sent to the principal's office after the incident. After that was solved, the students worked on their test and remained quiet for the test period. Students had a range from poor to fair on the test. The students who were involved in the intervention both passed and were doing better than they were at the beginning of the school year. . The cooperating teacher was pleasantly surprised with these results. He said "It seems to me that the students who are involved in the study are doing better academically. Their grades on this test and their quizzes are evidence of this trend." At the end of the class, two students were awarded stickers and one traded in their stickers for their mystery motivators. The research team was seeing decent results with the students but they were still inconsistent from week to week with each of the students who were participating in the intervention.

**Sixth Observation:**

During the sixth observation day, the cooperating teacher had stations set up for his lesson involving early global trade. He had set this up as a group activity where each group would go from station to station to find out about the beginnings of a globally interdependent economy. There were 4 students in the classroom today and only one of which was a student involved in the data collection process. This activity worked pretty well even though it took the cooperating teacher about 15 minutes to get the students to start the stations activity. There was a student who continuously tried to joke around. They finished their work right before the end of the period. The student who was involved in the data collection had a great week and was given a

sticker. This was this student's fourth sticker so another mystery motivator was awarded to the student. The other two students who were involved in the intervention were not awarded stickers or motivators for this week. "Attendance issues are the biggest problems we run into here at this school. Students, most of the time, rarely want to be here and they will find any excuse they can to not come to school" the cooperating teacher said. One student skipped a global studies class during the week, which is an automatic disqualification of eligibility for the week. The other student in the intervention had been having issues with another teacher in the school. Due to these issues, that student had not come to school since the incident in the other class happened.

#### Final Observation:

On the last day of observations, there were 4 students in the classroom, none of which were the students who were involved in the intervention. One of the students involved had stopped coming to school about two weeks ago and no one on the faculty had heard anything about what this student was up to. The second student involved in the intervention was still continuing to avoid the teacher that there was an issue with. This student had not been at school for over a week at this point. The final student involved, who had been the most consistent performer during the intervention, was not in class because of a suspension. This student was involved in a fistfight at the beginning of the week. This would be considered a major incident and would disqualify a student for eligibility for the motivator. The class was involved in a makeup day once again were they worked on back work that they owed for the cooperating teacher. I got involved in helping the class. I helped a couple students with some questions they had about back work. Essentially, I became part of that student work group. The students were mildly disruptive and tried to get the cooperating teacher on a tangent but he was not allowing for it today. After the class concluded, the cooperating teacher and the lead researcher discussed how

they felt the intervention went. They agreed that while there were some moments of bliss, the intervention needed some work to make the results more consistent. Secondly, they found one of the major issues to be the attendance of the students in alternative education settings. If students do not come to school, they are not going to be educated the way the state requires them to be. In the end, if students do not want to learn the material, be in school, or participate in activities, it is difficult to make them do so, especially students enrolled in alternative schools.

### *Individual Student Performance*

Since there were 3 different students involved in this intervention, each student needs their own breakdown of their performance during the study. Every student had their own moments of success and their moments of struggle during the entire study. Even though every student was not perfect throughout the whole study, slight amounts of progress were made and it could be inferred that with certain students, mystery motivators could be a valuable intervention for alternative education teachers to use in their classrooms. As with anything in education, interventions need to be tailored to help fit everyone involved. While these interventions may not meet every need of every person involved, they try to make the situation better for everyone in the group.

#### **Student A:**

Student A was the only female of the group. She was a 14-year-old Hispanic girl who came from a very difficult home life. At first she was very excited about the prospect of getting a motivator that she got to choose. She had made mention of the fact that “teachers never let us

pick exactly what we want to get.” According to the data, Student A was the rabbit of the group. She started off very strong earning a sticker in weeks 1 and 3, thus making her eligible for one motivator during the study. Unfortunately, the intervention was not that big of a help to Student A.

Her main issue throughout the study was her attendance. There wasn't a week where student A came to class for more than 4 days during the study. Her other major issue was she was constantly making off color remarks in all of her classes. Teachers throughout the school wrote up Student A for minor infractions in class several times throughout the study. It was the idea of the faculty that Student A was avoiding school during the last few weeks of the study because of an altercation with her science teacher. Student A saw some benefit from the study at the beginning of the intervention but, after the third week, she did not make any progress towards her academic goals and her attendance was poor at best.

### **Student B:**

Student B was a 14-year-old Caucasian male. This student came from an okay home life (at least compared to the others involved in the study) but he was the type of student who knew how to command the attention of the rest of the class. He was a master of getting the teacher off topic and he was without a doubt, one of the class clowns. The cooperating teacher deemed Student B as the most in need of the mystery motivator intervention. The cooperating teacher also mentioned that he would be the most defiant in terms of conformity and following the directions of the lead researcher. This was because Student B had trust issues and the cooperating teacher knew it would take time for the lead researcher to build a positive working

relationship. This is shown in the first week and the slight struggles during the second week. Even though he was awarded a sticker during the second week, he had some infractions throughout that week but it was not enough to make him ineligible for the sticker. Student B would show signs of promise each week but no real marked improvement. He would do really well one day, and have the maximum amount of infractions the next day. Student B did earn 1 motivator throughout the study, even though it took him until the fourth week of the study. After the fourth week of the study, Student B got into some trouble in school and stopped coming to class very infrequently.

Student B had several issues that needed to be addressed during the studies that were unfortunately not taken care of as much as the research team would have liked. While he did earn one of the mystery motivators, Student B was the most inconsistent student of the group. Even though he earned stickers, he barely met the standards that were set before him. Student B was the type of person who would shut down when whatever task in front of him became too difficult or he felt like he did not want to try any harder. By the last 2 weeks, Student B had stopped caring whatsoever and reverted back to his old ways of class clowning, insubordination to authority, and not attending class. Even on the days when the lead researcher was around, Student B's demeanor rarely changed. It's safe to say that Student B got little to no benefit from the mystery motivator intervention. During the first 4 weeks there were a few bright instances for Student B but, in the end, he wanted to remain the student he had always been.

**Student C:**

Student C was a 14 year-old Caucasian male. This student put in the most effort and saw the most marked academic improvement from the mystery motivator intervention. Student C also exhibited some consistency of performance during the intervention. He is the type of student who can be easily distracted by other students. Once Student C has gotten off task, it is very difficult to get him refocused and back to the assignment at hand. This student was included in the data collection phase of the intervention because of the dually completed consent forms. The cooperating teacher had made mention that this student would “work hard for a while and then trail off toward the end.” The cooperating teacher was partially correct but, Student C is not totally at fault.

Student C began working towards his motivators right from the get go. He was the type of student who would always forget one thing most of the time. While this got him into trouble a few weeks, results indicated that the intervention was helping Student C with his preparedness issues. In the second week, he was disqualified from motivator eligibility for forgetting a writing utensil for multiple days in a row. After this minor bump in the road, Student C exhibited excellent behavior in the Global 10 classroom during the rest of the time he was a participant in the intervention. He received a sticker during weeks 1, 3, 4, and 5. He even received the maximum allowed points during week 5 of the intervention. During the 6<sup>th</sup> and final week of the mystery motivator intervention, Student C was suspended from school early that week for getting into a fight. This would be considered a major disciplinary infraction thus disqualifying Student C for any further motivators. This was unfortunate because the data showed an improvement in overall student performance with Student C throughout the intervention.

**Conclusions:**

In conclusion, this mystery motivator intervention did have some positive effects on this population of alternative education students. While there were some moments of glory, most of the students involved in the intervention either gave up or were disqualified for incidents beyond their control. Results indicated that the participants were more involved in the intervention during the first few weeks of the study. Towards the end of the intervention students were not coming to school for various reasons. Data exhibited student performance was on the rise but, after students did not receive instant gratification for what they perceived as more effort, they began to shut down. One student said “Why should I try if I know that any little mess up will get me in trouble and I will not get my prize. It’s pointless and I am not gonna try for something I won’t even get.” Students felt as though no amount of extra effort would be enough to earn the mystery motivator. Typically, one mistake would lead to a student meltdown, which was followed by the student giving up on the intervention. In the end, student participation in the intervention has to be done fully or the participants will not gain the full advantages of the intervention. In the next chapter, the limitations of the study and the importance of the study to the career field will be outlined and discussed.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research project was to determine whether Mystery Motivators helped alternative education students come to school on time and prepared to learn. Before the intervention began, the three participants were constantly late to class, unprepared for the school day, disruptive, and generally unmotivated to do anything related to education. These students

were in need of added help to reach their academic goals. By the end of the intervention, it was unclear which students were really benefitting from the intervention, with the exception of one student. The results of this study indicated student progression during some of the weeks and decline during the weeks following. There was only one participant who truly showed progress during the intervention. This student showed marked improvement from the third week of the intervention until they were disqualified for a major behavioral incident. The results of the data collected on this participant were consistent with the previous research on mystery motivator interventions can (a) improve student performance (Skinner, Skinner, & Sterling, 2002; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010) (b) reduce disruptive behavior (DiMartini, Bray, & Kehle, 2000; Kehle, Bray, Theodore, Jenson, & Clark, 2000; Theodore et al., 2004) and (c) homework completion and accuracy (Madaus, Kehle, Madaus, & Bray, 2003; Pang & Foley, 2006). This indicated that the research available on the topic of mystery motivators in the field of alternative education were a useful tool in behavior modification.

### *Significance*

This population of participants did not seem to get too involved in the intervention. However, during the times that the lead researcher was in the classroom, especially during the first few weeks of the intervention, one could see the improved performance, participation, and preparedness of the participants. When some of the participants did not receive weekly stickers for their motivator, they began to give up on the intervention and revert back to their old ways. The environment of the classroom to the students was a place of comedy, social interaction, and

spending time with peers. Even when students decided to do their work, the students who did not want to learn would do whatever they could to make the class convert to their way of thinking. This goes against what the current literature says about mystery motivators and producing results such as improving academic success (Skinner, Skinner, & Sterling, 2002; Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011; Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010) and reducing disruptive behavior (DiMartini, Bray, & Kehle, 2000; Kehle, Bray, Theodore, Jenson, & Clark, 2000; Theodore et al., 2004).

The results of this study displayed some correlation between behavior modification through using extrinsic motivation tools in the form of mystery motivators. Due to inconsistent attendance from the participants, this study showed some data that were consistent with current findings while the majority of the participant data was inclusive due to lack of participation in the intervention. This could show that mystery motivators could be effective in the alternative education classroom. The ease of use and implementation allow for teachers to try the intervention without taking up much time. What could make mystery motivators work in alternative education would be a looser point system where students could get rewarded even with a few more bad behaviors. Another solution would be to give the students more instant gratification with rewards. In sum, teachers can give them rewards for positive behavior at shorter intervals to keep their students' attention focused on academic success.

### ***Limitations***

This study had some limitations that were unavoidable and led the research team to believe there were some places in which this study could have been improved. This study had to

be a distance study because the lead researcher was not the primary teacher in the room where the research took place. Since the lead researcher was not involved in the day to day activities of the classroom; it was difficult to get a true grasp on what was going on in the classroom. It also made for a marked behavioral change in the students when the lead researcher was in the classroom. The students would typically behave much better when the lead researcher was in the room. This could have led to skewed results in the data.

Another limitation of the intervention was the lack of resources, funding, and time. The lead researcher could not be involved in daily observations due to other employment and other various responsibilities. These responsibilities did not allow for him to spend as much time in the data collection room as he wanted to. This led to having to keep in contact via email and phone calls with the cooperating teacher. While this was a good method, some information could have been taken in a different context by the different people involved in the study. Since he was not involved in the day to day operations of class, his ideas of what was going could have been somewhat different than that of the cooperating teacher if he were there to observe the class.

The small size of the class involved was a limitation of the study. Without being able to draw data from a vast pool of participants, it would be difficult to draw conclusions that would coincide with every student that is enrolled in an alternative education program. The small participant pool also exhibited poor attendance throughout the intervention. This pool is also limited in its diversity. There were two Latino and one Caucasian student involved in the study which does not allow for a full scope of information for all walks of life. Unfortunately, students of all races were not enrolled in this school, let alone in the classroom where data was being collected.

Finally, these students enrolled in this alternative education program are products of their environment. These students come from tough homes where education is not the top priority. The majority of alternative education students see school as an outlet for socializing and spending time with their friends, as opposed to a place of learning. By putting all of these children in the same school, it makes for a tougher school environment, especially for those students who are trying to focus on their studies. Often times, alternative schools are where young teachers go to get their first jobs and begin their careers. Usually, these teachers don't have the experience and training to truly help the students enrolled in these programs. Peer pressure, lack of motivation, external factors from home all add up to a breeding ground for a school that is tougher than most to find success at. It's a shame to see that the students, who need the most help from the best teachers available, do not have those resources at their disposal.

### ***Need for Further Research***

This information is very important to the field of education, let alone alternative education. Teachers throughout time have always been looking for ways to help students find it in themselves to succeed in school. Even though this study did have some results that would lead educators to believe that alternative education students would benefit from a mystery motivator intervention. Due to the small sample size and poor attendance of the group of participants, more research is needed in order to figure out exactly how teachers could modify a similar intervention to fit the needs of their students. Literature has shown that mystery motivator interventions can be effective in settings similar to the one in the used in the study. Figuring out

what the best practices for a mystery motivator intervention would benefit teachers throughout all facets of education, especially educators in the field of alternative education.

Continuing research is extremely important for the future of education. Without it, teachers would never be able to adapt to the ever changing climate of today's classroom. Children have been known to be creatures that are always changing with the times. In order for educators to stay in tune with the youth of today, research projects like the one mentioned in this paper, need to happen to ensure the academic success of our future generations. Without studies like this, our educational system would eventually become vastly outdated and difficult to use since it won't be aligned with how people of the day learning new information.

### References

- Aron, Y. (2006). *An overview of alternative education*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
- Atkins, T. & Bartuska, J. (2010). Considerations for the placement of youth with EBD in alternative education programs. *Beyond Behavior, 1*(1), 14-20.
- Barrish, H. H., Saunders, M., & Wolf, M. M. (1969). Good behavior game: Effects of individual contingencies for group consequences on disruptive behavior in a classroom. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 2*(2), 119.
- Carver, P. R., Lewis, L., & Tice, P. (2010). Alternative schools and programs for public school students at risk of educational failure: 2007–08 (NCES 2010–026). US Department of Education. *National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.*

- Flower, A., McDaniel, S. C., & Jolivette, K. (2011). A literature review of research quality and effective practices in alternative education settings. *Education and Treatment of Children, 34*(4), 489-510.
- Hernandez, D. (2009). Gaming+ autonomy= academic achievement. *Principal Leadership, 10*(4), 44-47.
- Herndon, R. (2008). Annual alternative education report. Tennessee Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Kellam, S. G., McKenzie, A. C., Brown, C. H., & Poduska, J. M. (July 2011). The Good Behavior Game and the future of prevention and treatment. *Addiction Science & Clinical Practice, 6*(1), 73-84.
- Kehle, T. J., Bray, M. A., Theodore, L. A., Jenson, W. R., & Clark, E. (2000). A multi-component intervention designed to reduce disruptive classroom behavior. *Psychology In The Schools, 37*(5), 475-81.
- Kohn, A. (1999). *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise and other bribes*. Mariner Books.
- Lacey, R. H. & Sobers, M. R. (2005). The need for motivated and highly qualified teachers in alternative education. *International Journal on School Disaffection, 3*(2), 33-38.
- Maheady, L. & Jabot, M. (2012). A historical analysis of the jars: Using group contingencies with randomized components to improve students' academic and behavioral performance. *SUNY Fredonia, 1*,(1).
- Murphy, K. A., Theodore, L. A., Aloiso, D., Alric-Edwards, J. M. & Hughes, T. L. (2007). Interdependent group contingency and mystery motivators to reduce preschool disruptive behavior. *Psychology in the Schools, 44*(1), 53-63.

- Musser, E. H., Bray, M. A., Kehle, T. J. & Jenson, W. R. (2001). Reducing disruptive behaviors in students with serious emotional disturbance. *School Psychology Review*, 30(2), 294-304.
- Oklahoma Technical Assistance Center. (2010). Evaluation of Oklahoma alternative education programs, 2009 – 2010. Oklahoma Department of Education, 1(1).
- Olive, E. (2003). The African American child and positive youth development. *Community youth development: Programs, policies, and practices*, 27.
- Pang, L. S. & Foley, R. M. (2006). Alternative education programs: Program and student characteristics. *The High School Journal*, 89(3), 10-21.
- Payne, R. K. (2005). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Houston: aha! Process
- Quinn, M. M. & Poirier, J. M. (2006). *Study of effective alternative education programs: Final grant report*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research. Submitted to: Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education; Washington, DC.
- Raywid, M.A. (1998). The journey of the alternative schools movement: Where it's been and where it's going. *The High School Magazine*, 6(2), 12-15.
- Skinner, B. F. (1972). *Cumulative record: A selection of papers*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Skinner, B. F. (1982). Contrived reinforcement. *The Behavior Analyst*, 5(1), 3.
- Skinner, B. F., Ferster, C. B., & Ferster, C. B. (1997). *Schedules of reinforcement*. Boston: Copley Publishing Group.
- Skinner, C.H., Skinner, A.L., & Sterling-Turner, H.E. (2002). Best practices in contingency management: Application of individual and group contingencies in educational settings, *Best practices in school psychology*. 1,(4), 817–830.

- Tingstrom, D. H., Sterling-Turner, H. E. & Wilczynski, S. M. (2006). The good behavior game: 1969-2002. *Behavior Modification, 30*(2), 225-253.
- Tobin, T. & Sprague, J. (1999). Alternative education programs for at-risk youth: Issues, best practice, and recommendations. *Oregon School Study Council Bulletin, 42*(4).
- Unruh, D., Bullis, M., Todis, B., Waintrup, M. & Atkins, T. (2007). Programs and practices for special education students in alternative education settings. *National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 6*(1), 1-6.

Appendix 1-Student Consent Form

**Informed Consent Form**  
**Mystery Motivators and the Alternative Education Classroom**  
**With researcher, Mr. James Peil**

My name is James Peil. I am currently enrolled EDU 691, Master's Thesis Project, at Fredonia State University. I am conducting a research study on the effect of mystery motivators with students in alternative education.

The purpose of this research study is to determine if the use of mystery motivators can help students in alternative schools come to school more prepared to learn with all of their work done. You will be asked to come to social studies class on time with any work done for Mr. Talbot's class. You will need to have all materials to be prepared for the class period with your notebook, a writing utensil, and any work completed for Mr. Talbot's class. You will have to behave while in class and have no suspensions during the course of the research study. If you stay within the guidelines of the study you will be eligible for a mystery motivator, or a reward of less than \$10 dollars that is something of your choosing. The study will last 6 weeks.

I will collect the consent forms from the students. If your child agrees to participate, a consent form for you will be distributed. All the students who return both consent forms will be included in the study. All students enrolled in the class will participate in the mystery motivator intervention as it is being adopted by Mr. Talbot as a classroom management approach, but data specific to this study will only be collected for the students who provide both their own and parental consent.

I do not anticipate that there are any risks or discomforts associated with this study

Personal benefits you may get from this study are: Each week you will be eligible for a sticker. In order to get the mystery motivator (An item that each student chooses with a monetary value of \$10 or less), you need to have 2 stickers to trade in for the sealed motivator envelope. If you receive a sticker for each week of the research study, you will be eligible for 2 motivators and the possibility of a bonus motivator for good behavior and academic excellence.

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawal of your consent or discontinued participation in the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits or rights to which you might otherwise be entitled. The principal investigator may at his discretion remove you from the study for any of a number of reasons. In such an event, you will not suffer any penalty or loss of benefits or rights, which you might otherwise be entitled.

You will not receive any monetary compensation for your participation in this study.

Your identity will be protected throughout the study. Your anonymity will be maintained during data analysis and publication/presentation of results by the following means: (1) You will be assigned a number as names will not be recorded. (2) The researcher will save the data file by your number, not by name. (3) Only members of the research group will view collected data in detail. (4) Files will be stored in a secured location accessed only by authorized researchers and destroyed after three years.

The Fredonia State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) has approved the procedures of this study.

If you have any questions about this study, you should feel free to ask them now or anytime throughout the study by contacting:

Mr. James Peil, Graduate Researcher, Fredonia, NY 660-441-0965; Email: [peil6972@fredonia.edu](mailto:peil6972@fredonia.edu)

Dr. Janeil Rey, Professor of Education, E232 Thompson Hall, 673-4650 email: [janeil.rey@fredonia.edu](mailto:janeil.rey@fredonia.edu)

Catherine Kilpatrick, Human Subjects Administrator and Director, Office of Sponsored Programs phone: 673-3528; e-mail: [Catherine.kilpatrick@fredonia.edu](mailto:Catherine.kilpatrick@fredonia.edu)

I understand the nature of this study and agree to participate. I received a copy of this form. I give the principal investigator and his/her associates permission to present this work in written and/or oral form for teaching or presentation to advance the knowledge of science and/or academic without further permission from me provided that my name or identity is not disclosed.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

Appendix 2-Parental Consent Form

**Parental Informed Consent Form**  
**Mystery Motivators and the Alternative Education Classroom**  
**With researcher, Mr. James Peil**

My name is James Peil. I am currently enrolled EDU 691, Master's Thesis Project, at Fredonia State University. I am conducting a research study on the effect of mystery motivators with students in alternative education.

The purpose of this research study is to determine if the use of mystery motivators can help students in alternative schools come to school more prepared to learn with all of their work done. Your child will be asked to come to social studies class on time with any work done for Mr. Talbot's class. Your child will need to have all materials to be prepared for the class period with a notebook, a writing utensil, and any work completed for Mr. Talbot's class. Your child will have to behave while in class and have no suspensions in school during the course of the research study. If your child stays within the guidelines of the study he or she will be eligible for a mystery motivator, or a reward of less than \$10 dollars that is something of the student's choosing. The study will last 5 weeks.

I will collect the consent forms from the students. For the students who agree to participate, consent forms for their parents will be distributed. All the students who return both consent forms will be included in the study. All students enrolled in the class will participate in the mystery motivator intervention as it is being adopted by Mr. Talbot but data specific to this study will only be collected for the students who provide both their own and parental consent.

I do not anticipate that there are any risks or discomforts associated with this study:

Personal benefits your child may get from this study are: Each week he or she will be eligible for a sticker. In order to get the mystery motivator (An item that each student chooses with a monetary value of \$10 or less), the student needs to have 2 stickers to trade in for the sealed motivator envelope. If your child receives a sticker for each week of the research study, your child will be eligible for 2 motivators and the possibility of a bonus motivator for good behavior and academic excellence.

Your child's participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawal of your consent or discontinued participation in the study will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits or rights to which your child might otherwise be entitled. All students enrolled in the class will participate in the mystery motivator intervention as it is being adopted by the cooperating teacher as a classroom management approach, but data specific to this study will only be collected for the students who provide both their own and parental consent. The principal investigator may at his discretion remove your child from the study for any of a number of reasons. In such an event, your child will not suffer any penalty or loss of benefits or rights which they might otherwise be entitled.

Your child will not receive any monetary compensation for your participation in this study.

Your child's identity will be protected throughout the study. Your child will not be identified during data analysis and publication/presentation of results by any or all of the following means: (1) Students will be assigned a number as names will not be recorded. (2) The researcher will save the data file by your number, not by name. (3) Only members of the research group will view collected data in detail. (4) Files will be stored in a secured location accessed only by authorized researchers and destroyed after three years.

The Fredonia State University Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) has approved the procedures of this study.

If you have any questions about this study, you should feel free to ask them now or anytime throughout the study by contacting:

Mr. James Peil, Graduate Researcher, Fredonia, NY 660-441-0965; Email: peil6972@fredonia.edu

Dr. Janeil Rey, Professor of Education, E232 Thompson Hall, 673-420 email: janeil.rey@fredonia.edu

Catherine Kilpatrick, Human Subjects Administrator and Director, Office of Sponsored Programs phone: 673-3528; e-mail: catherine.kilpatrick@fredonia.edu

I understand the nature of this study and agree to participate. I received a copy of this form. I give the principal investigator and his/her associates permission to present this work in written and/or oral form for teaching or presentation to advance the knowledge of science and/or academic without further permission from me provided that my name or identity is not disclosed.

---

Parent/Guardian Signature

---

Name of Child

Appendix 3-Daily Observation Table

Date:							
Student	Attendance	On-Time	Assignments Complete	Pencil	Notebook	Eligible	Comments
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							