

**THE USE OF BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUES IN  
ALTERING DISRUPTIVE CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR**

**BY**

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THE USE OF BEHAVIORAL TECHNIQUES IN ALTERING  
DISRUPTIVE CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR

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A Research Paper

Presented to

the Graduate Council of

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Arts

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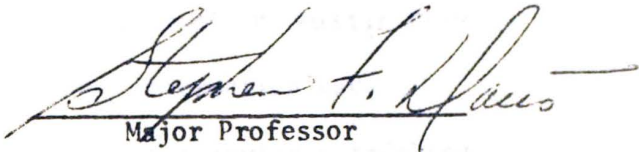
by

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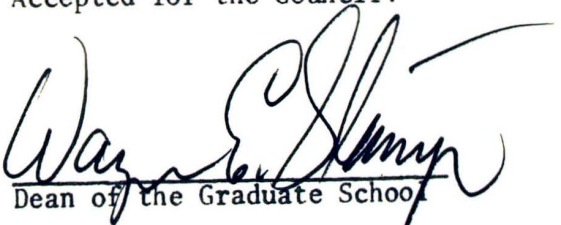
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Edward Otis White entitled "The Use of Behavioral Techniques in Altering Disruptive Classroom Behavior." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology.

  
Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Recent publications in the field of psychology and guidance report the evolution of a new counseling technique. John D. Krumboltz (1966) has referred to this new counseling technique as behavioral counseling. Behavioral counseling involves the application of basic principles of operant conditioning and reinforcement originally derived in the animal laboratory in the classroom situation. Its goal is to reduce, hopefully eliminate, maladaptive behavior by systematically reinforcing adaptive behavior. Maladaptive behavior can be defined as behavior that does not correspond to the role one is expected to play. When this happens in the classroom the student falls short of the expectations set by the teacher.

According to Krumboltz (1966) behavioral counseling has three general objectives: to alter maladaptive behavior, to aid in decision making, and to prevent maladaptive situations from becoming problems. The specific goals and methods used are individually designed to fit the specific needs of each subject.

Naturalistic approaches to the control of undesirable child behavior have typically emphasized adult control of the undesirable behaviors through various forms of punishment. Thus, the majority of investigations have examined interactions between parents and their children and/or between the teachers and pupils. Information from operant conditioning research has brought about a shift in attention from the children's problem behavior to the more desirable or adaptive



behavior. For example, a study by Madsen, Becker and Thomas (1968) had teachers develop and follow a program which involved making classroom rules explicit, ignoring disruptive behaviors unless injury occurred, and praising appropriate classroom behaviors. They had the pupils concentrate on their individual work, raise hands when appropriate, respond to questions, and study quietly. Under this program most of the severe problem children under study showed remarkable improvement in desirable classroom behavior.

However, the Madsen et al. (1968) experiment revealed that it was very threatening to the teachers involved to employ the behavioral techniques. In order to counteract this threat he recommended that teachers be given training in effective management techniques, and then taken through a series of short periods where both approval and disapproval are eliminated and then one or the other reinstated. The teacher would then have confidence that the class can be effectively handled with behavioral techniques. Also, short periods of chaos, if such did occur, would be more tolerable. Madsen et al. (1968) also recommended that the teacher have sufficient training in monitoring her own behavior to permit more effective control.

Clarizo (1971) also noted that classroom discipline continues to be one of the most difficult problems confronting teachers. Adequate preparation of teachers in this regard has been retarded by the lack of systematic training in behavior control or modification. Clarizo (1971) reaffirmed the finding of Madsen et al. (1968) that student behavior or misbehavior is closely related to the behavior of the teacher.



Typically, teachers have had difficulty putting into practice the general platitudes offered by the mental health or psycho-educational specialist who have not fully understood the teacher's role. Specific, concrete, practical suggestions pertaining to the management of children's daily behavior, not generalities, have been needed by the teacher. Lacking these specifics they have been forced to rely on their own common sense and ingenuity. Admonitions to be accepting, non-threatening, and understanding of the child's needs have not helped the teachers very much, if at all, in coping with aberrant behavior.

Although teachers have long known to some extent, about most of the principles of behavior modification, they have applied them in an inconsistent and unplanned way. Thus, classroom management is based more on mood than on rational intervention with the result that discipline becomes a hit or miss proposition. Clarizo (1971) noted that disciplinary strategies are learned through trial and error, and are applied in a similar fashion. This state of affairs is not surprising since effective discipline typically demands continual watchfulness, consistency, and persistence, thus requiring more energy than many teachers can spare. The simple truth appears to be that haphazard management practices, although seemingly more economical and less energy consuming, are actually more costly in the long run.

Several authors have recently produced books and review articles concerning the process of behavior modification. Statements in a book by Ullmann and Krasner (1965) are in agreement with other writers who have said that behavior modification focuses its attention on overt behavior and the application of concepts drawn from learning theory to attain the desired change. These authors indicate that while there are

many techniques currently being used there are only a few basic concepts or principles involved. Bandura (1961), Clarizo (1971), and Grossberg (1964) centered their reviews around processes of extinction, discrimination learning, methods of reward, punishment, and social imitation.

These writers, as well as the studies previously mentioned above, have taken the view that maladaptive behaviors are learned behaviors, and the development and the maintenance of such a behavior is not different from the development and maintenance of any other behavior. In general, all patterns of behavior are increased, shaped, modified, or maintained through reinforcement. Thus, it is not surprising that the giving of rewards (i.e., reinforcement), constitutes one of the most valuable tools for behavior modification that teachers have at their disposal.

While teachers generally appear to realize that desirable behavior should be rewarded, there is a discrepancy between what should be rewarded and what is actually rewarded. The question arises as to why so many opportunities to strengthen the very kind of behaviors that the teacher wants to develop are missed. Clarizo (1971) proposes four possible causes for this state of affairs. One possibility is that the teachers become sensitized to the maladaptive behaviors. Thus, they selectively attend to "misbehavior" and fail to see instances of desired behaviors. Second, even if they do see desired behavior, it apparently is very difficult to reward someone who has "given them a bad time." Third, the teacher has a tendency to shift attention elsewhere once the problem child has quieted down. Finally, he indicates that teachers simply expect all students to behave in a desirable fashion. After all, the teacher reasons, is it not the student's role to meet their

expectations? Why should they give the disorderly student extra payoffs when he is only doing what everyone in the classroom does without apparent reward. In view of this, giving extra privileges, could be considered unfair to the other students. These four points indicate quite clearly that the focus of teacher-pupil interaction has, indeed, been traditionally oriented toward the undesirable aspects of behavior. This situation apparently has not met with overwhelming success.

Currently, the focus of attention in classroom behavior modification would appear to have two aspects: (1) a determination of the maladaptive behavior and the reinforcement that is maintaining that behavior, and (2) a description of the desired (adaptive) behavior and the reinforcement techniques needed to shape and maintain this behavior. In dealing with undesired behavior most investigators have adopted the procedure of withdrawing reinforcement for this behavior (i.e., extinction training), and concurrently reinforcing the desired behavior. In working with the desired behavior, several trends have emerged. According to O'Leary (1972) techniques of behavior modification are usually most effective when they are employed by the very people who initially requested that the behavior be changed and who are also the key people in the child's environment (i.e., the teacher in the classroom setting).

Furthermore, Surratt, Ulrich and Hawkins (1969) have suggested the possibility that other students could be used as resource personnel in the classroom. They conducted an experiment in which a fifth grade child was used to dispense reinforcement and found positive results.

Schwartz and Hawkins (1970) have suggested that immediate reinforcement is not always practical in the classroom. They satis-



factorily employed delayed reinforcement to help a maladjusted 12-year-old sixth grade girl.

The present investigation was designed to apply the principles of behavior modification in an attempt to alter the disruptive behavior of a junior high school student. The target behaviors to be modified centered around unnecessary and inappropriate verbal outbursts during the class sessions. All of his teachers reported that the student was capable of doing his class work, but he consistently failed to work at his capacity.

His disruptive behaviors had prompted various forms of punishment, such as detentions after school, suspension from school, and isolation. None of these methods had worked consistently or with any permanency. It was hoped that through the reinforcement of desirable (adaptive) behaviors, and the extinction of undesirable (maladaptive) behaviors his performance in the classroom might be improved.



## Chapter II

### Method

#### Subject

The subject of the study was a black, male 14-year-old, who was the youngest boy in a family of six children. At the time of the study he was enrolled in the eighth grade at the Fort Campbell Junior High School.

School records indicated that the subject started having pronounced difficulty during his third year in school. His first two years appear to be normal although not exceptional. His major problem centered around an inability to adhere to prescribed rules and regulations. Comments such as, "gets great pleasure from disobeying", "doesn't obey", "should learn to take directions", and "talks back" were placed in his permanent school records. This type of disruptive behavior brought him to the attention of the Fort Campbell Junior High School authorities. Obviously, a modification of his disruptive behavior was highly desirable.

#### Procedure

Behavioral counseling requires that there be clear statement of the behavior that is to be changed. The first job of a behavioral counselor, then, is to establish precisely what the goal is for his client. Initially, a baseline must be established indicating the frequency of the behavior that requires altering.

With these purposes in mind the experimenter met with three of the teachers who were directly involved with the subject at least one

classroom period each day. A conference was held to determine precisely what behavior required changing. At that time it was agreed that verbal outbursts were the most annoying and disruptive behaviors shown by the subject. Following this meeting, a two week period was to be used to establish a baseline. Not all teachers kept a precise record, but in one classroom where the baseline period covered a little over two weeks he averaged 1.6 outbursts per class period. In another classroom where a daily tally was kept the subject averaged three outbursts per class period. Following the establishment of the baseline a general understanding was arrived at for dealing with the subject. The teachers indicated that they had a general understanding of the nature and operation of positive reinforcement. They were then advised to use praise and encouragement (i.e. positive reinforcement) every time the subject reached the desired level of behaving. Unfortunately this program did not work satisfactorily because the teachers were inconsistent in applying the reinforcement. Subsequently, a new reinforcement schedule was initiated. This schedule involved the application of tangible reinforcements, the administration of which were determined by the daily behavior of the subject. The tangible reinforcement of food was decided upon because the subject had been seen in the school cafeteria approaching other children to obtain some of their lunch. If the subject emitted no outburst in any of the classrooms during a day he acquired a total of 32 points which could be exchanged for a coke or candy bar. If the subject had an average of one outburst or less per classroom period he was given 16 points which could be exchanged for his choice of a gift from a collection held by his homeroom teacher. For an average of two or less outbursts per classroom period the subject

was given 8 points which could be exchanged for a pack of gum. If the subject had 3 or more outbursts per classroom period he was given no points which meant that there were no tangible reinforcement either. If the subject completed a whole week without any outbursts he accumulated 160 points which could be exchanged for a cafeteria meal card which was good for an entire week.

In addition to the tangible reinforcement the teachers were to give the intangible reinforcement such as praise and encouragement at the end of the class period.

### Chapter III

#### Results

Figure 1 shows the average number of outbursts during science and English classes for the baseline period, and the daily number of outbursts for these classes during the reinforcement period. The baseline period for the study in the science class showed an average of 1.64 outbursts per period. After the positive reinforcement was instituted for acceptable behavior, the outbursts averaged .789 per classroom period. This represented more than a fifty percent drop in the number of outbursts per period in the science class. The baseline period in the English class indicated an average outburst of 2.66 per class. After the institution of the reinforcement for acceptable behavior, outbursts dropped to an average of 1.16 per class period. As in the science class, this represented a reduction of more than fifty percent.

Figure 2 shows the number of outbursts per class period in social studies and math classes during the reinforcement period. Unfortunately, no baseline was available for these two classes. However, as the subject averaged 2.15 outbursts per class period during the baseline period in science and English, it would appear that the reinforcement procedures were effective in reducing the number of outbursts in social studies and math classes as well as the English and science classes.

The teachers were in agreement that the subject had shown more improvement during the course of the experiment than he had shown



during the entire time he had been at Fort Campbell Junior High School. However, the good effects were apparently limited to the classrooms in which the reinforcement procedures were employed as the carry over into other areas was not very dramatic. There was one noticeable change in all situations, however. There was a reported increase in the amount of constructive contribution he made in all of the classrooms.

## Chapter IV

### Discussion

The results of this study are supportive of the position taken by behavioral counseling that overt maladaptive behaviors can be modified through the use of positive reinforcement. The study also supports the position that behavior can be effectively altered by reinforcing desired actions that are incompatible with undesired ones. Thus, it would appear, in agreement with previous findings, that punishment is not an essential ingredient in the modification of undesired behavior.

Despite the positive results mentioned above, there were certain problems that should be considered by those who would use this method in the classroom setting. One problem centered around the teachers who dispensed the reinforcement. The teachers did not administer positive reinforcement at the end of the class period as they had agreed to. They required that the subject take the initiative and come to their desk. It was observed that the subject would come if he thought that his behavior was acceptable, otherwise he would leave the room hastily at the end of the class period.

The second possible problem concerned the subject's knowledge of the procedures being employed. Initially the subject was not given precise details about what was occurring. During the second week of the experiment he was told by one of the teachers the exact nature of the points that he could achieve in any one class period. He was then given the responsibility of determining how many points he should

receive for a class period and required to compare his assessment with that of the teacher. The teachers felt that this was an important step in making him aware of his behavior. However, it may have been a factor in hindering generalization of the desired behavior to situations outside the classroom. Knowing that the desired behavior was reinforced only in the classrooms may have confined it there.

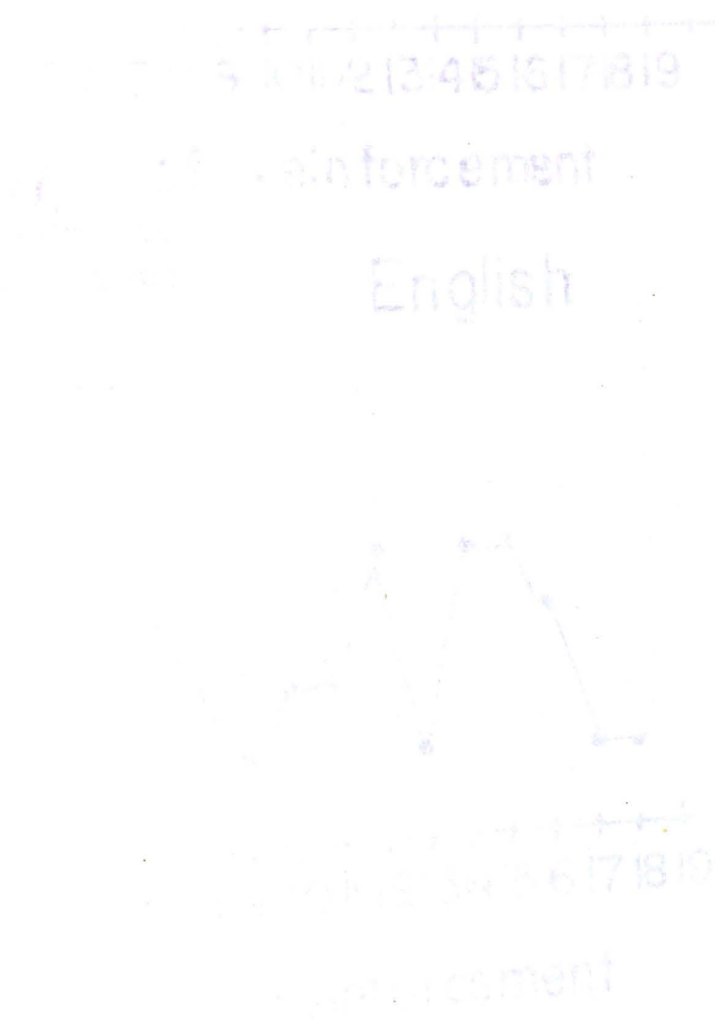
Certain unexpected events can significantly alter the trends of any experiment. In this case the subject suffered a broken arm on the eleventh day. On the twelfth day Figures 1 and 2 show an increase in the number of outbursts. The teachers felt that this increase in maladaptive behavior reflected the increased attention that he received. As can be seen from Figures 1 and 2 this increase in undesired behavior soon dissipated.

The present experiment seems to support other studies [e.g., Clarizo (1971), Madsen et al. (1968)] which have pointed out the benefits of having a specific behavior to work with. As noted above the maladaptive behavior was effectively modified. Also, in addition to this main change there may be some secondary benefits. In this case the teachers reported a reduction in the amount of frustration they felt in dealing with the subject. The final schedule of reinforcement provided them with a tool that they could effectively use as a team to alter the disruptive behavior.

## APPENDIX A



FIGURE 1 - Number of outbursts per science and English class period at baseline and during reinforcement.



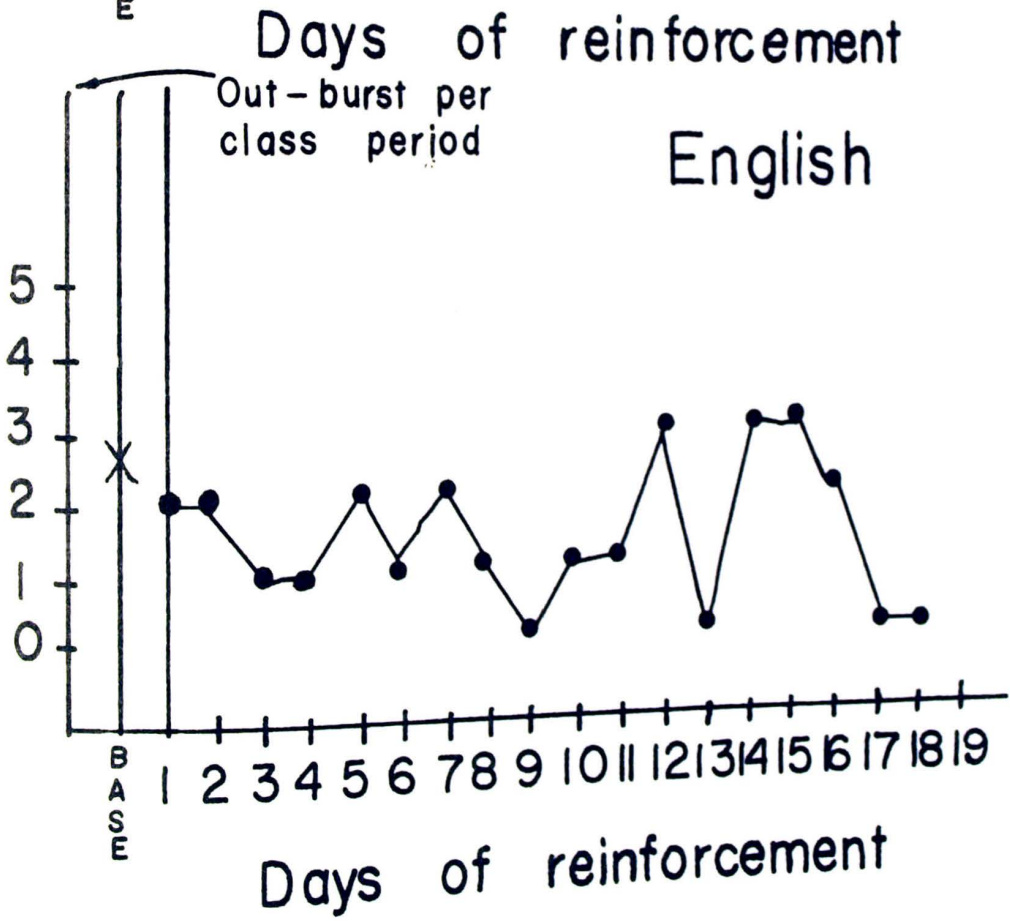
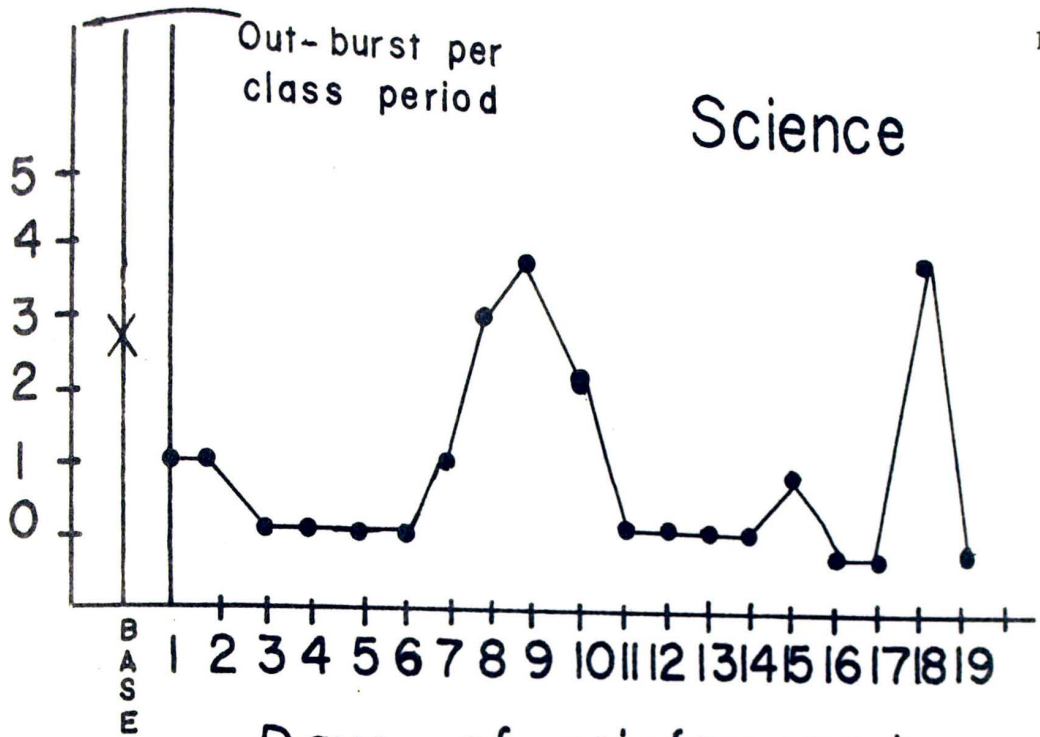
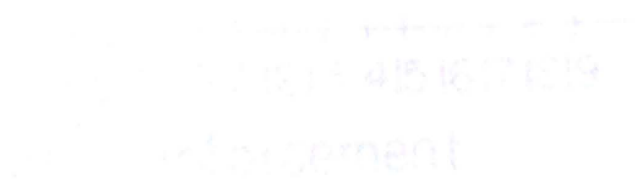
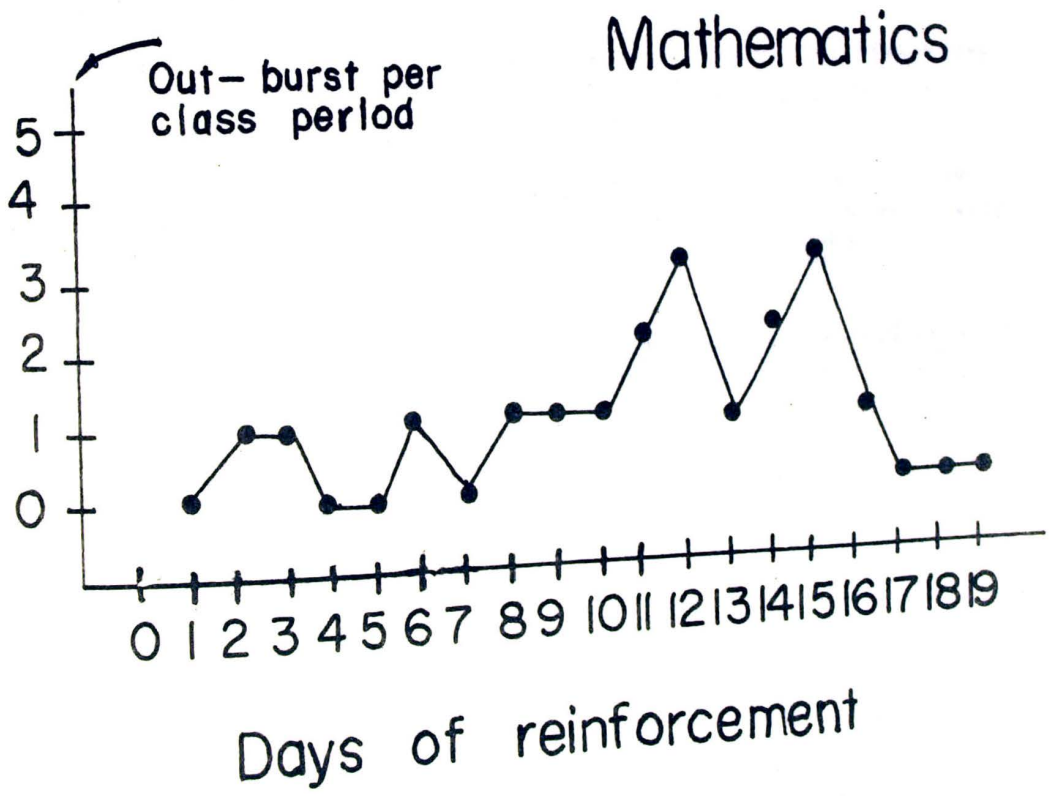
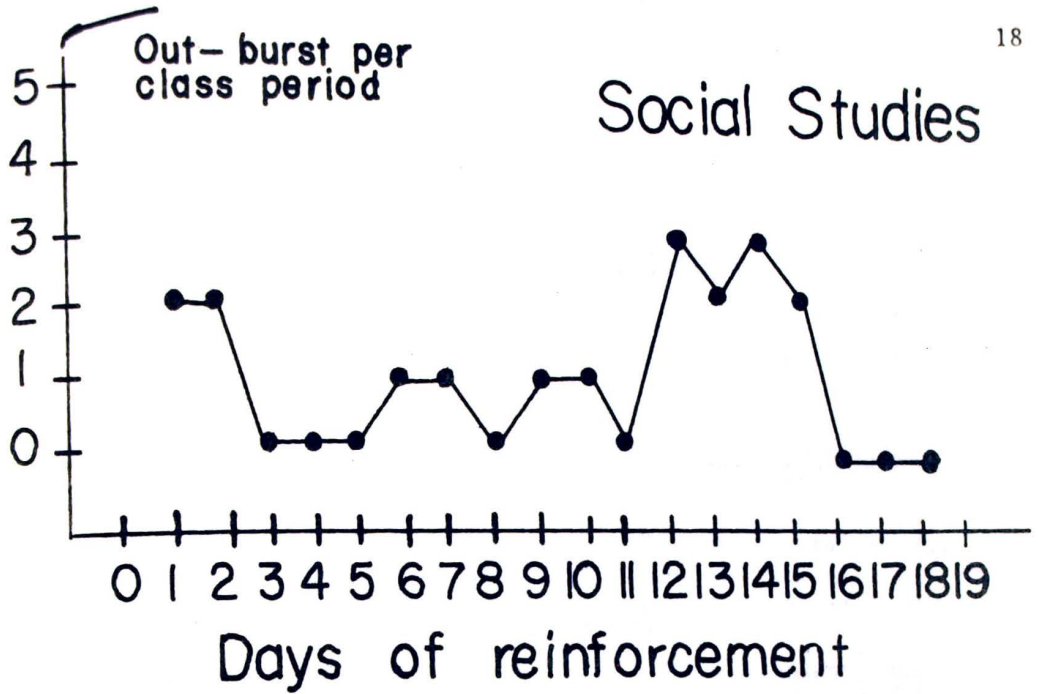


FIGURE 2 - Number of outbursts during reinforcement in social studies and mathematics class.



Mathematics







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