

The Dangers of Being Magnetic:  
Teachers' Reactions to Strong Personalities  
in the Elementary Classroom

A thesis submitted by

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## Abstract

This phenomenological analysis sought to investigate teachers' perceptions of and reactions to a group of children previously referred to in the literature as "bi-strategic controllers." Through the application of a strengths-based Positive Youth Development (PYD) approach, both the positive and negative attributes, thoughts, and behaviors of these children that prompted teacher reactions and interventions within a classroom setting were reported by six 1-5<sup>th</sup> grade Massachusetts teachers. Findings indicated that a new term that extended analysis beyond the domain of control was necessary. Thus, this study refers to Magnetic Children in an attempt to capture a fuller picture of how teachers perceived and reacted to the particular characteristics of these children. Findings indicated that teachers viewed magnetic children as possessing advanced social skills and both prosocial and coercive strategies for interacting with their peers. Teachers faced a conundrum in intervening in the sometimes challenging behavior of these children. Teachers utilized gender-differentiated strategies for managing children's behavior, teaching male students to be good leaders, and female students to be good group members.

*Keywords:* bi-strategic control; prosocial; coercive; teacher perceptions

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**Introduction**

We've all met them. Perhaps we were their teachers, or maybe they were our childhood friends. Children who attract their peers and adults, who shine and make us feel brighter by being in their company, but, who, at the same time, can ruthlessly isolate peers, tease, or bully. These children seem to teeter on the edge of what is socially acceptable, utilizing both prosocial and aggressive social control strategies. Capable of using their strong influence for good or evil, they can calm their classmates and become academic leaders, or lead a classroom rebellion. How do teachers recognize and respond to these children? What is the difference between a leader and a behavior problem?

Ryan<sup>1</sup>, a rising third grader, was much loved by other children. He was funny, kind, and smart. He could also be very bossy, and exclude children from his inner circle. At recess he gathered students together on the playground to do research about climate conservation, assigning homework to his group and kicking out children who forgot to bring back their "assignments" to Climate Club. He created a hierarchy of "smart kids." Some of his classmates were terrified of him.

Heaven, a rising third grader, could make anyone laugh. Other kids loved Heaven. She was always surrounded by a group of girls on the playground, choreographing dances

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<sup>1</sup> Names of all children and teachers have been changed

for the talent show, and was the nexus of most of the “girl drama” in the classroom. She had a sharp tongue and could send girls home in tears as easily as she could raise money for the town after school program.

Both these children possessed highly developed leadership skills, and could in turn attract and repel their peers. Both were funny, smart, and influential. However, teachers’ reactions to them throughout the years were very different. The summer before Ryan and Heaven came into my classroom, Ryan’s teacher dropped by to tell me how much I was going to love him: “He’s smart and motivated, I wish I had a whole classroom full of Ryans.” Both Heaven’s first and second grade teachers warned me, “She’s trouble. You need to keep a close eye on her, she can really turn the whole group around.”

Both children seemed to have similar behaviors. Leadership, charisma, social exclusion. Why had teachers reacted differently to each child? What characteristics separate students with similar behaviors into “leaders” or “trouble makers?”

Beginning teachers identify behavior management as a challenging aspect of their jobs, yet at the same time, most behavior management programs are developed with a one-size-fits-all mentality, although we know that children seek to gain power in the classroom in very different and distinct ways (Hawley, 2003). This study seeks to describe those children whom teachers identify as using both prosocial and coercive control strategies with peers. Further, it seeks to discern how teachers view these children; are both their positive and negative behaviors noted? Finally, it is hoped that the research will lead to a greater understanding of the motivations of such children in the classroom, and identify how teachers react to, characterize, and manage children with

both high prosocial and high coercive behaviors.

Ultimately, it is my hope that recognizing the unique social skills of this population of children will lead to more differentiated behavior management, and a greater understanding of effective techniques for promoting prosocial behavior by viewing children as, and developing them into, “leaders” instead of “troublemakers.”

## **Literature Review**

### **Terminology**

Children who have strong leadership skills and use both prosocial and aggressive social control strategies, are known by many names: “alpha” (Savin-Williams, 1976), “dominant” (Savin-Williams, 1976), “centrally-located aggressors” (Faris & Felmlee, 2011), “bullies” (Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003), “powerful and popular leaders” (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & VanAcker, 2006; Thunfors & Cornell, 2008; Vaillancourt, Hymel & McDougall, 2003), and “influential” or “bi-strategic controllers” (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002). Most of this terminology seems either overly clinical in reference to students—one cannot imagine a teacher in the staff room relating the latest behavioral problems of her “centrally-located aggressors”—or value laden—a “bully” is decidedly of poor moral fiber, while a “popular” child is envied. In this paper, children whose behavior is characterized by high prosocial and high coercive tendencies will be referred to as “magnetic children.” These children have a unique set of social skills and strategies that both attract and repel their peers and adults (Hawley, 2003.) By focusing on the effect such behavior has on others, rather than judging children’s character, or overly sterilizing behavior, we hope to discover more about magnetic

children and how teachers react to them.

### **A Social Problem**

Humans, baboons, and chickens alike all struggle with a similar conundrum. In a world where resources are scarce and must be acquired to promote growth and development, competition is king (Darwin, 1859). However, for social animals, such as humans, this presents a singular problem. Groups of humans can more easily take down a mastodon, enact a corporate takeover, or compete to win the Super Bowl (Trivers, 1971). To be perceived as a good group member, and gain the protection, support, and superior resource holding potential of the group, humans must be, or appear to be, cooperative and prosocial. Simultaneously, they must also compete with group members for control of limited resources (Darwin, 1859), the best cut of meat from the mastodon, the big bonus, the Heisman trophy. To facilitate the survival of themselves and their offspring, dominant group members must balance cooperative group-oriented strategies with competitive self-oriented resource-control strategies, as their survival depends on both the success of their group in relation to other groups, and their personal success in relation to other group members (Alexander, 1977; Trivers, 1971).

Humans have developed many social strategies to promote personal resource acquisition and limit inter-group conflict. As children become more aware of their standing within a social group, and their social models become more complex, the strategies they use to acquire and maintain dominance differentiate (Hawley, 1999). When a preschool child uses coercive or aggressive strategies to obtain control over toys, snacks, and adult attention, the child enjoys high social standing among peers; he or she is watched, admired, and liked (Hawley, 1999). Aggressive behavior may be more visible

to younger children and receive more attention from adults, earning admiration from peers (Hawley, 1999). However, we cannot imagine that self-same toddler, 30 years later tantrumming and hoarding complimentary bagels in the corporate lounge, meeting with much critical acclaim from his colleagues. Therefore, as children's conceptions of what makes an attractive playmate and group member change, the characteristics of dominant children change. By third grade, dominant-aggressive children are judged negatively by peers and children routinely prefer dominant pro-social playmates ( Coie & Dodge, 1983; Dodge, Coie, Pettit, & Price, 1990). Thus, as children mature, so must their strategies for acquiring social dominance.

### **Bi-Strategic Children**

Social dominance hierarchies in young children have been observed to be relatively stable across time and place (Savin-Williams, 1976). Researchers have separated children into groups that describe their social control strategies in an effort to further understand how control is attained and maintained by children (Hawley, Little, & Pasupathi, 2002). In a large scale study conducted across three schools with 719 participants, Hawley et al. (2002) found that children fell into one of five social-control categories. Prosocial Controllers, who made up roughly 18% of the population, used positive social strategies, such as cooperation, to achieve their ends. Conversely, Coercive Controllers, who also made up roughly 18% of the population, used predominantly negative control strategies, such as bullying. Bi-strategic children made up 14% of the population, and used both prosocial and coercive control strategies. The authors suggest that these children often make their way to the tops of human social dominance hierarchies, likening them to the high-powered CEO's of the playground. The

remaining 50% of children were categorized as either “subordinate” children who exert low control, or “typical,” children who were not outstanding on measures of general control, prosocial, or coercive control. What is not known, however, is how teachers and peers react to bi-strategic children, and whether there are differences in teachers’ reactions to male and female bi-strategic children.

### **Call For A New Term**

The terminology currently used to describe children who utilize both prosocial and coercive control strategies is either overly judgmental (as in the case of “bully”), or technical (“bi-strategic controller”). Furthermore, many labels focus on the effects of behavior on others, rather than describing a bidirectional exchange of behaviors between these children, their peers, and their teachers. A new term that humanizes these children, describing without judgment the messy interplay of social interactions in the classroom is necessary. I propose the term, “magnetic children.” Children who utilize both prosocial and coercive control strategies both attract and repel their peers and teachers. They struggle with the mixed feedback they receive from adults and other children because of their behavior (Hawley et. al, 2002). Like magnets, they both attract and repel, and are attracted and repelled by their peers. This new term allows teachers and researchers to examine children within the social context of their peer group, as both actors and acted upon.

### **Gender Differences in Aggressive Control Strategies**

It is commonly assumed that overall, men are more likely to engage in physical aggression than women. Males resort to physical violence more than females for a wide variety of goals (Buss, 2004; Hyde, 1986). In middle and high schools, males are more

likely to be physically bullied than females, however girls are much more likely to spread rumors or have rumors spread about them than boys (Ahmad & Smith, 1994). This is known as relational aggression. Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) pioneering work that established the validity of relational aggression as a construct found that girls were much more likely than boys to use relational aggression, and were more likely to be ostracized or disliked than their non-relationally aggressive counterparts.

However, recent research has challenged the view the physical aggression falls more under the male purview while females engage in primarily relational aggression. In a study of 314 Italian elementary schoolers, researchers found that males were more likely to engage in both relational and physical aggression than girls (Tomada & Schneider, 1997). It could be that our conceptions of what is identified as physical or relational aggression differs depending on whether the aggressor is male or female. As findings are often contested by other researchers, more investigation is needed. Interestingly, Hawley, et.al, (2002) found that males were twice as likely to be categorized as bi-strategic children than were females.

### **Behavior Management Strategies in the Classroom**

In a study of 97 primary school teachers, researchers found that teacher interviews accurately reflected the behavior management practices that were then observed in the classroom. Researchers divided behavior management strategies into proactive (meant to prevent behavior problems from surfacing) and reactive (responses to current behavior problems that were evident in the classroom). They found that teacher stress and off-task student behavior varied directly with the predominant use of reactive strategies (Clunies-Ross, Little & Kienhuis, 2008). The implications of this study are that proactive behavior

management techniques, such as establishing positive relationships with children, appear to be much more effective than reactive management techniques, such as time outs.

### **Teacher Expectations Affect Student Achievement**

Teacher behavior towards students varies depending upon teacher opinions of and expectations for students (Brophy & Good, 1970; Cooper & Good, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968.) The majority of research on teacher expectations has focused on determining if teacher expectations affect student academic performance, to what extent students are aware of teachers expectations for them, and identifying the basis for teacher's expectations. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) became the center of a tornado of discussion after they published their famous Oak School Experiment articulating the "Pygmalion Effect," the idea that teacher expectations affect student outcomes. The researchers gave elementary school teachers bogus test data that indicated that some of their students were due for a "spurt" in achievement that school year. Consequently, at the end of the school year, Rosenthal and Jacobson found that the randomly chosen "spurters" had, in fact, achieved at higher levels than their peers. Two years later, amid the firestorm of discussion that Pygmalion sparked, Brophy and Good (1970) published a study that sought to explain how Pygmalion effects might operate in the classroom. They postulated that early in the year, teachers form expectations for children which cause them to behave differently toward students. Students pick up on teachers' expectations, which in turn, impact the students' motivation, conduct, and interactions. This behavior reinforces teachers' expectations, and ultimately, the cycle affects student achievement.

Although the results of the original Pygmalion study have never been replicated, there is supporting evidence from stereotype threat research, as well as classroom



research, to corroborate the idea of a self-fulfilling prophesy: that expectations impact performance. A recent meta-analysis of Pygmalion effects conducted by Lee Jussim and Kent Harber (2005) found that these effects are strongest for marginalized groups, but the mechanism by which they operate in the classroom is unclear.

However, there is much evidence that teachers' expectations cause them to differentiate their behavior towards students. Teachers hold higher standards for students they expect to do well, and reinforce hard work and achievement from these students with verbal praise (Brophy & Good, 1970). Conversely, teachers accept poor quality work from students they expect to fail, and praise high quality work from these students less often (Brophy & Good, 1970). Expectations affect public behavior of teachers as well. Teachers interact with high achieving children more in public, and low achieving children in private, because they believe that low achieving children have more fragile self esteem (Cooper & Good, 1983). This research prompts the question, "Are students aware of teachers' opinions of them and does this affect student behavior?" This is especially relevant to magnetic children, who have high social competence and high classroom influence (Hawley, 2003).

Children are indeed aware of teacher expectations, and able to interpret them accurately (Weinstein, 2002). In fact, students can very explicitly identify the behaviors that communicate teacher expectations, such as smiling or eye rolling (Weinstein, 2002). Additionally, student perceptions of teacher support and expectations affect achievement. Teven and McCroskey (1996) found that when students believed that their teachers cared about them, they were more engaged in the subject matter, liked the subjects more, and perceived that they had learned more.

## **Effects of Student Characteristics on Teacher Expectations**

Given that teacher expectations affect achievement and student behavior, and that students are aware of teacher expectations, we must ask, “What frames teacher expectations?” Evidence has been found that teacher expectations of students are based on characteristics other than achievement potential only (Brophy & Good, 1974). Special education labels (Stinnett, Crawford, Gillespie, Cruce & Langford, 2001), gender and race (Page & Rosenthal, 1990; St. George, 1983) all have been found to impact teacher expectations independent of actual student academic ability. Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang (2005) explored one possible mechanism for this influence. The researchers postulated that teachers’ perceived relationships with families and students might mediate expectations. They found that teachers rated relationships with White and Hispanic children and families more positively than their relationships with Black students and families. Controlling for parental education level and actual child academic ability, relationship variables mediated differences in teacher expectations for students.

Clearly, teacher expectations impact student achievement and behavior. It therefore becomes important to understand how teachers view magnetic children in the classroom.

## **Gaps in The Literature**

The dominance literature and classroom sociometric evidence indicate that children can be separated into distinct groups based on their utilization of different control strategies. What is not known is how classroom teachers view children who engage in “bi-strategic” or magnetic control. Additionally, although the behavior management literature does suggest a general set of best practices, further inquiry is

required to determine how to differentiate behavior management practices to meet the needs of magnetic children.

Thus, the current study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do teachers view magnetic children?
- 2) How do teachers react to magnetic children?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data were gathered from seven teachers from diverse school systems across Massachusetts. In order to obtain a diverse sample, data were collected from 1<sup>st</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers from both private and public schools. The following Table 1 gives this information.

Table 1

Teacher pseudonym	Grade level	Public/Private	Urban y/n
Amy	4 <sup>th</sup>	Public	Y
Ben	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public	Y
Leslie	1 <sup>st</sup>	Public	N
Katie	1 <sup>st</sup>	Private	N
Sandra	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Private	N
Desiree	5 <sup>th</sup>	Public	N

### **Procedure**

Two types of data were collected, as described below.

#### **Student Sociometric Data Collected from Teachers**

Teachers were presented with a brief verbal description of the type of “influential” child being studied, and asked to think of two such children in their past classes. If teachers had been asked about current students, extensive IRB-required consent would have had to have been obtained, this was not possible within the time

frame of the current study. After selecting one male and one female child, teachers completed a teacher version of Hawley's (2002) sociometric survey to ensure that they identified bistrategic children. The measure was reviewed to confirm that children were scored highly on measures of control, and were therefore truly "bi-strategic children."

### **Teacher Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to elucidate how they view the identified magnetic children: the strategies they use when managing magnetic children's behavior; they were asked about the strategies they used to manage peer relationships with bi-strategic children, and how teachers view their role as a "classroom manager" in general. (See Interview Protocol, Appendix B) Teachers were interviewed in a quiet place of their own choosing at a convenient time of their own choosing.

### **Measures**

#### **The Social Control Strategy Inventory: Adapted**

The Social Control Strategy Inventory (Hawley, 2002) which was utilized in this study was obtained from Patricia Hawley from Texas Tech University, and initially utilized in her influential 2002 publication, "Examining Social Control Strategies in the Classroom" (Hawley, et. al, 2002). An updated version of this measure was obtained in October, 2014, from Dr. Hawley and her research team, who have used the measure in recent studies. As Dr. Hawley is one of the primary researchers on bi-strategic children, it was important to use measures in the current study that corresponded with those developed by her team.

Teachers completed a version of the Social Control Strategy Inventory (Hawley, 2002), adapted for their study, for two children in their classrooms. Teachers were asked

to select two students, one male and one female, from their past classes who “have the most influence (positive or negative) over their peers’ social behavior and choices.”

(Another choice of wording was, “Who are seen as leaders by their peers, either, positive or negative.”) Because this study focused on magnetic children (bi-strategic controllers) and was therefore unconcerned with subordinate or typical children, who make up the majority of the classroom, asking teachers to complete Social Control Strategy Inventories for all of the children in their classrooms would unnecessarily have wasted time and energy in a setting where both are scarce. Data from teacher inventories were analyzed to ensure that teachers selected bi- strategic controllers. These procedures resulted in a sample size of 12 children, six males and 6 females from 6 different classrooms. (See Appendix A)

#### **Teacher Interview Schedule**

In order to determine teachers’ attitudes toward, and strategies for, managing magnetic children, all teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Four main questions were asked, with follow up as needed to clarify, and determine common themes as they emerge from initial interviews. These are located in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Survey Question	Primary question addressed	Potential themes to follow up
Tell me about (student identified in sociometric survey).	How do teachers view magnetic children in the classroom? Are they perceived as primarily negative, positive, or magnetic?	Would you describe them as confident?
What do you think drew other children to (student)?	How do teachers view magnetic children in the classroom? Are they perceived as primarily negative, positive, or magnetic?	Elicit specific examples of peer interactions
What do you think motivated this student's behavior? What drove them socially?	How do teachers view magnetic children in the classroom? Are they perceived as primarily negative, positive, or magnetic?	Follow up on evidence of peer competition.  Elicit specific examples
Describe a time when you needed to manage this students behavior.	2) How do teachers manage the prosocial, as well as the behavior problems, of magnetic children?	Was this intervention successful? Elicit specific examples of teacher behaviors.

(See Teacher Interview Appendix B)

## Data Analysis

### Teacher Sociometric Surveys

Sociometric surveys were scored with a point value assigned to each item. Each item was scored on a Likert scale from one to four, with one being rated for a behavior that “never occurred” and four being rated for a behavior that “always occurred.” When a teacher circled two categories, such as “never” and “sometimes,” the item was recorded as a half point.

The instrument was divided into three sections, prosocial resource control,

coercive resource control, and general resource control. The sample was divided by gender, and averages were obtained for each item, as well as each section.

The variables for each category were as follows:

***Prosocial resource control***

- PRSC1) Is someone whose plans are usually liked by others and followed by them
- PRSC 2) Gets what s/he wants by 'helping' others (even if they don't really need it)
- PRSC 3) Promises friendship (ex: "I'll be your best friend if...") to get what s/he wants.
- PRSC 4) Gets what s/he wants by promising an invitation (ex: 'You can come to my house/birthday party, etc.)
- PRSC 5) Promises to do something in to get what s/he wants return (ex: sharing, reciprocating, turn-taking)
- PRSC 6) Gets what s/he wants by being really nice about it

***Coercive resource control***

- CRC1) This child is someone who gets others to do what s/he tells them to do, even if they don't really want to
- CRC2) Makes others follow his/her plans to gets what s/he wants
- CRC3) Gets what s/he wants by bullying others
- CRC4) Tricks others to get what s/he wants
- CRC5) Gets what s/he wants by forcing others
- CRC6) Gets what s/he wants by making verbal threats or threats of aggression

***General resource control***

- GRC1) Usually gets first access to preferred toys when with peers
- GRC2) Usually gets what s/he wants when with peers

GRC3) Usually gets the best roles in games when with peers

GRC4) Usually is the center of attention when with peers

GRC5) Usually plays with the favored toys when with peers

GRC6) Seems to win out over peers

These scores were used to identify children who were high powered (score high on general resource control) and had high scores in both prosocial and coercive resource control, identifying them as “bi-strategic controllers.” These scores were compared and used to determine if teachers saw magnetic children as primarily prosocial, or coercive, and to determine if gender differences existed.

### **Qualitative Interview and Observation Notes**

Qualitative data were coded from a phenomenological perspective (Cresswell, 2007). Data were stored and analyzed in ATLAS TI, an analytical program for qualitative data. As the primary researcher, I transcribed all interviews personally in order to facilitate immersion in the data, and kept data memos which included insights into the process, awareness of possible biases, and potential codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcribed interviews yielded 24 pages of data.

Teacher interviews were developed with central themes to ensure that responses given would be pertinent to the current study and speak to similar themes. During initial coding, data were sorted according to interview question by primary construct or topic.

Questions were designed to elicit data which addressed the following topics:

- 1) Overall behavior management philosophy
- 2) Teachers' characterizations of bi-strategic children (positive, negative, or magnetic)
- 3) Techniques utilized to address “bi-strategic children”



After the initial interview, I noted in a data memo that more focused questions were needed. Although data from the initial interview were centered around the same topics as subsequent interview data, the openness of the questions encouraged the teacher to speak to many interesting, yet unrelated topics, yielding a data set that was overly long and unwieldy. Subsequent interviews were more focused around central topics of the current study, yet obtained a thematically similar, although more brief and focused, data set.

As each new participant was interviewed, I continued to memo. The data analysis process was guided by a phenomenological perspective (Cresswell, 2007). Data were described into open coding categories, which were analyzed for themes, and areas of concurrence and variability. After all of the interviews were collected, an initial round of open coding occurred, where interviews were sorted by question. Later, the data were sorted by child gender (all of the teacher interview dialogue related to male magnetic children was grouped separately from female data) and an additional round of open coding occurred. Codes were gradually refined as categories emerged and I began to both relate and contrast categories to each-other, searching for areas of concurrence and variability. For example, for the category *lessons learned*, a sub-category emerged in the male data, *time and place*, which was contrasted to a subcategory in the female data, *kindness*. This contrast lead to the emergence of a theme, “The Skilled Leader vs. The Kind Leader.” Themes were discussed with my thesis chair, Martha Pott as they emerged, and together we identified productive directions to pursue. The table below (Table 3) indicates the frequency with which categories and subcategories were present in the data. When subcategories refer to a specific gender it is noted in the table. Totals are

out of 12 students, or 6 interviews.

Table 3

Category/Subcategory	Frequency
Social Centrality and Leadership	present in 6/6 interviews (6/6 males, 6/6 females)
Socially Skilled	present in 6/6 interviews(6/6 males, 6/6 females)
Use of humor	3/6 males
Physical	present in 6/6 interviews (6/6 males, 1/6 females)
Athletic	5/6 males, 1/6 females
Intelligence/Academic Ability	present in 5/6 interviews (5/6 males, 5/6 females)
Insecurity and Fear of Failure	present in 6/6 interviews
Risk Aversion	present in 4/12 children
Insecure	present in 9/12 children
Exclusion	present in 5/6 interviews (5/6 female, 4/6 male)
Control and Manipulation	present in 6/6 interviews (6/6 female, 5/6 male)
Competition	present in 5/6 interviews
I'm just the best/ other peoples feelings just aren't that important	present in 5/6 interviews
Lessons learned	present in 6/6 interviews

### Reliability and Validity

As this was an initial inquiry into the perceptions and management of magnetic children in the classroom, validity should be strengthened in future studies. Additionally,

teachers were presented with the initial findings of the research, and asked if the data represented “rang true” to their professional experiences with magnetic children in schools. In the current study, findings were discussed with two participants, who agreed with the emergent themes. Reliability was strengthened by collecting data from multiple sources, both interviews and survey measures. Additionally, the quantitative survey findings support the qualitative research findings. Reliability was also be reported as a limitation in this pilot study, as there was only one primary coder.

### **Researcher Bias**

My background is as a K-5 teacher, and I have taught in both districts utilized for this study. Throughout this study I used bracketing, a systematic procedure used by qualitative researchers to place themselves within a study in order to become aware of and minimize bias, both within the context of the schools and the classrooms (Cresswell, 2007).

As a former elementary school teacher of six years, it was important for me to situate myself within the study. My classroom experience afforded me insight into the teaching process and garnered credibility with interviewees. However, I needed to remain cognizant of making assumptions about teachers’ beliefs or perspectives throughout the process. Many follow-up questions were asked of participants to clarify their views, and ensure that I was not projecting my own assumptions or experience into the analysis.

As many of the teachers were known to me, as former co-workers, this could have shifted the data I collected, making teachers less comfortable sharing viewpoints they may have assumed I would be critical of. However, the reverse could also be true, and as

former colleagues, they may have felt safer and more comfortable sharing with me than they would have an outsider. Especially given the tension and false dichotomy that can occur between “research” and “practice” I felt my experience as a teacher functioned mainly to build credibility.

After completing interviews with teachers, I felt grateful for their time, honest and open reflection, and invaluable insights into what I understand can be a challenging and complex role. Several teachers interviewed expressed relief and gratitude about being able to talk and reflect openly about their practice in a non-evaluative, non-judgemental setting. This both indicates the need for continued exploratory discussions about students, but also speaks to the role that teacher/researchers can play in such conversations given their backgrounds as practitioners.

## **Results**

### **A Note on the Nature of Qualitative Inquiry**

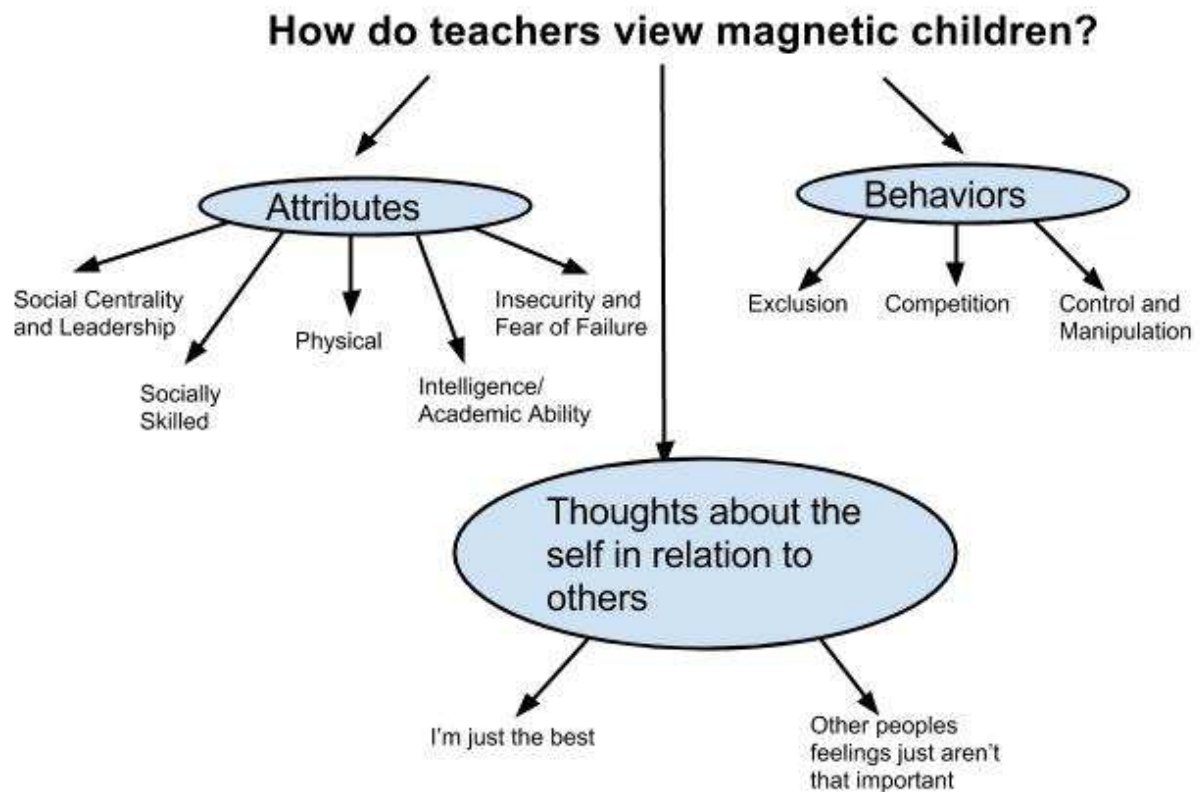
As a qualitative phenomenological study, the present research is concerned with teacher perceptions. As these perceptions impact classroom environment and student achievement and behavior, this is a fruitful avenue for inquiry (Brophy & Good, 1970; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968, Jussim & Harber, 2005). However, it is important to distinguish that the results presented reveal how teachers *experience* magnetic children in the classroom, and that students, parents, and magnetic children themselves may experience their behavior in a different manner. The results presented examine patterns in teachers’ perceptions of a particular type of student within the context of schools and curriculum.

The current study investigated two questions:

- 3) How do teachers view magnetic children?
- 4) How do teachers react to magnetic children?

In addressing the first question, “How do teachers view magnetic children?” interviews were coded for teachers’ perceptions of children's attributes, behaviors, and thoughts.

The diagram below shows categories that emerged from the teacher interviews, which are subsequently explained.



In coding attributes, all descriptions of magnetic children were open coded from teacher interviews, and then codes were gradually collapsed as themes were noted. Several themes emerged, and interviews were then re-coded for *Physical Descriptions*, *Social Centrality and Leadership*, *Social Skills*, and *Insecurity and Fear of Failure*. In coding behaviors, the same process was used, and three themes emerged: *Exclusion*, *Competition*, and *Control and Manipulation*. Teachers also ascribed two distinct thought

patterns to magnetic children, that described how they saw themselves in relation to others, which were described and coded as *I'm Just The Best*, and *Other People's Feelings Just Aren't That Important*.

To address the second research question, “How do teachers react to magnetic children?”, teachers were asked to describe a situation where they needed to intervene in children’s behavior. There were significant gender effects for the types of lessons teachers articulated relaying to boys vs girls, and the different types of conflict teachers believed male and female children to be involved in. Each code is described in greater detail below.

### **Results From Interviews “How Do Teachers View Magnetic Children?”**

#### ***Attribute: Social Centrality and Leadership***

All teachers (6/6) described both male and female magnetic children as socially central and influential in the classroom, using phrases such as, “What they did, how they felt, reverberated through the classroom,” and, “His energy would be sort of attractive to many other kids, so they would get sucked right into his silliness.” This was coded as *Social Centrality and Leadership* and defined as the ability to attract, influence, and lead other children. Teachers used both positive and negatively charged words to describe social centrality and leadership in both male and female students. Below, in table 4, are examples of quotations that were coded as indicative of positive or negative centrality and leadership.

Table 4

Positive Centrality and Leadership	Negative Centrality and Leadership
charismatic (male)	queen bee (female)
future mayor (male)	center of the drama (male)
a thought leader (female)	ringleader (male)
everybody just basked in her glow (female)	bossy leader (female)
he's just somebody who has this ability to walk into a room and in moments have people listening to him (male)	came from this princess paradigm (female)

However, teachers articulated that boys were more generally influential, leading the whole class in both positive and negative ways: “He could derail the flow of the class,” or “Suddenly he had control of the energy of the classroom,” whereas female magnetic children were viewed, in contrast to male magnetic children, as operating within a small group context. This was evidenced by statements such as “And there wasn’t so much large group control, or leadership; it was more around a small group of girls, and getting them to do what she wanted,” or “It wasn’t my whole class, just a subset of girls, but the ones who it was, they were so devoted!” Thus boys’ leadership was seen as influential over the whole class, whereas girls’ leadership was seen as influential over a smaller group.

**Attribute: *Socially Skilled***

All teachers described both male and female magnetic children as having advanced verbal skills and social skills. This was coded as *Socially Skilled* and noted in 6/6 interviews for all 12 children. Teachers used phrases that directly categorized children as socially advanced such as, “socially very mature” and “very socially aware,”



“has an amazing social sense,” as well as using descriptions of highly developed social skills, such as, “She knew how to manipulate to get what she wanted, but in a very backwards, reverse psychology way, where she would point out to kids what they wanted...and so they would all follow her.” Both direct statements of social maturity, as well as longer descriptions of social skills, were coded as *Socially Skilled*.

There were both positive and negative examples for each gender, but the perception of female verbal skills tended to be more negative than male verbal skills. Girls were reported to use verbal skills to “manipulate” and “hurt,” while boys used verbal skills to “make others laugh” and “communicate ideas.” The single specific example of a female magnetic child using her verbal skills to positive ends was qualified by the teacher, who stated, “So in that moment, she was able to use her skills to be her strong self, not mean, excluding, or manipulative.” Below are examples of quotations that were coded as indicative of positive or negative descriptions of magnetic children’s verbal abilities.

Table 5

Teacher	Male Verbal Ability	Female Verbal Ability
K	He was legitimately funny, and he would be this stand up comic, and that was how he got kids to like him and be drawn in. They liked his daring spirit.	Kids were drawn to her because they didn't know that they were being manipulated. They just, they felt like she understood them, but she didn't understand them, she was making them kind of think in her pattern, and pulling them along, and so, it was incredible to watch her, kind of have a conversation with kids, and get them to understand her, do what she wanted, play with her, play her game, her way, you know.
S	Got an ability to know enough to talk about just about anything, or the skills to turn a conversation into something that he can talk about.	A cut right to the soul thing that would happen with this girl.. a meanness that was verbal.
L	Socially very mature	She often had very good explanations that I never felt like I could fully trust.

Children's use of humor was an interesting subcode related to verbal and social ability. Humor was coded as phrases that directly described children as humorous or funny. Examples included, "He was just so funny, like he was just hilarious," and "He's got a great sense of humor." Half of male magnetic children were perceived as funny by their teachers, while none of the magnetic female children was described as funny.

**Attribute: *Physical***

Physical descriptions of magnetic children were present in 6/6 teacher interviews. Physical descriptions were coded as references to the way a child looked, such as, "long blonde hair," or physical abilities, such as "athletic." Almost all (5/6) teachers described

male magnetic children as athletic, while only one female child was described as athletic. Interestingly, when asked, “Tell me about this child, what were they like?” all six teachers gave physical descriptions of magnetic boys, however, only two teachers gave physical descriptions of magnetic girls. This finding is illustrated in the table below.

Table 6

Interview	Physical Descriptions (Male)	Physical Descriptions (Female)
A	This guy was really athletic	
B	Athletic	
D	Handsome	She was just another really attractive kiddo...kind of athletic, and long blonde hair, and really she was one of those students who was in fifth grade, but really looked more mature, she was definitely, she was just beautiful.
K	Agile and physical  could do all the games and run really fast.	Good gross motor and fine motor skills.
L	Very athletic	
S	An athlete  He’s got a bit of a physical advantage, tall and strong.	

**Attribute: *Intelligence/Academic Ability***

Intelligence or academic ability was defined as any specific mention of a strength or weakness related to a subject in school, such as, great reader, or low reading stamina, as well as use of terms associated with intelligence, such as prodigy, or genius.

Overall five out of six teachers (5/6) mentioned academic ability or intelligence as a notable attribute of magnetic children. Interestingly, teachers described both areas of academic strength and weakness for magnetic children. In general, academic strengths outweighed weaknesses by a 3:1 ratio for both boys and girls. However, teachers were more than twice as likely to comment on boys' academic abilities than girls' academic abilities, and, in general, went into much greater depth when describing boys' intellectual profiles. The examples from interviews below illustrate the tendency for teachers to speak longer, and with greater detail, about boys' perceived academic and intellectual strengths and weaknesses than girls' strengths and weaknesses.

Table 7

Interview	Male Student Description	Female Student Description
B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-is an original thinker</li> <li>-the penmanship is a real challenge for him</li> <li>-he's got high verbal intelligence</li> <li>-encoding is very difficult, like writing down his ideas is extremely difficult for him</li> <li>-he doesn't like to write, he'd much rather speak</li> <li>-So we did a standardized test, similar to the maps, we do one called STAR, and I noticed his score, and I told him, this is really low, and so I told him, you could do better</li> <li>-He's not the strongest reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-just not that into academics</li> <li>-low reading stamina and ability</li> </ul>
K	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-he was very smart</li> <li>-great reader</li> <li>-awesome mathematician</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-violin prodigy</li> </ul>

**Attribute: *Insecurity and Fear of Failure***

All teachers (6/6) mentioned insecurity as a characteristic of magnetic children.

Insecurity was noted in descriptions of both male and female magnetic children, and was defined by teachers directly describing children as insecure, risk averse, or afraid of failure. Only one magnetic child was described as secure. Four were specifically described as risk averse, and 9 were described as insecure. Examples of this code are listed in the table below.

Table 8

Teacher	Child Gender	Insecurity and Fear of Failure
L	male and female	They were risk averse, they wouldn't necessarily try things that would lead to failure, I think they stuck with things that knew they could be successful at.
S	male	He was very insecure, and that he didn't appear that way to other kids, but he would dissolve in tears if he appeared to be less than the image that he had helped to create of himself out there.
K	female	I think she was afraid a lot. Afraid of failing, and afraid of losing that control...I would say she was pretty insecure, because to me, I wouldn't think she would try so hard, and try to hold on to things so much if she didn't think there was a big possibility of losing it all.
D	male	There was definitely a vulnerable piece too...but to the general population, he had that bravado, I never felt like it was real.

Notably, teachers appeared to perceive a duality to these students, contrasting their confident public image with an insecure private image that was linked to risk avoidance, and high fear of public failure. One teacher described a scenario in which a male magnetic child wanted to sing a going away song to the class on the last day of

school, but forgot the words. Horrified that he had made a public mistake, he retreated to the cubby area sobbing, and could not return to join the class for the rest of the day.

When reflecting upon this situation, the teacher said, “He was very insecure, and that he didn’t appear that way to other kids, but he would dissolve in tears if he appeared to be less than the image that he had helped to create of himself out there...so there was this sense of insecurity that I was aware of, and I think that part of it was that his identity was built around this role of leadership, and control...and he put his all into maintaining his position.”

**Behavior: *Exclusion***

*Exclusion* was coded in interviews as examples of magnetic children socially isolating other children, or being socially isolated themselves. Four out of six teacher interviews (4/6) contained references to male magnetic children excluding others, while five out of six teacher interviews (5/6) referred to girls being exclusive or excluded. Examples of *exclusion* are located in the table below.

Table 9

Male Exclusion	Female Exclusion
He wanted to be on the team with Tyrell, and he wasn't one of the ones Tyrell wanted on the team, and so sometimes he would be excluded.	So there was this core group she always wanted to be her friend, unless she was very angry, and then someone was expelled.
Description of excluding unskilled players from a soccer game in order to win	But it never really seems to sustain, the girl who has exhibited the relational aggressive behaviors...is often punished for those skills in the same way, the pack goes after her.
Description of excluding a student from a recess game	I didn't want her (the magnetic child) to be isolated, even if she was manipulating other people.

In half of the male cases, teachers described magnetic children excluding other children from teams, specifically in order to win games. No teacher mentioned male magnetic children being excluded by classmates. When speaking about female magnetic children, status relationships were described as more fluid, with several teachers describing scenarios where balances of power “flipped,” and magnetic children who had excluded other girls were then themselves excluded.

Additionally, when asked what they felt motivated children, teachers tended to attribute male social exclusion to a desire to win at competitive recess games, and female social exclusion to a desire to define who was in or out socially or who was “in the know.”

### **Behaviors: *Control and Manipulation***

Themes of control and manipulation were coded in six out of six interviews (6/6), with six out of six teachers (6/6) mentioning control and manipulation in relation to girls,

and five out of six teachers (5/6) mentioning control and manipulation in relation to boys. This code was defined by either direct references to control, such as “she is addicted to this sense of power and controlling other people,” descriptions of getting people to do what the child “wants them to do,” and descriptions of goal oriented control, such as a child who always brought sports equipment to school, which the teacher perceived was motivated by a desire to always be the person who got to choose teams and control the team he got. “Manipulation” was a term used to describe three magnetic girls, and one magnetic boy.

In coding for *Control and Manipulation*, it became clear that female and male children were seen as utilizing control in very different ways. Teachers perceived girls to be more focused on controlling other *people*, whereas boys were viewed as using their social skills to control *outcomes*, such as stacking teams to win a game, or to challenge authority. This dichotomy was directly referenced by one teacher, who stated, “With the boy... the intention is to just be in this dominant role, but **not** by getting other people to do what he wants, but by just being able to do what he wants to do...whereas she is addicted to this sense of power and controlling other people.” Examples of control and manipulation are found in table 10 below.



Table 10

References to female control	References to male control
...being her friend meant doing what she wanted.	I think he loved demonstrating that power, in an environment, like challenging the authority figure. (by taking control of the class and using humor)
In talking to a magnetic child, "You are well aware of the persuasive skills that you have to get people to do what you want."	(In describing a situation where a boy would declare himself team captain and control who was on what team) "He was so invested in having the team he wanted it was hard for him to step outside those desires and not manipulate that."

### **Behavior: *Competition***

Competition was mentioned in five out of six interviews (5/6), and was coded when teachers directly used the word "competition" in describing a scenario, or described situations where children or groups of children were vying for power. Below are some representative examples.

Table 11

Quote number	Quote
1	It quickly turned into this situation where other girls were competing for her friendship, or time with her...I could feel her being very gratified by that and realizing she had power.
2	The areas where there was direct competition, in his mind, were the areas where he was more outspoken and competitive in, and the areas where he was top dog, he kind of sat back and didn't really share.
3	If somebody else were to come into that territory, it would be very destabilizing for him, so he would put his all into maintaining his position...his identity was built around his sense of power.
4	They have this weird one upping thing going on, and this other boy...has a lot of social capital in the classroom, so like they influence each-other and compete.

Two distinct types of competition were noted. Teachers described both male and female magnetic children as being in situations where other children were competing to be in their social circles, as exemplified by quote 1. One teacher noted that the effects of exclusion from a magnetic child's circle were keenly felt by other students, describing a child's reaction to being left off a team, "He knew that Tyrell wasn't choosing him purposefully, and he'd be devastated and angry...worse than angry, he'd feel like he wasn't good enough."

An additional type of competition involved magnetic children defending their social position by competing with similarly matched peers as exemplified by quotes 2,3, and 4. Boys were perceived as competing one-on-one, whereas girls were perceived as fighting one against a group. This behavior is linked to the behavior of exclusion, and could provide further insight into perceived differences between male and female exclusion behaviors in the classroom.

**Thoughts About the Self in Relation to Others: *I'm Just the Best* and *Other People's Feelings Just Aren't That Important***

Two coding categories related to teachers' perceptions of magnetic children's thoughts about themselves in relation to others. One category was coded as, "I'm Just The Best," and the other was coded as "Other People's Feelings Just Aren't That Important." The code, "I'm Just The Best," was an in-vivo code characterized by times when teachers related that magnetic children, often accurately, asserted that they had superior skills in relation to other children. An example of this is when a child asserted

she was not going to take turns singing with other children because, “I just do it better,” to which the teacher thought, “yeah, you kinda do.”

“Other People’s Feelings Just Aren’t That Important,” was coded when teachers described situations where they felt students behaved with an ambivalence towards, or disregard of, other students’ feelings. This was present in five out of six interviews (5/6). For example, Sam insisted Brian couldn’t be on his team because Brian just wasn’t as good at soccer. In interpreting his motivations, his teacher later stated, “But it was not mean-spirited...there were no personal attacks, it was simple, you don’t know how to play soccer. Very-matter-of-fact, very logical.”

The two categories described above often co-occurred. In four out of six interviews (4/6), teachers revealed that magnetic children justified excluding other children from activities because they were unskilled at that activity. Teachers felt this exclusion illustrated disregard for other children’s feelings. Four male and one female magnetic children were seen as participating in this kind of behavior. One teacher stated in obvious frustration, “He just doesn’t think about the way his behavior impacts other people.”

### **Survey Results: “How do teachers view magnetic children?”**

Teacher sociometric surveys (Hawley et al., 2002) were administered to all six participating teachers, each of whom filled out two surveys, one for a male magnetic child, and one for a female magnetic child, yielding a sample size of 12 surveys. The surveys measured teachers’ perceptions of magnetic childrens’ control behavior using three categories: *general social control*, *coercive social control*, and *pro-social control*. Each item was assessed on a Likert scale from 1 to 4, with 1 rated for a behavior that

“never occurred,” and 4 rated for a behavior that “always occurred.” When a teacher circled two categories, such as never, and sometimes, the item was recorded as a half point. The sample size is too small to garner statistically significant results; but averages reveal important trends as seen in the table below.

Table 12

	<b>General Control Average Score</b>	<b>Coercive Control Average Score</b>	<b>Pro-social Control Average Score</b>
<b>Girls</b>	3.08	2.39	3.36
<b>Boys</b>	2.59	2.1	3.03

Looking at rank order scores, it was interesting to note that on average, girls were perceived as exerting more general control, more prosocial control, and more coercive control over their peers than boys.

### **Interview Results: “How do teachers react to magnetic children?”**

#### **Messages Sent**

In response to the teacher interview question, “Describe a time when you needed to intervene in in this child’s behavior,” teachers tended to structure their responses as narratives, describing a classroom conflict, their intervention, and finally what they taught, or intended to teach, the magnetic child. These final statements were coded as *Messages Sent*. This code was present in all six interviews, five teachers (5/6) mentioned lessons they taught girls and six (6/6) teachers mentioned lessons they taught boys.

#### **The Skilled Leader vs. The Kind Leader**

Overall, messages sent to girls centered around themes of equality and kindness, whereas messages sent to boys centered around being good leaders, and learning the

appropriate time and place to use their strengths. Leadership was looked at as aligned with social goals for male children, but in opposition to social goals for female students.

Table 13

<b>Select Interview Excerpts Coded as Lessons Taught</b>	
<b>Messages Sent to boys</b>	<b>Messages Sent to girls</b>
this is not the time or place	need to explore how to treat other people and how to be treated.
this language is not for school	when is it appropriate to stay out of it.
channel who he is and what he's already good at into a positive place	you have talents and they have talents, and its not about that, it's about feeling like you are in the center every once and a while too.
I told him he's a leader in the classroom...my expectations are high for you, because other kids listen to you.	she learned, either you get along, or you are by yourself.
not the right time or place	go with the flow.
he was very secure, so he had to learn not to be insecure, but to be secure in an appropriate way.	build empathy build listening skills
how to be a good helpful leader...that supports the learning.	how to be a kind leader.
how to...be a leader as a teacher to other children."	you have to step back so that other people's light can shine too.

Teachers approached male magnetic children from a strengths-based approach, acknowledging their athletic or leadership abilities, and expressing a desire that students capitalize upon these strengths, using them to excel in new situations. This was exemplified in statements such as, "Helping him channel some of who he is, and what he's already good at into a positive place," and "Then I would pull him aside... noticing

his leadership abilities, his strengths, his abilities as an athlete,” [and tell him how he could] “use them to help other children.”

In contrast to the boys, who learned that excelling at a particular skill, such as a sport, gave them opportunities to hone their already advanced leadership and social skills, girls were taught that excelling was irrelevant to leadership success. This was evidenced in statements such as, “You have talents, and they have talents, and it’s not about that, it’s about feeling like (other people) can be in the center every once in a while too,” as well as teachers neglecting to link strengths with learning goals for girls in the same way they often did for boys.

For male children, leadership was openly acknowledged as a worthwhile end goal to pursue. This was evidenced in statements such as, “I would talk with him about what is a good leader, and what’s a helpful leader...we’d agree that he was building up to that.” However for girls, equality and power sharing were emphasized. In their interactions with female students, teachers stressed sharing leadership roles with others, teaching lessons such as, “You need to step back so that other people’s lights can shine too,” and “We’ve been talking about turn taking and how you have to share that power.” Building social skills focused on getting along was also a common theme in behavior intervention with female students. Teachers related, “building empathy,” “building listening skills,” and “exploring how to treat other people.” In this way, leadership was emphasized as an end goal for male students, while getting along and power sharing were emphasized as end goals for female students.

When male students misbehaved, teachers addressed the misbehavior as separate from leadership abilities, often teaching lessons of “time and place.” Boys were taught

that although their abilities and talents were recognized, this was not the time and place for them to showcase their strengths. When addressing a student who was derailing the focus of a class by making jokes, a teacher responded by saying, “that was really funny, but let’s refocus, this is not your stage right now.” In this case, the teacher acknowledged the child’s strength and reminded him that he was using this strength in a context that was inappropriate. Boys were taught that they needed to apply their behavior to other situations. However, girls were taught that their behaviors needed to change in order for them to be successful. “You are going to have to change your attitude, nobody is better than anyone else...you are going to have to be equal to everybody else.”

### **Social Context of Messages Sent**

Messages were relayed to individual students, small groups, and the classroom as a whole group. On some occasions, teachers spoke individually and privately with students, relaying their expectations for behavior. Other times, individual messages were relayed publicly in front of a whole group, as in the case of the teacher who informed a male magnetic child that group time was not the time or place for jokes. Teachers met with small groups of children to work through conflicts about picking teams, and getting along in a friend group. Additionally, some of the interventions teachers planned were within more structured whole group contexts, for example, a class meeting was called about the physically aggressive behavior of a particular male magnetic child. In thinking about intervention and management, all six teachers (6/6) mentioned a variety of individual, small group, and whole group interventions.

### Language Used By Teachers

The language teachers used in their interviews further reinforced a general finding of this study: that magnetic children inspired strong feeling in their teachers, and that these feelings were differentiated by child gender. The table below show the frequency with which teachers used different words in their interviews, depending on the gender of the child they were speaking about.

Table 14

Phrase	Frequency Male	Frequency Female
leader or leadership	20	15
success	12	8
manipulate	2	9
math	12	2
writing	2	0
reading	8	4

Additionally, magnetic children inspired strong language from teachers that could also be described as uncertain. All teachers (6/6) used powerful language, but expressed uncertainty and struggled for words when asked to specifically describe these children. Thus, teachers used language such as, “she just had it, this je n’ais se quoi.” Below are some examples.

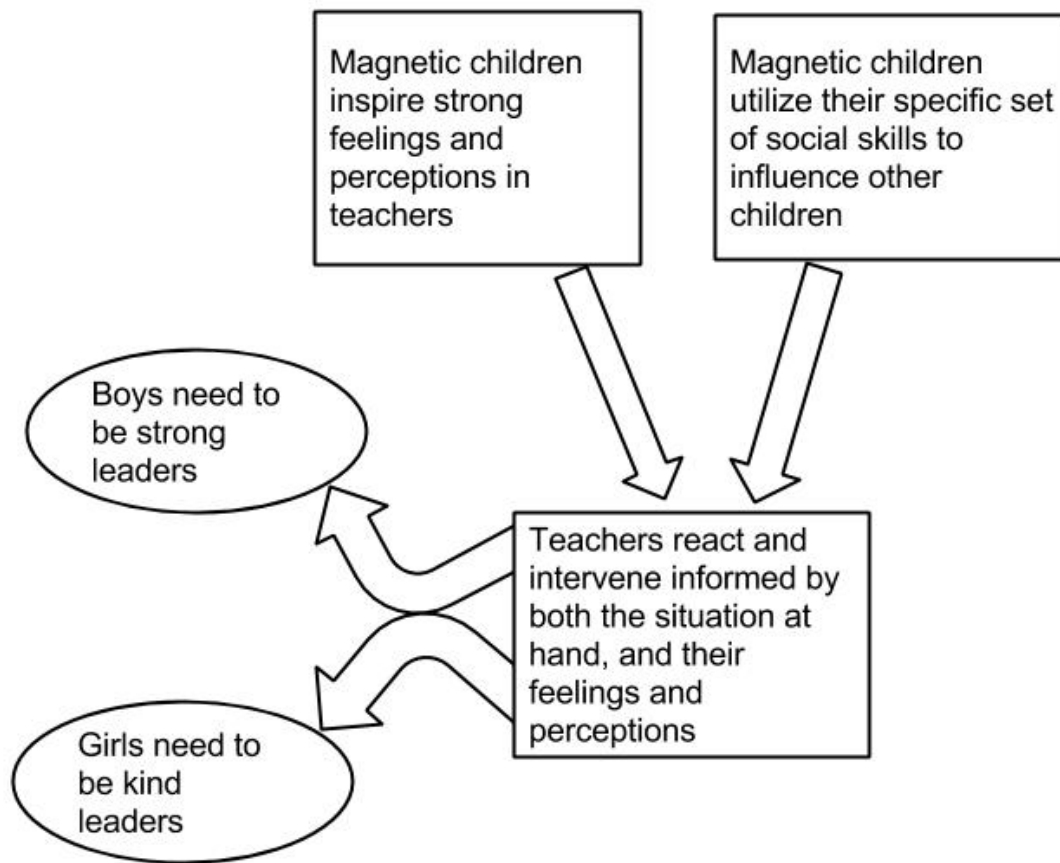


Table 15

Speaking about how she perceived one boy to be thinking, a teacher remarked "...are grown ups going to act like grown ups, or is it really Lord of the Flies, and if it is Lord of the Flies, I'm not gonna be Piggie, I'm going to be the guy that eats the other kid, and I'm going to make sure everybody knows about it ahead of time, because if you know its Lord of the Flies, you do what you can to survive."
When describing how he viewed a female magnetic child in his class a teacher stated, "She had this coolness, just, I think about coolness in the sense of the Beats, the originators, she just exuded this like energy that the kids were like that, you know, I don't know, it's hard to articulate and describe, but she just had like, you know like, sensibility, of just like a, I don't know what you would call it, like she was a thought leader. She just kind of had this. And it wasn't with everybody, but it was definitely with a subset of girls, so it recess, she would just have this posse that she was the leader of, like one of the girls who is in my class, who is part of this posse, was just lost without her, like on the day she was absent, this other girl was just lost. I mean it was like, dang, you've really been subsumed by this other person, so it was really pronounced."
When speaking about a female magnetic child in her class, a teacher said "...she knew how to be really mean, and it was just like dripping from her, this anger was almost like a venom, so it was, she could turn on one extreme, or the other...."

### Summary

Data revealed that both male and female magnetic children possessed a specific set of common skills and attributes, including highly developed social and verbal skills, physical prowess, and an inner sense of insecurity masked by outward bravado. Their behavior and personalities inspired strong feelings in their teachers. They engaged in specific behaviors, including exclusion and control, which necessitated teacher intervention. Intervention, in the form of the messages teachers sent children, was differentiated based upon child gender. This cycle is illustrated in the diagram below.



## Discussion

### Superior Social Skills

He has social skills that are so compelling, even to adults, its really amazing to me to just sit back and watch somebody like that. I think its just his wiring and his personality, but he's just somebody who has this ability to walk into a room, and in moments have people listening to him, and talking with him. He's got a face that lights up, he's got a great sense of humor, he's got an ability to know enough to talk about just about anything, or the skills to turn the conversation into something that he can talk about, and he has the ability to do that most of the time without hurting peoples feelings, so most of the time people think of him as a kind person,...

In this description of a male magnetic child it is easy to see why researchers refer to these children as “high-powered CEO’s of the playground” (Hawley, et. al, 2002).

Every interview from this study is peppered with examples of teachers expressing wonderment, and admiration at the behaviors of magnetic children. Indeed, the teacher who is quoted above seems almost in awe of the social abilities of this child.

### **Contradictory Behaviors Inspired Contradictory Reactions**

In speaking about the same child in the description above the teacher continued...

*and yet...he would do things sometimes when he wanted something that would manipulate and be mean and even bullyish, and kids would still feel like they were thrilled to be with him, because of who he was in their eyes. Umm, they might be mad at him for a moment, or devastated, I mean some kids would just get devastated if he did something that was mean to them, because they so wanted to be in the in crowd with him.*

Clearly, this child and population inspired strong and contradictory reactions and feelings in teachers. Previous research has indicated that these feelings are incited by the unique constellation of social skills, relating to control, that these children possess (Hawley, 2003). The current study further investigated a wide range of behaviors and attributes, and revealed specific contradictions in behavior that informed teachers' reactions to, and management of, these children.

Teachers' views of magnetic children revealed a complex duality in many arenas. These children inspired feelings of awe, frustration, disgust and admiration. Teachers were simultaneously impressed by children's intellectual abilities but frustrated by their tendency to avoid taking academic risks, admiring of their highly developed social skills but floored by their apparent ambivalence toward the feelings of others, and impressed by their advanced athletic and artistic abilities but repelled by their assertions of superiority.

Additionally, teachers reported a similar complex tension and reaction in

magnetic children's relationships with peers, who both wanted to bask in the glow of their magnetic peers' success and competence, but could be simultaneously fearful of their abilities to exclude and manipulate.

We know that magnetic children struggle with the mixed feedback they receive from adults and other children because of their behavior (Hawley et.al, 2002), and given the contradictory nature of these children revealed by this study, it is clear what might motivate such mixed reactions. Past research supports that children accurately interpret teachers' expectations (Weinstein, 2002), and that teacher expectations shape student performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Especially given the advanced social skills of magnetic children, it seems fair to assume that they are uniquely attuned to their teachers' and peers social cues.

### **Internal Struggle**

The push and pull of these magnetic children was also internal. Although magnetic children publicly projected an air of confidence and competence, teachers perceived that privately they could be deeply insecure and hyper-aware of their shortcomings. These children were afraid of public failure, and risk averse, sticking to the arenas where they could be assured of public success. This finding seems to indicate that magnetic children are particularly aware of the opinions and judgements of others, especially in relation to their own perceived ability or success. They seemed to be constantly defending their social position.

Teacher behavior towards students varies depending upon teacher opinions of and expectations for students (Brophy & Good, 1970; Cooper & Good, 1983; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) thus it is paramount to examine how teacher opinions of magnetic

students informed management of their behavior. What did these contradictory interpretations of magnetic children mean for teacher reactions?

### **Management of Magnetic Children: Gender Differences: Getting Along vs. Leading**

Magnetic children presented challenges for management, given their superior social abilities, in combination with their self-aggrandizement, teachers were faced with a conundrum. How do you teach children to share the stage when the spotlight shines naturally on them? Especially when teachers themselves were in awe of magnetic children's superior abilities. "She was kind of a violin prodigy, in fact, I still have a recording of her, when she played for 9 minutes straight this piece, and it was incredible. I had adults coming in thinking that we had asked somebody to join us today, and it was her."

There were gender differences in the ways teachers interpreted magnetic children's motivations, and thus in the way their behaviors were managed. For all children, teachers saw as problematic the tendency to exclude, participate in intense competition, control peers, and prioritize results over feelings. Teachers saw female magnetic children as operating within a small group setting, and utilizing their social skills to exert control over other girls within their social circle. Messages sent to girls then centered around how to get along with peers. Teachers saw male magnetic children as operating within a whole group setting, and utilizing their social skills to exert unfair influence in order to win. Messages sent to boys therefore centered around how to be fair and productive leaders.

There is value in both "getting along" and "leading." It is interesting that male magnetic children were not as often taught to be aware of and value the feelings and

goals of others in their leadership endeavors, especially since we know that this personality type has the propensity to be overly pragmatic, focusing on outcomes at the expense of other children's feelings. Male magnetic children were found to use relational aggression as part of their arsenal of social strategies, but were not criticized in the same way female magnetic children were for this behavior. Particularly given the characterization of these children as future CEO's, one wonders about the importance of communicating "corporate responsibility" in the classroom.

For female magnetic children, it was clear that more aggressive leadership behaviors were not rewarded. In fact, compelling social skills were more likely to be seen as manipulative in girls than in boys. Teachers communicated lessons of "get along, or be left out," which coincides with Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) finding that girls were more likely to be ostracized or disliked when they exhibited relational aggression. The children in the present study were also asked to, "share the spotlight," something that might be particularly difficult for them given their accurate perceptions of their own superiority. There is much value in "getting along," and "letting everyone shine," however, there is value too in leading. These findings may shed light on the early treatment and nurturance of female leaders, the lessons they learn, and the social positions they are asked to occupy. It may be no wonder that we are lacking in female CEO's given the lessons they are taught on the playground.

Teachers communicated important, concrete messages to magnetic children. Given the social profiles of these children, their propensity to behave with disregard for the feelings of others, and their high capacity for leadership, lessons about building empathy, sharing the spotlight, and developing leadership appear important. It was

interesting to note that these messages were communicated to children based on their gender, and to wonder how this might impact their future behavior, especially given the importance magnetic children place on their public image. Clearly, male magnetic children are being taught that they can apply their considerable skills to leadership positions, whereas magnetic girls are being taught to share the spotlight, and be kind group members, as opposed to leaders. The question then becomes, given these differing messages, how are we preparing magnetic children for success based upon their gender? Are we preparing boys for the collaborative workplaces they will find? Are we preparing girls for the board room?

### **Final Thoughts**

Given teachers' reactions to these children, the nomenclature "magnetic" is indeed warranted. Magnetic push and pull factors occurred on a variety of levels within the results, at a personal level within magnetic children (whose outer confidence belied inner insecurity), at an interpersonal level between teachers/peers and magnetic children (who were attracted to their prosocial skills, but repelled by their sometimes coercive means), at a classroom level when magnetic behavior was discussed in whole group settings, and at a societal level when messages about gender roles and leadership were sent.

### **Limitations**

There were significant constraints placed on this study due to months-long delays in IRB approval, which limited the study in several ways. One significant limitation was the sample size. This study used a sample size of six teachers, who each spoke about two

students, one male and one female student per teacher. The composition of the sample was also a possible limitation. Although both public and private school teachers were represented, as well as beginning and veteran teachers, this was largely a convenience sample, and all of the participants were known to the researcher. Female teachers comprised five out of six teachers; however, this is approximately the same ratio that occurs in the elementary teaching population. Additionally, one teacher had moved into a role as a school psychologist, and she may have been thinking about students more from the perspective of a counselor than a teacher (her interview responses indicated this). A larger sample size would also have yielded more quantitative data that would have allowed for statistical analysis.

Another limitation was that teachers were asked to speak about children in former classes in order to avoid a Pygmalion Effect. It is likely that teachers would have been able to give more specific examples of child behaviors and their reactions to those behaviors if they were asked to speak about children in their current classes. The obstacle to accomplishing this was the IRB request that all parents sign an informed consent if teachers spoke about students in their current classes, even though the identity of children would have remained anonymous. This would have placed a large burden on teachers for a research study that otherwise demanded only an hour of their time.

The study did not compare children identified as magnetic to children in the rest of the class, it is possible that behavior that teachers attributed to magnetic children could also have been applied to non magnetic children. However, Hawley and colleagues (2002, 2003) found a unique population they labeled “bi-strategic controllers,” whose behavior was different from the rest of the class. This study additionally presumably



examined a subset of that group and asked teachers to identify one male and one female child who “were the most socially influential” in the class. this “extreme group” sample, typically accentuates the difference between the target population and the control group, in this case, the rest of the class.

Additionally, as described in the Procedures section above, the interview instrument was revised after the first interview revealed that more specific questions were needed, and that some questions had led to long unproductive conversations. As a result, the first teacher interview, although yielding useful data, was much longer than subsequent interviews, was more general, and had many more tangential responses than subsequent interviews, which, by contrast, tended to be very focused, specific, and relevant. New research should utilize the final interview instrument across the entire sample.

### **Future Directions**

Many fascinating questions arose throughout the research process. Previous studies have utilized survey instrumentation to identify “bi-strategic controllers” (Hawley et. al, 2002) and differentiate them from other types of classroom leaders. The current study utilized a survey as well as in-depth interviews with teachers. Future research that combines classroom and playground observations with interviews and survey instrumentation may ensure a fuller picture of magnetic children, and also ensure that the conversations center around magnetic children, as opposed to other types of leaders.

Additionally, previous research indicates that male and female teachers perceive students’ behavior differently (e.g. Duffy, Warren, & Walsh, 2002), and that teacher perceptions impact student achievement and behavior (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).

An interesting avenue for future inquiry could investigate not only the difference in teachers' perceptions of magnetic children, but also the differences between *male and female* teachers' perceptions of magnetic children.

Furthermore, the current study indicated that magnetic children are particularly sensitive to public failure, and have a uniquely pragmatic social profile, as well as advanced social understandings. It would therefore be important to investigate how magnetic children react to teachers' interventions of their behavior, elucidating how magnetic children respond to and understand teacher interventions.

It may also be fruitful to attempt to situate magnetic children within a dominance hierarchy framework, so that teachers and researchers may better understand the unique set of pressures and advantages they experience in the classroom.

### **Conclusion**

The current study investigated a fascinating type of student. Described by teachers as politicians, manipulators, future mayors, bullies, and charismatic leaders, these students are perceived as being both supremely socially aware, and at the same time unconcerned about the feelings of their classmates. They project confidence and bravado, but can be deeply insecure. Especially given their ability to influence their peers and impact the classroom environment, accurate, prosocial understanding of these complex children is essential.

Previous research refers to these students as "bi-strategic controllers," a term which focuses on control only, and which does not fully capture the depth of these personalities, or the inner and outer conflicts they experience in the classroom and, furthermore, focuses on social control exclusively. The term "magnetic" captures both

the push and pull between outer bravado and inner insecurity that these children experience, as well the propensity for students and teachers to be simultaneously attracted to these childrens' charisma and competence, but repelled by their apparent disregard for the feelings of others, and their overly pragmatic goal-oriented behaviors.

Given the unique abilities and perspectives of these students, we must ensure that the lessons we teach magnetic children in schools allow both females and males to become strong leaders and productive group members.

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### Appendix A Teacher Sociometric Inventory

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. The results are confidential. Please circle the choice that best describes the child.

Child pseudonym : \_\_\_\_\_

This child...

Is someone whose plans are usually liked by others and followed by them

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by 'helping' others (even if they don't really need it)

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Promises friendship (ex: "I'll be your best friend if...") to get what s/he wants

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by promising an invitation (ex: 'You can come to my house/birthday etc.)

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Promises to do something in to get what s/he wants return (sharing, reciprocating, turn-taking)

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by being really nice about it.

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets others to do what s/he tells them to do, even if they don't really want to

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Makes others follow his/her plans to gets what s/he wants

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by bullying others

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Tricks others to get what s/he wants

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by forcing others

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Gets what s/he wants by making verbal threats or threats of aggression

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Usually gets first access to preferred toys when with peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Usually gets what s/he wants when with peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Usually gets the best roles in games when with peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Usually is the center of attention when with peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Usually plays with the favored toys when with peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always

Seems to win out over peers

never                      sometimes                      often                      always



### Appendix B Teacher Interview Schedule

This interview is meant to help clarify how you think about teaching and behavior management in your classroom. All responses are confidential and your name and children's names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

Think of a student in one of your past classes who was socially influential in both positive and negative ways.

*Ask teacher to fill out sociometric survey for the child. Check survey to ensure that the child is bi-strategic.*

Tell me about (student identified in sociometric survey)
What do you think drew other children to (student)? Follow up-elicite specific examples, probe for competitive behavior
What do you think motivated this student's behavior? What drove them socially? Follow up-elicite specific examples, probe for levels of confidence
Describe a time when you needed to manage this student's behavior. Follow up-elicite specific examples

Repeat sociometric inventory and interview schedule with teacher for a child of the opposite gender