"I can make a difference": Educators' lived experiences using de-escalation strategies

by

Stacey C. Kramer

B.A., Washburn University, 1993
M.E., Washburn University, 2005
M.S., Kansas State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

Students are displaying challenging behavior in schools. This phenomenological study investigated how educators used de-escalation skills in their day-to-day work and how, if at all, the use of those skills impacted educators' sense of safety. Using survey responses and semi-structured interviews, the lived experiences of educators who used de-escalation skills in a variety of roles were examined. The findings indicate that educators' use of de-escalation skills positively impacts both their ability to respond to challenging behaviors and their sense of safety in school.

Key terms: challenging behavior, de-escalation skills, educator sense of safety.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. Suzanne Porath

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband, Doug, and my son, Shawn, who endured watching me go back to school repeatedly and supported me throughout my educational journey. I could not continue to grow as an educator without your love and support.

It is also dedicated, in thanksgiving, to the interview and survey participants who shared sometimes vulnerable insights in service of ALL the dedicated educators who de-escalate students every day.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Introduction

Teaching in the 21st Century is hard. Tan et al. (2026) report that 1 in 7 public school teachers change schools or leave the profession altogether. In addition to this turnover, it has become increasingly difficult to fill teaching positions as the pool of candidates graduating from teaching programs is also decreasing. These factors have contributed to teacher shortages nationwide (Tan et al., 2026). Researchers have been trying to determine which variables correlate with or affect attrition.

Job satisfaction is one variable that impacts teacher attrition. Teachers increasingly cite a lack of safety at school and student behavior as factors affecting their job satisfaction. According to their research about teacher retention in Kansas, Simmering & Church (2025) found that "Student Behavior, Safety & Discipline " (p. 17) was the most common theme across the state as a major driver for teacher exits. The teachers reported experiencing disruptive and unsafe behavior and feeling unsafe at school (Simmering & Church, 2025). Nationally, the increase in school violence has been characterized as having the potential to negatively impact teacher well-being, efficacy, and longevity (Anderman et al., 2018).

Challenging student behaviors and school violence also impact administrator attrition. Perry et al.'s study (2024) examined the impact of school violence on administrator retention. The study found that school violence negatively affects administrators' well-being. Another finding was that administrators' sense of unsafety was also positively correlated with their intention to either quit or transfer out of their jobs.

While challenging behavior is a current research topic, it is not new in educational research. As Ford (1958) noted, “Discipline has long been one of the teacher’s major concerns” (p.1). A 1962 study examined the effects of suspension on students in a California school in the 1950s (Wilson, 1962). That study could not determine whether suspension improved student behavior; however, it did find that students with below-average intelligence were less able to adapt to behavioral expectations than those with average or above-average intelligence. In another study, Guilliams (1972) noted that conflict emerged in public schools as the students’ rights movements of the 1960s grew. Students began demonstrating dissent through acts such as growing their hair longer or refusing to follow the student dress code. Guilliams (1972) characterized these behaviors and others as a “battle between students and school officials” (p.15).

Challenging behavior has also been associated with students with disabilities. Students with disabilities and challenging behaviors were present in schools before the landmark Public Law 94-142, commonly known as the *All Handicapped Children Act (EHA),* enacted in 1975. However, the EHA more firmly established the right of students with disabilities to receive a public education. Renamed in a 1990 reauthorization as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, the law strengthened protections for all students with disabilities and aimed to ensure they could access a free and appropriate public education alongside other students (United States Department of Education, 2024). Prior to this law, only one in five students with disabilities, including students with emotional disturbances, were educated in public schools (United States Department of Education, 2024).

Long believed to be primarily a special education issue, general education teachers are increasingly serving students displaying behavioral difficulties (Colvin & Scott, 2015). IDEA

increased the number of students in schools with disabilities, including students who display challenging behavior. Guidance from the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services affirmed that students with behavioral needs must receive behavioral supports and services to access their education in the least restrictive environment (United States Department of Education, 2023). This has resulted in a dramatic increase in students being educated in their home schools and in general education classrooms (United States Department of Education, 2024).

Students, with and without special education services, are displaying behavior that interferes with the educational process (Westling, 2010), and not all teachers feel prepared to address challenging behavior in the classroom. Couvillon et al. (2010) found a disparity in teachers' perceptions of readiness to address challenging behaviors between general education and special education teachers. Westling (2010) confirmed this in a study of 38 special education teachers and 32 general education teachers examining their perceptions of challenging behaviors. The results showed that 38% of special education teachers felt their pre-service coursework prepared them to respond to challenging behaviors. In contrast, only 26% of general education teachers felt their pre-service programs prepared them to do so. A larger disparity emerged when comparing the adequacy of in-service programs in preparing teachers. 51% of special education teachers felt prepared, while only 23% of general education teachers felt ready to work with students displaying challenging behaviors (Westling, 2010).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Westling (2010) reports that special education teachers are less likely to consider leaving the profession because of students with challenging behaviors. This may also contribute to general education teacher attrition, as Westling (2010) noted that 44% of general education teachers surveyed reported considering leaving the profession because of

challenging behavior. This may be because general education teachers' preparation typically includes classroom management but does not routinely include explicit instruction in managing challenging behaviors (Westling, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Responding to students with challenging behaviors is a worldwide issue that affects school staff and disrupts learning (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023a), 32% of public-school teachers in the United States reported that student misbehavior had interfered with their teaching. Teachers with students who display challenging behavior also experience stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). Challenging student behaviors also stress administrators (Perry, 2024).

In addition to concerns about students with challenging behaviors, feeling unsafe at school is a nationwide concern, as school violence is increasing to the point that it is now considered a public health concern (Anderman et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2024). According to a report by the U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation (2025), schools experienced 1,299,063 criminal incidents between 2020 and 2024. 589,308 of those incidents were characterized as crimes against persons, and 538,778 were characterized as assaults (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025). In 411,192 incidents, the most common weapons were “personal weapons,” such as hands, fists, and feet (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025, p. 12). According to McMahon et al. (2020), 94% of the teachers surveyed in their study noted that, in their experience, students were perpetrators of physical aggression. Yet consensus remains lacking on best practices for responding to school violence (Perry et al., 2024).

Implementing programs to reduce classroom escalation is an essential priority for both K-12 and higher education institutions (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). A study in North Carolina,

for example, points out that when teachers were surveyed about their training needs, the most requested training involved addressing challenging behaviors (Gebbie et al., 2011). Training staff to use de-escalation skills and strategies can help teachers both prevent challenging behaviors and respond effectively to students displaying them, yet few studies examine how educators use de-escalation skills after training. Further, few studies explore whether using de-escalation skills impacts educators' sense of safety. Research is needed to understand how de-escalation skills are used in schools and whether using them affects educators' sense of safety.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to research on the use of de-escalation skills in schools by shedding light on how staff experienced using these skills to respond to challenging behaviors, and whether doing so impacted the safety of students and staff in 21st-century urban public schools. The study included the voices of a wide range of urban educators in various roles, including administrators, general education, special education teachers, and support personnel who use de-escalation skills. The participating educators shared their experiences and offered sage advice on how to de-escalate students effectively. In doing so, the educators offered concrete examples of best practices as well as recommendations for school administrators seeking to implement de-escalation training.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Herbert Blumer's theory of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism holds that people understand behavior and interactions through communication and symbols (Bloomberg, 2023). Blumer believed that the meaning ascribed to "things," such as activities, human beings, or encountered situations, develops through interactions and interpretation (Blumer, 1969). Interpreters' identities, values, needs, and preferences shape this

interpretation (Hammersley, 2020). Further, the interpretative process is iterative over time, and meaning changes through socialization with others (Hammersley, 2020). Blumer also believed that human behavior often rests on routine or institutionalized norms, but that humans have a strong capacity to suspend these routines and behave creatively (Hammersley, 2020).

This framework worked well with this study as the researcher interpreted the meaning of symbols (words) of educators as they described their own behaviors used during de-escalation skills. The stories they shared involved activities (using de-escalation skills), other people, and the situations they encountered. As each encounter unfolded, educators and students engaged in a social process of interpreting each other's words and actions and making meaning.

Furthermore, the educators in this study were trained using a specific brand of de-escalation training, which established a set of institutionalized norms for using de-escalation skills. Although these skills were institutionalized, educators' identities and values shaped how they interpreted and applied them in practice. As such, while they knew a prescribed set of norms, they used their own creativity to adjust their behavior based on the students' behavior they were trying to de-escalate. These interactions were an iterative process through which each participant interpreted the meaning of the other's words (symbols) and behavior and adapted their behavior accordingly.

This framework also complemented the study's methodology- an interpretative qualitative phenomenology inspired by hermeneutic principles. Hermeneutics is grounded in the notion that phenomena are always interpreted through how they manifest in the world and that interpretations are continually revised (Vagle, 2025). Investigating the phenomenon of using de-escalation skills was an interactive, iterative social process through which the researcher and participants co-constructed meaning.

Methodology

This study used phenomenology, a method that investigates how people make meaning of their lived experiences (Bloomberg, 2023). This interpretive qualitative phenomenology draws on hermeneutic principles, particularly Heideggerian hermeneutics, which provide a lens for exploring the meanings educators attribute to their experiences with de-escalation training and its application in the educational setting (Bloomberg, 2023; Peoples, 2021). A qualitative research design allows flexibility because the process is emergent, enabling the researcher to remain responsive and adaptive as knowledge is constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

This study used a survey and several in-depth interviews to bring the phenomenon to life. Much of the data in this study came from phenomenological interviews. Using interviews in phenomenology is particularly appropriate for this study as interviews are a means of obtaining a pool of narratives of lived experiences (Ajjawi, 2007). In addition, repeated interviews allowed relationships to develop with the interview participants that were comfortable and conversational. Survey results provided additional evidence and supported the credibility of the findings from the data analysis.

Phenomenology was particularly suited for this research because it allows phenomena to be understood more fully in the context of real-world complexity (Bloomberg, 2023). In this case, the research occurred in the real-world context of educators currently using de-escalation skills in their educational practice. Including educators in various contexts added to the richness of real-world complexity and increased the potential for generalization across contexts.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This study examined how a particular population of educators (those trained to use de-escalation skills) interpreted and integrated de-escalation skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice, and whether those practices affected their sense of safety.

This study aimed to answer these research questions about the lived experiences of educators who are using de-escalation skills:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?
>
> **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Dictionary of Terms

The following is a list of defined terms used in this study.

Challenging behavior- In this study, challenging behavior will be defined as any behavior that disrupts the learning environment.

De-escalation- Engel et al. (2020) defined de-escalation, which this study will use. De-escalation is "a process or tactics used to prevent, reduce, or manage behaviors associated with conflict, including verbal or physical agitation, aggression, violence, or similar behaviors, during an interaction between two or more individuals, p. 724."

Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) is defined in the study as: frameworks used in schools provide Tier 1 academic, social-emotional, and behavioral primary prevention to all students, utilizing validated curricula and evidence-based practices as well as planned Tier 2 (secondary) and Tier 3 (tertiary) interventions for academic, behavior, and social-emotional skills, for students who need more than primary prevention efforts (Lane et al., 2013).

Physical aggression is defined as aggressive actions directed at students or staff that involve physical contact or require the target to evade or a third party to intervene to avoid contact, adapted from McMahon et al.'s work (2020).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) will be defined in this study as: a framework that encourages creating school-wide behavioral expectations and an instructional approach to behavior based on applied behavioral principles (Mayer et al., 2021).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) for this study will be defined by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2025) as:

> …the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (para.1).

Tapping out is defined as a strategy teachers use to de-escalate by asking another staff member to take over the de-escalation process.

Verbal de-escalation for this study is defined as using words to de-escalate and defuse situations so that they do not escalate (Idol, 2018).

Violence against educators/teachers will be defined as physical acts directed at educators, as adapted from Anderman et al. (2018).

Delimitations and Limitations

This study contained two delimitations. The first delimitation was limiting the study to one school district. While limiting the study to one district may impact generalization, the variety of educators who participated increases the chance of generalization. Not limiting participants to one school or grade level also increased the potential for generalization. The

second delimitation limited study participants to those who had taken one specific commercial brand of de-escalation training during a certain time period. This may have reduced the pool of eligible participants. The intention of this delimitation was to use purposeful sampling to ensure participants had received professional development in de-escalation training relatively recently. This also helped reduce recall bias.

The study also has three limitations. The limitations may have impacted the study but were not controllable by the researcher. The study intended to include as many types of educators as possible. However, the pool of selected candidates did not have as many secondary educators as anticipated. This may reduce generalizability to secondary educators. A second limitation was that the researcher conducted an anonymous survey. This did not allow the researcher to encourage more participation by sending repeated reminders only to those who had not taken the survey. While this may have reduced the number of respondents, the anonymous nature of the survey helped ensure respondents could share candid insights, reducing the likelihood of dishonesty. Another limitation was that the researcher trained several of the participants. This may create researcher bias. However, this study used a theoretical methodology that embraces this potential bias as part of the interpretive process, which may reduce its impact. Other efforts to reduce this potential bias included using an anonymous survey and sending interview participation requests to staff members not trained by the researcher.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's first special education teaching job was in a school for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. While teaching there, the researcher became certified in The Mandt System®. When teaching in another school district as a special education resource teacher, the researcher became certified through another commercial program- Crisis Prevention

Institute. When she returned to her current district as a member of the special education leadership team, she became certified as a Mandt System Trainer® for the district and has coordinated training for the district ever since. Martin Heidegger believed that separating oneself as a researcher from a phenomenon is impossible, as phenomena are interpreted through lived experiences (Vagle, 2025). He also believed researchers cannot remove themselves entirely because they are always part of the larger world they examine (Peoples, 2021). This is certainly true, as the researcher is enmeshed in the world of teaching de-escalation skills.

The researcher was mindful of this positionality throughout the study. Using a Heideggerian circle analysis allowed the researcher to revisit the study participants' words numerous times. Further, using symbolic interactionist theory, the researcher was able to be cognizant of her insider perspective on using de-escalation skills while continuing to examine the phenomenon from multiple angles (Schwalbe, 2020). Further, as Blumer encouraged, the researcher did not stop analyzing the data too soon. She used a Heideggerian circle to keep examining the data and asking what the study participants' words revealed (Schwalbe, 2020). Although she had extensive prior knowledge of the phenomenon studied, repeatedly circling back to participants' related experiences prompted a profound revision of how the researcher interpreted their use of de-escalation skills.

Summary

Teachers' sense of safety continues to decline (Baker & Koedel, 2025). Both general educators and special educators need to know how to use de-escalation skills to manage crises (Adamson et al., 2024). However, research on teachers' perceptions of strategies used to reduce violence, including de-escalation, remains sparse (Perry et al., 2024). Murphy and Van Brunt

(2019) also note minimal primary research on the effectiveness of various approaches to de-escalation training.

This phenomenology addresses a research gap, particularly in understanding how general educators experience using de-escalation skills to respond to challenging behaviors. Using the voices of a wide variety of educators (administrators, general education teachers and support staff, mental health staff, and special education staff), this study illuminated how educators used de-escalation skills and how that use affected their efficacy in responding to challenging behaviors. The findings also revealed how educators' use of de-escalation skills affected their sense of safety.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Introduction

As teacher job satisfaction has waned over the last several years, researchers and educational leaders have examined why teachers are leaving the profession. One theme that has emerged is that student behavior is disrupting classrooms so much that teachers feel increasingly frustrated and stressed (Anderman et al., 2018; Simmering & Church, 2025; Westling, 2010). In addition, school violence is increasing, which is impacting educators' sense of safety at school (Anderman et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2024).

One initiative that could positively impact student behavior and safety in schools is using de-escalation skills. This study used educators' words to examine how they used de-escalation skills and whether that use affected their sense of safety. The study revealed several themes, including impactful strategies educators use when responding to challenging behaviors. It also illuminated how using those strategies positively impacted their sense of safety.

A literature review was conducted as part of the study. The review examined the historical context of challenging behaviors in schools, relevant literature on challenging student behavior, educators' use of de-escalation skills, and educator safety in schools. The literature review that follows also briefly focuses on research about the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, which underpinned the study and then describes relevant research themes related to the phenomenon of using de-escalation skills that emerged.

Symbolic Interactionism

Humans are social creatures. They exist in continual connection with others in community (De Rosa, 2018). Sociologist Herbert Blumer developed the concept of symbolic

interactionism (McPhail, Rexroat, 1979). Symbolic interactionism occurs when people interact with one another (Triplett & Turner, 2023). Blumer's groundbreaking work has influenced the field of sociology noticeably (Azarian, 2017). As educational researchers examine the social world, his work is an appropriate theoretical framework for educational research.

Blumer (1969) himself notes that symbolic interactionism is based on three premises:

1. Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings the things have for them.

2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.

3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. p. 2.

It is important to note that the "things" referred to by Blumer in the first premise include a wide variety of "things" such as activities, human beings, or situations encountered (Blumer, 1969). Blumer believed people develop the meaning of "things" through interactions with others (Blumer, 1969). In addition, as people interact with "things," they ascribe meaning to them through interpretation (Blumer, 1969).

One tenet of symbolic interactionism is joint action. Blumer firmly believed that meaning is best created jointly through social processes (Azarian, 2017). As each interaction unfolds, participants interpret and define others' actions (Triplett & Turner, 2023). This interpretation ascribes meaning to their own actions and to others' actions (McPhail & Rexroat, 1979). Blumer also believed that humans can ascribe meaning to concepts creatively and adaptively and that these meanings are developed contextually in the world (Schwalbe, 2020; Triplett & Turner, 2023)

Herbert Blumer understood that research conducted in the world is influenced by the researcher's own lens (McPhail & Rexroat, 1979). This parallels Martin Heidegger's notion that researchers study phenomena with foresight or foreknowledge of what they are examining (Vagle, 2025). Blumer also believed that research should begin by exploring the topic to gain clarity before beginning the actual study (Schwalbe, 2020). Conducting a literature review of what is known about the phenomenon is one way to do this. The review also gave the researcher additional background on educators' use of de-escalation skills.

Defining De-escalation

This study examined the use of de-escalation skills in the urban public-school setting. However, because these skills are used across multiple disciplines, this review includes research from other professions when the information is generalizable. For example, searching for "de-escalation" almost always returned results related to health care, particularly nursing, law enforcement, or both. For example, in one study by Hallett & Dickens (2017) for nursing staff, de-escalation was defined as:

> a collective term for a range of interwoven staff interventions, comprising verbal and non-verbal communication, self-regulation, assessment, and actions, whilst maintaining the safety of staff and patients (p. 10).

Including these studies helped determine how to define de-escalation for this study. Engel et al. (2020) defined de-escalation as:

> a process or tactics used to prevent, reduce, or manage behaviors associated with conflict, including verbal or physical agitation, aggression, violence, or similar behaviors, during an interaction between two or more individuals" (p. 724).

Another study defined verbal de-escalation as using words to de-escalate and defuse situations so they do not escalate (Idol, 2018).

A Brief Look at the Historical Role of Education in Shaping Student Behavior

Challenging behavior is not a new concept in educational research. This literature review highlights a few studies as historical examples of research on managing student behavior. This brief overview shows educators' roles in responding to and shaping behavior and how the concept of challenging behavior has been present over time.

The oldest study to be highlighted was conducted by a 19th-century American teacher. The study was conducted because the teacher was opposed to using corporal punishment and believed that other alternatives should be used to correct student behavior (Cobb, 1847). Cobb (1847) reported that he conducted research for over thirty years by speaking with "hundreds and thousands of parents and teachers" (p. 11) to learn how they corrected children's behavior. The findings indicated that corporal punishment should be used only as a last resort after milder, persuasive interventions failed to change behavior (Cobb, 1847). Educators in the next century also grappled with how to address challenging behavior.

In the 20th century, public education was "charged with molding a citizenry that can read, write, think critically, and control its emotions and behavior (Lewis, 1954; Wilson, 1962). Lewis (1954) explained further that:

> Thus, any child who comes to school is faced with several demands which he may not find easy to reconcile those which his own drive toward maturity make upon him, those which his family and his community make upon him, those which our democratic nation make upon him, and those which the school and the people he meets at school make upon him. None of these can be overlooked by him. He must learn to evade, struggle against,

> or cooperate with these demands. He must sometimes choose which demands he will yield to; he may sometimes find himself torn and frustrated in efforts to satisfy demands which are in opposition to each other (p.14).

When students struggled with school demands, teachers have historically been responsible for responding to their behavior. Teachers applied strategies to address challenging behaviors when students failed to cooperate and/or yield to demands. For example, one study examined the effectiveness of suspension as a response to challenging behavior. According to Wilson (1962), a public educator's duty was to provide education and teach students to exhibit self-control to help form "good behavior traits" (p. 2). In the study, the problem he identified was that teachers were plagued with students who continued to deviate from accepted norms:

> In all schools there is evidence of breaches of good and right conduct. These acts range from what can be called only annoyances to real serious disciplinary cases. Most children at the elementary level do not have criminal intent (p. 13).

To develop strategies to address challenging behaviors, Wilson (1962) asserted that schools were responsible for identify the underlying cause of the breach of conduct. Discovering the cause of the "breach of conduct," or challenging behavior, depends on how society and context construct that behavior. This is an important concept related to the theoretical framework of this study.

Challenging Behavior

What Constitutes Challenging Behavior Evolves Through Social Interaction

As Blumer reminded us, we develop the meaning we ascribe to activities or situations through interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969). In the social system of education, the meaning of "challenging behavior" is constructed within that system. Interpreters' identities, values, needs, and preferences shape how they interpret challenging behavior (Hammersley,

2020). Therefore, defining challenging behavior and how to respond to it is a socially and contextually constructed, ever-evolving process in education.

Historically, teachers have been responsible for shaping student behavior to conform to socially expected norms. Cobb (1847) noted, "The morals of every community will be and are either good and bad, just as in proportion as the rights, the happiness, the comfort, and the character of each individual are respected and regarded by the others," intro. 20th-century educators also noted that public education is a social system in which students' and educators' values and attitudes shape standards for student behavior (Guilliams, 1972).

In addition to changing over time, the context in which challenging behavior occurs also shapes how educators define it. Educators may care less about certain behaviors in an urban setting than in a rural setting. For example, in larger urban classrooms, students may answer questions when asked and be less likely to raise their hand to speak than students in small rural settings where speaking without being acknowledged first may be viewed as disrespectful. This is illuminated in one study examining special education placement of minority students. Heller et al. (1982) hypothesized that student characteristics such as emotional issues contributed to the disproportionate placement of some students in special education and surmised that this disproportionate placement related to how minority students responded to the "value structures in public schools" (p. 16) in dominant cultures.

What constitutes challenging behavior also changes over time. For example, the idea that long hair in school is inappropriate has changed over time, depending on context and social interaction. In the 1960s, male students keeping their hair long was considered challenging behavior. In modern classrooms, wearing long hair is not considered challenging behavior.

This study examined what a group of urban educators considered challenging behavior in their 21st-century work. The educators' perceptions of what constituted challenging behavior were likely shaped by their 21st-century values and attitudes, as were their responses to challenging behavior using de-escalation skills. Accordingly, it is important to highlight key points from 21st-century literature on using de-escalation skills to address challenging behaviors.

Themes in Literature

During the literature review, relevant research themes related to the phenomenon of using de-escalation skills emerged. Themes included challenging behavior, school violence and school safety, and both preventative and intervention practices to address challenging behaviors. Examples of preventative practices include school-wide initiatives, social-emotional learning, and the use of de-escalation skills. Intervention practices outlined strategies such as individualized student behavior support plans, controlled choice-making, building relationships with students, and talking with students about what happened. Key terms used in this review were: challenging behavior, de-escalation skills, and educator sense of safety.

Defining Challenging Behaviors in the 21st Century

The following outlines representative definitions of challenging behavior in relevant 21st-century literature. For example, in consultation with 14 national experts, Westling (2010) defined challenging behavior as intense behavior that presents "physical, instructional, or social concerns to the teacher" (p. 3). Another study by Nunan & Ntombela (2022) described challenging behaviors as defiantly refusing to listen to teachers or being "overbearing," intro. Finally, Ross W. Greene's (2025) book *Lost at School* uses the term "concerning behavior" to describe students who display social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. In this study, challenging behavior is defined as any behavior that disrupts the learning environment.

The literature also provided specific examples of challenging or concerning behaviors. Examples included disruptions that halt instruction, behaviors that limit a student's access to the curriculum or extracurricular activities, or physically dangerous behaviors that harm staff or students or damage property (Bambara, 2005). Behaviors increasingly reported in classrooms included disruptive behavior such as running around the school, screaming, or more violent acts such as throwing objects, hitting, and kicking (Dunlap et al., 2020). McMahon et al. (2020) defined physical aggression as: “hitting, kicking, shoving, biting, use of weapons, or use of objects intended as weapons (e.g., throwing a desk, stabbing with a pencil,118).” Including these descriptions of challenging behavior and specific examples of the types of behaviors occurring in school helps contextualize why educators may have needed to use de-escalation skills in their own setting.

School-Wide Practices: Preventing and Responding to Challenging Behavior

During the literature review, a few themes emerged about preventing challenging behavior or addressing behavior escalation as it occurs. School-wide practices were frequently referenced. Commonly referenced school-wide practices included: Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS), social-emotional learning (SEL), and trauma-informed practices.

Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

School improvement has focused on school climate over the last twenty years (Mayer et al., 2021). School improvement initiatives often aim to enhance student outcomes by implementing a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). Tiered supports are a common escalation-prevention model.

The literature frequently describes MTSS as helping staff prevent and respond to challenging behavior more effectively as it arises. For example, Bohanon et al. (2024) found that implementing an MTSS model with fidelity decreased office discipline referrals for students with disabilities. In other work, Colvin and Scott (2015) argued that when schools implemented Tier 1 prevention efforts and responded effectively to Tier 2 needs, fewer students with challenging behavior required the most intensive support.

One example of an MTSS framework is the Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention (Ci3T). In this framework, Tier 1 academic, social-emotional, and behavioral primary prevention is provided to all students, using validated curricula and evidence-based practices (Lane et al., 2013). The Ci3T framework also includes planned Tier 2 (secondary) and Tier 3 (tertiary) interventions for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional supports for students who need more than primary prevention efforts (Lane et al., 2013). This includes behavioral supports that can be implemented while students access Tier 1 academic curriculum.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Tiered MTSS frameworks, such as Ci3T, incorporate school-wide behavioral prevention strategies and interventions, including Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). As part of legislation, as early as the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, schools were encouraged to use positive and proactive approaches to address challenging behavior (Kerr & Nelson, 2010). School-wide PBIS is an adult-centered framework that encourages creating school-wide behavioral expectations and an instructional approach to behavior based on applied behavioral principles (Mayer et al., 2021). PBIS is often cited as a prevention framework (Brunzell et al., 2016; Couvillon et al., 2010).

Strategies used in a PBIS framework are cited as practical measures to reduce challenging behaviors and conflict in classrooms (Colvin & Scott, 2015; Dunlap et al., 2020; Shaw, 2023). Examples of PBIS prevention strategies include, but are not limited to, creating a safe classroom environment, fostering connections with students and families, developing predictable classroom routines, defining and teaching classroom expectations, planning relevant instruction, prompting and monitoring the use of social-emotional skills, using more positive comments than negative comments (a 5:1 ratio), and reinforcing the use of social-emotional skills (Center on PBIS, 2025).

Research indicates these strategies effectively prevent challenging behaviors and escalation. Murphy and Van Brunt (2019) identified themes in preventive practices that effectively de-escalate student behavior, such as setting clear expectations, to prevent or reduce escalation (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). Establishing positive expectations for both social and academic behaviors can also prevent students from responding negatively or becoming physically aggressive (McMahon et al., 2020).

Brunzell et al. (2016) noted that a predictable classroom environment helps prevent escalation. They also argued that pairing prevention strategies, such as creating positive classroom climates and setting clear expectations, with crisis-response strategies, such as counseling/calming techniques and specific crisis de-escalation skills, can decrease the risk of escalation and help staff respond effectively when escalation occurs.

Providing engaging instruction is another evidence-based proactive strategy (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). Colvin and Scott (2015) believe structuring the classroom environment is a preventative practice and that consistency and routines also prevent escalation. Colvin and Scott (2015) also advocate for ensuring the physical space is organized and well arranged.

Developing positive relationships with students (Astor et al., 2023) and focusing on improving relationships (Perry et al., 2024) are also commonly noted as ways to foster a favorable classroom climate. Colvin and Scott (2015) suggest teachers should be authentic, attentive, and caring. One way to foster positive relationships with students is to implement social-emotional learning.

Social-emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-emotional learning has long been part of public education. Lewis (1954) noted that "Good social development ranks high in our society, and because this is true, it is closely intertwined with emotional development," p. 37. Social-emotional needs were once the primary area of expertise of special education teachers and mental health professionals (Long et al., 2001). However, as in past centuries, general education teachers in twenty-first-century classrooms are expected to meet students' social-emotional and behavioral needs (Adamson et al., 2024). Hammond (2015) emphasizes this:

> "It becomes imperative to understand how to build positive social relationships that signal to the brain a sense of physical, psychological, and social safety so that learning is possible" (p.45).

Explicitly teaching social-emotional skills to students, with or without curricula, has become increasingly common over the last two decades. Social-emotional learning (SEL) appears in various forms, including SEL, socio-emotional learning, and social-emotional learning, with and without hyphens. For this study, social-emotional learning and the acronym SEL have been used interchangeably.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is a seminal resource for information on social-emotional learning (Todd et al., 2022). The Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2025), on its website, defines Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) as:

> …the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (para.1).

Research revealed an emerging relationship between SEL, challenging behavior, and de-escalation skills. For example, teaching students skills to manage their emotions can help reduce escalation (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). Another study noted that implementing a universal SEL curriculum improved management of challenging behaviors and interactions (Sandilos et al., 2023).

Researchers have also reported evidence that teaching social-emotional skills has a positive, and sometimes profound, impact on teachers. For example, Oliveira et al. (2021) noted that teaching social-emotional learning has been correlated with reducing teacher burnout and decreasing attrition. In a qualitative study, Sandilos et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between implementing a universal social-emotional curriculum and teachers' well-being and effectiveness. In another study, Howard (2021) concluded that when educators receive training or have pre-existing knowledge of social-emotional intelligence, they become more engaged in promoting social-emotional intelligence skills both in and outside of the classroom. Using a social-emotional curriculum is also correlated with improved trauma-informed practices (Kim et al., 2021).

Trauma-Informed Practices

Increasingly, students with trauma backgrounds display challenging behavior in classrooms. Childhood trauma has reached epidemic proportions (Souers & Hall, 2016). School staff see firsthand how trauma affects students' behavior, academic skills, and social-emotional issues (Crosby, 2015). Understanding the neurodevelopmental process can positively impact students with trauma backgrounds (Perry, 2009).

When children experience trauma, their neurodevelopment is impacted, which often leads to compromised functioning (Perry, 2009). Students who have been exposed to trauma are constantly vigilant and assessing if they are safe (Souers & Hall, 2016). When students are in survival mode, their bodies respond in ways that prepare them to survive (Souers & Hall, 2016). When students enter crisis, this creates disequilibrium for teachers, which may affect their ability to respond to challenging behavior (Souers & Hall, 2016). Trauma-informed practices are closely linked to de-escalation strategies.

Becoming trauma-sensitive may help teachers increase their self-efficacy in responding to challenging behaviors and de-escalating student behavior (Brunzell et al., 2016). Teachers' reactions to student behavior affect their relationships with students, and adults in the classroom must ensure children feel safe (Souers & Hall, 2016). Direct, trauma-informed interactions with students can impact them immediately (Crosby, 2015). For example, helping students identify their feelings and understand their biology, including how their brain functions, can help them manage stressful situations (Souers & Hall, 2016). Trauma-informed educational practices may help create emotionally safe learning environments for students (Crosby, 2015). These practices may prevent escalation and help teachers de-escalate students more quickly, especially when used alongside other prevention and intervention strategies.

Other Prevention and Intervention Strategies

Additional prevention and intervention strategies have been explored in the literature. For example, McMahon et al. (2020) noted that educators, because of their job responsibilities, such as issuing discipline or giving directions to students, may respond to challenging student behavior as a result. The study noted that better, preemptive training in de-escalation skills may change how educators perform those duties so they are less confrontational, which may prevent some of those challenges (McMahon et al., 2020). Similarly, Todd et al. (2022) recommended a model teachers can use to be more selective about the battles they choose to engage in. In this model, teachers learn to avoid power struggles with students. Todd argues this can reduce the likelihood of escalation (Todd et al., 2022). In another study, Dunlap et al. (2020) recommended that adults use a zone defense when interacting with students to ensure all adults use similar techniques. They assert that this team approach can better address challenging behaviors earlier.

Other prevention and intervention literature focuses on student supports. For example, providing Tier 2 and 3 supports in an MTSS framework, such as Ci3T, also helps address challenging behaviors (Lane et al., 2009). A common misunderstanding is that Tier 2 and 3 interventions should replace Tier 1 interventions. This is not the case, as removing students from Tier 1 services is more likely to widen achievement and behavioral gaps than close them.

The Ci3T framework emphasizes that Tier 2 and 3 interventions are provided in addition to Tier 1 services and can also be delivered during Tier 1 intervention. (Lane et al., 2009). For example, a specific Tier 3 intervention to help de-escalate student behavior is to examine the function of the behavior(s) and create an individualized student behavior support plan (Dunlap et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2009). Often referred to as behavior intervention plans, these plans are designed by gathering data about the student and their behavior, identifying the behavior's

function, and creating a strategy to help extinguish it (Kerr & Nelson, 2010). Plans often outline how staff will teach replacement behaviors to students (Dunlap et al., 2020; Lane et al., 2011). These plans also help students access Tier 1 curriculum in general education classes by preventing challenging behaviors or escalation.

One recent research study focused on combining culturally relevant practices with de-escalation skills (Chapman, 2024). During the study, the researcher taught teachers de-escalation skills alongside training on culturally relevant practices. Results of Chapman's (2024) action research revealed the five most effective de-escalation strategies that worked well with students of color:

- Using relevant stories and problems.
- Learning about the students.
- Giving students a role in class.
- Using slang and other current verbiage.
- Providing controlled choice

The study also identified several other strategies educators found effective for de-escalating students. For example, it was noted that "relationship alone can help a student de-escalate before continuing through the escalation cycle," p. 94. Identifying that a student is escalated early is important as well. Teachers reported that giving students time and space to talk about their feelings and problems, using active listening, and allowing students to be heard helped de-escalate students. Teachers also reported that students responded better to authority figures when they felt heard, and that feeling heard also affected their sense of safety. Participants emphasized the importance of making students feel like partners in the problem-solving process. When students began to escalate, calm voices and breathing strategies were also noted as effective de-

escalation strategies. Finally, changing strategies based on student need was identified as an effective strategy (Chapman, 2024).

In another recent study, Kennedy & Junker (2024) noted that when teachers and students interacted in classrooms, there are opportunities for what they term “loaded moments," p. 661. During these interactions, if teachers restore harmony, the moment de-escalates. If the moment is escalated, it leads to conflict. In addition, when teachers have many demands on their time, it becomes difficult to have quality moments of contact with students. This can create a climate that can increase the likelihood of conflict. Positive contact (relationship) supports the co-creation of a safe classroom. Teachers and students need relationships and safety in the classroom. Finally, Kennedy & Junker (2024) offer advice based on their findings:

> Professional development efforts might focus on positive aspects of loaded moments in ultimately supporting student-teacher relationships and helping teachers identify points of leverage for limiting the negative potential of loaded moments (p. 69).

The negative potential of loaded moments may decrease school safety and increase school violence.

Violence and School Safety

In conducting the literature review for this study, search results often included studies about school violence and school safety. For example, one study highlights the importance of strategically selecting safety policies and practices that have evidence of effectiveness (Astor et al., 2023). These topics also provide context for the growing need to use de-escalation skills in schools.

The literature frequently references school violence. Educators face violence every day (Sela-Shayovitz, 2009). Researchers have recently characterized school violence as a public

health concern (Astor et al., 2023). According to a most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2023b), 7.6% of elementary teachers reported having been threatened with injury, and 6.9% were physically attacked during the 2020-21 school year. In the same report, 3.9% of secondary teachers reported being threatened, and 1.4 % were physically attacked. According to a survey of 6,643 pre-K-12th-grade teachers, 50% of teachers reported experiencing obscene statements or gestures, 57.9% experienced having property stolen or damaged, 37.1% had objects thrown at them, 35.1% were verbally threatened, and 32.4% were intimidated. In addition, 1.5% were threatened with weapons (Astor et al., 2023). This survey included respondents from all states and Puerto Rico. Violence is also a growing international problem (Stillwell et al., 2025), as evidenced by a study from South Africa that noted that when teachers experience violence, their sense of safety can be greatly impacted (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022).

This research identified sub-themes related to school violence. One is characterizing violence against teachers as teacher victimization. Teacher victimization is generally more common in specific demographics. For example, middle school teachers report higher rates of victimization than elementary and high school teachers (Astor et al., 2023). Urban teachers are more likely to experience victimization and feel less safe than rural or suburban teachers (Astor et al., 2023).

Discipline practices are another subtheme mentioned in research as a factor in school violence. When experiencing stress, school staff may use ineffective strategies to address student behavior and school violence, such as punishing students for minor adolescent behaviors excessively (Souers & Hall, 2016). This approach is viewed as pushing students out of school, which may also contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Eisenberg, 2019; Kim,

2010). Discipline practices can also escalate student conflict and increase school violence (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). For example, in one study, it was noted that when school staff use exclusionary practices, teachers are more likely to experience physical violence as well as verbal abuse and property damage (Perry et al., 2024). Discipline practices, in some ways, are the opposite of de-escalation practices.

Reducing Violence and Increasing Safety at School

The literature about school violence includes studies examining strategies to reduce violence and increase safety. According to a comprehensive report on school crime and safety, schools have implemented both preventative and responsive initiatives to address safety in schools (Irwin et al., 2024). Some research has examined those initiatives. For example, in what the authors characterized as the first study of its kind, Perry et al. (2024) revealed that teachers perceive preventative practices as the most effective strategies for reducing violence in schools. The study discussed four common strategies for violence prevention practices: exclusionary discipline, such as suspension and expulsion; school hardening, which includes strategies to secure facilities, such as cameras and metal detectors; prevention strategies, such as instructional strategies or engagement strategies; and crisis intervention strategies, such as physical restraint and restorative practices (Perry et al., 2024). The study also discussed two new instruments to assess the effectiveness of these strategies: the School Violence Strategy Use and Effectiveness Scales and the Educator Victimization Scales (Perry et al., 2024).

An increasingly common approach to increasing school safety is implementing procedures that harden the school (Mayer et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2024). School hardening refers to strategies designed to secure schools, including metal detectors and cameras, which state laws often mandate (Perry et al., 2024). For example, securing entrances has become a

common practice. Interestingly, the research indicates that school hardening may not be an effective strategy (Perry et al., 2024). According to Astor et al. (2024), efforts to harden schools (such as installing alarms and securing entrances) may increase teacher victimization and exacerbate negative teacher-student relationships. While research has not identified definitive approaches to school safety (Maer et al., 2021), the literature has examined other approaches.

Another approach to school safety is the use of school resource officers (SROs). According to a statistical report published by the United States Department of Justice, as of the 2019-2020 school year, there were 23,400 sworn school resource officers, and 69% of the SROs responded to incidents in the classroom. 54% of the officers arrested students for drug violations (Davis, 2023). The American Civil Liberties Union (2019) reported that 14 million students have a school resource officer but lack access to a counselor, nurse, psychologist, or social worker.

Surprisingly, school resource officers have created unintended consequences. For example, one school police leader, Akil Hamm, Chief of the Baltimore City Police Department (BCPS), asserted that easy access to officers has created an opportunity for over-reliance on them for discipline (Hamm, 2016; Eisenberg, 2019). To address this, he implemented changes to the SRO training program when he assumed command (Hamm, 2016; Eisenberg, 2019). He suggested that school staff and SROs use a coordinated approach (Eisenberg, 2019). This led to a partnership with the Center for Dispute Resolution at the University of Maryland Carey Law (C-DRUM) to facilitate training for SROs and school administration (Eisenberg & Grochal, 2018).

By training both SROs and school staff, the goal was to reduce conflicts in how they approach student behavior, such as when an SRO is called to remove a disruptive student (Eisenberg, 2019). The training's positive or negative outcomes depend on the approach the staff take (Eisenberg, 2019). The new culture focused on prevention, interventions, and building

relationships and rapport, with the goal of creating a sense of safety and security in district buildings (Hamm, 2016; Eisenberg, 2019). After implementing the training program, arrests in BCPS decreased by 91% (Eisenberg, 2019; Papst, 2017).

Recent research on school safety has also examined alternatives to harsh punishments (Mayer et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that positive discipline can improve teacher safety (Astor et al., 2023). Astor et al. (2023) characterize this approach as restorative, fair, nonpunitive, and educational. They also assert that a school-wide policy of understanding positive discipline practices does not physically or psychologically harm students (Astor et al., 2023).

One study highlighted how a calm-down room could be utilized instead of school suspension or other harsh punishments (Baroni et al., 2020). The room included sensory items such as fidgets and weighted blankets. The room used specific interventions, such as talk therapy, motor activities, and facilitated problem-solving with trauma-informed, trained paraprofessionals (Baroni et al., 2020). Baroni (2020) also argued that school exclusions harm students because they do not help them feel part of the community and increase the likelihood of behavioral challenges at school. Examining strategies to reduce violence in schools is important, as responding to challenging behaviors and school violence is having a negative impact on teachers.

The Impact of Violence and Challenging Behavior on Educators

A theme in the literature review emerged about how challenging behavior and school violence affect educators. Aggressive or hostile student behavior negatively impacts the teaching environment (Castelli et al., 2015). Challenging behavior not only harms the classroom environment but also negatively affects teachers (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018).

As mentioned in the introduction, teacher well-being is a driver of teachers leaving the profession. A study from South Africa notes that some teachers report that they are having mental health issues due to challenging behavior and that some teachers are considering leaving the profession (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). In this study, teachers report that challenging behaviors in classrooms stress them, leading them to feel anger, impatience, frustration, and helplessness (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). The stress can also affect physical health, such as causing tension headaches (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). For some of the teachers, challenging behavior has increased so much that they feel unable to perform their normal teaching duties (Nunan & Ntombela, 2022). The stress can be emotionally draining for educators (Field, 2004), and some teachers seek support when they feel stressed due to violence.

When teachers experience violence directed at them, they have emotional reactions that may cause them to seek support (Anderman et al., 2018). When educators experience aggressive incidents, staff should receive support such as therapeutic services (McMahon, 2020). Providing supports such as de-escalation training could help reduce teacher attrition due to stress from responding to challenging classroom behaviors.

De-escalation Training

Having skills to manage challenging behaviors effectively is now imperative for all staff who work with students, including general education teachers and administrators (Couvillon et al., 2010). Providing de-escalation training is one way to help staff manage challenging behaviors. Many fields, including education, use a variety of de-escalation training approaches. De-escalation training can be delivered informally or through commercial training curricula.

De-escalation is a rather ambiguous concept. Price et al. (2015) found no consensus on how de-escalation is defined or on best practices for implementing de-escalation training.

Similarly, Hallett & Dickens (2017) note that after a rigorous literature review, they found no guidance on best practices or how de-escalation techniques should be taught.

While the literature offers no consensus on best practices for implementing de-escalation training, some studies provide insight; Price et al. (2015) revealed what they termed key components of de-escalation training. The key components they identified include characteristics of effective de-escalators, maintaining personal control, verbal and non-verbal skills, engaging with the patient, knowing when to intervene, ensuring safe conditions for de-escalation, and de-escalation strategies.

Another study also examined de-escalation training. Engel et al. (2020) asserted that de-escalation training generally includes both preventing aggression and managing it when it occurs. They also noted common components of de-escalation training: early-intervention strategies, communication skills (verbal and nonverbal), and physical intervention techniques (Engel et al., 2020). Utilizing curricula from commercial de-escalation programs is one way staff receive de-escalation training.

Commercial De-escalation Programs

Several companies provide de-escalation training to a variety of professionals, including educators. Many of these programs employ a train-the-trainer model to facilitate organizational training. These programs aim to train participants to prevent escalation to crisis (Adamson et al., 2024). Commercial de-escalation training programs are often associated with restraint training (Couvillon, 2010). However, these programs offer more than just physical skills training.

Couvillon et al. (2010) reviewed 13 programs to determine their effectiveness. Each program studied purports to prevent and intervene when aggressive behavior is displayed (Couvillon, 2010). Many programs reported spending between 25% and 50% of training time

examining antecedents and verbal de-escalation. This is hard for those selecting the programs to discern, as the programs themselves are often proprietary (Couvillon, 2010). This also makes it difficult to find program-related research. As a result, little evidence exists about their effectiveness (Adamson et al., 2024). Nor is there much empirical research that school districts can use to inform practice (Adamson et al., 2024). This confirms the need for additional research that examines how those trained to use de-escalation skills are using the skills they learned.

Summary

The use of de-escalation skills has many facets. This literature review identified several themes related to the use of de-escalation skills: challenging behaviors, school safety and violence in schools, and preventative practices. It also identified a few specific effective de-escalation skills.

The review also revealed a clear gap in the research about the use of de-escalation skills after training. This study was needed to help close that gap. By presenting examples of effective de-escalation skills used by a wide variety of educators, the study clarified how educators use these skills. Their words have also helped make the essence of de-escalation skills evident. In addition, it provided evidence to inform recommendations for school administrators as they consider best practices for implementing de-escalation training in their own settings.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

This study examined educators' experiences using de-escalation strategies in a mid-sized urban school district. The study also aimed to explore whether using de-escalation strategies affected educators' sense of safety in educational settings. The study included one anonymous survey and eighteen person-to-person semi-structured interviews with six educators. Most analyzed data came from interviews with the six educators. In addition, survey respondents provided additional perspectives that added richness to the dataset by expanding the range of perspectives included in the study.

The study included the voices of a wide range of educators who received de-escalation training in their district: administrators, instructional coaches, mental health providers, paraprofessionals, and both general education and special education teachers. The variety of participants' assignments and responsibilities provided the opportunity to learn how de-escalation skills were used in different contexts: general education classrooms, special education classrooms, and support staff offices. An unexpected context emerged during the study, as participants also reported using de-escalation strategies in other settings and in their personal lives.

Suitability of the Research Design

This study used an interpretative qualitative phenomenological research design inspired by ideas of Martin Heidegger, a German philosopher and educator. Heidegger believed that a phenomenon comes to life through its contextualization in day-to-day life (Horrigan-Kelly et al.,

2016; Vagle, 2024). His work has provided methodological guidance for researchers interpreting participants' lived experiences (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016).

Phenomenology is inherently interpretive (Heidegger et al., 2010). Heideggerian phenomenology includes not only describing the phenomena but also interpreting participants' meanings within the context of their being-in-the-world, making it appropriate for a study seeking to understand how educators experience, interpret, and integrate de-escalation training into their professional practice (Ho et al., 2026; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Vagle, 2024).

Central to Heideggerian phenomenology is the concept of Dasein, which Heidegger et al. (2010) described as follows:

> If the interpretation of the meaning of being is to become a task, Dasein is not only the primary being to be interrogated; in addition to that it is the being that always already in its being is related to what is sought in the question. (p. 13)

Heidegger argued that being human, or what he termed *Dasein*, is being aware of oneself as being but also being aware of the possibilities in the world (Conroy, 2003; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This was groundbreaking because it introduced the notion that, as a researcher, it is not possible to separate oneself from the object or phenomenon being studied (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). While analyzing the data collected, this reminded me to remain continually reflexive about my positionality as a de-escalation skills trainer, as I could not separate my perspective from that of a de-escalation trainer.

In addition to being inspired by Heidegger's ideas, the study methodology is also grounded in Herbert Blumer's work and his notion of Symbolic Interactionism. Interpretative phenomenology is appropriate for use when a study is guided by the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism requires researchers to make meaning of

symbols (words) through interactions with others in the real world. Because this interpretative phenomenology was grounded in symbolic interactionist theory, interviews and a survey were particularly appropriate for this study.

This qualitative phenomenological design allowed flexibility that enabled the researcher to be responsive and adaptive, as understanding was interpreted by the researcher and the educators who participated in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants' stories allowed the researcher to make sense of the phenomenon as they unfolded (Azarian, 2017). Through repeated coding, a hermeneutic circle, and member checking, a picture of how educators used de-escalation skills crystallized.

Purpose of the Study

According to Peoples (2021), phenomenological research brings to life the lived experiences of a particular population. This study examined how a particular population of educators (those trained to use de-escalation skills in an urban public school district) interpret and integrate de-escalation skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice. The second purpose was to explore whether those practices impacted the educators' sense of safety.

Research Questions

This study aimed to address these research questions to illuminate the lived experiences of educators who are using de-escalation skills and to determine if using the skills impacted their sense of safety:

> **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?
>
> **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Significance of the Study

Having skills to respond to challenging behavior, such as de-escalation skills, are an increasing priority in public education. Adopting programs to decrease escalation in classrooms is an essential priority for both K-12 and higher education institutions (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). In addition, teachers are seeking training on how to address challenging behavior. For example, teachers in North Carolina were surveyed about their training needs; the most requested training involved addressing challenging behaviors (Gebbie et al., 2011). Both general educators and special educators need to know how to use de-escalation skills to manage crises (Adamson et al., 2024). This study was needed to provide insight into how both general educators and special educators trained in de-escalation skills use them in daily practice to respond to challenging behaviors, as research on this is limited.

Murphy and Van Brunt (2019) noted that primary research on the effectiveness of various approaches to de-escalation training is limited. Research examining teacher perceptions of strategies used to reduce violence, including de-escalation, is also sparse to date (Perry et al., 2024). Further, one study characterized research evaluating de-escalation training as disappointing. Engel et al. (2020) noted that this disappointment is exacerbated by their finding that de-escalation training could have what they call a "critical impact" (p. 737) on the well-being, health, and safety of both professionals and the people they serve.

This study adds to the research on de-escalation skills by shedding light on how staff experience using them and whether doing so impacts safety for students and staff. The study included the voices of a wide variety of educators in various roles (e g, administrators, general education and special education teachers, support personnel). The variety of educators who participated shared similar stories and offered sage advice for how to effectively de-escalate

students. By sharing their experiences, participants provided concrete examples of best practices. This informed recommendations to school administrators seeking to implement best practices for de-escalation training.

Methodology

This study is an interpretative qualitative phenomenological study inspired by Heideggerian hermeneutics. Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a research methodology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In this case, it is both. Phenomenology allows researchers and participants to make meaning of lived experiences (Bloomberg, 2023). As a methodology, phenomenology helps researchers collect data, analyze it, and report the results (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). This study followed these expectations while remaining mindful of Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy. For example, Heidegger argued that a researcher cannot fully separate themselves from the phenomenon studied. This was important as the researcher was very familiar with the phenomenon examined in this study.

This study used one anonymous survey and several in-depth interviews to make sense of the phenomenon of using de-escalation skills. Using both interviews and survey results helped create a pool of narratives of lived experiences (Azarian, 2017). Each data collection method had advantages and disadvantages.

The study used one survey to maximize the number of educator perspectives (multivocality) and ensure credibility. Surveys are easy to administer as they are cost-effective and make data collection and analysis more convenient (Bloomberg, 2023). Surveys also provide an opportunity to collect anonymous responses. This was an intentional study design choice meant to make respondents more likely to take the survey and to answer questions openly. A disadvantage of using a survey was that it made it hard to ask follow-up questions when an

answer was unclear (Bloomberg, 2023). Using a second method was intended to reduce the impact of this disadvantage.

The study also used person-to-person interviews. Interviews are a standard qualitative data collection method, and person-to-person interviews are the most common type (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Interview participants related narratives or stories about the phenomenon and, in so doing, constructed meaning (Azarian, 2017). As interview participants related their stories, they used their perspective, definitions, and other available information to interpret the event as they told it (Ajjawi, 2007). According to Azarian (2017), interview participants' stories can provide researchers with evidence or a "justifying narrative" (p. 693). Interviews helped ensure the results were reliable.

Tracy (2010) notes that worthy studies are both interesting and surprising. This study was novel in that it focused on the voices of a variety of educators, including general educators, special educators, administrators, and others. Together, these voices created a well-rounded, coherent story of how educators experienced using de-escalation skills across settings, with interesting and surprising results.

Using purposeful sampling also made it possible to compare the different groups within the sample (Stratton, 2024). This was relevant because the study included different groups of educators, particularly general and special educators. The study included general educators and intentionally sought their perspectives. Examining de-escalation strategies through these multi-dimensional perspectives is rare in educational research and helps fill a significant gap.

The Research Site

This study was conducted in an urban, mid-sized Kansas school district. Selecting a single district helped bind the study to one research site (Hays, 2004). The district has nearly

13,000 students; 73% receive free or reduced-price lunch, 24% receive special education services, and 11% receive English Learner support. The racial and ethnic demographics illustrate the diversity of the students in the district:

Table 3.1. Research Site District Racial Demographics

Hispanic	37%
White	32.3%
Multiracial	14.7%
African American	14.5%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	.7%
Asian	.5%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	.3%

Data Collection

To begin the research, I sought permission from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the district research site. After obtaining district and IRB approval, I began data collection. I collected data over five months, from November 17, 2025, to April 10, 2026**.**

Table 3.2. Data Collection Timeline

District Site Permission Granted	**November 5, 2025**
Institutional Research Board (IRB) Approval Granted	**November 14, 2025**
Notification sent to Site Building Principals about approaching staff members	**November 17, 2025**
Anonymous Survey Sent	**November 17, 2025-January 6, 2026**
Interview Participants Recruited	**November 20, 2025-January 16, 2026**
Interviews Conducted	**December 5, 2025-April 10, 2026**

Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used when participants represent a particular population or have a specific characteristic of interest (Stratton, 2024). After receiving IRB approval from the university's Institutional Review Board and the district research site, I used purposeful sampling to select district educators to invite to participate in the study. Using district training records, I selected potential participants based on the following criteria: participants had to be current district employees who had completed district-provided de-escalation training (The Mandt System®) within the last three years.

Purposeful sampling increased efficiency because it required fewer resources and less time (Stratton, 2024). It also ensured that the participants had the prerequisite training needed to participate in the study. The method also increased the likelihood of obtaining a wider variety of perspectives. Participants could have come from any building in the district. Fifty-three district employees agreed to participate in this study.

Before approaching any staff members about participating, as required by the research district, emails were sent to the principals of potential participants outlining the purpose of the research and warning that the researcher would be approaching staff from their building to participate in the study. Principals were also assured that staff would not be approached about the study or participate in research during the duty day. No principals expressed concerns about approaching their staff. Data were collected in two phases.

Phase 1: Survey Data Collection

During the first phase of the study, a survey was sent to staff members who had received de-escalation training in the last three years. Before sending the survey to potential respondents,

I sent a test survey to a former Mandt System® trainer in the site district and a district-level administrator. Based on their feedback, I slightly adjusted the survey for clarity.

I invited 191 staff members who had received district de-escalation training within the last three years to participate in an anonymous survey via email. The informational email contained a Google Form that provided information about the purpose of the study, the research questions, the estimated time required to complete the survey, and the voluntary nature of participation. Potential participants were reminded that they could stop at any time if they changed their mind after starting the survey. To ensure procedural safeguards were in place, the survey included a consent statement (see Appendices A and B). This protected participants from harm, as they volunteered to participate in the research (Tracy, 2010). The form contained:

- The date of approval by the research site.
- The date of approval by the University Institutional Review Board
- The IRB Proposal Number
- The time frame of the study
- The principal investigator supervising my research
- Contact information for questions about the research or the IRB approval
- The purpose of the research
- The procedures for the research
- The voluntary nature of participation
- Risks of participating
- Benefits of participating
- Measures to ensure confidentiality
- Terms of participation

As Dillman et al. (2014) recommended, the survey appealed to the educators being surveyed by asking for their expertise. An initial email request and two reminder emails were sent to all potential respondents. Of those emailed, 47 (25%) responded to the survey and completed it between November 17, 2025, and January 14, 2026. The following tables represent the roles and grade levels of the survey respondents:

Table 3.3. Survey Respondents' Educational Roles

Role in Education	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Special Education Teacher	17	36.2%
General Education Teacher	6	12.8%
General Education Administrator	6	12.8%
Other	6	12.8%
Special Education Paraprofessional	5	10.6%
General Education Counselor	3	6.4%
Special Education Consultant	3	6.4%
Social Worker	2	4.3%
General Education Instructional Coach	1	2.1%
Special Education School Psychologist	1	2.1%
Total	50*	106.3%*

*Because respondents could **choose all that apply**, the totals exceed 47 respondents and 100%

Table 3.4. Grade-Level Bands of Survey Respondents

Grade Band	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Pre-K-Elementary only (Pre-K–5)	30	63.8%
Secondary only (6–12)	14	29.8%
Both Elementary and Secondary (Pre-K–12)	3	6.4%
Total	47	100.0%

For more detailed information about survey respondents, please see **Appendix C.**

Phase 2: Interview Data Collection

The architect of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer, encouraged researchers to talk with participants to understand how they envisioned the world (Schwalbe, 2020). Vagle states that interviews create opportunities to gain new knowledge about the phenomenon (2025). In the second phase of the study, I interviewed educators about their experiences using de-escalation strategies.

To recruit educators for the study, I emailed potential interview participants. The email outlined the research purpose and the structure of the semi-structured, confidential interviews. Potential participants were informed that each interview would likely take no more than one hour and that interviews would be conducted either in person or via Zoom and recorded, if preferred. The email also reminded participants that participation was voluntary and that they could begin and stop the interviews at any time. Participants who wanted to take part in the study were asked to complete another Google form that included the following (see Appendices D and E):

1. A brief (5-minute) demographic survey that included their name and professional experience.
2. Their preference for the interview mode (in person or via Zoom).
3. Their preferences regarding the time/location of interviews.
4. A consent statement to participate

The consent statement included:

- The date of approval by the research site.
- The date of approval by the University Institutional Review Board
- The IRB Proposal Number
- The time frame of the study
- The principal investigator supervising my research
- Contact information for questions about the research or the IRB approval
- The purpose of the research
- The procedures for the research
- The voluntary nature of participation
- Risks of participating
- Benefits of participating
- Measures to ensure confidentiality
- Terms of participation

My goal was to interview 5-10 educators. This number was chosen because the study site district had a relatively limited pool of candidates who had taken the training within the specified time frame. Fewer than 200 staff members had taken de-escalation training within the specified

time frame. The final number of participants also depended on how quickly saturation was reached (Peoples, 2021). I invited eleven educators to participate, and six ultimately agreed.

Purposeful sampling helped me reduce potential bias and increase the chances of generalization. To ensure participants included both general educators and special educators, I continued to solicit interview participants until representation was equal. This aimed to ensure respondents were not primarily special education teachers. This was important because I wanted to include general education perspectives. Having general educators participate also increased the chance of generalization. In addition, I purposefully included staff members I did not train to reduce potential bias. I successfully gained consent from one staff member who was trained by another district trainer. Employing purposeful sampling also ensured the study was sufficiently broad and captured multiple perspectives.

Each interviewee participated in three semi-structured interviews over five months. Interviews were conducted in person or online via Zoom conferencing and recorded using an iPad. A well-crafted research plan can be difficult because interactions can be unpredictable (Azarian, 2017). Semi-structured interviews ask some questions of all interviewees and allow flexibility in the order in which questions are asked (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This format allowed flexibility during the interview and adjustment when the respondent shared unexpected knowledge about the subject or when a response needed clarification (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The following table provides more information about the timeline and focus of each interview.

Table 3.5. Person-to-Person Interview Timeline and Focus of the Interviews

Interview 1 **Research Question 1 (RQ1)**	Introductory Questions: Background and Educational Philosophy, Classroom Management. Type of De-escalation training, Reason for taking the training, incorporating de-escalation skills in practice, most frequently used skills, describing a time when de-escalation skills were used and emotions felt, responding to challenging behavior, uncomfortableness using de-escalation skills and final thoughts about using de-escalation skills.
Interview 2 **Research Question 1 (RQ1)** **Research Question 2 (RQ2)**	Member Checking/Member reflection: noticings and clarification, if needed. Teacher identity in using de-escalation skills: efficacy in using de-escalation skills, identity as a teacher who uses de-escalation skills, impact of using de-escalation skills in practice and what it means to them personally, evolution of using de-escalation skills, using de-escalation skills and leaving the profession and final thoughts about using de-escalation skills. Safety: feeling unsafe at school, meaning as an educator, use of de-escalation skills impact on sense of safety.
Interview 3	Member Checking/member reflection: noticings and clarification, if needed. Final thoughts about using de-escalation skills. Sharing of emerging themes

Each educator was interviewed three times. To make interviewees more comfortable, they chose the interview time and location. Three interviewees preferred to meet in public settings where privacy could be maintained, and three were conducted in a mix of school settings and via Zoom. During the first interview, the participants were also asked to choose a pseudonym for the interviews. The following is a summary of each interviewee's responses about their background and experience:

Table 3.6. Interview Participant Background Information

Participant Pseudonym	Coach	Harley	Hoops	Jessica	Jim	Lauren
Years of Experience	3	11	11	23	8	21
Current Position	General Education Physical Education Teacher	Special Education Preschool teacher	Special Education Behavior Teacher	General Education Dean of Students	Teacher in a Specialized Behavior Program	General Education Instructional Coach
Grades currently Serving	K-5th grade students	3-4 years old Preschool students	K-5th grade students	6-8th grade students	4th-5th grade students	Pre-K-5th grade students and staff
Previous experience	Previous employment in a children's crisis center	Elementary Special Education Resource Room and Behavior Support Room	Elementary Special Education Resource Room	Middle School General Education Social Studies Teacher	General Education Catholic School 6th grade math and science teacher	General Education Elementary classroom teacher
Type(s) of De-escalation training received identified by participants	The Mandt System® Ci3T Low Intensity Strategies Training in a children's crisis center	The Mandt System® Behavior Professional Development Crisis Prevention Institute Social Emotional Learning	The Mandt System® District Professional development	The Mandt System® Boys Town Ci3T MTSS Framework Kagan Cooperative Learning Win-Win Love and Logic as a Trainer	The Mandt System® On the Job Training from Peers Traumatic Brain Injury Training	The Mandt System® Classroom Management Training

Most interview questions were intentionally left open-ended to elicit contextualized narratives that could help uncover the essence of the phenomenon. At the same time, using an exploratory lens enabled interpretive insights into how these experiences may or may not vary

across different educational contexts and career stages. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to adjust questions as participants' responses prompted follow-up or clarifying questions.

This study also used descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to report survey results and a few salient data points. For example, to identify the types of de-escalation training that participants received, results from both the survey and interviews were tabulated and results identified using descriptive statistics. This methodology allowed educators' lived experiences to be shared without searching for themes.

I protected all identifying information and used pseudonyms throughout data collection and analysis. Before each interview, interviewees confirmed that they consented to be interviewed and recorded. After each interview, I preserved the audio file and the transcript provided by the Voice Memo application. I stored all data in a Google Drive folder on a password-protected personal computer, accessible only to the primary investigator and me. Keeping the data in one place also facilitated efficient data and ongoing analysis.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data in phases as I reviewed the transcripts, recordings, and survey data through the interpretive process of coding (Saldaña, 2021). Throughout coding, I used a hermeneutic circle, inspired by Heidegger, to analyze the phenomenon as a whole and its constituent parts (Peoples, 2021). Heidegger's circle is an analytical tool used to interpret data by examining past, present, and future in a continually iterative manner (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). It is also a flexible analytical tool researchers can use at any stage of phenomenology, including analysis (Ho et al., 2026).

Using a hermeneutic circle is a skill researchers at all stages of their careers can use to be reflexive (Ho et al., 2026). Reflexivity is a key component of using a Heideggerian circle for

analysis. As a researcher, reflecting on my preconceptions as a de-escalation trainer helped me stay open-minded so I did not reach conclusions too early in the process (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Heidegger believed that separating oneself as a researcher was impossible, as phenomena are interpreted through lived experiences (Vagle, 2025). I researched a phenomenon about which I had extensive knowledge and practical experience. As such, it was difficult for me to bracket my experiences entirely, as I am so immersed in the phenomenon as a district trainer. This framework enabled me to utilize the research to revise some of my preconceived notions, given my familiarity with de-escalation training. Within an interpretative phenomenological framework, inspired by Heideggerian principles, such prior understanding is not bracketed; instead, it is recognized as an essential part of interpretation (Peoples, 2021).

I also used member checking to validate the findings after each interview (Saldaña, 2021). After coding the data, I shared the information with the respondents for reflection. In each subsequent interview, I discussed the dataset. Discussion provides an opportunity to reveal internal thoughts and elicit new ones (Saldaña, 2021).

As I coded, the circle helped me move between the educator's lived experiences, their thoughts, and the contexts that shape those experiences, such as school culture, prior knowledge, and philosophies. Circling back to codes throughout the process provided a vehicle for ongoing interpretation as new data entered the analysis (Peoples, 2021). By learning from educators' lived experiences, I developed new understandings of both the whole and the parts of the phenomenon (Peoples, 2021).

I conducted coding in several phases during data analysis. During initial and subsequent coding, I ascribed meaning to the data (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Initial coding for this project began with preliminary jottings. Preliminary jottings are collected during the data

collection process (Saldaña, 2021). As I interviewed participants, I created preliminary jottings. I recorded these jottings in an electronic journal. Preliminary jottings captured passing thoughts for later review (Saldaña, 2021).

In the next phase, I carefully read the transcripts and compared them with the recordings. I corrected the transcript to match the recording and made minor refinements. For example, the transcription generally left out ums, which reduced the need to remove them, but I deleted the remaining ums, along with hesitant or nervous words such as like. In addition, I labeled the speakers with pseudonyms selected by the interviewees and deleted any identifying data. Listening to the recordings and comparing them to the transcripts began a circular coding process as I made additional preliminary jottings.

Next, I read the transcripts to understand the big picture, as Saldaña (2021) recommends. Reading the transcripts also provided an opportunity to add analytic memos to the preliminary jottings, continuing the circling process. Analytic memos are widely recognized as a method to quickly collect thoughts and other musings about the data (Saldaña, 2021). The electronic journal transformed into a running list of codes that grew with each repeated round of analysis. Stopping to capture thoughts in the electronic journal was valuable because it revealed potential codes or patterns (Saldaña, 2021). It also created a space to capture ideas for follow-up questions and general thoughts. I referred to the electronic journal often during the study.

Data analysis also involved looking for commonalities in the data, which began to reveal themes, one function of coding (Saldaña, 2021). To begin this phase of coding, I manually coded data using spreadsheets. Manual coding is appropriate for small-scale studies (Saldaña, 2021). After listening to the recordings and ensuring the transcripts were accurate, I transferred transcript data to spreadsheets for more detailed analysis. I organized the transcripts in a

spreadsheet by interview by listing interview questions in the first column and pasting all participants' answers into the row. I also coded all open-ended survey questions in the same manner as the interviews and ultimately combined the open-ended survey question answer data with the interview data.

During this manual coding phase, I used a combination of holistic and in vivo coding. In vivo coding kept the analysis grounded in participants' voices (Saldaña, 2021). Listing the interview and survey questions in a spreadsheet provided an organizational tool for identifying holistic codes. Using color coding, I holistically coded groups of larger phrases into one broad-stroke code (Saldaña, 2021). Holistic coding efficiently captures the phenomenon's essence (Saldaña, 2021). Highlighting the answers and viewing the phrases alongside the questions revealed emerging themes almost immediately. Combining participant voices with holistic coding allowed me to get an initial sense of the data (Saldaña, 2021).

I conducted another round of coding using pattern coding. Pattern coding involves grouping codes that share similar meanings (Saldaña, 2021). In this round, I reorganized and recoded the data, ultimately winnowing the codes into a more streamlined list of "meaning units" (Bloomberg, 2023). This method helped identify emerging patterns or themes in the meaning units. As the participants described how they used the skill, several routines or procedures repeated across the data became larger concepts (Saldaña, 2021). During this round of coding, new insights showed how themes and patterns were often interconnected within larger concepts (Bloomberg, 2023).

A spontaneous third round of coding occurred. As I began outlining the research results, I referred to the original transcripts again. I wanted to review the whole phrase, not just a few words, to ensure I captured the quote accurately and in context. I eventually decided to re-read

all the transcripts one more time. This unplanned hermeneutic circling back to the transcripts was helpful. Reviewing the interview and survey texts continued to generate codes, resulting in new themes emerging and, in some instances, a change in direction through reflection.

Summary

Using the hermeneutic circle helped me analyze the phenomenon as a whole and its constituent parts (Peoples, 2021). The initial coding allowed a big-picture view to emerge, with general ideas about using de-escalation skills. The next round of coding began to reveal the phenomenon's constituent parts. Another round of coding generated new ideas and helped me zoom out to view the phenomenon as a whole. This allowed several key concepts with their constituent parts, about using de-escalation in schools to emerge, which I discuss in the next chapter.

Positionality Statement

As a district de-escalation trainer, I am an insider with experiential knowledge of the phenomenon. As a researcher facilitating de-escalation training, I chose an interpretative framework inspired by Heideggerian principles, as it allows the researcher to be recognized as part of the investigation rather than separate from it. As a researcher, I was committed to hearing and interpreting participants' voices on their own terms. Interpreting experiences with others within the familiar context of lived experience as educators added to my knowledge and influenced how I interpreted the phenomenon's meaning. As a result, my prior knowledge was augmented and enhanced exponentially.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

Tracy (2010) identified practices that define good qualitative research. This project used two of those practices, multivocality and member reflection, to ensure credibility. Multivocality involves including a variety of voices in the study. The following voices were included: administrators, counselors, a dean of students, general education teachers, an instructional coach, paraprofessionals, special education teachers, school psychologists, and social workers. Including such a wide variety of voices created an opportunity for diverse opinions (Tracy, 2010). Doing so also lent credibility to the results as saturation was reached during the study and several themes emerged.

To ensure reliability and credibility, I used member checking. Before the second and third interviews, I shared transcripts that were color-coded with initial codes with the participants. During the interviews, I asked for feedback about the transcripts. This procedure also helped me refine my conclusions about themes. Coach noted: “there was a lot of consistency throughout” (Coach, Interview 2) and “just so many similarities (Coach, Interview 3). Harley also noted, “there is a lot of consistency " (Harley, Interview 3). This confirmed my impression of consistency. It also helped me see themes through their eyes. For example, when Coach saw the following in the transcripts: “A lot of just being there for the kids and doing what's best for them, by putting them first, it was nice to see that as a common denominator through everyone (Coach, Interview 2), she helped shape my conclusion that the educators engaged in de-escalation training with the students’ interest in mind. Harley had a similar thought when she noticed: “a lot of putting the student first (Harley, Interview 3). Hoops said, “I think you did a really good job just picking the important parts (Hoops, Interview 2).

Member checking also led to new insights. For example, when Harley noted that "In the transcript, we spoke more about preventing the use of the holds and like, what we can do to prevent them at all costs (Harley, Interview 2). This was not how I interpreted the interview. However, this theme that Harley recognized became an important theme in the study. Her recognition of this theme prior to my own shows how member checking can also help co-construct understanding of a phenomenon.

Triangulation was also utilized to ensure credibility (Bloomberg, 2023). This project used multiple data sources. Results from an anonymous survey provided information from a wide variety of educators. 18 interviews were conducted with six educators. The use of repeated interviews allowed a relationship to be developed with the participants that was conversational and so those interviewed felt comfortable sharing their lived experiences (Ajjawi, 2007). These educators represented general education and special education. This was meaningful because general educators may have viewed the phenomenon through a different lens.

Finally, I kept an electronic journal. The journal became an important data source as I used it for organization and to store my internal thoughts. I continually circled back to the journal during the project. Using triangulation ensured that saturation was achieved (Bloomberg, 2023).

Transferability

I made efforts to ensure the findings from this project are transferable. During the literature review, it became clear that special educators used de-escalation skills more often than general educators. I wanted this study to be more generalizable, as de-escalation skills can be used with any student. Intentionally not limiting participants to one school, one grade level, or one position also increased the potential for generalization.

A delimitation of this study was limiting participants to those who had taken one specific commercial brand of de-escalation training within a certain time frame. This delimitation aimed to use purposeful sampling to ensure participants had received professional development de-escalation training relatively recently. This also helped reduce the potential impact of recall bias.

The study intended to include as many types of educators as possible. However, the pool of selected candidates did not have many secondary educators as anticipated. This may decrease generalization for secondary educators.

Confirmability

This study was grounded in symbolic interactionism and used interpretive methodology inspired by Heideggerian hermeneutic phenomenology. Both philosophies emphasize interpretation. Both philosophies acknowledge that the positionality of the researcher being part of the world in which meaning is made creates an opportunity for bias. Using both of these philosophies required me to identify this bias clearly. In both philosophies, it is considered impossible to separate oneself from the phenomenon; however, being part of the world in which this phenomenon was lived was a strength, as I had foreknowledge that served as a starting point for interpretation.

Both philosophies are based on understanding words and interpreting them. Many voices were heard in this study. Reflexivity throughout the process allowed me to continually reflect on those words to make meaning. Part of this involved reading participants' written words. Another part of making sense of the words was to engage in conversations with participants through interviews. To prepare for the 18 interviews, I constructed an initial set of questions to provide structure. I planned 31 questions for the interviews. The interviews became very conversational.

As interviewees shared their insights, I generated more questions. As a result, I asked 69 additional questions through reflexivity.

Reflexivity is a key component of using a Heideggerian circle for analysis (Ho et. al., 2026). At times, I read through the transcript and realized I had missed a question I meant to ask. I noted this in my electronic journal and remembered to ask it in the next interview. Reflecting on the interviews also generated follow-up questions. These additional questions, and more importantly the data they yielded, added to the richness of the data. Combining electronic journaling with reflexivity helped ensure the findings of this study are trustworthy (Bloomberg, 2023).

As a district trainer for de-escalation skills, additional measures were put into place to reduce potential bias. To ensure that the study was not an evaluation of district training or me, an anonymous survey was used. Questions were crafted to capture the essence of the phenomenon rather than assess the quality of the training that prepared educators to use the skills. In addition, an anonymous survey gave staff an opportunity to answer honestly and reduced the likelihood that they were evaluating my training methodology or were concerned about any preexisting relationship I had with the participants. I also ensured that at least one interview participant was not trained by me.

Dependability

To ensure dependability, I crafted a clear research plan. I included this plan in the study's methodology section. Supporting documents, such as the interview and survey questions, were included in the appendices. Other researchers could easily replicate these and use them in their own research. In addition, as mentioned before, triangulation was used to ensure credibility (Bloomberg, 2023). By using multiple data sources from a wide variety of educators across

general and special education and numerous positions, dependability was also attained, as evidenced by the fact that saturation was achieved (Bloomberg, 2023).

Conclusion

This study was crafted to ensure that it was relevant and produced accurate findings. I remained reflexive throughout the process to ensure the identified research plan was followed as closely as possible. I addressed potential bias in multiple ways to ensure the researcher's positionality did not affect the results. The project included a wide variety of voices to ensure enough data was collected and that it represented multiple perspectives. The data were analyzed multiple times to ensure the results were accurate and would add to the extant research about using de-escalation skills.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited and supportive way during the preparation of this manuscript. AI assisted in locating additional references, clarifying concepts, identifying spelling errors, suggesting grammar adjustments, and creating visual aids. All ideas, interpretations, and conceptual contributions are my own. I carefully reviewed, edited, and refined all AI-assisted content to ensure accuracy, integrity, and alignment with my voice and intent as a scholar. AI was not used to generate data or replace my critical thinking or judgment.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

This study attempted to answer two questions: **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice? **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students? Data collection to answer these questions occurred in two phases. The first phase involved an anonymous survey. 47 respondents completed the survey. The second phase involved a series of semi-structured interviews with six participants. Participants in the study were trained in de-escalation skills. Through their stories and experiences, the answers to the research questions became very clear.

Participant Educational Roles

To learn more about the educators whose lived experiences the study examined, survey and interview questions addressed topics such as experience, current positions, the age of students they serve, and the types of de-escalation training they had received. This information clarified educator demographics and the study context. For example, the data analysis revealed that 34% of the study participants were identified as general educators, 53% were identified as special educators, 2% self-identified as both a special educator and general educator, and 11% were unable to be identified, as 6 survey respondents marked "other" on the survey and could not be categorized with greater specificity. Participants in this study also represented at least 10 distinct roles in the district:

- Administrator
- Counselor
- Dean of Students
- General Education Teacher

- Instructional Coach
- Paraprofessional
- School Psychologist
- Social Worker
- Special Education Consultant
- Special Education Teacher

De-escalation Training Identified by Participants

To learn more about participants' experience with de-escalation training, participants identified any de-escalation skills training they had received. The Mandt System® training was by far the most common type reported by both survey respondents and interviewees, with 85% of participants reporting they received it. However, participants identified 23 different types of de-escalation training. The variety of training identified was unexpected.

Many participants reported receiving de-escalation training in addition to The Mandt System®. The most common type of de-escalation training, in addition to the Mandt System®, was district professional development, identified by seven participants. Tied for the next most common type of training received were two other commercial de-escalation training programs. Six participants had Crisis Prevention Institute Training, and one had Managing Aggressive Behavior Training. Another common training, identified by five participants, was Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) or The Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention (Ci3T), the district's MTSS model.

A few survey participants did not report receiving The Mandt System® training. Five reported receiving de-escalation training through unnamed district professional development sessions, and one respondent reported receiving only Boys Town Training. Another respondent identified Ci3T, the district's MTSS model, as the only de-escalation training received. One

respondent did not identify a type of training, but listed strategies used to de-escalate. The table immediately following summarize all types of de-escalation training identified by participants.

Table 4.1. Types of De-escalation Training Identified by All Participants

Mandt System®	45
District Professional Development	7
Crisis Prevention Institute	6
MTSS, Ci3T	5
Boys Town	4
College Coursework	2
Informal Training	2
Kagan/Kagan Win-Win	2
Love and Logic	2
Neurosequential Model in Education	2
Trauma-Informed Practices	2
Adverse Childhood Experiences Training	1
Behavior Professional Development	1
Children's Crisis Center Training	1
Classroom Management	1
Conscious Discipline	1
FEMA Training	1
Law Enforcement Officer Training	1
Managing Aggressive Behavior (MAB)	1
Psychology Degree Coursework	1
Positive Behavioral Intervention Support	1
Social Emotional Learning	1
Traumatic Brain Training	1

Note: Participants could select more than one option.

Interviews and Participants

A significant portion of the study data came from six educators who agreed to be interviewed for this project. While both survey respondents and interviewees answered some of the same questions, interviews allowed a broader range of questions and deeper exploration. I constructed an initial set of interview questions, but added 69 additional questions organically throughout the process. I asked some additional questions on the spot as follow-ups or to seek

clarification. Others were asked at the next interview, as they were added after reviewing the transcript. For example, a participant referenced having a safe place in the classroom, so I asked a follow-up question: What does a safe place look like for you in your classroom? The second and third interviews also included questions that created an opportunity for member checking.

Member checking allowed me to validate the project's findings throughout the process by discussing them with the participant (Saldaña, 2021). Allowing questions to emerge organically during the interview and conducting member checking created more opportunities for both participants and the researcher to interpret the data. This broader range of questions and answers provided a rich dataset to analyze.

During the first interview, each participant answered three questions to ease into the interview and introduce themselves. The questions were crafted to elicit information such as participants' years of experience, current position, the grades they currently serve, and any previous education experience. The current position also indicated whether the participant was a special educator or a general educator. For a summary of this information, see Table 3.6. The next few questions focused on participants' educational identity and philosophy. The following is a summary of their responses:

Coach

Coach is a general education physical education teacher. She is in her third year of teaching. Coach teaches kindergarten-5th grade students.

Coach believes that every child can be successful and that her philosophy is to lead with compassion and empathy. She believes this helps her determine how to meet her students' unique needs. Her ultimate goal is for them to be successful.

Harley

Harley is a preschool teacher in her 11th year. She currently teaches three- and four-year-olds in half-day special education classes. She has 12 students in each class, including a small number of typically developing peer models. This is her third year in that role. Previously, she taught elementary special education, including spending time in a specialized behavior support classroom.

Harley's educational philosophy is rooted in relationships. She believes that it is important to "love them first and teach them second" (Harley, Interview 1). She also notes that students will not work on academic work without a relationship with her. She also said she believes building relationships helps kids become better adults and that showing students respect is part of building those relationships.

Hoops

Hoops is in her 11th year as a special education teacher. She began teaching as a resource room teacher but has always gravitated toward serving students with behavioral issues. For the last four or five years, she has served students in a behavior classroom. Her classroom functions as an as-needed classroom. She characterizes her room as a "hodgepodge" of services such as breaks, completing academic work, and coming to her room to de-escalate. All her students have service time in her room written into their Individual Education Plans (IEPS) and also have behavior intervention plans. She currently has 16 students on her caseload in grades 1 through 5.

Hoops characterizes her educational philosophy as "authentic" (Hoops, Interview 1). She notes that loving students is important for building relationships. She also says it is important to learn about students so she can build relationships with them. Hoops surmises that the key to

building relationships is providing students with what she calls basic human needs, such as food and a sense of safety. Lastly, she notes that she is very structured in her classroom.

Jessica

Jessica is in her 23rd year of teaching middle school students. She started her career as a social studies teacher and decided that she wanted to be an administrator. She notes that her current position is a stepping stone for an administrative position; however, she is not currently pursuing an administrative position. She is currently the Dean of Students and works with all the 6th-8th grade students in her school. Much of her work focuses on discipline.

Jessica's educational philosophy is that every student can learn. She also notes that every student, even though they are not the same, deserves both love and compassion, even when they are not at their best. She believes that students have unique needs and that students in behavior classrooms need more compassion and leniency than others.

Jim

Jim is in his eighth year of teaching in a special program for students with extreme behaviors. He describes the setting as a locked program that allows students to roam in the unit but prevents them from leaving. He notes that this prevents elopement, which he characterizes as unsafe for the students: "So to keep them safe, we have to have locked doors" (Jim, Interview 2). He originally was a sixth-grade math and science teacher, but when the program moved the sixth-grade students to another program, he switched to teaching intermediate elementary students, typically in fourth and fifth grade. He is currently teaching four fifth-grade students in that setting. He has experience teaching in a Catholic school.

Jim's education philosophy is based on the foundation that every student needs to learn and can learn. He believes that many of his students lack social-emotional skills and that it is

important for him to teach them those skills. Finally, he advocates teaching students the basics they will need to be successful in life.

Lauren

Lauren has 21 years of experience in pre-K-5th-grade settings, including 15 years in her current role as an instructional coach. She describes herself as wearing many hats. Her primary job is to support teacher instruction. She focuses on coaching teachers about classroom management and student engagement. She also responds to care calls as a member of her building leadership team. She describes a care call as occurring after the teacher has made three requests to a student and the student has not responded. Members of the care call team collect the student(s) to implement plans or de-escalate the situation before returning the student to class.

Lauren's educational philosophy is grounded in the belief that all students can learn and should have the opportunity to do so. She also believes that when a student is having difficulty, an educator's responsibility is to determine why. She firmly believes this will help the educator support the student's learning.

As the educators answered the background questions, themes emerged in their responses. For example, one theme that emerged as educators shared their educational philosophy is the belief that every student can learn. The educators' words express this in the following representative statements:

Table 4.2. Theme: Every Kid Can Learn

Coach	Just that every kid can be successful.
Jessica-Interview 1	Everybody can learn.
Jim-Interview 1	I believe that every student and every kid needs [to] or can learn, and some of those kiddos, some of them lack social emotional skills and things like that.

Lauren-Interview 1	What I can say is my educational beliefs and the way things go are that every kid can learn, every kid should have the opportunity to learn, and everybody can have a bad day.

Another theme emerged as the educators shared more about themselves. These educators believe that structure and routine are an important part of their educational identity and philosophy. The educators related how this manifested for them in their practice:

Table 4.3. Theme: Structure and Routine

Coach-Interview 1	I think my own kind of internal practices show in my space, because everything is super organized.
Harley, Interview 1	Just having structure and routines and, you know, having the kids know that, and that helps a lot with managing the behaviors.
Hoops, Interview 1	I believe in structure. I feel like the kids need to know exactly what their expectations are.
Jim-Interview 1	Being consistent, don't change things up with the kiddos, because especially, kids where I'm at, they don't like change.
Lauren-Interview 1	The librarian, and I have made a checklist of what it looks like to be respectful, what it looks like to be in control, and what it looks like to be ready to learn because those are our three expectations across the board, anywhere you are in the building. And it's really hard to hold to that expectation if you don't understand what it looks like and sounds like. And so that's what our goal is to make sure that everybody in this situation knows what it looks like and sounds like.

As this data was analyzed, it was also clear that the educators interviewed cared deeply for their students and used de-escalation skills to benefit the students with whom they work. This sense of care and concern permeated the thoughts shared during the interviews. Several examples of this care and concern were expressed as love for their students.

Table 4.4. Theme: Love

Coach-Interview 2	Like, I love you, you matter to me.
Harley-Interview 1	I would say my educational philosophy is to love them first and teach them second.

Hoops-Interview 1	If you don't love the kids, then it's going to be hard to connect with them.
Jessica-Interview 1	…everyone deserves love and compassion…
Jim-Interview 1	They just need love.

Another background question posed to the participants was: What was your reason for taking de-escalation training? Each participant had a slightly different reason. Coach indicated that she had prior experience with children in crisis, and she took it to make sure her "bases were covered" because she is "not afraid to step into situations where it's a little more necessary to have or can be beneficial to have" (Coach, interview 1). Jessica reported something similar when she noted that she took it to ensure that she was well prepared for many eventualities: "To build my knowledge base, to build my toolbox because what works one day may not work the next day with the same student" (Jessica, Interview 1). Lauren "wanted to have it so that I knew how to support those kids when they did get upset and angry (Lauren, Interview 1). Harley took the training to help the students: "So whatever I can learn, whatever I can do to help them (Harley, Interview 1). Jim noted that it was required for him as a special education teacher and that:

> I think that if we are prepared for a bunch of different situations, if things are necessary, then if the kid's not being safe and things like that, we have to have the kids' best interest" (Jim, Interview 1).

Hoops took it because she is a special education teacher, but she also believes the training is very important: "I do feel like that whole first part is just so vital for people to see and to know" (Hoops, Interview 1).

This discussion and other questions highlight another theme related to the care and concern addressed previously. To care for students more effectively, these educators took a

proactive approach. These educators took de-escalation training and used de-escalation skills to help students. That theme was clear in the following comments collected during the interviews.

Table 4.5. Theme: To Help Students

Coach-Interview 3	…I mean, obviously, we're there for the kids…
Harley-Interview 1	Because we're always here for the kids and we're always here for, you know, helping them.
Hoops-Interview 1	I mean, I have to help them.
Jessica-Interview 1	Just compassion and wanting to help him, not feel as bad.
Jim-Interview 1	I really work for my kids too.
Lauren-Interview 1	And so, I wanted to have it so that I knew how to support those kids when they did get upset and angry. I did it for myself to help better understand kids and better understand how to help them.

Research Question 1 (RQ1): Concepts and Themes

Context of the Study

Participants in this study are urban public school educators who use de-escalation skills to help students. How they do so addresses **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice? Understanding how educators use de-escalation skills requires understanding what challenging behaviors occur in their context and how often they require de-escalation. As educators shared stories of using de-escalation skills, themes emerged that shed light on the educators' context. Educators reported using de-escalation skills every day.

De-escalation skills and challenging behaviors are interdependent concepts. The need to use de-escalation skills is predicated on the presence of challenging behaviors in schools. The educators in this study certainly experience challenging behaviors. For example, most interview participants and some survey respondents indicated that they use de-escalation skills daily. A sample of responses demonstrating this is listed in the table below.

Table 4.6. Theme: Just Today

Coach, Interview 1	Actually, just today.
Hoops-Interview 3	I mean, that's like it was today. It was just one after the other, after the other, and there's not enough people to go get them all. or I'm in the room and I have like six mad kids, you know?
Jessica-Interview 1	Today, even, somebody in the hallway, screaming and yelling, so I got quieter, got down on their level.
Jim-Interview 2	Today, a kid was running up and down the halls, screaming, yelling, like, cussing all the things.
Lauren-Interview 2	This truly happened today. I got a text message from a teacher that said, this child is frustrated with their classroom teachers, and they said the only person they want to talk to about it right now is you.
Survey Respondents	I used de-escalation skills with a student today after answering a care call for an upset student who eloped. I'm a self-contained para so I use it every day all day.

As noted above, several participants noted that they used their skills "today." During the data collection, participants were asked to describe a time they used de-escalation skills. In sharing their lived experience, they provided a glimpse of the types of challenging behaviors that they are seeing in schools. The following table summarizes the challenging behaviors mentioned by both survey respondents and interview participants.

Table 4.7. Challenging Behaviors Mentioned During Data Collection

Challenging Behaviors Mentioned by Survey Respondents and Interview Participants		
Category	Number of Mentions	Examples Mentioned
Physical Aggression	56	Aggression Assaulting staff or students Being physical with a parent Biting Destroying the room Fighting Flipping a table Groping staff Hitting Jumping off tables Kicking Moving objects off items off furniture Rampaging Scratching Self-biter Throwing things Throwing chairs Unsafe in class Wielding a knife
Physical but Not Aggressive	20	Banging like a roll of tape on the table Climbing a fence Elopement Pacing Poured bubbles on the floor Rolling on the ground Running around the room Taking clothes off Tearing Paper
Verbal Behaviors	29	Calling staff names Saying “crazy” things Screaming and/or yelling Swearing at staff or students Threatening staff Threatening students Threatening to fight Threatening self-harm Verbal aggression toward peer Voice got louder
Miscellaneous Behaviors	22	Feeling upset/frustrated about schoolwork Feeling upset at recess Feeling upset wanting parent Feeling upset and/or mad Getting Irritated Hallucinating “It's just like they blackout” Panic Attack Refusing to comply
Total behaviors mentioned	127	

Interconnected Concepts and Themes

Relationships

As educators shared their lived experiences using de-escalation skills, several interconnected themes emerged. As educators repeatedly described specific de-escalation skills and practices, broader concepts also emerged. For example, the interconnectedness of relationships emerged quickly as a clear concept as educators revealed that they believed building relationships with students was important when using de-escalation skills.

Using de-escalation skills and building relationships with students are closely intertwined. By using de-escalation skills, educators learned lessons about the importance of building relationships with students. They learned that building relationships before attempting de-escalation was more effective. When the relationship was already established, students found it easier to allow the educator to help them, participate in the de-escalation process, and ultimately return to academic work. They also learned that using de-escalation skills effectively with students they did not know well helped foster relationships, making it easier to de-escalate with the student next time. The following statements by educators illustrate how they reflected on their belief in the importance of building relationships with students with whom they use de-escalation skills.

Table 4.8. Theme: The Importance of Building Relationships

Coach, Interview 1	I get to have those stronger relationships and deeper relationships with them.
Harley, Interview 1	I feel like you have to build a relationship with kids before they're going to do any academics with you.
Hoops, Interview 1	So, the biggest thing for me is building relationships.
Jessica, Interview 3	I feel confident that I built a relationship with the student…

Jim, Interview 1	If you build that relationship, then the kiddo is a lot more likely to do what you ask.
Lauren, Interview 2	We discussed and talked about classroom management and debriefing and the escalation and all of that comes down to the same thing, which is relationships.
Survey Respondents	Luckily, I had a positive relationship with the student… It has helped me build better relationships with the students, which means lower care calls/issues, and shorter times to calm them down when they do.

Another theme related to the interconnectedness of relationships and de-escalation skills emerged, as trust and relationships were also often mentioned together. Trust and relationships can affect one another positively or negatively. Most felt that building relationships with students built trust. However, some educators noted that not building relationships negatively affected trust-building. The following table illustrates how educators reflected on the intersection of trust and relationships.

Table 4.9. Theme: Intersection of Trust and Relationship in Using De-escalation Skills

Hoops, Interview 2	I just feel like if you were willing to put in that time, you were going to have a better overall relationship with your kids, they're going to trust you a little bit more.
Jessica, Interview 2	And so presenting myself to students in a way that is positive, but the way I talk to them, the way I interact with them, the deescalation, because if I the first time they're escalated and I deal with them and I'm able to deescalate them, then the next time, it doesn't take as long, and they trust me.
Jim, Interview 1	And you lose a little bit of that relationship piece, if that follow through is not there, because then they can't rely on you, and they can't trust that it's gonna work the same way every time.
Lauren, Interview 2	And, you know, if we don't, if a kid doesn't know you and doesn't trust you, it's going to be really hard to help support them in any sort of elevated or escalated situation.
Survey Respondents	One thing I've noticed is that using de-escalation skills has helped me build stronger trust with my students. When I stay calm, give them space, and model strategies like breathing or using "I" messages, they begin to see me as

	someone who will support them. Overall, it's given me more confidence and has made challenging moments feel less overwhelming. I have noticed that consistently using these skills not only helps prevent escalation but also helps build trust and positive relationships with students.

Educator Self-awareness

Another concept related to using de-escalation skills is educator self-awareness. As educators reflected on how they used de-escalation skills, this study identified several self-awareness themes. For example, educators noted that they could reflect on their own state of mind while helping students de-escalate. In doing so, they adjusted their behavior accordingly by de-escalating themselves. They noted that they self-reflect before and while they use de-escalation skills. As noted in their responses, they prepare themselves before interacting using de-escalation skills such as deep breathing and intentionally try to de-escalate themselves when they become triggered. The following table lists examples of how the educators de-escalated themselves.

Table 4.10. Theme: De-escalate Yourself First

Coach-Interview 1	I think just making sure that, like self-reflection on making sure I'm in a good place to help them in their situation.
Harley-Interview 1	…just making sure yourself and your body is calm and regulated to go back to the situation.
Hoops-Interview 1	So I have to remember. That if I'm not going to be calm, they are not going to be calm. We are going to end up escalating each other.
Jessica-Interview 2	I just know how to keep myself under control, to help a student get back under control or get to a place where they're at least able to think rationally.
Jim-Interview 2	I need to take a breath; I need to deescalate myself. That's important…. We have to know where our tipping point is because if we're not being safe, then the kiddo is going to feel that.

Lauren-Interview 1	…unless you can de-escalate yourself, you can't de-escalate the child.
Survey Respondents	Staying regulated myself, giving space, and providing choices allowed him to de-escalate safely and return to learning. I have learned I have to center myself first. It helps making sure that I don't react and am able to stay calm when handling escalated students I also always have at the back of my mind that an escalated adult CANNOT de-escalate a child. It also helps me to know when to call for help.

A related theme that emerged in educators' self-awareness and de-escalation was that they recognized that whatever caused the student to escalate was not about them. They chose not to take the student's actions or words personally while the student was escalated. This was evidenced by the thoughts they shared, listed in the next table.

Table 4.11. Theme: It is Not Personal

Coach-Interview 1	I've had a student be physical with me, but I knew that he wasn't hurting me. He just wasn't there. He was in crisis. He was just acting. There were not necessarily thoughts or intentions behind it.
Harley-Interview 1	I think that the most important thing that I learned in the trainings, as well is not taking anything personally.
Hoops-Interview 2	You're willing to see that the need that the situation is not about you [it] is about the person in crisis.
Jessica-Interview 2	We have one kid who's very aggressive and has made threats on our lives. It doesn't bother me, because I'm not afraid of his words. I know his words mean other things.
Survey Respondent	I think it bothers me less. I'm not sure the training itself changed what I do specifically, but I think it did give me the ability to not become as personally annoyed or frustrated with what was going on. In a way you could say it gave me perspective.

The educators in this study demonstrated self-awareness by recognizing that some strategies are not effective in de-escalating students. They shared several examples of what they

learned while using de-escalation skills that either escalated students or failed to de-escalate them. Examples are listed in the following table.

Table 4.12. Theme: What Not to Do

Coach-Interview 1	I think I either reminded him that he needed to apologize or suggested it, and he started losing it again.
Harley-Interview 1	…standing over them…
Hoops-Interview 1	We need to stop, you know, trying to plead or whatever. We need to stop talking.
Jessica-Interview 1	I learned not to follow, because I just escalate some more.
Jim-Interview 1	I don't say, "Hey, stop it. Hey, cut it out."
Lauren-Interview 1	Talking to them when they're elevated, it's not going to help.

Tapping out emerged as another theme related to self-awareness. As noted in the following table, educators reported using this strategy when they felt they were not effectively de-escalating students and/or had become so escalated that they would not be effective. Through self-awareness, most educators reported knowing when to turn the de-escalation process over to another team member. Doing so allowed them to begin the de-escalation process themselves and take care of their own needs. One educator also shared that she did not always recognize when it was time to tap out, but responded when others pointed out that it might be time for her to do so.

Table 4.13. Theme: Tapping Out

Coach-Interview 1	Sometimes I'm like, okay, well, I'm not helping it. I just leave.
Harley-Interview 2	When they're, you know, when there's a lot more possibility of the physical aggression. I don't want to be in a point to where I'm not able to not take it personal, if that makes sense. So, I'm tagging out to a para, another teacher, somebody else certified.

Hoops	And so I feel like it's hard for me to tap out because I don't want somebody else to have to come and deal with this problem that they shouldn't have to deal with. You need to, you need to go. You know, because I'm not going to do them any good being just, like, where they're at too. Normally, it is somebody else telling you to go. It is very rarely me saying, "I need to, I need somebody to take over." It's very rare, but I am realizing that I probably need to start doing that more.
Jessica	Often, also, I need to take a break. I'm going to act out of character, and you don't deserve that. I'm going to go find somebody else. I'll get the school counselor. I'll get the secretary with the therapy dog to come in there. I'll go debrief the principal or assistant principal and tell him what's going on and what my thoughts need to happen, and I need to go take a walk.
Jim	I mean, we're all human. We all, like, we all have kind of a point where, okay, I have to be done, because I need somebody to take over for a little bit, so I can calm my nerves or whatever, and tapping out is a time where you're like, hey, I really, I really need someone else to step in for just a little bit. I just need a break.
Survey Respondents	Sometimes you can try all of those things and they stay escalated and you have to step out and get someone new in. I also always have at the back of my mind that an escalated adult CANNOT de-escalate a child. It also helps me to know when to call for help. De-escalation skills will work for the majority of students a majority of the time, but it will not work every time. Sometimes you need to tap out and you should never feel like a failure. If I notice that the student is targeting me or my presence is hindering them from calming, I will call for another staff member to take over and many times the student will de-escalate quickly.

Figuring It Out

Using strategies and interventions to identify the underlying issue that caused a student to escalate emerged as a concept in this study. Educators reported that it felt like being a detective, putting puzzle pieces together to solve the mystery of the "why," or what is causing the student to escalate. As noted in the following table, discovering the "why" often involved patience, removing triggers, talking with the student to identify the issue, and problem-solving with the student to find a solution that helped them de-escalate or stay de-escalated enough to return to

class or activities. They noted that involving the student in understanding the "why" also helped them figure out what would help the student de-escalate.

Table 4.14. Theme: Understanding the Why and the What

Coach-Interview 1	Finding a way to meet kids where they're at and figure out what they need to be successful, just because they're also unique and individualized and coming from places where we might not know what they're experiencing.
Harley-Interview 2	So, first thing, I hear you. Let me hear you further. Let me try to understand.
Hoops-Interview 2	And you want to get de-escalated, but also to the core of the problem, and you're gonna take that time.
Jessica-Interview 1	Or if I just keep if I think a little bit longer, if I move to a new skill, a new way to de-escalate, maybe one of those will work.
Jim-Interview 1	And you'll figure out what works. Everybody's different, and that's that that's that thing where you have to almost be a detective…
Lauren-Interview 1	Kids are a puzzle and every kid is different and every puzzle is different and you have to figure that puzzle.
Survey Respondent	Every kiddo is different. Some need a calm voice to come in and a new face. Some need that physical touch.

When students become escalated, a triggering event is typically involved. One of the first steps in understanding the "why" is understanding that a student has been triggered or agitated. Educators explained in this study that recognizing when a triggering event had occurred was an important component of using de-escalation skills. They explained, as illustrated in their thoughts in the following table, that they could tell when a student had experienced a trigger.

Table 4.15. Theme: Recognizing that Triggers Have Happened

Coach-Interview 1	I can kind of pick out when, oh, okay, they're looking at so-and- so a little sideways or kids balling up their fists and I know what's comes next, but really just getting to know the kids so you can tune into those moments of, okay, it's time to step in.
Coach-Interview 2	Like earlier in the year, there was a kindergarten or first grader that took his shoes off, and I'm like, okay, well, this is the first sign of, like, him being dysregulated.
Harley-Interview 1	I saw that it looked like you were really mad. Your face was red, your fists were clenched…
Hoops-Interview 2	You start to see the signs, you see the triggers, you can I mean, how many times can you just defuse the situation before it even becomes a thing?
Jim-Interview 2	Because there's always signs. 99% of the time. There's signs of when they're going to get frustrated or when that tipping point is. He'll just kind of look down. The facial expression won't change, but he'll just look down and, like, at a paper or at whatever we're doing. Another one of my kiddos will get up and start just walking and just pacing. Some of the other ones, like, start, like fidgeting with something, tapping on the tapping on the desk or with a pen or doing something like that. I've had kids get red in the face.
Lauren-Interview 1	When I saw this kid's behavior, I could tell he was upset. I could tell that the adults around him were what was upsetting him, and people were looking at him, and that would make him escalate more.
Survey Respondents	I tried not to talk too much, because in this event, I could tell it wasn't helping. Student was visibly agitated and walking around nudging items off of a table. His teacher asked him to make a correction on his paper and the student became upset and started running around the lunch room, hitting and kicking staff.

Once the educators recognized that the student had been agitated or triggered, they noted that it was often important to let the student calm down before trying to figure out what happened. A strategy the educators used to help students de-escalate enough to problem-solve with them was to provide time and space to de-escalate. Providing time and space involved being patient and waiting until the student was calm enough to talk. This often involved

distancing themselves from the student and/or providing calming spaces such as peace corners or spaces chosen by the student to calm down, such as sitting in the hallway. Other times, it meant providing time and space on the spot. The educators explained what providing time and space meant to them in the following table.

Table 4.16. Theme: Time and Space

Coach-Interview 1	I think the kind of stepping back and giving them space also just came with like, my own maturity and own level of like the battles that I pick and just the patience.
Harley-Interview 1	You know, we tell them when you're calm, we can talk, you let me know when you're ready.
Hoops-Interview 1	I will give you five minutes, and I'm gonna come back and talk to you. I'll see if you're ready.
Jessica-Interview 1	I just tell them how much I'd really appreciate it if they'd just come to a place where they could feel more safe, just come in here where nobody's going to be looking at you, you can take some time to just calm down and be with you, and then we can talk whenever you're ready.
Jim-Interview 1	If you talk to them about it and give them space, a lot of times a lot of times, they'll eventually talk to you about it. They'll eventually say, well, this is what the problem was.
Lauren-Interview 1	And so I've learned to just step [back] and watch. And so as I do that, I just, okay, and then when I think they may be in the right mind, I'll just say their name and I'll watch their reaction to see if they're ready. And if they're not, I back off again if they are, I start talking and if they de-escalate or if they escalate again, then I back off, you know, I think it's just back and forth and back and forth.
Survey Respondent	That's when I decided to step back, keep a safe distance, and I let the student know that, "I am here. You are safe. I will wait."

Once the students became calmer, educators in this study tried to identify the trigger that caused the students to escalate. The theme emerged as educators reflected that understanding the trigger helps understand the “why.” The importance of identifying the trigger is explained by the educators in the following table.

Table 4.17. Theme: Identifying the Trigger

Coach-Interview 2	…it's nice to understand that there's always a why for something.
Hoops-Interview 1	Well, I mean, there's a reason. And you need to be able to identify it. And there's sometimes that I don't even think that the kids know. Like, what the trigger is or maybe they don't understand why it is that type of way.
Jessica-Interview 1	The kid oftentimes, I feel like they're getting escalated in the class because of something someone else did or something they perceived someone else did.
Jim-Interview 2	They need you to like to pay attention, to hear them out, because something is going on.
Lauren-Interview 1	Because I think when you first start to get to know kids, you have to find out what their triggers are.
Survey Respondents	I wanted to help him figure out what was bothering him. It has helped me to look at the perspective of the student, what their triggers may be and how I can support them and focus on the needs of the student.

The educators also understood that figuring out the "why" involved understanding the student's perspective. To identify the trigger using the student's perspective, the educators noted that it was important to debrief or talk it out with the students. The theme of debriefing or talking it out often involved letting the student feel heard, understanding the reason they felt triggered, and problem-solving with students to find solutions that would help them de-escalate. It also involved helping the student reflect on their own behavior.

Table 4.18. Theme: Debriefing or Talking It Out

Coach-Interview 1	Just kind of walking him back through things in a way that he knew, I wasn't mad at him, but I can see what he did, and I also know, like, what he needs to do to fix it.
Harley Interview 2	You know, bringing it around full circle, making sure that you debrief with the student to continue to build that relationship back to where it was.
Hoops-Interview 1	I just think that, we want them to know that they are being understood, and I need them to know that.

Jessica-Interview 1	Maybe we can come up with a solution, something that would help.
Jim-Interview 1	…they just need you to listen. They need you to talk to them. They need you to pay attention, to hear them out, because something is going on. Something's causing this.
Lauren-Interview 1	You have to give those kids an opportunity to debrief like we were talking. They need a chance to say why they were upset and where it went.
Survey Respondents	I responded with reassurance: "Let's talk through what happened so we can make a plan." We reviewed the situation using a neutral tone. He shared that holiday talk in class had made him anxious because it reminded him of past instability. The student went to the hallway and I was able to talk to him by getting to his level and letting him vent and discuss what the issue was. I listened until he had finished then I started talking to him by acknowledging his feelings and gave him options of replacement behaviors. He eventually said he was ready to talk. I let the student talk without saying too much, only paraphrasing what he [was] saying so I could make sure I understand his frustration.

Another theme related to figuring it out was that educators in this study felt that using debriefing to help a student reflect on their behavior as a de-escalation skill helped students become more successful. The following table outlines their thoughts on how students became more successful. For some educators, that meant preparing students to succeed in their next grade-level band. For other educators, that meant preparing students for success farther in the future. Others believed that it was important for students in the present.

Table 4.19. Theme: Using De-escalation Skills to Foster Success

Coach-Interview 1	We were trying to kind of talk to him about the reality of things and his behaviors and what that looks like the further on you get into your education and just your life in general.
Harley, Interview 2	I think we're in those days de-escalation strategies, just continuing that relationship, building that positive rapport with them, you know, that helps them along the way when they become adults, you know.
Hoops-Interview 1	I want her to be okay, and she is one that I do worry [about] and the future is going to be a self-harmer, and really, like, with a lot of these kids, I just want them to be okay.
Jessica-Interview 2	Because they're not going to be successful and great in life as well. They just need somebody like us who has had training and can show them a different side of the world. What could be.
Jim-Interview 1	It's teaching them the basics. How are they going to make it when they get into a career or they settle into this stuff or things like that? So, teaching them all of these things, cooking and everything is super important.
Lauren-Interview 2	And so how do you teach somebody or work with somebody to be able to calm themselves out in a situation they don't feel comfortable in already? And so, I think it's very important to give those resources to kids because I think in life, it's just going to get worse.
Survey Respondent	Most importantly, I have learned that teaching the content is not the first thing to do as a teacher but teaching a child how to regulate emotions and advocate for themselves is number one.

To determine what works well for students, educators in this study used a variety of de-escalation and calming strategies, as shown in the next table. One theme that emerged was that educators offered students options for which strategies work for them. In some cases, educators offered strategies as choices in the moment while trying different de-escalation approaches. Sometimes they discussed the choices when they debriefed with students and learned what the student believed would work well the next time they escalated.

Table 4.20. Theme: Offering Options and/or Calming Activities

Coach-Interview 1	I'll send kids to the [calm down corner] or I'll be like, go to the bathroom and just wash your face off, rinse water on your face, get a drink, like, come back when you're ready to talk.
Harley-Interview 2	Just sitting in the calm down corner with them and helping them to co-regulate is really the major one that we use right now.
Hoops-Interview 1	It's just an armchair, and I have the couch and an armchair, and the kids, she's tiny, so she likes to just kind of go curl up like a cat on it... and kind of just be on her own, and she does benefit from, like, sensory. So just the weighted blanket.
Jessica-Interview 1	Okay, then choose one of the two options. And they did.
Jim-Interview 1	And so in the beginning of the year, we talk about using deep breaths, or doing an activity that you can do, that you don't have to think about like coloring or doing those things, or drawing or little things like that. But the big thing is let's take some deep breaths.
Lauren-Interview 1	I feel like there's always a strategy to help a child.
Survey Respondents	We then walked a little bit down the hallway, and I asked her if she needed a hug because I know that that is one of the strategies that calms her. Periodically I would say "match my breathing so we can calm down." Gave student some fidgets and practiced some mindfulness activities Showing empathy and offering choices can be a game changer

Educators mentioned a wide variety of strategies and calming activities during this study. The range of options mentioned was a surprising finding. The strategies have been categorized based on previously identified themes: debriefing/talking it out, recognizing that triggers have happened, offering options/calming strategies, and time and space. The strategies mentioned are listed in the following table.

Table 4.21. Specific Strategies Identified by Themes

Strategies by Themes	
Theme	Strategy mentioned
Debriefing/Talking it out	De-escalating language Expressing empathy Facilitating a problem-solving session with teacher and student Listening/Letting students know you hear them Paraphrase what they said Speaking with compassion, care and concern Validating their feelings
Recognizing that Triggers have Happened	Adjusting voice: Getting Quieter, speaking in a sing-song voice, changing the tone to get their attention, using a calming/soothing voice, refraining from speaking loudly or aggressively, changing tone to jovial. Approaching the student slowly Calm/Neutral/Non-threatening body language Calm facial expression Offer assistance
Offering Options/Calming Strategies Please note that some of these strategies may require that educators be specially trained and parental permission obtained before implementation such as: Deep Pressure Grounding/Meditation/ Mindfulness activities Therapeutic brushing Weighted Blanket or clothing	Big Body Movement Calming music Comfort object Coloring/Drawing Co-Regulation or “Being present with the student” Counting to 10 forward or backwards Deep breathing Deep Pressure Dimming lights Exercise-Push-ups/ride a stationary bike Fidgets Getting on the student’s level Giving a hug Grounding/Meditation/Mindfulness activities Offering to see a preferred person Provided paper to tear Resting heads Rubbing their back Snack Special Chair Splash water on face Stretching elastic bands Taking a walk with the student Therapeutic brushing Use a punching bag Weighted Blanket
Time and Space	Being mindful of where you're standing/Not hovering Breaks Calm down corner or safe place Moving out of the student’s line of sight Refrain from following Stop or Reduce Talking Stop looking at the student Timer

A surprising theme emerged as educators described using de-escalation skills outside their school practice. Many of the educators used de-escalation skills beyond school settings. Educators also reported using these skills with their families or other adults.

Table 4.22. Theme: Universality

Coach-Interview 2	So, it's kind of just like a deescalation can be for anyone. Like, you can de-escalate an adult. We let each other vent or rant, and then we're like, "Oh, okay, like, we got it out. What are we doing next?"
Harley-Interview 1	I mean, even in my own house, like, with my own kids, I feel myself using those with myself, even when I get frustrated and upset, I'm like, I need a minute.
Hoops-Interview 2	I think that not only helps in the school, but just in your life, in general, recognizing the signs of escalation and crisis, and knowing how to handle situations. With your family, you know, things like that.
Lauren-Interview 2	And a lot with my own kids at home. No. And that's, but to be honest, yes, because I think that that's one of the best, because when you breathe deep, you're really thinking about it.
Survey Respondents	Helps me a lot not with students also with my own son Completely, use it at school and home.

Using De-Escalation Skills Is Transformative

An important concept that emerged during this study is that using de-escalation skills is transformative for educators. One survey question asked: “How, if at all, has de-escalation training changed the way you respond to challenging student behavior?” During the interviews, a similar question was asked: “In what ways do you feel that using de-escalation skills has impacted your sense of efficacy in attempting to de-escalate challenging behavior? Using de-escalation skills helped educators become more confident, and the skills became so integrated into their work that using them felt like second nature. Several themes emerged as educators described how using de-escalation transformed them.

A major theme related to transformation is how using de-escalation skills positively impacted educators' responses to challenging behaviors. They found that using de-escalation skills gave them more tools in their toolbox, such as being proactive, giving time and space, and speaking less when responding to students. They also reported that using the skills helped them recognize their own escalation and address their feelings so they remained calm. Educators noted that improving their responses to challenging behaviors also made them feel more confident and inclined to use the skills more often.

Table 4.23. Theme: Positive Impact on Responding to Challenging Behaviors

Coach-Interview 2	I mean, it's more effective. It's efficient because you can do {it} quickly, depending on the situation. It just helps me. I mean, it just helps me know my kids better, and I'm getting better. So it's just, it's just like an added bonus, or like {a} tool in the toolbox.
Harley-Interview 2	I think that the de-escalation training has helped immensely with working with the challenging student behaviors in the classroom.
Hoops-Interview 2	Every day. I mean, it is ridiculous how much, like, you will use it. Hourly sometimes. It is helped me not be so reactive. I do feel that it does help me recognize where I'm at and thinking back like, okay, where am I at right now? What am I in a good spot to continue dealing with this? Like, it allows me to self-check.
Jessica-Interviews 1 and 2	It kind of changed everything. I mean, if before I would have because I didn't know any better, I would get escalated immediately, and I would respond in an escalated state. And so now, I just kind of stay even keel. I think it's given me a boost in self-esteem and my capability to do things. Really just staying calm, keeping myself at her a plane of being deescalated and calm I think those aspects of teaching are what has made my life easier as well as theirs.
Jim-Interviews 1 and 2	Having that training helps me be proactive, and it helps me get to be able to help those kiddos that are in need before it becomes to a really, like an unsafe environment for the kiddo or the other kiddos in the classroom or anyone.

	I use it on a daily basis. Like, I have to, like, like, it's super important. And it's important for the kiddos that I know what I'm doing. Like having that training definitely 100% helped how I handle different situations. When I was new, when I was new, like year one, it was kind of a tough year for de-escalation because I didn't have anything in my toolbox. Yeah, being good at deescalation strategies actually gives me the time so I can actually not just focus on our social emotional skills that the kids need.
Lauren-Interview 2	It's helped a lot. But I think the main thing that it's taught me is that to get a kid to deescalate, you have to give it time. Sometimes I have to use it when working with adults, as well.
Survey Respondents	It helped give multiple tools to pull from and it helped afterwards with giving more space and time before engaging in conversation about it. I have also learned that working with her, distraction is something that helps her. De-escalation training has really changed the way I respond to challenging student behavior. Before, I sometimes felt unsure how to handle those moments, but with Ci3T I now have a clear structure to follow. I stay calmer, I ask questions in a supportive way, and I give students space when they need it. It feels more appropriate and consistent, and I've noticed that students respond better because they know what to expect from me. De-escalation training has influenced the way I respond to challenging student behavior, even though I have not participated in a formal training this year. The informal trainings, orientations, and guidance provided by my school and district have helped me develop a better understanding of how to apply de-escalation techniques in real situations. These supports have been very useful because student behavior can be unpredictable, and having a clear set of strategies allows me to respond more calmly, safely, and effectively throughout the day.

Another theme related to transformation developed as educators reported their skills had evolved. Educators understood that practice honed their skills. As they evolved, they also acquired more de-escalation tools, and using those tools became easier. As the educators became

more skilled, using those skills became more natural. Their reflections are noted in the next table.

Table 4.24. Theme: Skills Evolve Over Time

Coach-Interview 2	…it takes practice. I think it's already helped me be kind of more in tune with my own actions and thoughts and choices that I make around the situations that are happening, not to say that I'm perfect by any means.
Harley-Interview 2	I have seen more techniques added in for the de-escalation. I think the more it gets the more and more we go along the more we learn that this way may not work as good this way or this way may be more beneficial.
Hoops-Interview 2	And so those are the times like where I know that that's where I need to tap out. I think sometimes it's evolving more like what I need to do on my end.
Jessica-Interview 2	The more experience I have, the more knowledge I have, the better I'm getting at all of it. The easier it is to step in and interact when they're in that escalation phase.
Jim-Interview 2	The de-escalation skills that I have gained throughout my years have helped me a lot because I have so much more in my teacher toolbox on that deescalation skills and strategies that just from experience, because nobody deescalates in the same way, like something that works with one kid is not gonna work with another.
Lauren-Interview 2	I continually have to evolve every day because different situations take different or different scenarios take different reactions and every reaction is going to be different.
Survey Respondent	In the past, I might have taken the "hard stance" approach with a defiant student. This doesn't work...I think students themselves have learned to take the "hard stance", and it becomes a fight for control. I try not to go there with students. Speaking less seems to help, letting the student have some time to come back to a calm state, rather than escalating the situation even more by too much talking.

As educators in this study were transformed by using skills, they also became cheerleaders for their use. A theme in this transformation is that as they used de-escalation skills, they realized they were modeling them for others who may not have had any de-escalation training. For some, the modeling was spontaneous. For others, it happened more intentionally as

they explained to their peers what they were doing and why. Modeling also sometimes happened in teams, so the whole team could respond in ways that increased the chances of de-escalating the student. The educators also modeled for students. When they demonstrated de-escalation regulation skills such as deep breathing, they helped the student learn and/or use those self-regulation skills. As with the adults, sometimes this modeling was intentional to teach students skills.

Table 4.25. Theme: Modeling De-escalation for Students and/or Staff

Coach-Interview 2	…there are teachers and paras that have seen me talk to the kid and deescalate them and we move on, and sometimes they're just like, how did you do that?
Harley-Interview 2	I'm modeling that for the kids in here, you know? Theme: Modeling De-escalation for Students and/or Staff
Hoops-Interview 2	I also appreciate the fact that, like, a lot of my para can take the cues and can see, like, how I'm doing it, and will ask me questions and then I tell them, "Well, this is why." And then they start doing that.
Jessica-Interview 2	…modeling, taking deep breaths. I'll model it.
Jim-Interview 1	Let's take some deep breaths, okay?
Lauren-Interview 1	I've done things with classes to teach them how to breathe and how to, you know, stay calm and how to, you know, like rest your heads and do this like that.

The Nexus between Social-Emotional Learning and De-escalation Skills

As noted in Chapter 2, the literature review identified a connection between social-emotional learning and de-escalation skills. This connection also emerged during the study interviews. While not all educators mentioned using SEL in their classrooms, enough did to make it a finding. For example, Harley uses strategies from two different SEL curricula to teach her students about their feelings:

> …the kids love the puppets and a lot of that is, you know, the puppets are saying what emotions they're feeling and why and the kids really relate to the puppets and then we discuss that…and that really engages them (Harley, Interview 1). She also notes that she teaches them about respecting peers and adults as well (Harley, Interview 2).

Hoops noted that "We talk very much about feelings" and that doing so helps students identify their emotions (Hoops, Interview1).

Jim teaches social-emotional skills extensively in his setting. He works in a special program for students with significant behavioral challenges. He notes that "...some of them lack social-emotional skills… (Jim, Interview 1). To remedy this, Jim uses a variety of methods to engage his students in social-emotional learning (SEL). He also uses two different curricula and chooses which parts are most useful (Jim, Interview 2). He engages his students in reflection about what they could have done differently and also teaches them about applying those skills outside of school:

> So I would give examples, and then we would fill out what we could have done differently and all of those types of things. So that's a lot of the social-emotional learning stuff. And then I try to teach my kids what acceptable social things to do outside of the school environment (Jim, Interview 2).

These comments from educators echo two studies mentioned in the literature review. One noted that teaching students skills to manage their emotions is a helpful strategy for reducing escalation (Murphy & Van Brunt, 2018). Further, another study noted that teaching social-emotional skills can be both a proactive and reactive strategy that reduces the likelihood of escalation (Sandilos et al., 2023).

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1 (RQ1)

The educators in this study shared insightful stories that revealed teachers' lived experiences in a 21st-century public school setting. They described the importance of building relationships and trust with students and how doing so helped them use de-escalation skills more effectively. They offered examples of strategies to use and a few examples of what not to do when responding to challenging behavior. They explained how to determine what caused the student to escalate and what helped them de-escalate, and how debriefing with the students was an important part of the de-escalation process. Finally, they explained how their use of de-escalation skills evolved over time and how it transformed them in confident de-escalators with a wide variety of de-escalation strategies in their toolbox.

Research Question 2 (RQ2) Concept and Themes

This study also aimed to answer Research Question 2 (RQ2): How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students? Several themes and one major concept emerged as participants shared how de-escalation skills shaped their sense of safety.

De-escalation Skills Positively Impact Safety

A major concept emerged as many educators in this study believed that using de-escalation skills positively impacted their sense of safety. For some educators, this meant they felt more prepared to intervene with students. For others, it meant they became better at recognizing early signs of escalation so they could defuse the situation before it became unsafe. For another group, this meant they could remain calm in the storm and respond rather than react. The following table outlines the educators' reflections on the positive impact of using de-escalation skills.

Table 4.26. Theme: De-escalation Skills Positively Impacted Educators' Sense of Safety

Coach-Interview 2	I think I just know that if I can get them, if I can get them to de-escalate, they're not gonna keep escalating, or they won't. We won't get to a point where either they're being unsafe or I'm starting to feel unsafe or, like, something else is going to happen.
Harley-Interview 2	I feel like it helps keep the students safe, it helps keep the teachers safe, all the way around, it benefits the school, it benefits the kids.
Hoops-Interview 2	You start to see the signs, you see the triggers, you can I mean, how many times can you just defuse the situation before it even becomes a thing?
Jessica-Interview 2	How you, as the adult, have to kind of keep yourself in a safe place as well. Putting my deescalation skills into practice, and honestly reviewing them, you know, getting recertified every year. I think [it} has made each year easier and more enjoyable and maybe more confidence to keep doing what I'm doing.
Jim-Interview 2	I can see when a kid's getting students getting frustrated, they'll do little things. So, a lot of times, like, in my room, a lot of times, I can deescalate, kiddos, before they even get to that point of where… I can tell I can kind of go over and just whisper to the kid or talk to the kid that I think is like getting frustrated. Because there's always signs. 99% of the time. There's signs of when they're going to get frustrated or when that tipping point is.
Lauren-Interview 2	I probably should have had more fear than I did because I feel confident in myself in taking care of things and doing what's best for kids.
Survey Respondents	I think it helps trained staff know how to react to keep themselves and others safe. Overall, the training has helped me stay calm, prioritize safety, and guide students back to regulation in a way that preserves their dignity and keeps relationships intact. It has given me the confidence in dealing with challenging students. So now I'm always willing to step in and help if needed. It's made me feel more prepared and comfortable stepping in. De-escalation training has changed the way I respond to challenging student behavior. Instead of reacting to surface behavior, I now focus on recognizing early signs of escalation and changes in tone, posture, and pacing, and intervening before the behavior peaks. I've learned to slow myself down, lower my voice, and use neutral, non-threatening language to reduce pressure rather than add to it. I'm more intentional about offering choices, giving space, and validating the student's feelings to avoid power struggles. Overall,

	the training has helped me stay calm, prioritize safety, and guide students back to regulation in a way that preserves their dignity and keeps relationships intact. This has given me feelings of empowerment because I know what to do and how to be prepared in the situation. De-escalation skills have definitely helped increase my sense of safety directly as it assists prevent escalations, decrease the time of escalated students, decrease the severity of escalations, and look at the whole person of the student.

A theme that emerged when examining how de-escalation skills shaped educators' sense of safety is that educators think of safety more in terms of students than themselves. As they reflected, they noted that part of shaping a sense of safety meant being the safe person for students or using de-escalation skills to increase their safety. They also shared strategies to help students feel safe, such as talking it out, speaking more quietly, or providing a safe place to de-escalate.

Table 4.27. Theme: Safety in Terms of Students

Coach-Interview 1	I think just being there for them in those moments, them seeing me step in during those times, is like, oh, she is a safe person.
Harley-Interview 1	Like, just knowing that I'm their safe person, if they need to talk to me about anything, they can talk to me.
Hoops-Interview 2	I did feel like I was always trying to make sure my students were safe.
Jessica-Interview 3	Whatever to give a little bit of comfort and get him back to a safe space.
Jim-Interview 1	I refuse to raise my voice because it doesn't help anything. It doesn't help anything. It makes things so uncomfortable, and it makes them used to it. Kids need to feel safe.
Lauren-Interview 2	And if they go off, I don't know how many people could help separate them and things like that. So my fear is not for myself. It's more for other kids around.

Survey Respondents	Making sure that all my students are safe while the student is having time to cool off. With the de-escalation skills that I have I believe that I am able to help students feel safer or regain a safe environment quicker when they escalate. It makes me feel a safe individual for a student to have a moment of crisis with someone safe and who will not harm them, and stay calm.

To examine teachers' sense of safety, educators were asked whether they felt unsafe at school. Many educators noted that they did not feel personally unsafe at school. Most educators were not afraid of students and did not believe their safety was in question. For some, this was because they felt confident in their skills and disposition in responding to unsafe situations.

Table 4.28. Theme: Educators Did Not Feel Unsafe Personally

Coach-Interview 2	I don't think with students. I don't think any of them have true intentions of, like, wanting to hurt someone or, like, wanting to do something, like, super seriously.
Harley-Interview 2	Not here, when I was teaching behavior classes, there were sixth graders that were a lot bigger than I was. And it was scary when they were upset.
Jessica-Interview 2	I don't know that I would say it ever felt unsafe, because my mind, I don't know, it's just the way I'm wired. It goes into like protect and care mode.
Jim-Interview 2	No. mean, when I was first here, and I didn't know what I was getting into, or what I was being asked to do. Sometimes it would feel weird because I wasn't used to anything like this…so being here was completely different, but unsafe, no.
Lauren-Interview 2	I don't believe so. I've never been worried about my own safety.
Survey Participants	I don't remember a time when I was ever "afraid" of a student or felt like they were placing me in an unsafe position. However, I do feel prepared to handle highly dysregulated situations when most others would avoid them. I'm 100% confident that my safety will remain. I have always felt comfortable and confident in my own safety and those that I work with.

The last theme that emerged related to safety was a very pleasant surprise. One interview question asked whether educators felt uncomfortable using de-escalation skills in any situations. Generally, they felt uncomfortable using physical skills. Interviewed educators and some surveyed educators reported not wanting to use physical skills or felt they rarely needed to. This theme relates to how using de-escalation skills shapes educator safety, as it suggests that using the skills well can positively impact safety to the point that educators rarely need to use physical skills in response to challenging behaviors.

Table 4.29. Theme: Little Need to Use Physical Skills

Coach-Interview 1	Like, not even necessarily going through the physical skills, but just walking through, like, the first highlights of each chapter. and sharing, like, how effective it's been for myself or why it's effective.
Harley, Interview 1	You know, I am trained in all of it, but I have never used any of the physical holds.
Hoops-Interview 1	I don't like the restraint part, and it has been ages. since I have done that. I have no desire to…
Jim-Interview 1	At this point, like, not really. I mean, I mean, there's there's things that I don't want to ever have to do. But if it's if it's for the safety of the kiddo or the safety of other people that are around me, I'm comfortable with doing it, but I don't. It's not a It's a last resort. I haven't had to do physical skills very often.
Lauren-	I would not say I feel like I've had any yet. That doesn't mean that I won't. Because I know there are some kids that we're not going to be able to de-escalate.
Survey Participant	It's been great. Now I know not to just jump in with the physical stuff. Even if they're destroying a room or something as long as nobody is getting hurt I just remind myself it's just stuff and it's ok.

Summary of Findings for Research Question 2 (RQ2)

This study examined a second research question: How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students? The findings

indicate that using de-escalation skills positively shapes educators' perceptions of safety. Educators in this study reported that their sense of safety related more to student safety than to their own safety. They reported that they did not personally feel unsafe with students and clearly indicated that using de-escalation skills positively affected their sense of safety.

Everyone Should Have De-escalation Training

To understand what it means to be educators who use de-escalation skills, the researcher repeatedly asked educators an open-ended question to identify anything else they wanted to share about de-escalation training throughout the study. The educators in this study were passionate advocates for using de-escalation skills. As they shared their reflections and experiences with de-escalation strategies, they strongly recommended that everyone receive de-escalation training.

Table 4.30. Theme: Everyone Should Have De-escalation Training

Coach-Interviews 1 and 3	I think it's beneficial for everyone to have the training. Just that it's effective. I wish I was utilized more…I don't think it should be limited to specific students. I think the relational part is more important.
Harley-Interviews 2 and 3	I feel like it is very important for I mean I wish all teachers would have to go through Mandt, I mean I really do. Just because it just gives you more tools in your belt… I just feel like any teacher or anyone in education should go through at least the de-escalation portion. I feel like, again, in the society that we're in, there's a lot of trauma response that we need to be aware of and trauma informed teaching and just be able to be a safe place for the kids.
Hoops-Interviews 1 and 3	Everybody needs to have it. Just the fact that every teacher, every staff member, whether you are admin, paras, gen ed custodian? should be sitting through de escalation training, period.
Jessica-Interview 1	It's really key. Getting teachers to the first stuff I get with teachers in classroom management and de-escalation is just stop talking. Like, that's the first thing I need teachers who are struggling to do. Just stop talking. You don't need to say anything else. State what you need, and then

	assume that they're going to comply. Don't argue with them…..So, just stop talking so much. Listen more. Talk less, listen more. You don't have to be right.
Jessica-Interview 3	If you're not experienced meaning you're new at teaching, and/or you haven't been a parent. Understanding how to really stay calm, stay cool and de-escalate students is, I think, much more difficult.
Jim-Interview 2	I mean, every teacher could use that stuff. Every single one.
Survey Respondents	I think all self-contained and behavior room paras should be required to take Mandt. It's definitely a game changer. I believe in the Mandt System® and think everyone should be trained in it. The place that I teach you really need to be good at using de-escalation skills and strategies. They are important for the kids so that they can be successful. All of the adults that they see need these strategies so that they meet the needs of their students. De-escalation training is essential for all staff working with all students. Everyone benefits from using de-escalation skills. Everyone who works with students (no matter what grade) should take a course about de-escalation. This includes support staff also. De-escalation training paired with my degree, continuing education, and reading on the subject completely changes the way I respond to challenging student behavior. I think anyone responding to care or crisis calls within the schools should be required to have it.

De-escalation Skills and Educator Retention

Another finding is related to the context of the study and a premise noted in the introduction. As the introduction states, teachers increasingly cite school safety and student behavior as factors affecting their job satisfaction. According to their research about teacher retention in Kansas, Simmering & Church (2025) found that "Student Behavior, Safety & Discipline " (p. 17) was the most common theme across the state as a major driver for teacher

exits. To explore this briefly, the study asked whether using de-escalation skills affected educators' decisions to remain in education. Many of the educators seemed surprised by the question. They paused to ponder and carefully weighed their answer, and a clear concept emerged. Educators in this study reported that using de-escalation skills positively influenced their decision to stay in education. This strongly supports the recommendation to train more educators in de-escalation skills, as such training could reduce attrition related to challenging student behavior.

Table 4.31. Theme: Positive Impact on Staying in Education

Coach-Interview 2	I don't know that the training would make me want to leave or stay. I think it makes it somewhat easier. I think it kind of takes some weight off my shoulders, knowing, like, "Okay, I can do this, I can do that."
Harley-Interview 2	I think that my experience, because I do take it so much to heart, that I do have a lot of good strategies to use and good outcomes from using them. I don't think that would be a reason for why I would leave the field. If I didn't have the tools and strategies to be able to work with student that have high behavior needs, I could definitely see me being frustrated and, you know, overwhelmed and not knowing what to do, not knowing how to handle it, so I would probably definitely look for another profession. But I feel like getting these strategies and having that support it definitely helps to be able to feel more confident going into a situation.
Hoops-Interview 2	I think there's sometimes where I feel like I'm constantly walking this fine line. I'm so tired of feeling like I can't even breathe. But then on the flip, I mean, it kind of makes me both. I do feel like me knowing what I know and being able to help other people you know, it not so much that it makes me want to stay in teaching forever, but I do see where I am able to share that knowledge.
Jessica-Interview 2	Putting my deescalation skills into practice, and honestly reviewing them, you know, getting recertified every year. I think has made each year easier and more enjoyable and maybe more confidence to keep doing what I'm doing…
Jim-Interview 2	Now I can get kiddos to do the things and I can have positive change in their lives. And that's what I focus on, that's what I try to do. And sometimes I don't. And those times are tough, but then when I go back and I think about the kids that I've had in the past, or when I go see them, or when I see them out at stores or wherever, if they happen to be there. Like, like, the part that keeps me hooked is they remember me. And I'm that teacher….and those are the things that make me want to stay.

Lauren-Interview 2	I can tell you the education field right now is very, very difficult, and it is one that after 21 years, I have thought a couple times about, which I didn't think that I necessarily would. I don't think that I'm going. I think that without the training and without the strategies, a lot of teachers will walk out faster than someone who does have the training.

Final Thoughts from Interviewed Participants

During the interviews, educators described what it means to be an educator who uses de-escalation skills. The following are their verbatim answers. I present them without interpretation so readers can use their own judgment about what they reveal about using de-escalation skills. I regret not asking the same question of those surveyed. I am certain their answers would have been just as insightful.

Table 4.32. What Does It Mean to Be an Educator Who Uses De-escalation Skills?

Coach-Interview 2	I feel like I'm going and I'm seeking the resources that I know. Not only are they going to, like, help me and my teaching practices, but also like, what's best for them and like how to handle situations like that. You have to be intentional and try to, like, not give into what they're saying or not react to what they're doing but it takes practice and you have to be conscious of what you're doing when you're doing it.
Harley-Interview 2	I would say that I mean, how it felt to me as an educator, like, my role with the student, is, you know, just being able to help them process what they're feeling, giving them those life skills to where when they're older, they're using those.
Hoops-Interview 2	I think that means that you're willing to listen. You're willing to see that the need that the situation is not about you is about the person in crises. And you want to get de-escalated, but also to the core of the problem, and you're gonna take that time. I just feel like if you were willing to put in that time, you were going to have a better overall relationship with your kids, they're going to trust you a little bit more. And I think that that just shows that you're flexible, you're willing to try things instead of saying, "It's my way or no way.”
Jessica-Interview 2	I always want to be a positive example. And for me, be a positive example of Jesus, of Christ. And so presenting myself to students in a way that is positive, but the way I talk to them, the way I interact with them, the de-escalation, because if I the first time they're escalated and I deal with them and I'm able to de-escalate them, then the next time, it doesn't take as long, and they trust me.

Jim-Interview 2	I see if I see a student struggling, it means the world to me to get them back to baseline. And it means a lot to be good at de-escalation strategies and skills, it is so powerful. You have no idea how powerful, if you are good at de-escalation. Like, that should be a superpower. I mean, and you should feel like, if you talk them down and if they start doing the things they're supposed to be doing and you did that, like, it feels amazing.
Lauren-Interview 2	Honestly, what it has meant to me and what it has done for me, and I would like to say it more than that, is it is it has allowed me to build a different kind of relationship with most of the kids, because being able to use the skills and being able to give them time to calm down has allowed more students to trust me and feel comfortable talking to me once they do come down. And so I think that that's a big piece I got just today. Again, this truly happened today was I got a text message from a teacher that said, this child is frustrated with their classroom teachers and they said the only person they want to talk to about it right now is you. Could you stop by my classroom later? You know? And so it's being able to use those skills has allowed the kids to have more trust within me because they know that allow them to get a safe space, get to a safe space before they have to have a conversation.

Summary

The educators in this study shared their thoughts openly and passionately. As the educators shared their lived experience as educators who use de-escalation skills, the essence of what it means to be an educator who uses de-escalation skills emerged. An educator who uses de-escalation skills cares for students and wants to help them be successful. An educator who uses de-escalation skills understands the importance of building relationships with the students they support and that using de-escalation skills well helps students trust them.

An educator who uses de-escalation skills has multiple de-escalation skills in their toolbox, including how to regulate themselves so they stay calm when responding to challenging behavior. They know when a student has been triggered, and they feel ready to use those strategies to address the challenging behavior caused by triggers. They understand that students are different and have different needs.

Educators in this study are reflective and adjust their strategies until they help the student de-escalate and remain safe. Once students are de-escalated and safe, these educators debrief with them to understand why they were upset and help them find strategies to use when they feel upset again.

Training in de-escalation skills and practicing them transform the educators in this study. Their skill and confidence in using de-escalation skills increases over time. The educators who use de-escalation skills help students and staff stay safer every day. They truly make a difference.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Introduction

> "Human beings, in interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing or is about to do; they are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their own situations in terms of what they take into account", p. 8 (Blumer, 1969).

In essence, this quote sums up what educators do when they use de-escalation skills. As educators approach a situation (when a student displays concerning or challenging behavior), they must act based on what they see and what they know. The interaction between the student and the educator becomes a dynamic and iterative process in which both respond to what they see and how they interpret the other person's behavior. Both parties continue to interact and interpret each other's responses until the situation is resolved and the student is de-escalated. As educators repeat this process, their skills increase, and their practice can evolve.

Discussion

This study sought to answer the following research question: **Research Question 1 (RQ1):** What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice? The educators' shared experiences illuminate the answer to this question. The findings suggest that as educators used de-escalation skills in their day-to-day practice, they experienced a profound professional transformation. The educators in this study described evolving into skilled de-escalators who feel confident responding to challenging behaviors. The educators became so skilled at incorporating de-escalation skills into their practice that using

them became natural. The question, then, is how these educators became so skilled at using de-escalation skills.

Educators were transformed through two means. The first method is through receiving de-escalation training. Nearly all the educators in this study reported receiving de-escalation training. Most of them were trained using a specified curriculum. However, educators identified receiving several different types of de-escalation training. Although this study did not evaluate the type of training educators received, it was clear that receiving de-escalation training was likely the catalyst that helped transform educators into effective users of de-escalation skills.

The second way that the educators became skilled de-escalators was through practice. Data in this study clearly indicates that although de-escalation training provides the foundation for learning de-escalation skills, applying them in practice catalyzes transformative change. Just as teachers apply their teacher preparation coursework and evolve through trial and error what works and what doesn't in their classrooms, the educators in this study learned through trial and error what works well in using de-escalation skills.

As the educators in this study transformed into confident and competent de-escalators, they learned several valuable lessons along the way. The educators learned that de-escalation skills are easier to use when they have built a relationship with the student. They also learned that helping a student de-escalate can help build a relationship.

Through using these skills, educators learned the importance of self-awareness when using de-escalation skills. Self-awareness helped the educators stay regulated as they used de-escalation skills. Through self-awareness, they understood that each student had different needs, and they learned to implement a wide variety of strategies to meet those needs effectively; sometimes that meant using strategies to calm themselves.

Over time, they also learned enough strategies to have many options. They learned that every student was different, and having a wide variety of strategies helped them feel more prepared to help support students. They learned they had to be skillful detectives to understand what caused students to escalate and which strategies would help them de-escalate.

They learned that sometimes they needed to model the strategies for the student, or for other staff who may or may not have had de-escalation training. While modeling for staff, they also demonstrated another lesson that they learned- what not to do. Through practice, they learned which strategies were not effective, and this became an important part of becoming a more skilled de-escalator. Many of the lessons the educators learned, shared as findings in Chapter 4, help answer the first research question well: What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?

Educators in this study also reflected on how de-escalation skills affected their sense of safety when responding to challenging behavior. The educators reported a transformation in their ability to help students and staff stay safer during episodes of escalation. Although they generally think of safety in terms of student safety, their confidence in keeping themselves and students safe also evolved. Therefore, the evidence clearly shows that using de-escalation skills positively impacts educators' sense of safety in this study, which answers **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Implications and Recommendations

This study is rich with implications for researchers and school personnel. The educators in the study provide clear evidence that using de-escalation skills has a positive and profound impact on their practice. The lessons they learned and shared also offer practical advice to

educators seeking to use de-escalation skills effectively. In the next section, I present this advice as key takeaways for educational leaders and educators considering how to implement de-escalation skills.

Key Takeaway 1

Plenty of Opportunities Exist to Use De-escalation Skills in Public Schools.

Educators in this study are certainly seeing challenging behaviors in their school buildings. One participant reported: "This year, it has felt like a dumpster fire (Coach, Interview 2)." During data collection, educators mentioned challenging behaviors 127 times. The types of behaviors mentioned included physical aggression, nonaggressive physical behaviors, verbal behavior, and other miscellaneous behaviors. (See Appendix G for a complete list). The literature review confirmed that challenging behaviors occur in schools. Behaviors increasingly reported in classrooms include disruptive behavior such as running around the school, screaming, or more violent acts such as throwing objects, hitting, and kicking (Dunlap et al., 2020).

School personnel also regularly use de-escalation skills. This notion quickly emerged during the interviews. When I asked participants to describe a time they used de-escalation skills, the story often started with "just today" or a similar phrase. This finding was confirmed when survey respondents also described an incident in which they used de-escalation skills. One respondent noted that she used de-escalation skills "every day, all day." These two findings are logically related. More frequent challenging behaviors create more opportunities for educators to use de-escalation skills.

The educators in this study described performing something akin to an interpretive dance with their students as they helped them de-escalate. As the student and educator interacted

during escalation and de-escalation, each behaved based on what they saw the other person doing and how they interpreted it. For example, when an educator noticed a student displaying challenging behavior, they offered a strategy they believed would help the student begin to de-escalate. The student then interpreted the educator's words and actions and adjusted their behavior based on that interpretation. As the interaction continued, the educator interpreted the student's behavior again, and if they noted that the implemented strategy was ineffective, they chose another strategy. This process of interaction, interpretation, and behavior change continued between the student and educator until de-escalation was achieved. For example, if the student pivoted and changed their behavior by going to a calm-down corner instead of continuing to display their challenging behavior, the de-escalation strategy successfully addressed the challenging behavior.

The educators learned to de-escalate students by choosing from an arsenal of de-escalation skills. They said having such a wide variety of strategies to choose from was helpful because, as Lauren explained: “Kids are a puzzle and every kid is different, and every puzzle is different, and you have to figure out that puzzle” (Lauren, Interview 1). Jessica expressed a similar notion: “If I think a little longer, if I move to a new skill, a new way to de-escalate, maybe one of those will work” (Jessica, Interview 1). Finally, a survey respondent also weighed in about the importance of knowing which strategy to use in the moment: “Every kiddo is different. Some need a calm voice. Some need the physical touch” (Survey participant).

The literature review found no definitive list of de-escalation skills. However, some scholars have attempted to define de-escalation. Hallett & Dickens (2017) reported that for nursing staff, de-escalation was defined as:

> a collective term for a range of interwoven staff interventions, comprising verbal and non-verbal communication, self-regulation, assessment, and actions, whilst maintaining the safety of staff and patients p. 10.

Engel et al (2020) defined de-escalation as:

> a process or tactics used to prevent, reduce, or manage behaviors associated with conflict, including verbal or physical agitation, aggression, violence, or similar behaviors, during an interaction between two or more individuals" (p. 724).

While this study cannot provide a definitive list of strategies, it offers examples that worked for these educators. The educators identified 46 strategies that they used in their practice. The strategies were categorized by themes: debriefing/talking it out, recognizing that triggers have happened, offering options/calming strategies, and time and space. For a full list of the strategies, please see **Appendix I.**

Key Takeaway 2

Relationships and De-escalation Skills are Closely Intertwined

Most educators in this study were not required to take de-escalation training. They took the training to be better prepared to help students, as Harley told us: "So whatever I can learn, whatever I can do to help them (Harley, Interview 1). She was not the only participant to mention using de-escalation skills to help students. Lauren, an instructional coach, took the training to help the students when they got upset or angry (Lauren, Interview 1). Educators in this study were intentional about helping students when they displayed challenging behaviors at school. They also stressed the importance of building relationships with students as part of their intentionality.

Building relationships with students was a central concept in this study. All interviewed participants said building relationships with students was a key factor in using de-escalation skills. In addition, one survey respondent reported that building a relationship with a student positively impacted her ability to de-escalate students. The respondent said, "It has helped me build better relationships with the students, which means lower care calls/issues, and shorter times to calm them down when they do (Survey respondent). Jim illustrated his intentionality about building relationships and trust with his students when he noted that every year he has to build new relationships with his students: "Every year, it's like, how am I going to build a relationship with this person?" (Jim, Interview 1).

The literature also stressed the importance of relationships. For example, Guilliams (1972) noted that, according to his research, a key to classroom learning was "interest shown to the student," acknowledgment. In a more recent study, Chapman noted that "relationship alone can help a student de-escalate before continuing through the escalation cycle, p. 94. McMahon et al. (2020) also noted: "Training teachers how to develop positive relationships can help prevent school violence (McMahon et al., 2020). As educational leaders begin to envision implementing a de-escalation training program for their staff, they should ensure the program emphasizes building relationships with students.

Another relationship-related theme also emerged. Relationships and trust are interdependent. Hoops said:

> I just feel like if you were willing to put in that time, you were going to have a better overall relationship with your kids, they're going to trust you a little bit more," (Hoops, Interview 2).

A survey respondent also pointed out that relationship and trust are connected, stating that "...consistently using these skills not only helps prevent escalation, but also helps build trust and positive relationships with students (Survey respondent). Jim builds relationships and trust with his students by sharing some of his home life so they feel like part of his life (Jim, Interview 2).

The relationship between building relationships and using de-escalation skills is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Using de-escalation skills effectively builds relationships, and building relationships helps educators use de-escalation skills more effectively. The lesson clearly shows that both are key to using de-escalation skills successfully.

Key Takeaway 3

Using De-escalation Skills is Like Being a Detective: You Have to Figure It Out

A student's escalation always has a reason. Educators reported that identifying the trigger, or what was bothering their students, is a critical part of using de-escalation skills. Discovering why a student escalated, or continued to escalate, required the educator to do investigative work. Jim clued me into this concept when he said: "Everybody's different, and that's [the] thing where you have to really almost be a detective. (Jim, Interview 1). This concept is related to several themes in the study.

Part of being a detective is understanding triggering events. The first step in identifying the issue is recognizing that something or someone has agitated or triggered a student. The educators in the study noted that their skills evolved to include a stronger ability to recognize when students were triggered. For example, Harley noted that when she recognized a student was triggered, she also used it as a teaching moment: "I saw that it looked like you were really mad. Your face was red, your fists were clenched" (Harley, Interview 1). Similarly, Coach noted:

> I can kind of pick out when, oh, okay, they're looking at so-and- so a little sideways or kids balling up their fists, and I know what's coming next, but really just getting to know the kids so you can tune into those moments of, okay, it's time to step in (Coach, Interview 1).

One survey respondent reported that she could tell when her actions were triggering a student: "I tried not to talk too much, because in this event, I could tell it wasn't helping" (Survey respondent). Recognizing that a trigger happened is a key part of the de-escalation process, as is understanding why it happened.

Figuring out what or who triggered a student, and why, is a skill educators develop through de-escalation practice. Interestingly, identifying the trigger or understanding what was bothering a student was not initially the natural instinct for some of the educators in the study. For example, Lauren related that "I've not always been good at that because I felt like things had to be done, done, done, done" (Lauren, Interview 1). She also noted that, prior to training, she felt she had to have the last word with students. By using de-escalation skills, she became an educator who listened to what was bothering students rather than needing the last word. She illustrated this when she noted that she learned to wait and talk with the students about what was bothering them:

> When you're ready, I'm ready to talk. I've had lots of situations where kids actually come back at a later time because they were ready to talk. And I think that's the best thing that we can do for kids is give them that opportunity to calm themselves down to be able to have the talk (Lauren, Interview 1).

Educators learned to investigate only the who, what, and why of what triggered a student when the student is calm enough to talk about it. Accordingly, they used de-escalation skills to

help the student calm down enough to talk about what triggered them. To help students de-escalate enough to talk about what is bothering them, educators employed many strategies.

A common strategy or theme educators mentioned in the study was giving students time and space to cool off. For example, Jessica had taken several different types of de-escalation training. I asked whether there were any similarities, and she said the importance of giving space was a common thread in all the training she had (Jessica, Interview 1). An example of what that looked like for her was:

> I just tell them how much I'd really appreciate it if they'd just come to a place where they could feel safer, just come in here where nobody's going to be looking at you, you can take some time to just calm down and be with you, and then we can talk whenever you're ready (Jessica, Interview 1).

The literature also mentions using time and space as a de-escalation strategy. For example, in a study focused on law enforcement de-escalation skills, Engle et al, (2020) noted that:

> Many law enforcement leaders supporting the adoption of de-escalation training espouse that slow-ing down situations, using time, distance, and cover, along with other de-escalation techniques, can help resolve police–citizen encounters with less frequent and severe uses of force, and that the tactics increase officer safety, p.725.

A recent study on teachers using de-escalation skills also discussed time and space. Teachers in the study recommended giving students time and space to talk about their feelings and their problems (Chapman, 2024). As students talked about their feelings, they also reported feeling heard, which helped de-escalate the situation (Chapman, 2024).

The teachers in Chapman's study learned the same lesson as the educators in this study about how time and space relate to identifying the trigger. Educators often identify a trigger when they can discuss what happened with students. Both interview and survey participants referenced this connection. Once the student is calmer and more rational, educators try to talk with them about what upset them. Lauren explains, "They need a chance to say why they were upset" (Lauren, Interview 1). A survey respondent explained this very well when they noted:

> It has made me approach the students with a lens of curiosity instead of feeling bad for them /feeling like I'm not making a difference or helping. The curiosity helps me see the issue from their perspective and makes me consider all the stressors involved that lead to the student behaving that way. [This] has made me better at identifying triggers, knowing which strategies to use, what I need to improve, and how to help them overall (Survey Respondent).

Once they identify the trigger, educators report moving into a problem-solving approach with the student and debriefing with them.

A clear lesson educators in this study learned from using de-escalation skills is that identifying the trigger through debriefing, or talking it out to problem-solve, is key to helping the student de-escalate in the moment and may also prevent future escalation by making a plan with them. Jessica explains what she does when she is problem-solving with a student: "Maybe we can come up with a solution, something that would help (Jessica, Interview1). A survey respondent explained their problem-solving approach: "I responded with assurances: 'Let's talk through what happened so we can make a plan' (Survey respondent).

Becoming a better detective and identifying the trigger are now second nature to many of the educators in this study, including Lauren. Lauren illustrates this when she said, "Because I

think when you first start to get to know kids, you have to find out what their triggers are" (Lauren, Interview 1). A survey respondent noted: "I wanted to help him figure out what was bothering him" (Survey respondent). Another survey respondent noted: "The first thing I try to do is assess the situation and figure out what might be the trigger" (Survey respondent).

Jim also noted that identifying the trigger earlier can affect safety. He advised that "we need to be able to get to them before they get to this place where they're so upset and so frustrated that they start doing things that are unsafe for them" (Jim, Interview 1). This indicates that understanding what triggered students as early as possible is one strategy educators believe positively impacts student safety. The educators in this study learned that identifying what was triggering the student not only built their capacity as de-escalators; it also helped them de-escalate effectively, improving safety for staff and students.

Key Takeaway 4

Using De-escalation Skills Results in a Professional Transformation of Educators.

During data collection, the educators had multiple opportunities to share how using de-escalation skills impacted them. The evidence shows that, over time, the educators honed their de-escalation skills and grew confident in using them. They shared that using de-escalation skills has led to significant professional growth and transformed their day-to-day practice.

When asked whether their de-escalation skills had evolved, the interviewed participants answered with a resounding yes. Coach illustrated this when she said:

> …it takes practice. I think it's already helped me be kind of more in tune with my own actions and thoughts and choices that I make around the situations that are happening, not to say that I'm perfect by any means (Coach, Interview 2).

While that question was not asked directly of survey respondents, there was evidence of evolution for them as well. For example, a survey respondent noted that their skills had grown:

> In the past, I might have taken the "hard stance" approach with a defiant student. This doesn't work...I think students themselves have learned to take the "hard stance", and it becomes a fight for control. I try not to go there with students. Speaking less seems to help, letting the student have some time to come back to a calm state, rather than escalating the situation even more by too much talking (Survey Respondent).

One of the most significant lessons educators learned as they developed their de-escalation skills is the importance of self-regulation. Educators learned that before they can help students de-escalate, they must regulate themselves. They learned that it was not only important to be regulated before attempting to de-escalate a student, but also to stay de-escalated throughout the process. All interview participants and several survey respondents pointed out the importance of this lesson. One example is what Hoops said, “If I’m not going to be calm, they are not going to be calm. We are going to end up escalating each other, (Hoops Interview 1). A survey respondent also emphasized this concept, saying emphatically, “I always have at the back of my mind that an escalated adult CANNOT de-escalate a child” (Survey respondent).

Understanding the importance of self-regulation while using de-escalation skills further shows the transformative impact of de-escalation skills for educators. Modulating one’s emotions in tense, sometimes scary situations is difficult. Educators becoming so skilled at this shows the skill has become ingrained in their professional identity. This transformation truly comes from being intentional, self-aware, and well-practiced in self-regulation, as Jessica noted:

> It kind of changed everything. I mean, if before I would have, because I didn't know any better, I would get escalated immediately, and I would respond in an escalated state. And so now, I just kind of stay even-keeled (Jessica, Interview 1).

It also means educators are practicing what they preach by using de-escalation skills. Beyond being a powerful lesson for educators, self-regulation is also an important lesson for the students they serve. When students see educators remain calm and engage in self-regulation, they learn that they, too, can self-regulate. Harley provided an example of how she does this with her students:

> I'll say, Miss Harley's mouth is, you know, my cheeks are getting red. I am feeling angry. I need to go take a minute. And, you know, I'll sit down. Sometimes it's for real. Sometimes it's just, you know, showing them (Harley, Interview 2).

Learning to self-regulate before and during de-escalation is one of the most important transformative, positive lessons educators learned through using de-escalation skills.

The literature also shows the positive impact of de-escalation skills on educator confidence. Engel et al. (2020) found that de-escalation training positively impacted participants' knowledge, confidence, and attitudes. While rereading the transcripts for this study, I noticed additional evidence of educators' evolution. Using de-escalation skills made educators feel more confident. Harley noted: "I feel like getting these strategies and having that support definitely helps to be able to feel more confident going into a situation" (Interview 2). A survey respondent also noted that becoming more confident in using de-escalation skills meant that it made difficult moments feel less overwhelming:

> One thing I've noticed is that using de-escalation skills has helped me build stronger trust with my students. When I stay calm, give them space, and model

> strategies like breathing or using "I" messages, they begin to see me as someone who will support them. Overall, it's given me more confidence and has made challenging moments feel less overwhelming (Survey Participant).

Jessica said that taking the training every year and practicing the skills has increased her confidence as well:

> Putting my de-escalation skills into practice, and honestly reviewing them, you know, getting recertified every year. I think it has made each year easier and more enjoyable and maybe more confident to keep doing what I'm doing…(Jessica, Interview 2).

Another survey respondent shared how using de-escalation skills transformed their practice and increased their confidence:

> De-escalation training has really changed the way I respond to challenging student behavior. Before, I sometimes felt unsure how to handle those moments, but with Ci3T I now have a clear structure to follow. I stay calmer, I ask questions in a supportive way, and I give students space when they need it. It feels more appropriate and consistent, and I've noticed that students respond better because they know what to expect from me (Survey Respondent).

The message in this study is clear: using de-escalation skills has had a positive, transformative impact on educators. This transformation has the potential to positively affect teacher attrition.

Impact on Teacher Attrition

The literature review revealed a correlation between challenging behaviors and teacher attrition. This notion piqued my curiosity and a related interview question became part of the study. In interviews, participants were asked whether using de-escalation skills affected their

decision to stay in education. While there was some hesitation, all interviewees indicated that using de-escalation skills was one of the deciding factors in staying in education. A summary of their responses appears in the next table.

Table 5.1. Theme: Positive Impact on Staying in Education

- I can do this, I can do that (Coach, Interview 2).
- I think that my experience, because I do take it so much to heart, [is] that I do have a lot of good strategies to use and good outcomes from using them. I feel like getting these strategies and having that support definitely helps to be able to feel more confident going into a situation (Harley, Interview 2).
- I do feel like me knowing what I know and being able to help other people, it's not so much that it makes me want to stay in teaching forever, but I do see where I am able to share that knowledge (Hoops).
- Putting my de-escalation skills into practice and honestly reviewing them, you know, getting recertified every year. I think [it] has made each year easier and more enjoyable and maybe more confident to keep doing what I'm doing…(Jessica, Interview 2).
- Now I can get kiddos to do the things, and I can have positive change in their lives. The part that keeps me hooked is they remember me. And I'm that teacher….and those are the things that make me want to stay (Jim, Interview 2).
- I don't think that I'm going. I think that without the training and without the strategies, a lot of teachers will walk out faster than someone who does have the training (Lauren, Interview 2)

While this evidence is not as clear-cut as other evidence in the study, these responses indicate that being able to confidently use de-escalation skills may be a factor that educators weigh when deciding whether to leave or stay in the field of education. Teachers in this study indicate that using de-escalation skills helped to tip the balance in favor of staying in education. This is another positive impact de-escalation skills have on the educators who use them. Another positive impact is that using de-escalation skills well increased educators' sense of safety, and educators believed they help keep students safe.

Key Takeaway 5: Using De-Escalation Skills Positively Impacts Safety for Educators and Students

This study also examined **Research Question 2 (RQ2):** How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students? Educators reported recognizing the potential for themselves or other staff members to be unsafe and, at times, feeling unsafe. Most reported that their safety concerns were tied to students' safety. The evidence is clear that de-escalation skills positively impacted not only educators' sense of safety, but also educators' belief that using de-escalation skills made school safer for students.

When asked, participants reported that they did not generally feel unsafe at school. For example, Jessica told us: "I don't know that I would say it ever felt unsafe, because my mind, I don't know, it's just the way I'm wired. It goes into, like, protect-and-care mode (Jessica, Interview 2). A survey respondent put it differently: "I don't remember a time when I was ever afraid of a student or felt like they were placing me in an unsafe position" (Survey respondent). Lauren similarly noted: "I don't believe so. I've never been worried about my own safety" (Lauren, Interview 2). However, the educators shared some incidents in which they felt unsafe.

The participants did share other thoughts about safety, including the rare times they felt unsafe at school. For example, one participant felt that while they did not feel unsafe, they recognized that other teachers might. Coach illustrates this by saying, "I think now being a teacher, I think there's more of a reality of being unsafe. Like, you really never know what to expect" (Coach, Interview 2). Harley reported that she felt safe in her current setting, but did have a time when she felt unsafe in a previous job: "When I was teaching behavior classes, there were sixth graders that were a lot bigger than I was. And it was scary when they were upset"

(Harley, Interview 2). As Harley reflected on using de-escalation skills in a previous setting, while she felt unsafe, she noted that using de-escalation skills there helped keep her safe:

> I do feel like the de-escalation process made it to where they very well could have done something, right? But because they knew that I was showing them respect, they had my respect, then it never got to a point where I felt like they were going to hurt me (Harley, Interview 2).

Hoops identified that there were times when she felt unsafe at school: “I know today, I'm going to be assaulted in some sort of way (Hoops, Interview 2). She attributes this to the long time it takes to provide enough support for some students. "It's disappointing to feel like you can have these things that are happening and people are still like, well, we need eight more weeks of, you know, data for that" (Hoops, Interview 2). She believes this made the environment unsafe (Hoops, Interview 2). Hoops also said that an expected training with blocking pads triggered strong emotions for her, especially because it came on the heels of a very tough day at school:

> That’s what it feels like. Like, we need to be ready to put our life on the line at any moment. You know, that day had been a really hard day with the student who was continually aggressive…you feel like you're getting triggered by a child, and that's very confusing as an adult. And then to go into that training and knowing that, oh, here's another thing we need to be prepared for, is very hard because I don't think I was ever prepared. What else next? Are we going to be trained on wearing bulletproof vests? (Hoops, Interview 2).

Jessica noted that sometimes her sense of safety was negatively impacted by parents being present during an incident and feeling uncomfortable knowing that she may have had to involve a school resource officer:

> I have specific parents that when they come in, like, immediately, it takes me to a place of fear and just being nervous and scared. We've had one real unsafe situation, and I didn't feel uncomfortable trying to put some things in place to de-escalate the situation, because I didn't want the officer to have to get involved (Jessica, Interview 1).

Jim hasn't felt unsafe, but noted that during his first year in the program he felt:

> Weird. I mean, when I was first here, I didn't know what I was getting into, or what I was being asked to do. Sometimes it would feel weird because I wasn't used to anything like this (Jim, Interview 2).

Jim's reflection, and those who felt similarly, highlighted one implication. Educators in this study believe that teachers should be better prepared to teach students with challenging behaviors in their pre-service programs. Training pre-service educators in effective de-escalation strategies could also improve their sense of safety.

Strategies to Keep Students Safe

As mentioned before, the educators in this study use a variety of skills to de-escalate students. They reported that many of them positively impact student safety. For example, when Jessica explained that having parents present while de-escalating a student made her feel unsafe at times, she also reported feeling confident using the skills at other times. "Even when a student ran around her school with a knife, I didn't ever feel unsafe" (Jessica, Interview 2). Jessica attributed part of this sense of safety to the effectiveness of the team approach her school building uses to de-escalate students. Jessica reported that her teammates also had de-escalation training, which she found helpful (Jessica, Interview 2). She noted that the team has been working together for three years and that the relationship between the team members has helped them function more effectively:

> The team that I work with, everybody is just on point and super. Without saying something, we can give each other a look at the eyes and we can make that movement around the kid or move to a different spot or if somebody, if there's somebody being more successful, that can take the point on that, then we step back but we're still, you know, just maybe a couple tables away, or we're holding the door open or acting like we're washing our hands, doing something else to work together, to help the student become de-escalated (Interview 2).

Harley reported that knowing which words to use when de-escalating a student helped her keep students safe. She reported that it was nice to be "able to use your verbiage to talk to the students or the people to kind of de-escalate the conversation down…" (Harley, Interview 2). She noted that pairing this strategy with a sensory strategy worked quickly for one student: "I said, oh, I see you need to get some frustrations out. Let's go to the calm down corner, and let's do the bands" (Harley, Interview 1). She reported that using the stretch bands helped the student de-escalate within 30 seconds, hugged her, and then returned to the class activity.

One way Jim helps students feel safe in his classroom is by using calming music and dimming the lights (Jim, Interview 1). He also related that the skill helped him catch triggers faster, which kept kids safer:

> If I didn't know if I didn't have that training and if I didn't know some of the initial things like, hey, this or this or this happens, then this happens. Like, if I didn't know all of that stuff, then. I don't think I would be able to do as good of a job at getting to them before they get to that point of like not being safe to themselves or to other people or whatever (Jim, Interview 1)

In her second interview, Lauren noted that she helped find a place for students to de-escalate outside of the classroom. She said that a safe place is where a student can: “melt.”

> So a safe space is where a child can truly just melt. And that's the best word I have for it, because when their body is tense and when they are frustrated and they are mad and they are all of the above, their thinking process is not there. And it's not until they feel comfortable and safe that their body “de-tenses” (Lauren, Interview 2).

Lauren also reported she can tell when students feel safe. This is important because she assessed the student and could also recognize when the student wasn’t quite safe enough to debrief, which kept everyone safer. I asked Lauren what melting looked like when a student “de-tenses.”

> When you see that tension in their body slowly come down, that's when they have hit their safe space, or they've hit the point where they can no longer fight. They'll start looking at you. When they start making eye contact with you, that means they're almost ready to talk. Not quite yet. You’ve got to give them a second. But, you know, when they start acknowledging the fact that you're even there, I feel like that's another sign that maybe they're ready to talk, but you have to make sure that you allow them that last few seconds to get de-escalated before you can really take off with that (Lauren, Interview 2)

A survey participant described recognizing that the student is safe in a different way:

> After several minutes, his breathing began to slow, and his body relaxed. After about five minutes, he initiated the first small interaction by asking, ‘Do I have to go back to class? This told me he had re-entered the thinking part of his brain (Survey Participant).

As the educators shared these stories and identified strategies, they focused on how their use impacted student safety but also recognized that using de-escalation skills positively affected their own safety.

Positive Impact on Educator Sense of Safety

Nearly all educators in this study reported that using de-escalation skills has positively impacted their sense of safety by helping them stay calm as students escalated. For example, Jim, Jessica, and Lauren circled back to the notion that regulated educators do a better job of using de-escalation skills. Jim noted that he always tried to have a calm demeanor because he believes it impacted safety:

> If you get tensed up, then, like, you as a teacher will react in a negative way, and then the students will see that. And if you do that, then they may not; if they see that, they may not feel like they're safe (Jim, Interview 1).

Jessica reported being trained using a wide variety of de-escalation programs and that many types of de-escalation skills training teach that it is important for the educator to keep themself in a "safe place" (Jessica, Interview 1). Lauren believes that getting de-escalation training helps her stay calm to help students stay safe:

> So, the training that I have been given has helped me to stay calm in that situation, and then my emotions need to come in after the child is back and safe and in their right headspace before I can put my emotions in front of me, I feel like (Lauren, Interview 1).

In addition to remaining calm, the educators reported that using de-escalation skills increased their sense of safety by increasing their confidence and competency in using the skills. Jessica agreed with Lauren and Jim about staying calm but also believes the skills have given her more confidence:

> How you, as the adult, have to kind of keep yourself in a safe place as well. Putting my de-escalation skills into practice, and honestly reviewing them, you know, getting

> recertified every year. I think [it] has made each year easier and more enjoyable and maybe more confident to keep doing what I'm doing (Jessica, Interview 2).

Hoops related that using the skills helped her learn to defuse situations more quickly and prevent situations from becoming unsafe:

> You start to see the signs, you see the triggers, you can, I mean, how many times can you just defuse the situation before it even becomes a thing? (Hoops Interview 2).

Coach said something similar:

> I think I just know that if I can get them, if I can get them to de-escalate, they're not going to keep escalating, or they won't. We won't get to a point where either they're being unsafe, or I'm starting to feel unsafe, or, like, something else is going to happen (Coach, Interview 2).

As the educators described the strategies they used, it was clear they had evolved into educators with greater self-awareness of how their actions affected safety. This self-awareness helped them understand what helped students stay safe in using the skills. They became confident users and reported feeling safe while using the skills.

Two other interesting findings showed how using de-escalation skills positively impacted educators' sense of safety at school. One finding described a strategy educators used. Another finding was related to what educators did not need to use while de-escalating students.

Tapping Out

Tapping out is a concept educators use when they are escalated to the point that they feel safety would be compromised or they just need a break. When this happens, they tap out to another staff member. This is another way de-escalation skills positively impacted safety for students and staff. Coach illustrated this when she stated, "I think tapping out just kind of lies

within being in tune with how you're feeling, and there have been times I had to walk away from a student" (Coach, Interview 2). Another educator used to tap out when there was a safety danger or when she didn't want to take the situation personally (Harley, Interview 2).

Learning to tap out also shows the educators' transformation in this study, as they became more aware of their need to improve at tapping out. Hoops exemplified this when she mentioned that it was harder for her to tap out, but that she knew she needed to do so:

> And so I feel like it's hard for me to tap out because I don't want somebody else to have to come and deal with this problem that they shouldn't have to deal with (Hoops, Interview 1). Normally, it is somebody else telling you to go. It is very rarely me saying, "I need somebody to take over. It's very rare, but I am realizing that I probably need to start doing that more (Hoops, Interview 1).

When I asked her more about this in the second interview, Hoops bravely admitted that she thinks her difficulty is about pride. She explained further, "You're the one that's supposed to be the one to [be] the professional (Hoops, Interview 2).

Jessica also noted that she evolved and learned to tap out over time: "If I'm starting to feel some sort of way, I tap out and let somebody else come in" (Jessica, Interview 1). Jessica also noted that there were several ways for her to tap out in her building:

> It's amazing. Often, also, I need to take a break. I'm going to act out of character, and you don't deserve that. I'm going to go find somebody else. I'll get the school counselor. I'll get the secretary with the therapy dog to come in there. I'll go debrief the principal or assistant principal, and tell him what's going on and what my thoughts are [about what] needs to happen, and I need to go take a walk (Jessica, Interview 1).

Jessica also bravely shared that sometimes she needs to tap out when a situation reminds her of something that has happened with her personal children:

> So there's one kid at school right now who I just have to let somebody else take spearhead that one, because it'll send me into reacting in ways that just shutting down and stepping back, because I don't ever get loud or aggressive or anything (Jessica, Interview 2).

Jessica relates that sometimes when she taps out in this situation, she stays in the room while another person comes in. She said: "That's the best way to preserve the child's dignity [and] mental health as well as mine (Jessica, Interview 2).

Tapping out was revealed as an important strategy for the educators in this study and, as Jim noted, tapping out is also about being human and recognizing that sometimes the staff de-escalating students just need to take a break: "…tapping out is a time where you're like, hey, I really, I really need someone else to kind of step in for just a little bit. I just need a break" (Jim, Interview 2). Taking a break keeps everyone safer.

Limited Use of Physical Skills

An unexpected finding emerged in this study related to physical safety interventions. Educators in this study reported that they rarely needed to use physical skills, and some were even reluctant to use them when danger was imminent. For example, Harley stated that she had never used physical skills (Harley, Interview 1) and Hoops noted: "I don't like the restraint part, and it has been ages since I have done that. I have no desire to…" (Hoops, Interview 1). One survey respondent also asserts that using de-escalation skills reduced their proclivity to use physical skills as a first line of intervention:

> I am not immediately responding with force; I am looking at the situation as a whole, looking for what the student might need in that moment. I don't want to get hurt, and I don't want students to get hurt either, so I give students a lot of prompts and options before we escort. I don't fight anger with more anger (Survey Participant).

Coach noted that she would like to train others in de-escalation, but did not see the need to teach others the physical skills: "Like, not even necessarily going through the physical skills…, and sharing, like, how effective it's been for myself or why it's effective (Coach, Interview 2).

This survey respondent summed up how using de-escalation skills positively impacted both student safety and their own sense of safety well:

> De-escalation skills have definitely helped increase my sense of safety directly as it assists [in] preventing escalations, decreasing the time of escalated students, decreasing the severity of escalations, and looking at the whole person of the student (Survey Respondent)

This study shared the experiences of both special education staff and general education staff. Educators in both roles clearly explained that using de-escalation skills is not solely the purview of special educators. Any educator can use de-escalation skills with any student. This assertion is the basis for the sixth key takeaway of this study.

Key Takeaway 6

Using De-escalation Skills to Manage Challenging Behaviors in School is Everyone's Responsibility

Using de-escalation skills to manage challenging behaviors is not just for special education students or special education staff. Including general educators in this study was an intentional design choice, as much of the educational research literature focuses on how de-

escalation skills are used with special education students. Purposive sampling ensured that general educators were included to capture their perspective on how they used de-escalation skills to manage crises.

Three general educators participated in the interviews, and 34% of the survey respondents were general educators. This perspective also helped fill a research gap, as Adamson et al. (2024) noted that both general educators and special educators need to know how to use de-escalation skills to manage crises. These general educators reported incorporating de-escalation skills into their daily practice and provided rich examples of how they did so.

By not limiting participants to any particular role within general education or special education, the study also included a wide variety of educator roles. The voices of general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, mental health support staff, and other staff such as instructional coaches and deans of students emerged loudly and clearly as themes and concepts from their stories. One concept that emerged loudly and clearly from many participants is that de-escalation skills are universal and that using them to manage challenging behaviors is everyone's responsibility.

Key Takeaway 7: Create a Culture of Care for Educators AND Students

As previously discussed, using de-escalation skills is transformative for teachers. The transformation is overwhelmingly positive as educators gain confidence in using the skills and create safer environments for students and staff. While the resulting transformation is ultimately positive for educators, it can take a toll.

The toll some educators pay to become skilled de-escalators is emotional. During the interviews, I asked which emotions the educators felt while using de-escalation skills. Another

theme emerged: using de-escalation skills is an emotional process. Coach noted how she felt when she accidentally re-escalated a student:

> I was relieved that he came with me without a fight, and I was feeling pretty good, that we were just talking about what happened in his next steps. And I really feel bad when I am the one that, like, makes him escalate more (Coach, Interview 1).

Hoops described how she felt when she interacts with a student she cares about: "…it makes me sad because I want her to be okay" (Hoops, Interview 1). Lauren's feelings were also related to students, as she noted how her feelings related to her anxiety about keeping students safe: "I just get real anxious because I'm like, okay, how do I protect them? (Lauren, Interview 2). Harley shared that using de-escalation skills involves a range of emotions: "I guess feeling helpless. …But it is kind of a roller coaster…once they were able to go through the calm down corner, and they're using the techniques, you're excited (Harley, Interview 1). I believe Harley's example is powerful because she demonstrates not only the emotional lows of using de-escalation skills, but the highs as well. I believe this high is what encourages educators to use de-escalation skills. However, at times, the emotional toll on educators feels overwhelming to them.

As noted in the literature review, some teachers report that challenging behavior is a major stressor, and some are considering leaving the profession because of it. If challenging behaviors cause so much stress that teachers consider leaving the profession, it seems important to put strategies in place to care for the educators who care for students who display these challenging behaviors. Hoops suggested this:

> I think that when I start to feel unsafe or, like, just say, like, I don't want to go to work today because I don't have a mental capacity to know that I'm going to get groped or I'm

> going to get, you know, this or that. There needs to be more access, not only to help with the kids, but with us (Interview 2).

As I reflected on what Hoops and other educators shared about the emotions involved in using de-escalation skills, I decided to add another key takeaway to the list. School administrators should establish a culture of care for those who serve students with challenging behaviors. Creating a culture of care for students is also important in using de-escalation skills, as the educators in this study have demonstrated.

According to Colvin & Scott (2015), teachers should be authentic, attentive, and caring. It was clear that the teachers in this study care deeply about the students they serve and demonstrated authenticity and attentiveness as well. The educators in this study related that they felt love, care, and concern for their students. For example, Jim noted that: "we are kind of their school family, and families care about each other" (Jim Interview 2). Coach thought of caring for students as doing what is best for them:

> I feel like I'm seeking the resources that I know. Not only are {they} going to help me and my teaching practices, but also, what's best for them and how to handle situations like that (Coach, Interview 2).

Harley noted: "When they know that the teacher cares, then that puts it in a different perspective" (Harley, Interview 2).

Creating a culture where students feel cared for is important for both preventing escalation and using de-escalation skills to respond to challenging behaviors. For educational leaders, this means establishing a culture of caring for students and staff in schools. In this type of culture, educators keep students and staff safer, especially when students display challenging behaviors.

Recommendations

The lessons from this study also have implications for future educational practice. Maintaining or establishing a culture of care for staff and students in schools may go a long way to make schools safer. As part of this culture of caring, several practices are recommended.

All School Staff Should Receive De-escalation Training

Couvillon et al. (2010) asserted that having skills to manage challenging behaviors effectively is now imperative for all staff who work with students, including general education teachers and administrators. The educators in this study agreed. The first implication is that all staff should receive de-escalation training. This table was shared in Chapter 4, but these points are worth repeating. Using de-escalation skills is everyone's responsibility at school:

Table 5.2. Everyone Should Have De-escalation Training.

Coach-Interviews 1 and 3	I think it's beneficial for everyone to have the training. Just that it's effective. I wish I was utilized more…I don't think it should be limited to specific students. I think the relational part is more important.
Harley-Interviews 2 and 3	I feel like it is very important for I mean I wish all teachers would have to go through Mandt, I mean I really do. Just because it just gives you more tools in your belt… I just feel like any teacher or anyone in education should go through at least the de-escalation portion. I feel like, again, in the society that we're in, there's a lot of trauma response that we need to be aware of and trauma trauma informed teaching and just be able to be a safe place for the kids.
Hoops-Interviews 1 and 3	Everybody needs to have it. Just the fact that every teacher, every staff member, whether you are admin, paras, gen ed custodian? should be sitting through de escalation training, period.
Jessica-Interview 1	It's really key. Getting teachers to the first stuff I get with teachers in classroom management and de-escalation is just stop talking. Like, that's the first thing I need teachers who are struggling to do. Just stop talking. You don't need to say anything else. State what you need, and then assume that they're going to comply. Don't argue with them…..So, just stop

	talking so much. Listen more. Talk less, listen more. You don't have to be right.
Jessica-Interview 3	If you're not experienced meaning you're new at teaching, and/or you haven't been a parent. Understanding how to really stay calm, stay cool and de-escalate students is, I think, much more difficult.
Jim-Interview 2	I mean, every teacher could use that stuff. Every single one.
Survey Respondents	I think all self-contained and behavior room paras should be required to take Mandt. It's definitely a game changer. I believe in the Mandt system and think everyone should be trained in it. The place that I teach you really need to be good at using de-escalation skills and strategies. They are important for the kids so that they can be successful. All of the adults that they see need these strategies so that they meet the needs of their students. Everyone benefits from using de-escalation skills. Everyone who works with students (no matter what grade) should take a course about de-escalation. This includes support staff also. De-escalation training paired with my degree, continuing education, and reading on the subject completely changes the way I respond to challenging student behavior. I think anyone responding to care or crisis calls within the schools should be required to have it.

Take a Team Approach to Using De-escalation Skills

School leaders should ensure that all care/crisis team members are trained in de-escalation skills so they can use a team approach. Part of establishing a culture of care for students and staff is taking a team approach to using de-escalation skills. Jessica (Interview 2) noted that part of what makes her an effective de-escalator is that her building team works together to de-escalate students. In the district, care teams are summoned when a student displays challenging behavior. This approach was also recommended in the literature. For

example, Dunlap et al. (2020) recommended that adults use a zone defense when interacting with students to ensure that all adults use similar techniques.

In addition to using similar approaches, using a team approach allows team members to tap out. Educators in this study noted that tapping out served multiple purposes during the de-escalation process. Tapping out allowed the educator to remove themselves from the situation if they felt as though they were beginning to escalate. They also used tapping out to prevent them from escalating. Some felt as though tapping out helped protect their wellbeing. Using a team approach increases the likelihood that tapping out can occur, which should be considered another reason to use a team approach in a culture of care.

Debriefing with students was another way educators showed they care about students and want to help them find a solution. This study revealed that problem-solving is part of debriefing. Learning what is upsetting the student, what could work better for the student, and finding strategies that work for the student all help students de-escalate or, better yet, avoid escalating in the first place.

However, debriefing and problem-solving are time-consuming and resource-intensive strategies, and the educators in this study noted that it was not happening as often as it should. Greene (2025) argues that giving classroom teachers more time to problem-solve with their students about what triggers or frustrates them would be a much more efficient use of resources. This is consistent with what Jim explained in his first interview:

> We need to be able to get to them before they get to this place where they're so upset and so frustrated that they start doing things that are unsafe for them. And being able to build those relationships and getting to know that kiddo, you can start picking up, if you pay attention, you can pick up on when this tipping point is going to be, and then if you can

> stop it or pause it and get them to where they are able to talk through things and they are able to do these things before that stuff happens. That's the goal. (Jim, Interview 1).

Teams should have time to gather and discuss events they perceive as significant, or that continue to occur regularly. This team approach can help the team support one another and the student(s) involved in the incidents, especially when they use a problem-solving approach during the discussion. Perhaps care response teams, as Greene (2025) recommends, could redirect their focus to covering for classroom teachers so teachers have time to team with the student. They could use this time to teach students strategies, with or without social-emotional learning curricula, to anticipate when problems may frustrate them and work through frustration when it happens.

As Hoops recommended, a team approach also includes ensuring that administration supports staff who use de-escalation skills (Hoops, Interview 2). Supporting staff could include strategies such as providing access to emotional/mental health supports for staff who use de-escalation skills to support students with challenging behaviors. Building administrators should also check in with their care team staff and teachers to assess their need for support. District administrators should then check in with building administrators and assess their support needs. These strategies can reduce the emotional toll on educators by supporting them as they use de-escalation skills.

Provide De-escalation Training for Pre-Service Teachers

Teachers in this study suggest a need for pre-service teachers to have de-escalation training, as evidenced by the thoughts of Coach:

> My first year, I had some moments dealing with situations I'd never dealt with before and not having the training or understanding that I have now, or even just experiences, because college does not prepare you for teaching (Coach, Interview 2).

Coach also reflected that pairing pre-service preparation with more practical experiences would be beneficial for aspiring teachers as well:

> And not even necessarily the preparedness of college for, like, the skills-wise, but just experience-wise. Lesson plans are thorough in college because I want you to know what you're doing, but there are a lot of things that I'm like, "This is not. They never talk to me about this, or you never got to see the reality of it, I guess, until you're actually there and doing it (Coach, Interview 3).

Hoops agrees that there is a need for pre-service teachers to have experience using de-escalation skills during their pre-service preparation, particularly with special education students, when she noted that:

> There's no sort of preparing you for this in college because they don't talk about it. They don't talk about what can happen. You have teachers that come in that are like, I was not ready for this. Well, we weren't prepared for it. And I also don't think that teachers get enough time. I think, you know, when they're coming in to be teaching, they need to have [special education] experience to see what happens (Hoops, Interview 2).

The literature indicates that new teachers feel stress in managing student behavior. For example, in a nationally normed survey, 61% of teachers with less than five years of experience reported managing student behavior as a significant stressor (Steiner et al., 2026). The final implication is clear: institutes of higher education developing programs for pre-service teachers should consider including de-escalation training. Further, if pre-service programs do not provide

this training, school leaders should consider offering it to new teachers so that they will feel more prepared when confronted with challenging behaviors.

Summary

The evidence in this study is overwhelming. Using de-escalation skills positively impacts educators. De-escalation skills also positively impact staff and student safety. Any school staff member can be trained in de-escalation skills and they can use them with any student. All staff could benefit from receiving de-escalation training. A survey respondent captured the essence of this notion well: “De-escalation training is essential for all staff working with all students” (Survey Respondent).

Positionality

As a district trainer in de-escalation skills, I needed to keep my positionality as a participant in de-escalation training in perspective while designing and implementing the study. I had foreknowledge of the tenets taught in the training and could have known many of the interview participants or survey respondents. I used several strategies to reduce any potential negative impacts of this positionality.

One of the first strategies was to focus the research questions on how educators used de-escalation skills rather than how they experienced de-escalation training. Another strategy I used was to ask many open-ended questions during data collection to ensure interview participants and survey respondents shared their own lived experiences. I also used three other strategies to minimize the impact of my pre-existing relationship with potential participants. I tried to ensure the study included staff members I did not know well, as well as those trained by other trainers. Finally, I conducted the survey anonymously to encourage respondents to feel more comfortable answering openly by reducing the impression that the survey evaluated the training.

Because of my pre-existing relationship with some participants and my extensive knowledge of the phenomenon, as Heidegger predicted, I could not detach myself completely. However, as an engaged listener, I learned a great deal from participants' perspectives. I thought that I would need to remind myself frequently to stay detached and not let my own understanding of de-escalation color my interpretation during analysis. Instead, I stayed continually engaged as I listened to the educators share their experiences using de-escalation skills. The vivid storytelling and shared feelings brought a clearer picture of what it is like to use de-escalation skills for others, including me.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. For example, while analyzing the survey results, I could not categorize six participants' roles in education. This slightly impacted my statistical accuracy. Another limitation is that, during analysis, a researcher can never truly interpret data from a neutral perspective (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This is especially true for me as the district de-escalation trainer.

The study also has potential limitations related to generalization. The small sample size may also hamper generalization. In addition, the pool of potential participants included few secondary staff, especially high school staff. While this was not controllable, it may still limit generalizability for that population.

There is a small chance of response bias due to self-reporting (Engel et al., 2020). Self-reporting can cause challenges with both recall and hindsight bias (McMahon et al., 2020). For example, 15% of participants did not identify that they had the Mandt System training. This was a study qualifier and an unexpected result. However, because the list of potential participants

came from a district-maintained list of training records, it is reasonable to assume participants had the prerequisite training, even if they did not name the training in their response.

Despite the potential limitations identified, the results indicate a high degree of credibility, as there was strong evidence of saturation. In addition, the researcher included a wide variety of perspectives, or multivocality, which increased the credibility. Finally, the researcher analyzed the data using multiple methods to support the findings' reliability.

Future Research Topics

Three potential ideas for future researchers to consider are related to this study. For example, researchers studying de-escalation implementation may want to gather observational data to learn how schools use de-escalation skills. Most literature, including this study, relies on teachers' perceptions of their own skill use. It may be helpful to observe educators de-escalating students, if privacy can be protected. This may provide new insights that even those using the skills cannot reveal.

It would be intriguing to interview students about their experiences with educators who help them de-escalate. Capturing this perspective could broaden the understanding of why some de-escalation skills work for them and why some are less effective. It would also be interesting to compare the perceptions of students and staff participating in the same de-escalation encounter.

Researchers might also consider examining whether and how new and/or pre-service teachers experience de-escalation training and apply it in practice. If the training is not occurring, an action study could help determine whether training new or pre-service teachers impacts teaching practice. If training is occurring, researchers and educational leaders would benefit from understanding how it is delivered.

Conclusion

Using a Heideggerian-inspired methodology, the data sets collected during this project were interpreted as a constantly evolving and interactive endeavor (Conroy, 2003). Using the Heideggerian-inspired circle of analysis to continually analyze, circle back, revisit, and re-analyze, the participants and the researcher made sense of the phenomenon of using de-escalation skills together. Through the voices of several educators, the essence and value of using de-escalation skills were clearly illuminated. Engle et al. (2020) concluded that de-escalation training is a "promising practice" p. 740. The educators in this study illuminated how this promising practice is used in schools.

Educators in this study reported that using de-escalation skills was transformative. As educators responded to challenging behaviors and decided how to respond, they continually relied on their judgment to select de-escalation strategies. As situations unfolded, they reflected on the effectiveness of their chosen response and adjusted as needed until they identified what helped the student de-escalate. As they supported their students through the de-escalation process, they also remained regulated, which required self-reflection and using de-escalation strategies on themselves. The more they repeated this process, the better they got at using de-escalation skills, and the more their confidence increased. As they improved their de-escalation skills and confidence, they also improved safety for their students and themselves.

By sharing their experiences using de-escalation strategies, this study provides 7 Key Takeaways for educators interested in learning more about how to implement de-escalation strategies.

Key Takeaways

1. Plenty of Opportunities Exist to Use De-escalation Skills in Public Schools.

2. Relationship and De-escalation Skills are Closely Intertwined
3. Using De-escalation Skills is Like Being a Detective: You Have to Figure It Out
4. Using De-escalation Skills Results in a Professional Transformation of Educators
5. Using De-Escalation Skills Positively Impacts Safety for Educators and Students
6. Using De-escalation Skills to Manage Challenging Behaviors in School is Everyone's Responsibility
7. Create a Culture of Care for Educators AND Students

A final thought from Jim captures the power of de-escalation: "to be good at de-escalation strategies and skills is so powerful…that [it] should be a superpower" (Jim, Interview 2). His reflection captures a central finding of this study: de-escalation is not simply a collection of strategies or skills to learn and apply, but a powerful capacity that shapes how educators understand, navigate, and respond to challenging behaviors. In the hands of an educator, de-escalation may, indeed, be a superpower.

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Appendix A - Invitation for Survey Email

You are invited to take part in an anonymous survey for a doctoral study, Teachers' Lived Experiences Using De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study, led by Stacey Kramer, a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University.

Purpose of this research: Teachers' sense of safety continues to decline (Baker & Koedel, 2025). The use of de-escalation skills has been identified as a means for promoting safer learning environments. I hope to learn how educators themselves interpret and integrate de-escalation skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice, and if those practices impact their sense of safety. This research aims to address these research questions:

What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?

How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you begin the survey and change your mind, you may end your participation at any time. The estimated time to complete the survey is 15–30 minutes.

If you would be willing to participate in this survey, please click on this link to read a consent statement and begin the survey:

De-escalation Skills Survey

Thank you so much for considering this request. If you have any questions at all about the survey or the research, please contact me at 785-230-3935 or skramer@tps501.org.

Respectfully,

Stacey Kramer
Doctoral Candidate
Kansas State University

Appendix B - Survey Consent Statement

Consent Statement:

You are invited to take part in a study, Teachers' Lived Experiences Using De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study, led by Stacey Kramer, a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University.

This project was approved by the Topeka Public Schools Research Team on November 5th and by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board on: August 14, 2025. IRB Proposal Number 13297.

The study will begin on November 15, 2025, and end by August 15, 2026.

Dr. Suzanne Porath, Principal Investigator, sporath@ksu.edu, (920) 858-3010, will be supervising my research as the **Responsible Graduate Student.**

Questions: If you have any questions, please contact Stacey Kramer at yecats519@ksu.edu, 782-230-3935. For concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Suzanne Porath, Principal Investigator, sporath@ksu.edu, (920) 858-3010.

If you have questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB, please contact us. These are: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.

Purpose of this research: Teachers' sense of safety continues to decline (Baker & Koedel, 2025). The use of de-escalation skills has been identified as a means for promoting safer learning environments. I hope to learn how educators themselves interpret and integrate these skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice, and if those practices impact their sense of safety. This research aims to address these research questions:

What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?

How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Procedures for the research: This phase of the study will include an anonymous survey that invites you to share your lived experiences of using de-escalation skills in your teaching practice. Identifying information, including your email address, will not be collected during this survey. Your responses will remain confidential, and you should avoid including names or identifying

details of students or colleagues. There are no right or wrong answers—your unique perspective is valuable. **Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you begin the survey and change your mind, you may end your participation at any time.** The estimated time to complete the survey is 15–30 minutes

Risks: The survey requests personal opinions; therefore, procedures to protect confidentiality will be implemented: your email address will not be collected. As with any online-related activity, the risk of a breach of confidentiality is always possible. To the best of my ability, your answers in this study will remain confidential.

Benefits Anticipated: The study is designed to examine how de-escalation skills are used and if they impact your sense of safety while working with students. While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation may inform professional learning offerings in school districts.

Confidentiality: All data will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes. Participant information will not be collected as part of this phase of the research, and even if identifiers are removed, it will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Names of students and staff members inadvertently mentioned will be de-identified. Data and information will be stored in locked containers and on a personal password-protected computer and iPad, accessible only to the researchers. After the project is complete, the survey results will be deleted from the personal computer three years after the project has been completed.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

Continuing to complete this survey indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described.

Appendix C - Survey Participants' Role, Grade Level, and Population Served

Identified Role	Number of participants	Grades currently Serving	Special Education or General Education
Administrator	1	PK	General Education
Administrator	4	PK-5	General Education
Administrator	1	6-8	General Education
Counselor	1	PK-2	General Education
Counselor	1	K-5	General Education
Counselor	1	6-8	General Education
Both General Education and Special Education Teacher	1	PK-12	Both
General Education Teacher	3	K-2	General Education
General Education Teacher	1	K-8	General Education
General Education Teacher	1	3-5	General Education
Instructional Coach	1	6-12	General Education
Other	1	PK	Unknown
Other	3	PK-5	Unknown
Other	2	6-8	Unknown
Paraprofessional	1	PK	Special Education
Paraprofessional	2	K-5	Special Education
Paraprofessional	1	6-8	Special Education
Paraprofessional	2	9-12	Special Education
School Psychologist	1	PK-5	Special Education

Social Worker	1	K-5	Special Education
Social Worker	1	9-12	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	2	K-2	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	1	Pk-5	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	4	K-5	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	1	3-5	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	4	6-8	Special Education
Special Education Teacher	1	9-12	Special Education
Special Education Consultants/Special Education Teacher	1	PK–5	Special Education
Special Education Consultants/Special Education Teacher	1	K-5	Special Education
Special Education Consultant	1	PK-5	Special Education

Appendix D - Invitation Email for Interviews

You are invited to take part in a doctoral study, Teachers' Lived Experiences Using De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study, led by Stacey Kramer, a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University.

This phase of the study will include two semi-structured **confidential** interviews and at least one follow-up interview. It is anticipated that each interview will take no more than one hour. The confidential interviews will be conducted in person or via Zoom electronic conferencing and recorded according to your preference.

Purpose of this research: Teachers' sense of safety continues to decline (Baker & Koedel, 2025). The use of de-escalation skills has been identified as a means for promoting safer learning environments. I hope to learn how educators themselves interpret and integrate de-escalation skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice, and if those practices impact their sense of safety. This research aims to address these research questions:
What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?
How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?
Your participation is completely voluntary. If you begin the survey or interviews, you may stop at any time.
If you would be willing to participate in this project, please complete this very brief Google Survey Form. The form will include:

1. A brief (5-minute) demographic survey that includes your name and information about your professional experience.
2. Your preference for the interview mode (in person or via Zoom).
3. Your preferences regarding the time/location of interviews.
4. A consent statement to participate:

Thank you so much for considering this request. If you have any questions at all about the survey or the research, please contact me at 785-230-3935 or skramer@tps501.org.
Respectfully,

Stacey Kramer Doctoral Candidate
Kansas State University

Appendix E - De-escalation Skills Project Interview Consent Statement

De-escalation Skills Project Interview Consent Statement

Consent: You are invited to take part in a study, Teachers' Lived Experiences Using De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study, led by Stacey Kramer, a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University.

At the end of this email is a brief demographic survey, which includes a formal consent statement and the opportunity to choose how you would like to be interviewed.

This project was approved by the Topeka Public Schools Research Team on November 5th and by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board on: August 14, 2025. IRB Proposal Number 13297.

The study will begin on November 15, 2025, and end by August 15, 2026.

Dr. Suzanne Porath, Principal Investigator, sporath@ksu.edu, (920)858-3010, will be supervising my research as the **Responsible Graduate Student.**

Questions: If you have any questions, please contact Stacey Kramer at yecats519@ksu.edu, 782-230-3935. For concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Suzanne Porath, Principal Investigator, sporath@ksu.edu, (920) 858-3010.

If you have questions or wish to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB, please contact us. These are: Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.

Purpose of this research: Teachers' sense of safety continues to decline (Baker & Koedel, 2025). The use of de-escalation skills has been identified as a means for promoting safer learning environments. I hope to learn how educators themselves interpret and integrate these skills into their professional identities and day-to-day practice, and if those practices impact their sense of safety. This research aims to address these research questions:

What is the lived experience of educators in applying de-escalation skills within their educational practice?

How does using de-escalation skills shape educators' perceptions of their sense of safety in working with students?

Procedures for the research: This phase of the study will include two semi-structured interviews and at least one follow-up interview. All interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes. It is anticipated that each interview will take no more than one hour. The confidential interviews will be conducted in person or via Zoom electronic conferencing and recorded according to your preference. During the interviews, you should refrain from naming specific people or other identifying information during the interviews.

After each interview, our conversations will be transcribed using a transcription software service, either via Zoom or Go Transcript, for analysis. I will share the transcriptions with you after each interview for your review and feedback. In the follow-up interview, we will review the

transcripts and make any necessary corrections or clarifications as needed. This will also be an opportunity for you to ask any questions that you may have.
The first interview will focus on learning more about you as an educator and your experience using de-escalation skills. The second interview will begin with a review of the first transcript and will then focus on learning more about your experiences using de-escalation skills. The third follow-up interview will be to discuss the transcripts of both interviews and my preliminary findings with you. If our discussion leads to more revisions to the transcripts or my conclusions, I will share the corrections with you, and we will schedule a final interview to discuss them, should you wish to do so.
Risks: The interviews request personal opinions; therefore, procedures to protect confidentiality will be implemented (e.g., your name will not be linked to your information). As with any online-related activity, the risk of a breach of confidentiality is always possible. To the best of my ability, your answers in this study will remain confidential.
Benefits Anticipated: The study is designed to examine how de-escalation skills are used and if they impact your sense of safety while working with students. While there are no direct benefits to you, your participation may inform professional learning offerings in school districts.
Confidentiality: All data will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for research purposes. Participant information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies. Names of students and staff members inadvertently mentioned will be de-identified. Names of interview participants will be given pseudonyms. Video aspects will be immediately deleted. Contents of the audio interviews will be uploaded to a password-protected cloud account and a personal computer secured with password protection on both the file and the computer. The computer is only accessible to the researcher. After the project is complete, the interviews and transcriptions will be deleted from the iPad and personal computer three years after the project has been completed. Data and information will be stored in locked containers and on a personal password-protected computer and iPad, accessible only to the researchers. After the project is complete, the interviews and transcriptions will be deleted from the iPad and personal computer three years after the project has been completed.
Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, (b) you or someone else is in danger, or (c) you give written permission.
Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.
Continuing to complete this survey indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described.

Appendix F - Interview Questions

Interview 1 Questions

Planned Questions:

1. What pseudonym would you like to be called?
2. Do you consent to participate in this research project and consent to be recorded?
3. Briefly describe your role as an educator, setting, and years of experience.
4. How would you describe your educational philosophy?
5. How do you approach classroom management?
6. What types of professional development related to using de-escalation skills have you experienced in your career?
7. What was the reason for taking the training?
8. In what ways, if any, have you incorporated de-escalation training in your classroom practice?
9. Are there any de-escalation skills that you find yourself using more often than others, and if so, why do you think you use them more regularly?
10. Describe a specific time you used de-escalation skills with a student. How did the situation unfold, moment by moment?
11. What emotions or moods did you experience in that moment? How did they change as the situation progressed?
12. How, if at all, has de-escalation training changed the way you respond to challenging student behavior?
13. In what situations are you not comfortable using de-escalation strategies?
14. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with using de-escalation skills you would like to share?

Questions added during the interview:

1. You primarily, you teach any of the kids, right? (Coach)
2. What other proactive strategies do you use?(Coach)
3. Did you get some training on the low intensity strategies early in your career? (Coach)
4. If you feel comfortable, what was your prior experience with? (Coach)
5. Was it a school or mental health hospital? (Coach)
6. Like a crisis center? (Coach)
7. What kind of de-escalation training did you get there? (Coach)
8. How do they respond to getting on their level and being silly? (Coach)
9. How do you think your relationship with that kiddo impacted how that happened? (Coach)
10. For those who don't know what **** is to kind of describe what the setting looks like (Harley)
11. How does that help manage the behaviors when you have the structures and routines? (Harley)
12. What does a safe place look like for you in your classroom? (Harley)
13. How do you process that with littles? (Harley)

14. Do you use any curriculum or social-emotional learning tools that go along with those emotions? (Harley)
15. How do you establish boundaries in your classroom? (Hoops)
16. You mentioned the chair a couple of times. Is it a special chair or can you to talk a little bit about that? (Hoops)
17. Were you always in middle school? (Jessica)
18. You mentioned the behavior support room and the intensive support room. For people who are reading this. How would you describe those two settings? (Jessica)
19. Do you notice any similarities between those programs? (Jessica)
20. Just how have you incorporated it? (Jessica)
21. How long did it take? (Jessica)
22. How do you modify your tone? How do you adjust it? (Jessica)
23. Someone else in another interview mentioned tapping out (Jessica)
24. What's your relationship, like, with your SRO? (Jessica)
25. How would you describe a J setting to people who don't know what that means? (Jim)
26. How would you describe a safe classroom? What are some things that you would expect
27. to see? (Jim)
28. Do you remember anything from some of the district professional developments besides Mandt that come to mind about de-escalation? (Jim)
29. You mentioned that one of the things you do is stop or pause things because they get bigger. Can you talk a little bit more about that? (Jim)
30. So, you mentioned that sometimes you can tell what the kids look like.
31. What does that look like for you? (Jim)
32. Can they identify it? (Jim)
33. I kind of presume you're speaking of physical skills. (Jim)
34. Tell me about some of those hats you wear. (Lauren)
35. So you mentioned care calls. Can you talk a little bit about what a care call looks like in your building? (Lauren)
36. As you're doing the instructional rounds, what sort of expectations would you expect for this new teacher to see? (Lauren)
37. Talk more a little bit about that. How do you think that having the classroom management training impacts de-escalation, besides having, you know, the expectations out? (Lauren)
38. What would make you uncomfortable about them knowing that you had it. (Lauren)
39. What kind of activities do you use to help them calm down? (Lauren)
40. Are there opportunities to debrief in your experience? Are you seeing that happen (Lauren)
41. Would you ever, or have you ever, when that situation happens, done anything to help de-escalate the situation? (Lauren)
42. And you can actually see them relax? (Lauren)
43. Are there any other signs, physical signs that you notice? (Lauren)

Interview 2 Questions

Planned Questions:

1. Do you consent to participate in this research project and consent to be recorded?
2. When you examined the transcript and my analysis, what did you notice?
3. Is there anything that you would like to add to your answers or clarify?
4. You mentioned that you use reinforcements. Can you talk more about that?
5. You mentioned calming body techniques like deep breathing. Are there other techniques that you use frequently?
6. Have you ever experienced a time when you felt unsafe at school?
7. What did that incident mean to you as an educator? (e.g., about your role, about the student, about safety, about your competence).
8. In what ways do you feel that using de-escalation skills has impacted your sense of efficacy in attempting to de-escalate challenging behavior?
9. How, if at all, has using de-escalation skills affected your sense of safety when working with students?
10. What does it mean to you to be a teacher who uses de-escalation skills?
11. Describe how, if at all, de-escalation training has impacted your teaching practice and why that matters to you personally.
12. How do you see your approach to de-escalation evolving as you continue in your career?
13. In what ways, if any, has your experience with de-escalation training influenced how you see yourself remaining in or leaving the field of education.

Questions added during the interview:

1. We talked about tapping out last time. Please talk a little more about that. (Coach)
2. [Clarifying Have you ever experienced a time when you felt unsafe at school] How about both (Coach).
3. Do you notice a difference as you're talking about the skill level of staff members, do you think there's a difference between special education, skill level, and general education skill level? (Coach)
4. I noticed you talked about reinforcements. Can you talk a little bit more about that? What are some common ones that you use? (Harley)
5. You also mentioned, like, using calming body techniques, like deep breathing deep breathing. And I think you mentioned the bands, too. Like, what were some, are there other calming techniques that you use with kids? (Harley)
6. That is an interesting point. Do you think that as it has evolved for you, is the need for de-escalation is evolving too? (Harley)
7. So do you think that having them impacts you staying? (Harley)
8. If you had your perfect world, so therapy in buildings during the duty day, what else would help? (Hoops)
9. Like, give you some relief in the moment? (Hoops)
10. Kind of like a team that we do when somebody passes, right? (Hoops)
11. Do you have time with your team, like your para team to debrief, or is that that's not that's what you're missing. (Hoops)

12. Do you think de-escalation skills can help address that at all? (Hoops)
13. Do you have any experience with social-emotional learning? (Jessica)
14. Does your team have de-escalation skills training, or is this just something that they've developed? (Jessica)
15. One of the things that's kind of come up is people are noticing that even if they're not trained, like, then you as a person who is trained, like, you teach people what to do. And did you have to do that with the social worker? (Jessica)
16. One of the other people kind of talked about social-emotional learning, and I'm wondering, what's your experience with that here? (Jim)
17. What does tapping out look like for you? (Jim)
18. What are some signs that you notice when you can tell they're getting frustrated? (Jim)
19. You talked about calming body techniques, deep breathing a couple times. Could you talk just a little bit more about that? (Lauren)
20. Do you use deep breathing a lot with them? (Lauren)
21. When you say, um, that they'll get into fight or flight, do you think that's like a sense of safety? Is that kind of what I'm hearing you say? (Lauren)
22. So somebody else has brought up a sense of safe space. What does that look like for you? (Lauren)
23. Are you noticing any of that here? Like, are people articulating anything like that? (Lauren).

Interview 3 Questions

Planned Questions:

When you examined the transcript and my analysis, what did you notice?

1. Do you have any new thoughts or clarifications that you would like to discuss?
2. Any final thoughts about the first or second interviews?
3. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with using de-escalation skills you would like to share?

Questions added during the interview:

1. Would you characterize the de-escalation training that you've had as trauma-responsive? (Harley)
2. Was he able to talk about it then? (Jessica)
3. I wonder why it was rough this week, is the weather changing? (Jessica)

Appendix G - Challenging Behaviors Mentioned by Participants

Challenging Behaviors Mentioned by Participants		
Category	Number of Mentions	Examples Mentioned
Physical Aggression	57	Aggression Assaulting staff or students Being physical with a parent Biting Climbing a fence Destroying the room Fighting Flipping a table Groping staff Hitting Jumping off tables Kicking Moving objects off items off furniture Rampaging Scratching Self-biter Throwing things Throwing chairs Unsafe in class Wielding a knife
Physical but Not Aggressive	19	Banging like a roll of tape on the table Elopement Pacing Poured bubbles on the floor Rolling on the ground Running around the room Taking clothes off Tearing Paper
Verbal Behaviors	29	Calling staff names Saying “crazy” things Screaming and/or yelling Swearing at staff or students Threatening staff Threatening students Threatening to fight Threatening self-harm

Challenging Behaviors Mentioned by Participants		
		Verbal aggression toward peer Voice got louder
MISC	22	Feeling upset/frustrated about schoolwork Feeling upset at recess Feeling upset wanting parent Feeling upset and/or mad Getting Irritated Hallucinating “It's just like they blackout” Panic Attack Refusing to comply
Total behaviors mentioned	127	

Appendix H - Institutional Research Board (IRB) Approval Letter

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Suzanne Porath
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number IRB-13297

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 11/14/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Teacher Experiences with De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study of Teachers' Lived Experiences using De-escalation Skills."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 11/14/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 11/13/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 11/14/2025 4:38 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix I - Specific Strategies Mentioned by Participants by Theme

Specific Strategies Mentioned by Participants by Theme	
Theme	Strategy mentioned
Debriefing/Talking it out	• De-escalating language • Expressing empathy • Facilitating a problem solving session with teacher and student • Listening/Letting students know you hear them • Paraphrase what they said • Speaking with compassion, care and concern • Validating their feelings
Recognizing that Triggers have Happened	• Adjusting voice: Getting Quieter, speaking in a sing-song voice, changing the tone to get their attention, Using a calming/soothing voice, refraining from speaking loudly or aggressively, changing tone to jovial. • Approaching the student slowly • Calm/Neutral/Non threatening body language • Calm facial expression • Offer assistance
Offering Options/Calming Strategies Please note that some of these strategies require that educators be specially trained and parental permission before implementation: Deep Pressure Some Grounding/Meditation/Mindfulness activities Therapeutic brushing Weighted Blanket	• Big Body Movement • Calming music • Comfort object • Coloring/Drawing • Co-Regulation or “Being present with the student” • Counting to 10 forward or backwards • Deep breathing • Deep Pressure • Dimming lights • Exercise-Push ups/ride a stationary bike • Fidgets • Getting on the student’s level • Giving a hug

Specific Strategies Mentioned by Participants by Theme	
	• Grounding/Meditation/Mindfulness activities • Offering to see a preferred person • Provided paper to tear • Resting heads • Nunanng their back • Snack • Special Chair • Splash water on face • Stretching elastic bands • Taking a walk with the student • Therapeutic brushing • Use a punching bag • Weighted Blanket
Time and Space	• Being mindful of where you're standing/Not hovering • Breaks • Calm down corner or safe place • Moving out of the student's line of sight • Refrain from following • Stop or Reduce Talking • Stop looking at the student • Timer

Appendix J - Survey Questions

1) Are you willing to give your consent to participate in a survey as part of a research study called Teachers' Lived Experiences Using De-escalation Strategies: A Heideggerian Phenomenological Study, led by Stacey Kramer, a doctoral candidate at Kansas State University?
2) What is your role in education? Choose all that apply.
3) What grades do you support or work with? Mark all that apply.
4) What type(s) of de-escalation training have you received?
5) Describe a specific time you used de-escalation skills with a student. Use as much detail as you can recall.
6) How, if at all, has de-escalation training changed the way you respond to challenging student behavior?
7) How, if at all, has using de-escalation skills impacted your sense of safety when working with students?
8) Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experience with using de-escalation skills?