SCHOOL CLIMATE AND DISABILITY INCLUSION:
AN EXPLORATION OF DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL CLIMATE AND ITS IMPACTS ON BEST PRACTICES

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 2

CHAPTER 2: SPECIAL EDUCATION BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT ........ 6
  I. Short History of Special Education and Disability ............................................................... 6
  II. Race and Special Education ............................................................................................. 9

CHAPTER 3: SCHOOL CLIMATE LITERATURE AND OPERATIONALIZATION ....... 15
  I. School Climate Literature .................................................................................................. 15
  II. School Climate and Disability ......................................................................................... 16
  III. Operationalizing School Climate ................................................................................... 18

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS ......................................................................................... 22

CHAPTER 5: DISTRICT CONTEXT AND CHARACTERISTICS ............................................. 26
  I. Lower Merion School District .......................................................................................... 26
  II. Council Rock School District .......................................................................................... 27
  III. School District of Philadelphia ....................................................................................... 28
  IV. District Discussion ........................................................................................................... 31

CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS ............................................................................... 33
  I. Communicative to Individualized Norms ......................................................................... 35
  II. Collaboration to Self-Sufficiency ..................................................................................... 38
  III. Individual Responsibility to Community Effort ............................................................. 40
  IV. School Expectations and Image ..................................................................................... 44
  V. Parent and Community Involvement ............................................................................. 45
  VI. Discussion ...................................................................................................................... 47

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION ...................................................................................................... 52

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................................... 55
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Imagine this: you walk into a 7th grade general English classroom in a local school in your district. Within this class, one student is using a slant board for reading and writing, one student has an instructional assistant with them for individual support, another is using an audiobook to follow along up to speed with the class reading. All of this is happening while the teacher is conducting a lesson on a unit on fiction reading and writing using multiple modes of instruction and engagement. This may seem like a utopia and unachievable classroom to some, yet this is what full inclusion should look like in classrooms across the country according to goals outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA.

Despite these goals, there are many challenges and roadblocks surrounding teacher preparation and support that inhibit the ability of schools, particularly general education teachers, to fully realize this classroom inclusion goal, in addition to vast discretion given to teachers and administrators on best methods for implementing inclusion. Additionally, federal funding promised for IDEA implementation to individual schools has never met the expected amounts needed to meet the needs of disabled students. When IDEA was passed, Congress promised states an additional forty percent of the per student cost of education per year for disabled students, yet federal spending in 2014 was only $11.48 billion compared to the $28.65 billion that would have been needed to meet the estimated costs of educating disabled students (Wilson 2017). The challenges faced by teachers and administrators in efforts to promote inclusion are many, but despite them, the goals of inclusion in the general education classroom remain. To work to overcome these challenges, it is important that schools have a positive and supportive climate within their teachers, administrators, and community actors that allow these goals of inclusion to be realized. The climate of a school relates to how staff interact, the priorities of a
school, and the overall goals as they are translated into relationships within a school and has a large impact on the day-to-day operations of a school community. Recognizing these challenges to inclusion and the different approaches to inclusion across districts, my research looks to answer the question: How does school climate impact the service delivery and implementation of best practices for teachers of special education students within a general education context? In this research, I am interested in school climate because of the ways it shows the relational connections within school environments, and directly impacts the ways in which professionals in the school context operate. I use school climate to investigate questions of inclusion and implementation of best practices considering IDEA and the push for increased inclusion of disabled students within a general education classroom.

Research into this question revolved around interviews with teachers, administrators, and other pertinent stakeholders in three districts around Southeastern Pennsylvania. I hypothesized that schools with communicative climates, a high level of teacher support and collaboration, and positive relationships with community and parents would translate to the most successful programs for inclusion in the general education classroom. I also hypothesized that schools with more negative school climates would be less successful in the implementation of these practices. These hypotheses were partially supported at the end of my research. Although I focused my interviews on how school climate impacts service delivery and success, much of my findings related to the determinants of school climate. In my analysis, I found that there were large differences in the climates of schools that fell along divisions of the level of socioeconomic resources of a specific school. The climates of schools with higher levels of resources were, by the standards of my hypotheses, overall more negative but maintained high standards of excellence because of the resources at their disposal. Specifically, I found that while schools with
higher levels of resources were able to hire more experienced teachers and provide many resources to staff and students, their climate was more individualized, less communicative, and more adversarial when it came to parent and teacher relationships regarding best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities. On the other hand, while schools with fewer resources were unable to provide as many material resources to staff and students, data found that their climates were more communicative, had a high level of initiative, and collaborative when it came to best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities. These findings on the major differences in school climate between low resource and high resource schools point to the way that level of resource can provide enough material support needed for districts, yet may not cultivate the best climate regarding inclusion. At the same time, these findings are not meant to glorify the situations that schools with fewer resources have- it is important to note though, that the environmental factors of resources faced by schools play an important part in the climate surrounding a school’s approach to special education, and can lead to more positive climates.

This thesis investigated these questions of climate and inclusion of disabled students through first a look at special education background and policy context, a discussion of school climate, briefly looking into research methods, then the district characteristics, analysis and results, discussion of results, and then concluding points.

Last, it is important to note my positionality within this project and the broader context of disability in education. As the principal researcher, I acknowledge that I identify as a white, cis, heterosexual woman who is not disabled. Because of this position, I will never completely understand the experiences of the disabled students I completed this project about, recognizing that within the field of disability many have multiple intersectional identities that are discriminated against, particularly regarding race in special education. I also acknowledge that I
am not originally from any of the communities interviewed as part of this research, and bring an outsider perspective in that regard. With this recognition, I attempted to approach this project with an intent to listen first, and be cognizant to all these dynamics that were at play long before this project started, and will continue to be important long after the conclusion of this project.
CHAPTER 2: SPECIAL EDUCATION BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

I Short History of Special Education and Disability

Today, special education services are found in every school across the United States, and programs are federally mandated. This unfortunately was not always the case, and education for disabled people had to be achieved through many years and trials. Disability has long been a stigmatized and isolating condition for individuals in the United States and around the world, and disabled people were long excluded from public life and the education system, and often institutionalized. This exclusion is based on the medical model of disability which posits disability as an inherent flaw within a person, and looks to remedy a perceived weakness in their being, assuming that people with disabilities are not the same as able bodied people (Kirby 2017). The medical model of disability has long dominated the discussion of how disabled individuals should be treated in society, to the detriment of their health, wellness, and impacted the recognition of their own human rights and self-determination. But this doesn’t have to be the case; the medical model framework for understanding disability is countered with the social constructivist paradigm, which understands the environment around a person as disabling to the individual, rather than the person having an inherent flaw (Kirby 2017). The social constructivist paradigm recognizes the rights and inherent value of individuals with disabilities and reframes the discussion to look at how our society functions in ways that exclude rather than understanding disability as an exception to the norm that must be accommodated for.

As the paradigm has slowly shifted from a medical model of disability to a social constructivist model of disability, so have the civil rights laws that grant individuals with
disabilities protected freedoms, although the stigma around disability still holds individuals back from true equality in US society. One of the places where the shift for inclusion through legislation has been most clear is the public k-12 classroom in the United States, mostly on the grounds of human rights. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education act, or IDEA in a 1977 update) put into law the right of disabled people to receive an education. Prior to the passage of IDEA, only one in five children with disabilities attended public schools, an estimated 1 million children had no access to public school education, and 3 million attended classes in segregated facilities apart from mainstream schools (Lafee 2011). The landscape changed drastically with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act which focuses heavily on “the concept of educating children with disabilities along with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, ideally in the regular classroom” (Thompson, 2015). One of the major components to this legislation is the least restrictive environment requirement, or the LRE. The focus on inclusion through the least restrictive environment implies preference for placement into the general education classroom, and this preference fundamentally changed the general education classroom as a whole (Thompson 2015). Mainstreaming led school aged disabled children to learn, many for the first time, in the same environment as other peers without disabilities, transforming classroom spaces. Lui et al. note that “one of the strongest arguments for inclusive education is that students with special educational needs should have the right to learn together with typically developing students in general education classrooms,” which connects back to the shift towards a human rights based approach to disability, through a social constructivist paradigm that focuses on inclusion rather than individuals with disabilities as people who are different from typically developing students (Lui, Yang, and Sin 2017). In this
shift to inclusion through the LRE, students with disabilities have entered mainstream US classrooms and transformed them but it is up to the teachers and school administrators to provide the necessary changes and support needed to create inclusive classrooms for all.

While legislation like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act put forth broad regulatory inclusion requirements, these laws left much of the discretion of implementation up to teachers, administrators, or other actors. This has led to a variance in the methods of implementation scope, and effectiveness of implementing these regulatory requirements, specifically when it comes to the least restrictive environment requirement under IDEA. Regarding implementation of LRE in schools, Melgarejo et al. argue that “while schools are increasingly required to implement evidence-based practices (EBPs; Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 2004; No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), research indicates that EBPs are not consistently implemented in schools,” pointing towards a gap in the effective practices for implementation (Melgarejo et al. 2020).

Additionally, IDEA legislation has been updated with a major overhaul in 2004 that pushed for the implementation of universal design learning in the classroom and universal standards for achievement. (Lafee 2011). To elaborate, the framework of UDL when applied in educational settings often looks different from classroom to classroom, but there are common themes. Some of the most prominent forms of implementing UDL practices in the classroom to create a successful LRE environment are through multiple methods of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of expression. Wilson cites her own classroom practice for multiple means of representation, noting that she uses a syllabus, PowerPoint presentations, lectures, discussion questions, study guides in digital formats that allow students to adapt the font and style, volume, and other changes needed (Wilson 2017). Changes like these
in the classroom reflect a UDL framework for instruction, by offering multiple options for students to fit their educational needs to the classroom. While the UDL focused legislative changes centered around curriculum changes like mentioned above, the legislation itself came without a clear implementation plan for teachers, and so training and classroom practices varied (Lafee 2011).

II. Race and Special Education

In addition to potential differences in service delivery and interpretation of legislation because of the broad discretion given to educators and administrators in the implementation of IDEA, the field of special education has long been criticized for its racial discrepancies in who is singled out to receive these services and why. Although special education is supposed to be fundamentally set up for inclusion and access, as it came into the public school system it was not used as such. After Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, many public schools fought desegregation in subtle and not so subtle ways and used the special education label as a tool to do so. David Connor and Beth Ferri in their work on integration and inclusion in public schools note that coding and tracking of students were common practices for segregation after Brown v. Board. They noted that in Washington DC for the school year 1955-1956, school officials placed nearly 24% of their recently admitted Black and Brown students in separate special education classrooms while 3% of white students were placed in the same programs (Connor and Ferri 2005). Trends of over-representation have persisted beyond the 50s, and scholars have recognized this discrepancy for some time. Martha Coutinho notes that the National Academy of Sciences Panel Report from 1978 found “substantial evidence of over-representation for some minority groups in some disability categories” (Coutinho and Oswald 2000). Special education
became a tool for modern segregation in many diverse public schools, and this injustice has persisted to the present day. Although the disproportionate representation is not always as stark, it is clear that Black and Brown boys specifically are more often categorized as having learning disabilities and coded for special education services. Disproportionate representation has been a trend for decades in the special education realm, brought to light notably by Oswald et al. as they reported that “African American children were 2.4 times more likely to be identified as mentally retarded (MR) and about 1.5 times more likely to be identified as emotionally/behaviorally disturbed (EBD) than their non-African American peers” (Hibel, Farkas, and Morgan 2010). The disproportionate representation of Black children in special education is clear and raises questions about the validity of the educational categorization system. Kincaid and Sullivan overall categorize disproportionate representation as “referring to the extent group membership affects special education identification and outcomes (Coutinho, Oswald, and Best, 2002). These potential disparities are problematic because students who are mislabeled may receive inappropriate educational services, triggering questions about educational equity and the validity of educational decision underpinning observed patterns” (Kincaid and Sullivan 2017). Disproportionate representation not only represents an injustice faced by young Black and Brown students in the United States educational system, but these trends also question the validity of the current categorization and referral system for special education.

The miscategorization for special education services, specifically regarding learning disabilities, can partially be explained by the categorization process. To receive special education services in public schools, children must have an IEP, and the IEP referral process often starts with teacher or staff referral from those schools. Teachers, school administrators, and other staff play an important role in ensuring that students receive the correct services, and thus it is
concerning that the amount of miscategorization happens as it does. One way of understanding how this miscategorization happens is through judgmental and nonjudgmental categories of disability. O’Connor and Fernandez refer to nonjudgmental categories of disability as those whose diagnoses require limited inference from professionals, such as children who are deaf or blind or have physical impairments. Judgmental categories of disability, on the other hand, cover disabilities that require more judgement, and include children with developmental, intellectual, and learning disabilities. They note that “Although children in the nonjudgmental categories usually start school with a disability determination, children ‘who are referred to the judgmental categories … rarely come to school with a disability determination. They are referred to special education only after they have failed to achieve in the general education classroom’” (O’Connor and Fernandez 2006). The varying referral process for judgmental and nonjudgmental categories to disability determination leads to overrepresentation of minority students in the judgement categories of special education through staff and teacher bias. Compounding this is the reality that the majority of teachers in the education system are white and match the general student population less and less as the United States diversifies. Data from the 2017–18 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) found that 79.3% of teachers in the United States identified as white or non-Hispanic, and even in schools where the student population was majority nonwhite, teacher representation did not follow (National Center for Education Statistics 2020). The combination of the personal judgement necessary to refer students to disability services in judgmental categories of disability and the mismatch of the teaching staff to students creates a situation susceptible to disproportionate representation of minority students categorized to receive special education services.
Disproportionate representation impacts service delivery and the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities because of the ways it impacts teachers’ workload and ability to provide services for disabled students. When the population of who is labeled with an IEP and receives increased support is changed, the dynamic of a classroom changes, because students with IEPs, mislabeled or not, will receive a higher amount of thought and attention. Especially in more diverse districts, the chances of an increased burden placed on general education teachers due to a larger proportion of students with IEPs in the classroom is higher, and this undue burden impacts the quality of education for all students. This is important to take into consideration when looking into service delivery and the least restrictive mandate in diverse districts, because the workload may be different, and the ways that teachers interact with the legislation may change. Beyond service delivery, disproportionate representation impacts the students themselves because if a student is mislabeled, it means that there was already a miscommunication or gap in understanding of best practices in how to relate to and teach students from different backgrounds. I argue that even if an IEP provides increased services, it can represent to many students who were mislabeled an injustice because they were not seen and cared for in ways that recognized their true potential as students. Last, mislabeling of students of color for special education harms community trust and the parent-school relationship. The IEP is intended to be a tool for disabled students to receive clear and fair services to support their learning, but when a student is mislabeled, I argue that parents are less likely to trust the school’s authority and less likely to positively respond to special education services if they are actually needed for their child. IEP mislabeling is not just an injustice on its own- it negatively impacts student-teacher relationships, teacher workload, and community-school relationships.
This dynamic, although not directly addressed in this thesis, is an important underlying factor to special education in the United States today. There is no sector of education that is not impacted by biases and racist practices, whether current or former and this is true in the field of special education. The over-representation of students of color, specifically male students, in special education shifts the field due to its lack of fair representation - even if the types of services are standardized, when the population that special education is serving is not proportionally represented, the type of manner of service delivery will change. The school district of Philadelphia, one of the districts represented in this research, published that African Americans represented 48% of the district’s enrollment, but 53% of the district-wide students with an IEP and that twice as many male students as female students had IEPs (Park 2020). Even though this discrepancy may seem slight, the skew in increased burden for services provided for disabled students over time adds up to a trend that must be taken into consideration when studying special education and inclusion, especially in diverse districts.

Although some may argue that disproportionate representation of students of color in special education programs shouldn’t be a problem because of the increased services they receive and the push for general education within the LRE mandate, I disagree with this assumption. Even though students may get increased services, the main injustice here is that staff bias from schools through the process of judgmental identification of disabilities makes an IEP more of a label than a tool because it can represent a lack of care or support for Black and Brown students. This may seem like a paradox - but by disproportionately labeling students of color as needing special education services, it creates a narrative against students who would not need these services, and represents staff bias which is uninviting for community building and parent relationships with the school. Mislabeling, even if it leads to increased services, cannot build
inclusive spaces within schools because truly inclusive schools—-to disabled students and nondisabled students--values and views all students for their strengths first, and doesn’t allow certain narratives of past lack of achievement or learning difficulties define students.

Overall, the racially-biased legacy in special education from the separation of Black and Brown students after Brown V. Board in ‘desegregated schools’ to the current disproportionate representation of the same populations in special education is a necessary context in the study of inclusive education. A lack of inclusion has long marked the special education field, and progress is still to be made. This context underlies this research on school climate and inclusion, and as is clear from the results section continues to shape many inequities in the field of special education and inclusion. Although I was unable to complete a full analysis connecting race and the climates of different districts from my research, these dynamics and histories played a role in the background, especially when it came to parent-school relations.
CHAPTER 3: SCHOOL CLIMATE LITERATURE AND OPERATIONALIZATION

I. School Climate Literature

Scholars of school function and performance have used the framework of organizational climate to describe and evaluate the differences in school outcomes in their research. These frameworks are based on organizational culture or climate frameworks but are tailored to fit the educational landscape. Prominent scholars of school climate and culture have related but slightly different definitions and uses for the organizational climate framework in the school setting.

Wayne K. Hoy, in his work studying organizational climate and culture in the school workplace offers a definition of climate, that “the organizational climate of a school is the set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members… school climate is the relatively enduring quality of the school environment that is experienced by participants, affects their behaviour, and is based on their collective perceptions of behaviour in schools” (Hoy 1990). Meanwhile, Cohen et al. define school climate as “the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (Cohen et al. 2009). Cohen et al. used the framework of school climate to look into the relationship between school climate related research findings and educational policy, school improvement practice, and teacher education (Cohen et al. 2009).

David Hargreaves focused on school culture and different models of school culture and how they impact the school as an institution, rather than using the culture as a mode for analysis of different aspects of the school (Hargreaves 1995). Meanwhile, Gray, Wilcox, and Nordstokke define school climate focused on a sense of belonging and experience, that “school climate
reflects aspects of a school system related to the sense of safety and belonging that its members experience, and it is comprised of the organizational structure of the school, staff, students, families, and community” (Gray et al. 2017).

Delving into what school climate looks like beyond a theoretical view, Cohen et al. coined four dimensions of school climate as school safety, teaching and learning, relationships, environmental-structural components (Cohen et al. 2009). Physical dimensions of school climate relate to the physical safety plans and social emotional health of the school. Meanwhile, teaching and learning refers to the quality of instruction, ethical learning, professional development, and leadership. The relationship dimension of school climate refers to the respect for diversity, school community and collaboration, and moral and connectedness of the school. Last, the environmental-structural dimension of school climate refers to the cleanliness, space, and other physical offerings of the school (Cohen et al. 2009). Although Cohen et. al did not specifically use school climate to evaluate disability and inclusion in schools, the ways that they operationalized school climate for a general school analysis tool is useful for my project.

II. School Climate and Disability

These components to school climate can be used to evaluate disability teaching in the classroom through the ways in which professional development, leadership, and social, emotional, and ethical learning are understood at the school and what learning styles and intelligences are appreciated. Cohen’s school climate dimensions offer a way of parsing out which aspects impact the quality, support, and overall success of the school’s approach to disabled education. The specificity of school climate lends itself well to evaluating the success of teaching regarding disability and the broader school’s approach to it, through how it can focus on
the relational dynamics between actors in a school environment and attempt to isolate these factors in how they influence the success of special education within a school.

School climate matters as a form of measurement for the health of a school because “school climate has a profound impact on individual experience” (Cohen et al. 2009). Cohen et al. argue that a positive school climate is directly related to student success, fosters a greater attachment to the school, promotes meaningful student learning, and generally promotes a more cohesive and successful school environment. They note that a “safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate fosters greater attachment to school and provides the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning” (Cohen et al. 2009). A positive school climate is integral for successful school functioning, but Cohen et al. found a gap in the understanding of what made positive school climates and actually implementing the tools and strategies necessary for successful school functioning, and overall suggested more collaboration between school institutions and increased school climate focused programs for educators to explore the importance of a shared vision of education (Cohen et al. 2009). Despite this gap in between knowledge and action when it comes to the school climate, school climate matters both as a tool of analysis and as an institutional goal to reach towards. School climate as a framework of analysis can offer insight into the success and places for improvement in the education of students with disabilities. Given the importance of principal and administration leadership as discussed above in the implementation of IDEA policy, school climate scholars also recognize the importance of their leadership- this overlap is key in finding ways to measure the effectiveness of implementation of inclusive classroom practices through a measurement of positive school climate.
III. Operationalizing School Climate

From the above definitions and review of literature on school climate, this framework is useful for delving into the aspects of school life that influence the service delivery and learning environment for students. Specifically, this framework is useful for my project because schools operate under the same legal mandates from IDEA and the Least Restrictive Environment, but the differences in quality of services and successful inclusion can be analyzed through the relational differences found in the climate of each school. Hoy and Cohen et al provide the most useful framework and definition for my analysis of the climate of disability and inclusion through the IEP and LRE mandates in public schools. Hoy’s definition that school climate “is the set of internal characteristics that distinguishes one school from another and influences the behavior of its members” and is experienced by participants, affects their behaviour, and is based on their collective perceptions of behaviour in schools is a key characteristic I used for analysis (Hoy 1990). Additionally, the definitional framework from Cohen et al that school climate is “the quality and character of school life… based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” is also useful for analysis of inclusion climate in schools for my work (Cohen et al. 2009). These definitions both look at school climate through the aspects of school life that affect people’s experiences in that school, and how these different aspects differentiate the experiences of one school community from another, and this framework is useful in analyzing how inclusion is thought of in different schools because it gets at the interpersonal differences between each community.

Beyond the definitions provided by Hoy and Cohen et al, Hoy goes on to operationalize school climate through eight different sections, all of which coordinate in his analysis to an open
or closed school climate continuum. Hoy uses Hindrance, Intimacy, Disengagement, Esprit, Production Emphasis, Aloofness, Consideration, and Thrust as measurements of climate, all which he maps onto the continuum of open to closed climates (Hoy 1990). Hoy is able to isolate these aspects in his analysis, and then cleanly map them onto the overall climate to the school. Similarly in my analysis, I defined climate operationally through various aspects found from the interview research process. The different aspects of school climate are set up on a spectrum of climate, and many of the interviewees’ perceptions of climate fell within a range on the spectrum, rather than having clear cut opposing views. The aspects used for analysis in this project were:

1. Schools with communicative to individualized norms
2. Climates of supportive collaboration to expectations of self-sufficiency
3. High levels of individual responsibility to rigidity of staff roles
4. Positive school expectations and image to negative expectations and image
5. High to low parent involvement and adversarial versus non adversarial parent-staff communication

This analysis does not use a continuum of open to closed school climates, but rather relies on these five operationalizations of school climate on a spectrum to point out major differences between the districts studied in this analysis. While these categories do not directly mirror Hoy’s, they get at the individual parts of the relationships that hold together school communities and look into the quality of them specifically regarding inclusion. Hoy’s categories look generally at a school climate, while mine are more applicable directly to questions of the climate regarding the education of disabled students.
More specifically, communicative norms within a school climate are studied through the ways in which the school structure and the relationships found between teachers, administrators, students, and parents are set up for ease of communication. A communicative climate within a school is one in which the viewpoints of all parties involved are valued, and there are explicit support structures in place for staff regarding idea sharing and other aspects of inclusion, and there is a low barrier for access to administrators by parents and teachers for conversation about school operations. On the other hand, a school climate with individualized norms is one in which teachers and administrators are expected to be the experts in their specific area and have a high level of self-sufficiency regarding their classroom and school practices. Parent voice is valued, but communication across all facets of the school is more difficult because the barriers to conversation are higher. Similarly, the climate aspect of supportive collaboration versus expectations of self-sufficiency revolves around ease of communication and the nature of a school’s approach to shared learning. A climate with high levels of supportive collaboration would have characteristics like constant teacher feedback from other teachers, administrators, and parents, a focus on idea sharing and innovation from people connected to the school from a variety of perspectives, rather than just administrators and teachers themselves. A climate with expectations of self-sufficiency is one where teachers especially are expected to enter the classroom with a prior high level of knowledge and innovate on classroom practices on their own. Input from broader members of the community is less valued unless they have a high level of expertise in the subject. A school climate that has a high level of individual responsibility can show up in a variety of ways- either that the responsibility for inclusion and specific students falls only on the professional directly related to the IEP or other legal standards for inclusion, but also individual responsibility can show in a school through the level of care beyond the basic job
parameters for a professional connected to the school. A school climate with a high level of community effort norms is one in which the responsibility for inclusion of children with disabilities is thought of as a whole school approach, rather than the special education specific professionals. Last, a school climate with positive school expectations and image looks like a sense of pride in the school, people connected to the institution expressing a level of pride and the expectation that the school will perform well, sometimes without evidence to back that up.

These aspects of school climate are important in analyzing the climate around inclusion and school’s approach to special education because they reveal more about what a school values, their goals for inclusion, and how these expectations are translated on the ground. The above comparative aspects of climate all relate to central concepts that are important in the formation of school climate, in line with the definitions presented by Hoy and Cohen et al. These concepts are communication, performance expectations, relationships to a large cause, and image. The continuum approach makes it possible to compare between the schools and interviews from the research, and come to certain conclusions about school’s specific climates around inclusion in a special education setting. These concepts relate to my research questions regarding the impacts that school climate has on the LRE mandate and service delivery in that they all investigate how teachers and administrators operate on a day-to-day basis, what their priorities are regarding the school community, and how they go about building relationships within the school. All of these are major drivers for the effectiveness of inclusive education, and influence the ways in which schools operate their special education programs.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS

Given the goals of understanding the school climate and how that affects inclusion and special education in public schools, research was conducted through interviews with teachers, administrators, other staff, and a lawyer and school board member connected to the broader school community. Interviews were chosen because they offered unique insight into the personal thoughts, opinions, and struggles of the practitioners themselves. Background data on the district and school breakdowns was helpful for context, but interviews offered qualitative insight into the specific opinions and parts of the school climate that differentiated how schools approached inclusion.

Goals related to the interview format were to gain a clear understanding of the different attitudes teachers, administrators, and family or community members held about their specific school’s ability to implement inclusive policies and evidence-based practices in the classroom, and the ways in which decisions were made surrounding inclusion of disabled students in each specific school. Interview goals also were focused on differentiating between different schools and districts climates through analysis of policies, resources, attitudes, and supports for disabled education in each district. The study of school climate involves analysis of the ways in which members of a school institution view their work and interact with one another, and the use of the interview format was meant to reveal more of those specific differences than statistical data or document analysis could.

Interviews were conducted in three districts in the Philadelphia region. Interviewees were contacted through professor connection, personal connection, and from emailing based on publicly available school personnel lists. Beyond that, connections were made from referrals from interviewees. Attempts were made to contact multiple people at every school, in different
positions within the school. For example, at a school where a principal or administrator was interviewed, a teacher or instructional assistant from that same school or district was also reached out to. Because of the limited connections to contacts in all areas in each school, some schools had only one interview while others had a number from the same institution. This made it difficult to gain a complete picture of the individual school’s climate, because one staff member’s interpretation of the school climate might be very different from another person who holds a different position in the school.

Interviews were conducted over video conferencing platforms, phone, or in person and all were recorded for further analysis. Most of the interviews were conducted over the phone due to the busy workload of all interviewees. Two of the interviews were conducted in person, and one in person in a school followed by shadowing for the day. The interviews in general took between 20-40 minutes to complete, while some were shorter, and a few went much longer in length. They all could have been longer, but interviews were purposefully kept shorter to be sensitive to the interviewee’s time commitments.

All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, touching on predetermined categories but allowing for flexibility as interviewees brought up topics they were more passionate about than others. The categories of questions fell under background, preparations and support available, in the classroom or behind the scenes, challenges, and success. Examples of questions for teachers were “What resources as a teacher do you have to prepare for disabled students in your class?” “How would you characterize your school’s approach to inclusion for students with IEPs?” “Who in your school takes the main responsibility for the learning goals and support of students with IEPs?” and “What are some of the biggest challenges for you in educating students with disabilities?” Examples of questions posed to administrators or other
professionals in the schools were “How does the district measure success for students, and does this differ for students with disabilities?” “What types of support does the district offer to teachers in the general education classroom who have students with disabilities?” “How does your district or school measure success for educating students with disabilities?” These questions were aimed at both teacher and administrator experience within the school organization and their broader thoughts on barriers and successes in inclusion.

While the interview questions aimed at deciphering how school climate impacted the ability of schools to implement inclusive educational practices, much of the data collected pointed towards determinants of school climate rather than the impacts the school climate itself had on the school’s disability inclusion practices. As I will discuss in the analysis, interviews revealed major differences in the climate of schools largely based on differences in school resources, but I found less on the exact ways that school climates impacted the quality of instruction and the capacity of schools to successfully implement the LRE mandate. These findings still do show important considerations for the development of school climate surrounding education of students with disabilities, because of the major differences between how schools were found to approach this segment of the educational world.

Despite the goals of this research, fewer interviews were conducted than hoped for, and so while important themes and conclusions were evident from the interviews, more research is necessary to finalize these claims. In all, I was able to complete 13 interviews across the Lower Merion, Council Rock, and Philadelphia school district. Many of the interviews had common threads that are identified in the analysis section, along with evocative stories and experiences that signal important considerations surrounding inclusion and the LRE mandate in schools, but no definitive conclusions were possible. The interviews that were able to be done were still
impactful for future considerations regarding the climate of schools surrounding special education and point to important themes especially along the lines of resource availability and the impacts that it has on the broader school climate in teacher and administrator responsibility and action. These findings will be discussed in depth in the analysis sections. Overall, it is important to note the constraints on the research scope and how this changed the conclusions that were made from this project; further research is necessary to continue a full analysis of school climate and inclusion in public educational institutions.
CHAPTER 5: DISTRICT CONTEXT AND CHARACTERISTICS

For this project, I conducted research at multiple schools across three different districts in the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. These districts were chosen because of proximity to the researcher’s institution, personal connection, and the availability of teachers and other administrators to be interviewed. The districts from which interviews were conducted were Lower Merion School District, Council Rock School District, and the District of Philadelphia. These three districts offered comparative perspectives from two suburban districts that are largely well resourced (Lower Merion and Council Rock) and from an urban and less resourced one (District of Philadelphia). Although there were not enough interviews conducted to be able to make definitive conclusions about the region as a whole or even the districts themselves, from the data collected these three districts had large enough distinctions that it is helpful to compare them individually before looking at the interview data obtained from each of them.

I. Lower Merion School District

First, Lower Merion School District was one of the most prominent districts that I conducted interviews at. As mentioned above, the district is a well-resourced suburban district, situated in the Philadelphia region’s suburban ‘mainline,’ a historically wealthy region located Northeast of the city. Lower Merion School District has an enrollment of 8,797 students, and a student to teacher ratio of 11.94:1 with 736 classroom teachers (“District Detail for Lower Merion SD” n.d.). Demographically, the district is 69% White, 10.6% Asian, 7.9% Black, and 5.5% Latino (“Lower Merion School District” n.d.). Lower Merion staff demographics were not easily available for consulting. Beyond the demographics of the school district, Lower Merion
spends $31,556 per student each year, and has an annual revenue of $270,468,000 (“Lower Merion School District” n.d.). This funding is broken down into state, local, and federal sources and Lower Merion obtains 85.1% of it’s funding from local revenue, 14.1% from state, and .5% from federal funding sources (“Lower Merion School District” n.d.)

For special education, Lower Merion is known for the services it provides according to multiple interviewees, and the district generally takes great pride in their program. Noting this, 16.6% of Lower Merion students ages 3-12 receive special education related services, compared to 18.1% state wide (Special Education Data Report Lower Merion, 2021). Additionally, they provided a higher rate of services to students with autism than the state average, with 16.9% receiving services in the district and 12.1% state wide (Special Education Data Report Lower Merion 2021). The district had a higher percentage of students with disabilities receiving services in a general education classroom than the state average, with 68% in the district and 62% state wide (Special Education Data Report Lower Merion 2021). In 2019-2020, the district hired an outside company to evaluate the special education program at Lower Merion, and they highlighted many other key facts, including that Lower Merion has a special education expenditure of $5,347,038 from FY 2019-2020 and that in general the special education program had enough resources. Additionally, they noted that Lower Merion special education students performed better on statewide testing than their peers, and the district had an 81% graduation rate of students with disabilities (WestEd 2021).

II. Council Rock School District

The second suburban district involved in this project is Council Rock School District in Lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania. This district is similar in many ways to Lower Merion
School District, from a largely suburban setting and well-resourced area. Council Rock has slightly larger enrollment at 10,778 students and a slightly higher student to staff ratio of 14.8:1, with 724 total teachers in classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). The student population of the district is 88% White, 2% Black, 3% Hispanic/Latino, and 5% Asian, and staff demographics were unavailable (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). Budget wise, Council Rock School District had a budget of $241,238,000 in FY 2017-2018, with funding coming from 77% local sources, 22% state sources, and 1% from federal sources (National Center for Education Statistics 2021).

Specifically for special education, Council Rock School District had 15.8% of its total students enrolled in special education, also lower than the state average of 18.1% similar to Lower Merion (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). They had only a slightly higher percentage of students enrolled in special education receiving services for autism, 13% within the district compared to 12% statewide (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). Within the classroom, the district had fewer students in general education rooms, with 59.6% spending their day in the general education room compared to 62.1% average statewide (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). There was not a comprehensive report on the state of special education readily available for Council Rock district like there was for Lower Merion.

### III. School District of Philadelphia

The last school district I conducted interviews at was the School District of Philadelphia. The only urban school district in this project, the District of Philadelphia was also the largest enrollment by far of any of the districts involved, with a total enrollment of 202,944 from school year 2020-2021 (“Fast Facts – The School District of Philadelphia” n.d.). Along with the size of
the district, Philadelphia public schools are also the most diverse, with a student population that is 52% Black, 21% Latino, 14% White, 7% Asian, and 5% other (“Fast Facts – The School District of Philadelphia” n.d.). The district also is the only one that has a mix of district and charter operated schools under its jurisdiction with 326 total schools in the district, 215 of them are district operated, 86 charter operated, and 25 alternative education. Funding wise, the district receives 1.6 billion from local sources, 1.62 billion from the state, and 17 million from federal sources (“Fast Facts – The School District of Philadelphia” n.d.). The almost even split between state and local sources of funding point towards the district’s relative lack of resources from local taxes, a sharp contrast to the wealthy suburban districts of Lower Merion and Council Rock.

Beyond size and funding, the District of Philadelphia special education statistics are somewhat similar to the other districts interviewed. Philadelphia has 16.5% of its entire population in some form of special education support structure, compared to 18.1% at the state average (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). Of the students with disabilities in the district, 16% of them have autism, compared to 12.1% as the state average. Noticeably, only 37% of disabled students spend over 80% of their day inside a general education classroom, significantly lower than the 62.1% state average and the averages of Lower Merion and Council Rock (National Center for Education Statistics 2021). The district posted a data brief on special education from the 2018-2019 school year, and they noted more important facts than were available in information for the other two districts. The most common disability in the district was a “specific learning disability,” covering 40% of learners with IEPS (Park 2020). Additionally, the report found that there was slight overrepresentation of African American students with disabilities in the district- during the school year 2018-2019, African American
students represented 48% of total enrollment but 53% of district wide students with an IEP (Park 2020). The district sorts students with disabilities into specific schools, more so than the other suburban districts, which partially explains the low percent of disabled students spending more than 80% of their day inside the general education classroom. The report mentioned that “the percentage of students with IEPs varied across schools (Figure 9). In some cases, the percentage of students with IEPs at a school was higher than the district average because the school housed one or more programs for students with IEPs such as autistic support, emotional support, or life skills support” (Park 2020). Overall, the district provides special education services from central coordination and budget allocations in the district, with some schools offering more specialized services to meet the needs of the student population.

Despite the centralized process for special education and tracking students to specialized schools as needs arise, the District of Philadelphia has struggled with special education funding for years. As the needs for special education have grown within the district as they have grown across the country, the increases of state aid have been insufficient- between the 2008-2009 year and 2018-2019 school year, special education costs for the district grew by 304 million to 617 million, while special education aid from the state grew by just 20 million (Mezzacappa 2020). This trend in lessening state funding for special education is seen across the state, but felt more severely in Philadelphia. The report noted that the average share of state funding for special education dropped from 32 to 22%, while in Philadelphia the share dropped from 42 to 24% (Mezzacappa 2020). These funding deficits have real implications for the success and quality of instruction for special education in the District of Philadelphia and beyond.
IV. District Discussion

The three districts covered, Lower Merion, Council Rock, and Philadelphia all have distinct size, location, and funding differences, especially between the suburban districts and Philadelphia. These differences underscore the interview data collected that found major differences between the climate of schools with more funding and those with less funding, through what the data reveals about funding difficulties in the district. Because of the relatively well-funded financial situation of Lower Merion and Council Rock districts, the structure and external pressures faced by the individual schools, teachers, and administrators were different than those interviewed in the district of Philadelphia. I expected these differences to be clear from the experiences of the interviewees, but in many ways the resources and stability of each school’s special education program were different when comparing interviews. Additionally, race and cultural context is important to take into consideration from each of these school profiles. Legacies of racial discrimination in special education are present in districts across the country, but it is important to highlight strongly within the district of Philadelphia because of their majority Black student population and their unique cultural and socioeconomic context when compared with Lower Merion and Council Rock districts. I expected from the interviews to receive different perspectives from teacher and parent or community relationships due to these well-known legacies surrounding special education, and for these legacies to be less on the minds of teachers and administrators from the suburban districts. Overall, the school district profiles offer data to help understand the full context in which these interviews on inclusion and special education were conducted through quantitative data on the student make up, financial contexts, and special education program data. This quantitative data supplements my interview data for this project through offering a supplemental perspective on ways to compare and
contrast the districts and give a full picture to the population and financial differences of each district.
CHAPTER 6: ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

As I mentioned briefly in the climate chapter, five main themes surrounding school climate and inclusion with the LRE mandate arose from the interview data collected. These themes were used as methods of analysis for the interviews, and to do so were compared on a spectrum of school climate. The five modes of analysis of school climate were communicative to individualistic norms, supportive collaboration to expectations of self-sufficiency, individual responsibility to rigidity in staff roles, positive school expectation and image to negative expectations and image, and high to low parental involvement in relation to adversarial to non-adversarial parent-staff communication. These themes of analysis revealed important findings about the climate of schools surrounding communication and their ability to support staff and students, how professional expectations of staff varied based on the climate around self-sufficiency regarding sharing of teaching practices and support for less experienced teachers, and how the climate around the level of individual responsibility for students functions in relation to staff hiring power. Additionally, the last two themes revealed how school perceptions of past performance or success impacted how teachers and administrators understood the importance of their job and their drive to continue excelling in inclusive adaptations and practices and how parental involvement or lack thereof changed how staff operated within the school.

Beyond these five comparative themes for analysis, school resource level and funding impacted the development of school climate surrounding approaches to inclusion and disability. While the five themes reveal distinct differences about school climate and how it impacts the accessibility and culture around inclusion for disabled students in the general education classroom, the themes of school climate themselves were shaped by the relative access or lack thereof to resources. Resource availability at schools came across in many material ways through
this research, and these material discrepancies impacted each school’s climate surrounding inclusion and disability. Schools with higher levels of monetary and physical resources were able to hire more staff to fulfill mandates within individual student’s IEPs and other aspects of IDEA, which in turn impacted school’s ability to successfully implement the LRE and use best practices for inclusion in the general education classroom. This shift can be characterized for schools with fewer resources as a more communicative, collaborative climate when compared to schools with ample resources. Without necessary staff, the climate of a school around inclusion shifts due to the nature of teachers, administrators, and other staff’s positions in the institutions changing to make up for the constraints. Beyond staff shortages, other budgetary challenges lead some schools to have fewer resources for teachers such as staff training, structural support, and other components that support successful teaching practices. This in turn shapes schools’ ability to ensure quality inclusive practices and impacts the climate of the specific school. These resource-based differences between different schools and districts involved in this research impacted all the themes and conclusions produced from this research on school climate and inclusion, even if the themes produced were not directly related to resource availability at each specific school.

Because of these findings that underlie all the other continuums of analysis used to interpret the data, the largest impact on school climate is the level of resource availability each specific school or larger district has—this is not to say that other things shaped school climate, but resource availability was the clearest that impacted all of this research’s findings. It is also important to note that resource availability impacts a school’s ability to implement the LRE mandate separate from climate, and fundamentally changes how schools operate. Resource availability complicates my original research question that solely focused on the ways in which school climate impacted service delivery and practices in the LRE context, to broaden the
discussion on how resource level is a determinant of school climate, which in turn impacts service delivery and inclusion.

I. Communicative to Individualized Norms

The first continuum of climate, communicative to individualistic norms, showed up in important ways in the interviews. First under communication, there was a gap between the perceptions of the quality and level of communication between school administrators and teachers or other classroom professionals. In almost all districts, administrators, when asked about their leadership style and perceptions of communication, responded positively and that they valued feedback and ensured high levels of communication between their staff and other stakeholders within the school. But when the same questions were posed to teachers or other classroom professionals like instructional assistants, they responded with more mixed messages when it came to ease of communication, and their perceptions of being heard within the context of inclusion and special education. One administrator at the district level from Council Rock noted that while working with teachers and parents, “I believe in full transparency, like I don’t ever want a parent to think I’m hiding something from them or being sneaky in a way because that’s just not how I operate. And I think, you know, they appreciate that and for the most part, allows us a good working relationship so that when we do recommend something or suggest something there, you know, they’re willing to listen and accept that you know truly what’s best for the child.” This points towards an administrator's perception of a climate of transparency and ease of communication from an administrator standpoint. Additionally, a principal from the School District of Philadelphia emphasized the importance of communication and sorting of students’ needs so that teachers were able to handle caseloads and support students effectively
RG). Last, another principal from the School District of Philadelphia also focused on communication as a way to integrate inclusion in real time into her school, constantly bringing teachers, parents, and other community members into conversation about best practices within the school. This principal’s hands-on approach to communication focused on getting and receiving feedback from everyone, through practices ranging from in class observations and discussions with teachers to personally giving her cell number to every parent, teacher, and staff member connected to the school. These experiences of administrators all revealed their perception of a communicative and collaborative school climate around inclusion, although it should be noted that some of the interviews and observation times were more in depth than others and might lead to slightly different data collection as I was able to shadow a principal for an entire day in school, leading to a more complete understanding of her approach to communication and leadership.

Meanwhile, teachers and instructional assistants on the whole discussed communicative norms within their respective schools, but many also brought up some different experiences than administrators. When asked about tools used for collaboration and dynamics between staff within their respective schools, many teachers reported that they had mixed experiences with the climate surrounding communication. A teacher in Lower Merion school district reported that she received all of the information about students' IEPs and specific needs in a reliable fashion through an online school-wide information sharing system, but when it came to communication between teachers on their best practices and support, she knew very little about what actually happens in the classroom. This teacher noted “well it’s funny, like, I know shockingly little about what happens around other teachers’ classrooms. I get a sense, basically, if things are going well or not going well just kind of overhearing chit chat between students.” This teacher's experience
of a lack of communication goes directly against the reports from various administrators from multiple districts, and points towards a gap in the perception of communication and the climate of support for teachers around best practices and inclusion in the classroom. Additionally, an instructional assistant in the Lower Merion district reflected similar reservations about communication. She shared that she doesn’t get many cross-team meetings and teachers often don’t have time to talk to the IAs that work with students in their classrooms. Additionally, the instructional assistant shared that she had communication issues with her principal in advocating for the students with IEPs that she supports, and she felt that the principal dropped the ball on some inclusion practices but didn’t care enough to follow up. Beyond Lower Merion, overall interview findings from teachers were mostly positive on the ease of communication across teachers and administration, but they noticeably had more negative experiences with communication than administrators.

This gap in perception of quality of communication across staff to ensure best practices for inclusion regarding students with disabilities points to potential barriers in a school’s ability to ensure inclusion and best practices for the LRE. A school’s climate of communication, especially ease of communication between staff for idea sharing, concerns to be voiced, and other important messages, plays a large part in a school’s ability to successfully promote inclusive policies regarding education of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. While not every interviewee experience mapped perfectly onto another, clear themes emerged from the data collected on a gap in the perception of the ease of communication between teachers and administrators.
II. Collaboration to Self-Sufficiency

Like the continuum of communication, the mode of analysis using supportive collaboration versus expectations of self-sufficiency revealed that schools with more resources tended to have more individualistic norms when it came to support and communication with inclusion. From interviews at Lower Merion, a highly well-resourced district, it was clear that the district prides itself on hiring extremely experienced teachers with ample background knowledge in their field. A teacher from Lower Merion remarked that she felt because the district hired experienced teachers, there were fewer support mechanisms in place for professional development. She noted that “it's interesting because the district pays relatively well and tends to hire teachers who are pretty confident and have experience, and sort of like just hope that they know what they're doing.” This experience points to a strong school climate of expectations of self-sufficiency. It also should be noted that this same teacher shared experiences of a lack of communication between teachers within her school, mentioned in the above section on ease of communication perceptions. Other teachers interviewed from the district referred to collaboration and support as “hand holding,” which denotes negative perceptions of collaboration, and that they felt very confident in their own ability to teach and support all students in their classroom based on degrees and experience. This sentiment from a teacher that support was equated to hand holding and that as an experienced teacher she never needed reflects a climate of individuality, and expectations of personal self-sufficiency. These interviews show a strong theme of schools with more resources holding higher expectations of self-sufficiency, that in turn leads to less idea sharing and support through collaboration with other teachers for teachers as they navigate the classroom.
On the other hand, in interviews with both teachers and administrators from under-resourced schools, specifically both schools interviewed from the district of Philadelphia, there was a stronger climate for collaboration and direct teacher support without the expectation of self-sufficiency. A special education teacher from an elementary school in the district noted that collaboration was an important practice in her school, and she often aided less experienced general education teachers in curriculum planning and preparation to ensure accessibility for all students. This teacher, unlike the teacher from Lower Merion, described collaboration in a positive light even when she was leading the way in curriculum prep in collaboration with a less experienced general education teacher. The principal from the same school also referenced the collaborative sorting meetings that are prioritized to talk through best practices and settings for students with IEPs in the school and having a team-oriented approach. At another school within the district, the principal highlighted her priorities of constant teacher feedback on instruction and using the funds the school had to provide a full-time instructional coach whose sole purpose was to observe teachers and provide the support they needed in collaboration with the assistant principal. This principal mentioned that this was the first year they were able to hire an assistant principal and made sure that the position was focused on classroom feedback and collaboration for teachers. These experiences from teachers and administrators at less resourced schools within the district of Philadelphia stand in stark contrast to the more individual and self-sufficient expectations from the more well-resourced Lower Merion school district.

The interview data showed a correlation between a district's hiring power, which is linked to the resource availability of the district, and school’s climates around collaboration of self-sufficiency. Districts that had more hiring power had higher expectations for their teachers, which led to some experiencing a lack of collaboration and prior expectations of self-sufficiency.
without as much feedback of support for teachers, while districts with less hiring power or resources to put up in general for their teachers seemed to cultivate a higher level of collaboration between teachers and other staff throughout the schools. In general, schools with less collaborative climates are less likely to share best practices and support teachers in creating inclusive environments for disabled learners under IDEA, which impacts the quality of instruction. It may be true that schools with less collaborative climates, as they were the more well-resourced schools from my research, are able to provide more material support to teachers so they feel less need to prioritize collaboration and idea sharing between staff, and also are able to hire more experienced staff from the start which impacts the level of teacher need. While this research was not complete enough to make this full connection, these experiences shared from the interview data point towards climate difference in teacher support and collaboration that in the long run can impact the quality of services provided within a school.

III. Individual Responsibility to Community Effort

The third theme used for evaluating the school climate surrounding inclusion was norms of individual responsibility versus community effort. Individual responsibility in this context meant the level of personal commitment and connection that staff members felt outside of their prescribed job descriptions to care for students within the school, while community effort refers to the climate in which school staff felt that the responsibility for the wellbeing of students and the school fell on the broader community and not themselves individually. These themes showed up in the data in a variety of ways, and as in prior themes mapped on to differences in resource availability between different schools.
Primarily, the interview data showed that schools with fewer resources had a higher level of a climate of individual responsibility for the students, which was often combined with a community effort approach. This meant that interviewees would mention doing things to support their students outside of specified job descriptions or taking responsibility for things to help make the school run smoothly to help the broader community, with the recognition that if they did not do that there wasn’t a fallback person or mechanism of support. This was predominantly seen through an interview and shadowing a principal at a school within the district of Philadelphia. This principal reiterated these beliefs of individual responsibility, noting that when put in situations of staff or funding shortages, “So, you make it work, right. You re-assign people.... You have to handle it. It’s not like you can say ok, go home, [to students]..., I mean, you work in whatever way is necessary, but it’s a challenge.” The urgency expressed by this Principal regarding these situations of staff shortages and budget constraints and the response to make it work no matter what indicated an extremely high level of individual responsibility that is connected more directly to the health of the school and those attending. This sentiment was echoed by a former teacher from the district of Philadelphia who taught at a different school, noting that “It was very true that in a less resourced situation, it’s all on one teacher. And then in Lower Merion for example, it is very much like ‘no the aide does that, I don’t have to pay attention over there.’” These experiences from the district of Philadelphia highlight that there is a stark difference in school climate surrounding the individual responsibility that teachers and administrators take around the support of students with disabilities, oftentimes because they are put in more compromising situations due to financial constraints. The climate of the school is strengthened around the individual care and responsibility that each staff member takes because
of the financial barriers that their individual schools face for extra support while more resourced schools might not have to put staff in such situations.

On the other side, interviews revealed than in more resourced schools, individual responsibility showed up in a more “my kids” versus “yours” understanding and staff in the general education classroom did not express the need to care or put effort in outside of their prescribed job descriptions to support disabled students to the same amount that teachers and administrators at less resourced schools mentioned. This led to a different approach to the support of disabled students in the general education classroom. The instructional assistant I interviewed from Lower Merion school district described this climate shift while discussing how she interacts with general education teachers: “I've worked with some great teachers that really are connected to the kids and know how to talk to them and know how to adapt curriculum for them and materials, and then I've worked with teachers who are just been like, kind of at a loss, and just look to me to do a lot of stuff.” The hit or miss nature of the professional collaborative relationships between the general education teachers and the experience of the instructional assistant point towards a shift in culture. I found that the teachers, because there are plenty of support staff, have the privilege of not always recognizing students with disabilities in their classrooms and directly working with them to provide support for inclusion, instead that falls on the instructional assistant alone. Additionally, an administrator from Council Rock school district, a similarly well-resourced district to Lower Merion, noted that “I think with every district there’s still a tendency to look at the students as yours versus ours. So we’re, you know, constantly working on that like reminding them that just because this student has an IEP doesn’t mean they don’t belong in the gen ed class that you’re not responsible for them.” This administrator’s recognition of the negative climate within her district of “your kids” versus
“ours” when it comes to special education and support for inclusion within the general education classroom is starkly different from administrators accounts of the climate of responsibility at schools within less resourced districts. Multiple other interviewees from Lower Merion and Council Rock also reflected this sentiment, that attitudes towards inclusion of students with disabilities and the level of care that teachers had for students outside of their personal job description was much less than at schools with fewer staff or resources.

It is clear that there are major climatic differences in how schools with resources and those without approach individual responsibility for students and how staff connect their work to the importance of the overall health and trajectory of the school. There are many contributing factors to this difference in climate regarding individual responsibility, notably that schools with more resources can hire more staff and provide more support so that many of the situations of staff shortages or IEP plans not being met at less resourced schools do not happen. Because of the difference in staff numbers and resources, educators and administrators are not faced with such urgency to be responsible for their students in the same way. Schools with more resources have more structural support systems, and the interview data suggests that this can lead to a lack of initiative on the part of teachers and administrators to connect with students and invest in the same manner that schools with fewer resources have. While interview data was inconclusive and I was not able to directly connect these differences in climate directly to the variance in resources and staff numbers between schools, the experiences from current administrators and teachers show a significant connection between the resources of a school and the school’s climate surrounding individual responsibility taken for students.
IV. School Expectations and Image

Additionally, the spectrum of analysis used of positive and negative school expectations and image revealed differences in the expectations of teachers and administrators regarding their school’s performance. This was seen most clearly in the interviews with teachers and administrators from Lower Merion school district. When asked about success and their school or district’s special education program, everyone interviewed responded with a sense of pride, and many mentioned high expectations surrounding the program. The reputation of the district’s special education program was positive, and this impacted how staff, administrators, and parents interacted with each other in the context of special education and inclusion. A school board member, when asked about how they perceived the special education program, said that “I would say that the district is incredibly successful with special education and educating students with disabilities and being inclusive. The district has had a focus on that for a long time, and it is not perfect, there are always some families that have an issue, or something pops up, but it's well known that many families with special needs children will move to Lower Merion specifically because of the quality of services that are provided.” The reputation of the district regarding special education precedes itself, and this sets a climate of high expectations and standards for staff, and especially for parents. This pride and sentiment of high expectations was reflected in multiple teacher interviews from the district as well, with some teachers mentioning that they “lucked out” and got a job at Lower Merion and expected me to be familiar with the success of the Lower Merion special education program. It was clear that Lower Merion has a high perception of the success of their special education programs and a climate of pride in that which was different from the other schools. While this does not directly point towards any improvements in service delivery and inclusion, this climate of pride does correlate with high
expectations of staff and other stakeholders within the district to provide quality services for 
students with disabilities. While no school or district had a particularly negative self-image or 
perceived as their school as holding low expectations for the program, this distinct sense of pride 
and excellence was only reflected in Lower Merion, a very well-resourced school district that 
had the resources (as mentioned above) to hire experienced teachers and staff and had a 
reputation to uphold, in ways that were different from the other schools interviewed.

V. Parent and Community Involvement

Last, interviews were analyzed on the spectrum of high to low parent and community 
involvement. This mode of analysis looked at the broader climate of the school community, and 
how parents and community members interacted with the school staff and special education 
programs within the school. Noticeably, as in many of the other modes of analysis, schools with 
more resources and wealthier parents and community members tended to have a higher climate 
of direct parent involvement, and teachers and administrators spent more time fielding questions, 
concerns, and interacting with parents in a formalized matter than at other less resourced schools. 
This in turn impacted the climate of the school, and created a more adversarial environment for 
the relationship between parents, teachers, and administrators. Multiple teachers interviewed 
from Lower Merion school district mentioned that parents held significant weight within the 
school. One Instructional Assistant mentioned that “the parents are very knowledgeable and 
aware and not afraid to speak up. They want their children integrated as much as possible into 
the regular ed setting.” Additionally, a lawyer specialized in special education law connected 
with Lower Merion reflected this experience of parents holding a lot of weight in the district and 
have significant influence in the process of IEP due process hearings, and that they consulted
with legal counsel more often than in other districts in the area, and brought cases revolving around more minor regulatory issues to due process hearings than at other less affluent districts. These experiences highlight the important role that parents play within the district, and how they have the potential to influence the normal operations of staff within the district. Within these interviews, parent involvement was described as more of a give and take an adversarial relationship rather than a collaborative one. Parent voice in this district was spoken of as something to be wary of, and that parents were not afraid of using their voice with legal backing to make changes and influence the processes for special education, specifically surrounding IEPs for their children. This was also somewhat echoed in interviews with administrators at Council Rock school district, who noted that parents felt that they needed to push through to receive the best services for their children. An administrator noted that she prioritizes a systematic structure for coordinating services for students with disabilities within the district because without that, “Parents feel like, unless they advocate strongly, they’re not going to get as much support because it’s not a system. So, the more systematic it is, then I think the better it works at the elementary level, it’s a lot easier.” This administrator’s decision to promote a systematic approach to organizing special education support for elementary students largely because of parent demands and fear of an unequal level of services reflects a climate of parent involvement that is more adversarial rather than collaborative, and parents are viewed as stakeholders who must be appeased rather than collaborated with. This in turn impacts service delivery and inclusion because time and resources are used to appease parents, and in the case of inclusion within the schools, singles out students with disabilities in a way that can be seen as anti-inclusive because of the sense of an adversarial relationship that the students’ parents have due to their intense involvement.
On the other hand, in less resourced schools within the district of Philadelphia, the climate surrounding parent school relations was much more collaborative, and less adversarial than in wealthier more resourced districts. While there were not as many examples from the school district of Philadelphia, one administrator freely mentioned that she viewed parents within her school community as a large focus for the school, but within a more collaborative lens. This administrator mentioned that she personally gave her cell phone number to every parent within the school, and frequently completed home visits with all parents, whether they had a disabled student at the school or not. This administrator sought out parent-school relationships and conveyed that although the parent voice is prioritized within the school, the climate of the relationship was not as adversarial as that of more resourced districts. This collaborative approach showed how the school viewed parents less as parties to appease and more as valuable resources for insight into best practices within the school. A collaborative approach to parent-school communication as shown in this school was starkly different from the other more resourced schools, and pointed to a better ease of idea sharing and help when it came to communication and best practices for supporting all students in the classroom. This was shown through the frequent home visits, easy communication through parents over text and call, and outreach from administrators for community input when considering changes within the school.

VI. Discussion

Through a compiled analysis of the interview data collected, there are some major differences surrounding the climates of individual schools within the Southeastern Pennsylvania region. Primarily, findings highlighted that resource availability played the biggest role in the development of school climate and the approach that schools took to special education and
especially inclusion in general education classrooms. Schools with higher levels of resource were able to have more staff and broader material resources, while schools with lower levels of resource more often struggled to meet specialized instruction necessities. These differences in resource availability were the biggest components in shaping each individual school’s climate, underlaying all of the themes produced from parent involvement to communication standards. Taking this into consideration, the five themes all showed unique findings relating more to the determinants of school climate first, and then secondarily showed changes in the approach to school’s ability to implement LRE and inclusive classroom practices.

First, there is a gap in the perceptions of the quality of the ease of communication between administrators and teachers surrounding special education and student inclusion. This finding did not have as much of a distinct difference when it came to resource level of the school, although it was most clearly noted in well-resourced schools. Second, schools with higher levels of resources exhibited increased expectations of self-sufficient and less collaborative climates, while schools with lower levels of resources exhibited more collaborative approaches to teacher support and professional relationships between teachers and administrators. Third, schools with fewer resources had a higher level of individual initiative for students that went beyond their job descriptions, while schools with more resources showed more of a mindset of “my kids” versus “yours:” signaling to a climate difference between the ways that teachers in these schools approach their students and overall job regarding inclusion. Fourth, school districts with higher levels of resources expressed high levels of pride in their districts’ special education program, while others interviewed did not express to the same extent. Last, districts with more resources had a high level of parent involvement and with that a more
adversarial climate between parents and teachers, while schools with fewer resources sought out parent involvement more often and had more of a collaborative climate.

These five major findings, in general, point towards large differences in the climate of schools that mainly fall along lines of resource availability within the schools. This study found that while schools with higher levels of resource were able to hire experienced teachers and provide many resources to staff and students, the interview data found that the climate of the schools was more individualized, less communicative, and more adversarial when it came to parent and teacher relationships regarding best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities. On the other hand, while schools with fewer resources were unable to provide as many material resources to staff and students, interview data found that the climate of these schools was more communicative, had a high level of initiative, and was more collaborative when it came to best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities. Despite the limited nature of this dataset, these conclusions point towards important considerations that teachers and administrators should be aware of when thinking about school climate and inclusion, especially how structural differences from school funding differences have a large impact on the general school climate.

Given these major findings, it is important to investigate how poverty generates the difference between school climate in low resource and high resourced schools. As I found in my interviews, poverty creates a specific set of challenges not felt by richer school districts. With less access to funds for material classroom support, less hiring power because of a lesser ability to pay teachers, and the inability to sometimes fill enough staff for provide ample support in the school, all of these factors create the conditions that cause these large differences in school climate. Given these circumstances, I argue that when there is an environment of less resource
and not as much of a safety net as is offered at affluent districts, staff are forced to look to each other for the support needed when not found in material resources. On the other hand, affluence generates a different climate because of the different set of circumstances that the schools operate under. Affluent schools have more hiring power through reputation surrounding their affluence, can provide ample material resources, and are able to pay teachers more competitively because of increased funding mechanisms; all of which directly influence the formation of school climate. I argue that when there is a standard of enough resources and needs being met in multiple forms at affluent districts, this creates more of a safety net and staff do not have to rely on each other as much to provide that safety net in the same way that is experienced at low resourced schools. This in turn creates different conditions which create the variance in climate I found in my research.

Last, connecting back to the segment on race and special education in the history and context section, while resource availability was used as the main mode of distinction between these districts and their differences in climate, it is important to also recognize the racial differences of the student populations in these schools that lines up directly with the resource divide. Lower Merion School District and Council Rock School District are both predominantly white districts and were the two well-resourced districts mentioned throughout this analysis, while the School District of Philadelphia, the under-resourced district used in this analysis, is a predominantly Black school district. The racial makeup differences between these schools and their districts used in this project also played a large role in the difference in climate and goes hand in hand with the differences in resource distribution. Race and school climate has not been mentioned as much in this analysis because the interviews did not support a critical analysis along the same lines that they supported an analysis based on differences in resource availability,
but the impacts were there because of the historical legacies of racism, school funding, and discrimination make up the fabric of the district of Philadelphia. Legacies of racism in special education, which in turn change the climate of a school surrounding special education services, were clear in some interviews conducted, especially with teachers who had experience in the district of Philadelphia. A former teacher from the district who had experience both in Philadelphia and other districts mentioned a culture shift among parents surrounding IEPs- that for some parents in the district of Philadelphia it was viewed as a “branding” while in Lower Merion it was viewed more “as a tool” to be leveraged. The likelihood of parents to view the IEP with a negative connotation reflects on the legacies of injustice felt by the communities within the district, that they saw the IEP as another way to isolate and exceptionalize the learning of their children from their peers. This is a direct example of legacies of racism in special education, from special education being used as a new form of segregation to the disproportionate representation of students of color in special education that manifested itself in one teacher noticing a cultural difference between how families at different schools viewed the IEP. Throughout these interviews and while discussing differences in school climate and its impacts on special education and classroom inclusion, race also plays a large role even if the analysis did not address it fully. Issues of school resource and funding and cultural differences are impacted by race and play an important role in the formation of school climate as well.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Special education in the United States is a rapidly growing and evolving part of the educational landscape, guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As commonly held ideas for best practices with the education of disabled students have shifted, so have many of the policy mandates in IDEA, and there has been a shift to prioritize the education of disabled students in the general education classroom to the greatest extent possible. This movement has been guided by the Least Restrictive Environment mandate, which prioritizes education alongside peers to the greatest extent possible, while giving schools discretion to implement this as they best see fit according to student’s IEPs. Given this discretion, schools hold different priorities, cultures, and approaches to the LRE mandate all of which are influenced by a variety of factors. This project attempted to name some of these differences to approaches of school inclusion using the framework of school climate, through interviews with teachers and administrators from three districts in Southeastern Pennsylvania. While the scope of the interviews completed were more limited and firm conclusions were unable to be drawn, the interviews pointed to some important differences between the climates of schools with monetary and material resources and those without. In all, data showed that schools with higher levels of resources were able to hire more experienced teachers and provide many resources to staff and students, their climate was more individualized, less communicative, and more adversarial when it came to parent and teacher relationships regarding best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities. On the other hand, while schools with fewer resources were unable to provide as many material resources to staff and students, data found that the climate was more communicative, had a high level of initiative, and collaborative when it came to best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities.
These findings are important because they show how differences in the level of resources, whether funding, staff, or material resource constraints, directly align with many of the major differences found between individual school climates. This points to the conclusion that the financial constraints of a school have a broader impact beyond just the inability to spend money on staff or supplies, but also impact the attitudes, policies, and communication of teachers and administrators within the school. The finding that schools with fewer resources were more likely to have strong communication, individual responsibility, and collaboration with community members and parents is a result of the broader financial environment that the school is in, and this is deeply important for considerations about how schools with financial constraints approach legislative mandates from IDEA, along with evaluations of the capacity of schools to enforce best practices for students with disabilities. If the end goal of IDEA and inclusive education in the general classroom is to provide staff, students, and parents with the best possible resources and support to make learning equitable for all students, then the finding that financial resources was perhaps the largest determinant of school climate is extremely important. Many positive collaborative traits were found within schools with financial resources, and their climates were markedly different from those of schools with resources, yet it is dangerous to argue that schools must undergo undue stress from financial constraints to form a positive climate. Rather, the most important takeaway from this research is that while evaluating school success with inclusion of disabled students, it is integral to understand how financial constraints transform a school’s climate and can impact the approach to inclusion. It is unjust that some schools function under constrained conditions and are not able to meet all the staffing needs financially, but these pressures may create superior school climates surrounding inclusion.
Further research is highly encouraged on this project, from a more intensive analysis of school financial resources to more interviews with staff and parents in order to more firmly draw conclusions from this project. Many of the interviews done were individual actors at schools, and while I obtained interviews with multiple teachers or administrators from the same district, multiple interviews from the same schools within a district would be preferred. Multiple interviews from individual schools across parent, teacher and administration could then be compiled to gain a more complete understanding of the climate of schools, and then could be cross referenced with other schools with complete interviews as well. Additionally, deeper research needs to be done on the impact financial and resource constraints have on a school’s climate, especially regarding the climate around special education and inclusion. The interviews collected offered great insight into the school processes for special education support and teachers' experience with the funding side of the school’s makeup, but clearer and more probing questions could have been asked. Last, a deeper analysis of the role of race and a school’s climate on special education needs to be addressed, recognizing that the legacies of racial discrimination in special education are alive and well today and impact the climate and cultural norms around special education programs in many districts today.
**REFERENCES**


