CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background & Importance of the Problem

Academic excellence has always been part of the “American Dream”. Education in the United States, historically, has been the gateway to economic success and the path to personal freedom. Although the Dream has not changed over the years, the faces of those pursuing it have. As the Hispanic population continues to grow in the United States, so too, does the need to be able to help Hispanic students achieve academic success.

Our society has relied heavily on the public education system to educate the masses and produce quality citizens who can, in turn, significantly contribute to the economic success of this country. Schools in the United States have long been the stepping stone for generations of Americans and the key to the “American Dream” for all immigrants. Although America is young relative to its European neighbors, its school system has attained considerable success. Marzano (2003) cited that “the research on the effectiveness of (American) schools considered as a whole paints a very positive image of their impact on student achievement” (p. 6). Historically, U.S. schools have produced a workforce capable of successfully maintaining the U.S. as a world leader.

This expectation of academic excellence has been a contributing factor to the success of the American public school system. However, it is critical to acknowledge and address several very important exceptions to the celebrated academic progress in public education. The American school system has not been able to successfully meet
the needs of students for whom English is not their first language. These students are commonly referred to as English Language Learners (ELs). In the United States, the majority of the student population who are ELs are also Hispanic. “By far, the majority of ELLs--80%--are Spanish speakers” (Goldenberg, 2008, p. 10). An achievement gap is defined as the discrepancy of academic achievement between sub-populations of students. Not being able to close the Hispanic EL achievement gap is a profound dilemma in public education that, without a resolution, stands to discredit the long-standing belief that the “American dream” can be reached by all.

The federal government authorized its newest iteration of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. This reform acknowledged the existence of achievement gaps and required accountability measures to close the gaps. This new legislation led educators to develop a sense of urgency that previously did not exist. Educators found themselves fast approaching the 2014 deadline with dismal chances ensuring 100% proficiency for their students. Prior to this initiative, A Nation at Risk (1983) and the TIMSS Report brought into perspective the state of the United States public educational system, placing pressure upon the federal and state governments to improve upon the current educational outcomes. As a result, states implemented accountability systems to ensure their districts were working toward meeting the demands established by NCLB and initiated efforts to create a schooling system where their students graduated high school better prepared for today’s professional expectations. In turn, districts have developed innovative sets of
measures to ensure their schools more adequately meet the diverse needs of their students.

Although these efforts appeared effective, not all students demonstrated the expected academic progress. Furthermore, when district data is disaggregated, time and time again, the subgroups that continue to demonstrate the widest achievement gaps are the Hispanic, African-American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islander populations (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnick, 2007). The persistent achievement gap amongst the Hispanic population is of considerable concern as this subgroup is projected to become the majority within the next decade in California (Garcia, 2002). Williams et al. (2007) estimates that nearly 1.6 million, or one out every four students enrolled in California schools, are currently designated as [an] English Language Learner (p. 1). Estimates suggest that in the last twenty-five years, the EL subgroup population has steadily grown from 8% to 25% enrolled (Williams et al., 2007, p. 1).

In its quest to promote equality in education, NCLB delineated federal requirements for the education of all children, and specifically for minority and underrepresented students. Implementation of the federal guidelines in NCLB yield identification of significant achievement gaps within minority subgroup populations in American schools. Gaps in student performance are increasingly becoming more common in public education (Williams et al., 2007). Consequently, public concerns surrounding American schools’ effectiveness in educating minority students have steadily increased. Salamon (1991) concluded that the need to effectively address issues of
inequality is essential for the wellness of our nation’s democratic philosophy, economic strength, and world status.

Statewide studies consistently show disproportionate patterns of specific student subgroup achievement levels in California (NCLB, 2001). Specifically, patterns of EL students’ underperformance have increased and become increasingly more evident. The numbers continue to rise. As a result, the number of schools and districts entering Program Improvement (PI) status also continue to rise. As more ELs enroll in California public schools, their continual academic underperformance, if it remains unaddressed, carries potentially damaging effects to the state and to American society. This trend also jeopardizes our collective well-being as the resulting gaps extend into local, state, and national economics.

Garcia (2002) and Williams et al. (2005) indicated that in California, the connection between student achievement and social status have become a hot topic platform in education. Goldenberg (2008, p. 10) points out:

Spanish speakers in the U.S. tend to come from lower economic and educational backgrounds than either the general population or other immigrants and language-minority populations. For example, nearly 24 percent of immigrants from Mexico and Central America live below the poverty level, compared with 9 to 14 percent of immigrants from other regions of the world (and 11.5 percent of U.S. native-born populations.

California has a high EL student enrollment; ensuring educational equity is especially critical when all these facts are taken into consideration. Many districts that serve large percentages of Hispanic, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and EL students have been severely impacted with all the requirements and deadlines to attain academic success in closing this achievement gap.
Rowland Unified School District (RUSD) in California recently entered PI status under NCLB Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) guidelines. This status is due primarily to its Hispanic and EL subgroups performance levels falling short of proficiency levels required by NCLB (California Department of Education, 2010). RUSD, like numerous other school districts in the nation, struggles to improve student performance, especially within the minority-language student population. In effect, mandated cost-cutting measures have made it challenging for RUSD to effectively employ previously planned interventions. As a result, the district has endured numerous challenges in effectively maintaining programs to adequately address the needs of its students, with the bulk of its challenges affecting its Hispanic EL students. Consequently, Hispanic EL students have consistently experienced challenges in meeting national and state educational targets and benchmarks.

Admirably, RUSD has successfully promoted overall student performance levels in the positive direction. Consequently, the district has earned a distinctive reputation as a high-performing district, an achievement of which the district is very proud. RUSD plays a critical leadership role in the quality of education that is practiced in its schools. That role is crucial to the success of its students and, consequently, to the wellness and health of the greater community which it serves.

**Problem Analysis**

The district has a multitude of responsibilities in its role as the educational organization. According to Clark & Estes (2002), organizations will ultimately face organizational barriers. Clark & Estes (2002) defines organizational barriers as "missing
tools, inadequate facilities, or faulty processes or procedures," (p. 44). This inquiry project focuses on the identification of such organizational barriers, which may contain the underlying causes for the existing gaps. Because it is the responsibility of a local educational agency (LEA), also known as the district office, and its schools to safeguard educational equity and to promote equal opportunities for all students, successful student preparation is a key responsibility for both the district office and its schools.

School and district funding in RUSD are dependent on Average Daily Attendance (ADA). This is also important because the academic performance of minority-language students renders school districts to receive fiscal sanctions from federal NCLB and state legislature. Perhaps most costly is the consequence of the district entering Program Improvement (PI) status as a district. From a social perspective, this problem becomes an incentive issue as residents in the community may become disappointed and disinterested in the school district’s services such that parents may exercise their right of school choice (Marzano, 2003) and ultimately disenroll their child from RUSD because of its PI status.

By identifying the root causes for the Hispanic EL achievement gap in RUSD, the district will be able to use research-based strategies to help mitigate gap. By closing the achievement gap for Hispanic students, every stakeholder in the district will benefit. Schools will reap the rewards of increased API scores and meeting AYP target, and as a result, Hispanic students will be better served. This is very important because a district's ability to maintain an adequate performance standing as measured by PI rankings has economic impacts on the school and community. A school's PI status is connected to the market value of homes within the district's local area. In addition to economic effects,
the resulting findings will help enrich the academic performance of the local youth and therefore increase their likelihood of successfully reaching their potential.

**Inquiry Purpose**

The purpose of this inquiry project is to identify factors that enable the existing student achievement gaps in RUSD to persist. For the purpose of this inquiry project, the achievement gap is defined as the disparaging academic performance based on state standardized test scores between Hispanic English Language Learners and White and/or Asian students within RUSD. Thus, this inquiry project addresses the question: Despite implemented district-wide reforms efforts, what are the root causes to the persistent achievement gap amongst Hispanic students in RUSD? Identifying such factors will allow for the application of a problem-solving framework proposed by Clark & Estes (2002) in which potential factors affecting organizational goals and objectives are investigated. The Clark & Estes (2002) Gap Analysis Model will enable the inquiry team to use a framework to identify the reasons underlying within the persistent levels of underperformance that impact RUSD's current educational system.

We will also support the Clark & Estes (2002) framework by drawing on theories, of learning, motivation, and organizational structure to inform our analysis. The use of these theories will provide the project team with two basic supports: (1) to act as a lens through which the team views the observations; and (2) provide scientific background & support the inquiry project and its findings. Finally, the project will generate recommendations for the LEA to implement aiming to improve student performance, targeting the Hispanic student population. The project and its results will provide a
platform of considerations for areas of future research in the quest of educational equity and the improvements in the education of Hispanic EL students in RUSD.

This chapter presented the background and the importance of the inquiry team’s focus on the Hispanic EL achievement gap. It also provided a brief overview of the scope of the project. Chapter Two will provide 1) a review of the literature on the elements that contribute to the Hispanic EL achievement gap; 2) the methodology used by the inquiry team; and 3) analysis of root causes of the performance gaps. Lastly, Chapter Three will provide an additional literature review focused on the proposed solutions and a detailed solution summary that outlines our recommendations.

**Project Significance**

The opportunity for doctoral students to work in dissertation teams with a thematic commonality is the hallmark of the Ed.D. Program at USC Rossier; this singular opportunity is of great significance. This particular alternative capstone project was of further importance because of its novel structure and process. As an alternative capstone project, this inquiry project has greatly contributed to the further development of the Ed.D dissertation in differentiating it from the traditional dissertation model used across the nation.

This alternative capstone project was formed from a partnership between RUSD and USC Rossier School of Education. The superintendent of RUSD is an enthusiastic supporter of the thematic dissertation process. She saw the benefits of having doctoral students explore real-world problems in her district. The doctoral students explored areas of particular interest and value to RUSD by applying the gap analysis framework as the
problem-solving mechanism. This was the basis of the inquiry projects conducted by the Marsh/Rueda Thematic Dissertation Group in Spring 2010.

Students worked as cohesive teams of three to explore the problems selected by the district and mutually agreed upon by the team. The teams reviewed a broad body of literature and developed a methodology to conduct the inquiry project. The inquiry teams worked together throughout the entire dissertation process to develop the tools of inquiry, to conduct the inquiry, to code & analyze data, to develop findings, and to suggest research-based solutions to present as recommendations to the district. The extensive amount of collaboration among the inquiry team members was another unique attribute of this alternative capstone project.

This alternative capstone project afforded the inquiry team the opportunity to step beyond the traditional role of doctoral students and become more like expert consultants, immersing themselves in the district, its culture, and its expectations. Like consultants, the inquiry team engaged in an ongoing dialogue with district employees to better understand the culture, beliefs, and practices of the district. The inquiry team then applied a research-based, problem-solving framework and other theoretical constructs in coming up with possible solutions to enhance the work of the district. Possible solutions developed by the doctoral students extended far beyond a research study report or a summary of findings. The goal of the inquiry team was to present solutions that would be implemented by the district with the sole purpose of helping the district make changes.