Preface

This book presents, in a narrative style, a research journey conducted over 16 years in an Australian alternative secondary school. The purpose of this book is to reveal, in a series of inter-related chapters, the significant findings of this research and the important contribution that these findings make to education in both specific and broader terms. In 2000, the Alpine school, now known as the School for Student Leadership (SSL), was officially opened and the first cohort of students took up residence in Term 2, 2000. This first cohort participated in a shortened program of five weeks' duration with students coming from the Gippsland and Western Metropolitan regions of the state of Victoria, which is in the southeast part of Australia. The principal of the then Alpine school, Mark Reeves, recognised in the early days of the school's existence, the desirability and necessity of gathering empirical evidence into the perceived benefits and associated challenges of this alternative, yet contemporary year nine educational program. From his previous experience of managing alternative educational programs in a variety of settings, he was aware of other alternative national and international offerings but few had ever been researched. To redress this paucity, a research partnership was established between the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Gippsland and the Alpine school in 2001. I was part of this original partnership with my colleague and long-time friend—Assoc. Prof. Len Cairns. The partnership eventually changed in 2014 when Ballarat University and the Gippsland campus of Monash University merged to form Australia's newest regional university—Federation University, Australia.

Over the years, a number of research projects were implemented to gather and interpret data about the impact the school was having with regard to leadership development, relationship building, adolescent development and community. Using a mixed-method case study approach, data was gathered from parents, staff and the students during 2001–2003. Due to other research commitments, including my Ph. D., the project then went into remission until 2005, when discussions began into a new direction for the project. Data was again gathered during 2006 and 2007 with a new research partner, Dr. Robyn Zink, a fellow New Zealander, who had a solid research background in outdoor education and experiential learning. This included a

study involving a unique cohort of Indigenous students at the Alpine school campus in 2006 and research about educating Gen Y at the new Snowy River campus at Marlo, which opened in 2007. In 2009, Assoc. Prof. Margaret Plunkett took up the vacancy on the research team to replace Robyn, who had taken up residence in Canada. Although Margaret's background was not in experiential learning or outdoor education, she had an extensive background in mixed methods research and in adolescent development and learning. With this background, she became a strong contributor to the SSL research project. New directions were taken up as will be revealed in the body of the text with extensive research being conducted with past students, parents, teachers and a cohort of students who spent part of their SSL time in China.

In retrospect, much has been accomplished over the 16 years of the research project, despite a heavy reliance on in-house funding through the SSL. Although two Australian Research Council (ARC) grants were applied for, unfortunately they missed the mark, despite solid interest from the Department of Education Victoria as a possible linkage grant partner. Three Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students also began their Masters and Doctoral research studies into various aspects of this unique school, the findings of which will be published in the next few years and hopefully will provide further valuable insights into the SSL.

Churchill, Australia Michael Dyson



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