

Michael Dyson  
Margaret Plunkett *Editors*

# Surviving, Thriving and Reviving in Adolescence

Research and Narratives from the School  
for Student Leadership

 Springer

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# 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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# Editors and Contributors

## About the Editors

**Dr. Michael Dyson** joined the first research team with Assoc. Prof. Len Cairns in 2001 and has remained involved with the School of Student Leadership (SSL) for the last 16 years. The SSL project has been the main focus of his research agenda. Now in part-time retirement, and a Senior Research Fellow of Federation University, Australia, this book has become a tool to draw the research journey to a close—for now. He has contributed to a number of chapters in the book.

**Assoc. Prof. Margaret Plunkett** is an academic and researcher at Federation University, Australia, and became involved in the SSL research due to her interest in adolescent development, student learning and alternative educational settings. Her contribution to the research project and to this text has been extensive.

## Contributors

**Assoc. Prof. Len Cairns** is a retired academic and researcher from Monash University, Australia. His interest in the SSL was first sparked when his youngest son joined the first intake of students in Term 2, 2000. Len set up the first research team but reprised this role when he became a member of the School Council, a role he still holds today. In his Chap. 8, Len illustrates the significant role the School Council has played in supporting the principal and staff as the school has grown and developed.

**Ms. Wendy Holcombe** is a part-time academic at Federation University, Australia and is a current Ph.D. student investigating teacher perceptions of twice-exceptional students in Victorian schools. Wendy acted as a research assistant for the China project, collecting and analysing data and assisting with the writing of the report for the Department of Education, Victoria, which forms the basis of Chap. 11.



**Ms. Sue Joyce** is formerly a teacher at the SSL and in this role held the position of curriculum coordinator. As a result of her interest in different lengths of time to run successful programs, Sue began a Ph.D. to test her hypothesis. She is in the final stages of writing up her thesis, and her Chap. 10 provides some of her initial findings. Sue is currently a secondary school teacher in the town of Bright, northern Victoria.

**Mr. Mark Reeves** was founding principal of the SSL and remains as principal today. He has an extensive background in teaching and administering alternate school settings and has a particular research interest in ‘modern rites of passage’. He was an international Churchill Fellow in 2011. He has contributed to a number of chapters in this book including the History chapter (Chap. 2) and the chapter on Rites of Passage (Chap. 9).

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# Chapter 1

## The Journey Begins

Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the reader to the journey underpinning the creation of the School for Student Leadership (SSL), which was known initially as the Alpine School. This unique educational establishment is unlike any other in Australia, or perhaps the world, and has offered a distinctive and highly valuable experience to more than 5000 Victorian secondary school students since its inception in 2000. Mark Reeves was appointed the inaugural principal of what was then known as the Alpine school, and remains principal of the three campuses that form the school today. The initial campus was established within the pristine environment of Dinner Plain in the high country of Victoria, Australia. It has since expanded into the Snowy River area in Marlo East Gippsland, and Glen Ormiston in West Victoria. What has added to the distinctiveness of the SSL is involvement in ongoing research in partnership with university educationalists/researchers, thereby ensuring its programs and operations are continually responsive to the findings and recommendations of that research. In this opening chapter, a brief background is provided, followed by an overview of the content of the book, to guide the reader in the research journey that has underpinned the development of this unique school.

### Brief Background of the SSL

The School for Student Leadership (SSL), initially known as the Alpine school due to the location of the first campus, is an initiative of the State Government of Victoria, providing 9-week residential programs for Year 9 students from a mix of urban and regional areas. Until 2007, there was only one campus—the Alpine school campus at Dinner Plain, near Mt Hotham. However, due to the popularity of

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the school, a second campus—the Snowy River Campus in Marlo Eastern Victoria, was opened in 2007, closely followed by a third campus in 2009 at Glemoriston in the Western district of Victoria. This campus was given an Indigenous name—Gnurad Gundidj, which represents both the Indigenous name of the local area and an interpretation of the phrase ‘belonging to this place’.

Notable amongst the unique features of the SSL is the fact that the school provides exclusively for Year 9 students through a one school term live-in program. During that 9-week term, at each of the three campuses, a gender balanced group of 45 students from a number of Victorian secondary schools participate in an experientially based curriculum designed to stimulate leadership ideas and ideals supporting an enhanced self-concept. Unlike many other Year 9 programs offered around the world, the SSL is not an outdoor education facility and does not offer an outdoor education experience. The school was established to provide an authentic, engaging environment for students desiring to develop leadership potential (as further explained in Chap. 2). The learning processes at the SSL are innovative with a strong emphasis on experiential and service learning, requiring students to undertake actual physical and educational tasks where the individual and team processes are carefully facilitated. The curriculum and the program are underwritten by a strong philosophical understanding of adolescent social and neuro-development. The residential nature of the program also facilitates integrated and authentic learning, with students progressively taking on more of the responsibility for managing and organising the community in which they live over the term. This enables students to practice what it means to be a leader and come to understand what leadership, particularly adolescent leadership, entails, through a variety of constructs. These constructs will be unpacked and expanded on in the following chapters of this text. However, in brief, the development of personal skills underpins much of the planning and processes within the school. For instance, there is a focus on developing: supportive structures that enable strong bonds to develop between students and staff; curriculum that facilitates deep engagement with learning; student engagement with and support from the community and experiencing adult-like roles and responsibilities (Cole et al. 2006). The pedagogical approach utilised at the SSL draws on and builds upon the theories of engagement, experiential learning and cooperative learning. The latter two are grounded in the work of educational theorist Dewey (1938), who argued that for learning to be meaningful it had to be orientated to student interests and needs, required active involvement by students and incorporated reflection to assist students articulating and transferring their learning to other contexts.

The selection of students to attend the SSL has always evoked discussion and questioning. Any Victorian state government school is entitled to apply to send 4–6 students to one of the three campuses of the SSL during any of the four school terms, which means that each campus has approximately 45 students each term—a total of 540 students per year attending the SSL. The reality is that many more students across Victoria want to attend, but spaces are restricted due to the size and nature of the school. There is a cost involved to cover living expenses however, a

range of scholarship opportunities exist for situations where this cost cannot be met by the family of the student.

In terms of how students are selected to attend, in essence one could say that the students self select through their quality applications in their home schools and their ability to demonstrate that they will make the most of this unique and highly sought after experience. The staff at the SSL does not select the students—this is the role of the liaison staff from each of the home schools that students regularly attend. Each school determines their selection criteria but the underpinning principle is that the students are willing to commit to the requirements of the residential stay, which includes developing a Community Learning Project (CLP) and adhering to the rules and regulations of the school, both of which will be covered more fully in later chapters. Prior to seeking expressions of interest from students, they are made aware of aspects including restrictions on the use of social media, the focus on healthy eating and living, and on shared responsibility for all tasks including washing, cleaning and serving of food. Despite what some adolescents would see as a restrictive regime, schools generally report having more than the required number of expressions of interest and have to make a determination about the students that they will send to the SSL.

The following section outlines the structure of the entire text and details the various contexts of the overall research project.

## **Book Structure**

Chapter 2, written by principal Mark Reeves, in conjunction with Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett, provides an introduction to the SSL and a chronological overview of the history of the SSL. The political background, which was an important consideration in the creation of the school is discussed in detail, as is the expansion from a single campus to the current three campuses of the school. The chapter also outlines some of the learning approaches and activities offered, detailing the influence of experiential learning, reflection, and community education.

Chapter 3, written by Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett, provides a narrative account of the research journey undertaken in the school-university partnership that began in 2001. The chapter explains the approach that has underpinned much of the research, and also provides a detailed list of all the conference presentations, journal articles and reports that have emerged from the various research projects over the last 16 years.

Chapter 4, written by Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett, describes how the themes of relationships and community have been constantly framed and reframed in all the research undertaken with the SSL. In this chapter, these two themes are presented within the context of an Indigenous only cohort of students, revealing through narratives, the key insights into what the experience meant to them and how they developed as individuals as the result of their participation. The data was

analysed using Glasser's (1998) five basic needs as a framework. The use of this framework and the resultant findings lent support to the SSL being deemed what Glasser (2000) referred to as a 'quality school'.

Chapter 5, written by Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett is the second chapter unpacking the student perspective. This chapter presents two of the other themes that have been constants throughout the research journey—leadership and communication. The data obtained, using a mixed method approach, was gathered from students who attended the Alpine and the Snowy River campuses during 2006 and 2007. The students highlighted the ways in which they grew in understanding about themselves and those they lived with for 9 weeks, emphasising the importance of communication and interpersonal skill development. The data suggested that students came away from the experience with a broader understanding of leadership, particularly in an adolescent context.

Chapter 6, written by Margaret Plunkett and Michael Dyson reveals the teacher perspective from a unique viewpoint—the core moral purpose of the school. Research with the teachers found that those who chose to teach in this unique residential environment did not see themselves as anything special but recognised that the SSL was special because it explicitly practices what it preaches. It appears likely that the different emphasis of the school, especially in terms of embedding a core moral purpose, could occur more easily within this distinctive setting.

Chapter 7, written by Margaret Plunkett and Michael Dyson discusses the perspective of the parents. The data adds support to the large body of anecdotal evidence and formal survey data from parent satisfaction surveys, which strongly acknowledges a high level of parent satisfaction with the SSL. The findings from the data gathered from 38 parents through pre- and post surveys demonstrated an awareness of both the benefits and the challenges encountered by their children in terms of understanding themselves, others and the environment they were living in as a community. Their expectations were not only met but exceeded.

Chapter 8, written by Len Cairns presents the perspective of a School Council member. It addresses some of the challenges that faced the School Council as it attempted to meet the standards, requirements and regulations of the Department of Education and Training within a residential environment that does not fit the mould of a traditional secondary school. The highlights and the challenges faced by the Council over the last 16 years have been documented.

Chapter 9, written by Mark Reeves focuses on some of the cultural and societal factors of what is known as an adolescent 'rite of passage' both historically and in the present age. Mark, who has a particular interest in the notion of a 'rite of passage', explores whether contemporary society can reinterpret what is known as a traditional construct, into an element of contemporary educational practice. The School for Student Leadership proactively works towards providing an environment that is conducive to adolescents experiencing a 'rite of passage'.

Chapter 10, written by Susan Joyce, who is a current Ph.D. student at Federation University Australia, reports on various elements of her research into the anticipated and perceived outcomes for students attending 5-week programs compared with the normal 9-week program. A sample of her findings is revealed in this chapter and



suggests that regardless of the length of the program, there were positive impacts on the development of students who participated.

Chapter 11, written by Margaret Plunkett, Michael Dyson and Wendy Holcombe reports on the findings from a research project that was conducted during Term 4 of 2014 with a cohort of students and teachers from the Alpine Campus of the SSL who participated in a cultural experience at an International school in southern China. The study investigated how the leadership capacity of students was enhanced through their involvement in the Victorian Young Leaders China (VYLC) program and how the teachers managed the students in this alternate program. As a result of this research, government funding was obtained by the SSL to send a further five groups of students to China during 2015 and 2016.

## Summary

This chapter provides a very brief introduction to the background and context of the School for Student Leadership, including student selection. An overview of the main underpinnings of the program is provided as an introduction to what will be covered in more depth in later chapters. The later part of this chapter outlines the research undertaken over the last 16 years and the various contexts of this research.

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# Chapter 2

## A Chronological History of the School

Mark Reeves, Michael Dyson and Margaret Plunkett

**Abstract** This chapter introduces the Alpine School and its original purpose and goals before leading into the story of the historical development of the current School for Student Leadership (SSL). It outlines the extensive political background behind the creation of this unique Victorian school and the search for an appropriate principal. The development of the school from a single campus to the current three campuses is detailed, with photos of each included to illustrate the diverse environmental contexts that are represented. Also presented is an outline of some of the major differences in the curriculum and overall experience that students receive through a term spent at the SSL, compared to that offered via traditional mainstream education. The different learning opportunities resulting from a program that focuses on providing a rite of passage for adolescents and includes experiential learning, reflection and a Community Learning Project are discussed, illustrating the contemporary approach used at the school to meet the cognitive, physical, social and emotional needs of the attending Year 9 students.

### Introduction

An introduction to the development of the Alpine School, situated in Dinner Plain in the Victorian Alps, in Australia, which eventually became the SSL, has been presented in earlier chapters. However, it is important in this chapter to make it clear why the school was initially created and its main focus as it became established and subsequently evolved. Due to the establishment of two further campuses—the Snowy River campus near the mouth of the Snowy River at Marlo in East Gippsland

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and the Gnurad Gundidj campus, which is adjacent to Mount Noorat near Camperdown in Victoria's Western District, the life and operating programs of the school have metamorphosed.

The Alpine school could be said to have been established as a way for the Department of Education in Victoria, to address the growing concerns in the late 1990s about the lack of educational provision in Departmental schools (State secondary schools in Victoria) for Year 9 students. A number of independent schools were attempting to address the needs of Year 9 students, and had done so for some time, through the provision of outdoor education programs at places such as Timbertop and Marshmead. There was a perception by a number of senior staff in the Department that the provision of a different kind of support for the middle years of schooling in purpose-built residential accommodation could be beneficial to adolescent development for state school students.

The school was established to provide a 9-week residential program for Year 9 students with a major focus on developing leadership and enterprise through a community-learning model. A holistic approach to learning was seen to be central to the program and was founded on the building of positive relationships between staff and students as well as between the students as a group. This in turn was supported by a non-traditional curriculum that utilised the principles of cooperative learning to assist the development of self-understanding and environmental awareness. The Alpine school, and subsequently the SSL, was never perceived to be an outdoor education camp. The main focus has always been on offering a blend of purposeful learning opportunities for Year 9 students that meets their needs in terms of personal and interpersonal skill development, moving towards emotional maturity and recognition that they are in control of their own lives. The narrative below unpacks the story of the development of the school and reveals the wisdom of the founders.

## **History of the School for Student Leadership (Formerly the Alpine School)**

The School for Student Leadership (SSL) largely owes its existence to the determination of Phillip Gude, the Deputy Leader of the Kennett Government following the Victorian state election of 1989. Gude seized the opportunity to create an alternative form of schooling at the Alpine School, the precursor of the School for Student Leadership. Gude's early life reinforced his ministerial resolve to provide alternative forms of schooling. Polio had made his expected attendance at Geelong College untenable, because it would have involved continual movement from one room to another during each period of the day. He therefore attended Geelong High, where students remained in the one room for the entire day.

In his role as state Minister for Education, he made a number of shrewd key appointments. He drew on the enthusiasm of John Castran, and Dr. Ron Bassett,

who were both property developers and keen to contribute to a unique state school at Dinner Plain, a town in the Victorian Alps. Gude also recruited Bruce Hartnett who worked in the community sector, the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and the National Australia Bank. Hartnett was active in pro bono work and later accepted the role as President of the Alpine School Council. As Education Minister for Victoria, Gude believed in the notion of the Alpine School and the promising fresh face to education that it would represent. In 1998, he put forward to the Victorian Parliamentary Cabinet a bold funding proposition for the school as part of the 1999 bid process. Although Premier Kennett rejected it, Gude decided he would pursue the concept further and formed a taskforce led by Don Tyrer, an Education General Manager. Other members of the taskforce included John Margetts, the Principal at Rubicon, an outdoor education school. Two members from Victorian Department of Education were also included in the taskforce, namely Jeanne Norling from the Goulburn North-Eastern Region and Ben Cuillo representing the Finance Division, who remained neutral and very helpful. Don Tyrer believed that the provision of a different kind of support for the middle years of schooling would facilitate growth in individual students, and enable them to recognise that interdependence could also lead to greater personal effectiveness. He considered that the creation of a visionary Alpine School would bring this about.

By December 1998, Gude had assessed the progress to date. It had been agreed by the taskforce that Year 9 students were to be the target group and that a purpose built school, with accommodation, should be built at Dinner Plain. However, by the first quarter of 1999, little actual progress was apparent. Gude turned this around by directing Geoff Spring, the then Secretary of Education, to sign off on the school's creation. Gude also founded the Education Trust to encourage philanthropy and insisted on the conceptualisation of governance procedures for the Alpine School. He also arranged for a public ceremony to reinforce awareness that the creation of this school would happen.

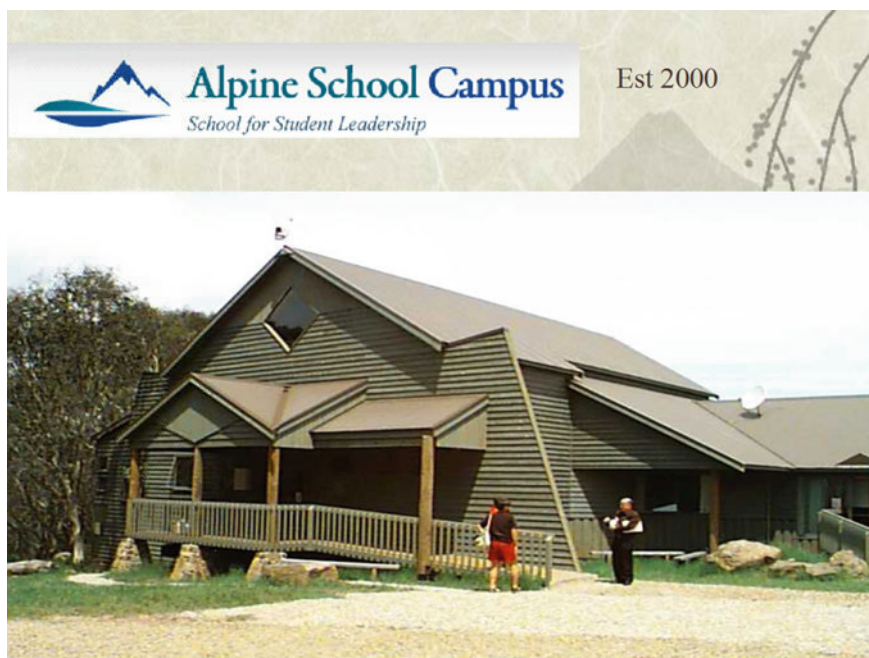
Sue Tait, the newly appointed Regional Director for Gippsland had the opportunity to speak privately with Minister Gude on the mountain before the ceremony. They agreed that the proposed school was on Tait's side of the mountain and that the Gippsland Region would accept responsibility for the proposed school. Gude appreciated Ms. Tait's talents and saw her as someone who could provide a high level of enthusiasm and quality interaction, in both Melbourne and in her region. In the same time frame, Tyrer's team focused on a curriculum model with community at the centre. A key component of the curriculum was to be a Community Learning Project (CLP), which linked learning at the Alpine school to the home community, to ensure links continued when students returned to their home schools. John Margetts and Sue Tait formed an effective working team and Margetts agreed to undertake acting and interim Principal duties until the position was finalised. There was a school to be built, budgets approved, staff appointed, curriculum established, learning technologies installed, student selection procedures defined and a Principal to be found.

A state election was to be held in September of 1999 and Gude's political career was almost over, for he had decided not to contest this election. Therefore, finding a

school Principal became a priority. It was Gude's vision to establish the Alpine School and he believed it would provide different learning opportunities for students, especially those with no prior experience of the country, who would now have an opportunity to broaden their knowledge.

### *Opening of the Alpine School*

A tied State election result in September 1999 put numerous plans on hold. Personnel such as Sue Tait and John Margetts had to distance themselves by sitting on the fence until the impasse was resolved. Prior to the election, Gude had appointed Hartnett as President of the School Council for the Alpine School. As there was no static parent population for the school, Gude approved the appointment of 'Ministerial Nominee's or 'community members', drawn from corporate and philanthropic backgrounds. Foundation members were Dr. Ron Bassett of Mount Hotham Ski Company, Richard Bluck Executive Director of Leadership Victoria (Williamson Community Leadership Program), Janine Kirk CEO Committee for Melbourne, Michael Liffman Research Fellow Myer Foundation, Annabel Shears Carter, and Chairperson Bligh Voller Neild. Figures 2.1 and 2.2



**Fig. 2.1** The Alpine School campus. Photo used with permission from M. Reeves, Principal. [www.alpineschool.vic.edu.au/photogallery](http://www.alpineschool.vic.edu.au/photogallery) (2001)