



Member Profile Dr Sue Elliott July 2021

Can you tell us about yourself and the work you do?

I originally trained as preschool teacher in Melbourne and have worked in the early childhood sector over several decades in various guises as an early childhood teacher, consultant, author, lecturer and researcher. Along the way, I completed two science degrees and then, a doctorate in education focussed on sustainability and outdoor playspaces. My interest in early childhood science provoked concerns about global sustainability and intergenerational equity; and, by all accounts, young children face a precipitous future. I have been writing about and advocating for early childhood education for sustainability since the 1990's (Elliott & Emmett, 1997) and there is still much to do in this arena (Elliott, Arlemalm-Hagser & Davis, 2020). Alongside this role, playing outdoors has always been a focus, most probably inspired by my father and childhood holidays in the bush. The recent surge in Australian nature play programs has offered new possibilities for children to explore their agencies and capacities outdoors. Educators are also critically reflecting on how best to implement such programs both in and with their communities. With several of my post-graduate students engaged in this emerging research area, I feel privileged to be potentially laying some foundations with them in this new research field.

In thinking about my various roles over many years, three things come to the fore: wonderful collegiality and networking with other professionals across local and international contexts; engaging with undergraduate and post-graduate students as witness to their achievements; and, celebrating being in outdoor spaces that inspire, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne where I once taught. I called it my green fix with children and still recall the day a young child slipped his hand into mine as we walked along and emphatically said 'I love this place'! Me too!

What do you see as the most important issue/s we need to address in terms of children and play in Australia?

I often hear sustainability and nature play conflated as really just the same thing, but they are not. Nature play can be much more than sensory and physical experiences, if an ethic of sustainability underpins being outdoors. Similarly, sustainability is more than simply being outdoors *in* nature, it is about a critically reflective stance for thinking and being relationally as humans *with* nature. With the active marketing of 'nature play' to connect urbanised children with nature, I am concerned that deeper consideration of a sustainability ethic may be thwarted, particularly when there are synergies and much potential.

An issue increasingly raised is children's long-term health and well-being linked to the erosion of outdoor play opportunities.

Whether it is in the guise of physical literacy, diet, screen time, accessibility, urbanisation, disabilities or mental health, buckets of active outdoor is urgently required for children's healthy futures. All settings including homes, municipalities, schools and early childhood services can and must facilitate active outdoor play opportunities.

Specific to the early childhood sector, although outdoor play is a quintessential early childhood education tenet, 'real' outdoor play is under threat from the economics of childcare provision. Current policies in early childhood education elaborate requirements for sand, mud, water, flowers and trees, yet the private sector is finding regulatory loopholes to create synthetic or simulated outdoors, which are physically indoors. This begs the questions, how do we define outdoors and what sense of being outdoors can young children construct when the sun and clouds are not readily visible overhead?

What prompted you to join Play Australia?

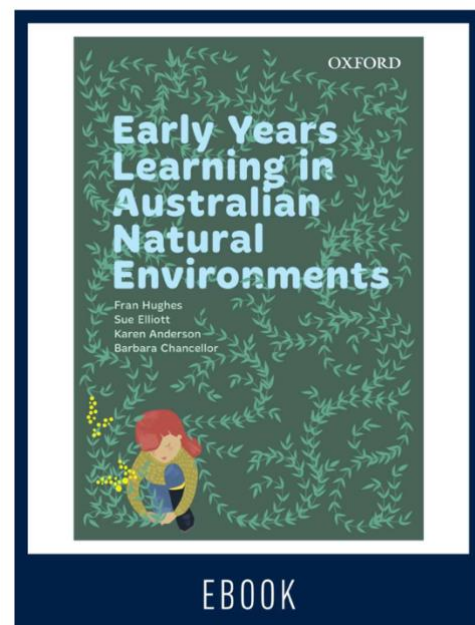
That is a funny story! Originally, in 2002, PRAV invited an early childhood practitioner colleague to join the PRAV board, but due to a young family, she declined. She asked me to keep the seat warm for her and I did so for 10 years until 2012! When I moved interstate to NSW in 2013, I more fully realised state differences; and, just how fortunate I had been to be involved with like-minded PRAV people and the many outdoor play initiatives supported by the Victorian government. In 2016, I was delighted to be awarded a life membership; and more recently, I have joined the fledgling NSW Branch of Play Australia. Thus, the journey continues, Play Australia has been integral to my professional life for many years now.

Is being a Play Australia member important to you as a professional in the sector?

Yes, very much so. Play Australia is my professional family, a place where I am comfortable and there are shared understandings about the value of play. History helps too, when you catch up with colleagues after many years there is instant rapport. I don't have to justify my position and I can readily find support and the right people who know stuff whether it is design, policies, standards, training, research, conferences or simply new playspaces to visit.

How do you PLAY?

My adult children would suggest I never play, but for me play and work intermingle as they do for young children. I relish playing with colleagues around new ideas or ventures and visiting far away playful green places, albeit a distant memory now



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