



HAPPY BIRTHDAY KINDERGARTEN

Although Froebel Australia is dedicated to play, its commitment to early childhood is serious business. **Camille Howard** uncovers the story of the organisation's arrival and continued growth in the Australian education and care landscape.

In May this year, Froebel Australia celebrated 175 years of 'kindergarten', the term coined by German educator (and namesake) Friedrich Froebel, which is based on the philosophy of children learning through play.

Before Friedrich Froebel started the first kindergarten, education wasn't deemed necessary for children under the age of seven, before they went to school. A visionary of his time, Friedrich Froebel understood the importance of the early years and advocated for every child's right to education.

Today, thankfully, his vision is reflected in early childhood education and care services around the world, including Froebel Australia, a subsidiary of Fröbel e.V., one of the largest not-for-profit early education and care providers in Germany.

The not-for-profit organisation's arrival in Australia was a serendipitous one. Recognising the early years as a critical time for children in acquiring a new language, the German provider had been focusing on bilingual education, introducing English as a second language to the children in its early learning centres.

'We quickly figured out it is very difficult to recruit qualified, native English-speaking early childhood teachers on the German job market,' says Olde Lorenzen, Froebel Australia managing director. 'That's when Froebel made the strategic decision to expand into an English-speaking country.'

While Australia wasn't an obvious first choice destination, this decision to expand coincided with the collapse of ABC Learning, which also

made German headlines. 'It was big news because of the enormity of the insolvency, and the impact it had on a very large number of families,' Mr Lorenzen says.

Mr Lorenzen, Fröbel e.V.'s solicitor at the time, was charged with submitting a bid for two of the defunct ABC Learning centres, and Froebel became the only overseas provider to be successful in its bid, securing services in North Sydney and Alexandria in April 2009.

'It's quite unusual for a German not-for-profit organisation to explore an opportunity like that,' explains Mr Lorenzen, who packed up his life in Germany to lead Froebel Australia.

But the reasoning behind setting up a small subsidiary, Mr Lorenzen assures, was not just about having access to another job market. 'It was also to establish our own network, have our own services, showcase what we believe is excellence in early childhood education and, through that network, attract English-speaking early childhood teachers who would then work in our centres in Germany for one or two years.'

This arrangement is reciprocal, with German-speaking teachers coming into Australian services. 'It's a very interesting experience for any early childhood teacher to work in a different system,' he adds. 'And I think it's quite beneficial for both sides.'

Ongoing investment

While the first three years in Australia were about learning the ropes and navigating the political and regulatory landscape (in Germany, education and care is heavily subsidised by the government), the next few have been dedicated to growing the Australian presence.

State of play: Froebel North Sydney director, Eva Steinmetzer.

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Last year Froebel Australia opened its first brand new, purpose-built early learning centre in Melbourne. This year, a 99-place service in St Leonards, North Sydney, will open its doors.

Beyond that, there are plans to open another service in Melbourne, as well as explore Brisbane and Adelaide in the future. 'Our plan is to continue a small growth,' Mr Lorenzen says.

In a climate that has seen several not-for-profit providers leaving the sector, it's a promising sign that Froebel is continuing its commitment and investment in the Australian education and care sector.

The Froebel community

Given the organisation's foundations, Mr Lorenzen says they were expecting to become, more or less, the German kindergarten. 'But we never really wanted to be the German island within the Australian community. We wanted to be very much part of the Australian community, or the North Sydney community and the Alexandria community, and reach out and promote early language learning as such, not the German language in particular.'

Today, Mr Lorenzen suggests around 25 per cent of families have some sort of connection to the German language. And because the services are located in metropolitan areas, he says families are typically multicultural—for some children, the introduction of German is their third language, and even a fourth. 'It's a very Australian mix, I'd say!'

Despite the growing popularity of introducing language learning in early childhood settings, one of Froebel's key points of difference is its immersion approach. 'We have that "one person, one language" principle,' Mr Lorenzen says, whereby German educators speak, play and teach in their native language only.

'There's a lot of research to say that that is the best way to learn a language, and there's a critical period in your life when you can best learn a language and the early years are a very crucial part of that.'

Eva Steinmetzer, director of Froebel North Sydney, has been a part of Froebel Australia from the beginning. And as the only German-speaking teacher at North Sydney in those early days, she remembers the moment she saw the children 'get it', when they could understand the point of being exposed to another language.

'We were talking about colours at the time, and we talked about different colours every week and with those colours I associated different flowers and plants, animals and fruits,' she says. 'It was some time after group time, where we talked about a yellow sunflower, and all of a sudden this girl looked at the orange flower on her shoes and looked at me and said, "Flower is blume in German!" And she was so proud that she understood and that she made the connection to what I had said before. There was so much pride in her understanding me and being able to respond to me in my language.'

Aside from the benefits of communicating in a different language, Ms Steinmetzer says the bilingual approach is also about making connections.

'Bilingualism opens them up to differences in the world and prepares them for the diversity that is in the world,' she says. 'And the concept of being able to verbalise and express yourself in different languages, and therefore connect to different cultures and differences in people, helps children appreciate that not everyone is the same.'

It's not rocket science

Another key initiative is Froebel's Little Scientists program, in partnership with Little Scientists' House Foundation in Germany, which is designed to promote children's curiosity for science, maths and technology. Launching in Australia in 2013, Little Scientists is a professional development program dedicated to teaching educators how to teach science and scientific concepts in early learning services.

'Science and mathematics are topics that are normally neglected in the program, and there seems to be a fear that "I'm not good at science, and I'm not good at mathematics",' Mr Lorenzen says. 'So the aim of our workshops is to take the fear from educators and to show them they are actually doing a fair bit of science already; they may just need some help in how to structure it and turn it into a more rewarding experience for the children.'

It's not about purchasing an expensive science kit, but rather learning to see science everywhere. 'It's inquiry based and it's teaching the educators how they can guide children through a learning experience that is



science related,' Mr Lorenzen explains, 'and how they can ask questions that trigger "inquiry" in children, so they want to learn more and they want to experiment and they want to find the right answer.'

Ms Steinmetzer says it's about combining what the children are interested in and how the teacher can explore that idea with the children, in a scientific way. 'When they line up, for example, and the kids get involved in working out who is the tallest and who is the smallest, that's already something scientific,' she says.

'Last week the children filled up glasses with different amounts water and then made music with the glasses,' she adds. 'And the kids asked some really interesting questions and made some really good assumptions about why that happens. That's exactly how you want it to go: you as the teacher just provide the resources and set it up, but the children take control and go on with it.'

And it's more than just science, Mr Lorenzen adds. 'It's also about social skills, trying to figure something out together with your peers, fine motor skills, language development—there's a whole range of skills that are being developed through the program.'

'The feedback we almost always receive is that science can be fun and it can be interesting and engaging, and that's what we wanted to achieve. And that's why the workshop are so hands on, so the educators experiment at the workshops and try a few things out.'

In Germany, the workshops are reaching 1,000,000 children in 27,000 early learning centres—the

biggest early childhood program ever developed, Mr Lorenzen explains. 'We want to copy that success in Australia. The Little Scientists are not designed to be just implemented in our Froebel centres; we want to make it available to every early learning centre in Australia.'

Through a train the trainer concept, Froebel works with a number of local network partners to deliver the workshops. 'Through that we hope to be able to reach a large number of communities across Australia,' Mr Lorenzen says. 'We are also heavily lobbying the federal government to come onboard, because we feel if it becomes a government-supported initiative, it would make it easier to get the message out and to reach more services.'

As well as embracing science, technology and maths through play, Froebel is also keen to encourage children to embrace risky play. This is evidenced by the five-metre slide that connects the second storey indoor learning environment, to the ground-floor outdoor environment at the new Melbourne site.

'The slide is meant to symbolise risky play,' Mr Lorenzen says. 'If you were to see the slide, and stand in front of the slide's entrance, it does require a little bit of courage to go down because it's curved and you can't really see the end when you go in.'

It's about testing the children's limits, he adds, and having children decide whether or not they are daring enough. 'There is a group of children who can't wait to go in, and they go down headfirst. Then there

is the group of children who are very anxious and take the stairs. And that's fine. It's beautiful to see how different personalities develop and how they respect their own decision.

'We would also encourage those children that do go down the slide to respect the [decision of the] child who doesn't. There's a lot of learning around that experience.'

The right staff

These days, the North Sydney and Melbourne services include, roughly, a 50/50 mix of English-speaking and German-speaking educators. In Alexandria, there are closer to two-thirds German-speaking educators.

Although there are additional challenges associated with employing international staff (approving qualifications, managing visa requirements and so on), Froebel is committed to quality, which means, generally, hiring above ratio and higher qualified staff than required. And rather than trying to rush hiring decisions, Mr Lorenzen says Froebel is determined to find the right person for each job.

'In Melbourne, for instance, we've decided to take things slow and wait for the right person rather than rush into recruiting decision that you may regret later on,' he says. 'We've got quite an amazing bunch of people together now, and they're all on the same page together, they all strongly believe in excellence and are very ambitious, so it does make a big difference in the end. Hopefully, that then leads to educators staying onboard because they feel they are in the right place and together with the right people.' ★

