

Riley Street Infants' School – the first successful kindergarten

Beginnings of preschool education

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, very young children were not formally educated before they reached school age six or seven years old. The German educator Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the first to recognise that significant brain development occurs between birth and the age of three. He believed that young children should receive some education before they entered school.

In 1837, Froebel established the first kindergarten in Germany, based on his ideas of nurturing creativity and independent learning by structured play. Central to his philosophy was the systematic use of a series of educational toys (called “gifts”), such as coloured balls, geometric building blocks, mosaic tiles, and drawing materials. The child’s creativity was stimulated by a set of activities with the gifts (called “occupations”). He offered no moral or character-building instruction, but thought that children would acquire these traits by caring for living things like the plants and animals, fixtures in most kindergartens classrooms today¹.

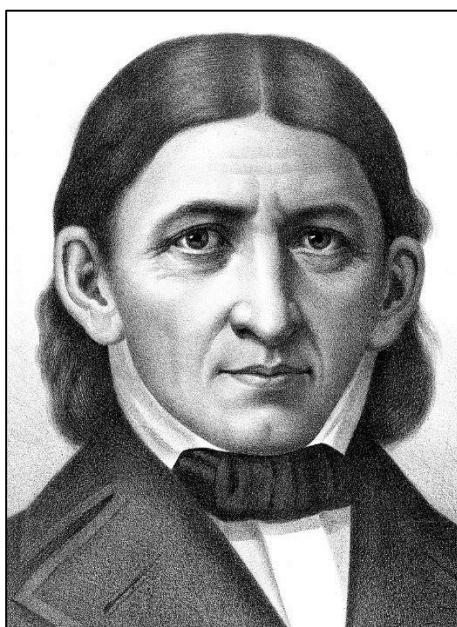


Figure 1 Friedrich Froebel

First attempts at kindergarten in New South Wales

Englishman William Wilkins (1827-1892) arrived in Sydney in 1851 as headmaster of the new Fort Street Model School². At this time, children of preschool age in Australian schools learned by rote in large classes while seated in rows on forms³. This system was cheap to run and the pragmatic colonial parents could see tangible results. But Wilkins wanted to introduce Froebel’s ideas to the colony, and in 1856 he started using kindergarten methods as he understood them in a special Nursery Class for children aged two to five years.

However, Wilkins’ perception was that kindergarten was a form of training for the senses, and that the gifts appealed to the eye and other senses. Kindergarten had only started in England in 1851⁴, so it is not surprising that Wilkins had only a superficial knowledge of Froebel’s underlying principles⁵.

In any case, there was a lack of support from the government, an absence of trained kindergarten teachers, and it was costly to equip the classrooms with the specialised materials and furniture. Special infants' classes continued, but the method of teaching became more traditional⁶.

In 1880, the NSW Member of Parliament and engineer Edward Combes toured European and North American schools, researching facilities for the rapidly expanding public school system at home. Apart from matters related to his mission, he reported enthusiastically on the kindergarten system he saw first-hand in several countries. But while Combes' saw the value of Froebel's ideas of providing ordered freedom and self-activated learning rather than just progress in the three Rs, he thought of kindergarten as really a technical education⁷. Meanwhile, the public remained sceptical of the new methods, and still saw little value in preschool education.

Too many infants to ignore

The NSW Public Instruction Act of 1881 provided for compulsory public education of all children aged six to fourteen, funded by the government. By this time, 17% of children on school rolls were aged two to five, as many working parents simply sent their infants off to school with their school-age siblings. There were clearly too many preschool children to ignore, so more attention had to be given to their education⁸.

Englishwoman Amelia Crowley, newly arrived in 1881 after successfully introducing Froebel's kindergarten system in Christchurch Normal School in New Zealand, put a proposal to William Wilkins to introduce a similar program in NSW. Wilkins, by then the head of the Department of Public Instruction, agreed to a trial of "pure" kindergarten for three months, despite an ongoing lack of interest from his department. Crown Street Public School in Surry Hills was chosen for the experiment. But it was not a success, a lack of space for the large classes, a shortage of suitable materials and furniture, and no trained assistant teachers. Despite Amelia Crowley's best efforts to gain the support of influential people and to explain Froebel's ideas through lectures and newspaper articles, the Crown Street kindergarten was closed at the end of the trial⁹.

Amelia Crowley continued a form of kindergarten teaching at the Castlereagh Public School near Penrith, but the inspectors were not impressed with the results, and the kindergarten closed in 1884. Despite its lack of acceptance by the government or the public to date, the kindergarten system continued to arouse interest in the media, and was debated in the New South Wales Parliament in 1884¹⁰.

Success at Riley Street Infants' School

The Devonshire Street Public School opened in 1874 in a rented hall of the Congregational Church in Devonshire Street, Surry Hills. When the lease ended in 1883, the Department of Public Instruction decided to move it to a vacant site nearby in Riley Street. But because of the small area available, and its proximity to Crown and Bourke Street schools, it became a school for infants only. Classes began in 1884 in temporary wooden buildings along Riley Street¹¹.



Figure 2 Riley Street Infants' School in 1903

In 1886, Dundee-born Elizabeth Banks (1849-1933) arrived in Sydney accompanying an invalid sister with the intention of returning home a few months afterwards. However, she applied for a teaching position and was appointed to the Riley Street Infants' School¹². She was an experienced teacher who had been well trained in kindergarten methods in Scotland and in Germany by Professor Heinrich Hoffman, a pupil of Froebel¹³.

This time the kindergarten was enthusiastically received, and it became a model for the kindergarten system in NSW. For the next fifteen years, Elizabeth Banks was the authority on kindergarten methods. Despite poor accommodation and lack of equipment, the teaching at Riley Street quickly won recognition¹⁴. The children's work gained medals at the Adelaide Exhibition in 1887 and the Centennial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1888¹⁵.

In 1889, Elizabeth Banks commenced the first systematic training of kindergarten teachers at Hurlstone Training College¹⁶. She was appointed special kindergarten instructor at Fort Street Kindergarten, where she taught until her retirement in 1917. At Fort Street she introduced the Montessori method, which grew out of Froebel's ideas and is used around the world today. She was convinced that Froebel would have been the first to welcome Maria Montessori's extension of his work¹⁷.

The success of kindergarten at Riley Street can probably be attributed to Elizabeth Banks' training and experience in Europe, which gave her a thorough understanding of Froebel's principles, as well as her insistence on hiring trained teachers as assistants. On her retirement, an ex-student summed up her qualities with the words: "I have never seen the child whose soul Miss Banks could not reach"¹⁸.



Figure 3 Blackfriars Practising School in 1913 - Martha Simpson on left

Mary Simpson, a former pupil of Elizabeth Banks, took over as headmistress of the Riley Street School in 1889, and maintained Froebel's system until her retirement in 1925¹⁹. Martha Simpson (1865-1948), another former pupil of Elizabeth Banks, successfully introduced the Montessori kindergarten methods at Blackfriars Practising School in Chippendale in 1912²⁰. Following a long period of declining enrolments, the Riley Street School closed in 1989²¹. Today it houses the Sydney Distance Education Primary School, which moved to the site in 2011²².

Notes

1. Froebel Australia Limited website.
2. Australian Dictionary of Biography, William Wilkins entry.
3. *Riley Street Infants School 115 years*.
4. *Two centuries of Education in NSW*.
5. *Kindergartens and Cultures*.
6. *Two Centuries of Education in NSW*.
7. *Kindergartens and Cultures*.
8. *Kindergartens and Cultures*.
9. *Kindergartens and Cultures*.
10. *A History of early Childhood Education*.
11. *Riley Street Infants' school, 115 years*.
12. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Elizabeth Banks entry.
13. *Maria Montessori*.

14. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Elizabeth Banks entry.
15. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1917.
16. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 September 1933.
17. *Maria Montessori*.
18. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 February 1917.
19. *Riley Street Infants School, 115 years*.
20. *Montessori: The Australian Story*.
21. *Riley Street Infants School, 115 years*.
22. Sydney Distance Education Primary School website.

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