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Responses to Covid-19 in Steiner Early Childhood Settings: A comparison of Australian and New Zealand experiences

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Responses to Covid-19 restrictions in Steiner early childhood settings: A comparison of Australian and New Zealand experiences

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Introduction

The restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic have had wide-ranging repercussions around the world. This is certainly the case in the early childhood sector both in Australia and New Zealand.

Two reports on Steiner early childhood teachers' responses to the Covid pandemic have recently been published, one for Waekura, the early childhood branch of Steiner Education Aotearoa New Zealand (Boland & Mortlock, 2020), and one for the Australian Association of Steiner Early Childhood Education (Boland, 2020). These reports were based on two questionnaires sent to practitioners in both countries. When compiling the reports, I became aware of interesting differences between the two sets of responses which merited further exploration. This document does not repeat information which is available in the full reports for each country, but extracts data in order to compare responses in the two countries.

Background

The response of every country to the current coronavirus pandemic has been individual and based on local situations and circumstances. This makes the comparison between the responses of teachers in different countries difficult. In order to give context to this study, some background is given below on how Steiner early childhood teachers in Australia and New Zealand have approached and been affected by the Covid pandemic.

The first case of Covid 19 in Australia was recorded on 25 January and in New Zealand on 28 February; numbers rose steadily over the subsequent weeks. Learning from the experience of other countries, the New Zealand government decided to “go hard and go early” to break the cycle of community transmission. On 23 March, 2020, a Level 3 lockdown was declared throughout New Zealand, giving people two days to prepare for a Level 4 lockdown starting on 25 March.

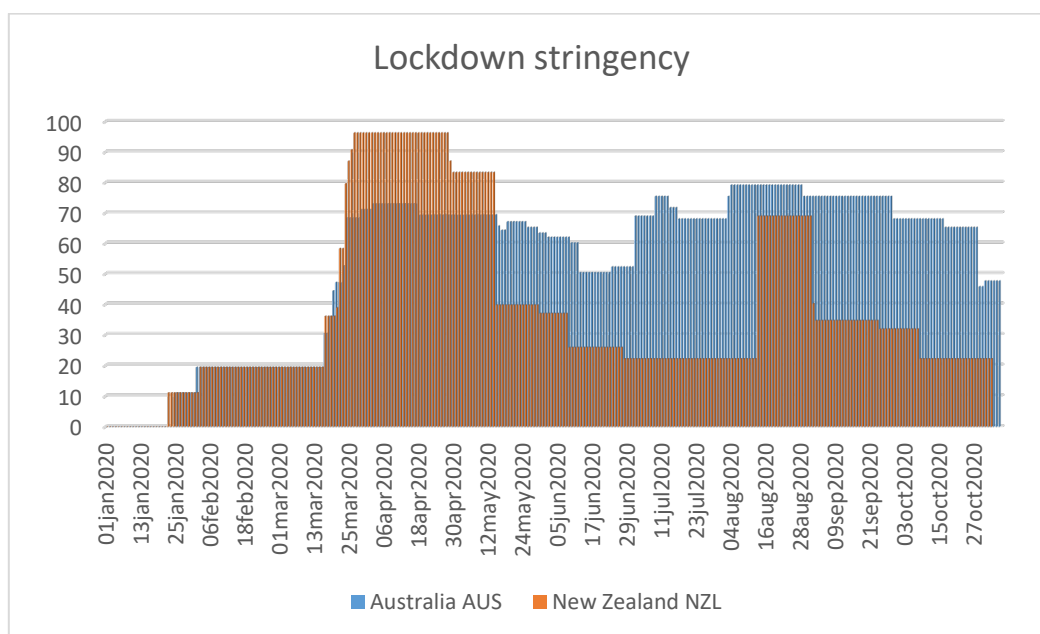
The highest rating on a four-level scale, Level 4 required all early childhood facilities to close for the duration the level remained in place. In addition, all but ‘essential workers’ were required to stay at home, venturing out only to buy food, go to the pharmacy (all doctor’s appointments were online) or take exercise locally so long as distance from other people was maintained. All other workplaces were shut, with workers continuing online where possible. This remained in place for five weeks. Level 4 was rated by Oxford University’s Coronavirus Government Response Tracker as 96% restriction in force (Oxford University Blavatnik School of Government, 2020).

Everyone was told to identify their own ‘bubble’ – immediate contacts, often household members – and not mix with those in other bubbles, even close family members. Almost all travel ceased. The border was closed to everyone except returning New Zealanders and permanent residents. Weddings, funerals, tangihanga and other important events were cancelled or greatly restricted. Due to the raised health risks, visits to rest homes and hospitals stopped, including those to terminally ill patients.

A result of these restrictions was that young children throughout the country were locked down at home with their parents/caregivers with little notice, while teachers were confined to their own bubbles. For children, routines were abruptly altered; what was familiar was disrupted, contact with other children was greatly reduced (and for many children stopped). In New Zealand, value was placed on relationships during the COVID-19 response. Early on, relationships were placed in the spotlight as “be kind” became the mantra of the country. The *whakataukī* or Māori proverb *He waka eke noa*

states how, as a #teamof5million, we were all in this together. The reciprocal relationship of *whakawhanaungatanga*¹ became critically important as the connection between home and learning was experienced in different ways.

Table 1: Relative levels of restriction for the period January – November, 2020 (Oxford University Blavatnik School of Government, 2020)



Halfway through New Zealand’s initial Level Four lockdown, the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, said the country’s geography, its relative isolation and being an island had been a “distinct advantage in our ability to eliminate the virus” (Ardern, 2020). These are attributes which are shared by Australia. However, in Australia, a different approach was taken. Restrictions were put in place but not as severe as New Zealand’s (73% restriction compared to 96%). This lower level of restriction was in order to lessen the economic impact of the pandemic, but at the time was criticised as causing equal financial pain to the New Zealand lockdown (Andelane, 2020).

One of the features which has characterised the Covid pandemic in Australia is how unevenly it has affected different parts of the country, with over 73% of the cases and 90% of the deaths occurring in Victoria (Department of Health, 2020).

¹ The process of establishing relationships, relating well to others.

Table 2. Incidence of Covid-19 in Australia to 13 November 2020 (Department of Health, 2020)

Source: Department of Health, States & Territories Report 13/11/2020

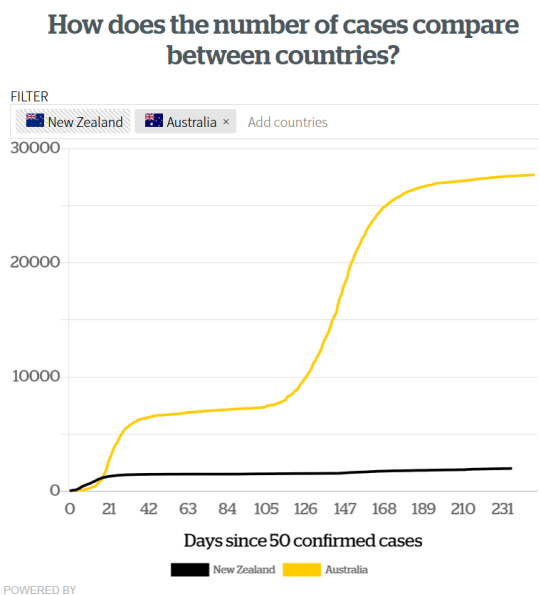
Jurisdiction	Total confirmed cases	New cases in last 24 hours	Deaths
Australia	27,703	7	907
ACT	114	0	3
NSW	4,482	1	53
NT	46	5	0
QLD	1,183	1	6
SA	520	0	4
TAS	230	0	13
VIC	20,345	0	819
WA	783	0	9

Because of this uneven spread, the response to the pandemic has also varied between the different states and territories. Unlike some countries, Australia did not initially shut its early childhood settings and schools in response to the pandemic, instead recommending that they stayed open, while giving parents the option to keep their children at home, a decision which was strongly questioned at the time (Karp & Davey, 2020) and which caused some confusion (McCulloch, 2020). The early childhood sector was regarded in some states as an essential service and so remained open for the children of ‘permitted workers’ (Collignon, 2020) including during Level 4 in Melbourne.

The early childhood sector has faced quite different challenges to schools and tertiary institutions. This is for complex and partly historic reasons which have long confronted policy makers. Early childhood education has frequently been shown to have significant benefits for children’s development as well as life and learning outcomes; reduce the disadvantages of societal inequality, as well as allow parents to re-enter the workforce, so contributing to the wider economy (The Front Project, 2019). Despite this, the funding of the sector has made it susceptible to financial shock. The economic downturn caused by the coronavirus has meant that ‘snapping back’ to the status quo for early childhood settings would likely result in access difficulties for many Australian families, based largely on socio-economic status. Specific financial care packages have been made available to early childhood institutions (Department of Education, 2020) as well as more general JobKeeper payments, nonetheless Noble, Hurley and Macklin (2020) talk about “the near-collapse of this sector” (p. 15) during the course of the pandemic. Globally, UNICEF identifies that “lack of childcare is likely to be one of the worst affected services available to families” (Gromada et al., 2020, p. 1) as a result of the Covid pandemic.

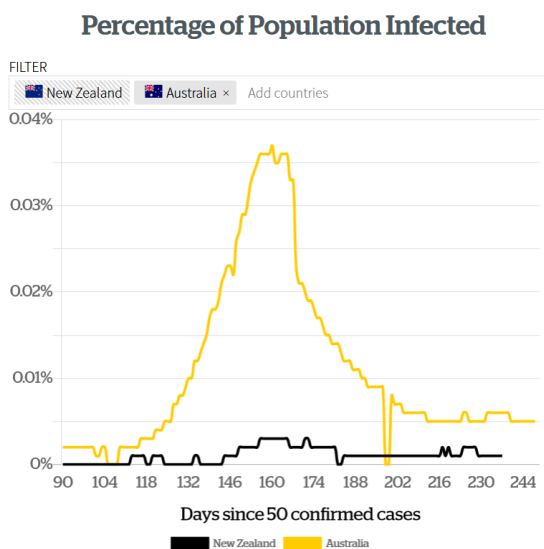
The daily New Zealand Herald has maintained a webpage comparing the results of and approach to the pandemic across many countries, with detailed information about how New Zealand and Australian experiences compare (Knox, 2020). The tables below illustrate visually how the pandemic has affected the two countries and allow some insight into the experiences of people living and working in Australia and New Zealand.

Table 3: Comparison of the number of cases between Australia and New Zealand (Knox, 2020)



Note: The population of Australia (just over 25 million) is around five times that of New Zealand (just over 5 million).

Table 4: Comparison of the percentage of population infected (Knox, 2020)



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Methodology

The data sought in this research was time sensitive. It needed to be gathered before teachers had 'forgotten' how lockdown might have affected them as individuals and as teachers. This was one of the main reasons why a survey methodology has been adopted.

- It allows the collection of data quickly and easily
- It does not take up a lot of the respondents' time
- The data collected can be analysed swiftly and made into simple-to-read graphs
- Identifying and selecting respondents in this instance is straight forward, as usual demographic considerations such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, culture and age do not pertain to the study.

Two surveys were distributed, one multiple choice, Likert-scale questions and one of longer, open questions. In this comparative document, only the responses to the Likert questions are compared.

Study design

In consultation with the body requesting the research, the vocabulary used in the questions was plain and direct and the questions themselves are as short as could be managed. Any specialist references could be easily understood by anyone working in the field. Loaded questions or ones leading the respondent towards a certain answer were avoided (Patten, 2017).

The design of the research (online questionnaires) was chosen out of respect for and consideration of the time pressure many teachers work under (Cumming, 2017). For the same reason, the questionnaires were designed to be able to be answered on a phone as well as a laptop. The project was suggested by Waekura before being extended to Australia and there were several rounds of consultation with both bodies regarding the form and content of the questionnaire. It was reviewed and approved by AUTEK, Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (reference 20/193).

Steiner early childhood teachers – the respondents – are the group most likely to benefit from the research. The principle role of the respondents is one of sharing information so data can be gathered to provide an overview of how the Steiner early childhood movement as a whole has responded to and has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is hoped that this will help inform future actions inter/nationally as well as locally in each early childhood centre, especially should such a situation occur again (settings in Auckland and areas of Australia have already gone through more than one period of restriction).

The opening screen of the online questionnaires was laid out as a consent form. In order to begin the questionnaire, respondents indicated their consent by ticking 'I agree', so providing evidence of consent.

Respondents in the online survey could exit the survey at any point and choose not to have their data recorded. Being anonymous, there has been no interaction between the researcher and respondents or between respondents, and power imbalances cannot come to the fore. The respondents come from all cultures and backgrounds. This was not a feature of the enquiry; no identifying questions were asked about gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture or belief.

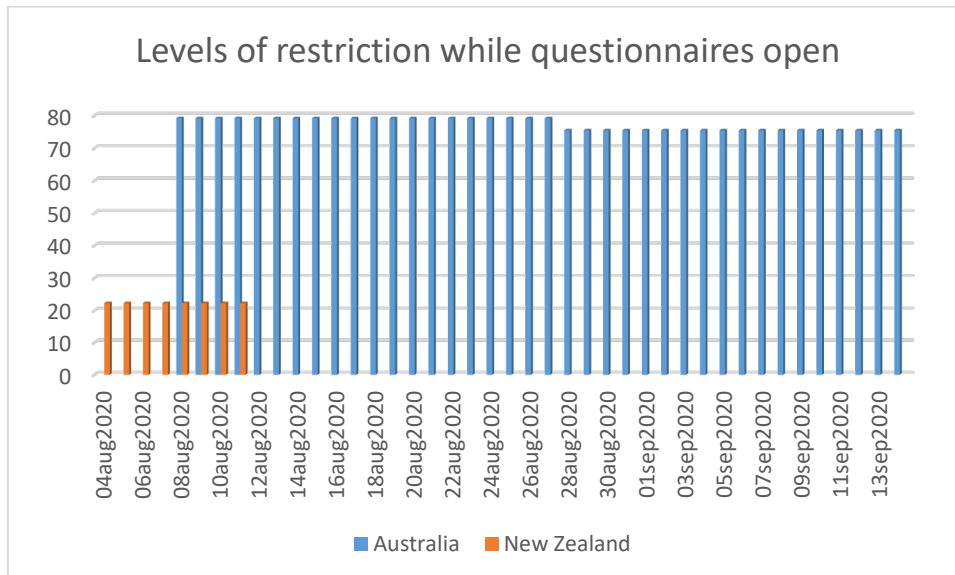
Limitations

When the data gathering began, it was not intended that a comparison would be made between experiences of Covid restrictions in Australia and New Zealand. For that reason, although measures to ensure that the data in the two countries would be collected within similar timeframes were originally built into the research design, they were not enacted because of local circumstances.

In New Zealand, data began to be collected on 4 August, 2020 but was halted on 11 August. This was because on 11 August the New Zealand government announced further restrictions due to a re-emergence of Covid in the community in Auckland which affected the provision of early childhood education. This would almost certainly have had an impact on the content of the responses. Therefore all New Zealand data comes from a condensed one-week period. In Australia, the survey was kept open for longer than originally intended, from 8 August, 2020 to 14 September. This extension was to allow for more responses to be gathered, hence Australian responses come from a five-week period.

Further, Table 5 illustrates both the relatively short time the New Zealand questionnaire was open compared to the longer Australian one as well as how different the levels of restriction were operating in the two countries at the time. How these levels during this period relate to the overall pandemic can be seen in context by Table 1, which shows the stringency of restriction in the two countries throughout 2020 from January to November.

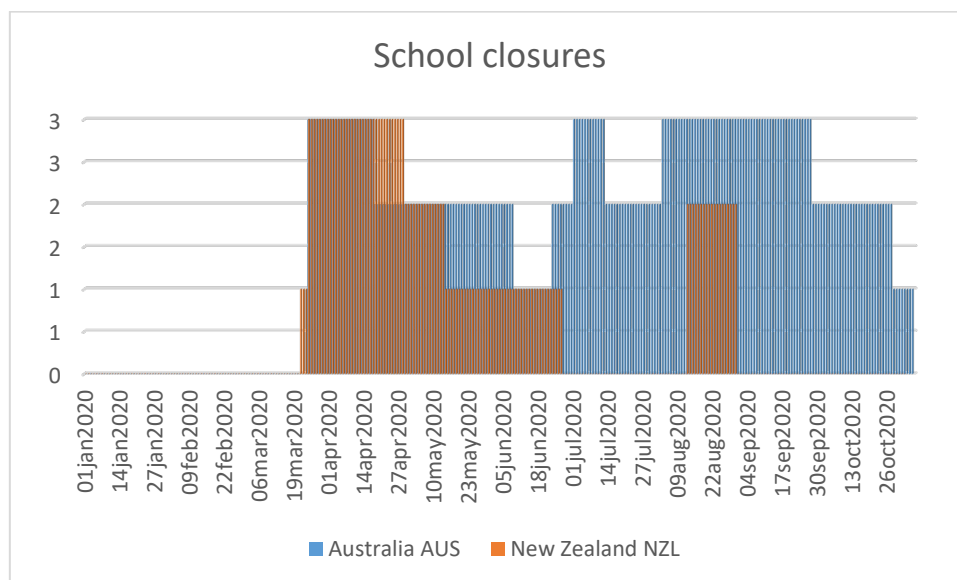
Table 5: Relative levels of restriction for the period the questionnaires were open (Oxford University Blavatnik School of Government, 2020)



The following table shows the severity of school closures throughout 2020 in the two countries. One particular restriction which is mentioned by Australian participants was when the government of New South Wales introduced a ban on singing and the use of wind instruments in educational establishments on 17 August – this affected the daily routines of Steiner early childhood establishments across the state and was not popular.

It should be emphasised that throughout the pandemic different areas of Australia have been under different levels of restriction. The data used in these tables comes from the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University (2020)

Table 6: Levels of school closures in Australia and New Zealand during 2020 (Oxford University Blavatnik School of Government, 2020)



The numbers of participants differed in the two surveys – 41 respondents from Australia and 34 from New Zealand. Not all Australians answered all questions. In this report, all numerical data have been made into percentages of responses allowing direct comparisons to be made.

The Covid pandemic affects communities differently as well as countries (see Australian report). It leads to a further limitation of this comparison, as the survey was halted in New Zealand because of new restrictions being enforced, whereas data was collected all through a strict lockdown period in Melbourne and Victoria. This is undoubtedly reflected in the data.

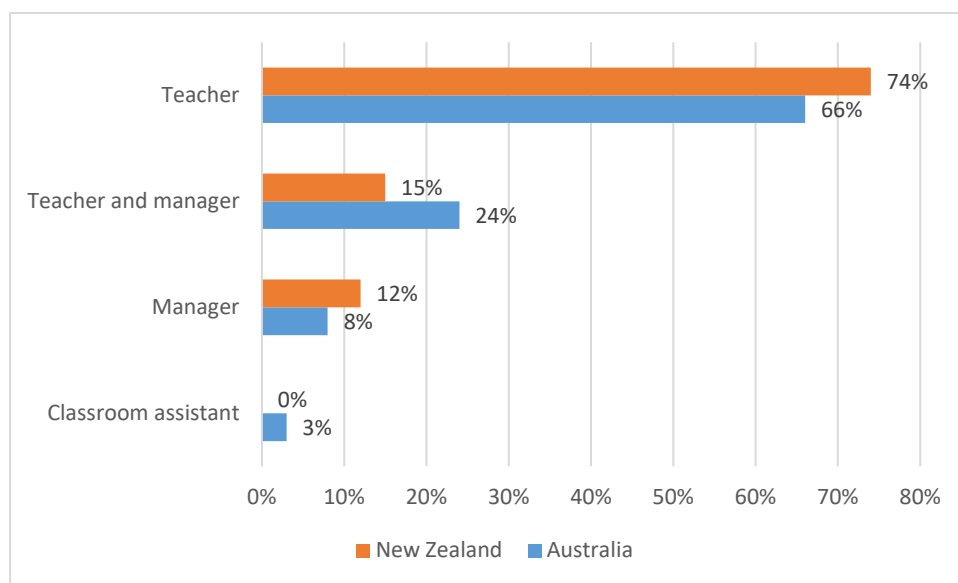
Despite these limitations, I believe that a comparison between the experiences of Australian and New Zealand Steiner early childhood teachers is both achievable as well as worthwhile.

Comparative graphs and analysis

In this section, 11 comparative graphs are presented to illustrate similarities and differences between responses in the two national reports. All are from the first of the two surveys which were run and involve responses to Likert questions which could be analysed (and compared) numerically.

The majority are straight forward comparisons. The final three graphs break down the ‘back to normal’ questions to compare Australian responses state by state to New Zealand because of the wide variance in replies.

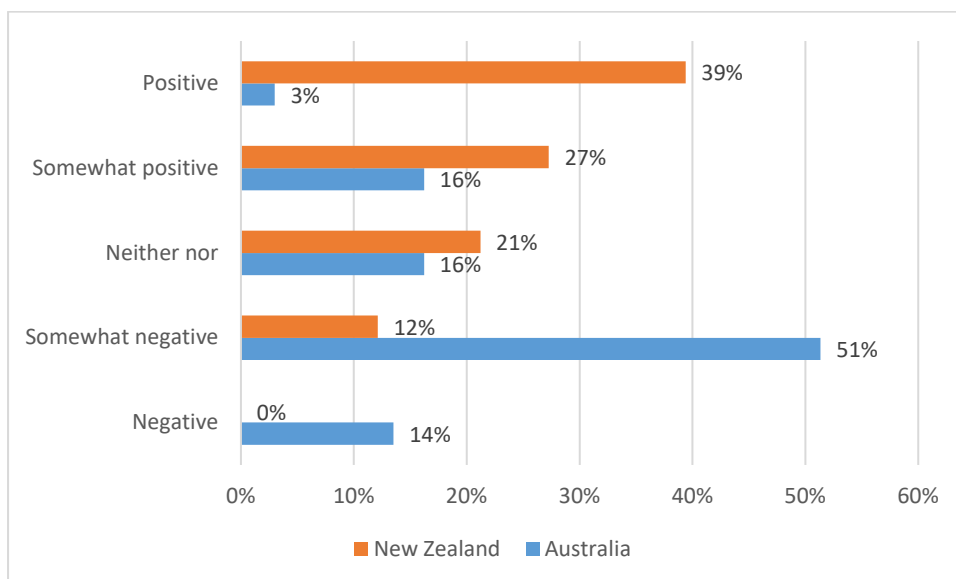
Table 7: What is your role in your setting?



Analysis

Respondents represented a similar cross-section of the early childhood sector in both countries – predominantly teachers with fewer managers. Interestingly, only one classroom assistant took part from both countries combined. It would have been both interesting and valuable to receive feedback from this group of practitioners as well. If a future study is undertaken, ways to ensure that assistants’ voices are heard will need to be explored.

Table 8: How was lockdown for you as a teacher?

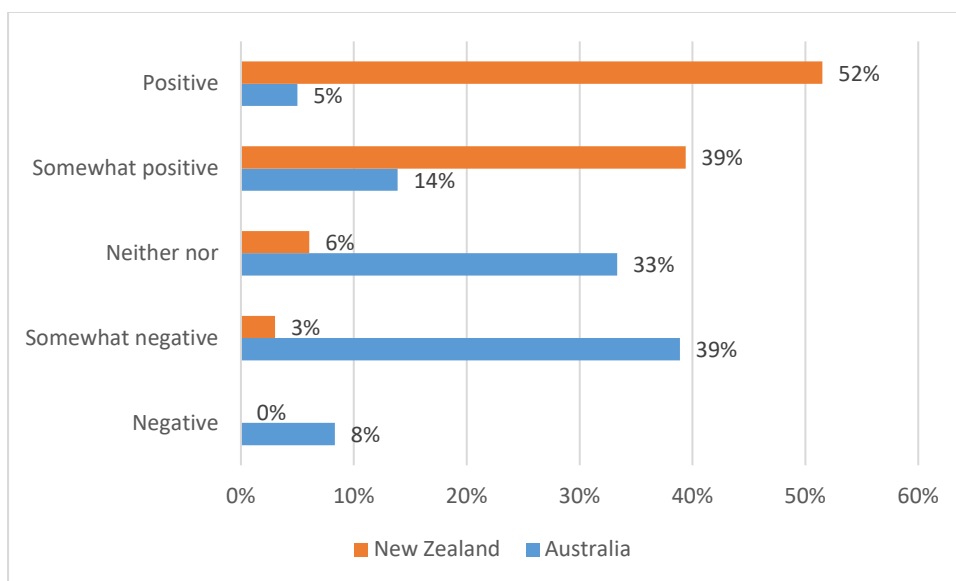


Analysis

This comparison of teachers’ impressions of lockdown shows a striking contrast between the two countries, with teachers in New Zealand experiencing lockdown as much more positive. Only 12% of New Zealanders thought the lockdown period was somewhat negative for them as teachers, whereas only 19% of Australians thought it was in some way positive. This is a stark difference.

It should be borne in mind that New Zealand respondents were replying while out of lockdown, while some Australian respondents were in lockdown. However, it is nonetheless the case that that New Zealand Level 4 lockdown was significantly more restrictive that that enacted in Australia (see Table 1).

Table 9: How was lockdown for children in your group?



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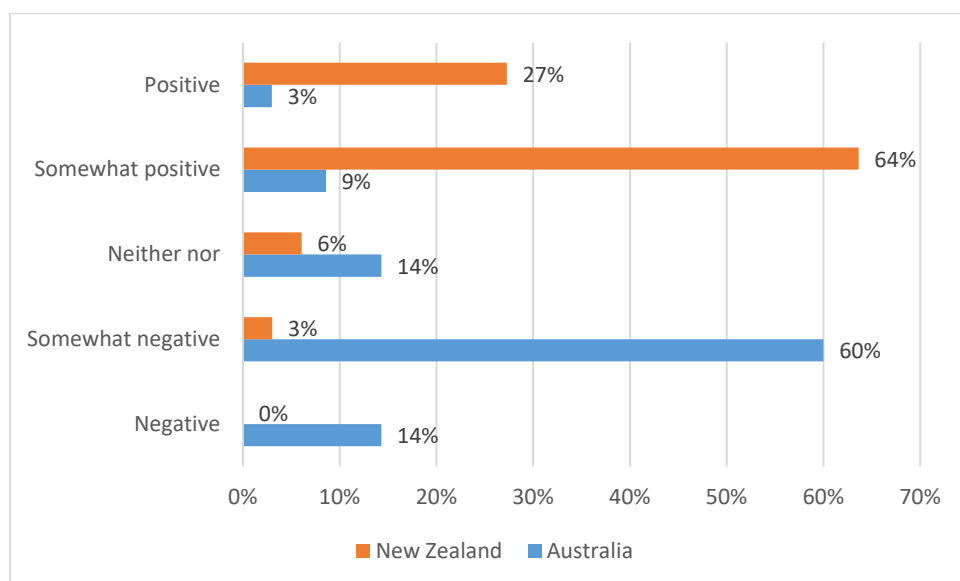
Analysis

An even-stronger difference can be seen in teachers’ perceptions of how children found lockdown. Only 3% of New Zealanders found it to some degree negative for children compared to 47% of Australians. An overwhelming 91% of New Zealanders found lockdown was a positive or somewhat positive experience for children compared to 19% of Australians.

It has been noted that lockdown restrictions intensified situations already existing pre-pandemic (Flack et al., 2020; Gauthier et al., 2020; Noble, 2020). Those people in favourable living circumstances found lockdown by and large a positive experience, while those living under housing, social or financial stresses were more likely to find it negative. It is unlikely however that this explains the results above. While information on the comparative socio-economic status of families who send their children to Steiner early childhood settings in New Zealand and Australia is not available, it is unlikely that there is a significant difference in socio-economic level between them. If anything, Australia is the more affluent society with higher wages and a better standard of living (countryeconomy.com, 2020).

Literature has highlighted the increase in family interaction and high quality parental input during lockdown periods (Gammon & Ramshaw, 2020), with fathers in particular being more involved than usual with their children (Williams, 2020). Why this did not happen or was not perceived as positive by a significant number of teachers in Australia needs further investigation.

Table 10: How was lockdown for the families of your group?



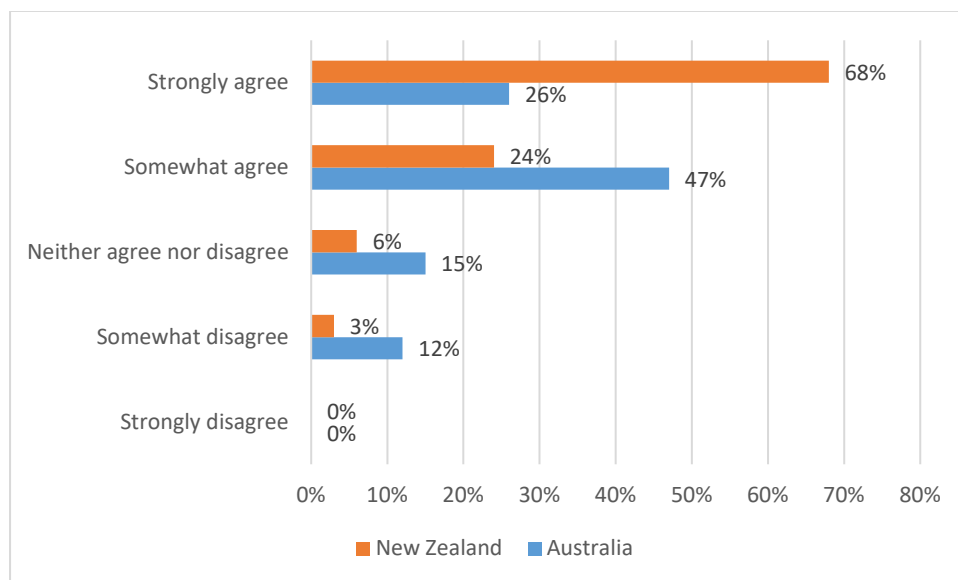
Analysis

A similar contrast in perception is evident in how teachers saw lockdown affecting families. Whereas 91% of New Zealanders saw lockdown as positive or somewhat positive for families – spending quality time together, reduction in travel, reduction work-associated stress – only 12% of Australians saw it as positive.

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Lockdown was reported as a negative experience for families by 74% of Australian teachers compared to only 3% of New Zealanders. Without further study, it is hard to assess why these figures are so strongly contrasting.

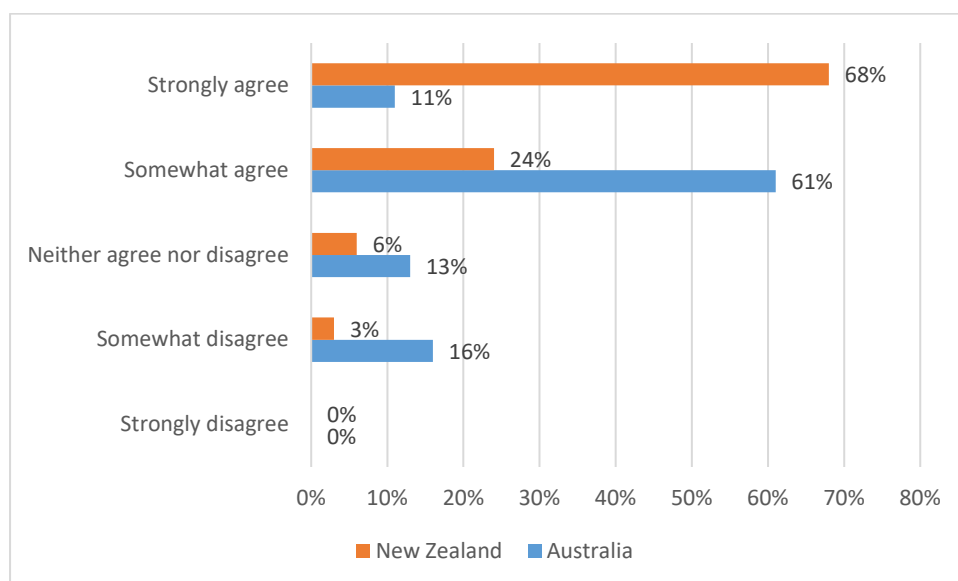
Table 11: The advice I was given was helpful



Analysis

In both countries, advice given was regarded as helpful (New Zealand, 92%; Australia, 73%). This is unlikely to have significantly contributed to the difference in the country responses in the above three graphs.

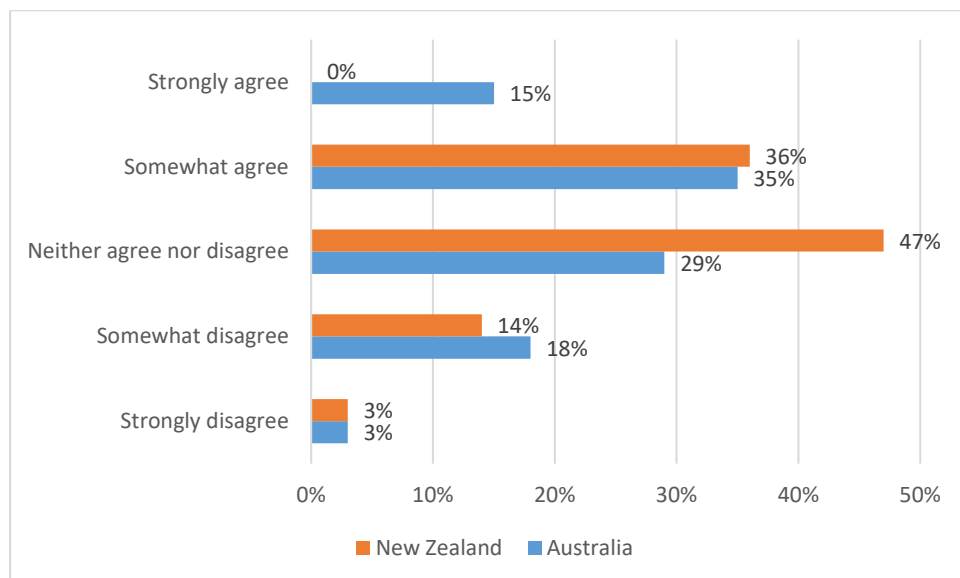
Table 12: I am satisfied with my centre’s response to the situation



Analysis

Here again, both countries responded much more positively than negatively. New Zealand teachers in particular (68%) were strongly satisfied with their centre’s response to the Covid restrictions.

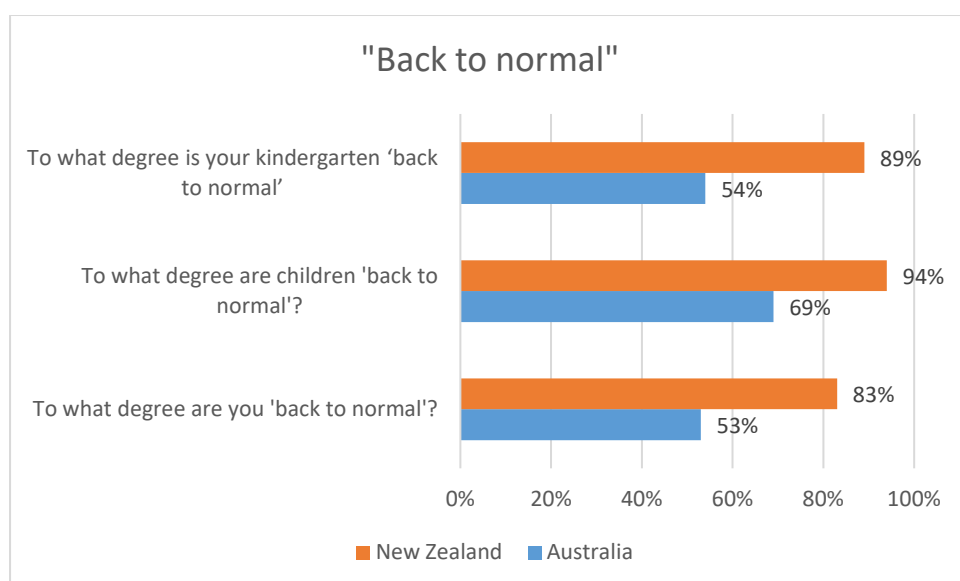
Table 13: I was satisfied with resourcing and funding



Analysis

Regarding funding and resources, Australian respondents were more satisfied (50%) than New Zealanders (35%). Access to resources and funding is unlikely to have significantly influenced the overall negative Australian response to lockdown.

Table 14: ‘Back to normal’ – direct comparison between countries



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Analysis

It was expected that there would be striking differences between the two countries regarding being 'back to normal' as the questionnaire was answered by New Zealanders when not under any domestic restrictions and by Australians under different levels of restriction from mild (WA) to strict (VIC). For this reason, each of these three questions (kindergarten, children and self) is looked at by Australian state.

Table 15: To what degree are you 'back to normal'?



Analysis

These responses roughly mirror how restricted teachers were at time of answering, New Zealanders being the least restricted and Victorians the most. It is worth noting that WA and TAS have been less affected by the Covid pandemic than NSW, yet teachers reported being less 'back to normal'.

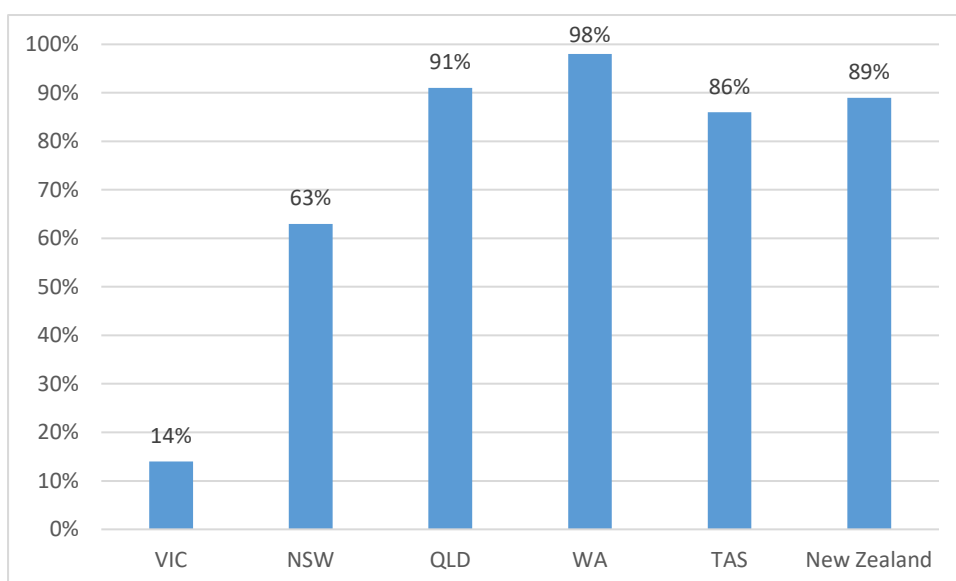
Table 16: To what degree are children ‘back to normal’?



Analysis

The resilience of children to bounce back after pandemic restrictions are lifted can be seen in this graph. With all but TAS and VIC indicating that children are on the way to or have greatly recovered from having been lockdown down for a period. Parts of Victoria were under strict lockdown when these responses were collected which can be seen in the replies.

Table 17: To what degree is your kindergarten ‘back to normal’?



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Analysis

In this graph, it can be seen that in QLD, WA, TAS and New Zealand where few restrictions are in place, early childhood settings are more or less functioning as normal. NSW was still restricted to a degree and VIC was under major restrictions. What is comment-worthy is the response from Tasmania. Whereas children and the teachers report themselves and children to be 48% 'back to normal' (see Tables 15 and 16), the settings themselves are functioning 86% normally, indicating that teacher/child resilience may be an issue here.

Conclusion

What stands out most strongly from this small comparative study is the wide discrepancy between the responses of Australian teachers and New Zealand teachers to lockdown. This is for themselves as teachers, for children and for families. While lockdown was seen as an overwhelmingly positive period in New Zealand for all three groups, it was experienced as negative for all three groups in Australia.²

While it is documented that socioeconomically marginalised communities have been affected more negatively by lockdown restrictions, it is unlikely that families who send their children to Steiner settings in Australia belong to this group and that the dissimilarity of responses can be explained in this way. Similarly, once lockdown ended, Australian teachers, children and settings appear to have got 'back to normal' quite well – this can be seen once responses are viewed by state. Australians were more satisfied with the level of financial and resource support and teachers in both countries were positive about how their settings responded to the situation. It appears to be that the lockdown periods themselves are the issue.

In a recent Bloomberg comparison of 53 countries, New Zealand's response to the Covid pandemic was ranked as the best in the world (Chang et al., 2020), with Australia being seventh in the listing. New Zealand lockdowns were stricter than those in Australia (see Table 1), and it might have been expected that they would have been viewed more negatively, however these teacher responses indicate that the opposite is the case. It cannot be known without further study why this is so, however it is possible that the New Zealand government's approach to "go hard and go early" contributed to the more favourable results. These factors could include that:

- Government messaging was regarded internationally as exemplary
- New Zealand entered Level 4 restrictions before a single death had occurred
- The initial New Zealand lockdown was severe (96% restriction) with no leeway given for personal interpretation or preference
- The lockdown period in New Zealand was more intense but significantly shorter than in Australia
- Public health was specifically and clearly prioritised over the national economy by the New Zealand government

² It should be remembered that the Covid pandemic began in Australia shortly after large areas of the country, especially the east coast and Victoria, had been affected by a severe bush fire season. It is possible that this has affected the resilience of teachers, children and families during the Covid pandemic.

- New Zealanders were frequently asked to “be kind”, to protect each other and to practice *whakawhanaungatanga*. This Māori concept includes acting to help others.

In New Zealand, the first lockdown caused all business premises and operations to close with the exception of supermarkets, pharmacies and petrol stations (for the selling of petrol only). Other workers worked from home if possible; the government offered wage subsidy support to all employers who could show that the pandemic had resulted in a 30% decline in income. No domestic travel was allowed; people had to remain in their household ‘bubble’ and could walk to a nearby park or walk round their area to exercise. This meant that almost the whole country was at home for five weeks. Life became less complex and people could connect to each other and their surroundings (Boland & Dobson, 2020). Families spent extended periods of time together – there was no option to do otherwise. It is important to note at the same time that heightened levels of family violence also occurred during lockdown and that the experience was by no means positive for all (Every-Palmer et al., 2020; Kronast, 2020). However, lockdown experiences for many in New Zealand were widely reported to have been ones of stillness and quiet, family time and a reduction in stress.

In the absence of other differences between the two countries and communities, it is likely the enforced family proximity caused by the Level 4 lockdown which may be a significant factor why lockdown in New Zealand was assessed to be strongly positive for teachers, children and families.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations arising from this small comparative study. While the pandemic is still active in the world, it is possible that we may all face similar restrictions in the future. If we are able to learn from recent experiences, it would be wise.

1. New Zealand teachers appear to have supported more successfully. What experiences and/or approaches can be shared in this regard to support other colleagues if a similar situation were to occur in the future?
2. Australia teachers reported being better supported with funding and resources. What forms of support were effective? What can be learned from this?
3. Australia and New Zealand Steiner early childhood bodies both commissioned reports into the consequences of the pandemic restrictions on teachers, children and families. This creates a research-informed body of work which can guide future policies and actions. It would be of value if this was done in other countries. If a number of countries use the same research approach, data can be collected which is of value nationally, but is also able to be used to provide international comparisons like the current report.

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to thank all the early childhood teachers and managers who took the time to complete these surveys during what we acknowledge was a pressured time. Thanks also to AARSECE and Waekura for their support and for mailing out details of the project to its members.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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