# Responses to Covid-19 in Steiner Early Childhood Settings in Australia

## Report to the Australian Association of Steiner Early Childhood Education

Dr Neil Boland

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# Responses to Covid-19 restrictions in Steiner early childhood settings in Australia
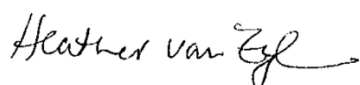
# Introduction

2020 has not been an easy year in Australia. It began with severe bush fires in many parts of the country which tragically cost many human lives and the lives of countless animals as well as laying waste to homes, communities and huge areas of country.

Not long after this, Australians began to hear of a growing coronavirus pandemic which we now know as Covid-19. Australian borders closed not non-residents on 20 March and on 21 March 'non-essential services' began to close across the country. Writing seven months later, it is clear that that consequences of this pandemic for young children, their families, communities and teachers are serious and will last for a long time to come.

The Australian Association of Rudolf Steiner Early Childhood Education (AARSECE) tried to support all Steiner early childhood education in Australia throughout this uncertain period, in order that the teachers in each could find their own best way. Drawing on some of the initial thinking and resources provided by the International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education (IASWECE), AARSECE members worked together closely to develop approaches to Covid-19 restrictions that placed the wellbeing of children at the centre of their response. This meant that AARSECE members chose not to focus on delivery of curriculum content but on encouraging parenting that supported children's wellbeing and resilience. They worked toward strengthening relationships and communication, and offered some insights into ways to accompany children and help them make sense of their experience, taking care not to add additional expectations on whānau which were unmanageable or added further stress to their lives.

Covid restrictions have affected different parts of Australia very differently. Similarly, every ECE community and every setting in Australia has had a different experience of the periods of lockdown and much information has been shared in meetings, over cups of tea, by phone or over social media. However, this information has remained largely anecdotal. To gain a fuller and more accurate picture of how the Australian Steiner early childhood movement has experienced the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, AARSECE commissioned the New Zealand Steiner specialist Dr Neil Boland to gather information and present it in a report which you are now reading. This report summarises responses gathered from Steiner early childhood teachers throughout Australia about pedagogical responses to the first lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and their experiences of the subsequent learning period. It explores if and how this continues to affect Steiner early childhood teachers and teachers' perceptions of its impact on children, families and communities.

The information was gathered during a five-week period August–September while some parts of the country were still in strict lockdown. As such, it is a snapshot of a period of time which has passed, and we are aware that stressors for many families have increased over time. Nonetheless, I believe it offers a valuable insight into the resilience and strength of the movement nationally.

*Heather van Zyl*

Heather van Zyl, on behalf of AARSECE. Australian Council Member of IASWECE

# Background

In early 2020, a novel coronavirus was reported in Wuhan, China which over the coming months spread throughout most countries in the world, including all parts of Australia. National responses to the virus differed greatly, but most countries brought in restrictions on movement and on gathering. In Australia, these impacted all educational institutions from playgroups to universities and affected the lives of children, teachers, their families and extended communities.

One of the features which has characterised the Covid pandemic in Australia is how differently it has affected different parts of the country, with 74% of the cases and 90% of the deaths occurring in Victoria (Department of Health, 2020).

Source: Department of Health, States & Territories Report 14/10/2020

| Jurisdiction | Total confirmed cases | New cases in last 24 hours | Deaths |
|---|---|---|---|
| Australia | 27,341 | 25 | 904 |
| ACT | 113 | 0 | 3 |
| NSW | 4,310 | 14 | 53 |
| NT | 33 | 0 | 0 |
| QLD | 1,161 | 0 | 6 |
| SA | 479 | 3 | 4 |
| TAS | 230 | 0 | 13 |
| VIC | 20,311 | 7 | 816 |
| WA | 704 | 1 | 9 |

**Table 1.** Incidence of Covid-19 in Australia (Department of Health, 2020)

Because of this uneven spread, the response to the pandemic has also varied between the different states and territories.

| Key stages of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia | |
|---|---|
| **25 January** | Australia reports its first case of Covid-19 |
| **21 March** | Non-essential services and many schools across Australia close from this date. Schools recommended to stay open, but children attend at parents' discretion<br>Responses and requirements differ from state to state |
| **10 May** | Easing of lockdown restrictions gradually introduced across Australia |
| **20 June** | Restrictions reinstated in the state of Victoria as new Covid clusters begin to be recorded, in an apparent 'second wave' of infection likely linked to hotel quarantine facilities |
| **9 July** | Second period of lockdown introduced for metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire for a minimum of six weeks. Schools and early childhood settings close |

| 17 August | NSW introduces a ban on singing and the use of wind instruments in educational establishments |
|---|---|
| 13 September | Victoria begins to come out of lockdown in a four-step plan |
| 5 October | Early childhood services in Victoria able to open with COVID-Safe plan |

**Table 2.** Key stages of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Australia

Unlike some countries, Australia did not 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 caused some confusion (McCulloch, 2020). Early childhood 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 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). 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 the early childhood institutions (Department of Education, 2020) a well as more general JobKeeper payments, but, 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.

While it is not yet clear what the overall effect of the pandemic restrictions will be for early childhood settings in Australia, including Steiner settings, it is likely that their effects will be felt for many years to come.

## Respondents and researcher

The respondents are all employed in Steiner early childhood settings in Australia. The invitation to participate was emailed to all settings by AARSECE, with a request that details be passed on to all early childhood settings, teachers and teaching assistants so that they could take part in the questionnaires if they wished.

Dr Neil Boland is senior lecturer at Auckland University of Technology and is a specialist in Steiner education and publishes widely on a range of topics to do with the education. He has recently published a report on the New Zealand Steiner early childhood response to the Covid-19 pandemic with Dr Anita Mortlock of Victoria University of Wellington (Boland & Mortlock, 2020).

## Context

The study takes place in the context of Steiner early childhood services. These centres use a holistic pedagogy emphasising child-directed play and practical activity (Nicol & Taplin, 2017). They are spread throughout Australia, both in urban and rural settings. Some settings are attached to schools and comprise multiple groups with a number of teachers; others are smaller, single-room settings.

The survey opened on 8 August, 2020 and was closed on 14 September. When the survey began, it was intended to keep it open for two weeks, but it was extended to allow for more responses to be gathered. This report documents responses gathered during this five-week period.

The lockdown period was often one of financial as well as social and professional strain for early childhood settings. The Australian government provided a range of financial support measures for early childhood services (Department of Education, 2020) yet there have been multiple news reports of the financial consequences of the pandemic to the early childhood sector (Duffy, 2020; McGowan, 2020). The questionnaires did not seek information on financial effects of the lockdown, though did ask for information about enquiries and enrolments.

There were regular informational bulletins from the Department of Education throughout the period (2020) as well as from state bodies, and information was shared by Steiner early childhood bodies worldwide (IASWECE, 2020a).

## Methodology

The data sought in this research is, to a degree, time sensitive. It needed to be gathered before teachers had 'forgotten' how lockdown 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. Given the finite number of Steiner early childhood teachers in Australia, the link to the questionnaires could be sent to them all.

- Two surveys were distributed:

  o In the first, the majority of questions were multiple choice and involved a Likert scale. This had the advantage of speed of response and also of scoring and analysis. Some items were grouped into a multi-item scale for ease of answering. These advantages were balanced by responses being less nuanced and less individual.

  o The second survey contained a number of open questions. These allowed for personal responses, which have been analysed thematically.

Though small in scale, the questionnaires involve mixed methods, being both quantitative (Likert scale questions, able to be numerically analysed) and qualitative (open-ended questions, analysed thematically) (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

## 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 AARSECE and there were several rounds of consultation with them regarding the form and content of the questionnaire. It was reviewed and approved by AUTEC, 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 given that some areas have had more than one lockdown and the situation looks as if it is going to continue for a while. A comparison study of this and New Zealand report (Boland & Mortlock, 2020) is forthcoming.

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.

# Findings

In all, 41 teachers responded to the first, and shorter, questionnaire which asked questions which could be analysed and presented graphically, and 22 to the second which consisted of open-ended questions. This second set of questions came from IASWECE and has been asked of Steiner early childhood settings in all IASWECE member countries.

## Quantitative questions

### 1: Where do you work? (count)
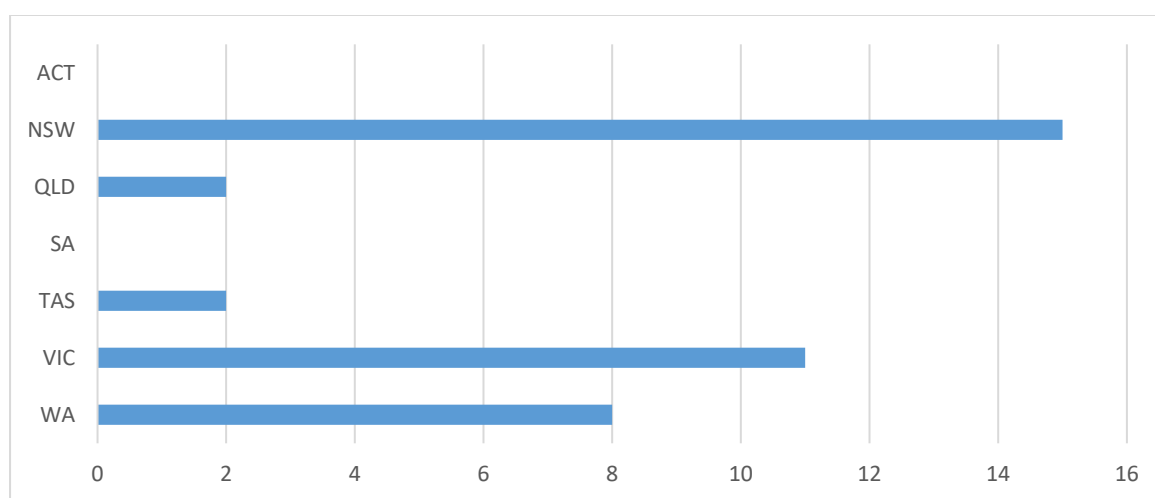


Analysis

Most responses came from NSW and VIC which also have the greatest number of settings (see below) and was to be expected. Responses from QLD were lower than predicted and from WA significantly higher.

| State | Number of members | | | | | | |
|-------|-------------------|-----|---|-----|---|-----|---|
| NSW | 12 | TAS | 2 | NT | 2 | | |
| VIC | 7 | WA | 2 | ACT | 1 | | |
| QLD | 4 | SA | 2 | | | | |

**Table 3.** Distribution of AARSECE member settings by state/territory (AARSECE, 2020)

## 2: The respondents (count)
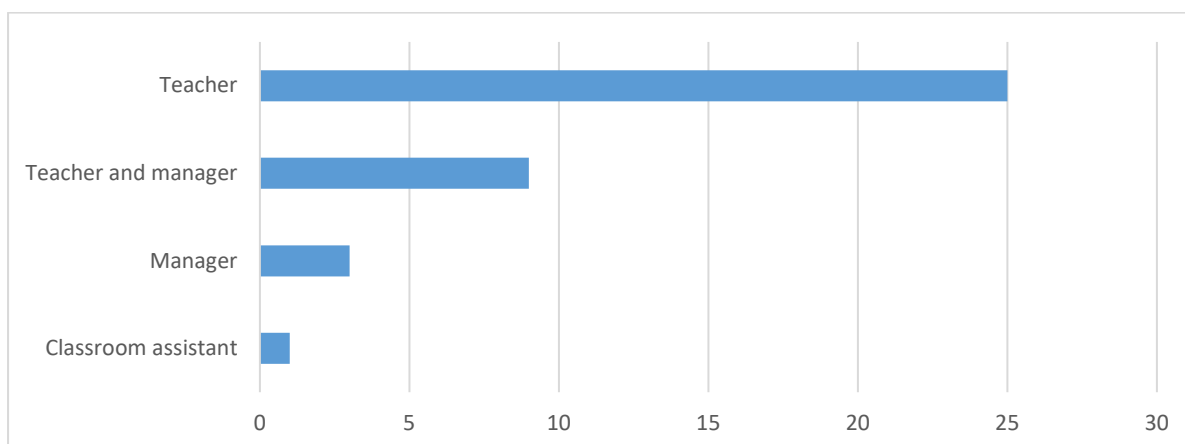


Analysis

The large majority of respondents work as teachers. This response ratio was expected. In addition, the questionnaire was answered by a number of those who are both teachers and managers, and just managers. What was surprising was that only one teaching assistant completed the questionnaire. Reasons for this are unclear. Three possibilities are that a) the questionnaires were not distributed to assistants (verbal enquires indicate that this was not the case), b) they were completed at staff meetings which the assistants did not attend, or c) the teaching assistants were for some reason not motivated to complete them.

## 3: The lockdown experience (%age respondents)
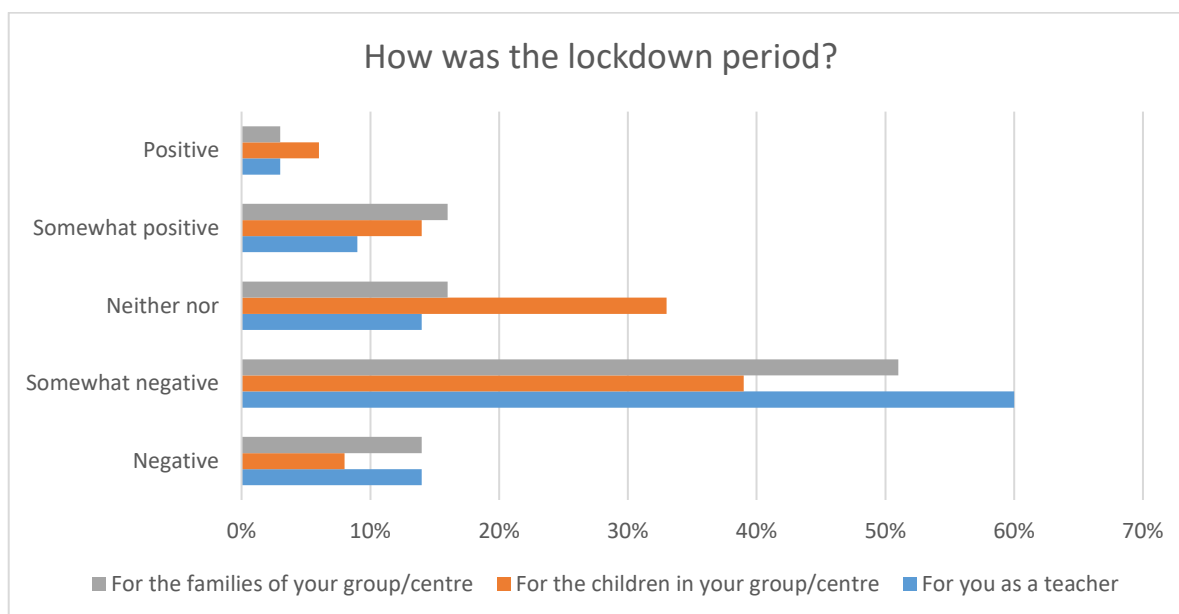


Analysis

From the data provided by teachers, it can be seen that the lockdown period overall was seen as more negative than positive for families, children and teachers alike. It was most negative for teachers (74%),

but also for families (65%) and children (57%). Only 3% of teachers rated lockdown positive for themselves or for families. Of these three groups, lockdown was perceived as most positive for children (20%), still significantly less than the responses seeing it as negative.

These responses also indicate positive sides to lockdown for both families and children, that families (especially fathers) enjoyed and appreciated having quality time to spend with children over an extended period (Williams, 2020) and that children also benefitted from having everyday stresses removed from their schedules (Fitzsimmons, 2020).

No socio-economic data was collected in the survey. It has been widely reported in the press that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in society with those better off managing well during lockdown and those less well-off being affected more negatively (Da(Ganie & Mukhter, 2020)vison, 2020; Gauthier et al., 2020). It is possible that the negative impressions of the lockdown period are, to a degree, a reflection of this.

Lastly, it is also possible that the more negative response is a consequence of a mixture of lockdown fatigue (Hickie, 2020) and the Australian government not following well-established principles of risk communication regarding the requirements of lockdown (Leask & Hooker, 2020). Initially, confusion was reported by educational centres when they had to decide themselves what to do (Karp & Davey, 2020; McCulloch, 2020), with some closing proactively and against official advice (Leask & Hooker, 2020) in order to minimise the risk for students and teachers.

## 4: Advice and support (%age respondents)
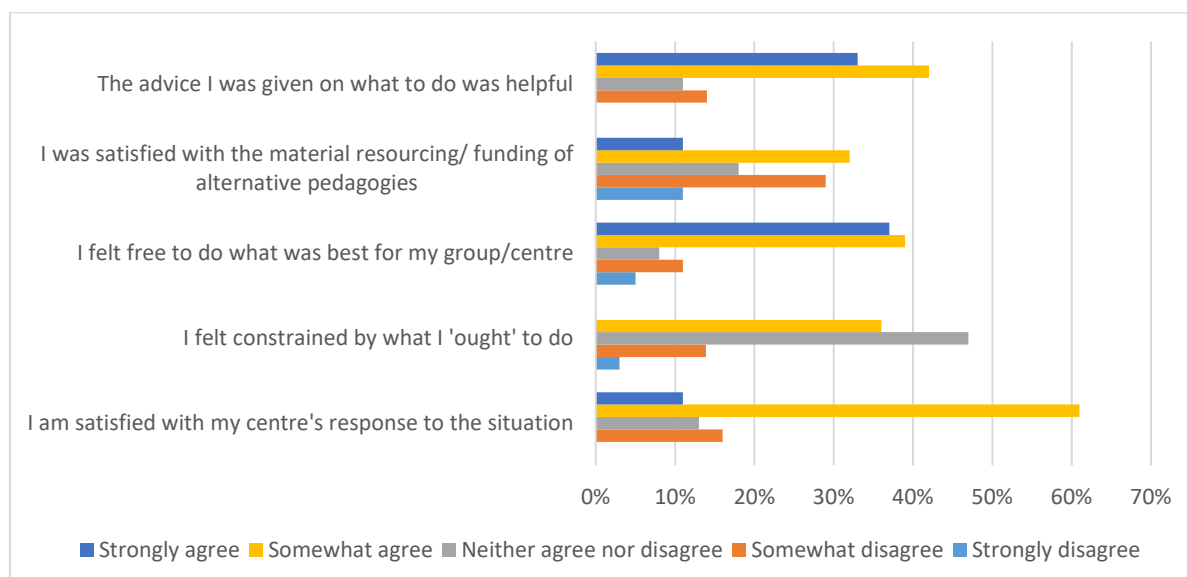


Analysis

The large majority of teachers rated the advice they received as positive 73% and expressed satisfaction with resources available and funding 50%.

The response is not so clear when considering their impressions of if they were in any way restricted in how they responded to the pandemic situation in the classroom. While 82% agreed that they felt free to do what was best for their group, 38% felt constrained to do what they 'ought' to do and 12%

had no opinion. It is possible that the phrasing or placing of these questions in the questionnaire led to these seemingly contradictory answers.

Most teachers are satisfied with how their setting responded to lockdown restrictions (72%). No teachers were strongly dissatisfied.

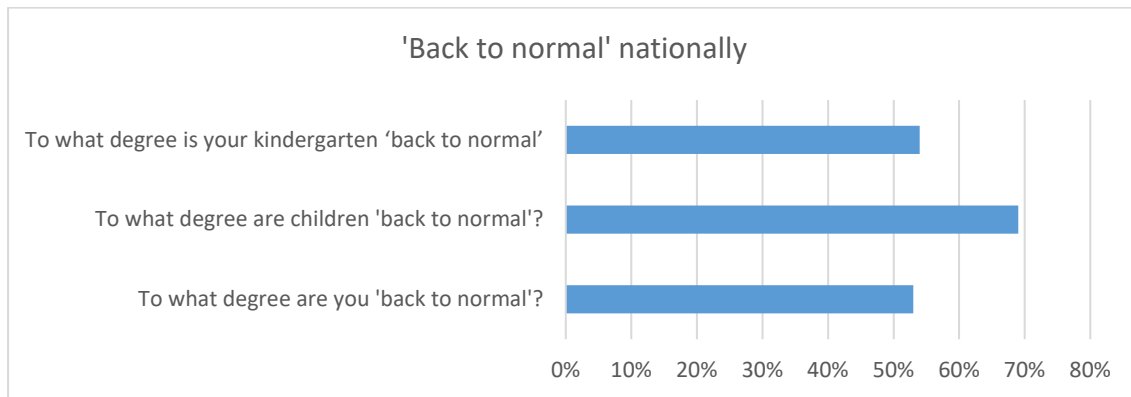## 5: The situation after lockdown (count)

When the children returned, which of these did you observe?

| Observation | Count |
|---|---|
| 1. Children happy to be back | 36 |
| 2. Teachers happy to be back | 26 |
| 3. Parents happy for children to be back | 34 |
| 4. Children anxious | 10 |
| 5. Parents anxious | 15 |
| 6. Teachers anxious | 13 |
| Increased antisocial behaviour (chldn) | 3 |
| 8. Children's play the same | 18 |
| 9. Children's play less free | 3 |
| 10. Children's play more free | 6 |
| 11. Children attending kdgn less frequently | 8 |
| 12. Parent/teacher relationship the same | 13 |
| 13. Parent/teacher relationship improved | 14 |
| 14. Parent/teacher relationship less close | 10 |
| 15. Children needing less structure | 2 |
| 16. Parents more concerned about health and safety… | 11 |

Analysis

It is clear that one of the chief feelings about early childhood settings returning after the lockdown was of happiness. Children were most happy to be back (36/41 responses), followed by parents happy to be able to send their children back (34/41) with fewer but still most teachers happy to be back (25/41).

There were noticeable levels of anxiety at the move, with parents the most anxious (15/41), followed by teachers (13/41) and children (10/41). 11 teacher reported that parents were more concerned about health and safety polities than before the lockdown. There was little antisocial behaviour reported and most teachers (18 of the 27 who responded to this section) thought that children's play was more or less the same as before, with a majority thinking it was more free than less, and benefitted slightly from being having less structure.

Regarding the parent/teacher relationship, roughly the same numbers of correspondents thought it was about the same (13), as thought it was better (14) or worse (10).

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## 6: Getting back to normal (%age respondents)



### 'Back to normal' nationally

Analysis

When considered as a national picture, children were reported to be the most 'back to normal' following their return (69%) with kindergartens (54%) and teachers (53%) almost the same.

However, the questionnaire was open during a period when at least Victoria was in lockdown, with all educational facilities closed. This undoubtedly affected responses to this question. A state-by-state breakdown shows this clearly.



### By state
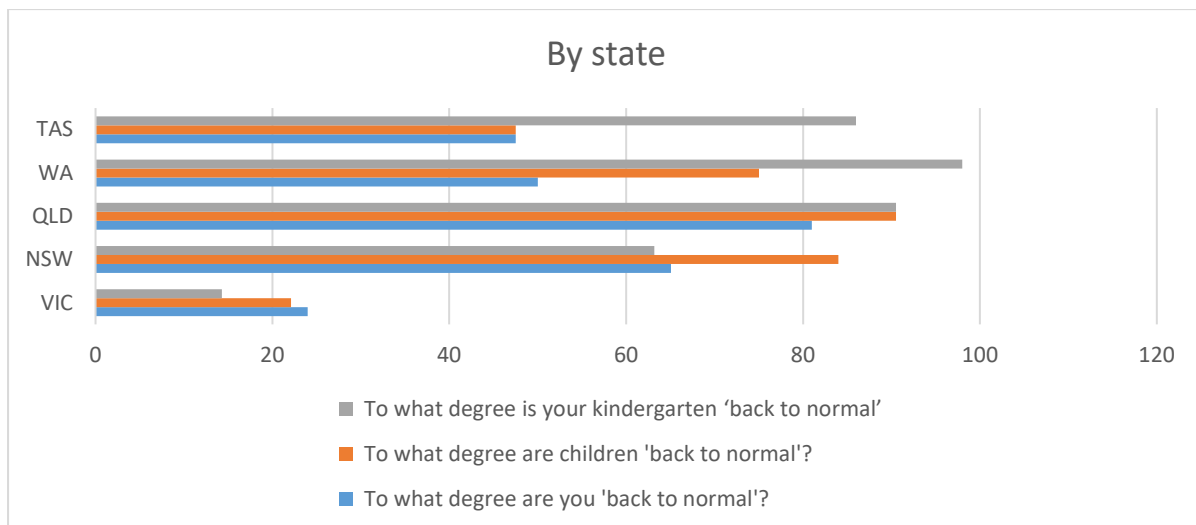
There is a clear and understandable correlation between lockdown restrictions and 'back to normality'. Western Australian settings were almost entirely back to normal, with Queensland and Tasmania not far behind. Interestingly, teachers in Western Australia and Tasmania are noticeably slower to return to normal, as are children in Western Australia. These noticeable differences are being explored in a forthcoming comparative study (Boland, forthcoming).

## 7: To what degree do you consider your lockdown pedagogies innovative? (%age)

62% of respondents considered the pedagogies chosen by their settings during lockdown to be innovative.

**To what degree do you consider your lockdown pedagogies innovative?**

| State | Value |
|-------|-------|
| TAS | 36 |
| WA | 90 |
| QLD | 76 |
| NSW | 57 |
| VIC | 59 |
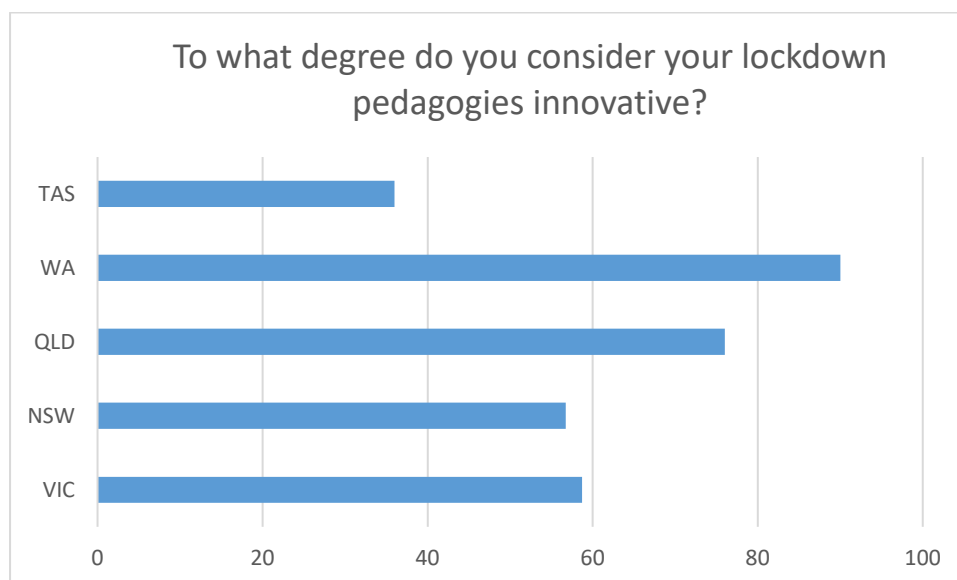
## 8: Therapy provision

Of the twelve teachers who replied to this question, seven reported the use of therapeutic stories, in particular *The Little Gnome Who Had to Stay Home* by Susan Perrow. One respondent mentioned a story about 'Bugs are our friends' to help balance a fear of 'bugs' some children had developed. (It is unclear –possibly also in the children's minds – whether these are viral 'bugs' or insects.)

One respondent mentioned eurythmy therapy and another administering footbaths as anthroposophical nursing therapy.

Analysis

Therapeutic story telling is a form of narrative sometimes practised in Steiner early childhood settings in which situations are expressed metaphorically in story form to make a strong connection with the inner reality or the child. Such narratives are usually told by a trusted and respected individual (see Mihić et al., 2017; Perrow, 2012). The story mentioned was *The little gnome who had to stay home* (Perrow, 2020).

Eurythmy is a form of movement initiated by Rudolf Steiner which can be used as "a comprehensive movement therapy aiming to restore a state of health and wellbeing to all aspects of our being" (Eurythmy Therapy Association, 2020). Medical research has indicated it can be helpful for treating anxiety (Kienle et al., 2011).

Anthroposophical nursing therapies are practised by trained nurse practitioners in frequently involve the use of wraps, compresses, baths, massages and oilings to strengthen the self-healing forces of the body (Arman et al., 2008).

Other comments given by participants detailed wholesome activities such as art, encouraging play, connecting to nature, speaking clearly to counter speech regression due to raised TV exposure and

distributing information to parents. Though worthwhile, these do not fall under the umbrella of therapy.

9: Enrolments and enquiries (count)
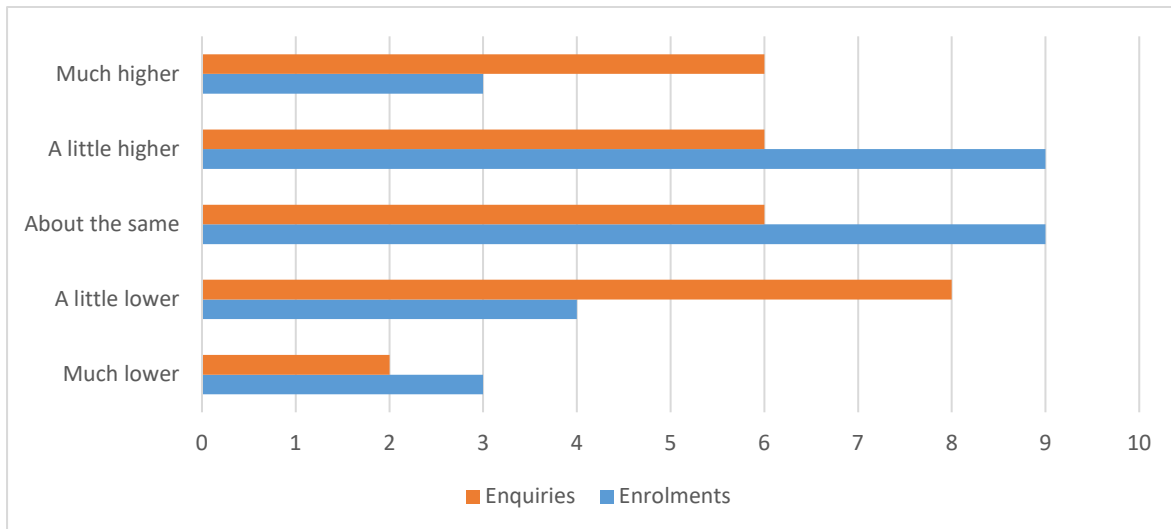


Analysis

A slight increase in enquiries and enrolments is evident.

## Qualitative questions

As well as a set of quantitative questions, early childhood teachers were asked to respond to a set of open questions for qualitative analysis. These included the questions sent to Steiner early childhood settings worldwide from IASWECE, the International Association of Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education.

These questions were set both to kindergartens, who traditionally have children aged three to six years old, and those settings who work with children from birth to three years old. Kindergarten teachers answered individually while play group responses were sent by five state representatives, speaking for the play group teachers in their state. For this reason, the two sets of responses are handled separately below.

## 10: Where do you work? (count)



### State

| State | Count |
|-------|-------|
| WA | 1 |
| QLD | 2 |
| NSW | 7 |
| VIC | 9 |
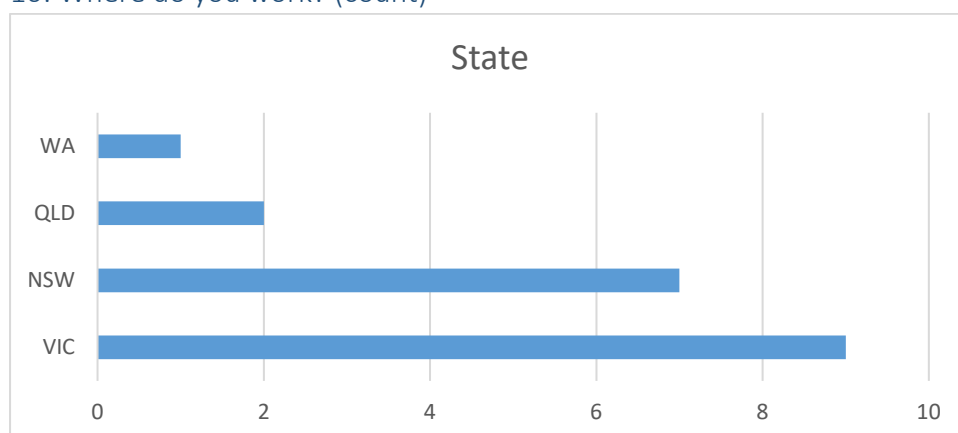
Analysis

This distribution of responses follows the distribution of early childhood settings in Australia quite closely (see page 7). It is also possible that Victoria is better represented because of the lockdown restrictions in place in the state at the time of answering.

## Kindergartner responses

## 11: Have there been positives to lockdown for your centre or for you personally?

39% of respondents reported benefits of Covid-19 restrictions for deepening relationships, self-reflection, slowing down, supporting each other.

> *Really enjoyed being at home more with family, life became more routine and simple.*

> *Yes, it has been a time to reflect and change ways of doing things, e.g. now we have indoor/outdoor play as a choice at the same time for children which has not only allowed better social distancing but it has enabled much richer play and meets children's needs better*

> *Some of the children are coming less days so the children have busy lives after parents sorting out priorities having enjoyed being at home more. This left spaces for the children on the waiting list to attend.*

These observations have much in common with other reported responses to lockdown, that the simplification of life and greater time for families to spend time together has been strongly beneficial (for those in adequate living situations).

25% of respondents reported an increase of parental appreciation of teachers and engagement with Steiner curriculum through home learning support.

> *We were able to showcase our curriculum and parents had a greater appreciation of the work of teachers and the school.*

15% of respondents reported an increase in enrolments and attendance at sessions due to the Covid-19 situation. Some centres were able to remain open during restrictions; others offered extra sessions on reopening after restrictions were lifted.

Two respondents reported gains in child independence at centres due to parents dropping off at gate and social distancing opening up larger play areas within centres.

> …A positive about the continuing restrictions have been the fact that the parents have to leave their child at the gate and the children have learnt to be very independent coming across the playground by themselves.

Two respondents reported gains were made due to having more time to catch up on administration, maintenance, research, and creative projects.

> … (I was able to) catch up with lots of those tasks you never have time to do. For example, I completed a research on indigenous culture in my programme. I made lots of toys for the room and gifts for the future.

A further two respondents reported a greater appreciation of social contact and freedom to 'get out' after restrictions.

Lastly, one respondent reported no positives as they had lost job due to Covid.

## 12: Have you observed any changes in the children?

42% of respondents reported that overall children were unsettled, stressed or anxious.

> Took much longer for children to settle back into play that was consistent and not just silly.

> We are currently in lockdown but during our short time with them they were out of rhythm and it was hard to bring them back into being in a held space. A few were anxious and talking about Covid

> …The ones who had seen things in the news and from their parents seemed more anxious and affected. The children's play seemed bigger, more destructive and more emotionally driven. It has taken a whole term for things to settle down. There was a lot more TV talk and even [sic] talk of computer games…

31% of respondents hadn't seen their children yet or did not respond.

10% of respondents reported little or no change

> No, they are as happy, and play filled as ever.

10% of respondents reported increased independence or resilience in children (see page 15).



**Image 1.** Word frequency in the responses to the question *Have you observed any changes in the children?*

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## 13: Have you noticed any changes in your community regarding the parenting of children?

31% respondents reported no changes or have not been able to observe parenting, while 21% reported that parents were experiencing increased stress, additional challenges with children and/or had heightened anxieties.

> *Most parents find the 4-5 year old child challenging to parent and rely on the kindergarten year for advice and ideas for rhythm.*

> *There is a heightened sense of anxiety, a general alertness to uncertainty i.e. needing to be prepared to change or adapt. The relaxedness of life going on as usual has changed.*

10% of respondents reported a range of changes from positive changes from children having a *daily* rhythm at home, to some negative changes of increased screen time.

> *Some parents have noticed the positivity in implementing the daily rhythm at home. However, in many families, screen times increased.*

10% of respondents reported on improved transitions and greater child independence.

10% of respondents reported that parents were more engaged and aware of the Steiner programme from having implemented it at home

> *Through the lockdown activities and rhythm offered some families took this into their homes and have maintained this. Families also commented on being more aware of what we do in kindergarten.*

> *Some parents have become very engaged with their children and the program, others have just decided to play with their children*

Additional comments included:

> *Community had increased happiness in reconnecting with the centre after restrictions*

> *Parents had a greater focus on hygiene*

> *Community was engaging in more nature play.*



**Image 2.** Word frequency in the responses to the question *Have you noticed any changes in your community regarding the parenting of children?*

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## 14: What needs is this situation highlighting?

Almost 50% of respondents highlighted the need of families and communities for connection and support.

> *Regular rhythm and play opportunities. parents being able to have their child cared for and educated so that they can have a break and deal with their own stress away from their children*

> *A lack of boundaries and rhythm in some families. The need for parents to have support to create and maintain these and families need support in general. Meet various needs of the community. Families with only one child have found this difficult from lack of child play / socialising.*

26 % highlighted the need for greater parent education / guidance

> *For playgroup, I believe that producing newsletters with resources and article is very important to keep the community connected and also is an opportunity to increase parent education and to bring awareness to what Steiner education offers.*

> *In this situation I believe that Parents need to be really conscious about protecting the children from 'Virus information'.*

10% (2 of 19) respondents highlighted the need for children to have less screen time

Outlier: The need to reassure families that centres are safe and hygienic places.

## 15: What positive aspects you can see in relation to this situation?

11 of 19 of respondents (58%) identified a slower pace of life, which has given opportunity for deeper relationships and for self-reflection.

> *Parents are spending more time at home with the children and have slowed life down.*

> *The very small number of vulnerable children still attending kinder have benefited from the small group through building relationships and positive participation.*

> *It has been a time to reflect on our practices and re-evaluate and to implement change.*

> *We are all connecting on a daily basis.*

26% of respondents report that parents have a greater appreciation of teachers and the Steiner programme

> *Some parents seem to understand better what we are doing.*

> *Children are spending more time with parents; parents have more understanding of Steiner Education*

11% reported that children have gained greater independence and parents are more "hands-off" compared to before the pandemic – itself perhaps because of greater time spent as a family unit.

> *The children have gained added independence (6 year olds enjoy this challenge). Because parents are spending less time on campus there seem to me to be fewer complaints about social dynamics, supervision after school etc. The parents seem to have accepted that they are not involved in the school day and with this has come less need to give input. I think this is generally a positive.*

One respondent identified that trying new technology has been positive.

> *New approaches have to be tried e.g. zoom class meetings, weekly parenting support.*

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## 16: What are your burning issues?

9 of 19 respondents (47%) identified the concerns about the lack of social connection, activities and support or limitations due to covid-19 restrictions

> *Bring the children back to school / lack of socialising during lockdown particularly for only children.*

> *Not being allowed to hold our Festivals with the parents, and not being allowed to sing with the children.*

> *The very new parents of Kindergarten haven't had much chance to connect with the community.*

26% had no burning issues / did not provide a response.

Three respondents (16%) reported financial concerns, uncertainty at the possibility of a second lockdown or uncertainty of when their state centres can reopen.

> *There had been no direct support to playgroups in terms of ideas as far as I know.*

> *Anxiety at the possible prospect of having to go back into isolation delivering a remote learning situation.*

One respondent was concerned about parents supporting centre health and safety.

> *Parents supporting us with keeping sick children at home, and testing for Covid and not loitering at pick up time with other parents*

## 17: How can we at AARSECE help? (Be as concrete as possible)

6 of 19 participants gave no response.

Five respondents requested that AARSECE share what other centres had done so people could benefit from others' experiences. Four asked for increased provision of resources and online support for families and settings during periods of pandemic restriction. The same number specified holding regional meetings as a way to support both families and early childhood settings.

One respondent identified the provision of mentoring and the possibility to phone AARSECE representatives for support, in addition to the online support and resources made available.

One respondent suggested that AARSECE act as advocate to bring children back to the classroom, especially in early childhood.

## 18: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Ten of 19 participants did not respond to this question.

Two expressed thanks for collecting this data and providing the opportunity to share reflections.

Two respondents expressed upset and disagreement with lockdown restrictions being imposed, in particular regarding the restrictions on singing (NSW Government, 2020) at early childhood settings in their state.

## Playgroup responses

As well as responses from early childhood settings (usually for children aged from three to six), there were also five responses from play centre teachers (who look care for children from birth to age three). The questions they answered were those sent out directly by IASWECE and so are analysed here separately. There were five responses in all: two from New South Wales, and one each from Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

### 19: How are you facing this time in your country?

All five play group teachers identified negative emotions of sadness, disillusionment, isolation, uncertainty and anxiety in themselves and/or their communities as an impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

> *Soon before we terminated playgroup there was apparent anxiety…*

> *For families in our playgroup it has been very difficult to be without the ongoing nourishment and support they find with each other in the community setting.*

Three identified positive aspects of the lockdown restrictions for themselves or their communities:

> *Personally, the situation has presented an opportunity to go on 'retreat' – to have time out, to reflect and really slow down.*

Two responded that they had employed new technologies to connect with families and support learning practices at home.

> *I chose to offer courses online and sessions online via zoom. My learning curve with Zoom was very steep… I was able to connect with and support parents in the evenings through this medium.*

> *On requests from families I made a short YouTube clip of our circle songs so they could learn the songs to sing to their children.*

One participant identified their community was divided in their reactions to Covid-19 and that some parents were "defiant" about aspects of the situation.

> *Before we finished school in Term 1 the issue was already causing some division in the conversation between parents. Some were fearful and others almost defiant.*

### 20: Have you noticed any changes in your community related to the way young children are being cared for?

Four of the five participants noticed that the biggest change for children was the shift to being cared for solely at home. The same ratio noticed a range of experiences as a result of the change, some very positive, some negative, but most somewhere in the middle.

> *I feel that there is a group of families who have really embraced this inward turning and it has met a great need in them for stillness and family connection. There is also a group of families for whom this is a time of huge stress and trauma and struggle. The bulk of my families are in the middle and swing between the two ends at times.*

*Some families have indicated they have found this time to be a lovely opportunity to slow down (no morning rush out the door, traffic etc.), and to bring a greater sense of 'homeliness' in the home. On the other hand they are sorely missing the sense of community and the nourishment they find at playgroup. Some have indicated they have found this time to be stressful, particularly around the uncertainties C19 has presented and adapting to changes.*

One participant reporting that children had more time with their fathers – a change that resulted in greater appreciation of at-home care work and children engaging in a greater range of activities.

Another participant reported growing use of digital technology to support child-care.

*Growing reliance on talking books, media. Belief in positives of 'lovely Waldorf style' media and talking books. Provision of online Waldorf circles for playgroup, etc.*

## 21: What are the needs that this situation is bringing to us?

Four participants identified the need for families, and in some cases themselves, to experience social connection with their playgroup community. One highlights what has been widely reported elsewhere (Flack et al., 2020) that the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified situations already existing in communities, with those doing well managing the situation without many problems while others face significant hardships.

*I think loneliness, support and connection are the biggest struggles for parents. To be honest these are the same struggles pre covid-19 **however they are amplified now**. I think the connection through the courses and sessions I have run has been wonderful for my community and those others who have chosen to join as well. It has enabled parents to put into words what they are feeling and to connect and grow around it. (Emphasis added,)*

*Through the last few months there has been a real impact of the connection between households and although the connections are slowly regathering there is a healing and re0bonding that is needed… Festivals and family catch ups will help building these bonds and connectedness within the community.*

*How to continue to feel connected to families while not being physically present. How to deal with loneliness, theirs and ours!*

One respondent identified the need to provide support for learning at home.

*How to provide wholesome resources and activities. Parents expressed concrete need for a stronger rhythm in their day.*

Another identified health considerations as increasingly important – the need to stay isolated, socially distant, maintaining good hygiene practices and supporting the immune system. Another participant mentioned the practical need for a reliable income stream to for playgroup to be viable. This was the only mention of centre or teacher finances in the replies.

## 22: What are the challenges?

Four participants report challenges of parental stress, fears and sense of being overwhelmed.

> *Families having more pressure put onto them and so puts more strain on the family unity and relationships within the family.*

> *Mothers also working from home have reported the challenge of their workplace being understanding that the mothers are trying to balance childcare/parenting with work. The mothers are self-disciplining to get enough sleep/ rest in the night so that they are better able to respond to the children's needs and also perform their work functions.*

Three participants identified the barriers to face-to-face meeting as a challenge.

> *It is our intent to continue supporting the families in the many ways that are possible as the 'barriers to meeting' continues.*

> *Not being able to have playgroups or playdates have restricted some families to be able to be exposed to positive and supportive guidance and inspiration.*

> *How do we maintain a sense of community now?*

Two identified the challenge of children experiencing increased exposure to digital media and the consequences of this heightened exposure.

> *Space for processing changes – rise in access to media / talking books / inside time / etc.*

> *Some families may have needed more television or other technology to entertain their children and find quiet time as they were unable to catch up with friends, may have been conflict in the family... Music and activity classes also went online to zoom and so children were having extra screen time catching up with their activities.*

One of the five participants identified the challenge of managing the transition back to playgroup;

> *Establishing new ways to hold playgroup under new conditions.*

## 23: Can you already detect any kind of traumas in the children?

This question was suggested by IASWECE. It was changed in the kindergarten survey before it was sent off to ethics approval (to *Have you observed any changes in the children?*) as it contains an implicit suggestion of trauma being present and could be classed as a leading question (Scott & Steward, 2018).

Two participants were not able to report trauma as they had not observed any.

Two participants said that some parents had reported stress behaviours in children, such as heightened anxiety and regressions in behaviour, or suspected some latent trauma.

> *I have not been seeing any children. From talking with parents some say their children are 'unaffected'; others talk of a rise in anxiety.*

> *There is concern from parents for children 'regressing' socially; reverting to nappies after having previously been toilet trained; not wanting to go out.*

## 24: What are the positive aspects you can see in relation to this new situation?

All participants reported a slower pace of life for families as a positive aspect.

> *Less doing, more being. The pace of life has slowed down. The opportunity for deepening the home-life – more meaningful time, co-operation among family members and time for domestic activities, living and playing together, Parents take a more pro-active role in parenting their children rather than outsourcing care.*

> *Parents have been grateful for the 'slowing down'. They have appreciated the lack of outer activities and they have embraced 'cocooning'.*

One reported that lockdown presented an opportunity for parents' personal growth

> *[Positives include] Families who are really embracing a rhythmic day at home. Parents who have really embraced inner work and self-education.*

Another participant reported a greater awareness of how to stay healthy as a significant positive outcome of the pandemic.

> *A heightened awareness of healthy hygiene. Looking after self and each other during sickness by staying at home.*

## 25: What are the burning issues in your country?

Participants noted a range of burning issues for Australia. Two commented on the economy.

> *Economy effects from Covid-19. Buying local and within Australia and supportive local businesses and makers.*

> *Adequate, affordable housing. An obsession with doing/having, rushing ... the perceived need to be a cog in the wheel of the economy.*

Another two identified the prospect of a compulsory vaccine as an issue as well as access to affordable health care.

> *Our school community watch vaccine developments closely so some angst about this being another mandatory vaccine.*

> *Affordable alternative therapies and compulsory vaccination*

The issue of vaccination can be polarising, with parents holding strong views for and against. There is a historically low ratio of children being vaccinated against childhood illnesses in Steiner settings both in Australia and overseas (Byström et al.; Rozbroj et al., 2020; Sobo, 2016; Ward et al., 2017; Wiley et al., 2020). In particular, Sobo (2015) highlights the possibility that this reticence to vaccinate is "socially cultivated" within Steiner communities. It is worth considering the concerns expressed by participants here in conjunction with the public statement issued by the Medical Section on vaccination from the point of view of anthroposophical medicine (Medical Section at the Goetheanum, 2019).

One teacher commented on a lack of confidence in what the future might bring as a burning issue,

> *Lack of confidence in the future - how will things roll out and with what impact?*

Lastly, one participant identified a range of political, social and environmental issues, touching on the 5G conspiracy theory which has been promoted widely on Facebook (Bruns et al., 2020), recalling the

destructive wild fires which ravaged Australia just before the virus became established and the importance of good leadership.

*5G technology, technology use with children; a new generation of higher technology use in schools and households.*

*Impacts of environmental change with communities, e.g. fires, floods, heat and how the leaders react to these.*

She also touched on the fact that the pandemic affects the marginalised in society more harshly and has been shown to intensify inequality in Australia and overseas (Davison, 2020; Flack et al., 2020; Gauthier et al., 2020) –

*Equal rights, refugees, reconciliation.*

## Summary

From the responses to these questionnaires, a number of key points emerge.

The majority of teachers were satisfied or strongly satisfied by their setting's response to the Covid restrictions and felt pedagogically free to do what was necessary for the children in their group. Advice given was helpful and teachers mentioned appreciating and valuing time at home with their own families and how life became simpler and allowed more time for reflection. The benefits of children spending time at home with their parents and enjoying a slower pace of life is mentioned multiple times in the second questionnaire. Parents' experience of connecting with teachers to support their children's home learning has tended to foster a greater appreciation for the work of the teachers do. Some parents appear to have engaged more deeply with the curriculum and the Steiner approach at home.

Though time at home with families was valued, the large majority of teachers reported that the lockdown periods themselves were negative for themselves as teachers, for children and for parents. Once the restrictions were lifted and teaching resumed, life for teachers, children and parents appeared to get back to normal quite quickly. A number of written responses referred briefly to the destructive bush fires of the 2019-2020 bush fire season which affected the east coast of Australia and Victoria especially severely. The fact that this bush fire period segued almost directly into the Covid pandemic will almost certainly have affected the resilience of many in Australia.

Almost half of the participants report that children have been increasingly unsettled, stressed or anxious as a result of the covid-19 situation, and almost half have concerns about the lack of social connection, and limitation on activities and support due to covid-19 restrictions. A quarter of participants highlighted the need for greater parent education / guidance to help support their children's learning at home.

Many respondents have not been able to observe changes in parenting or have not noticed change. Those that report changes, see a range of positive and negative parenting experiences. Some concern was expressed about the impact of increased screen time on children, and a number of teachers have financial concerns for their centres, feel uncertain for when their state centres can reopen, or feel uncertain at the possibility of a second lockdown.

## Conclusion

I hope that this report gives an insight into how Steiner early childhood settings in Australia have been affected by and have managed consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Though the lockdown periods have been tough on many associated with Steiner early childhood settings in Australia, as a researcher, one of the most striking features is the earnestness of the respondents which comes through the report and the resilience, commitment and dedication which they show to their students and communities.

This report is a snapshot of a window of time August–September 2020. The pandemic looks to be with us all for a long time to come. It will undoubtedly continue to have financial, educational, individual and societal consequences which can only be guessed at. I hope that there will be aspects of this report which will help inform local or national planning and so support and benefit Steiner early childhood education in Australia into the future.

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## Correspondence

All correspondence regarding this report should be directed to Dr Neil Boland neil.boland@aut.ac.nz

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