

On Medical Experts' Advice On Schools

Koji Tanaka

School of Philosophy
Research School of Social Sciences
Australian National University
Koji.Tanaka@anu.edu.au

Draft of 7 May 2020
Please don't quote or distribute

The 2019-2020 bushfires made us realise the importance of taking *experts' advice* seriously. We were told retrospectively that Fire Departments in Australia were raising warning of the danger that the 2019-2020 summer would bring. Their experts' advice, however, wasn't taken seriously by politicians nor by the media. The media reported only retrospectively that the NSW government did not only prepare for the possible bushfires but, in fact, withdrew some of the funding to their Fire Department. Politicians are, perhaps, not the only ones to be blamed. Media could have played a key role and raised an urgent warning to the public. To be honest, though, even if politicians and/or media did raise the possibility of huge bushfires, such a news would have stayed in people's consciousness only for a very short period of time and after a day or two, it would all be forgotten.

3-4 months have passed and things have changed dramatically. The events of the 2019-2020 summer are now long forgotten. We have a medical situation, a world-wide pandemic to be precise. COVID-19 (or Coronavirus) has infected 3,818,779 people and killed 264,810 people worldwide at the time of writing (according to worldmeter (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>)). One thing that has changed since the time of bushfires is that politicians, media and the public are now glued to the medical experts' advice.

One advice medical experts are giving consistently is that schools are safe. Since the beginning of the pandemic, medical experts have told us that schools are safe. Different politicians reacted differently to this advice. Federal politicians, especially the Prime Minister Scot Morrison, have taken this advice to mean that schools should remain open. Their stance may be in response to the economic fallout that the closure of schools may bring. If kids have to stay home, their parents would have to stay home too. Working from home is not much of a problem when you do not have any kids. When you have kids, especially when you have to home-school them, that's a totally different proposition. It is a miracle if any work gets done during the day. And good luck trying to do any work after home-schooling and parenting your kids all day. So if we want to have any kind of productivity up and get the economy going somehow, the closure of schools is

an obstacle for achieving that, so the politicians seem to argue.

However, Australia's states' politicians took a different approach. Despite the medical experts' advice, they moved all teaching online. Each state implemented their own strategy but, by and large, students were urged to stay home and parents were asked to home-school them by helping their study. Given that the states effectively 'closed' schools, they now have to come up with a strategy to reopen them. Federal government's voice is finally going through to the states' governments and most states (except Victoria) now have plans to reopen schools in near future if not already. It may be the federal government's push that has finally convinced the states' government to reopen schools. But it's really the medical experts' advice that is finally getting the attention of the state governments who have the jurisdictions over schools.

The medical experts' advice has been that schools are safe. This advice was in place at the beginning of the pandemic and it has not changed as medical experts are keen to emphasise. The argument and reasoning behind their advice have not changed either. Medical experts have presented the same argument throughout this time. I am not a medical or health expert. So I can't say whether their advice withstand medical and health science's scrutiny. But, as a logician, I am an expert on evaluating arguments. How do medical experts' argument for their advice fare from a logician's perspective? I have to say that their argument as they present it to the public for their advice is rather poor as it is fallacious.

In summary form, medical experts present the following argument to justify their advice::

Premise: There is no evidence that kids transmit COVID-19.

Conclusion: Schools are safe.

Premise is the reason for the conclusion and the conclusion is what medical experts want us to believe.

To evaluate an argument, we have to examine two things: the truth of the premise(s) and the support the premise(s) may have for the conclusion. The latter is often expressed as the preservation of truth from the premise(s) to the conclusion. If any of the premises is false or not true, the argument is said to be *unsound*. If the premises do not support the conclusion (if the truth of the premises does not guarantee the truth of the conclusion), the argument is said to be *invalid*. Medical experts' argument is both unsound and invalid.

First, about the premise. I have read many articles that claim that kids transmit the virus. The symptoms are often described as mild, milder than those of adults; nevertheless those articles suggest that kids are not immune from being infected and transmitting the virus. I am not sure to what extent the premise of the argument is true. But I am not a medical expert. So I don't pass any judgement on

this. However, in response to a question about the COVID-19 outbreak at Marist College in Auckland which had 91 confirmed cases (****to be checked****), Deputy Medical Officer Nick Coatsworth claimed on ABC's Q+A (aired ****) that he did not know much about the case. Interestingly, he then went on to claim that Australia's medical experts' advice is based on the studies conducted nationally. In particular, there was a school which had 9 confirmed cases and only 2 cases could be traced to kids' transmission (****to be checked****).

This highlights two things. (1) A school environment does not necessarily cultivate COVID-19. This is what Dr. Coatsworth emphasised and medical experts in the country seem to be focusing on. But it also suggests something else: (2) kids do get infected and transmit the virus. The probability may be low; yet, it doesn't rule out the possibility and, indeed, it demonstrates such possibility. If this is right, the premise of the argument can't be true. The truth of the premise is ruled out by their own claim.

Second, even if the premise were true (and so we accepted the premise as it is stated), the conclusion does not follow. All medical experts are entitled to conclude for the consideration of the argument's validity is that there is no evidence that outbreaks would occur in schools. But the fact that there is *no* evidence does not entail that there *is* evidence of outbreaks *not* occurring in schools. Where you put 'not' is very important and putting it in a wrong place results in an invalid argument. So the premise of the argument does not support the truth of the conclusion. The medical experts' argument is invalid.

Medical experts tend to provide their advice in the context of responding to questions about the *possibility* of transmission or outbreak in schools as teachers and parents are concerned about the possibility of being infected. Somehow, they want to rule out such possibility. But they just can't do this. All they can do is to put their advice in terms of probability and claim that the risk of transmission in schools is low. (I believe WHO make such a claim.) If they put it like that, though, whether or not the risk is low enough to reopen schools can't just be a matter of medical science since individuals have all kinds of considerations they need to take into account in order to assess whether the risk is low *enough*.

To be clear, I am actually in favour of reopening schools. As an academic, I believe in the value of education. And I have always emphasised the importance of face-to-face teaching. Online teaching can supplement face-to-face teaching but can never replace it. But I can also see that the anxiety people have is legitimate and no one should be able to silence them. This is so especially when the reason given for medical experts' advice, the driving force behind the whole conversation, does not support the advice. We need to approach the reopening of schools differently.