

**It's ok to cry wolf if the wolf is at the door: A rejoinder to Tom Sticht**

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I am writing to respond to opinions voiced by Tom Sticht in "**ALL Wrong Again! Can Adult Literacy Assessments Be Fixed?**" published on May 17, 2005 on the NALD website.

I do so somewhat reluctantly because I have considerable respect for Tom's contribution to the literacy field. In this case, however, he does injustice to the governments that have financed the ALL study, the national teams that devoted their lives to implementing it, to science and, worst of all, to the millions of adults with limited reading skills who could benefit from government attention to their plight.

I would like to begin by pointing out that the study is a collaborative effort that has involved a large team of international experts drawn from a very wide range of countries. The procedures employed in the study, and the inferences drawn from them, were subjected to intense scrutiny by some of the world's best technicians and policy makers in a range of related domains: psychometrics, assessment design, quality assurance and statistical analysis. 30 countries made an informed and studied decision to field the IALS and ALL studies. Tom seems to imply that they all fell off the proverbial turnip truck, that they spent millions of dollars each on something deeply flawed. I think not. Interested readers are referred to **The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey: New Frameworks for Assessment** (available at [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca) or [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)) for a sense of the theory underlying the ALL study and how the instruments were validated.

Tom also advances an argument that the performance levels employed in the IALS and ALL are inappropriate, citing the work of the US National Academy of Sciences as support for his position. Tom is right that none of the surveys (NALS, IALS, or ALL) ever underwent a standard setting process to identify a "suitable minimum needed for coping in today's societies". No such standard setting process was ever undertaken. What both Tom and NAS report fail to acknowledge is the **DATA** which lead us to say that adults who are in these two levels are at increased risk. In the US, for example, adult education is targeted at those who are over the age of 16 and who have not earned a high school diploma or GED. This idea was supported by the Committee on Reading of the National Academy of Education when they said, "we take the position that the reading problem in the United States should not be stated as one of teaching people to read at the minimum level of literacy, but rather as one of ensuring that every person arriving at adulthood will be able to read and understand the whole spectrum of printed materials that one is likely to encounter in daily life." The Committee went on to say that, "our national educational policy is that every child is expected to complete at least the twelfth grade; we ought then to expect every child to attain twelfth-grade literacy."

Using this as a stated goal, the NALS data reveals that adults Level 1 (0-225) performed at a level that was below the average of those adults who had dropped out of high school (231), and far below those adults

who terminated their education with a GED (268) or diploma (268). Interestingly, these latter mean scores are close to the top of Level 2 (275). These data have been confirmed by both the IALS and ALL survey.

Recent reports on how American 15 year old students perform in international comparative assessments of math and reading confirm the patterns seen in NALS, IALS and ALL. Only 68 percent of US students who start high school earn a diploma and among those who do many are deemed by governors and business leaders as not having adequate skills to earn a middle class wage or successfully enter and complete post-secondary education programs.

Differences in proficiency matter are not trivial - about 53% of the poor and near poor in the US are in Level 1, 34% are in Level 2. 52% of individuals classified at Level 1 are out of the labour force. 3/4 of Level 1 adults do not have savings upon which they could draw if needed. In sharp contrast 3/4 of Level 4 have savings. Differences in the level and distribution of literacy as defined in NALS, IALS and ALL explain up to 33% of wage differences, and over half of differences in the long term growth of GDP per capita, in OECD countries. It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that these things have a material impact on the quality of life of individuals with low skills. Tom seems not to care.

Tom then goes on to bring up the RP issue, yet again. What he fails to acknowledge is that a response probability has no impact on the underlying ability distribution. Even Andy Kolstad, one of the most ardent proponents of lower RP values, was quoted in the Washington Post as stating that the "true literacy proficiencies of the population remain as reported...the response probability convention influences how the results are interpreted not how well adults perform on the assessment."

Tom is correct when he says that an RP 50 is the point where one has equal errors about whether a person can or cannot perform a task. Put another way, however, RP 50 is also the point at which the least is known about whether an individual can or cannot perform a task correctly. If the goal is to know whether or not someone is likely to answer a question correctly one needs to set the RP criterion higher. Thus setting an RP is a judgment call that depends on the inferences one wants to make. Few employers or patients would set a low criterion.

Thus, response proficiencies are something that one applies after the fact to add interpretative value to the underlying proficiency scales. Setting an RP is a judgment call that depends on the inferences one wants to make. Adopting a less demanding response proficiency standard would reduce the numbers of people classified in the lowest skill levels. Unfortunately, however, it would also serve to blur the relationship of literacy to the educational, social, health and labour market outcomes that are of central concern to policy makers. I might forgive my tom cat if he only managed to find his way home 50% of the time but the empirical evidence presented in the NALS, IALS and ALL reports confirms that employers notions of mastery are much more

demanding - anything lower than 80% attenuates the relationships with critical co-variates and hence the policy utility of the findings.

Recent data from a US study designed to explore the relationship of component reading skills to the emergence of fluency also provides more empirical support for applying an RP80 (see Strucker, J., Yamamoto, K. and Kirsch, (2004), ***Component Skills of Reading: Tipping Points and Five Classes of Adult Learners***, ANCLI, Lyon)

Change the RP criterion means changing the interpretation of what it means to be in a proficiency level. In NALS, IALS and ALL someone who is in the middle of Level 2 would be expected to get a score of 80 percent correct on a hypothetical test drawn from Level 2 items or a grade of "B" in most American schools. Using an RP 50 criterion, an individual in the middle of Level 2 would be expected to get a grade of 50 on a hypothetical test made up of items that fell in Level 2 - equivalent to an "F" on that test, whereas an RP 67 would yield a "D". Not many parents would be pleased with such performance.

Finally, Tom seems to have missed the fact that the notion of literacy embodied in NALS, IALS and ALL is a dynamic one in which functionality can only be judged against the reading demands that individuals are likely to confront in their daily lives. It is a given that individuals are far more proficient with familiar tasks than implied in the NALS, IALS and ALL results. This, however, misses the point.

It is of critical importance to acknowledge that reading demands change, either in response to changes in society and technology, to natural changes that occur as adults negotiate the life course, or because adults develop goals or aspirations that involve a need to master new, unfamiliar reading tasks.

In this dynamic view, fluent reading, as defined by Level 3, can be thought of as a tool that helps individuals cope efficiently with such change. The analyses presented in the ALL comparative report provide compelling evidence that the transferable skills measured in the study are what matter. Individuals, and nations, that fail to attain Level 3 proficiency pay a serious price - wage inequality is growing, not shrinking and it is low skilled that suffer.

It is expected that the rapidly increasing global supply of literacy skill, and literacy's link to information and communication technologies and productivity, will amplify these effects. This evidence has played a critical role in convincing several countries to invest heavily in adult education and training. Swiss data presented in the ALL report reveals that policy can improve the level and social distribution of literacy skill over the course of a decade.

Crying wolf is ok if the wolf is indeed at the door. Perhaps it is Tom who is "ALL wrong."