Adult Foundational Education: A Fresh Seed Sown?

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David J. Rosen's essay calling for a new unified name for adult literacy, numeracy, and English language education is thought-provoking indeed. His argument is based on the perceived failure of any of the current names to describe the field's activity adequately. Rosen suggests none of these names is beloved by the field or represents it clearly. They are described as confusing and unclear to people not involved in our work and not very useful for those within it. The replacement he and his colleagues from the Open Door Collective present is "adult foundational education."

I must admit to a little hesitancy about the argument, both in terms of premise and conclusion. In other words, I'm not sure Rosen makes a good case for there being a problem capable of solution, and I'm also not sure, even if there is a problem, the proposed name is the answer. I'll look at these parts one at time.

It is worthwhile clarifying one point before addressing these parts of the argument. When thinking about renaming any set of activities it is critically important to have clear boundaries. Rosen's definition of the area under discussion is "core skills and knowledge that adults need for work, further education, helping their families, functioning effectively in their communities, and as citizens in a democracy" followed by a list of examples. This very broad, as it could easily include associate's and bachelor's degrees, professional development, and bible study, among many other possibilities. I find myself genuinely uncertain whether the aim is to sublimate all education for adults under foundational skills or to address only literacy and related areas.

In order to discuss Rosen's proposals seriously, it many be helpful to set aside this enormously inclusive definition to avoid undermining the argument. The remarks in this response will be focused specifically on the field outlined in the purpose statement of this journal: "adult literacy, numeracy, and English language education in publicly funded, community and volunteer-based programs in a wide range of contexts" (ProLiteracy, n.d.). Adopting this boundary for discussion helps significantly in clarifying Rosen's argument and, based on my knowledge of Rosen's work, is generally compatible with his interests and intent.

The first section of the paper presents the case for seeing current names as failures; for example, Rosen argues that "adult education" is a name that "confuses policy-makers and the general public, who assume we are referring to higher education or to non-credit courses offered in higher education or by local community education centres." Another issue Rosen raises as evidence of a failure of naming is the relative invisibility of family literacy. It seems important to pause and

consider if these are really problems solvable by a new name. Even Rosen's essay seems unsettled about the extent to which the names used for our field are to blame for its relative invisibility. The essay contains a description of people overlooking the field because they do not recognise its name, but there is also acknowledgement this will not be improved simply by changing the title.

Nonetheless, Rosen's prescription is for a new name to "make it clear what our field does and what kinds of education organizations and institutions do it" along with a media campaign to publicise the new formulation. The essay provides a list of criteria the new name should meet, and it must also distinguish our work from that of credit-bearing post-secondary and PreK-12 institutions.

The first question is whether any name can accomplish all of this and whether language works like this in any context. Wittgenstein (1953/2009), who thought about this issue a lot, rejected the idea of a one-to-one mapping between word and referent, positing the idea of "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (p. 66). This notion was extremely influential in the field of linguistics and easily illustrated in everyday language. For example, the word "dog" may refer to a furry four-legged friend, but seems harder to pin down when we describe someone as dogged as they work through their homework, call ourselves dog-tired, or celebrate finding a pair of antique firedogs. Words gain their meaning through relation with other words, not through careful pre-determination of what they should mean. The instrumental use of language Rosen is advocating does not appear to be viable in natural language.

Where it *is* used is branding. Coca-Cola™ has been around for over a hundred years using the same name to refer to a single sweet, fizzy beverage with a handful of variations. The brand works because it is simple, ubiquitous and promoted with billions of dollars a year (Pham, 2021). Rosen's call for a "major, multi-year, multi-partner media campaign" to support a new name appears to reflect his awareness of re-naming as a branding issue. The usefulness or viability of such an effort does not appear self-evident and Rosen does not say what the aim would be. There is certainly an argument for familiarity or name recognition (as it is called when applied to politicians) as a first step in broader acceptance of an idea or activity. But the other part of good advertising is a call to action (Drink Coke!™) and without it familiarity counts for little. It's not clear what the associated action would be in this case, making it hard to assess whether the efforts were paying off. I also think it would be hard to make a case to funders for spending money on branding rather than program delivery. With no call to action and no single product a branding exercise would have little impact.

The profile of the adult literacy field may be limited partly because the resources being put into our work are themselves limited. The annual budget for community-based adult learning in my home jurisdiction is roughly equivalent to the annual budget of a largish elementary school. There are over 1,500 schools, elementary and much more expensive high schools, in that jurisdiction. Even if the other funding streams for adult learning were to be taken into account, the work of adult literacy, numeracy and English-language programs attracts a miniscule proportion of the resources for schools and universities. It seems unlikely any new name would make us more prominent in policy conversations.

Finally, based on my own experience, I'm not at all sure people engaged in the work—in all its glorious variety and inconsistency—would

necessarily rally to a single new flag.

In summary, the argument for a new all-encompassing name for the bundle of activities in which we are engaged is not a slam-dunk. With our existing histories and diversities, it is not clear we can get there from here--or would want to. Wittgenstein's (1953/2009) insight may be useful in helping us think of ways to highlight the commonalities of our work through a network of similarities rather than seeking formal alignment. The implication of this stance is, of course, that the scattered and overlapping names we currently use may represent us better than we sometimes assume.

Turning to the more speculative question of what name would capture all we do (this would be a great ice-breaker for a workshop), it is hard to escape context and all its implications. One striking aspect of Rosen's suggestion is how much it reflects North American thinking. In this part of the world we have an extraordinarily linear conception of education, for the most part. Even though our borrowed lands are home to about 5% of the world's population we sometimes fall into assuming the rest of the world uses the same sort of system, which is not the case. Defining education for adults against the PreK-16 continuum, either sequentially or as an alternative, both limits what can be included and also serves as a form of self-marginalisation because we lie outside that continuum.

If learning and education are seen from a competence-based perspective instead of "years of school," perhaps resembling the European Qualifications Framework (Europass, n.d.), it is easier to think of learning as occurring within a broad ecosystem with many different pathways. Learning sites outside of the formal system can be acknowledged as important components of this ecosystem.

A further implication of this thinking is the recognition of learning as inherently valuable rather than worthwhile because it leads to the equivalent of completing high school (which is a meaningless concept in most of Europe). Moving to a less linear system where people can demonstrate skills through formal examinations, work experience, professional development and a whole range of other mechanisms would help to move adult literacy, numeracy and English learning beyond the perception of remedial education. It could-- and would-- take a central place in skills development.

Within a less linear framework any notion of "foundational" or "basic" is unhelpful. The levels may be cumulative, but may not. The idea of any learning task being inferior to, or preparatory for, another is not a necessary part of the structure. Somebody with a high level of knowledge in one area may be at a very different level of knowledge in another, meaning they would need support to transition into a new set of competencies. One example is nurses from the Philippines who come to North America and end up working as homecare workers. These are very highly skilled people held back by racist perceptions and their specific language skills from meeting North American nursing standards (Guo, 2015). Overall, linearity plays a very limited role in everyday learning, and our field should be challenging linearity rather than reinforcing it.

The question of whether "adult" should be part of any new name is far from simple. As described by Rosen, the work done by the term in the proposed title is not clear. It can be read as implying an adult version of the sort of education normally done by *not* adults: children, in other words. This does not seem to bring a lot of clarity to the endeavour, especially as part of our work is with people who have not attained the age of majority.

Taking the name "adult foundational education" as a whole, one concern is the degree of conservativism it represents. It does not tackle or re-frame the impression of deficit on the part of learners, an issue haunting our field. It makes no claims on existing formal education structures to acknowledge the scope, legitimacy, or expertise of our field--and the learners within it--but instead seems to signal contentment with the place we have been assigned. "Foundational" risks being read as a synonym of "simple." The learners we serve are very often people of color, people living with poverty, and people experiencing other forms of marginalisation. There is a moral duty to challenge the any perception that these learners would benefit from simple education. Overall, while there may be good reason to be unhappy with the present name for the field, the new name seems to double down on our challenges rather than offer new vistas and new pathways to influence.

Having been so skeptical about Rosen's argument, I feel it is only fair to expose my own thinking briefly. I am not sure we are well served by meso-level terms. At the broadest level our work is adult education; at the narrowest it is working with adult literacy learners in the community agency on Maple Street. Policy may need an intermediate level to write on funding envelopes, but I'm not at all sure it matters what that is and whether it varies.

I'd like to close by thanking David Rosen and The Open Door Collective for bringing this idea forward. It's certainly stimulating to think about. I fear whatever we choose to call our fields will end up as a fundamentally contested term, with some folk having business cards proudly printed and others seeing it as ignoring or dis-respecting what they do. Our work has always been like this, shape-shifting its way through the demands of funders and the language applied by different policy regimes.

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