

Keynote Address: Dr Lisa Denny

Conflation of hats: workforce demographer, advocate and
mum – the lived experience

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I often describe speech and language pathologists as having the most important job in the world. While I probably don't need to tell you that, today, I am going to share with you why I have come to that conclusion and, I guess, challenge us all to raise the profile of speech and language pathologists so that more people aspire to become one.

Before I was a mum and then an advocate, I was – and still am - what I call a workforce demographer – I research and provide advice in relation to the changing nature of the population, economy and workforce and the future of work in terms of education and skills. I am also fiercely Tasmanian.

Despite trying to keep my hats separate for many years, over time, my hats – mum, advocate and workforce demographer - have become entwined to the point that they are now very difficult to separate.

Today, I'd like to share with you some anecdotes from my journey so far – the conflation of my hats - but first I'd like to set the scene. As a demographer, I am always saying that context matters.

I was born the daughter of a modern-day suffragette. Mum was born into poverty, the daughter of a triplet dad raised in an orphanage, while her mum was the daughter of a widow. Life wasn't easy for them and mum moved from school to school within Tasmania and interstate while my grandparents looked for work. As a result, mum didn't do so well at school. When she finally finished year 12, her dad told her she had to choose to be either a teacher, a secretary or a nurse, because that was what young women did back then. Thankfully for us, she chose to be a nurse.

My dad, on the other hand, was born into the upper echelon of English society. He was sent to boarding school from the age of 7 and only saw his parents in the school holidays. He had to learn to be very independent from a very young age. While he did well academically, was captain of his school, and went on university, as was expected of him, he hadn't developed a close relationship with his parents.

So, in raising my sister and I, mum and dad were determined in their own ways, to provide us with an upbringing different to their own. We were told from a young age that the best gift they could give us was a good education and that we should dream big – that as young women we could do anything we put our minds to and they supported us to do that in every way they could. And they still do today.

From my own perspective, I had never been particularly career oriented, I was ambitious and determined in other ways and had an early quest for knowledge and for

understanding society and the economy. I had also never been particularly maternal. As my demographic knowledge developed over the years and I researched the relationship between education, work and the labour force and the impact on the decision of whether or not to have child and how many to have, I got to an age when I realised that if I was going to have children, I had better get a wriggle on.

My son, Rory, was born nearly 14 years ago... I had never really appreciated the saying 'a mother's love' until he arrived in this world and I was overcome by this indescribable wave of emotion that I could physically feel. I knew in that moment that I would do everything in my power to protect, support and nurture my son – what I now think of as a mother's love.

Rory wasn't a bouncy babe with fulsome cheeks like my nephew, who had arrived two days earlier and was in a room two doors down from us – so Tasmanian - Rory was more like Benjamin Button – wise beyond his years – and was about to teach me more about life and love than I had ever learnt.

While no one actually said it out loud, I know everyone was thinking "what is wrong with this baby?". Within 15 hours the paediatrician had been and told me that Rory had a cleft palate which explained his inability to feed. Another 3 days later, I learnt he was completely deaf. It took another 8 to 9 years to arrive at Rory's current diagnosis – apraxia of speech, language disorder, ADHD, mild intellectual disability, mild conductive hearing loss, and a range of physical impairments

as well as a genetic abnormality which does not explain the extent of his challenges.

So, from those very early days of being a first-time mum, a speech and language pathologist helped me keep my newborn son alive by supporting the process of feeding, sucking and swallowing and then as guiding lights as we navigated his communication challenges, and continue to do so. Many of you are here in this room today, and I hope you know how grateful I am for you all.

It wasn't until Rory started school that I realised that life was only going to get harder. I vividly remember a conversation I had with the Principal very early on who basically said to me, school funding is determined by the socio-economic background of parents – their education and occupation – based on the premise that parents with higher educational attainment will be better positioned to support their children's education and advocate for their needs.

I did already know this given my workforce demographer hat, but I didn't really appreciate the depths of what that meant as a mum. I spent a bit of time reflecting on this situation, working out how best to respond.

At the time, Rory's diagnosis was 'unexplained case' and so he did not qualify for additional funding support in the schooling system – despite him being completely non-verbal, having a hearing impairment and physical challenges as well

as having transitioned from Early Childhood Intervention Services which was within the then DoE.

It was 2014 and Tasmania had just had a change of government. I had worked very closely with the school Principal to get Rory the support he needed, unsuccessfully, so I thought, I have nothing to lose, and I wrote to the newly appointed Education Minister to explain the deficiencies in the education system for children with disabilities. Reflecting on this now, I guess it was good timing as it opened up a channel of communication between myself and the new Minister's office which may not have been possible with a less fresh Minister wanting to make a difference.

I learnt a few years later that the Minister and his office learnt more from that letter and our subsequent conversations about disability education in Tasmania than they had in the whole transition folder they had received from the Department when they formed government.

Unfortunately, while the government intended to shift to a needs-based, inclusive education policy position, at the time, the only way for the school to receive additional funding to support Rory's education was for him to be listed on the Severe Disability Register – the SDR- which was IQ based. So, I went down that path. While I had no other option at the time, I would later regret it for 2 reasons – firstly – that it automatically created a position of 'low expectations' for Rory within the system which I completely reject and still do

and, secondly, it had implications for when the NDIS would be rolled out in the future.

Around the same time as all this was happening, the 2015 Australian of the Year recipients had been announced for each state and territory and I made a stark realisation. All but one of the recipients were activists – activists for basic human rights in Australia whether that was for equality, family violence, child protection, peace or children’s rights. I asked myself, why is it that we are recognising – on the national stage - the mighty efforts of people advocating for what should essentially be the fundamental foundations from which our society and economy are shaped. But the reality was that policy failure over many decades, across jurisdictions and across levels of government, was failing so many Australians – and still is.

Again, I had to reflect on this and work out how I was going to respond.

The time came when there was an article in the local newspaper about the education system and children living with disabilities. I was pretty riled about it so I decided I would write a letter to the editor. At that time, I had been writing Opinion Pieces for the paper for around 5 or 6 years with my workforce demographer hat on, so I had a relatively good relationship with the Opinion Editor. He gave me a call to ask whether I would turn my letter to the editor into an Opinion Piece. I asked him to give me some time to consider

it. I reflected on it and concluded that I had nothing to lose. Unfortunately, I was wrong.

But, I am still here to tell the story.

At the time, the Education Minister was also the Minister for Primary Industries and Water and the Government had just announced a massive investment in irrigation infrastructure so that the state could double its farmgate value by 2050. So, I thought I would use that angle to get some attention in relation to disability education and improving educational outcomes for all in Tasmania.

While I outlined the problems with the funding process in the education system for students with disabilities, I also likened investing in students to investing in agriculture. In the OpEd I stated “Just like Tasmania’s rich natural resources need investment and nurturing to realise their potential, so too does my son’ and ‘that the education system of resource allocation hardly caters to the needs of the individual student and compromises all involved: the student, parent, teacher and classmates.’ The OpEd was accompanied by a large photo spread of myself, Rory, our dog and a chook.

By 9am the morning the OpEd was printed, I had a call from the Minister’s Chief of Staff who said, “Can you at least give us the head’s up when you are going to write stuff like that?”. I can’t actually remember how I responded because I was in a little bit of shock, but I do know that I thought, I shouldn’t

have to expose my vulnerabilities to the world (or Hobart at least), to get your attention.

So, for the academics in the room, I achieved more impact with that OpEd than I probably have for any of my academic publications.

As a result, it required another pause for reflection. With one OpEd I went from being Lisa Denny Workforce Demographer to being Lisa Denny, single mum of a kid with a disability and a pet chook. Life as I knew it changed that day. And, to this day, I still get asked if I have pet chooks. We do.

The greatest realisation that I came to from that OpEd was that personal stories matter. I could present data-informed evidence in an objective, positivist manner to support policy development as much as I like, but a sob story – or what my journo friends call ‘the human element’ - goes much further. Stories that connect or that people relate to is what people remember and hold on to. So, my mission in life changed. I felt an obligation to those who didn’t, or couldn’t, have a voice for whatever reason, to also be their advocate. It also meant that I had to let my guard down. But, at the same time, I vehemently tried to keep my workforce demographer hat separate to my mum and advocate hats.

Another moment to be a voice for others came with the roll out of the NDIS in Tasmania. Rolled out in stages across the country, children aged 0 to 14 were the first recipients in Tasmania. All those students who were on the SDR with the

education system were automatically rolled over into the NDIS. But as the SDR was based on IQ and did not capture any other co-morbidities or otherwise, Rory's reason for being on the NDIS was for intellectual disability rather than his greatest challenges of communication disorders. But, of course, I didn't actually find this out until about 5 years later. I am not going to go into the rigmaroles of navigating the NDIS – we are all aware of it and it's just too traumatic for me!

But what I want to share with you is the story of the power of mums. Over the years, through sharing my story or being connected to others in similar circumstances, I have met some other pretty determined mums (and some dads) doing everything they could to support their child's needs. One of these mums happened to work in a government department and was co-ordinating the response to a Parliamentary Inquiry into the NDIS. She really wanted to get some parent voices to speak at the inquiry and implored a group of us to share our stories. We agreed thinking safety in numbers would make things a little easier. We turned up at Parliament House on the nominated day, each of us with folders of evidence of the ordeal we had all endured to try and access funding support for our children. While we had not colluded at all - we didn't need to as our stories are all the same - we each took to the stand to share our pre-prepared stories, each of us highly educated, highly articulate and highly emotional. While we each described ourselves as having to be assertive, yet also respectful mothers, in navigating such a

complex system, we all agreed afterwards that we feel like we border on crazy mum status because everything is just so unreasonably hard when it really shouldn't be and we find ourselves questioning our sanity. I reflected on this afterwards, and randomly looked up what the collective noun of mothers is – a consternation. For those who don't know, consternation means a feeling of anxiety, confusion or dismay that hinders you.

As Rory got older and we continued to search for answers and solutions to Rory's communication challenges I began a new journey of learning about the relationship between language and literacy and educational achievement. For over a decade I had been researching and writing about Tasmania's low levels of educational attainment and the implications for our workforce, economy and society and their direct relationship with population change and our socio-economic profile. My focus had been on school completion and post-school education and training without knowing and understanding the critical importance of language, and then literacy, in the early and pre-high school years in laying the foundations for future education and life successes.

Once I connected the dots with the help from Rory's wonderful speech and language pathologists, my life mission changed again. The workforce demographer had a new angle from which to champion improving educational outcomes for

all Tasmanians. My hats had really started to conflate to a point of no return.

In addition to writing opinion pieces on a range of topics, hat dependent, I wrote many proposals, submissions to inquiries and consultation processes and continued to advocate directly to the Minister and their office, finally obtaining a meeting with them.

I went into the meeting with a written agenda, which I think they found quite amusing, but we worked through it – me pointing out which hat I was wearing for each item. If there was one thing that I hope resonated with them in that meeting it was my assessment of the value that the Tasmanian Government placed on education and students with personal challenges compared with the building and construction industry. While the Government rhetoric may be that education is the most powerful policy lever we have to change a person's life trajectory and to improve economic and social well-being, the actions of the government suggested otherwise. At the time, unfilled vacancies for speech and language pathologists, social workers, educational psychologists were at an all time high, so it was not uncommon that a school or student would wait up to 18 months for screening assessments and/or diagnoses before appropriate support and intervention could be provided. I basically said that if a builder or developer was told that they had to wait for 3 months let alone 18 months for a meeting with an engineer or planner to advise them on their

development there would be an uproar – it would be all over the media and the stakeholders would be crying blue murder. The government response would be to immediately step up and offer incentives to attract the relevant skill sets to Tasmania and to fast track vocational and education training qualifications and a whole range of other initiatives involving hi-vis. But in the education space, there is no action from the Government in these circumstances because there isn't a worthy enough stakeholder voice for them to respond to. But I pointed out that their inaction means we all suffer in the long run and that an 18 month wait for assessments is equivalent to around a quarter of a young person's life in many circumstances.

Whenever I go to a meeting like that one, I like to make sure that we conclude the meeting with an agreed action. In this instance, the Minister agreed to receive a proposal or a plan for how to improve literacy outcomes in Tasmania. I believe that if we want things to change, we need to be part of the solution.

From that meeting, the Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance was born – a collective voice of 8 individuals and their respective organisations which advocate for improving literacy and educational outcomes in Tasmania. Six months later we presented the Minister with a Road Map to a Literate Tasmania. Three weeks after that, the Minister announced a target that by no later than 2030, all Tasmanian students would start grade seven above the expected level for reading.

The Alliance provides the stakeholder voice that was missing from an education perspective.

Don't get me wrong, there are some low moments. I feel very alone being a mum of a kid with a disability and it's very lonely being an advocate. Very few people really understand what it is like on a day-to-day basis and what the impact is over a lifetime and why it matters so much. Advocacy can be all consuming, I've been doing it for almost 10 years, and sometimes you feel that you are making progress and then other times you feel like you are going backwards. But there are also moments that make it all worth it and give me reason to keep on keeping on. Sometimes people contact me to tell me their stories or to ask for advice or to thank me for all the effort that we do advocating. Often parents tell me that they were unaware that their child may have been struggling with reading or communicating and they have sought out more advice and support or a diagnosis because of the stories that I share.

And of course, there are times when I get angry, very angry at the injustices of it all. What makes me see red the most, is the parent blame or the socio-economic background blame. The parents I know from all backgrounds, those who share their stories with me, those whose stories we read in the media and those who are constantly posting in various social media support groups are desperately trying to help their children and get them the support they need to succeed and be safe and happy in school and in life. As is their right.

Here in Tasmania, our Government has policies and initiatives which prioritise engaging parents in the education and health of their children as the solution to improving education outcomes. However, my experience, and every other parent who has shared their experience with me, has been one of blocking, gaslighting, and obfuscation. So much so that they appear find every reason to say no, to not fund or not provide the intervention and adjustments that allied health professionals advise will support a student's education engagement and achievement.

And it enrages me.

But there are also moments of joy. I have met and connected with people I would never have met in another life. We laugh, we cry and we grow stronger together. Recently, I watched Rory enjoy his first ever text message exchange with his cousin and the joy on his face was indescribable.

And we have also had some advocacy successes which bring joy. Earlier this year, the Tasmanian Premier and Education Minister announced that by 2026 structured literacy and explicit teaching practices would be embedded in a system-wide, whole-school, tiered approach to teaching reading and writing in government primary schools. The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance was heartened indeed, but we are still yet to see the implementation plan for this game-changing policy initiative. So, pure, unadulterated joy is on hold until I see that plan!

While I mainly wear my Workforce Demographer hat as part of the Alliance, I cannot entirely separate it from my mum hat and what a system-wide, whole-school, tiered approach would mean for students with disabilities. The day for pure, unadulterated joy will come when Tier 1 classroom instruction is so effective that Tier 3 students, like Rory, receive the type of intervention they need at the intensity they need it so they too can achieve in education.

It is my hope that the implementation plan for embedding structured literacy and explicit teaching practices into Tasmanian government schools prioritises greater collaboration between educators and speech and language pathologists and other allied health professionals to achieve this.

So, bear with me, I want to put my work hat back on. You may have heard the saying “Demography is Destiny”, well, I don’t subscribe to that. It suggests that our future is predetermined by a set of circumstances beyond our control. The socio-economic demography that exists today is actually the outcome of policy decisions and investments made in the past. This means that we can make decisions today, to shape our future of tomorrow and what our collective destiny can be.

So, thank you for from the bottom of my slightly crazy mum, advocate and workforce demographer heart for choosing to become speech and language pathologists, for helping shape

a better future for those people that you work with and positively changing their destinies.

But we need more of you.

Over the next five years, the National Skills Council or Jobs and Skills Australia projects that demand for speech and language pathologists (and audiologists) will grow by 34.7%.

Your own Workforce Analysis Project also identifies unmet demand and unequal distribution of services across the country. In addition to greater investment, the long term solution is better career education from an early age.

Research shows that young people start making decisions about their future careers as early as primary school. The greatest influence on these career making decisions is awareness and direct engagement with an occupation, or industry. This experience is mainly achieved through parents, family members or other community members as well as through the school system and increasingly through the internet.

If school students don't know and understand what a speech and language pathologist is and does, they will not explore it as an option as they make their subject selections from grade 9 onwards... you cannot be what you cannot see.

So, as Speech Pathology Australia develops your workforce strategy, please make sure that you include career education as a priority.

To finish, not a day goes by that I don't wonder what would have been if Rory had received the level of support he needed from an early age. How would his life have been different? And, selfishly, how would my life have been different? I worry about his future every day. Like so many, our journey isn't any easy one, but the strength of a mother's love keeps me going.

I hope that in some way the conflation of my hats will go some way to helping shape a better destiny for those who need it most.

Shameless plug – please consider moving to Tasmania! We need you! (NB – *I didn't get to say this bit as I was a bit emotional!!*)