

Featured researcher

Karen Bloomberg

Sheridan Forster, Cathy Olsson, Teena Caithness, Libby Brownlie, and Hilary Johnson

The etymology of the word “research” draws from Latin and French, combining “to seek for”, “go about, wander, traverse”, and an “act of searching closely”. Karen Bloomberg brought an inquisitive nature and a willingness to challenge accepted practice and assumptions to what was a lifelong quest to create a better world of communication, where people who used different forms of communication were respected, valued, and supported to access supports that allowed them to connect. Karen not only created new pathways, but she also managed to do it in ways that brought hundreds of people along with her on the journey. She was about sharing her knowledge, not keeping it to herself. She was a researcher, seeking, searching closely, and achieving a mission of communication. She was a knowledge translator.

Karen Bloomberg died peacefully on 27 January 2022, leaving behind friends, family, colleagues, and an enduring legacy for others to continue.

Karen’s insight into diversity started in childhood, forged in her own experiences of multiple surgeries, hospitalisations, and issues with physical mobility and access. Her engagement in a career within the disability sector began on her graduation from Lincoln Institute in Melbourne (1978) when she was employed with the Spastic Society of Victoria and continued to her retirement in 2017. It was marked by numerous successes, innovations, and awards. Stories of her compassion, curiosity, drive, and focus abound.

From the beginning of her career, Karen demonstrated all these characteristics, contributing to many landmark activities for practice in the area of AAC (augmentative and alternative communication methods): establishment of a camp for children who were not using speech, and the creation of AGOSCI (formerly Australian Group on Severe Communication Impairment) in 1981. Karen was central to the development and use of Makaton Australia and was involved in the transition to Key Word Sign Australia with its important reorientation to vocabulary reflecting research and the needs of adults and children. Teena Caithness described how “Karen had a clear vision and dragged us all along with her desire to have something unique for Australia, but also something that could be argued as research inspired”. All Karen’s work in Key Word Sign harnessed the willingness and expertise of people from a range of professions and families. She was also a founding director of ISAAC (International Society AAC). Karen’s absolute commitment to creating greater access for, and recognition of, the voice of people using AAC was the common thread, way before any term of “lived experience” was used.

At a time when much of the focus of AAC was on children who had physical disability and good cognitive



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ability, Karen was bringing her thoughts and focus to the needs of people with intellectual disability, and it was in this area that Karen started her formal research activities. She travelled to Purdue University in the United States in 1983 to complete her master’s study in AAC, focusing on picture iconicity. The findings of her research at this time highlighted the importance of considering iconicity from the individual perspectives of people with a disability and sparked the design and development of COMPIC, the first pictographic library that included Australian vocabulary. Karen was one of the researchers who undertook a world-leading demographic study of people with “severe communication impairment (SCI)” in Victoria. This was the first time that an attempt was made to identify the numbers of people with SCI and was an important step in being able to advocate for increased levels of services and resources to support this specific group. In 1987, Karen and Hilary Johnson were presented with the Elinor Wray Award to recognise this contribution. Many people with SCI across Victoria went on to benefit from Karen and Hilary Johnson’s clinical services through the Severe Communication Impairment Outreach Project (SCIOIP).

Embracing the Sandwell Communication Aids Centre quote “A communication disability does not just belong to the individual. It belongs to the entire environment of which the individual is the focal point”, Karen recognised the

importance of communication partners in supporting better communication development and participation for people with disabilities. This focus is reflected in Karen's work on the PICTURE It study, The Triple C: Checklist of Communication Competency, the InterAACtion Manual, the FCOS videos, and the myriad Key Word Sign resources. Many of these resources filled massive gaps in written and audiovisual materials suitable for supporting adults with intellectual disability and difficulties in communication for speech pathologists and disability support workers. In these projects, she shone in her role as a writer, producer, and actor (with many speech pathologists able to quote her phrases).

The model of E3BP is now well known and accepted, and Karen applied the principles as part of her practice throughout her career. Karen contributed to the evidence, writing more than 15 peer-reviewed articles. Karen drew from her experiences of providing clinical services and was generous in sharing her knowledge and experience, contributing to countless keynotes, conference presentations, and collegiate discussions. A learner herself, she could draw the salience from a research article and distil it to others to understand. Sheridan Forster remembers when Karen, with affectionate tease, reminded her that "not everyone loves to read a research article". Karen was always encouraging of others—undergraduate and graduate students, colleagues, AAC users, and community members—contributing her thoughts to help inform the questions that were important to answer. She was also a researcher who fed her work through collaboration, discussion, shared reflection, and questioning, the inspiration of discovering as part of a team—and in turn nurtured the work and achievement of those around her. David Trembath remembered Karen's approach to supervising and mentoring students: "She was able to challenge their (and my) thinking with just a few words, with such gravity, but always—always—with a hand outstretched to warmly welcome them to a different way of seeing the issue, the situation, or the idea."

Karen's work also held central her belief in ensuring that the person was at the centre of any engagement. She was able to connect and had a carefully attuned attention to each disabled individual and their home and social environments and support requirements.

Karen never allowed herself to be intimidated and was able to create amazing collaborations and became one of the leaders in the field of AAC internationally as well as nationally, working, communicating with, and creating connections between. In many ways an iconoclast, Karen challenged the status quo when needed, managing to avoid being seen as aggressive or antagonising people. She was always open and invited discussion and reflection—but with that drive to create better systems and supports to lead into a world that met people with communication difficulties on their own terms, rather than imposing those of the mainstream. This approach came part with her experiences and activism as a feminist, a lesbian, and possibly as a Jew. Cathy Olsson reflected that "Despite her own incredible contributions on the national and international stage, she always treated me as a colleague whose ideas and opinions she genuinely wanted to hear and valued, and encouraged me to be confident in my own thinking. And she was funny, and a little mischievous, and witty and warm, thoughtful, and genuine".

A "family tree" could illustrate the speech pathologists who graduated with her, held their first jobs with her, were later colleagues, and went on to also become inspiring professionals in the area of people with complex

communication needs. A similar tree could capture the AAC users who have also gone on to be leaders with influence from Karen. Karen, the researcher, the pioneer, the wit, the sharp observer, the nurturer, the friend, the challenger, the collaborator, left us many gifts to communication for all, for which we are thankful.

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