

Promoting early childhood education 'is imperative' ^[1]

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Source: The Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 23 Jul 2016

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

With 42 per cent of adult Canadians lacking essential reading and writing skills, promoting early childhood education is a growing imperative.

Education technology is a burgeoning industry with innovative startups devising digital tools to personalize learning adapted to young students' needs. Leading the way is P.E.I.-based Ooka Island Inc.

On fictional Ooka Island, children create an online avatar on a 3D mission to help Ooka's elves learn to read utilizing 85 eBooks, 24 levels of interactive adventure, and more than 80 hours of individualized learning. Research indicates a child visiting the Island for 30 minutes, three times a week, will become a confident reader in just one year.

Enterprising women are central to the product's development. Ooka Island is the culmination of a 40-year mission by P.E.I. educator and researcher, Kay MacPhee, to eradicate illiteracy and teach all children to read. Inspired by her profoundly deaf son, she created techniques enabling the hearing-impaired to develop language skills and then applied them successfully to other struggling readers.

Her SpellRead program was recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as No. 1 in reading intervention for older readers. In 2008, MacPhee partnered with children's author Jim Barber to create Ooka Island Inc., leveraging children's appetite for digital games to create an early literacy initiative.

Kelly Shaw first encountered Ooka Island while assessing high-potential early-stage startups at Toronto's MaRS Discovery District. She was digital strategy vice-president for Pearson North America at the time.

"It met all my criteria – game-based, adaptive, research-oriented, with learning outcomes based in robust pedagogy," Shaw is now CEO of the company, steering a product development roadmap that may see Ooka Island launch versions in Spanish, French and Portuguese; create an adaptation for older readers; and apply the learning concepts to different subjects, including numeracy.

At present, the Adaptive Reading Platform has 35,000 subscribers in 33 countries and markets directly to parents and communities, as well as schools.

The Ooka Island senior management team is primarily female – still notable in the ICT sector.

"It wasn't planned," says Shaw. "We hired the best people available and have a male CTO (chief technology officer). Women in leadership attract other women."

Shaw actively supports women in the technology sector.

MacPhee is still inspired by the correlation between literacy and economic growth: research indicates reading well by age seven is a strong predictor of success. "We're helping children globally, but I don't want to leave Island kids behind," she says. "We're trying to find a way to give Ooka Island to every child on P.E.I. What a wonderful legacy that would be."

-reprinted from The Guardian

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