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Educator Sherelle believes Fast ForWord gives children hope

Q & A

ON Wednesday night at the Bermuda Underwater Exploration Institute, Dr. Sherelle Walker talked of the latest advances in brain research and the technology that has allowed that research to be delivered to schools and clinics.

Dr. Walker, the Chief Education Officer of California-based Scientific Learning Inc., visited Bermuda under the auspices of Bercon Ltd., the educational consultants who brought Scientific Learning's Fast ForWord system to the island. After almost 30 years in the US public school systems in Connecticut and Washington state, Dr. Walker was looking for a way to contribute to education in a more empirical way, when she was asked to join a company which distributed curricula in disc form; from there, she was asked to join Oakland's Scientific Learning, a company that combines advances in knowledge of the brain and in technology to create products and services that develop learning and communications skills.

During her time in the Federal Way school district near Seattle, she established one of the first "Internet academies" for home schooling, which was featured on CNN. Dr. Walker was a recipient of an NAACP Cultural Arts Award.

An enthusiastic and positive force, she talked to reporter COLIN O'CONNOR and photographer DAVID SKINNER about her journey from a childhood in Newport News, Virginia via an educational and cultural stay in London and the Isle of Wight, to her current position in California.

Q: Does your long career in education stem from any family influence, and when did you know you wanted to follow that career path?



Dr. Sherelle Walker

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A: My parents were both educators, and all the way back at least to my grandmother, who was a college professor, education was central to our history; it was an expectation. I think my mother first saw it in me.

I was the last of three daughters, youngest by five years, and I tended to command my own world, and I ended up teaching those around me anything that needed to be taught. Teaching was an important area for me, and I found it easy to explain concepts and ideas even to my friends and peers, so that they could understand them.

Q: At what point in your educational process did you decide that you could do this, that you would like to be an educator?

A: In high school, I actually ended up teaching a lot of classes in my senior year, helping teachers, including physical education classes, because I was an athlete, a tennis player, eventually Virginia State tennis champion. I was really interested in medicine, and I thought teaching would be a wonderful background, so I went off to do Pre-Med at college.

Q: Where was home, where did you attend high school?

A: I was born in Newport News, Virginia, in the Tidewater area, and went to school in Hampton, Virginia, and attended Phoenix High School there, and went on to Hampton University, because in my senior year at high school, I took three college courses that were attached to Hampton, so it was an easy segue for me.

I started in the sciences, but I had to attend two autopsies in my sophomore year, and I realised that medicine was not for me! That was a little too real for me, and it took four autopsies before I could sit through one!

Q: Did you switch your major at that point?

A: Well, my major was in biology with a minor in physical education, but in sophomore year, I was encouraged to apply for a humanities programme, because of my writing and my language skills. I wasn't in the English department, but a professor talked me into applying, and I was accepted, and ended up studying in England, at the University of London, for my junior year. That was in 1966, and growing up in a small community, that was a real experience for me.

Q: How did you find that experience?

A: Actually, it was a unique experience for us, because we lived with a family in Cowes, on the Isle of Wight, prior to going to school in London, to get acculturated or acclimated. We didn't want to be 'ugly Americans', we wanted to be embraced by the culture. I spent a month with a couple, Mike and Alison, a dentist and a nurse respectively. They were only a few years older than me, in their late twenties when I was 19.

Q: So, did it turn out to be an interesting and positive experience?

A: Yes, very much so, a unique one. I knew I was still going to teach, to work with kids, and I actually graduated with a degree in physical education, because to finish my degree in science, I would have had to stay another year, and in my family, you finished in four, and then you could go back and do whatever else you wanted to do.

Q: Did you start your teaching career straight out of college?

A: Yes, I was 21, and immediately moved to a high school in Waterbury, Connecticut, where my students, seniors, were 18. I had a hard time making the staff understand I was a teacher, not a student! I was only there a year, before I was recruited to Hartford, starting in physical education, and moved the following year to be a 'team leader' in a middle school.

While I was there, I did my master's degree in education at the University of Connecticut, but also did more work with special populations, and my degree covered that area.

Q: By 'special populations', do you mean children with special needs?

A: Yes, very special needs; in fact, I worked at the Newington Children's Hospital, just outside Hartford, for a period of time, and these were youngsters with cerebral palsy and other students with really dramatic physical difficulties. I also worked at the Mansfield training centre, a place for what we now call the 'emotionally' handicapped.

Then I continued teaching, and developed a dance company. You get into things and you wonder why! I actually wanted them to play tennis – I was a tennis champion for goodness' sakes – but nobody wanted to play tennis.

So, I thought of ways to use dance, and channel that into ways to teach the children to talk appropriately, and speak as if they understood what they were talking about. I started with 25 youngsters, boys and girls, unusual then in a middle school, and ended up with 300 of them.

I got help from the mayor of Hartford, who was a great fan of what we were doing in the public schools, in the shape of CETA (Comprehensive Education Training Act) federal grants, and we started hearing from the private schools in the city.

We had 25 in the performing company, and some 300 kids who just wanted to dance. The big issue was to help them understand that they could move out of their communities, move into higher education, but it took commitment and focus.

So we would rehearse every day for three hours, but in the middle hour, we would spend time on what we called 'impromptu speaking'; there were four areas of the newspaper they had to read every night, and next day, I would ask them to speak on one of these topics.

We were working on grammar and diction, and their ability to talk about a concept in a short period of time, and to be fluent and articulate; every time they said 'ah' it cost them a penny, if they didn't conjugate a verb correctly, it would cost them a quarter!

Q: And then your career took you across country to Seattle?

A: Yes, as an assistant principal at a middle school, and principal of another middle school three years later, then director of secondary education for the district in Renton, Washington, outside of Seattle. Then I decided I needed a new experience, so I moved to the Federal Way school district as assistant superintendent, also a suburb of Seattle.

Q: At what point did you develop curricula for home schooling?

A: That followed a request from a new superintendent, who wanted to bring technology to bear and have it make an impact. At that point, in the late '90s, technology was a bit scary for teachers, who thought it might cost them their jobs!

So we thought about home schooling populations first; parents choose home schooling because they don't like all of those kids in school, or subjects are not being taught in the way they would like, or for religious reasons, or the parents were teachers and thought they could do it better, a whole variety of reasons.

The drawback, from the district's point of view, was that it was pulling youngsters out of the system, and the revenue stream that came with them. So, we aimed to draw the home schooled kids back into the system with courses that we could teach them online, and so we started one of the first 'internet academies' in the country.

We had planned for a class of 30, and had 100 at our door before we were ready! We were in operation in six months with six classes, and CNN came to the district in 1996 to do a special.

Q: Was it that experience that helped you decide to move into national curricula, eventually with Pearsons National Computer Systems?

A: Well, I had done 29½ years in public education, and I thought that the Washington state standards were great, and we worked with Riverside Publishing for the testing company who developed our assessments.

But most districts, ours included, were missing the pieces which involved training teachers to be able to meet those standards, and helping kids understand the requirements and expectations of them, and the consequences of not meeting those standards.

We needed a different delivery system, and I spoke at different technology conferences telling tech companies what they did well, and what they didn't do well.

After one conference in Arizona in 1997, on a Friday, I met a gentleman who wanted to talk about his product but I didn't have time right then, and on the Monday morning, he was sitting outside my office. I thought I was too old to have a stalker!

But seriously, I did look at his product and told him it was interesting, but teachers would not use it on a day to day basis. Well, two months later, he convinced me to join his company, and the deciding factor was something my father had said to me.

He died of Alzheimer's on Thanksgiving morning that year, and he had always said that when opportunity knocks, you have got to open the door and step through it. I had preached to my students, teachers, and principals, that you may have five to seven different careers in your lifetime, and I was having second thoughts about my second one! So, I stepped right through that door.

We produced a product called 'Educational Structures', and if you were a chemistry teacher, this online product would provide 180 days of lesson plans on all of the concepts needed to teach the subject, with step-by-step instructional directions based on the best theories of instructional pedagogy, and all of the other resources and supports needed.

The CEO I worked with, a man called Bob Bowen, wasn't just a businessperson, he understood and had a passion for education, and that's why I was there. When he retired, I expected to go back and finish my 30 years in public education.

But just before I finished some projects, he called me and asked me to look at two companies he was being asked to run, and one of them was Scientific Learning in

Oakland.

Q: So you joined Scientific Learning as Chief Education Officer in 2002 because your colleague Bob Bowen came back out of retirement to run it?

A: Well, I evaluated the products of both companies, and I really wanted the Seattle company to be the best one, because it was home, but it was clear, when I looked hard at Scientific Learning's products and research, that there was nothing like this in public education. I took the Fast ForWord product around schools to evaluate it, and teachers told me over and over that it was having a dramatic effect on performance.

Q: Could you just summarise the benefits to school children of that system compared to other online systems you have worked with?

A: It works on neuroscience principles, on how the brain learns. We strengthen those areas in the brain where a child can work effectively to do particular tasks, processing the information faster, learning it faster, sequencing it better, and hearing and understanding it better.

We work on cognitive skills 'from K through 12', we don't teach adverbs or adjectives. The brain forms patterns or 'maps'; when you hear me talk, you are not *seeing* the text, your brain is interpreting that sound, which it has 'mapped' because your brain has been stimulated over and over again.

For children whose learning has been impaired by, say, persistent ear infections which have muffled the sounds they hear, their brains have not made the connections or 'maps' that your brain has made. So, we are making those 'maps' for kids, and when they use Fast ForWord, they think they are playing and going through exercises that are challenging, but what we are doing is stimulating that brain thousands of times, so that a neural connection will be made, and a 'map' will form.

Q: This is your first time in Bermuda. What do you hope that your audience will take from your talk?

A: I hope that I can convince them that children no longer have to suffer, and be unable to learn, or to learn at the level that they should be at. Fast ForWord is the one thing that I have found, as an educator, that has really made a dramatic difference in youngsters, and we're not waiting three to five years to see changes occur. There is hope for children today.

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