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The Purpose and Passion of KLA Schools

by Candy and Roberto Ortega
as told to Dan Salter

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Candy and Roberto Ortega are the heart and soul of the KLA Schools' interpretation of Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool. Pouring their lives into the children and families of their community of schools, the duo has transformed vision into reality. And their story is only just beginning.



Candelaria (Candy) Ortega and Roberto Ortega are the director and CEO of KLA schools. Candy started her career as a teacher at a Reggio Emilia-inspired school in Miami. They founded KLA Academy and KLA Schools in 2008 and it has grown to almost 30 schools nationwide. KLA schools are committed to being a model of learning by design, by investing heavily in professional development and bringing in like-minded researchers across all fields.



Candy: I have heard it a thousand times, and you probably have, too: “Children have such amazing potential for learning!” Then one of two things usually happens. We set them aside without resources until they are “old enough” to interact intelligibly, or we sit them in their chairs while force-feeding them facts to memorize. But imagine a world where teachers supplied children with freedom instead of weighty requirements, and opportunities rather than oppressive control. The idea for such a world began in northern Italy, especially concentrated in the city of Reggio Emilia. I will never forget observing classrooms there and having my breath taken away. Small groups of children, thoroughly engaged throughout different spaces, were building, researching, painting, playing ... they were all actively learning!

Assorted displays of their projects surrounded us. Their curiosity, distinctive interests, and creative abilities mesmerized and overwhelmed me with

one Wow! moment after another. I returned to my school in Miami with that magnitude of Wow! reinforcing my own passion for genuine education. Armed with the knowledge I gained from the professional development in my Reggio study group travels, international conferences, and consultancies, I invested my heart with renewed energy into these young lives, in order to ensure true learning through the Reggio Emilia approach.

Reggio Emilia-inspired learning is hard to define. It exists in principles rather than outline, in attitude rather than tactics. We have traveled with study groups multiple times to Reggio Emilia in Italy and have always returned bursting with exciting ideas. But they are all invariably grounded in the foundational principles of participation, environment, collaboration, and documentation. Understanding the child as an active participant in learning is paramount. Allowing and following their engagement unveils

their “hundred languages”—a concept emphasizing both interest and expression. And they learn through their environment, which effectively becomes a third teacher (after the classroom teacher and the child’s parents). Next, collaboration among parents, teachers, and other children elevates the children as contributors rather than mere material to be molded. And finally, documentation makes learning visible. Through photos, recordings, journals, and other media, we document the children’s thoughts and ideas as they play and work on projects together.

My passion, which would eventually lead to our Reggio Emilia-inspired suite of KLA Schools, began long before I ever imagined I would become so involved in early childhood education. In fact, being born in Argentina, growing up in Brazil, and attending a British school all contributed to an initial embrace of the international community and learning languages. I certainly thought my career would travel in that direction, so I earned a degree in international business and marketing. But I should have known my love for children and their joy in discovery would ultimately redirect my focus. My life had always revolved around children—playing school as a child, helping at summer camps while in high school, assisting in preschools, tutoring while in college. So when a full-time teaching opportunity presented itself, I instantly grasped the directional shift, sure now of this fresh path. I went back to school to get a degree in education and poured all my attention and passion into my new calling.

That first teaching position introduced me to the Reggio Emilia approach. I immediately fell in love with the style, which I prefer to term “style” rather than “method,” because the approach is not set in dictums or design. Rather, its principles flow through each



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classroom, and even from classroom to classroom, and succeed in engaging the children. Within my first year of teaching, Roberto and I had the opportunity to establish our own school in Brickell, a neighborhood of Miami. The thrill of beginning such an enterprise was tempered with trepidation at so daunting a task. Our commitment to the Reggio Emilia approach gave me pause regarding our extended vision to start not just this one school, but multiple schools. After all, this teaching style requires clear focus on its principles, as well as a passion to see it through. I wondered how we could ensure such dedication for additional schools in which our personal involvement could not be so direct. Would we be able to sign on co-educators with the same kind of commitment? Roberto’s consistent vision supported us there.

“Children need the freedom to appreciate the infinite resources of their hands, their eyes, and their ears, the resources of forms, materials, sounds, and colors.”

—Loris Malaguzzi,
founder of the Reggio Emilia approach

Roberto: My outlook from the beginning was for multiple schools. But as Candy said, I knew the key to success would be to find similar knowledgeable

and impassioned people to carry our dream into those sister schools. While Candy is the true educator and my contribution relates more to the business side, I nevertheless enthusiastically support the Reggio Emilia approach and realize that a brand without consistent quality will ultimately slump into the mundane and routine.

I grew up in Ecuador and, like Candy, had been on a different career track (business). But after we met and I was introduced to the world of education, I recognized the value of building the school and our brand. So while Candy immersed herself in the teaching atmosphere and direction, I worked at developing the school into a prototype that could be replicated, at least from a business point of view. Of course, the uniqueness of the Reggio Emilia approach, which develops through collaboration even with the children themselves, makes “replicating” a school a challenge. But we did systematize the process, from supporting franchise owners in property acquisition, building, and licensing, to classroom design flow and procedural guidelines.

We opened the doors of our second school only a year after the first. And another school followed a year after that. Soon, we had parents and others

eagerly requesting more schools in this or that area, where needs were obvious and interest was bubbling over. But of course, we were firm that the most important aspect of adding any school to our KLA Schools family is the fit of the franchise owners. Are they passionate about children? Do they embrace a different kind of educational approach and curriculum from the traditional? Will they ensure that the teachers they hire hold those same values and spirit? We were extremely fortunate at the start of our second school to connect with good people—those who understood how children learn best and were passionate in that direction. I use “passion” a lot because it really is the best and most distinguishing characteristic of successful KLA Schools owners and directors and pedagogical coordinators and teachers.

“If a child can’t learn the way we teach, maybe we should teach the way they learn.”

—Ignacio Estrada,
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation

Candy: I agree with Roberto. And that is why I did worry a bit in the beginning about how we could find the intensity of commitment to ensure the additional schools would maintain

that focus—that drive for our non-traditional approach. But because of the outstanding educators who joined with us, my fears began to melt away as my excitement grew. I recognized in the new school the advantages of both multiplied resources and the greater number of children who would benefit. And as we continued to add more schools (we now have nearly 30 spread around the country), the benefit of shared observations, ideas, and support has been incredibly satisfying and advantageous. Our whole community of KLA Schools is a wellspring of educational research and knowledge that contributes to our service improvement from day to day, month to month, and year to year.

I have to say that I could share this adventure with no better partner than Roberto. Our education and business roles complement each other perfectly, which is one of the main reasons for our quick and outstanding growth. Still, it would not have worked had we not had similar foundational blocks in place—that passion for children, the absolute commitment to Reggio Emilia, and a feverish desire to work long hours at an enthusiastic pace to realize success. We also both feel a dedication to the teachers whose own

satisfaction we must attend to, not only so they can focus their uninterrupted attention on their work, but also, quite simply, because they deserve it.

“Children are not things to be molded, but people to be unfolded.”

—Jess Lair, professor and author

Roberto: Each school in the KLA Schools community needs time to develop, and our corporate mindset must prioritize our investment in those schools to encourage, build, and consistently present the qualities of our brand. Franchising is not a business for the faint of heart. There can be no easy corporate ride for us while the schools work to support the organization at the top. No, it is corporate who must undergird and sacrifice, in order to ensure those frontline efforts continue at a consistently high level.

In just that way, KLA Schools has realized success. Parents and the educational community can see that steady quality represented in the low teacher-to-child ratios; superior teacher qualifications; safe, secure, child-friendly environments; supportive direction through branded policies and procedures; and a strong commitment to and encouragement toward professional development. Even during the pandemic atmosphere of 2020 and 2021, we were committed to finding and filling gaps with teachers and resources. We were not letting team members go, because providing for the needs of the children and of our KLA community were just as necessary during those tough times. I believe that parents realize how important it is for their children to attend a preschool where they are the center of everything that happens. At KLA Schools, the children really are our focus, for the teachers and leaders at the schools, as well as for the staff in our corporate offices. We design, manage, organize, and exist for them.



And in listening to the cluster of KLA Schools in the Miami-Dade County area, several years ago we entertained a new and challenging idea: a Reggio Emilia-inspired primary school, taking the concepts, philosophy, and children-centered goals up from preschool to kindergarten and then all the way to fifth grade.

It would be another huge effort to produce this KLA Academy.

I found the property, and we had the fortune to have world-renowned architect Trung Le to design the interior. Trung Le founded The Third Teacher+, an educational design consultancy known for incorporating multiple intelligences and learning styles in the design of education environments, and whose collaborative research experience resulted in the book, “The Third Teacher: 79 Ways You Can Use Design to Transform Teaching & Learning.” We spent three years in the design struggle, but the more difficult the process, the better the result. The collaboration of Trung Le with our administrative staff and

teacher-provided input produced an amazing flow, color scheme, and area coordination.

“Children have real understanding only of that which they invent themselves.”

—Jean Piaget,
psychologist and genetic epistemologist

Candy: During those three years of development, I again became nervous. Our climb was now reaching rarefied air. Of the hundreds and hundreds of Reggio Emilia-inspired schools in the world, fewer than a handful advance to grade levels beyond preschool. But such a school did exist in Italy, so our growing relationship (through our yearly trips) with the Reggio Children organization assisted us in philosophical grounding, providing a virtual treasure trove of ideas and practical applications.

We added one grade level per year until our KLA Academy elementary program was complete through fifth grade — actually, just this past spring!

Our children love it! KLA Schools inform practices at KLA Academy and, in turn, KLA Academy informs and inspires KLA Schools. This dynamic is priceless. In this infant to fifth-grade community, we see the invaluable advantage for research and longitudinal studies to support the effectiveness of the Reggio Emilia approach.

With the completion of the academy, we graduated its first class to middle school last year. And not only are Roberto and I corporate officers and co-owners, but we are KLA parents, as well. Our oldest child, also named Roberto, was among those first graduates. I can still picture him, entering our first KLA school back when he was only one; after a decade of experience, he graduated from the KLA Schools Academy.

Last year, we applied for his entry into middle school. On the day we received his acceptance letter, I excitedly told him the news. I expected him to be equally excited. But instead, he was wistful. I had not thought of the tremendous impact this moment would hold. He was leaving the only school he had known throughout his life from his earliest experiences. In that moment, I shared his subdued mood and in it recognized just how very special and, actually, glorious his KLA experience had been.

“Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn.”

—Loris Malaguzzi,
founder of the Reggio Emilia approach





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