

for instance, teachers learn to devise projects that will spark kids' thinking. They also spend time observing at top-notch preschools, where they can see for themselves what happens when lightbulbs switch on.

The day I visited Para Los Niños Child Development Center, an unprepossessing building on a skuzzy block in South LA, several preschool teachers were there as observers. That's understandable, for this prekindergarten is one of LAUP's best.³³

There are only so many ways to teach calculus or history, but when it comes to preschool the choices seem endless. The best teachers pull ideas from everywhere and engage the kids in art, hands-on experiments, and improvisational theater. Carmela Santiago is one of them. Like all the teachers at Para Los Niños, Santiago has adopted an educational approach that was developed in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia. To simplify a complex pedagogy, respect for the child is the central theme. "Authentic learning" comes from children's own curiosity and the ways they collaborate with their classmates. Teachers lend their expertise, provoking and stimulating learning while also documenting what the children are doing. And at every step parents are enlisted as participants. It's brilliant when done well, but easily messed up.³⁴

The Reggio Emilia philosophy emphasizes the natural over the artificial. The tables and chairs in Santiago's class were made of wood, not plastic; the dishes were pottery; and the couch could have come from grandma's house. Japanese banners were hanging from the ceiling, plants were blooming, and scores of photos chronicled what was happening in the classroom. Four adults, Santiago and three aides, were constantly talking with nineteen four-year-olds. Art plays a big part in the Reggio model. Few preschools allow children to venture beyond fingerpainting; here, a precocious artist, his

hands covered in paint, was pushing black and white paint rollers across a large sheet of construction paper on the floor. In the kitchen nook, Arturo and Felicia were engrossed in gluing their collages; Susana and Hector were using look-alike money to buy a pretend pizza, counting out the change. The class swung back and forth between Spanish and English. Almost all the children at Para Los Niños are Latino, as are two-thirds of the children in LAUP and 61 percent of the children in the school district, and many of them come from families where Spanish was the exclusive language.

Each teacher had adapted the Reggio pedagogy to make it work for her. Consistency resides not in the specific activities but in the approach—the grownups (a teacher, an aide, and a parent or two) talking with the children; kids working on their own or in small groups; and an endless variety of things to do, whether it's sculpting a zebra out of clay or manipulating a model of the human body. Reggio isn't something you can pick up from a book. That's why many of the teachers at Para Los Niños have made the pilgrimage to Italy, and it's why so many LAUP teachers spend time at this preschool. What's happening in these classes easily passes the Golden Rule test.

The most impressive accomplishment of LAUP, and the one most worthy of emulation, is the transformation of family-based child-care centers into preschools, not just in name but in fact. The fact that these centers still label themselves "child care" hints at the difficulty of the task. The stereotype of family-based care is *Abuela* Julia, Grandma Julia, a maternal figure who might have finished high school, rummaging among half a dozen toddlers in a living room scattered with coloring books, a few games, a couple of dolls, discarded milk cartons, and a big TV—in other words, the antithesis of good prekindergarten.³⁵