San Francisco’s La Scuola: Bilingual Education With an Italian Accent

Keenan Nachman, left, and his classmates at La Scuola learn the gender of animals in Italian. (Patricia Yollin/KQED)

By Patricia Yollin

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What’s the most beautiful thing about San Francisco? It’s a common question. But in this case the person asking it is Matteo Renzi, the prime minister of Italy. He’s querying students at La Scuola, an Italian immersion school in San Francisco that has just moved into a permanent new home on Fell Street.

Of course Renzi, who is dedicating the 13,000-square-foot building a few blocks from Alamo Square, is speaking Italian: “Qual’e la cosa più bella di San Francisco?”

“Il parco!” shouts one child, clearly a fan of the city’s parks.

“La Scuola!” yells another.
“The ice cream shop!” offers a third youngster.

But 7-year-old Keenan Nachman gets the biggest reaction: “The Eiffel Tower!”

The crowd erupts in laughter. It turns out Keenan had not heard the full question. But it doesn’t matter. He’s among friends.

“La Scuola is by far the best thing that’s ever happened to me and to my son and to my husband,” says Keenan’s mother, Lama Nachman, almost a week after the K-8 school was inaugurated on Sept. 22.

She’s a Palestinian from Kuwait who researches future technology for Intel. Her husband, Ramez Nachman, grew up in Syria and is a reliability science manager at Amazon Lab126. Both moved to the United States in the 1980s. Although they work in Silicon Valley, they live on Potrero Hill with Keenan, their only child.

They spent a long time searching for schools and finally found one in Marin County that was a terrible fit for Keenan. His mother says he became overly emotional, easily frustrated and much less interactive.

“Now he’s a different child,” she says. “Before, he was crying every morning on his way to school. Now, when he gets sick, he cries if I have to leave him at home. His flare-ups have calmed down, he’s not as agitated and he’s very comfortable at the school.”

He’s also more accepting of different ways of learning, Nachman says, and likes to do experiments.

One day she asked him what he loved about La Scuola. “He told me about his friends and then he said, ‘Something is really different there. All the parents care about all the kids, not just their kids.’ ”

By any measure, La Scuola is different.
Twelve years ago, it started out as a play group and evolved into a recreational program and then a fully licensed preschool. [La Piccola Scuola Italiana (The Little Italian School)](http://www.sfgate.com/magazine/article/Bay-Area-is-biggest-Little-Italy-for-preschools-3223154.php)

Now it’s not so little. The preschool in San Francisco’s Dogpatch neighborhood has 120 children, ranging in age from 18 months to 4½ years. In 2012, the elementary school opened at the same site. With 42 students so far, it extends from kindergarten through third grade and will grow by one grade a year until reaching eighth grade. The move to Fell Street — into the former home of the old Sacred Heart Grammar School — is a major milestone for La Scuola.

“Our community has changed incredibly,” says Valentina Imbeni, director of La Scuola, who was born in Modena, Italy.

Claudia Volpi, president of the board of directors, says: “Italian is the culture and the language that unites us. The food, music and architecture are Italian. But it has become a truly international school.”

In 40 percent of families, one or both parents are native Italians, Italian-Americans or have lived in Italy at some point. The other families consist of Italophiles and people who appreciate the benefits of bilingual education or the international mix of families — among whom 17 languages are spoken.

The school, officially known as La Scuola Internazionale di San Francisco, practices the [Reggio Emilia philosophy of education](http://www.thelittleschool.net/duke/5-big-ideas/reggio-approach), which took shape in the same region of Italy where Imbeni grew up.

“The child is the protagonist of the learning process,” Imbeni says. “The focus is on learning, not teaching, and there’s deep respect for the competence of the child.”

La Scuola is also on track to become an international elementary school in San Francisco: It’s a candidate for International Baccalaureate status and relies on a curriculum based on the IB’s Primary Years Programme, which exceeds the requirements mandated by the state.

The IB and Reggio Emilia approaches are compatible, emphasizing critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving within a safe and nurturing environment, where empathy and collaboration are valued.

San Francisco was Renzi’s initial stop during his first official visit to the United States — which also included an appearance at the United Nations and meetings with the Clintons and Obamas. In the Bay Area, he went to Twitter, Yahoo, Google, NASA and Stanford and met with tech leaders such as Marissa Mayer and Larry Page.

In that context, La Scuola might have seemed like a detour. But the 39-year-old Renzi — the youngest prime minister in the history of Italy — made it clear that the school is very much in keeping with the spirit of innovation that fuels the high-tech world.

“In this school, there is an ideal. And the ideal is to invest in high-quality education. This is the real challenge of changing the world,” the charismatic Italian leader tells the gathering of 300 or so people.

The kids are taking his visit in stride — unlike many of the adults, who jostle each other, jockey for position and scramble to snap selfies with the prime minister. Women in their 80s are swooning like schoolgirls, and a 40-something art curator jokes — after shaking hands with Renzi — that she’ll never wash her right hand again.
Nachman says she and her husband were not looking for an Italian immersion school. They were hoping to find a bilingual program, but an independent, project-based curriculum was more important. Now they're studying Italian. When Lama went to a conference in Rome last November, Keenan and his father came along. In restaurants, the boy was able to translate for his parents.

“He understands fully but in terms of speaking, he’s a bit self-conscious,” Nachman says. “When he’s not paying attention, it’s easier for him to speak.”

Arabic is the family's native language. Keenan spoke it until he was 3, his mother says, and then decided “he didn’t want to have anything to do with it.”

But after six months at La Scuola, his interest in Arabic revived.

“The school does these sessions every month for parents,” Nachman says. “They had one on bilingual education. It mentioned that once a child gets into a language, their acceptance of other languages grows as well.”

Keenan’s old school was “all about conforming and there was no flexibility,” she says. “Everything had to be a certain way.”

As a result, she was wary. Keenan's whole first year at La Scuola seemed too good to be true, she says, so she was continually looking for what was wrong. Instead, her first impression — “there were all these signs of happiness and comfort” — was reinforced.

“I’ve done startups,” Nachman says. “I love being part of them — the passion, the excitement, the hard work.”

Ironically, although the Reggio Emilia approach originated in Italy, it now has more cachet in the United States. Renzi says he’s hoping La Scuola will serve as a model for transforming education in Italy and he promised to return annually to check its progress.
“Italy is a capital of the past, and this area of the United States is a capital of the future,” Renzi says. “If we invest in education, we create possibilities for the future.”

For La Scuola, the investment is substantial. The private school is funded by donations and tuition — $21,300 a year for elementary school and a wider range for preschool, where about 100 students are on the waiting list. None of the teachers has more than 10 students. Parents are deeply involved — many shoveled dirt on weekends to get the school ready for the prime minister’s visit.

“They really keep us connected and actively participating,” says Noe Valley resident Josh Mogal, whose 6-year-old son, Aidan, entered La Scuola in kindergarten and is now in first grade.

Josh’s wife, Katy Mogal, who is head of user experience research for wearable technology company Jawbone, says she studied French for 12 years but couldn’t really speak it when she went to France. She wanted to give Aidan an earlier start than she had in learning a language.

“Initially, he’d come back at the end of the day and say, ‘They’d talk to me and I didn’t understand what they were saying. It’s so boring.’ That didn’t last long — about a month,” says Josh Mogal, whose company buys and rebuilds old Victorians.

“At this point Aidan’s really good,” he adds. “He sang me the Italian national anthem the other day and it was flawless.”

Asked for his assessment of La Scuola, Aidan says: “I love it. And, um, the art field trips that they do are really fun, and the lunch is sometimes really good, and we get to make art that is really beautiful.”

Aidan’s mother says her son seems to have a lot more global awareness than friends his age in other schools. That’s important to the Mogals. For years, she lived in England and Japan. And her husband attended a U.N. school in New York when he was growing up. His Spanish teachers were from Argentina and his two best friends in third grade were from Saudi Arabia and Indonesia.

“Being a citizen of the world was a given,” he says. He wants the same thing for his son — and so do the people who run La Scuola.

“California is a dot on the Earth,” says Volpi, who grew up in Uruguay and New York but whose grandparents on both sides are Italian. Her Milan-born husband was raised in Tokyo. Their 4-year-old son goes to preschool at La Scuola.

The International Baccalaureate program is built around units of inquiry, or themes, that run through every subject. Community is the current theme. Last year, students focused on light.

“In science they studied where light comes from and how light bulbs get made,” Katy Mogal says. “They went to the Exploratorium, which had an exhibit on light. In art they would go to the park at different times of the day and paint. And they’d see how the placement of the sun changed the light and made you see different colors. They weave these themes into the whole curriculum, so it really brings it to life for the kids.”

On the last Thursday of the month, La Scuola’s kindergartners are learning addition and subtraction by focusing on September. “How many days of school have there been?” asks teacher Paola Dieci.

“Venti (20),” the students shout in unison.
In Aidan’s art class in the atelier, children are drawing. In Keenan’s Italian class, they’re figuring out the gender of animals. He proudly puts *il lupo* (the wolf) at the top of his list.

Across town in the Dogpatch preschool, children are eating a lunch of *strisce di pollo, riso fritto, spicchi di patate arrosto, insalata e frutta* — chicken strips, fried rice, roast potatoes, salad and fruit — all cooked at the school. They’re using ceramic bowls, real glasses and silverware.

“They are perfectly capable,” Volpi says. “We do not need to dumb them down.”

There are almost 30 teachers at La Scuola. For most, Italian is their mother tongue. The others, such as Ginny Smith, speak with the fluency of natives.

In Smith’s preschool classroom last year, the students raised land snails next to aquarium snails.

“By the end of the year they loved *lumache,*” she says. “They each got a miniature terrarium, and they could raise snails or release them.”

In another project — which got its start when students learned a classmate’s father was from Naples — they built a model of the volcanic eruption that had destroyed ancient Pompeii. When the year ended, two families visited Pompeii at the insistence of their children.

Italian is spoken 100 percent in preschool and 80 percent K-2. Grades 3-5 will be divided equally between English and Italian. For sixth through eighth grade, Italian will comprise 30 percent of the curriculum. This video (http://vimeo.com/88830723) shows what life is currently like at La Scuola.

Mauro Battocchi (http://www.sfgate.com/default/article/Mauro-Battocchi-Italian-ambassador-4161833.php), Italy’s consul general in San Francisco, says the school represents a new paradigm for the promotion of Italian language and culture in the United States.

“It is as innovative as San Francisco is in general for technology and culture,” he says. “La Scuola is perfect not only for Italian families, but also for American parents who aspire to offer their children a rigorous education based on creative thinking and beauty.”
The playground at La Scuola’s new Fell Street campus in San Francisco is a very popular place.
(Patricia Yollin/KQED)

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Pat Yollin has written about all kinds of stuff, including wayward penguins at the San Francisco Zoo, organ transplants, the comeback of the cream puff, New York on the fifth anniversary of 9/11, a Slow Food gathering in Italy and the microcredit movement in Northern California. Among her favorite stories: an interview with George Lucas at Skywalker Ranch, a profile of Italy’s consul general in SF, and a pirate Trader Joe’s operation in Vancouver that prompted the grocery chain to sue -- and lose.