

‘SEPARATE BUT EQUAL’, SEGREGATED OR STYMIED?  
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING ISSUES IN SOUTH TYROL

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**1. Introduction**

The Italian province of South Tyrol, with its mixed Italian-, German- and Ladin-speaking communities, is situated just south of the border between Austria and northern Italy. In this mixed border region, identity negotiation and association, whether referring to language or culture, play a large part in establishing perceptions of self (Urciuoli 1995). My research is partially concerned with the modalities and construction of such linguistic identities, but it also concentrates on how second language acquisition between local community members is acquired in a region that practices ‘separate but equal’ education.

While the German- and Ladin-speaking communities have received a certain (though not excessive) amount of attention already from anthropology and allied disciplines, the local Italian-speaking community has not. Therefore, this article will try to bring to light not only the latter’s concerns regarding the German-speaking community, but also educational issues that are relevant in the Italian-speaking community.<sup>2</sup>

The objective is to understand some of the reasons why many South Tyrolean students are having difficulty in engaging themselves in the second language spoken in South Tyrol. While much theoretical research on second language acquisition has focused on factors such as anxiety, motivation and perceived attitudes towards language learning in general (Ellis 1994, Gardner 1985, Horwitz et al. 1986), little research (if any) has been done on understanding how the role of history in South Tyrol assists in creating mental ‘blocks’ preventing second language acquisition from occurring in a region that is technically bilingual.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this article, I will not be focusing on the Ladin-speaking citizens of South Tyrol, but rather on the linguistic tensions between its German- and Italian-speaking citizens. The German-speaking citizens of South Tyrol make up two-thirds of the population and Italian-speaking citizens less than one-third of the population (Woelk 2001: 2). The Ladin-speaking citizens are confined to a small regional area within the Dolomites (Alcock 2001; Woelk 2001) that accounts for only four percent of the South Tyrolean population. For more information on the Ladin-speaking people, see Cesare Poppi’s work, *The Ladins: people of the pale mountains* (2001).

## 2. Language identity and local prejudices

In order to make sense of language-learning issues in South Tyrol between its German- and Italian-speaking residents, local journalists Giudiceandrea and Mazza refer to a key concern regarding the difficulties that can occur in second language learning: by learning another language, one is essentially opening oneself up to another culture (2012: 74). Because the history of South Tyrol is riddled with linguistic controversy and political struggle, 'language identity' takes on a new meaning for those who are required to learn the second language. 'When speaking a new language, one is adopting' the identity markers of another group, 'which can be a source of enrichment or a source of resentment', depending on how the two speech communities view their second language-speaking neighbours (Lightbrown and Spada 1999: 56).

The Italian-speaking community has made quite an impression on South Tyrol since it was ceded to Italy by Austria in the 1920s. Political objectives on the part of the Fascist Party enforced the Italian language on the German-speaking community, resulting in 'imposed monolingualism' (Giudiceandrea and Mazza 2012: 79) in German-speaking schools. As a result of these past historical objectives, while many German-speakers have maintained a decent knowledge of Italian, there still remain those German-speakers who carry the 'wounds' of the past. While attempts have been made over the course of several years to promote inter-communal integration through second language acquisition, the social distance between German- and Italian-speakers is still felt throughout the region, including in education.

According to researchers Susan Gass and Larry Selinker, an affinity is needed with the target language group and culture in order to prevent a distancing from its speakers (2001: 332). If negative perspectives of the second language community are maintained, this creates a language distance enclosed within boundaries, which are further magnified when language groups develop stereotypes and prejudices towards their second language-speaking associates (Richard-Amato 2003: 112; Giudiceandrea and Mazza 2012: 81). Consequently, there is truth in Austrian educationalist and multilingual researcher Dietmar Larcher asserting that 'nothing is more difficult than to learn the language of your neighbour'<sup>3</sup> (cited in Giudiceandrea and Mazza *ibid.*); if one speech community does not have a genuine interest in its neighbours, its members may never fully acquire the region's second language.

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<sup>3</sup> Taken from Aldo Mazza's *Per imparare la lingua del vicino*, 1992.

Subsequently there have been attempts by educational professionals to modify the language system by promoting better language-learning policies to foster inter-group communication. But before these language policies can be put into effect, local students must move past their social boundaries by addressing the consequences that some students express, partially as a result of local histories.

### **3. History and structure of the education system**

South Tyrol, which is historically situated just south of the Austrian border, acts as a sort of regional buffer zone between the German- and Italian-speaking communities. The province, which is home to three linguistic communities (Ladin-, Italian- and German-speakers), has experienced regional conflict since the nineteenth century, when the area was under Habsburg rule (Eichinger 2002: 137-8). Territorial friction between Austria and Italy occurred during and after both world wars because the territorial border was moved southwards as a result of political negotiations (Alcock 1970, 2001). Those German-speaking inhabitants of South Tyrol who became a part of the Kingdom of Italy were not provided with autonomy or minority protection, even though ‘public appeal by political parties characterized South Tyrol as a “victim of a peace treaty”’ that denied the right to self-determination (Steininger 2003: 5-6; Alcock 2001, Kager 1998). South Tyrol was eventually annexed by Italy on 10 October 1920. The annexation, according to Steininger, was considered an “abomination” before the eyes of history’ (2003: 6). Tyrolean representative Eduard Reut-Nicolussi stated that the cession of South Tyrol to Italy would signal the beginning of a desperate and unequal struggle between the German- and Italian-speaking communities (ibid.: 5).

Almost one hundred years later, the local linguistic communities still find themselves striving for linguistic equilibrium. After World War I, a new education system was established in South Tyrol after Mussolini encouraged the Fascist occupation of what was originally a German-speaking province. The newly promoted Fascist school system, designed as a monolingual system for the promotion of the Italian language, was largely created to eradicate the use of the German language from regular, ordinary discourse.

It was only on 5 September 1946, when the Paris Agreement was signed between Austria and Italy, that German and Italian were both permitted as languages of instruction in South Tyrolean elementary and secondary schools (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 235; Fraenkel-Haeberle 2008: 261). The agreement implemented separate language school systems for the German- and Italian-speaking communities. In order to reinforce mother-

tongue fluency in both languages, German- and Italian-speaking students were required to attend the school of their mother tongue. Teachers were hired for the separate school systems based on their own mother-tongue proficiency. Language instruction in the other provincial language was also obligatory for both school systems (Hannum 1996: 437).

In 1972, Article 19 of the Second Autonomy Statute mandated that three separate but parallel school systems be established for the German-, Italian- and Ladin-speaking communities. The German- and Italian-speaking school systems required that primary and secondary school education be taught in the mother tongue, while the Ladin-speaking school system had courses taught equally in both German and Italian (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 235; Abel 2007: 237; Second Autonomy Statute 1972, Article 19).

Article 19, followed by Presidential Decree No. 116 of 1973, also permitted the introduction of a ‘largely separated education policy’ (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 243) converting the original education office, or *Provveditorato agli Studi*, into three independent education offices for the Ladin-, German- and Italian-speaking communities respectively. After the Paris Accord of 5 September 1946, this agreement allowed all German-speakers to be guaranteed mother-tongue instruction in German in elementary and secondary education (Alber 2011: 3; Baur and Medda-Windischer *ibid.*). One of the objectives of the new policy was to re-establish the German-speaking language and culture, which before 1946 had been endangered due to the Italianization language policies that had come into force in South Tyrol during the Fascist period (*ibid.*: 244). These actions resulted in the German-speaking school system making efforts in the direction of monolingualism in school instruction for the sake of German language preservation. Monoculturalism was another educational directive, since many German-speaking South Tyroleans felt that their culture had previously been under threat (*ibid.*).

The aim of the reformed education system was to preserve the German and Ladin languages (Alber 2011: 5). The system was divided into three language sectors to ‘preserve the German mother tongue against “foreign” influences’ (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 237). The historical upheaval of the German- and Ladin-speaking populations resulted in a ‘separate but equal’ language policy whereby separate school systems for the Italian-, German- and Ladin-speakers were created to preserve not only minority languages but also local cultures.

On 28 July 2003, the predominately German-speaking provincial government of South Tyrol adopted a package of measures for second language acquisition. Point 4 of the package emphasized the importance of having a fluent basis in the mother tongue before learning the

second language (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 246). Criticisms, however, were made by researchers Baur and Medda-Windischer, who stated that, although learning the mother tongue is important, it is not a prerequisite for second language acquisition (*ibid.*). Research on early bilingual education conducted by Dr Patricia Kuhl (2010) indicates that multilingual language learning is quite possible during infancy, but after the age of seven, the critical period for learning languages becomes increasingly difficult, so much so that after the age of puberty, 'we fall off the [language learning] map' (see Lightbrown and Spada 1999: 30).

Despite these findings, on 12 December 2003 the 13th Legislature presented the concept of 'Free Choice' to the Provincial Committee of Bolzano. The South Tyrolean education system permits parents to place their children in the school system of their choosing (Alber 2011: 6). However, students can be refused admission if their language skills in the second or third language (required by the chosen school) do not meet native language proficiency, which some schools require as part of the admissions process (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 236; Abel 2007: 237). Parents can challenge the school's decision not to accept their child into a particular school before the Administrative Court, but it is only in recent years that the school system, and more specifically the German-speaking school system, has become more flexible in allowing non-mother-tongue German-speakers to attend German-speaking schools (Baur and Medda-Windischer *ibid.*).

Although the school system is designed to fulfil the principle of separation and monolingual instruction between German and Italian language learning, some parents and politicians are pushing for a more integrated education system (Alber 2011: 1, 11). In 2008, German-speaking parents and Italian-speaking politicians began asking for new teaching methods in second language acquisition of the other provincial language, along with the promotion of English as a third language in school education (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 237; Alber 2011: 1, 11). Some Italian-speaking parents, as well as teachers and students, also expressed an interest in trilingual schooling as recently as 2004, but the Italian-speaking provincial assessor at the time, Luisa Gnechi, raised objections to trilingual education. Despite support for the idea from the German-speaking superintendent, Bruna Rauzi, Gnechi was concerned at the financial costs and knew that adequate procedures to prepare trilingual teachers were outside the bounds of what their schools could offer (Giudiceandrea 2007: 23, 29).

Nevertheless, interviews with parents suggested that they were starting to see cultural and linguistic advantages in having both a German- and an Italian-speaking background. Many adults cannot work in public office without a fluent understanding of both languages

due to the Second Autonomy Statute of 1972 (Giudiceandrea 2007: 23). This has encouraged some families to push for bilingual language fluency at a younger age, as well as to support better methods of immersion teaching. According to Enrico Hell, as many as 23 percent of Italian-speaking families in 2008 chose to place their children in German-speaking education (Hell 2008a), while January 2014 showed a dramatic decrease in the number of Italian-speaking parents enrolling their children in Italian-speaking nurseries for the 2014/ 2015 school year. In the words of the South Tyrolean Provincial Councillor Alessandro Urzì, Italian and mixed families [i.e. families of both German- and Italian-speaking ancestry] will always be more inclined to gravitate towards German-speaking nursery schools, as Italian-speaking parents are constantly dissatisfied with the second language learning options in Italian-speaking education. There is a belief:

that placing children in the German-speaking classroom is a kind of investment for the future, and nursery school is considered an ideal context for the initial immersion in the second language.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, surveys conducted as far back as the 1970s show that German- and Italian-speaking South Tyroleans were aware of the values of promoting bilingualism in order to ‘[enhance] cross-group interaction’ (Kaplan 1999: 52). But Francesco Palermo, representative of the Trento-South Tyrol region for the Italian Republican Senate, goes even further by stating that Italian-speaking parents (and in some cases, German-speaking parents) place their children in the school of the second language not necessarily in order to promote better movement between the two cultures, but because there is no satisfactory bilingual option in South Tyrolean education (2012: 71) to prepare students for civil service positions.

Like personal observations made between 2011 and 2012, these figures partially reflect the demands made by parents for better second language proficiency in South Tyrolean schools, but they also suggest that the current second language acquisition methods being taught in some Italian-speaking schools are not being well received by some Italian-speaking parents. As Hell goes on to state, these percentages act as ‘a sign that something [in education] is not working’ (2008b).

In response to the possibility of introducing ‘immersion teaching’ techniques, Alber referred to the belief among some members of the German-speaking community that

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<sup>4</sup> See Luca Sticcotti’s article, ‘A Bolzano scuole materne italiane senza alunni?’ (29 January 2014). Available at: <<http://salto.bz/it/article/29012014/bolzano-scuole-materne-italiane-senza-alunni>> [accessed 8 January 2015].

proficiency in one's mother tongue was necessary in order to prevent 'the threat to [mixing] up languages and assimilation' (Alber 2011: 11). Although this view is not held by all members of the German-speaking community, the German-speaking school system has always been at the core of language policy in South Tyrol for the sake of language preservation against outside foreign linguistic influences intruding into the German language (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 236, 237, 244). Even as bilingualism was becoming more highly valued by German-speaking parents during the course of my fieldwork, several German-speaking political representatives had reservations about bilingual instruction and language immersion.

#### **4. The 'block' in second language acquisition**

Along with these reservations, several interviewees insisted that, despite parental attempts to promote bilingual learning, there was a 'block' that was 'preventing' students from acquiring the second language.

While on a train to Verona, I spoke with one of my high-school students, Ashley, about this supposed language learning 'block'. She told me that, when she moved to Bolzano from Trento, she had noticed contrasts between Bolzanino students who came from Italian-speaking backgrounds and students who came from the Trentino region, who were also Italian mother-tongue speakers.

When I go to Germany I have no problem speaking German, but when I'm in South Tyrol...I dunno...for South Tyrolean Italian-speakers [in Bolzano] they have a blocked side and they don't want to speak German even if they can, which I find very strange...

For many students attending courses in Bolzano, there was a cultural inhibition that some students felt discouraged second language acquisition. It was this 'block' that prevented some students from wanting to learn the second language, as opposed to those students who had grown up in other Italian regions. According to Ashley, the 'block' existed for a variety of historical reasons, which may have explained why older generations were less inclined to learn the second language. In Trento, approximately sixty kilometres south of Bolzano, she described the linguistic situation as quite different because the local Italian-speaking population did not have historical prejudices towards the German-speaking community. Therefore students from Trento who studied German were described as having an easier

transition when switching languages because there was less reticence towards and more acceptance of German-speaking people and their culture.

In so far as historical influences contributed to this language learning 'block', Kager states that recent South Tyrolean history has affected relations in respect of local communication between three language groups. Despite the linguistic richness that pervades the area, along with increasing touristic interest in the region, these factors are undervalued by cultural conditions which cause language communities to 'preserve a distance' from each other (Peterlini 2013: 267).

During the history of the South Tyrol question, both [language groups] developed a strong [linguistic] solidarity. Both groups, and especially the German/Ladin community, were well aware that their chances of survival depended on the unity of the group. German and Ladin-speakers were opposed to anything which might expose the group to Italian cultural assimilation tendencies. The result was a segregation policy: one goes to a school of one's group.... (Kager 1998)

This residue of anti-colonialist thinking in opposition to the Italian Fascist movement emphasized linguistic superiority amongst the German- and Ladin-speaking locals. The fact that their cultures were considered 'less than equal in the social (un)conscious' by the Italian-speaking community (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 239-240) increased conflicts between all three language groups and blocked language learning attempts that could have reduced internal local factions. Attitudes pitting the 'colonialized' against the 'colonializer' had continuing social affects that made learning the second language a more difficult process based on people's perceptions of social, historical and political circumstances (Lanthaler 2007: 234).

#### *4.1 Local myths of self*

Identity construction also played an important part in whether the members of one speech community would communicate with the members of others. Certain perceptions of minority groups as documented in local history may have prevented some citizens from wanting to learn the language of their neighbours.

These historical labels of the 'other', according to local journalist Hans Karl, contributed to the language learning 'block'. The self-labelling arose from historical circumstances as

early as the First World War, when the German-speaking group played the role of ‘the victim’ and the Italian-speaking group played the role of ‘the conqueror’. These ‘blocks’, he stated, were another set of elements that impeded second language learning when the two main language groups were forced to live together in an environment that was originally Austrian.

Latin American history, Hans Karl explained, was riddled with postcolonial guilt in which the Spanish-speaking ‘winners’ were never free from the shame of the transgressions that resulted from the eradication of local languages, indigenous culture and property. He stated that, similarly, in public debates the Italian-speaking group suffered from a ‘cultural and linguistic wall’ in that, although unaware of their internal guilt regarding the ‘other’ group, historically they were unable to allow themselves to move beyond their cultural and linguistic differences from the other community.

While these myths of the self are generalizations and do not apply to every individual, Hans Karl felt that one’s sense of identity in comparison to the ‘other’ could influence second language learning. For Italian-speakers arriving from Calabria, learning German would not be impossible, but for Italian-speaking children of South Tyrol there was a psychological block which made learning German an impossible task which they had difficulty overcoming. According to Hans Karl, the Italian children ‘drag behind them the historical weight of the “unjust conqueror”’, preventing them from moving beyond these cultural and historical obstacles:

Whoever conquers has difficulty stepping out of the vest of the conqueror...to drop these symbols of the conqueror would seem like a loss of right to the conqueror’s land....

This suggests that in learning German the Italian-speaker is inadvertently relinquishing his or her right to South Tyrol by allowing his or her sense of space to be shared by two nations instead of one. Although this interpretation of German- and Italian-speaking identities could be construed as somewhat radical (especially since German is viewed by some Italian-speakers as a necessary language for work in the local civil service), it is worth recognizing how certain individuals, like Hans Karl, choose to identify their personal ‘place’ within the social spectrum.

As a German-speaker herself, my colleague Beatrix agreed with Hans Karl that language learning can be a ‘psychological thing’:

If I make mistakes in English, who cares? Nobody cares. But if I speak Italian, the pressure to do it perfectly is much higher. It's not about mistakes. It's about yourself wanting to be better. If I go to Rome in front of a professional, [I] want to be perfect in Italian.

She attributed these concerns towards language learning perfection as another layer to this 'block'. There is a sort of expectation that people set for themselves if they really care about the language. Even her Italian-speaking colleagues have expressed the same issues with German because there is an internal pressure to speak it better than English. But unfortunately, due to historical reasons and the local topography of the region, students found it difficult to search for opportunities to immerse themselves in the other languages. Sports clubs, churches and schools have historically always been parallel but divided (Kager 1998), which means that students will not automatically have friends from the 'other' group. In addition, some German-speaking parents do not have the time or energy to encourage their children to mix with other language groups if the latter have already made German-speaking friends in the monolingual German-speaking clubs.

Nevertheless, Beatrix insisted that this 'block' was becoming less obvious, while the superintendent of the German-speaking school system, Peter Hoellrigl, contended that these varied cultural differences had always been in existence. 'It is a matter of Goethe versus Dante, of Beethoven versus Vivaldi', sentiments that have coexisted for years. From Hoellrigl's perspective Bolzano is a region where the people are very strong and stubborn. People from outside are impressed by the region because of its multicultural atmosphere, but when one studies the deeper layers that make up the entirety of South Tyrol, one sees a region that is very proud of its language, historical background and traditions. Even if outsiders are encouraged by the various languages spoken in South Tyrol, the internal local response cautions 'Yes, and look how quickly we can lose our identity if we allow ourselves to mix to the point that we do not have a solid foundation'.

#### *4.2 Other contributors to the 'block'*

As a result, this 'block' has brought with it a variety of interpretations in that, for one set of people, it could represent political confrontations between local political groups, while for another set of people it could represent the internal structure of the varied 'separate but equal' education system. However, Dr Drumbi, Professor of German at the Free University of

Bolzano, believed that it was the structure of the education system, and not so much the history, that contributed to these ‘blocks’. It was the fault of the students and the fault of the parents in not encouraging language at home, as well as the structure of the Italian-speaking school system, that interrupted further language learning. According to Drumbl, the Italian language programme’s focus on grammar and memorization prevented students from understanding the deeper meanings behind language learning. Drumbl claimed that language teachers in Italian schools were unhelpful and unwilling to ‘think outside the box’. He explained that language teachers in Italian-speaking schools were reluctant to look at other models of language acquisition and that these elements, outside of politics, had created an education system that was not helpful for those students who wanted to advance in the second language. In Drumbl’s opinion Italian students were unable to see the application behind language learning because they had not learned the skills necessary to apply their knowledge of grammar and memorization to the wider social context.

Nevertheless, Italian-speaking politician Dr Christian Tommasini implied in an interview that the ‘block’ is the result of the parents’ influence on their children. If students thought that relations between Germans and Italians were hostile or disrupted in some way, research ‘suggests that students form their own opinions of intergroup relations in South Tyrol [based on the opinions] of their family’ (Abel et al. 2012: 70). As a result, these viewpoints made it harder for students to acquire a decent understanding of the other local language if their parents maintained negative stereotypes of other local minorities. In Tommasini’s case, his parents were Italian nationalists and thought negatively about the German-speaking group. However, as he grew older he stepped away from their adverse social conventions and married a German-speaking South Tyrolean. He also became an advocate of bilingual language teaching for children in the South Tyrolean school system. Even though he is aware that there are locals who remain reluctant to accept language assimilation policies, he identified a need for the community to move past this language ‘block’ in order to be linguistically integrated into an open European Union. However, some locals are afraid that language assimilation policies could lead to the loss of their culture and that introducing a bilingual education system could be interpreted as a threat to local identity.

Despite these concerns, many parents have opted for ‘Free Choice’ in education in order to move past these ‘historical, sociological and psychological preconceptions’ (Baur and Medda-Windischer 2008: 241). As mentioned previously, the ‘Free Choice’ option in local education (an aspect addressed below) has provided parents with an alternative to monolingual learning by placing their children in a school of their own preference. Although

this concept of 'Free Choice' comes with some political complications, many children attend schools in the second language. While some parents would prefer not to expose their children to the second language of the region, the German-speaking Director of Distribution, Dr Andergassen, estimated that 'out of five thousand people, only five would choose not to have their children learn another language, and those people are usually politicians.'

Since children in South Tyrol are given a choice as to which school they would like to attend, Dr Andergassen believes that this 'Free Choice' reduces the language learning 'block' to some extent. If the 'Free Choice' option were to be replaced with multilingual schools, then students would be 'forced' to attend courses in the second language. 'It's about equality for everyone', continued Andergassen, 'and if students have the choice over which school they can attend, then students will be more equipped for better fluency, promoting second language acquisition.' In Trento, for example, he stated that there is a greater desire amongst students to learn German due to them being given the choice over whether to participate or not. 'If students *have to* learn a language, then they *won't want to*', suggesting that enforced second language learning causes further complications in second language acquisition by contributing to this 'block'.

### **5. Is 'Free Choice' in education really a free choice?**

But is Andergassen correct in assuming that students would benefit from separate education? Or is it an attempt by local politicians to mitigate the language learning issues?

'Free Choice', which was adopted in 1972 as a result of the Second Autonomy statutes (see Alber 2011: 6), gave parents the flexibility to enrol their children in any school that they felt was most appropriate. Within the course of a few years, many parents took this 'rule' and applied it to second language acquisition. If technically by law the child had the right to attend any school within the province, then legally the child could attend another school where the language of instruction was the second language. For Italian-speaking parents, the Second Autonomy statute allowed them to overcome legal barriers (Peterlini 2013: 124), which previously forbade Italian-speaking students from attending the German-speaking education system.

When examining the concept of the 'Free Choice' regulation, which is supposedly mentioned in the statutes, further probing reveals that the concept of 'Free Choice' is not explicitly discussed in legislation. Instead, it says in Article 19 (paragraph 1) of the Second Autonomy statute that the student has the right to learn in his or her mother tongue by means of teachers of the mother tongue. Paragraph 3, which supposedly refers to the 'Free Choice'

principle in education, states that the “enrolment of a pupil in schools in the Province of Bolzano shall follow a simple application by the father or guardian” (Alber 2011: 6-7; Peterlini 1997: 198). In the event of a school refusing to admit a child into an institution, the father or guardian can challenge the school’s refusal before the regional court of administrative justice<sup>5</sup> (ibid.). Consequently, while the words ‘Free Choice’ are not explicitly addressed in the autonomy statutes, the liberal interpretation of Article 19 (paragraph 3) is still referred to as the ‘Free Choice’ principle.

However, despite parental attempts to use the ‘Free Choice’ option to enrol their children into second language-speaking schools, in 2008 the ruling German party, or South Tyrolean People’s Party (SVP), expressed dissatisfaction with the number of Italian-speaking students in German-speaking education. To counteract this ‘problem’, the SVP stressed the importance of language tests in nursery schools (Hell 2008b), implying that all Italian-speaking students must take a language assessment test to be accepted into German education. According to the SVP, an excess of Italian-speaking students in German-speaking education created a ‘disturbance’ (ibid.). Therefore, these language tests could ‘purify’ the German schooling system from the influence of ‘Italian and immigrant children’ (Peterlini 2013: 272).

To support the party’s needs for language assessment tests, the SVP referred to a presidential decree passed in 1988.<sup>6</sup> In the decree it states that in the event a child is unable to follow a school’s language of instruction (so much so that the child compromises the efficiency of regular instruction in the classroom), the child will be subject to a probationary period of 20 to 25 days at the start of the school year. During that time, the child will be assessed by the committee and school council to determine whether or not s/he can stay in school. If the committee and the school board decide to refuse the child’s enrolment into a particular school, the child will be required to attend another school where instruction is in ‘the other language’ (Peterlini 1997: 198-199; Peterlini 2010: 158-159; see Alber 2011: 7; Hell 2008b).

That said, this decree does not mandate the enforcement of language tests in schools, but it does stress that parents are entitled to appeal against the school’s decision to the Bolzano Regional Court of Administrative Justice (Peterlini 1997: 199; Alber 2011: 7; Hell 2008b). In one such instance, a German-speaking mother wrote a formal complaint in response to South

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<sup>5</sup> See the Second Autonomy Statute (1972) Article 19, paragraphs 1 and 3 for more details.

<sup>6</sup> This presidential decree is also referred as DPR 15 July 1988, no. 301 seen here: <[http://www.consiglio.provincia.tn.it/documenti\\_pdf/clex\\_10845.pdf](http://www.consiglio.provincia.tn.it/documenti_pdf/clex_10845.pdf)> aAccessed 23 July 2013].

Tyrol's 'legal institutionalization of ethnicity'. Her son, who was raised in a bilingual household, 'was cared for by an Italian-speaking childminder' (Marko 2008: 386). Upon enrolling her child in a German-speaking kindergarten, the school placed her child on probation for 25 days because s/he was in contact with Italian-speakers. According to the school, it wanted to determine that the child had 'a competent knowledge of German' (ibid.). In response to the school policy, the mother wrote a note, which was published in a weekly magazine.

[When speaking Italian] [i]t is almost as if one speaks of an infectious illness and not of an enrichment. Did you know that many children are thereby hindered from learning good German even though it is the language of one of their parents? On the one hand, you [officials and school administration] speak highly of justice; on the other hand, you allow such rules. This can never really lead to an understanding between the language groups.<sup>7</sup>

When interviewing Donna, she explained that, while in theory South Tyroleans have a 'choice' in education, there is a fear in German circles of increased immersion education, which could lead to a bilingual schooling system. In her opinion:

The problem lies with politicians who impede language groups from finding a commonality. The language groups, as a whole, do not have problems with immersion education. They speak the other local languages. Some say, 'We're Italian, so we must speak Italian', and others say, 'This is South Tyrol'. And the thing is: nobody forgets the language of their own culture. But there is this fear of losing your roots.... [And] nowadays we have this added drama because we have to choose either a German or Italian school for our children. Why do we have to choose? I was born here, and I'm used to living in an area that's bilingual. If I go to a café and someone talks to me in German, I respond to them in German. It's not a problem. It's a wonderful thing to be able to speak in another language, and it makes it easier to communicate.

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<sup>7</sup> See Anon 2001 and Marko 2008: 386 for more information.

But unfortunately, not all locals would agree with Donna's opinions of bilingual education, which is why many parents are constantly debating over which language school to decide on for their children. Since some parents and politicians have mild trepidations over the effects of second language-speakers in their schools, the question then arises: 'Is the concept of "Free Choice" as "free" as politicians would suggest?'

## 6. Conclusion and analysis

As a result, the current 'separate but equal' education system in South Tyrol continues to try to appease both language groups. Some parents are asking for better language learning methods, while others would prefer more segregation. Consequently schooling methods, like the 'Free Choice' system, act as a means to avoid confrontation, while simultaneously 'Free Choice', as a language learning system, does not provide bilingual education.

Consequently there are concerns as to whether the school system is addressing students' needs in second language learning, especially when students are expressing their concerns over language learning 'blocks' in education. With local politicians like those in the German SVP wanting to safeguard their own identity, this need to 'preserve' may only magnify historical attitudes towards the 'Other'.

Therefore school officials may need to readdress the problems that are faced in education by taking into account many of the views and observations described above concerning second language acquisition. Since history has repercussions for generations and can impact on how neighbours live with each other, these social 'blocks' must be dealt with at the schooling level so students can move past these mental hurdles. However, based on recent fieldwork, my data suggest that there is no collective will to solve this problem. And until the politicians, educators, administrators and parents find a solution to this issue, it may take several years for the system to become one of 'equal', bilingual education.

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