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# Policy Statements Versus Social Outcomes: An American Analyzing Assessment in France

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## **Policy Statements Versus Social Outcomes: An American Analyzing Assessment in France**

### **Introduction: An American Researcher in Paris**

I became interested in the concept of testing early in my educational studies career. Specifically, while observing in classrooms in Hartford, Connecticut, I was exposed to academic environments where much of the curriculum and classroom conversation was directed to students taking the Connecticut Mastery Test. My interests were further heightened after reading literature on testing. High-stakes testing is controversial in America and has contributed to the existing achievement gap, as Diane Ravitch explained in *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (2010) and *Reign of Error* (2013). Additionally, assessment is highly debated in United States policy. Congress enacted No Child Left Behind in America, establishing standardized testing as the primary measure of school quality, student learning, and teacher effectiveness. Although testing can be a necessary measurement of school performance, many argue that the uniform, centralized process of testing in America places too much emphasis on results and not enough on student learning. Therefore, it is interesting to research how assessment is perceived and practiced in other nations, such as France.

With this in mind, I took an interest in assessment while studying in Paris, France in the spring of 2015. While in Paris, I had the opportunity to observe classroom sessions in a French middle school called Parisian International Bilingual School<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter PIBS). My observations inspired me to question how the French system of assessment affects students, teachers, schools, and society. While conducting my research, I soon recognized my American misunderstandings about the French educational system. Unlike the American system, French students are subject to standardized testing only twice in their educational careers. The first time

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym to ensure confidentiality

is the Brevet exam administered in the final year of middle school and the second is the Baccalaureate exam at the end of high school. I tried to draw parallels between the two cultures based on my own personal framework and familiarity with American methods. Although my cultural misassumptions resulted from my experience in the American educational system, this mistake also shaped the way I thought about and executed the rest of my research by inspiring me to focus on the French middle school exit exam, formally known as the *Brevet des college*, which I refer to simply as the Brevet.

My research project will investigate the questions: What is the stated purpose of the Brevet exam in French education, and how do educators interpret these expectations in the French middle school, PIBS? What are the social consequences of the Brevet exam? This research question will address testing, a major component of education in many (but not all) nations of the world, from an international perspective. Ultimately, this will allow readers to consider the process of assessment differently, and expand their own personal framework, just as it did for me.

To address my research question, I analyzed the sharp contrast between the stated purpose of the Brevet in policy and the consequential social outcomes of the exam. The stated purpose of the Brevet exam is relatively simple; to ascertain that students have learned what they are supposed to by the end of middle school. On the one hand, the official policies, as well as interviews with French educators and a student, portray the exam as low-stakes with very few academic consequences for failure. On the other hand, performance on the Brevet is widely reported in French news publications and social media, revealing a wide social following, pressure for students to succeed, and social stigma if students fail to perform. This disparity between purpose and consequences can be explained by the increased accessibility to exam

scores due to online news reports and the explosion of social media. The convenience of the internet causes the contrast between the Brevet's purpose and social consequences, resulting in a results-based societal fixation with the exam.

### **Background: The French System of Education**

In order to discuss the Brevet exam, it is first necessary to explain the French educational system. By law, students must attend school until age sixteen, to include five to seven years of elementary school, four years of middle school, and three years of high school. Students can attend public schools or opt to apply to private schools. After middle school, students must apply for high school and the application process is mandatory for all schools, including public and private. There are two types of high schools that students can attend: general and technical, and vocational. In a general and technical school, all first year students take the same classes. In the last two years, students can choose to continue in general education, where they study literary studies, economic studies, or scientific studies, or the technological path that involves more scientific professional studies.<sup>2</sup> The other option is Vocational, where students receive a "professional education," in preparation for work after three years of high school.<sup>3</sup>

Through compulsory education, all students are taught the French National Curriculum. It is formally called the "common core of knowledge and skills," and dictates the material every student is expected to know at the end of required schooling. The centralized curriculum is set by the French Ministry of Education and is implemented by the classroom teacher. All French

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<sup>2</sup> "La Voie Générale Au Lycée." Ministère De L'Éducation Nationale, De L'Enseignement Supérieur Et De La Recherche. Accessed November 18, 2015.  
<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid2570/la-voie-generale-au-lycee.html>.

<sup>3</sup> "Voies De Formation Et Diplômes." Ministère De L'Éducation Nationale, De L'Enseignement Supérieur Et De La Recherche. Accessed November 18, 2015.  
<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid24238/voies-de-formation-et-diplomes.html>.

schools, including private schools and French schools abroad must follow the national curriculum. The ministry states that the curriculum “brings together all the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for successful schooling, self life, and future citizens.”<sup>4</sup> The common base requires proficiency in seven areas: French language, foreign language, elements of mathematics/scientific and technological culture, information and communication technologies, humanistic culture, social and civic competences, and autonomy and initiative.<sup>5</sup> As part of my research methods, which I will explain in depth later in this essay, I conducted interviews with two teachers and one student. Teachers I interviewed remarked that while they hold autonomy in how they teach their classes, their lessons are designed based on the curricular guidelines set by the ministry.

Students take two national assessments that are based on the curriculum: first is the Brevet exam taken at the end of “troisième,” or their last year of middle school, and the second is the Bac, taken at the end of high school. The Brevet exam factors into whether or not students receive the National Brevet Diploma (DNB), a certification signifying that they have met the standards dictated by the French Ministry of Education’s national curriculum.<sup>6</sup> The other component factored into the awarding of the DNB is student’s report card grades from their last year of middle school. The Brevet exam was created in 1947 with the same stated purpose used today: to assess that students have met the minimum knowledge standards by the end of middle

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<sup>4</sup> "Le Socle Commun De Connaissances Et De Compétences." Ministère De L'Éducation Nationale, De L'Enseignement Supérieur Et De La Recherche. April 1, 2015. Accessed November 2, 2015. <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid2770/le-socle-commun-de-connaissances-et-de-competences.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Organisation Et Modalités D'attribution Du DNB." Diplôme National Du Brevet. February 5, 2014. Accessed November 21, 2015. <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid46835/organisation-et-modalites-d-attribution.html>.

school. Since then, it has undergone changes, with the latest version established in 2011.<sup>7</sup> This national exam consists of three written tests and an oral exam. The first written exam tests reading comprehension and writing, the second tests mathematics, and the third tests history, geography, and physics.<sup>8</sup> Finally, students complete a fifteen-minute art history oral exam. All questions require short or long written response answers, except for the oral component, which is verbal. Teachers who I interviewed noted that the French Academy is extremely weighted to the side of the written word, although public speaking is regarded as highly important. Additionally, imbedded in French cultural history is the importance of the “French intellectual,” defined as one who writes and speaks well. French society’s emphasis on the importance of language as an assimilatory and nationalistic tool is reflected in the format of the Brevet exam. The Brevet is the first and only formal, national assessment that students will take until the end of high school. While teachers retain autonomy in their teaching methods and assessment, they must emphasize student preparation for national examinations such as the Brevet, because they are designed based on the national curriculum.

Each section of the Brevet is scored out of twenty points, with the exam totaling eighty points. To pass, students must receive at least ten points out of twenty in each section. Unlike in the United States, this is not equivalent to fifty percent since the grading system is not comparable. For students seeking a challenge, the goal is to pass the Brevet with a “mention” or with honors. Scoring 12-13.5/20 grants an “assez bien” or “well enough,” 14-15.5/20 grants “bien” or “well,” and 16-20 grants “tres bien” or “very well.” Apparently, it is very rare for a

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<sup>7</sup> Brigaudeau, Christel. "Ce diplome celebre le fin de la scolarite obligatoire" *Le Parisien* 30 Sept. 2015, *Le Fait Du Jour* sec. Print.

<sup>8</sup> "Les Trois épreuves écrites Du DNB." *Diplôme National Du Brevet*. December 6, 2013. Accessed November 21, 2015. <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid59348/les-trois-epreuves-ecrites-du-dnb.html>.

student to score *tres bien*, and teachers regard *bien* to be a very impressive score. The important number for most schools and national reporting purposes is the percentage of students with a passing grade (10/20 or above), although many schools, such as PIBS, desire students to pass with a mention. Before the internet, Brevet scores were reported in print news articles and locally distributed. Today, the scores are easily accessible to anyone with an interest in them because they are published on the internet.

The second national exam that French students take comes at the end of high school when students take the Baccalaureate examination, or the Bac. While my study does not focus on the Bac, it is an extremely important aspect of French education because it determines students' educational futures. Each type of school has its own Bac so there is the General Bac, Technical Bac, and Vocational Bac. Success on the Bac is extremely high stakes as it determines where students will attend higher education and what career paths they will follow.<sup>9</sup> The Bac is regarded as the ominous, high-stakes, anxiety-inducing exam in France that is intensely followed by society, while the Brevet remains in its far less threatening shadow. Similar to the Brevet, the Bac contains questions requiring both written and oral responses. The Bac is criticized for putting immense pressure on students and being obsessed over by society.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the French system of education has a highly centralized curriculum set by the ministry that students are tested on at the end of middle school and high school.

## **Methodology**

My research for this study took place in two parts: first, I conducted interview data while researching at PIBS in Paris last spring, and second, in the Fall of 2015, I performed content

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<sup>9</sup> Fowler, Frances C. "Testing, French Style." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 2001, 199.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

analysis on policy data, news sources, and school websites. Based on this research, this study will examine the Brevet and analyze its impact on teaching, school culture, and French society.

PIBS is a secular, private French middle school that provides bilingual education to both French and international students. There is an application process for admission into PIBS, but there is no entrance exam. Although this school is not public, and the aggregate of students within the school is self-selected, the internal processes of the school follow the basic protocol of the vast majority of French middle schools. This means that PIBS follows the French national curriculum and assessment format set by the French Ministry of Education.

To begin my research process, I interviewed three people: Madame Coulon, the principal of PIBS who has worked as an educator for close to three decades, Madame Boucher, a teacher at PIBS who has taught for over twenty years in multiple countries, and Lucie,<sup>11</sup> a young French woman who attended middle school at a different location and is currently enrolled at one of the most prestigious universities in Paris. These interviewees were selected to gain insight into how an administrator, teacher, and student each viewed the Brevet. While I cannot say that the statements of each were representative of all French educators and students, they do provide a range of viewpoints because of each person's diverse perspective. Before interviewing these subjects I obtained Trinity College IRB approval, which signifies that I met all ethical guidelines of research. Participants were given a letter of informed consent stating that participation was optional. Additionally, I promised confidentiality, which is why each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Throughout this research process, all interview data has been in a locked file on my computer and after completion, the data will be destroyed.

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<sup>11</sup> All names are pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality

I began my research with interview data to investigate the curricular standards and the processes of assessment in French schools through the lenses of French teachers and a student. Specifically, I sought to understand assessment mandates and procedures, and the effects these systems have on teachers, school culture, and students. In my interviews, I questioned each educator on her interpretation of the curricular and assessment mandates set by the French Ministry of education and how this affected her job. Further, I inquired about how they implemented the curricular mandates in their classrooms, and about their systems of assessment. Finally, I asked what, if any, impact the Brevet exam had on their day-to-day teaching. For Lucie, I asked about how the Brevet affected her as a student. The goal was to address what they thought of the purpose of the Brevet exam, how it was carried out in this school, and the overall social impact of the exam.

Although my interview data provides valuable source material for this project, after returning to the United States, I felt as though my research was still incomplete, mainly because of cultural misassumptions that drove my research in Paris. Therefore, I conducted content analysis on policy documents from the French Ministry of Education to examine the stated and written purpose of the Brevet exam, as defined by the Ministry. Additionally, I analyzed French online news articles about the Brevet to understand how the results are reported. To obtain this information, I reached out to a local French contact asking for “widely read French news articles that report on education.” My contact recommended, *Le Parisien*, *Metro News*, and *L’express*. I searched each source’s website archives for keywords such as, “brevet” “exams” “brevet results” “DNB” and found articles for each from 2012-2015. I personally translated all articles from French to English. I analyzed the language of different articles to see what was emphasized, meaning, did reports highlight success rates or failure? Were high-achieving schools or low

achieving schools reported more significantly? What content is revealed in the reports? With this analysis I was able to draw conclusions about the social impact and consequences of the exam.

I also researched sixty school websites to see if and how Brevet results were posted, and the purpose of the posting. To systematically choose schools to analyze, I noted the top three and bottom three performing regions, out of a total of thirty-three regions, for the 2014 Brevet exam. I chose 2014 results because these scores are recent, but old enough that there were regional reports available about success rates. I then used a website called “guide to middle schools,”<sup>12</sup> which provides lists of private and public schools within each region, and the school’s performance results on the Brevet. I chose to analyze ten schools from each region, five public and five private. For high performing regions, I picked schools that scored at or above the national average for the year and for low-performing regions, I chose schools that performed below the national average, so that each category was representative of the performance. At each website, I looked to see if Brevet scores were shown, and if they were, how blatantly they were advertised.

Ultimately, primary research consisting of interview data, content analysis of policy and mass media documents, and school website research helped me to investigate the stated purpose of the Brevet exam and its consequential social outcomes.

### **Literature Review**

My thorough examination of French and American databases for scholarly research conducted in both French and English, exchanges with French students, French professors, and international researchers, revealed very few examples of scholarly literature discussing French

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<sup>12</sup> "Guide Des Collèges." Collèges : Rechercher Votre Collège Avec L'annuaire De Letudiant.fr. Accessed November 16, 2015. <http://www.letudiant.fr/etudes/annuaire-des-colleges.html>.

assessment systems, and even fewer directly addressing the Brevet exam. Most scholarly literature focuses mainly on reforms in the overall system throughout history, including the rise of different types of schools, curriculum, and the purposes behind middle school. The majority of the current discussion regarding the Brevet exam is contained in mass media reports. Literature that does address assessment focuses on its purpose in general, but not the Brevet specifically, nor its societal impact. My research advances the existing literature, by focusing solely on the Brevet Exam. Furthermore, to my knowledge, my methodology of interview data and content analysis of mass-media sources has yet to be utilized by any other researcher. Finally, no other researchers, French nor American, have addressed the social impact of the Brevet exam in depth.

The majority of literature about French education focuses on historical changes in the system. French historian Ponteil (1966) discusses the major stages of French educational change as a means of democratizing the system from the Revolution until 1964.<sup>13</sup> Journalist Prost (1997) discussed societal and political forces contributing to major educational changes occurring over a span of sixty years.<sup>14</sup> These provide valuable material about the evolution of French education, but neither source directly addresses the role of assessment in the changes.

Much has been written about the driving principles behind French schooling, and the development of schools throughout history. *The French System of Education* (1958) traces the historical development of schooling in France, detailing the shift from religious to purely secular education.<sup>15</sup> It discusses the principles of French schooling and the administrative organization;

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<sup>13</sup> Ponteil, Fe. *Histoire De L'enseignement En France: Les Grandes Etapes, 1789-1964*. Paris: Sirey, 1966.

<sup>14</sup> Prost, Antoine. *Education, Société Et Politiques: Une Histoire De L'enseignement En France, De 1945 À Nos Jours*. Nouv. Éd. Augmentée. ed. Paris: Ed. Du Seuil, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> "The French System of Education." New York: French Cultural Services, 1958. *Key Competencies*. Brussels: Eurydice, 2002.

including free primary and secondary education, low-cost higher education, qualification for entrance to certain school systems, and the centralized curriculum of all schools. Debiesse (1951) provides research regarding legal provisions and organization of compulsory education<sup>16</sup> in France while Gaziel (1989) addresses the rise of the comprehensive middle schools as a means of bridging the gap between primary and secondary schooling.<sup>17</sup> She reveals that middle schools arose to allow students over age eleven a means to continue schooling and describes middle school as an “orientation phase,” allowing eleven year old students the opportunity to investigate their academic interests well before choosing a career. Although these sources address systems within schools and the purpose of middle school, neither addresses assessment or the Brevet exam.

Research about French educational policy mostly focuses on curriculum rather than assessment. A report by Eurydice (2002) examines curriculum from a multinational perspective.<sup>18</sup> It explains the material students are supposed to know by the end of compulsory education in fifteen European nations. The report found that France has a highly centralized curriculum and that proficiency in speaking and writing the French language is considered highly important. While assessment is typically linked to curriculum, this was not addressed by Eurydice.

Although research is limited, some scholars have written about assessment processes in France. Fraser (1971) directly addresses assessment in his book about educational reforms in France. He writes, “achievement in French education is signaled by the passing of an exam and

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<sup>16</sup> Debiesse, Jean. *Compulsory Education in France*. Paris: UNESCO, 1951.

<sup>17</sup> Gaziel, Haim. "The Emergence of the Comprehensive Middle School in France: Educational Policy-making in a Centralised System." *Comparative Education* 25, no. 1 (1989): 29-40.

<sup>18</sup> "The French System of Education." New York: French Cultural Services, 1958. *Key Competencies*. Brussels: Eurydice, 2002.

the receipt of the appropriate certificate.”<sup>19</sup> Additionally, he argues that the elimination of the exam in French education would be impossible. He mainly focuses his discussion on the Baccalaureate exam rather than the Brevet.

The few scholarly articles that directly research the Brevet do so in a limited way. Looney (2002) described the Brevet as an “exit exam” from compulsory schooling but not required for access to high school.<sup>20</sup> Fowler (2001) provides an account of the national exams that all French students are required to take, and the history of high stakes testing in France. She discusses the format of the exam and calls it “low stakes” because the scores do not impact a student’s admission into high school, nor do they affect teachers and schools.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, she suggests that students “may experience some nervousness about it.”<sup>22</sup> She does not delve deeper into the social impact of the exam. While this source provides a succinct overview of the Brevet and its purposes, the sole motive of her article was national assessment in general, not specifically the Brevet. Existing literature that includes the Brevet mostly addresses its processes and purpose rather than the social impact.

My study draws on prior research about the French education system, curricular policy, and purposes of assessment. I move beyond existing literature into new territory by focusing an entire research project on the Brevet exam. Scholars have yet to use interview data, policy documents and mass media news reports to analyze the social presence and the societal impact of exam score reporting. Very little literature touches on the Brevet exam and, to my knowledge,

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<sup>19</sup> Fraser, W. R. *Reforms and Restraints in Modern French Education*; London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971.

<sup>20</sup> Looney, Janet. "Assessment and Innovation in Education." *OECD Education Working Papers*, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler, Frances C. "Testing, French Style." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 2001, 197-200.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

no research addresses the social outcomes and societal impact of the Brevet exam. My study uses new methods of research to examine the Brevet, its purpose, and the social consequences.

### **Brevet: Policy Perspectives and Views from the Classroom**

In policy, the purpose of the Brevet exam reveals that it is low stakes. The purpose is to ensure that students have learned certain material by the end of middle school, as a means of determining which students are awarded the DNB. The French Ministry of Education states, “The DNB certifies mastery of the common base and sanctions the training acquired at the end of college.”<sup>23</sup> So, the diploma verifies that a student has learned the “common base” of required subjects as stated by the French Ministry, but it fails to specifically point out that a passing grade is needed for graduation from middle school. Blatantly absent from this statement is any penalty for failing the Brevet and not receiving DNB, giving the impression that there are no consequences of not receiving the diploma. This immediately takes pressure and importance off of the Brevet exam, rendering the consequences low-stakes. As a result, teachers and students interpret the exam in a similar manner, stating that because there are few consequences for failing the exam, it is relatively low-stakes.

Although the Brevet exam is required for obtaining the DNB, this diploma is not required for access to high school. The French Ministry of Education states, “it does not condition access to a higher class late in the third (year of middle school): the two decisions, awarding the degree and direction, are separated.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, if a student does not take or pass the Brevet exam, they can still continue their education into high school. Similarly, if a student wishes, they can retake the exam at a later date. Madame Coulon said, “in some schools kids do not even show

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<sup>23</sup> "Organisation Et Modalités D'attribution Du DNB." Diplôme National Du Brevet. February 5, 2014. Accessed November 2, 2015. <http://eduscol.education.fr/cid46835/organisation-et-modalites-d-attribution.html>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

up for the exam because it doesn't make any difference for what they are going to do next." The consequences of missing or failing the exam are relatively low in policy because students do have backup options, and therefore students and teachers stated that the exam is relatively unimportant. Lucie, who considered herself a hard-working student said:

I think it is a big deal, but not that big of a deal. I think it's (the Brevet) quite easy to have (pass) it...it's really the basics...and, some high schools accept students even if they do not have the Brevet, so it's not like the end of the world if you don't pass. Some people if they do not have the Brevet they can go into professional high school... they still have options.

Similarly, Madame Coulon said, "I would not consider the Brevet high stakes at all. My students know that they can be admitted (into high school) with or without a high score. This was a decision of the Ministry, it is how the system is designed." Madame Coulon also stated that the situation may be different in an "underprivileged" area, but in her opinion, the exam is not that important. Lucie also cited her brother, who did not go to PIBS and who she does not consider a diligent student, and said, "My brother, for example, has the brevet this year and he's not making a big deal of it because he knows next year he can still go to high school."

Moreover, a mother of a student who has taken the Brevet was reported saying, "frankly, the Brevet is kind of useless"<sup>25</sup> because students can still pass middle school even if they fail it. In the official French educational system, there is not a lot of emphasis placed on this exam. In the case of the Brevet, students' educational futures are not determined by one exam. At least, that is how the purpose is treated by policy documents, teachers at PIBS, students, and parents.

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<sup>25</sup> Brigaudeau, Christel. "Ce diplome celebre le fin de la scolarite obligatoire" *Le Parisien* 30 Sept. 2015, Le Fait Du Jour sec. Print.

On paper, the importance of the Brevet is diminished by the fact that a student's grades in the last year of middle school are factored into the awarding of the DNB, along with the passing of the Brevet exam. Immediately, this distribution de-emphasizes the weight of the exam because students are not held fully accountable for their academics by one assessment alone. Sixty percent of the DNB is based on grades from marking periods throughout the year, and forty percent is based on the Brevet exam. Madame Boucher said, "I think this is important because it is the first large test my students will take, but this allows for less stress of the unknown...and students are in the mood of knowing that their yearlong grades are more important because they are part of the final exam." The stakes and academic consequences of the Brevet exam are diminished by grades being a large factor in middle school graduation.

Just as for students' academic careers, success on the Brevet has a low impact on teachers and schools. Madame Coulon explained, "at PIBS, we teachers do not teach to the exam, simply because there is a disconnect between what is required to pass this exam and what students will be asked to do even in their first year of high school. And so, our responsibility is to prepare them for high school, not simply to have them pass the exam." Furthermore, Madame Boucher said that while she finds assessment to be an important factor in education for stimulating students and for teachers to monitor whether or not students understand the material, she "does not think it (the Brevet) is the final aim of troisieme, not at all." While the Brevet is a large exam that students take when exiting middle school, it does not consume and control the education that students receive in their schooling.

The weight of the Brevet is further diminished because student performance does not impact the teacher's career and they are not held accountable for the success of their students. Madame Coulon said, "I want my students to do well and pass the exam, because I am their

teacher and I care. But, I do know that if they do not do well it doesn't affect the status of my job." Teacher accountability comes in the form of "inspections" where inspectors from the academy observe classrooms and assess teaching materials and lesson plans. This occurs every five years and a good inspection will help a teacher earn a higher salary and obtain job security. Additionally, schools are not answerable for test results. Madame Coulon said, "Schools are not rewarded or reprimanded for high or low test scores, they are just ranked for image. Maybe even schools with low scores get more money because that says they need it." The fact that teachers and schools are not held accountable for performances on the Brevet exam lowers the stakes. From the official description in policy material to the way it is approached by teachers and students, the importance of the Brevet exam seems de-emphasized in French schools.

### **Brevet: Social Outcomes**

Although the official stated policy of the Brevet and the way this policy is interpreted by students and educators render it low stakes, I argue that there is a sharp contrast between this stated policy and the social outcomes of the exam. The first reason for this is that I found an internal contradiction in how teachers considered and experienced the Brevet. While both teachers that I interviewed stated that the official policy of the exam is low stakes, they also both pointed out that students still strived to obtain high scores, regardless of its minimal academic consequences. Madame Coulon, who previously said that she does not consider the exam high-stakes, and does not focus her teaching on passing the exam, later said, "the kids themselves take it (the Brevet exam) seriously, it's something that the students here, which I know is not the case in all schools, really put an effort into doing their best. Our school targets getting as many students to pass the exam with honors. This year, I am proud to say, the students, un-prodded, said they want 100% to achieve honors." The school culture emphasized success, regardless of

the purported stakes and importance of the exam. Madame Coulon compared this to a school wanting a successful sports team. She said,

“I like to think of it as when a school really wants a successful sports team. It doesn't really matter, but it *matters!* It matters for pride, satisfaction, competition...it is good for kids to be able to measure themselves against something because it is human characteristic to derive benefit from completing something well.”

While the results of the Brevet matter very little, many students still felt a drive to succeed stemming from a competitiveness and personal pride in a job well done. Of course, this type of internal motivation varies among students. While some may argue that students in less competitive schools are not as motivated to pass the Brevet, Lucie, who did not go to school at PIBS, reflected a similar personal ambition to pass the exam. She said, “if I had done badly, I would have tried again to pass it. I would have repeated troisieme...I wanted to be successful.” This is the same student who also remarked that she did not see the Brevet as a “big deal”, and yet she still felt a need to pass the exam, so much so, that she would have repeated a year of schooling to accomplish it. Therefore, regardless of how teachers and students interpreted the stated policy and academic consequences of the Brevet, there appears to be rather widespread motivation and pressure to pass the exam, resulting in consequential social outcomes.

Although much of this motivation to pass the Brevet is internal and personal, many external factors cause the disparity in how the Brevet is interpreted. A major example is the French news reporting of Brevet exam scores. News articles are accessible online, which means that they are available to a massive audience of anyone with a computer and interest in the results, thus increasing their importance. Within the vast majority of reports about the Brevet, success was highlighted over failure. *L'express* exemplifies this in many articles that were

published following the release of 2015 Brevet results. One article reads, “This year, the rate of the national brevet diploma success looks record in number of academies...And the winner is ... the Academy of Rennes!”<sup>26</sup> Clearly there is a celebration over the results being higher this year than in past years, calling the highest scoring region “winner.” This report not only emphasizes success, but also proves that there is a social curiosity in Brevet results, enough so that the success rates make national headlines.

In 2015 French news documented academies that improved from 2014, even if improvement was slight, which shows that there was interest in success, even if it was minor. For example, the article reads, “Some success rate rose only symbolically: +0.16 point in the Academy of Besançon, 0.4 point in the Academy of Strasbourg or even 0.6 in the academy of Poitiers.”<sup>27</sup> Although it would be safe to argue that some academies may have faced a decrease in scores, in these reports, there are no statistics on schools with lower results from 2014 to 2015, nor are there any mention in the article of underperforming regions or schools,. This type of reporting was consistent with *L'Express* articles from 2012-2015, and implies that success on the exam is more important and more interesting to readers than failure, thus inferring a societal interest in passing the Brevet exam.

Other news sources reported in similar ways. *Le Parisien* reported, “The patent college completion rates rose one point this year, to 86.3% according to preliminary results released Monday by the Ministry of Education National. Girls do better than boys with 89.3% against

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<sup>26</sup> "Brevet 2015: Vers Un Taux De Réussite Record?" - L'Express. July 10, 2015. Accessed October 28, 2015. [http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-2015-vers-un-taux-de-reussite-record\\_1697950.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-2015-vers-un-taux-de-reussite-record_1697950.html)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

83.3%.”<sup>28</sup> Again, this shows an emphasis on success rates over failures and promotes the importance of improving scores. Statistics of success are prominent in this article and a brief reference to a lower performing region, Academy of Mayotte, is immediately overshadowed by a mention of the number of students who passed the Brevet in 2015: 705,300<sup>29</sup>. One article mentioned that girls did better than boys, and that success rates improved from the following year. Additionally, the title points out that nearly two thirds of French students that year received honors<sup>30</sup>. By headlining an article in this way, it shows the importance of success in the exam.

This emphasis on success was prevalent in 2012-2015, particularly in 2014. *Le Parisien* featured in bold font the success rates of 2013 and 2014,<sup>31</sup> immediately drawing the eye to those figures:

**All Results Live Patent academies 85.2% success in 2014** The department released the first successful figures Patent 2014. This year 674,200 candidates were admitted, representing a success rate of 85.2%, up 0.7 point compared to 2013. 791 200 candidates sat for the examination (97.6% of registered voters). As in 2013, nine out of ten candidates DNB master the core knowledge and skills. At the session 2014: 9.1% of candidates have obtained the DNB with an average score of at least 16/20 (honors ); 17.3% of the candidates have had with a score between 14 and 16 (honors); 25.2% of candidates with a score between 12 and 14 (with honors); 33.6% successful candidates with a score between 10 and 12; 14.8% of the candidates failed with an average score of less than 10.

**84.7% success in 2013** Introduced in 1987, the patent is awarded

<sup>28</sup> "Brevet 2015 : Taux De Réussite En Hausse à 86,3%." Leparisien.fr. Accessed October 28, 2015. <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/brevet-2015-taux-de-reussite-en-hausse-a-86-3-13-07-2015-4941251.php>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Brevet Des Collèges 2012 : Deux élèves Sur Trois Ont Obtenu Une Mention." Leparisien.fr. Accessed October 28, 2015. <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/brevet-des-colleges-2012-deux-eleves-sur-trois-ont-obtenu-une-mention-13-07-2012-2089077.php>

<sup>31</sup> "Brevet 2014 : Découvrez Les Résultats Complets Par Académie." Leparisien.fr. July 8, 2014. Accessed October 28, 2015. <http://www.leparisien.fr/laparisienne/societe/brevet-2014-decouvrez-les-premiers-resultats-08-07-2014-3986817.php>

This highlights the increase in success and makes them appear to be the most important information in the article. It honors successful students by making their scores the most evident and therefore important scores.

Of course, not every year represented an increase in success rates. Between 2012 and 2013, there was a decrease in the national passing average. Yet, *Le Parisien* still reported about successes. One reads,

Unlike the success rate in the past...the results...this year (were) a slight decrease (- 0.3 points) compared to 2012. The college students were 3rd 16942 to run the tests; 88.9% of them, or 15,061 students were admitted. More than half got...(a) mention: 14% for the honors; 24% mention bien et 28% for the honors. Throughout the academy of Versailles, the results...are stable with 87.6% success rate, 0.1 percentage point more than in 2012.

Rather than discussing the reasons for the decrease in detail or revealing the regions that may have brought the average down, the report still focuses on success rates and highlights the regions that scored higher than the national average. Even in down years, those who highly achieved are still regarded as the most newsworthy, therefore spotlighting the importance behind success and promoting a social following and importance onto the Brevet exam.

The emphasis that is put on Brevet scores in news reports is a social outcome that contradicts its stated purpose. This social outcome is even further exacerbated because these news reports are online. By publishing these articles online a much greater number of people have access to the Brevet results than if the results were only printed on paper and locally distributed. This increased audience can explain the disparity between the stated purpose of the exam and the social outcomes because it expands the societal following.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of the social importance of the exam is the fact that students' results are published, unless they opt out of the process at the beginning of troisieme. If the student does not opt out, the names of passing students are published in schools, public journals, and mass-media news sources. Because these reports are available online, by simply searching a news website for "Brevet Scores," a researcher, or anyone who may be curious about the results, can find lists of students who passed the exam from each region and their mention, if they received one. Although the actual percentage of how each student scored is not publicly available (this information is only sent home to the student and their family) his or her mention is presented and one could easily estimate each student's performance. This type of information was available on all three of the websites that I researched: *L'express*, *Le Parisien*, and *Metro News*. Below is an example from *l'express* of a list of students from the low performing region Mayotte<sup>32</sup>, on the left, and the high performing region of Toulouse, on the right<sup>33</sup>:

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<sup>32</sup> "Retrouvez Tous Les Résultats Du Brevet Des Collèges 2015 Par Candidat Dans Dzaoudzi." *L'express.fr*. 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://www.lexpress.fr/education/resultats-brevet/academie-mayotte/dzaoudzi/m/>

<sup>33</sup> "Retrouvez Tous Les Résultats Du Brevet Des Collèges 2015 Par Candidat Dans Espalion." *L'Express.fr*. 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://www.lexpress.fr/education/resultats-brevet/academie-toulouse/espalion/a/>

Candidat ▾	Résultat	Mention ▾
<u>Abdou Nasmat</u>	Admis	Assez Bien
<u>Abdoulhamid Samira</u>	Admis	
<u>Assani Farza</u>	Admis	
<u>Attoumane Oili Faiz</u>	Admis	

Candidat ▾	Résultat	Mention ▾
<u>Albouy Mael Gaspard Clement</u>	Admis	Très Bien
<u>Aldebert Adrien</u>	Admis	Assez Bien
<u>Allegre Margaux</u>	Admis	Assez Bien
<u>Antonucci Dorian Michel Sabino</u>	Admis	
<u>Auguy Justine Emilie Camille</u>	Admis	Très Bien
<u>Aygaleng Mathilde</u>	Admis	Bien

In the complete lists, Mayotte had far fewer names than Toulouse. This could be because many students opted out, but is also because there were fewer students who passed the exam. The image is representative of the full results list, in that it shows few students who passed with a mention. The students in this list who did pass with a mention received the lowest one: “well enough.” The list from Toulouse is also representative in that there was more published names, because overall a higher percentage of students in the region passed, and more students passed

with mentions. A potential social outcome of these public lists is that viewers could make generalizations about student performance based on students' names. For example, someone could look the names shown on the Mayotte results and either correctly or falsely assume that these are names of Muslim students. That person could then draw assumptions that Muslim students typically perform lower on the Brevet, whether this is true or not. This is a clear social outcome of the exam because it stigmatizes groups of students and this consequence would not happen in the same way if the exam scores were not published online.

To gain more context about the publishing of these scores, I emailed editors of *L'Express* asking how they collected the data for this publication to grasp a better understanding of the process and transparency of data collection in France, but I did not receive a response. Therefore, I looked to my contacts in Paris, Madame Coulon and Lucie. I asked them if personal information (by an American's standards) such as this is typically published and they both replied no, and that this type of publishing is specific to exam scores. Additionally, I asked if this type of publishing was new, but again they both replied in the negative and said that before the internet, scores were reported in newspapers as print articles. I searched internet archives and asked my Parisien contacts if they had any examples of such printed reports, but I was unable to find any formal examples of print articles. I was also unable to determine the year the switch was made from print to internet reporting. Yet, one can still conclude that the social following of the Brevet greatly expanded when scores began being published online. This gives the globe, rather than local newspaper readers, access to individual students scores and the increased audience could put extreme pressure on students to succeed. Although Lucie suspected that the only parties interested in the reports would be "other students and all of my teachers," still, anyone can access this information, including classmates, teachers, and future

employers. Overall, this contributes to the causes behind the disparity between the purpose and outcomes of the exam because it worsens the social consequences of the exam by increasing the significance of performance.

To place this in a United States context for a moment, consider the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that requires the confidentiality of educational records.<sup>34</sup> This includes graded assignments, report card grades, test grades, and standardized testing grades. Therefore, in the US, which is sometimes accused of placing too much emphasis on testing, the disclosure of a student's records without her consent is illegal. Only the student can permit release of her record. In theory, an entity such as an SAT tutoring center can seek students' permission to publicize scores before and after participation in a program, but this rarely, if ever, happens, and certainly not with a student's name attached. Yet France, a country that denies the existence of a high-stakes testing in policy, still allows global access to most student-level results. This establishes that there is major difference between the stated policy of the Brevet exam and the actual social outcomes of the exam.

Beyond simply reporting results, in recent years, news stories have revealed anxiety in the days leading up to the release of Brevet scores, and celebration after the release of the scores. In 2015, Brevet results were released in waves, over the course of four days, meaning some regions received their results four days earlier than others. This system of releasing the results in waves de-emphasizes somewhat the "doomsday" effect, however, anxiety is inevitable. This is

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<sup>34</sup> "Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)." Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). June 26, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015.

evident in reports that told those who had to wait “be patient.”<sup>35</sup> On the final day of release, *L’express* reported, “time results of the patent of the colleges has finally arrived for new academies past France. On Friday, July 10 is the last day of the announcement of decisions by the jury and proofreaders. By early afternoon, all French schoolchildren may relieve pressure.”<sup>36</sup> Once all the results were published, the article read, “the holidays can begin!”<sup>37</sup> *Le Parisien* stated, “After the results of the results of Bac ... Brevet, which are just as expected by the candidates by their relatives.”<sup>38</sup> This reference compares the Brevet to the extremely high stakes Baccalaureate exam that determines students’ academic and working futures. Even though there are supposedly little to no consequences attached to the Brevet exam, it is clear that students stressed and society focused on the results.

Other articles reveal that there is a major social fixation with Brevet exam success. For example, in the weeks preceding the exam reports stressed the importance of eating a healthy breakfast the morning of the Brevet. Articles state that although it is important for students to study for the exam, the last hours leading up to it are “ultra-important to put yourself in the best possible conditions. And this requires a real ‘champion meal’ before going into the test center.”<sup>39</sup> The article then elaborates on the ideal breakfast menu, including proteins that boost the brain

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<sup>35</sup> "Brevet Des Collèges 2015: Retrouvez Vos Résultats Par Académie." - L'Express. July 6, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015. [http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-des-colleges-2015-le-calendrier-et-les-resultats-par-academie\\_1696638.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-des-colleges-2015-le-calendrier-et-les-resultats-par-academie_1696638.html)

<sup>36</sup> "Brevet 2015: Paris, Bordeaux, Nantes... Les Derniers Résultats Publiés Ce Vendredi." - L'Express. July 10, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015. [http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-2015-paris-bordeaux-nantes-les-derniers-resultats-publies-ce-vendredi\\_1697640.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/education/brevet-2015-paris-bordeaux-nantes-les-derniers-resultats-publies-ce-vendredi_1697640.html)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> "Brevet 2015 : Les Résultats Académie Par Académie." Leparisien.fr. July 9, 2015. Accessed October 29, 2015. <http://www.leparisien.fr/societe/brevet-2015-les-premiers-resultats-sont-arrive-07-07-2015-4926919.php>

<sup>39</sup> "Bac and Patent 2015: The Ideal Breakfast on the Day of Exams." Metro News. June 16, 2015. Accessed November 12, 2015. <http://www.metronews.fr/bac/baccalaureat-et-brevet-des-colleges-2015-le-petit-dejeuner-ideal-le-jour-des-examens/modD!Qtg4ThgJQOY/>.

function, mobilize concentration, and “for the proper functioning of both your body and your mind.”<sup>40</sup> Overall, this article emphasizes putting a test taker in the perfect position to pass the exam, thus, stressing a social importance in succeeding on the Brevet.

All of the articles presenting Brevet scores and containing language revealing anxiety over the exam reveal the social importance that the exam, and align with the contradiction between its stated purpose and social outcomes. Individuals and society disclose a deep fixation with exam results, and this fixation is exacerbated by the fact that results are reported online. If results were only printed as hard-copy articles, such as they were before the internet, the audience capable of accessing these reports would be limited. Online news reporting causes a change in the social outcomes of the exam because the use of the internet simplifies accessibility to scores and increases their audience, thus exacerbating the social consequences.

In addition to internet-based reports, social media also impacts the consequences of the exam. The social presence of the Brevet is seen in social media when students took to Twitter to celebrate their results. *Le Parisien* reported the most noteworthy tweets.<sup>41</sup> Many used a hashtag, #resultatsBrevet, which implies a social following around the exam because typically hashtags are created for pressing current events. The first archived use of this hashtag occurred when the results were released in July of 2011. This year, students revealed excitement that can be seen in these celebratory tweets:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

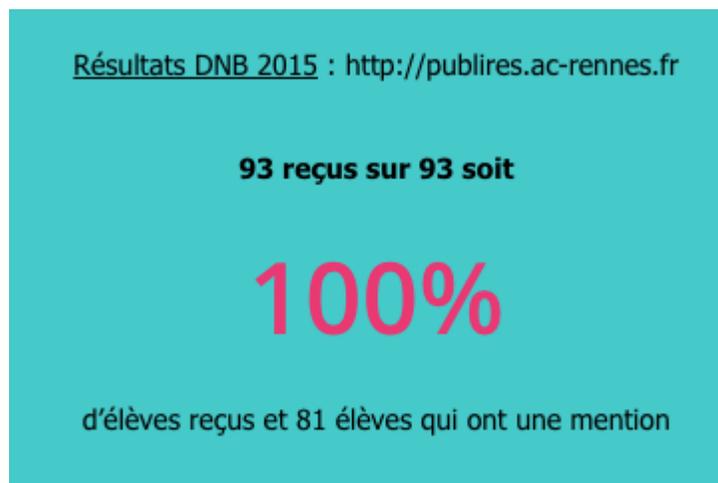
<sup>41</sup> "Résultats Du Brevet 2015 : Les Réactions Les plus Folles Sur Twitter." *Le Parisien Etudiant*. Accessed October 30, 2015. <http://etudiant.aujourd'hui.fr/etudiant/info/resultats-du-brevet-2015-les-reactions-sur-twitter.html>



the societal fixation with the results of the Brevet, and because of this it is a cause for the disparity between the purpose and social outcomes of the exam.

### **Brevet Exam: A Tool for Marketing?**

While conducting this research, I wondered if schools used Brevet performance as a marketing tool, because this would also act as a social outcome of the exam. To explore this, I examined many school websites and found that most schools did not post Brevet scores. While schools could use Brevet scores to brag about their performance and draw high performing students to enroll, I found that very few schools actually did this. None of the low-performing schools presented any type of Brevet score report. Of the schools that did report their performance, ten out of eighteen were private schools from all three high performing regions, but not all high performing schools listed their scores. Those that did post their performance did so in varying ways. For some, it was very prominent on the homepage of the school's website, while others were more discrete. Below is an example of a prominently displayed report:<sup>42</sup>



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<sup>42</sup> "Page D'accueil." Collège Saint Hilaire. Accessed November 16, 2015. <http://www.collegesainthilaire.fr/>.

This posting from the website of College Saint-Hillaire, a high performing private middle school was prominently displayed on the homepage. College Saint-Hilaire uses a bright color to draw attention to the results, as a marketing strategy or tool for bragging. Although students must apply to high school, both public and private, the evidence I collected suggests that mostly private schools use this type of strategy to draw high-performing students. Schools that use this technique emphasize Brevet success for their own benefit at the expense of students pressured to pass the exam. Ultimately, the argument that schools report their Brevet performance as a tool for bragging or as a marketing technique cannot be generalized for all schools in France, but there is evidence that some schools do use this strategy.

### **Explanations for Social Consequences of the Brevet**

While I argue that the internet causes the disparity between the stated purpose and social outcomes of the Brevet, there are, of course, other aspects of French education that encourage these outcomes. One is that French students must apply to all types of high school, both private and public and while the Brevet is not an entrance exam for secondary school, my interviewees suggested that students who score highly attend “better” high schools than students who score poorly or do not take the exam at all. Madame Boucher said, “if students do poorly (on the Brevet), they may be pushed towards vocational schools.” Lucie added, “most of the students in vocational schools were not very good in school,” meaning they were not the highest performers academically. If a student is in a vocational school, they take the “vocational Baccalaureate,”<sup>43</sup> to prove that they can work without studying anymore, and are steered into vocational jobs. In general, there is a stigma attached to this type of schooling, and jobs in this line of work. There

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<sup>43</sup>“La Voie Technologique Au Lycée.” Ministère De L'Éducation Nationale, De L'Enseignement Supérieur Et De La Recherche. Accessed November 17, 2015. <http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid2604/la-voie-technologique-au-lycee.html>.

exists a “hierarchy” of schools in France, with typical academic high schools valued over vocational schools.<sup>44</sup> While the Brevet performance does not solely decide the type of school a student will enter, it does set an educational path. Many may not want to face the social consequences of failing the exam (i.e. vocational schooling stigma), and therefore push to succeed, which contributes to the contrast between the Brevet’s intended purpose and outcomes.

A second factor is that the Brevet is the first national exam taken by students, and it can be described as a “dry run” for the extremely high-stakes Baccalaureat exam. For United States audiences, one can think of the PSAT and the SAT. While this comparison is not perfect, because the Brevet is based on different content than the Bac, there are connections that can be made. The PSAT is taken before the SAT and has very little impact on students’ academic careers. Rather, it provides experience for a student before taking the very high stakes SAT. Lucie, Madame Coulon, and Madame Boucher all suggested that the Brevet is practice for the Bac, which is the culmination of a student’s academic career. While the format of the Brevet and the Bac are different, they both assess written and oral responses to questions. The Brevet is intended to be a first experience with a national exam, making the ominous Bac less daunting. In spite of this, the Brevet does not seem to ease any stress over the Bac, which is a highly anxiety-provoking exam that is obsessed over by French society.<sup>45</sup> Success on the Brevet exam in no way determines success on the Bac, and the Brevet cannot be described as a “practice Baccalaureat.” However, students may wish to do well on the Brevet as a first step in their pathway to the Bac. While this and the social stigma that can result from Brevet

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<sup>44</sup> Keaton, Trica Danielle, and Manthia Diawara. *Muslim Girls and the Other France Race, Identity Politics, & Social Exclusion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Fowler, Frances C. "Testing, French Style." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 2001, 199.

underperformance contribute to the contrast between the intended purpose and social outcomes of the exam, overall, the internet still plays a major role.

### **Why is International Analysis of Assessment Important?**

In stated policy, there are few consequences for failing or skipping, the Brevet exam. Reality however, is different. Success is highlighted by schools, individuals, news sources, and society. The French ministry emphasizes curriculum and the retention of certain subject matter, and not necessarily Brevet exam performance, and yet there exists a societal obsession with Brevet results and success, that is exacerbated by the internet. There are social consequences of the exam because it puts pressure on students to succeed and leads to a societal obsession with passing an exam that is stated to be relatively meaningless. Therefore, although the Brevet is “low-stakes,” it has high societal stakes caused by the convenience of the internet and the increased audiences that it allows for.

Researching the Brevet exam can help us to think critically about testing and assessment broadly, and the power of the internet. On the one hand, American assessment procedures are criticized for being too high stakes, prioritizing accountability over student learning. Many argue for a change in the assessment processes to amend these shortcomings. On the other hand, France has the Brevet exam, which is intended to be low stakes, because it does not stifle teacher autonomy nor having detrimental academic consequences on students. Yet, there is still societal focus, student anxiety, and pressure to succeed that is driven by results. It says a lot about testing culture when two different nations, with two unlike systems of assessment produce similar anxieties revolving around testing and test results. I argue that the obsession with results is fueled by the internet, because the internet allows accessibility to results to massive audiences. Because of online news reporting and social media, more people can view results and post

comments thus exacerbating society's obsession and following of the Brevet. This research shows the problematic power that assessment can have over society, especially in the age of easy accessibility that the internet provides.

Beginning in 2016, the Brevet exam will undergo change. Although the details of the changes are still relatively unclear and incomplete, what is certain is that over the past few years many teachers, students, and parents have demanded change.<sup>46</sup> Those in favor of the change want an exam that more accurately assesses what students learn, so that it can be more relevant and useful for students' academic growth and moreover, for it to be a less stressful event for students. The format of the exam will remain the same, but the written tests will be extended from one to two days.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, a ceremony for students who pass the exam will celebrate the completion of this "symbolic moment."<sup>48</sup> This celebration seems to heighten the significance of the exam, so the changes, may have the opposite effect and actually increase the stress. It will be interesting to see the impact of the changes, although it seems unlikely that all anxiety and social following can be eliminated from academic assessment.

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<sup>46</sup> Brigaudeau, Christel. "Ce diplôme celebre le fin de la scolarite obligatoire" *Le Parisien* 30 Sept. 2015, Le Fait Du Jour sec. Print.

<sup>47</sup> "Le Diplôme National Du Brevet." Ministère De L'Éducation Nationale, De L'Enseignement Supérieur Et De La Recherche. Accessed November 20, 2015.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

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