ANTHROPOLOGY OF EVALUATION: THE 'MACABRE CONSTANT'

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that a natural outcome of learning is assessment of what has been learnt: there is no teaching without evaluation. When the process of evaluation has been completed, two groups of students become discernible: those who have succeeded and those who have failed. In a book entitled *Other People's children: What Happens to Those in the Bottom 50% Academically?* (2018), Barnaby Lenon[1] offers an in-depth and well-documented analysis of academic failure in the British school system, and he eventually argues in favour of better funded and more efficient vocational schools to cater for those 50%. Improved technical skills, he argues, will give students better job opportunities in the economy, especially with regard to an expected after-Brexit shortage of skilled labour.

Research has shown that 'too many children start primary school at the age of five without the basic skills they need to cope' (p. 13). The skills children should master at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) have been defined as follows (p. 13):

- listen to, understand and follow instructions
- use the past present and future tenses correctly
- talk about their own and other's feelings
- read and understand simple sentences
- count and carry out simple addition and subtraction

'This is assessed at the end of reception year, when most children are aged five, through the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile*.' It seems that 'in 2016, 31% of

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[1] Lenon Barnaby, 2018, *Other People's Children. What happens to those in the bottom 50% academically?* John Catt Educational, Woodbridge.

children in England began primary school without this good level of early development, 46% of those on free school meals' (p. 13). 'Children who do not achieve the expected standard of early language and communication at age five are over four times more likely to be below the normal target level of reading at age five than those who did' (p. 15).

Some of the low achievement is blamed on low income and its consequences on the quality of parenting. 'Parents from lower income homes speak less to their children, have a more limited vocabulary, are less likely to help them learn to read or count, are less likely to own books' (p. 14).[2] Such observations are accurate, and they seem to perfectly describe reality as experienced by teachers, parents and students. Scientific research provides an in-depth understanding of these observations based on academic knowledge and figures collected through empirical studies.

Yet little thought is given to the *standards* of evaluation themselves and to their *social context*. Who has chosen the items of the EYFS list? Under what authority? Have they been decided upon in an impressionistic way by a few educationalists or have there been empirical studies to define them? Are they free from ideological influence? An item such as 'talk about their own and other's feelings' is clearly linked to our zeitgeist: exchange about emotions and feelings is probably given more value nowadays than a few decades ago when more intellectual capacities would perhaps have been paramount. Specialists in education are no doubt aware of the link between exposure to rich and meaningful conversation at home and academic achievement, and they must know that items such as 'use the past present and future tenses correctly' and 'read and understand simple sentences' will separate students according to social class. In that case, evaluation becomes a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy which results in identifying children from lower-income homes.[3] Gearing them towards vocational careers can then be construed as a way of maintaining them in their social class.

In this article, I am not advocating a fairer EYFS list. It is in line with society and produces generally accepted results. If it were modified to favour working-class children, chances are the failure/success ratio would remain the same, with more middle-class children in the failing group. The fact is that any evaluation will produce failure, because failure is part of the meaning of evaluation. It is this question that I am going to address in this text.

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[2] Bernstein made a similar distinction between working-class 'restricted code' and middle-class 'elaborate code' (Bernstein 1975).

[3] This may be considered as part of the 'symbolic violence' inflicted upon the lower classes, according to Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1979, Bourdieu & Passeron 1970).

I was an English teacher for many years in secondary schools in France and abroad, and I also taught French as a foreign language to adults in Germany. Later I made a PhD in computational linguistics and eventually became a senior lecturer at the English department of Strasbourg University and then a professor in Rheims. I mainly taught linguistics, philosophy of language and didactics. I was also involved in the setting up of multilingual self-study language centres in France and abroad and I became the head of SPIRAL[4] in Strasbourg and then of the Maison des Langues in Rheims. I quickly noticed that the evaluation of self-studying students could not be done in the usual way, and this triggered a whole new way of looking at evaluation in general, particularly with regard to my experience in secondary schools. This analysis will focus on the situation in France, but I believe it is valid in most countries. Illustrations will be given in the field of language acquisition.[5]

Teachers know that if all of their students have good grades on a regular basis, they will be considered too 'nice'; conversely, if they consistently give marks below average, they will be considered too "strict". A 'good' assessment thus divides the class into three groups: the 'good', the 'average' and the 'bad'. Some students will certainly move to an adjacent group, but the ternary structure will remain. About a third of students are thus condemned to failure regardless of educational conditions: whatever the level of the class, the quality of teaching, the subjects taught, failure will happen.

This unvarying proportion of failure has been called 'the macabre constant' by André Antibi,[6] a mathematics inspector in the Toulouse regional educational area, in his eponymous book published in 2003. I used to talk about this aspect of evaluation to students training to become teachers and colleagues in conversation, but I had not given it a name. I discovered Antibi's excellent book fortuitously a few years ago and I have used his term ever since, because it is very expressive.

Many researchers have addressed the issue of assessment and grading. Docimologists[7] have identified various biases affecting marking; educationalists have studied its damaging effects on children's well-being and learning; others have observed evaluative practices from a historical perspective; others still have established typologies. Most authors end up making suggestions for improvement, and indeed some suggestions are from time to time officially accepted and put into practice in schools.

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[4] spiral.unistra.fr
[5] This article is partly based on two texts I have written in French (Frath 2019, Frath 2020, forthcoming).
[6] Antibi André, 2003, *La constante macabre*, Toulouse, édition Math'Adore.
[7] Docimology is the scientific study of testing and marking.

However, no proposal has so far succeeded in really improving the situation: failure remains. The reason is that all evaluations are finally caught up by the macabre constant: there inevitably comes a time when the desire or the need to sort and eliminate comes about. For a significant change to really take place, it will be necessary to become aware of the central role of the macabre constant. Yet most conferences and publications devoted to evaluation ignore it completely. Books about education sometimes mention it, but they do not often perceive its centrality. This general blindness is disturbing. I will endeavour to explore its causes, beginning with general considerations on assessment and grading and then proceed to offer a humanistic framework in which various methods can be given their full measure.

1.   TYPOLOGY OF EVALUATION

Researchers have introduced a distinction between 'summative' and 'formative' assessment. The first is exemplified by the traditional written test given at the end of a teaching period and its purpose is to check whether learning has been achieved. It produces a global mark which allows students to appreciate to what extent they have acquired what they have been taught and to see their rank, relative to the other students in the same class. Summative assessment generates the macabre constant.

A variant of summative evaluation is a 'certificative' examination. It is an exam based on a programme set up outside school, an example being the baccalaureate. A key difference is that certificative assessment is anonymous and takes place outside the classroom. It therefore does not produce the macabre constant and there is theoretically no limit to success. However, when all students succeed, the social value of the exam falls rapidly and this often means the end of its implementation. This is what happened in France to the *Certificat d'Études Primaires* (Primary School Certificate), an exam which used to be taken by all fourteen-year-olds, which was dropped a few decades ago when its success rate practically reached 100%. The baccalaureate, with its 90% rate of success over two years, is now being gradually disposed of. A percentage of failure is therefore desirable to ensure the social value of the exam.

As for formative evaluation, its aim is to give students indications on their learning achievements and to help them overcome problems by means of a personalised work programme. Formative assessment takes place in a dialogue between student and teacher and it does not concern the class and the institution: there is no official mention of it in institutional documents such as reports. Students sum up formative evaluation as follows: 'we get marks but they do not count'.

Assessment should not be harmful. Pierre Merle (2018:27)[8] says studies have shown that benevolent assessment actually increases academic performance, because it generates a feeling of confidence conducive to better learning. Formative and benevolent assessments are therefore extremely positive. Ultimately, however, they will be caught up by the macabre constant, and a mark that 'counts' will be mentioned in reports. It is hoped that assessments that do not 'count' will lead to better ones that 'count', but if the final assessment is summative, it will inevitably generate the macabre constant. Benevolent assessments then live under the threat of 'malicious' assessment, which will bring about a certain proportion of failure.

Another problem is that evaluation says nothing about what should happen to the students who have failed. Teachers claim to seek everyone's success, but we all know that it will not happen. Schools may sometimes set up remediation courses, but they know perfectly well that they will only be marginally effective and will not eliminate failure.

2. A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

France has been plagued by a marking system which rates students on a numerical scale from 0 (very bad) to 20 (excellent), with 10 as the pivotal limit between failure and success. Pierre Merle (2018, chapter 2)[9] explains that it was originally conceived in the 16th century by the Jesuits in the schools they had created to train an intellectual and religious elite, 'the soldiers of God'. It ensured competition between three groups of students, the *optimi*, who were rewarded, the *dubii*, who were encouraged, and the *inepti*, who were excluded. This marking system was later adopted in schools at large and it was institutionalised in the 19th century when competitive examinations for the Grandes Écoles and teacher-training schools (Écoles Normales) were introduced. From there, it percolated into primary and secondary education until it became the default system.

Yet there has been an alternative to macabre evaluation, and that is skills assessment. It was first established by Jean-Baptiste de la Salle in the Christian Schools he set up to teach and educate working-class children at the end of the 17th century. According to Merle (2018:59–60)[10], Christian Schools replaced the selective and permanent rivalry of the Jesuit model by a personal progression. Students start in the order of *beginners* and they try to reach the orders of *advanced* and *perfect*. The transition to a higher level is based on a form of global assessment

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[8] Merle Pierre, 2018, *Les pratiques d'évaluation scolaire. Historique, difficultés, perspectives.* PUF.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

against a list of pre-defined skills. Merle points out that this is a foreshadowing of modern day frameworks of reference such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) produced within the Council of Europe.[11] Classes were not formed according to age criteria, therefore students could stay in a given level until they managed to enter the next or dropped out.

3. HOW THE MACABRE CONSTANT STRIKES BACK WITH A VENGEANCE IN SKILLS ASSESSMENTS

In France and most other countries in Europe, language learning is evaluated against the CEFRL. The skills to be acquired are expressed in terms of ability descriptors describing actions. At a given level, students should be able to *do* this or that. Grammatical knowledge of irregular verbs and conjugation for example are not specifically measured. Teachers then implement educational activities to help students acquire these skills. In its first version, published in 2001, the Framework did not foster any particular methodology; it rather advocated eclecticism and recommended periodic consultations of the descriptors. Later, the Council of Europe suggested that task-based approaches were more in line with the Framework than most other methods employed.

Newly acquired skills can be evaluated at the end of a learning period by intuitively checking whether learners are capable of performing the tasks mentioned by the descriptors. However, such an evaluation does not produce marks and therefore has little institutional value. Written exams and certifications are then introduced. They often consist of lists of items to which the candidate should respond. Answers are often evaluated in binary terms (right or wrong, ability demonstrated or not). This is where the macabre constant strikes back. If some items are passed by all the students or on the contrary if all fail, exam designers will consider that the items are not sufficiently 'discriminating'. They will then modify them until a dispersal of results is obtained. A 'good' question will then separate the candidates into two groups, those who fail and those who succeed.

Philippe Perrenoud (1989)[12] is right when he says that the hierarchy of skills

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[11] The CEFRL defines six levels of competency (beginners: A1, A2; intermediate: B1, B2; advanced: C1, C2) in five skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, conversation. Evaluation is achieved against a list of descriptors, also known as can-do statements, such as 'I can write a postcard' (A1 in writing), 'I can understand a film without subtitles' (C2 in listening), 'I can participate in a conversation about a subject that I am familiar with' (B2 in conversation).

[12] Perrenoud Philippe, 1989, « La triple fabrication de l'échec scolaire ». In *Psychologie*

produced by exams is an artefact of the evaluation methodology. There are certainly differences in skills among learners, he says, but they are increased by the assessment process. Perrenoud considers that evaluation should rather be geared towards the *reduction* of differences. The CEFRL could allow such a feat because it assesses what the learners *can* do and not than what they *cannot*.

Preparation of language certification at university is another example of the macabre use of skills assessment. Universities quite often decide to impose a minimum level in languages, usually English, that students must reach at the end of a given cycle, say B2 at Bachelor's degree level. Evaluation is often achieved through an external certification such as CLES, TOEFL or TOEIC.[13] Teachers naturally want to prepare their students for the exam, especially since the results will allow comparisons between classes and therefore between them. The learning content is then formatted by the final assessment. This phenomenon is known as the 'washback effect'.

During preparation, classroom work is often quite unsatisfactory and joyless both for teachers and students. Students tend to drag their feet in order to demoralise teachers and lower their expectations. The *optimi* do not need to learn anything more than what they already know. The *inepti* are not motivated either, because they have always been in the macabre constant and they do not see why this should change now; they simply hope to minimise damage at the time of certification by revising the records. Only the *dubii* may be keen on making some progress. Instead of seeking excellence and linguistic diversity, universities are content with low-level monolingualism ('English only'), with no ambition other than training for certification in classes where the washback effect has reduced learning to a joyless activity.[14]

A famous French writer, Paul Valéry,[15] had some harsh words about diplomas in a presentation he made in 1935. 'The diploma is a mortal enemy of culture,' he said. 'As soon as some action is submitted to control, the deep aim of the controlled

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française, n° 34/4, 1989, pp. 237–245. Repris in Pierrehumbert, B. (dir.) *L'échec à l'école: échec de l'école*, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1992, pp. 85–102.

[13] The CLES (Certificat de Compétences en Langue dans l'Enseignement Supérieur) is a French officially accredited certification; the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) are the two most widely used American certifications.

[14] Many colleagues will certainly disagree with this description of classroom work. Yet, when I once came under attack on that subject at a conference about language teaching at university, I was eventually saved by students in the audience who concurred with me.

[15] Valéry Paul, 1936, 2011, *Le bilan de l'intelligence*, http://descolarisation.org/pdf/le-bilan-de-l-intelligence.pdf.

person is no longer the action itself but the anticipation of control and of the means to defeat it . . . If the aim of teaching is no longer the education of the mind but the acquisition of a diploma, the object of studying turns into a minimal requirement.'[16]

Certification, as it is, certainly measures a 'minimal requirement'.

4. SEMIOTIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CAUSES OF THE MACABRE CONSTANT

So why this taste for sorting and exclusion? There is a semiotic reason: there can be no success without failure. Many words in a language work in pairs: small/large, indoor/outdoor, rich/poor, etc. They structure our understanding of the environment and society. There would be no sense in talking about the *inside* if there were no *outside*; if there were no *poor*, there would be no *rich* either; *small* has no meaning without *large*. What would everyone's success mean? Nothing at all. Success would literally make no sense without its counterpart, failure. Schools systems often claim they want to eradicate failure. They forget that for some to succeed, others must fail.[17]

This semiotic structure of success and failure is in line with our anthropological being. We live in extraordinarily unequal societies. Parents want their children to succeed in life, i.e. to get jobs that will provide them with sufficient income and are prestigious enough to secure as high a social status as possible. It is better to be a doctor, a teacher, a CEO or a lawyer than, say, a chimney sweep or a cleaner. To achieve this, middle-class parents get involved in their children's education. They worry about their schools and the level of their class. They do their best to bring their failing offsprings to success by helping them at home or by giving them private tuition. Working-class parents want the best for their children too, but when problems arise they are frequently at a loss. Quite often they do not know what to do and they do not feel they can have a grip on the school system. They remember their own failure as children and they become fatalistic: school is not for 'people like us'. This may lead either to passive submission to the social order or to violence and petty criminality. In the best of cases such parents engage in political militancy, usually on the left, hoping to help bring about a fairer society.

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[16] Paul Valéry, 1936, 2011, *Le Bilan de l'intelligence* (*Taking Stock of Intelligence*). « Le diplôme est l'ennemi mortel de la culture »; « Dès qu'une action est soumise à un contrôle, le but profond de celui qui agit n'est plus l'action même, mais il conçoit d'abord la prévision du contrôle, la mise en échec des moyens de contrôle »; « Le but de l'enseignement n'étant plus la formation de l'esprit, mais l'acquisition du diplôme, c'est le minimum exigible qui devient l'objectif des études » (my translation).

[17] The semiotic aspect of evaluation is explored Frath 2012a.

The success/failure hierarchy produced in schools reflects social class structure and this is why the macabre constant is etched in the stone of our common values. It is with this in mind that I will now try to make some humanistic proposals.

5.   HUMANISTIC PROPOSALS

Two questions should be asked before engaging in evaluation: for what purpose, and what should be done with failed students? Institutional assessment is carried out following a ritual calendar at the end of term, semester, year or cycle. Failing students are usually offered remediation, and indeed it often happens that some manage to make progress. However, if all got good results by means of remediation, the level of expectation would be raised in order to recreate the macabre constant.

Failed students move on to higher classes, where they go on failing, thereby ensuring ad infinitum the value of success for those who succeed. Their failure is enshrined in the evaluation system. They have no alternative. It is therefore not surprising that many adults, remembering their difficult education, maintain that they are hopeless at English, Maths or French; some even claim it as an element of their personality.

The French Ministry for Education often organises nationwide assessments. The objective is to take stock of students' levels in order to help teachers adjust their lessons. But as tests are based on 'discriminating' items, they necessarily generate the macabre constant. At any rate, if all students succeeded, tests would have no value at all; teachers would see them as a waste of time and would refuse to carry them out. Their sole role is then to confirm students in their relative positions. Any general improvement would be annihilated the following year by an increase in the level of expectation.

Now what could we do? Let's first look at the options available: 1) no evaluation at all; 2) evaluation against a framework of reference; 3) macabre evaluation. I will first examine evaluation in primary schools and then evaluation of languages in secondary and higher education.

Macabre assessments should in any case be banned from primary schools. We could let children work at their own pace and wager on their natural curiosity and desire to learn. Teachers are aware of these two features of children's psyche, and they also know they can fluctuate depending on the children's family history, their empathy for their teachers, their interest in the subjects, their maturity, pair-influence and so on. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that what they did not learn during this term they may learn in the next. At any rate, macabre marking does not improve results and locks the children into an institutionalised perception of their level. Teachers could refer to syllabi which spell out the skills they should

aim for at each stage. They could then conduct intuitive assessments using descriptors and discuss results with parents. They could also carry out formal assessments, which should remain individual, and results should only be communicated to parents. The last year of primary education could be devoted to the preparation of a stocktaking assessment to help students and parents make an informed choice of curriculum in secondary schools.

In the rest of this section, I will look at the evaluation of languages, beginning with the first cycle of secondary schools (known as *collèges*, i.e. the equivalent of comprehensive schools in Britain), where the macabre constant could also be removed very easily. Assessment could be regularly made against the CEFRL, either intuitively using the descriptors, or through online tests or tests designed on site. No specific level should be required. Levels achieved in the understanding and production of oral and written language could simply be written down on a regular basis in a portfolio, i.e. a document where best work and results are stored. Progress made, or the lack of it, would then become visible. A student stagnating at a given level might then be motivated to provide additional work targeted towards the skills needed to improve. This would require the use of a self-study set up, which would have to be installed. Most *collège* school-leavers apply for admission in a *lycée*, i.e. the equivalent of either grammar, technical or vocational schools. If these schools required a particular language level – say, B2 in English and B1 in German – chances are students would take this as an external motivation and they might put in some extra work to reach the required level.

Students should also be given another chance in another language. If they failed their first year of English, for example, they could be offered to study another language in the following year, and they could eventually go back to English when they have gained confidence and learned the methods of success. Schools might also want to introduce intercomprehension, an efficient method of learning to understand, not speak, a series of languages belonging to the same phylum, e.g. Romance or Germanic languages.[18] Intercomprehension would allow students to acquire partial skills that can be used in real life and within the job market.

The same policy could be continued in secondary schools, and portfolio-type evaluation could be complemented with external certifications, all the more useful since international universities usually require a certain level of proficiency in the language of tuition, quite often English. Of course, there would still be a certain ratio of failure, but at least it would not have been generated by the evaluation system.

At university, the language situation is more diverse, and a wider variety of assessments can be carried out. Students in Foreign Language and Literature

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[18] See for example Castagne 2004, Capucho 2008, Capucho & Pelsmaekers 2008.

Departments, those who want to become teachers or translators for example, can certainly be assessed by macabre exams: they need to reach a high level of excellence to be well prepared for their future careers. Competition may very well increase the amount of work done by the *optimi* and *dubii* and will eliminate the *inepti*, making sure graduates will be on the market with the required knowledge and skills.

Most students specialise in subjects other than languages (science, medicine, law . . .) and will still need languages in their future careers. They are known as non-specialist students. English is usually compulsory while other languages are optional. Non-specialist students only need to reach a certain level set by the institution, say B2 in English at Bachelor's degree level and B1 in one or two other languages. Skills assessment against a framework of reference does not rest on the macabre constant, and so all non-specialist students could theoretically succeed. Yet university stakeholders, be they students, teachers or administration, are so used to macabre evaluations that they find it abnormal when practically all students pass. As the head of a language centre, I had to explain again and again the philosophy of the evaluation we had adopted in our language centres.

Promoting non-macabre evaluation is an uphill struggle. Most universities simply do not understand what is at stake. They are content with an intermediate level in English when they could encourage students to do their best in English and promote voluntary multilingualism. A diagnostic assessment at the beginning of the first year could help identify three groups of students: those who already have the required level in English (say B2), those who are not far from it and those who are very far from it. The first group could then deepen their knowledge and skills and try to reach C1, even C2; they could also work on their second language, usually German or Spanish, or learn another one altogether. The second group could first work to reach level B2, then follow the same path as the previous group. The last group should focus on the compulsory level. Internal or external certification could then give an institutional value to the level achieved in the compulsory language.[19]

Students could easily be encouraged to learn more languages than just English. In the languages centres I used to head, we offered about twenty languages, and they were quite successful. Hundreds, thousands of students were happy to voluntarily learn Japanese, Norwegian or Bulgarian in their free time in our learning setups. Most of them did so without institutional recognition, because the university did not know how to evaluate optional voluntary learning: they had not foreseen the possibility. After a period of hard lobbying, I eventually managed to

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[19] See Frath 2012b for the use of the CEFRL in universities.

have the levels inscribed in what is known as the *Supplément au diplôme,* a document which comes with the diploma.

To assess the students' levels of achievement, we experimented with the portfolio, a completely relevant way of using the CEFRL (see Frath 2005).[20] It is particularly suitable for languages *chosen* by students, i.e. not compulsory. When a student has voluntarily spent several hours a week in a self-study language centre to learn for example Japanese in their free time, it is very inappropriate to impose a macabre exam which will inevitably be unrelated to the actual learning accomplished by the student. Failure is then more than likely, followed by the giving up of learning. This is why we designed what we called *declarative evaluation* of actual work accomplished. Students submit their portfolio to a jury composed of a teacher and a speaker of the language learned. They claim to have reached a certain level in a given language – say A1 in reading Japanese – and they prove it by showing and using their portfolio. The jury then takes a binary decision: no, the level is not (yet) reached, or yes, the level is reached, in which case it issues a certificate, which is later listed in the *Supplément au diplôme.*

Now let us go back to the two questions asked at the beginning of this section: 1) why evaluate? and 2) what to do with failed students?

We should ask ourselves the first question, mainly to stop us from thoughtlessly engaging in conventional macabre evaluation. Do we want to exercise pressure on the students, to make them work harder, to eliminate the less successful? Then macabre evaluations are just what we need. Do we want to check if students have attained a certain level defined by the institution? Skills assessment against an external framework of reference is then perfect. Do we want to give an institutional value to free voluntary work? The portfolio is the answer. And quite often evaluation is not needed at all, because students are just interested in learning something for its own sake and do not necessarily need or want an official recognition of it.

As for the second question, students should always know what will happen to them after evaluation. If they study to become teachers or doctors, they must accept that the less talented will be eliminated, and this is done with the help of macabre evaluation. In all other cases, we should wager on the students' willingness to learn. If they are not willing now, maybe we can wait and give them another chance later; if unwillingness perseveres, nothing can be done in any case. We can also offer alternatives: failure in history does not necessarily mean failure in

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[20] Frath Pierre, 2005, "Introducing the Cercles European Language Portfolio into a self-study multilingual resource centre", in *Papers of the 8th CERCLES conference, University language Centres: Broadening Horizons, Expanding Networks.* Bratislava, 9–11 September 2004.

geography; remediation is also quite efficient, especially in a self-study environment.

Also, we should be aware that the school is a machine which inflicts 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1979)[21] on 'other people's children' (Lenon 2018) in order to preserve the existence of social classes. We can either accept it or regret it; it is for the voters to decide in a democracy. The trouble is real issues are often blurred, even distorted by clever self-serving arguments and sheer ignorance.

CONCLUSION

The macabre constant is at the heart of most evaluation systems. Most stakeholders, be they the institution, the students, the parents, the teachers and many educationalists, are not aware of its limitations and the damage it can inflict on learning. I have tried to explore its semiotic, anthropological and social foundations in this article.

For anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1965:20)[22], much of what we do originates in a 'twilight state of mind'; we are not really aware of our motivations, sometimes because we are reluctant to recognize the evilness of what we do. And indeed, it is almost impossible to face an assessment system that ruins the lives of so many school children. It is to be hoped that the exposure of the macabre constant will ultimately help make it untenable as the default means of evaluation and that schools and universities will eventually integrate it in a more effective, diverse and humanistic evaluation system.

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[21] Bourdieu Pierre, 1979, *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Les Éditions de Minuit.

[22] Leroi-Gourhan André, 1965, *Le geste et la parole. La mémoire et les rythmes.* Albin Michel.