

Chapter 9

Toward a Social Psychology of Assimilation: Self-Determination Theory in Cognitive Development and Education

RICHARD M. RYAN AND EDWARD L. DECI

University of Rochester

*But what is the true type of education?
It is like the art of the gardener under whose care
a thousand trees blossom and grow.
He contributes nothing to their actual growth;
the principle of growth lies in the trees themselves.
He plants and waters....*

(Pestalozzi, 1818)

Humans are curious, interested creatures, who naturally seek out novelty and challenge, enjoy learning, and actively internalize new practices and cultural values from others around them. These evolved tendencies to be curious (Silvia, 2008) and to assimilate (Piaget, 1971) would seem to be primary resources in the social promotion of learning and development (Niemi & Ryan, 2009). Yet, it is increasingly frequent in contemporary societies for parents and educators not to rely on these inherent propensities, but rather to try to ensure learning through external incentives and controls, often interfering with or crowding out intrinsic epistemic processes. Externally controlling motivators have been systemically extended to teachers as well. For example, in many nations policies link rewards and sanctions contingently on raising specific test scores (Ryan & Brown, 2005; Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Under such controlling conditions, predictable changes in teaching practices occur that attempt to supplant active learning by assimilation with learning by externally controlled directives and goals.

It is particularly interesting in this regard that this chapter is occasioned by a common focus of Jean Piaget Society members and a few of us representatives of self-determination theory on autonomy and self-regulation in