

# **Consumerism Threatens Our Sustainable Well-Being. What Can Schools Do?**

Gary Babiuk (University of Manitoba)

## *Abstract*

Our belief about our personal wellbeing, how to live well, has an impact on earth's sustainability. Much of our current cultural ethos about "being happy" is based on consuming and to ask people "...to curb consumption is akin to asking them to stop breathing...". By all estimates we in North America have an ecological footprint well beyond our earth capacity to support us, in fact the estimates are that we would need 3 or 4 earths to maintain the current level of consumption for all humans. Yet with all of the evidence that we are negatively impacting the earth's ability to support us, we continue to over-consume.

Human consumption has become a cultural norm, a "spiritual pursue", and others would say a new form of idolatry. This has not happened by accident but has been engineered over the last few centuries by the institutions of business, government and the media. There is a need for change, a transformation of our attitudes, values, some would say our consciousness, if we wish future generations to be able to live sustainably. UNESCO has felt that the most effective way of creating a sustainable world is through education and in fact called for the *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development*, 2005-2014.

At this time there has been an effort by educators to increase our students' literacies, including ecological literacy and systems thinking. We have also in a limited way included critical thinking and decision making in school outcomes. But "perhaps the greatest critique of schools is that they represent a huge missed opportunity to combat consumerism and to educate students about its effects on people and the environment". In fact few schools teach media literacy, which can be a critical way to begin the transformation of the attitudes and values around consumerism. My presentation will outline the possibilities of addressing the influence of consumerism on our students using as an example the newly implemented Grade 12 course in Manitoba, *Global Issues, Citizenship and Sustainability* which emphasizes media literacy and an action component which is uncommon in high school courses. I also will suggest that contemplative practice needs to be a complementary part of the critical and creative thinking of students if we wish to transform into a culture of sustainability.