

Transformative Environmental Philosophy in a Learning Organization for children, teachers, and parents

Maria Papathanasiou¹

Abstract: Children today face a different reality from those a few years ago. Environmental changes are being very transparent because of the rapid transmission of information on one hand and the direct access that most people are entitled to from various sources on the other hand. However, it is vital for the current and future democracy, of citizens of all generations, to be able to filter, distinguish, critically reflect, and further communicate the ethical concerns of human actions especially regarding the environment and our responsibilities to it. Considering the duty of the human community to prepare the younger people and to transform the perceptions of the older ones, philosophical inquiry and reinforcing critical thinking within the school and home through reflective dialogue is suggested through Philosophy for Parents (P4P), for the purpose of bridging a now widely recognized gap in communication and collaboration between parents and teachers, and hence in potential educational efficacy.

Key-words: Environmental Philosophy; Philosophy for Parents & Teachers; P4C; Learning Organization;

¹University of Thessaly, Greece. Email: papathanasioum@uth.gr

An emerging need...

The enormous dimensions and complexity of environmental problems which create unprecedented situations creates huge question-marks in children's and teenagers' minds. The relationship and the attitude of people with and towards the environment is a big part of everyday's discussions at a global level in school, at home and wherever dialogue occurs. Critical thinking and reflection can be decisive in the conscious shaping of environmental ethics and environmental education of citizens, especially future citizens. But what is ethics and how does it relate to the environment? Ethics is the name of the philosophical section that examines the rules of our behavior towards fellow human beings. It explores key concepts such as values, normative principles, rights, and duties. Environmental ethics explores additionally, the ethical dimension of the relationship between humans and nature and the position we take for example, when their interests conflict with each other.

As it is well known, every community is characterized by a high degree of organization of the relationships between the individuals and the populations that compose it. The individuals of each population of the ecosystem, on the one hand, communicate with each other, and on the other hand, cooperate and interact, mate for reproduction, compete for the use of common resources (food, shelter, energy, etc.), cooperate for the best exploitation of these resources or to protect themselves from the threats. So, cooperation is necessary for everyone's survival. The appearance of the human species was a potential source of imbalance in nature, which was never threatened by the other countless organisms. In the last decades, in these bio-communities there are constant "interactions" or clash of interests. Although, their members are interdependent through relationships, usually of a trophic nature, contributing to the maintenance of balance, humans tend to exceed, transgress the limits. There are disturbances that are caused by natural causes, however, most turmoil origin by human interventions. In recent decades the knowledge of the degree of stability of the ecosystem, its limits, and the speed of its return to balance seems to be collapsing.

Fire and agriculture/livestock farming were from the beginning serious disturbances in the ecosystem, but not as much as today. Human-

environment relations began to change radically from the middle of the 18th century with the industrial revolution and the expansion of urban centers. In combination with the subsequent leaping development of technology, which could be the catalyst in this disturbed relationship, man leads the environment to a profound crisis which plagues modern civilization and troubles the young.

The radical alteration of many habitats or even their complete disappearance, the incredible destruction of forests, lakes, rivers, and seas are now a clear threat to the entire planet. It is to wonder whether the expansion of this ecological crisis is due to humans' inability to foresee long-term disruptions of large ecological systems or to vanity, ambition, ingratitude, and selfishness- perhaps a philosophical question/s- that have eliminated every sense.

It is therefore imperative that we reflect and review our role on this planet and that critical thinking within a living organism like that of the school is cultivated and upgraded (Stratan, A., 2023). Education, as it is a vital area of fermentation and field of influence of social changes (Assadourian, E., 2017), it was inevitable that sooner or later would adopt the messages of Environmental Ethics, which developed after the growing theoretical searches which over time led to the creation of an organized framework of thought and dialogue, the chapter of applied ethics.

Presupposing human plasticity, learning for children, teachers and parents in a school that functions as a Learning Organization (Papathanasiou, M., 2023) generates an inquiry, analysis, reflection, and redesign of new understandings regarding the obligations and rights of human beings within our known universe.

The need for constructive knowledge and critical thinking in approaching environmental issues, the interdisciplinary approach to an issue, the cooperation and democratic action of citizens who are actively interested in the environment make imperative the need for reflective dialogue at school, at home, on the playground or elsewhere. Critical thinking between teachers, students, and parents, within the school learning community, is the space for active theoretical and practical simultaneous reflection, revision of perceptions and attitudes towards the ecological disaster that we watch every day in our receivers.

"Philosophy begins with wonder and who wonders more than children?" (Aristotle)

From the Past to the Future – Philosophical Inquiry in Schools

Once in a while, what we usually take for granted about ourselves, other people and the world around—that we were born and raised, that the sun rises and sets every day, that words have a meaning—causes us surprise and wonder. Then, unusual “philosophical” questions may arise very often, reminiscent of those children, and not adult philosophers, many times ask: Who am I really? What is my place in the world and how can I help? Where do I come from and what is the future of this planet? Why are there so many disasters in the world? Who created the world? Why are we destroying our world? What is time? Why all these great disasters happen and what happens when people die? What is good and what is bad? Are we free to do certain things or are we driven by deeper powers that we cannot control? What makes “nice” things seem nice?

In history, the critical turn of philosophy toward the dialogic vs. a monologic process—its new conception from Socrates—continued in Plato’s Academy and was completed with the “scientificity” of Aristotle, a well-educated young man, who started as 17-year-old in Plato’s Academy. Central elements of the new method that was introduced by all three of them was the interactive way of exposing philosophical problems, the formulation of opposite-and/or-multiple positions on each issue, the search for definitions, and the critical rejection of dogmatic decisions—in sum, philosophy roughly as we know it today. In his philosophy, Plato used the everyday language of his time, occasionally transforming some words and extending their meaning, and avoiding introducing new terms. Nevertheless, and despite their undeniable charm, Socrates and Plato are essentially strangers (in terms of their methods) to those outside of traditional academia.

Perhaps the distance that separates modern humans from the complex problems of Athenian society of the 5th and 4th centuries BC—from the problems that shaped Socratic and Platonic philosophy—seems enormous and unbridgeable regardless of their similarities when studied in depth. There are those few who still read Platonic dialogues with “philosophic” interest, but most read them more as a form of literature, as tiles in the mosaic of an exotic era that has finally passed.

Therefore, philosophy and its texts have come to evolve for most, as an individual quest, which presupposes isolation from current concerns and everyday worries (Kalfas, 2015).

With Aristotle, somehow, the modern reader feels more familiar. First, because Aristotle has written in a way that is reminiscent of the current manner of writing philosophy; in fact, he was the first to establish the scientific treatise as a vehicle for the transmission of philosophy. Aristotelian texts are dominated by the problems discussed and the positions exposed and not the voice of the author himself. There is a specific problem at the starting point of every Aristotelian treatise.

Before proceeding with the presentation of his own positions, Aristotle quotes the views of other philosophers (often alongside the perceptions of common people), and then proceeds to their analysis and critique, to arrive at some fundamental questions—philosophical and scientific dilemmas. His own contribution now usually takes the form of an evidentiary process: it is preceded by the formulation of general positions, “first principles” or axioms of each scientific discipline, and then conclusions are drawn from these first principles in a strictly reasoned manner. Reading Aristotle’s writings is like following a researcher who opens a theoretical discussion with his predecessors and then contemporaries, who clearly states his sources and influences, and who claims for himself a new strict philosophical method (Kalfas, 2015).

Aristotle’s specialty, his special attraction, has been the surfacing of critical problems. Aristotle always started from a problem that would give the opportunity to his students to reflect on the existing answers, to proceed to subtle distinctions, and to locate the core in a philosophical dilemma, in a critical “question.” It is well known that Aristotle considered the discussion that led to the formulation of a philosophical position more important than the value of the position itself. Because of this view, he presents philosophy as something useful, not only for the few, and it starts by dealing with practical problems of everyday life, problems that attract also children who wonder genuinely until adults restrain them.

With that as model, then, it should not seem a coincidence that the first experimental philosophical work (novel) written by Lipman in the 70s, in his attempt to transfer philosophical dialogue to children’s society, was the novel called *Harry Stottlemeier’s discovery*, which recounts the

adventures of Harry and his friends and the conversations they have regarding the world, knowledge, science, and the mind.

Although Lipman (1991, pp. 5-6) admitted his lack of familiarity with the principles of education and the writing of fiction he was influenced by his readings of Dewey's educational theory and philosophy of education during World War II, as well as by several French writers in whom he became interested while in France for a period of study after the war. Moreover, the Pre-Socratic philosophical ideas became his foundation for the logical themes and the logic that were to be introduced. In the years that followed, a Handbook/Manual with guidelines for teachers was also published by the IAPC, as well as other philosophical literature for the ages of primary and secondary school students (K-12 curriculum)—a dialogical pedagogy—a professional development model for philosophy in schools. All materials that have been written throughout the years from P4C experts, aim to connect childhood with philosophy—with their common linkage, i.e., wonder and inquiry.

The philosophical and thoughtful dialogues that are created in the process do not require someone lecturing about philosophers, but, rather, provide a strong stimulus for discussing philosophical ideas that can be derived from a text (story, poetry, newspaper articles, etc.), art (sculpture, paintings, music, dance, drama, etc.), nature itself (e.g., radical climate changes), and/or anything that can engage the students in a philosophical discussion. A path where ideas are explored with questions that are posed either in the ordinary manner of posing a question or sometimes even in other creative ways such as poems, drawings, descriptions, or any other expression that helps students to listen to the others, thinking, reflecting, and building on each other's ideas.

It is however important for the students to learn the rules of engagement, get accustomed to recognizing a philosophical idea and be exposed to and practice creating a philosophical question that brings the community into thinking, reasoning, and reflecting. The ensuing deep discussion also embraces the exercises and/or activities that are suggested in the Manual aiming at the topic on which they need to focus and clarify the meanings at issue. And, most importantly, the inquiry is epitomized with an assessment of the inquiry itself, the community, and the facilitator.

Philosophy for Children (P4C) — Lipman / Sharp's Educational Project

Lipman's experience as a Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University in New York was an important impetus for his exploring children's ability to think. He believed that thinking, exploring, and reflecting are skills that can be taught from an early age if children's inquiring and their tendency to ask questions and explore them is innate. While observing a teacher's efforts to teach reading to neurologically impaired children, his suggestion for exercises with logical inferences seemed to have assisted those children to better comprehend the meaning of what they were reading (Lipman, 1992, p.3). His experience as a professor of Philosophy at the university motivated him to explore ways to cultivate thinking skills from an early age and he decided to rely on the practices of Socrates. As is well known, Socrates used to encourage his interlocutors to participate in a discussion, listen carefully to others (because listening entails thinking), to think before speaking and to repeat in their minds what others have previously said because, a dialogue means examining, discovering, recognizing, and ultimately creating a research community.

Inquiry through questions that are created by the innate need of children to conquer development of knowledge contains fulsome links to philosophy in every dimension and to its greatest depth. With their questions the children wonder and try to discover the paths along which to further explore their world. They are constantly intrigued by life itself and the discovery of the possible answers to the various questions brings them to philosophizing without realizing that they are acting like young philosophers. These are usually questions that typically surprise adults—who frequently find it even challenging to respond to them. It is, however, the innate search for answers and the exploration of the world which surrounds children that forces them to explore, inquire, and discover multiple and various answers, first at home—if the society is one where philosophical enquiry is “endemic,” and, before long, in the extended school community that includes them, their peers, teachers, and students' families. The pedagogical framework of P4C points out a way, children can learn how to think, analyze, and argue from an early age, one that is necessary for children's' true learning because, in its absence, their

inherent ability to think abstractly is lost. Their abstract thinking brings them to Philosophy, familiarizes them with discussion, while their critical thinking, and their "reasoning" skills bring them closer to Socrates' Dialogue (Lipman & Sharp, 1994). In addition, as has been pointed out by Lipman himself (2003), P4C is characterized by reflective, deliberative, communicative, and dialogic actions, which conclude in both reinforcing individual judgment and, at the same time, solidifying the community. Specifically, individuals' diverse, e.g., in ideas, beliefs, and socio-economic backgrounds, are given the chance to voice their ideas in a democratic, empathic, and respectful manner, and co-construct a community that promotes trust and well-being, while building a *Community of Philosophical Inquiry* (CPI) (Lipman, 2009).

Among other things, it could also be a potential way for children to exercise a basic right, as clearly described in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child: "The right of the child to express his or her views freely on any matter which concerns him or her" and "the opportunity to seek to receive and disseminate information and ideas of all kinds" (UNICEF, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989)

For this to happen we need to change the way we understand education. To investigate how can one best assimilate anything that is external? Who is the guide, the mentor, the pedagogue that lays the foundation and further empowers the research community and the interactive relationship that this community brings to life that prompts students to become partners in learning? What is its role, if not that of the traditional monophony? Abraham Lincoln in his famous letter to his son's teacher writes: "Teach him to listen to all men but teach him also to filter all he hears on a screen of Truth and take Only the Good that comes through" (Lincoln, 1966).

Educational Tool needed to sponsor active and reflective engagement of parents

However, in order to enhance active and reflective engagement in a group of adult learners such as bring the parents into involvement with the school's educational strategies and practices, the writer of this article sees the need for an educational tool like her innovative Parents Community of Inquiry- PCI Model, aimed at enhancing the capacity of parents to

cooperate, dialogue critically, reflect within the school community as a partner, and institutionalize active engagement in educational dialogue with their children as a primary effort.

Thinking and reflecting cannot be taught from one day to the other. But they can be practiced, grown and nurtured. People should have the opportunity to ask questions, to think, to reflect, to reason, to decide, and act. This whole process reflects the thinking of the human mind. The key to deep thinking, then, would be to ask dynamic questions, reflect on one's own and on others' ideas, perceptions, and assumptions, and explore multiple possible answers. The power of thought is fueled by the dynamics of our questions that, in turn, direct the search for different paths that may or may not be based on experiences that may be personal or not, previous, or new. The questions are drawn to provoke deep thinking into dialogue and make the learners responsible for looking at a perplexing question from different angles. The internal or external dialogue that is born from the question or questions can become the spark to ignite new learning.

A rational discourse among learners will bring to the surface different points of view that the learner can accept or not, reflect, or build upon—or not. This process has been found likely to yield learning and change. In order to enable this mental stretching, learners should be given the opportunity, in a designated space and time, to submit their questions and reflect (Hategan, 2021). That must optimally occur in a safe environment, conducive to fresh thinking and dialogue, where learners discuss, think, express themselves freely and learn that the power lies not in each of us individually but in the interaction of the participants.

That the value of parents as a source of information and support, derives mostly from their life experiences, has been acknowledged by researchers (Cross, 1981). As a result, there have been numerous ideas, proposals, and models that seek to enhance parent-school partnership and relationship. Various theoretical schemes have been proposed from time to time, which attempt to organize the different ways in which the interaction of school and family can best be maintained. Each of them illuminates the processes that take place during this interaction in different ways where, in the most functional ones, it seems that school retains a dominant role in the wider community (Mapp & Bergman, 2019). However, the limited and unclear legislative framework for such an initiative coupled with the lack of will and action, that could enable this

educational practice with the appropriate tools to promote parental participation in a child's learning (Manolitsis, 2004) are two key factors that inform the typical, merely superficial, and "formal" relationship between school and family, recorded in related literature (ibid), particularly for the European countries. Both parents and teachers, the principal actors in this partnership, are adult learners who continually learn individually in their lives (Brookfield, 1986, Cross, 1981), but rarely do so collectively as a learning community (Watkins & Marsick, 1999). Therefore, realization of the concept of the school community as a potential Learning Organization (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1999) needs a bridge for this communication and relational gap, that is originated in a collective manner and with a unified/coherent vision.

Let us not forget that today's children are tomorrow's teenagers, today's teenagers are tomorrow's adults, and citizens and possibly tomorrow's parents. We must think in terms of this continuum as we try to conceptualize and seek to foster continual improvement of societal education as a whole.

To that end the researcher proposes a wider trial of her Parents' Community of Inquiry Model to help parents and teachers to develop together from a relatively early stage, a democratic and critical way of thinking, as a way to help them become familiar with active listening, democratic interaction, as well as a collaborative search for effective, creative options rather than the same old easy solutions. Furthermore, accept different views and diversity as an agent of assembling various perspectives and assumptions, thinking critically, and reflecting upon thus endorsing complexity. Additionally, CPI offers the prospect of strengthening the relations of teachers with the parents of the students at each school by convening them through the agency of a democratic dialogical model that can have a positive, integrative effect on the development of individual personalities on a cognitive, moral, and emotional level as well as somewhat a consensual one for the group as a whole.

But "*We will never philosophize even if we have read all the theories of Plato and Aristotle if we are nevertheless unable to think and express a judgment on a subject of discussion*" (Descartes).

The discourse itself thus becomes the object of a further dialogue aimed at the self-awareness and self-regulation of the group. Strong

questioning and reflecting can be the key to cultivating thought because the dynamics of our questions are what guides the zeal for research and even the erasure of other, past paths. The questions through the dialogue stimulate different points of view which the actors hear and entertain, whether they agree with them or not. They are what provokes thought in dialogue and make it necessary to look at the issue from different angles. In order for this mental exercise to take place, the process of selecting the appropriate questions should be structured to give the participants the opportunity and the freedom to listen as well as to submit their own questions.

It is important to consider that Epicurus' Garden was open to the Athenian citizens and other Greeks (mainly from Ionia), but also to women, slaves, the poor, and even the uneducated. Everyone was accepted because it was considered that everyone can become a philosopher. After all, as Epicurus said, *and Protagoras at first was lame and carried wood, and Aristotle first ate his father's money, then went to the army, then became a drug dealer, until he met Plato. He listened to his lessons (he was not brainless) and what happened (To the philosophers in Mytilene)*. At the time, all this was from disturbing to scandalous for the intellectual world of Athens, who preferred to imagine that philosophy is an occupation for the elite (who are usually few) and certainly not coming from the lower educational or social level (Kalfas, 2015).

So, what were the main innovations in relation to the old practice at a certain point of time in philosophy? First, the philosopher left the pedestal of the isolated sage and became the person next door. They met ordinary people, wandered the streets and hangouts of the city, participated in its institutions, and were in direct contact with its political leaders. Then, philosophy was presented as something useful for the first time. The philosopher was still appealing to those who were concerned about the salvation of their soul and the moral foundations of human behavior. But at that point in time, the philosopher seems to have been the one with solutions to practical problems as well.

Nonetheless, adults very infrequently, usually never, pick up on or engage with the philosophical questions or comments that children raise—as one could easily imagine happening when their children return home from school having, earlier in the day, engaged in dialogic philosophical discussion with their teacher, either by their own spontaneous questions

arising during the day, or prompted via stories purposefully introduced by their teacher teachers to raise questions among them, by ethical dilemmas involving fairness in person-to-person interactions that are likely to occur in their everyday life. In fact, what I am calling the “Aristotelian conception” of childhood insulates adults from appreciating the philosophical comments, questions, and reasoning that the children around them come up with. Being themselves, presumably, mature specimens of the species human being (*homo sapiens!*), adults naturally assume that they must have the cognitive means immediately available to them to deal with any significant issues their children can formulate. Because these adults won’t, typically, have worked out any very good responses to philosophical issues, they often simply do not hear what is philosophically interesting or challenging about what their children have to say. Moreover, it doesn’t occur to them that it might be appropriate to venture into unfamiliar territory and explore issues with their children that normal, standard adults do not, as a general thing, spend any time thinking about. But by ignoring the possibility of philosophical reflection and dialogue with their children, adults impoverish their relationship to those children, underestimate the cognitive capacities of children, to the detriment of both.

For the parent-teacher-school complex envisioned in my model to learn and act together as a unified entity, it is most likely helpful to conceptualize and structure it to operate as a unified learning organization—one that Watkins and Marsick argue, will require deep changes in the actors’ mindsets, and the culture of the organization—ones that occur only in a series of interrelated overlapping stages over time (1993, 1999). This is the process that Watkins and Marsick envision in their widely accepted Model, Dimensions of a Learning Organization. The potential seems real that, if it were able to keep learning continually it could potentially transform itself, and its members as individuals, as a group, and, ultimately, as a coherent organization through the three interrelated stages that characterize its emergence in their Model of Dimensions of a Learning Organization (1998).

- Individual learning, i.e., the way in which people make meaning of their experiences, and how the organization provides them with opportunities to build their knowledge and skills,

- Team learning, i.e., the way in which groups of people work and learn collaboratively and, as a result, create new knowledge together as well as the capacity for collaborative action,
- Organizational learning, i.e., shared thinking and the capacity of a system that is embodied in systems, procedures, artifacts, and mental models, (Watkins and Marsick, 1999).

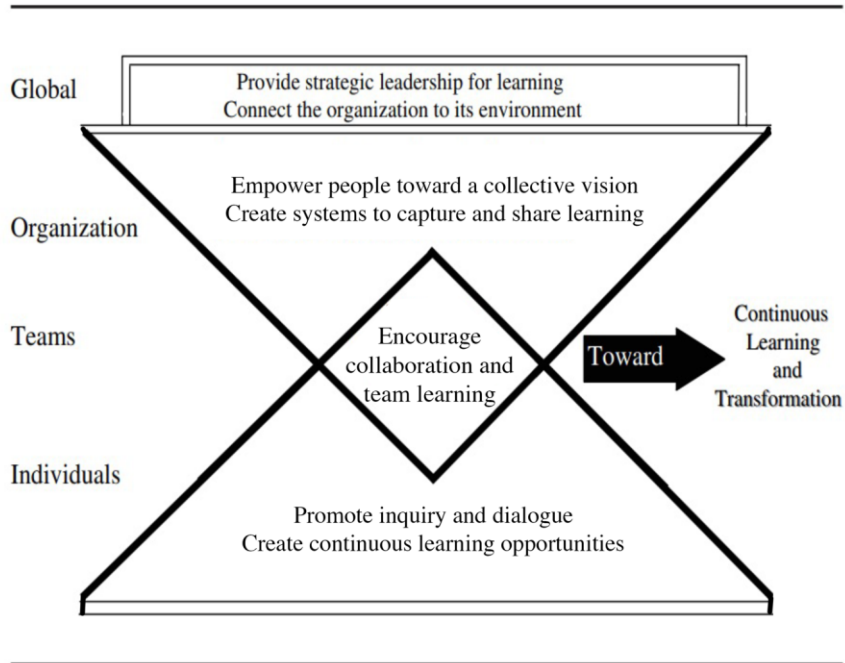


Figure 1. Watkins and Marsick, (1998), Model, Dimensions of a Learning Organization (Watkins, 2005)

Based on the assumption that "learning for organizational productivity cannot be separated from learning for personal development" (Marsick, 1988, p.191). Marsick and Watkins argue that traditional professional development programs are not sufficient for modern needs. Marsick proposes a new model in the field which includes both interactive and reflective learning as described in the theory of transformative learning. The basic argument is that "individuals are more productive when they can participate fully in the negotiation of their substantive contribution within the organization" (p. 194). Furthermore, Marsick explains that adult education cannot be effective when it is limited to

individual and largely predetermined actions rather than being shaped by the thoughtful collaboration of organizational members—a proposition, again pointing to the Theory of TL. In sum, their model utilizes the basic principles of TL to inform a *new* model for coherent organizational learning (Watkins, Marsick, Faller, 2012). So, for the parents-teachers-students' community to exist and operate in a unified way, it could best strive to become a *Learning Organization*—where students, teachers, parents, administrators, and staff can join way together to form a Community of Inquiry engaged in a collective effort with a common vision” (Watkins & Marsick, 1999).

Conclusions

It should not be overlooked that the greatest challenge for educators nowadays is probably, overcoming fearful worries about their kids, their students, and their families. Vast fires, floods, earthquakes, and other catastrophic events caused by environmental changes stress children's hopes and dreams for the future. On top of that, their everyday exposure to such catastrophic events in their communities, cities, countries, their world, could cause a complex trauma that can be pernicious. As is well known, trauma has a tremendous impact on children's learning; healthy development can be derailed (NCCDC, 2014). More specifically, neuroscience research has confirmed that—depending on duration, intensity, and timing—in the absence of support and intervention, when a young child's stress response systems are activated their brain development is negatively affected (NCCDC, 2014). The impacts of a prolonged activation of stress on the body and brain within the micro-meso- and exo-systems, could be devastating. Such a need requires to be acknowledged and elaborated in a reflective and critical way.

Therefore, the presence of a trusting and responsive relationship within the immediate environment—microsystem (home + school) described in the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model Theory (1992)—could potentially strengthen the necessary defense mechanisms that a parent needs for restoring their child's environment to a state that permits it keep the child growing, developing, learning, and dreaming of a possible future. Ethics, endurance and resilience on the tremendous environmental changes, especially for the young generations has been “uncharted

territory” (Geoffrey, C., 2020, in UNESCO Report, 2020) as an educational leader has stated, and “it’s the time for the educators to act as scientists.”

The vision of a society of conscientious people who come into direct contact and relationship within a community and maturely co-decide on the issues that concern them gives another dimension – aesthetic- to the relationship between people and the environment (Wildemeersch, D. 2023).

Inquiring, reflecting and thus clarifying social and ethical issues in a Learning Organization, with other citizens, so that they gain accurate knowledge of the dilemmas and challenges they have to take a stand against, is of prime importance. And the process of clarification is completed more successfully when it is methodologically based on the reflection and construction of ideas from the simple to the most complex. A Learning Organization that is directed toward converting the actors into a well-bonded community—one that is actively engaged via “philosophic” Socratic dialogue with questions that probe and challenge their own and mutual frames of reference. And one that will intentionally sponsor and facilitate teachers-parents’ direct involvement with their children’s needs and concerns.

When philosophical thinking collaborates with the sciences, investigating the ethical status of both the humans and their achievements. When the limits of human responsibility have been eventually elucidated and all age groups get to acknowledge, reflect, enhance, respect, and develop similar perceptions, values and attitudes that conclude to the adoption of an Environmental Ethic which will ensure the sustainability of Life.

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