

Street Discussion Spaces in Post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire: non-formal learning, dialogue and daily life

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ABSTRACT – Street Discussion Spaces in Post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire: non-formal learning, dialogue and daily life. This paper frames the daily life of education outside of formal school, by considering two types of non-formal discussion spaces in Côte d'Ivoire. I argue that both *traditional* and *modern* learning were reinvented in the *street* in response to the Ivoirian political crisis through the proliferation of spaces called *grins* and *agoras*. At daily meetings, teenagers and adults gathered important information regarding the crisis and also learned how to *be* in a conflicted society, often through dialogic encounters between members of different generations, professions and experiences. In the post-conflict context, these spaces, and the dialogue within them, have evolved to meet the changing needs of participants, further highlighting the connection between learning in everyday life and the surrounding structures and systems.

Keywords: Dialogue. Non-formal Education. Ethnography. Peacebuilding. Martin Buber.

RESUMO – Espaços de Discussão na Rua na Costa do Marfim Pós-Conflito: aprendizagem não formal, diálogo e cotidiano. Este artigo enfoca o cotidiano da educação fora da escola formal, considerando dois tipos de espaços não formais de discussão na Costa do Marfim. Sustento que tanto a aprendizagem *tradicional* como a *moderna* foram reinventadas *na rua* em resposta à crise política na Costa do Marfim por meio da proliferação de espaços denominados *grins* e *agoras*. Em encontros diários, adolescentes e adultos reuniam informações importantes referentes à crise, além de aprenderem como *ser* em uma sociedade em conflito, muitas vezes por meio de encontros dialógicos entre participantes de diferentes gerações, profissões e experiências. No contexto pós-conflito, estes espaços e o diálogo no seu interior evoluíram para atender as necessidades em transformação dos participantes, destacando ainda mais a conexão entre aprendizagem no cotidiano e as estruturas e os sistemas circundantes.

Palavras-chave: Diálogo. Educação não formal. Etnografia. Construção da paz. Martin Buber.

Introduction

The daily life of education extends beyond the schoolyard to the learning that occurs at home, in the street, in religious spaces or other familiar spaces. Framing these extracurricular learning experiences as dialogic exchanges can diminish the boundaries between school and non-school settings and provide a lens to assess non-formal learning outcomes. In constrained contexts such as conflict affected areas where access to formal education is often limited (Unesco, 2011; 2015), non-formal learning spaces may also play a critical role in increasing access and in providing a learning experience relevant and adapted to on-the-ground realities. I argue that the concept of dialogue gives value to learning that happens within daily life and enables a view of how these dialogic encounters can contribute to rebuilding and reconciliation.

The term *dialogue* in this paper refers to specific *humanistic* conceptions of dialogue based on the dialectic materialist views of Paulo Freire (Freire, 1972; 1993; 1998) and of humanist Martin Buber (Buber, 1949; 1958; 2002). In their distinct but related concepts of dialogue, daily life is the primary location of learning and transforming society, both of which occur through full, mutual dialogue. This paper highlights the relational nature of dialogue, particularly through the I-Thou relationship in daily life and the importance of relationships to creating spaces for political mobilisation and change. The works of Buber and Freire have been instrumental in fields of peace education, critical pedagogy and education for social justice and therefore their application in the Ivorian context also sheds light on challenges of achieving dialogue in daily settings.

Côte d'Ivoire, a country that has recently emerged from over a decade of political and social unrest that culminated in a violent post-electoral crisis, provides an interesting case to explore the role of dialogue and learning in daily life. A civil conflict increased citizens' needs and desires for factual, up-to-date news and nurtured a phenomenon of 'street discussion spaces' where people met daily to receive information, to exchange and to support one another (Atchoua, 2008; Cutolo; Banégas, 2012). This paper presents qualitative research on these spaces three years after the conflict, and shows how these sites continued to provide current political and economic news and also gave members' a feeling of hope, solidarity and power in a troubled time. This research also shows how participants modified traditional discussion spaces, called *grins*, and created new sites called *agoras*, inspired by universities, to fulfil learning needs in daily life.

This article first introduces the concept of daily life and then considers its relationship to dialogic education as developed in Paulo Freire and Martin Buber's works. Then the context of Côte d'Ivoire and the importance of non-formal learning and dialogue in the conflict and post-conflict era will be discussed. Next, qualitative data from a 2014 study

on *grins* and *agoras* will be analysed, drawing out the nature of teaching and learning in daily life and potential moments of dialogue with consideration for Freire and Buber's concepts.

Daily Life, Relationships and Social Transformation

Daily life is shaped by events at local, national and international levels and in return communities and actors influence society at large. The study of everyday life seeks to bridge a gap in research and theory between the local and the global or national levels, revealing how individuals and groups both transform and adapt to society (Latour, 2007). This concept of everyday life bears particular significance for Marxist scholars who wish to re-examine the creation of social revolutions. For example, Michel de Certeau (1984) described how individual actors use *tactics* to navigate and reconfigure the structures and *strategies* of societal institutions. Henri Lefebvre (1991), in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, also views daily life as starting block of political change and revolution – looking beyond the *worker* commonly portrayed in Marxist literature to a person with actives, friends and leisure time.

In particular, Lefebvres' attempts to create a critique of everyday life are bound in questions of what makes an authentic life and how human agency can ignite a class-based revolution. These studies of everyday life place high value on human relationships and dialogue lays the foundation for the development of a critical consciousness. In fact, Trebitsch (1991) argues that Lefebvre did not believe in an individual consciousness and that consciousness was relational or that "[...] consciousness was consciousness of the other". This concept of everyday life and social transformation, or praxis, is embedded in the relationships of people in their natural surroundings. This relational concept of daily life and human consciousness implicates the notion of dialogue, as discussed in the following section on Freire (1972; 1993; 1998) and Buber (1958; 2002).

The study of everyday life also plays an important role in understanding how personal experiences and values shape politics. For example, Nussbaum's (2015) work on political emotions as well as Gamson's (1992) work on *talking politics* highlight an awareness that decision making and beliefs about politics are grounded in the emotions and relationships of day-to-day activities as opposed to rationality. The minutiae of daily life remain critical in forming opinions and instigating actions that actually impact upon broader society, in contrast to liberal political theorists who consider rational thought as the primary basis for political and economic choices (e.g. Habermas, 1984). This acute attention to individual well-being and development is also reflected in the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) which attributes development to human freedoms. For this reason, learning and education that occurs in daily life should be researched and understood in multiple contexts.

Dialogue, Learning and Daily Life

Dialogue has played a prominent role in education theory and pedagogy over the past century and many implicit and explicit connections between dialogue and the study of daily life can be found, most notably by Paulo Freire (1972; 1993; 1998) whose dialogic pedagogy has been adopted and recreated across the world. Freire drew from an eclectic range of Marxist and humanist literature that emphasized the importance of aligning learning with social change and with daily lived experiences (Irwin, 2012; Roberts, 2003), among which Martin Buber (Buber, 1949; 1958; 2002) was a key influence. The following section describes key elements of Freire and Buber's concepts of dialogue and highlights the importance of *daily life* within them. In particular the centrality of relationships to learning and the importance of the learning in the present moment for social transformation are drawn out and the relevance of dialogue as a conceptualization of learning is highlighted in relationship to the concept of daily life. Differences in Freire and Buber's approaches to dialogue and learning have also been noted (e.g. Guilherme; Morgan, 2009) with regards to life should contribute to broader social change.

In Freire (1972; 1998) and Buber's (1958; 2002) views, dialogue constitutes an ontology, a way of living and being in the world and thus cannot be separated from daily experiences. For Buber, dialogue consisted of 'everyday encounters of man with the world' (Diamond, 1960, p. 3) and he described true dialogue as an I-Thou relationship of full mutuality, as opposed to a monological I-It relationship. Like Freire (1972), dialogue involved a process of humanizing the other, of seeing the other in one's full humanness; in this case, the 'other' does not represent a dehumanized, colonized figure (Spivak, 1988) but part of oneself (Metcalfe; Game, 2012). Dialogue, or genuine mutual relationships, form the basis of a meaningful human existence and as well as effective learning, and these relationships derive from daily actions with family, friends and spouses as well as other more liminal relations such as colleagues, neighbours, shopkeepers, and even adversaries. As in the works of Lefebvre (1991), consciousness and being can only exist in relation to others and these relationships derive from daily experiences.

Buber (1958, p.16) claims that it is "[...] the exalted melancholy of our fate, that every Thou in our world must become an It" or that dialogue cannot be permanently maintained. Instead, humans constantly oscillate between moments of dialogue and monologue, and that technical exchanges, which he refers to as *technical dialogue* and monologue constitute necessary parts of human life (Buber, 2002). Buber warns against, however, "[...] monologue disguised as dialogue" or situations in which a situation claims to be dialogic without any true mutuality or love. However, these monological moments can transform into dialogue and remaining open to the *possibility* is necessary. This complements Lefebvre and de Certeau's view that mundane parts of daily life that play a role in creating social transformation, just as dialogue can

manifest in unseemingly moments. Only examining deliberate political action or dialogue may lead to overlooking moments of I-Thou, underscoring the importance of examining learning and knowledge acquisition in everyday spaces.

Regarding education and learning, Freire's (1972) pedagogy of dialogue derives directly from daily life, most prominently in the teacher's responsibility to immerse herself in the learner's community and understand its primary issues. In doing this, the teacher should create *generative themes* to illicit student engagement and learning (Freire, 1972) and learning should originate in daily life and serve to transform it. While Freire initially framed this pedagogy within adult literacy, the concept of dialogic learning as reflection and action to change the world has been adopted and reformatted in contexts across the world (e.g. Freire, 1978; Mesquida; Peroza; Akkari, 2014; Shor, 1993). Like Freire, Buber (Cohen, 1983; Morgan; Guilherme, 2014) also maintained that learning must serve a social purpose in improving the world and must respond to context. However, Buber's approach focused more on the particular role of the teacher to draw out knowledge from the student through I-Thou relationships whereas Freire placed importance of the role of the teacher while viewing all actors as both teachers and students. Guilherme and Morgan (2009) also argue that Buber was more tied to the role of the formal educator and less focused on literacy learning. In his essay *Education* Buber (2002, p. 103) argues that the primary goal of education was "[...] sharing in an undertaking and to entering into mutuality" – that creating shared projects and mutual relationships are the two most important aspects of human life and learning. While these elements figure into Freire's work, "sharing an undertaking" would not have been politically oriented enough for Freire's more radical transformative goals.

For Buber (1947) and Freire (1972), dialogue inherently relates to resolving conflict and social problems and to creating a more just and equitable world and should occur in the present moment, or the prefigurative (Honeywell, 2007; Mccowan, 2010). Thus while de Certeau is concerned mostly by how people materialize and adapt phenomena and ideas from popular culture or from a systemized society, Freire and Buber see the importance of creating small changes in our lives that may not necessarily impact society as a whole in the short term. For this reason, both Freire and Buber have been described as utopian thinkers (Irwin, 2012; Honeywell, 2007) and in the case of Buber, an "anarcho-federalist" (Susser, 1979) due to Buber's distinct emphasis on community empowerment and change. This emphasis on the community differed from Freire's utopianism; Buber did not approach a social revolution in the same manner as Freire but rather wished for dialogue, learning and change to occur in communities and for disparate communities to eventually support each other. This view undoubtedly originates from the divided, conflict-affected societies in which Buber lived, pre-WWII Germany and Israel-Palestine, as opposed to Freire's context of Brazilian

and Latin American social inequalities to which a Marxist social revolution seemed a more appropriate solution.

Peace educators have recognized the relevance of this dialogic learning in daily life as an important process in learning and reconciliation in conflict-affected societies. Freire's critical pedagogy has influenced the discipline of critical peace education (e.g. Bajaj; Brantmeier, 2010; Bekerman; Zembylas, 2012; Trifonas; Wright, 2014) and Buber's work, though less prominent in educational interventions, has influenced peacebuilding work in Israel and Palestine and broader theories on violence and education (Cremin; Guilherme, 2016; Feuerverger, 2014; Steinberg; Bar-On, 2002). In these approaches, the importance of non-hierarchical teacher-student relationships and social transformation are generally advocated in order to rebuild society and to repair relationships between conflicting groups.

Côte d'Ivoire: learning in daily life in a post-conflict context

Côte d'Ivoire is a francophone West African country that experienced tremendous economic growth and social harmony in the post-independence era due to cacao and coffee industries. During this period President Félix Houphouët-Boigny encouraged immigration of West African labourers, contributing to today's highly diverse population of which 25% are of foreign origin (Ekanza, 2006; McGovern, 2011). Social and political turmoil followed the country's transition to multiparty politics in 1990, and a struggle for citizenship rights emerged, creating divisions between northern Ivoirians and southern and western Ivoirians (Marshall-Fratani, 2006). Between 2000 and 2011, Laurent Gbagbo, a Christian from western Côte d'Ivoire and founder of the country's first opposition party, served as president and his policies increased divisions between foreign and Northern Ivoirians many of whom share the same Muslim faith and the Christian and Southern Ivoirians. In 2002, a rebellion of northern soldiers led to a division between North and South; periodic violence continued until 2010 when long awaited presidential elections occurred, resulting in a contested run-off between incumbent Gbagbo and his decades-long opponent Alassane Ouattara, a northern, Muslim Ivoirian. Ouattara's victory was announced and accepted by the international community but Gbagbo refused to step down from office, instigating four months of violence that ended in April 2011. Ouattara has served as president since 2011 and was peacefully reelected in October 2015, though the low voter turnout and boycotting of elections indicates that underlying tensions may resurface in the future (Piccolino, 2016).

The concept of daily life and dialogue resonates strongly within the Ivoirian reconstruction. The government and some NGOs often employed the term *vivre ensemble* or living together, as the aim of peacebuilding, locating peace on a relational and interpersonal level. While the government's *Commission de Dialogue, Vérité et Réconciliation* (CDVR, Commission for Dialogue, Truth and Reconciliation), tried

to emphasise dialogue through public hearings and community work these were largely viewed as unsuccessful (Lopes, 2015). Often in Côte d'Ivoire, enacted dialogue does not correspond to full, mutual dialogue but rather Buber's (2002) concept of technical dialogue or monologue, as discussed in the previous section. More so, dialogue may exist as an element of liberal peacebuilding that was replicated in the Ivoirian context without considering its local meaning or enactments (Mac Ginty, 2011), such as the importation of a Truth Commission modelled after the South African or Rwandan experience.

Dialogue Spaces in Côte d'Ivoire: grins and agoras

Public discussion of political affairs occupies a prominent place in Abidjan, the country's economic capital¹. In the late 1980s, a group called *La Sorbonne* began assembling daily in Abidjan's central. Modeled after the prestigious Parisian university, *La Sorbonne* had a *rector* and various *departments* and *faculties* where speakers expounded the importance of opening the country to multi-party politics and regaining economic strength to crowds of hundreds (Bahi, 2003; Kessé, 2009). *La Sorbonne* transitioned from a site of resistance to a public channel of the Gbagbo regime in the early 2000s as the FPI espoused an increasingly xenophobic and anti-imperialist discourse. Its popularity and importance in spreading news and information on the political crisis led to replications of the *la Sorbonne* throughout Abidjan into forums called *agoras* and *parlements* (Cutolo; Banégas, 2012; Koffi; Silué, 2012). Speakers, known as *orators* would tour these sites, estimated to have numbered over 300 nationally by 2011. Several national associations of orators, *agoras* and *parlements* existed that served to unify political discourses throughout the spaces.

While *agoras* and *parlements* provided forums for discussing the political crisis that favored former President Gbagbo, supporters of Alassane Ouattara and the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR, Rally of the Republicans) partook in political dialogue in separate sites called *grins*. RDR members, a majority of whom identified as Northern Ivoirian and/or Muslim, mobilized spaces called *grins*, traditional tea drinking groups comprising primarily men from teens to senior citizens (Atchoua, 2008; Vincourt; Kouyaté, 2012). Historically sites of non-formal learning and leisure, the conflicted environment of Côte d'Ivoire transformed *grins* into sites of political mobilization and transmission of messages (Vincourt; Kouyate, 2012).

While forms of dialogue differed, both *agoras* and *grins* maintained parallel purposes of providing information and promoting solidarity during a conflicted period. However, both spaces re-interpreted and reformulated learning in daily life, responding to challenges posed by society at large. *Agoras* transformed essentially *modern* and, some would argue Western, spaces and repurposed them to meet their own needs by reimagining university and *parlements* in the Ivoirian context (Bahi, 2013), whereas *grins* modified a somewhat traditional space to

better respond to a current crisis situation. Creation and adaptation of these sites could be understood as 'tactics' enabled to navigate daily life (Certeau, 1984) and this research will show that the spaces have also reconfigured to meet new daily challenges in the post conflict setting.

Methodologies

The findings in the following sections are derived from a qualitative study that took place between August and December 2014 in Abidjan for the completion of a doctoral thesis. This research method was informed by Burawoy's (1991) concept of the "extended case method" which seeks to elaborate theory based on findings from everyday life and relies upon participant observation. The research included 98.5 hours of observation in 38 dialogue spaces and 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews, 15 with *grin* members and 15 with *agora* members. 18 additional interviews were done with NGOs, journalists, government officials and activists to gain a better understanding of the political context surrounding it. 20 observation hours also took place in other dialogue activities sponsored by NGOs, government and community organizations. Participatory actor mapping also took place in 4 spaces in order to understand how participants mapped the dialogue spaces within their neighborhoods, helping to situate participants in the context of their daily lives. In the following sections, all names of *agora* and *grin* participants are pseudonyms. Furthermore, the names of the spaces are not revealed to protect anonymity.

Participants were sampled through previously contacted *grin* or *agora* members and initial points of contact included taxi drivers, university students and non-governmental organization staff. Most participants were sampled after initial contact with the discussion space and at least one observation. Participants were purposively sampled to reflect the broader population: ages ranged from 19- 60; 27 males and 3 females; 14 Muslims (all *grin* participants) and 16 Christians (15 of which were *agora* participants). Data on ethnicity was not collected. Observation hours and interviews with *grins* outnumbered those of *agoras*, due to the political situation at the time of the fieldwork. In observations of dialogue, the number of people and times that each person spoke were mapped at different intervals, as well as notes on group dynamics, location and topics of conversation.

Upon completion of data collection and transcription, interviews were first analyzed in their hardcopies to underline primary themes in the original French, what Miles and Huberman (1994) call "early steps analysis". These initial codes were entered into Nvivo and then grouped into superordinate themes that clustered together related codes. Themes such as *relationships* emerged that suggested the relevance of Freire and Buber and were not prefigured into the data analysis, a practice encouraged in the "extended case method" (Burawoy, 1999) and the empirical data drove theoretical analysis. Semi-structured and unstructured observation notes were read closely to identify charac-

teristics of dialogue, particularly through dialogue maps that had been created to map speaking time, types of speech (e.g. jokes, arguments) and flows of conversation. Observations that linked to participant interviews were more closely analysed and dialogue maps were used to explore how participants viewed their dialogue versus recorded events. Relationships with professors and experts in Côte d'Ivoire also served as an important validation tool.

Due to the politically sensitive nature of this study, the safety of both the researcher and participants was prioritized and the research was ethically approved by the UCL Institute of Education Ethical Review Board. Informed consent was obtained in all cases and was recorded orally and all interviews and transcripts were saved on encrypted devices, as per the British Educational Research Association guidelines (British Educational Research Association, 2011). All interviews were conducted in French and translated by the author.

***Agoras*: learning, politics and solidarity in daily life**

This section will highlight three examples of learning in daily life that occurred in *agoras* and consider their dialogic nature. In particular, I will discuss transition from learning to solidarity that occurred in the post-conflict era, the perception of student-teacher relationships and political ambitions for change in many *agoras*.

As previously discussed, *agoras* arose in Abidjan in the late 1980s and soon became an important site for citizens to access information on current local and international news. Conceptually, these spaces attempted to replicate higher education and government structures in nomenclature and processes (Atchoua, 2008, 2016), representing a type of production of space in everyday life that Lefebvre (1991) describes. For example, *agora* names included *Open Air University*, *Parlement of SODECI*, *The Duma*, and *The All-Powerful Congress of Abobo*, (Atchoua, 2008; Bahi, 2003; Banégas; Brisset-Foucault; Cutolo, 2012; Konaté, 2003). Pre-2011, *agoras* often occupied vacant lots throughout Abidjan, largely thanks to the support of the Gbagbo regime. However, at the time of the study in 2014, *agoras* rarely gathered large crowds and many sites had been destroyed or built upon. Philippe, a 36-year old medical technician and student from Yopougon, said that most young people had fled the neighborhood or were scared to participate, hinting that some feared retribution. The reticence of *agoras* to reconvene after the crisis can indicate a lack of dialogue and I-Thou relationships at a societal level.

In these *agoras*, participants came to learn specific information related to the political crisis or to other relevant aspects of life, such as religion and spirituality. Many people framed these sites as either a substitute for or a more accessible form of higher education. Kouamé, a 27-year old law student-cum-orator explained that he valued the *agoras* because he was exposed to multiple disciplines by experts in the field:

Someone can talk to me about politics because there were also people who did political science, who will explain how we should do politics, the strategies, everything. There were people who did economics, these people they give us courses on it and it's free.

Accessible in cost and location, some deemed these sites as more valuable than a traditional university where one would have to choose a single discipline. Both Kouamé and Vincent, a 40-year old French teacher and former orator originally from Yopougon, both felt that *agoras* rendered specialist subjects comprehensible to those without a formal educational background or high literacy level, thus it was viewed by some as a democratization of knowledge (Bahi, 2003; Konaté, 2003) or in Vincent's words a less *bookish* rendering of content. In this way, *agoras* recreated formalised spaces and rendered them more accessible in both geographic location and delivery of content and potentially represented the type of community-oriented learning that Buber or Freire might advocate for, though without a dialogic teacher-student relationship.

In *agoras*, many capacities that participants claimed to learn also corresponded to outcomes of formal education and skills needed to work in the formal economy. For example, young members who went to listen, but not to orate, generally identified *l'art oratoire*, or public speaking skills, as a gained skill. Davide, a 19-year old student at UFHB explained that "[...] I learned how to talk. What gestures to make when one talks. What attitude you should adopt. How to make a speech". This *l'art oratoire* seemed to play an important role for both students and professionals. Philippe, a medical technician in a Yopougon hospital, explained that his attendance and speaking at *agoras* helped to develop more confidence in his job to ask questions:

Whereas before I was so scared, when I don't understand I couldn't ask. So I had this deficiency, 'I didn't understand, I won't ask anything'. That means that I didn't learn anything! And then I leave. But today, when I go somewhere, when you talk and I don't understand, I ask that you explain clearly the thought that you just said. And that helps me to learn better.

Philippe believed that learning in the *agoras* complements his learning and performance in other areas of his life and was self assured and motivated as a student and in his job. This type of learning in non-formal settings does not often receive recognition in formal settings yet has notable impacts for individuals. While such experiences may not be clearly identifiable as dialogue, they also have impacts on individual self-confidence and agency that can in turn influence other areas of life, including abilities to engage in dialogue (Buber, 2002).

Before the 2011 crisis, most literature focused on political, and at times economic, reasons for attending *agoras* (e.g. Cutolo; Banégas, 2012; Silué, 2012). In 2014, observations and interviews with participants of *agoras* revealed new reasons for taking part in the forums. For example, at an *agora* in Abobo (November 11, 2014), members explained that they were a *lieu de fraternité* – a site of brotherhood or solidarity while simultaneously acting as a *political tribunal*. However this group preferred

the term *meeting space* as opposed to *agora* to describe its newer, small structure. Fieldnotes from this observation give the impression that the group resembled a *grin*, particularly in response to one member saying, “[...] when you get off work, you come talk, exchange. Forget stress. Get information”, highlighting the leisure aspect of the space. In the current political climate of Côte d’Ivoire, *agoras* who no longer enjoyed the same freedom to occupy public space, nor the same militant membership base, due questions of security and censorship, as well as perhaps an awareness of some of the negative implications of the spaces in previous times, had also adapted to the current climate. Furthermore, the members may have required more solidarity and more discretion, similar to pre-2011 *grins*. Vincent also said that since he moved to a new neighbourhood after the crisis, he met people with similar political orientations and began discussing politics but also played chess and other games, putting friendships before potential disagreements on political issues. The political divides of Vincent’s political party, FPI founded by Laurent Gbagbo, made discussion difficult. Though most *agora* members claimed that dissent and disagreement surfaced regularly in their spaces, the current disputes questioned fundamental values within their political parties and created deep divisions. The importance of disagreement and conflict in dialogue (Freire, 1972) was sometimes sacrificed in such spaces to support relationships.

From Dialogue to Action: Politics in Agoras

In spite of a new emphasis on personal relationships and leisure, *agoras* remained politically motivated only now they now sought to oppose the regime and in particular to contest the trial of Laurent Gbagbo at the ICC. At all six *agoras* that were observed in the study, the main topic of oration related to Gbagbo’s liberation and about political mobilization regarding internal divisions in their political party. It should be stated that these members who still participated in *agoras* constituted the most militant part of the FPI and even in their own groups suffered divisions relating to disagreements within the political party. However, Kouassi, a 28 year old university student from Yopougon, insisted that *agoras* must act effectively:

It’s true that speech can influence action, but one must act. You understand? I mean, act in the sense of changing the day-to-day. Of changing, I mean, that there’s an impact. On the political level, on the economic level. On the cultural level. *Voilà*, you can’t only talk. You also have to act. [...] You must take actions. And after, and after it must be felt in the day-to-day.

While Kouassi later elucidated that action does not entail violence, he feels that the speaking and discussions in *agoras* serve a distinct purpose: to change the daily lives of Ivoirians. Along with many pro-Gbagbo supporters, Kouassi had a strong grasp of Marxist and socialist ideals and passionately spoke against France’s economic and political dominance in Africa. For him, change related to fairer economic

prospects for Ivoirians and would occur through strong leadership and policies and was less related to peaceful relationships at a community level, though such political actions could in turn improve daily life.

Dialogue in *agoras* had distinct learning outcomes that related to success in formal work and education sectors and these spaces also envisioned themselves as part of a broader political struggle for justice in Côte d'Ivoire. These spaces, in both content and form, have shifted towards smaller, more informal spaces in the post-conflict context and demonstrate the need for dialogue at a local level to adapt to national and global events.

Grins

This section explores two examples of dialogue and learning embedded in daily life in the *grins*: mutuality and intergenerational relationships to foster learning and social transformation. As mentioned above, *grins* are a traditional site of learning and leisure for Muslim and Northern Ivoirians whose primary objective is to impart religious and cultural values needed to succeed in a community. *Grins* generally consist of 10-25 men who sit in a circle, drink tea and discuss pertinent issues. *Grins* reflect some of Lefebvre's (1991, p. 41) concept of a *café* in form and function, as:

[...] generally an extra-familial and extra-professional meeting place, where people come together on the basis of personal affinities (in principle and at least apparently), because they have the same street or the same neighbourhood in common rather than the same profession or class (although there do exist some cafés where the clients are predominantly of the same class or profession). It is a place where the regulars can find a certain luxury, if only on the surface; where they can speak freely (about politics, women, etc.), and where if what is said may be superficial, the freedom to say it is fiercely defended; where they play.

Like cafés, *grins* exist within the daily functioning of people's lives and highlight the importance of leisure time, not only the Marxist emphasis on the individual as a worker. As Lefebvre argues, the café is a place where people can *critique* and contemplate the meanings of everyday experiences, not dissimilar to Habermas' (1984) concept of space and the lifeworld but more explicitly concerned with the *nature* of space. Using the concept of the café, the importance of having a space in which to experience freedom to speak and to think, outside of both the home and workplace, was evident for many members. *Grins* were generally described as a place to relax, to "[...] talk about everything and nothing" (inconsequential things) but also to act on issues of importance.

All of the 15 *grin* interviewees, except one who was Christian, viewed the spaces as cultural and thus an enduring part of their lifestyles, even if other obligations temporarily restricted their ability to attend. However, some older members who had participated in *grins*

for over 20 years noted that the nature of the spaces had transformed since 2002, following to the army mutiny by northern soldiers in 2002 and the subsequent retaliations against northerners in Abidjan and heightened discrimination against northerners and foreigners as part of an augmented *patriotism* and *Ivoirité* (Cutolo, 2012). Diaby, a founder of the *Rassemblement des Grins de Côte d'Ivoire* (RGCI, Rally of the Grins of Côte d'Ivoire) and former *rector* of *la Sorbonne*, explained that while *grins* had existed for decades if not centuries, they became politicized because of the hostile environment towards Muslims and more formalised due to the need for heightened solidarity, communication and self-defense. Diaby further noted that RGCI had been constructed expressly as a counter-structure to the *agoras* as a way of mobilizing northerners. Here, the spaces closely related to daily life adapted and modified the discourses from a national level and also transformed the learning to meet their current needs.

Some *grins* had names that reflected a degree of politicization; three *grins* in the study had entitled themselves *United Nations*, an organisation viewed positively by many members for its pro-Ouattara intervention. However, politics did not generally lie at the forefront of most groups and many simply referred to their spaces as *Chez* and the name of the *grin's* leader, for example *Chez Yacou* or *Chez Alassane* (Meaning Alassane or Yacou's house). Most *grins* met in front of members' homes or businesses and their smaller size made anonymous spectators impossible thus occupying the streets in a more private way than *agoras*.

Relationships played a primary role in teaching and learning and many *grins* emphasized the importance of familial bonds and friendships. According to Amara, a 28-year-old self-employed participant from Abobo, "When you come in a *grin*, in the beginning you are reticent, but at a given moment, you become like brothers". The frequency of meetings and often times family ties and geographic proximity meant that groups could establish strong personal bonds. Furthermore, formal membership generally was acquired through commitment to monthly contributions and to donations to fellow members for weddings, illnesses, naming ceremonies or other important life events. These acts of solidarity helped to maintain a dialogic aspect of mutuality central to Buber's *I-Thou* relationship, which in turn could create potential for dialogue.

These strong relationships that were fostered in daily life outside of school allowed for particular types of learning that differed from *agoras*. For example, Lucas, a 19-year old university student living in Abobo, explained his motivations for knowledge related to surviving daily life, explaining that he sought:

Advice mostly advice. How to succeed, how to stay on the right path. You see, in big cities, there are always problems. They will advise you on how to behave. 'You shouldn't hang around with that person, it's very dangerous. You will have problems. Do you know where you're headed?' So it's advice, mostly advice here. In terms of money, they say it's not important. It's the advice, that's more important.

For Lucas, life in the big city presented daily challenges that he felt unable to navigate alone and thus sought out guidance from elders. As a new arrival to his Abobo neighborhood, he had also received some financial support from older *grin* members that he viewed this as secondary to the life advice. While still a student in the formal system, he required a separate form of learning that could help him in more practical areas of his life. Though teaching is not formal in the sense that Freire or Buber would pedagogically demand, the love and respect between student and teacher fosters a conducive learning environment and supports the building of peace in the community through improved well-being of younger community members.

While Lucas' story seems to support a wide body of literature on African society that emphasises gerontocratic societal structures (Bidima, 2014; Cabral, 1979; Waghid, 2015), the case of *grins* offers a more fluid approach to knowledge and teaching that derives from sharing of specific knowledge and skills regardless of age and knowledge, as well as the right to speak, was allocated based on personal strengths and weaknesses. In many *grins*, youth often contributed technical knowledge whereas elders provided life advice based on experience. For Doumbia, an insurance broker and volunteer literacy teacher living in a predominantly northern and Muslim district of Abidjan, these relationships were also restorative: “[...] at certain moment, there is a divide between father and son in our culture, there's a lack of communication. But if we learn at that level...you see that really the communication corrects a lot of things”.

Doumbia felt that these relationships could help to heal social divisions and also mentioned that some of the new things he learned from younger *grin* members also aided him in his interactions with youth. While not always perfectly mutual in the way Buber (1958) would have framed an I-Thou relationship, the openness of young and old to learn from each other indicates the possibilities for dialogic teaching in which every person teaches and everyone learns.

Social Transformation in Daily Life

Both Buber (1949) and Freire (1972)² advocate for prefigurative change, a Marxian utopian concept that emphasizes enacting transformation in daily life as opposed to waiting for broader structures to transform. Observations revealed that many *grins* seemed to embody this principle through grassroots initiatives in their communities. Many participants and experts, including a newspaper editor who had a weekly column on *grins*, noted an increase in *grins* applying for official status as associations or NGOs in order to access municipal and international funds. Of the 32 *grins* observed, at least 11 had official association status or had created an association on the side. Others had either begun the process or desired to organize into an association.

Lassina, a self-proclaimed *grin* leader and former resident of Abobo, explained that his *grin* formalised itself after meeting nightly and discussing issues facing the community. Instead of simply talking:

What can we do? Isn't it better to fight that? Isn't it better to tackle the insalubrity in which we live? Isn't it better to fight against violence? Because we suffer from violence. Isn't it better to tackle that? So that's how we formalised ourselves, I mean, I mean we went from the *grin* and then we created an informal association.

The changes that most associations had dedicated themselves to related to the issues that they identified in their immediate communities. A very popular *grin* in Abobo, for example, had dedicated itself to promoting Women's Rights, as the space had witnessed a particularly brutal attack against Abobo women during the crisis (Varenne, 2012). These initiatives to create change in their own communities as opposed to waiting for politicians or others to solve their problems seem to demonstrate a link between discussion spaces and action and could imply that a form of reflection-action, or praxis in the Freirean dialogic sense, took place. At the same time analysis from a Buber or Freirean perspective could differ since Buber, who viewed communities as the most important sites of change would probably see more value in these grassroots level actions than Freire who would push for more connections to systemic violence.

Dialogue and Learning: reflections on *grins* and *agoras*

Grins and *agoras* have very different forms of dialogue and discussion that reflect differences in quotidian existences. For example, the varying degrees of size and formality between the spaces connote different levels of perceived freedom in maintaining public dialogue. While many *grin* members reported to enjoy a degree of freedom due to their feelings of peace, *agora* members did not perceive the same level of liberty to voice their political opinions. Hence the ways that people can learn and engage in dialogue and enact social change relate to broader factors shaping their daily lives, supporting the concept of a holistic and humanistic concept of dialogue which be reinvented as society evolves (Freire, 1972). Furthermore the role of these spaces in perpetuating social divisions must be examined. For the most part, political actions and dialogue occurred in single group spaces that did not necessarily bridge intergroup divides, at least immediately. However, Buber (1958) would argue that every moment of dialogue, even if not between two opposing groups, sets a precedent for more dialogue in the future.

Furthermore, aspirations to learn for success in both the formal economy and in personal affairs drive members to participate in such spaces and these learning opportunities must be acknowledged. In the reinvention of both formal spaces such as universities and government structures and of traditional sites like *grins*, the desires for learning within daily life become apparent, and members took action to provide

learning and support where government and society had failed in ways emphasise the importance of community resources in peacebuilding and social change (Buber, 1958). Thus dialogic encounters in daily life should not be categorized as inconsequential, as actors view themselves as agents of broader justice and change.

The shifts in the form of spaces and in the learners' motivations to attend indicate the importance of daily life to the form of education and learning and in particular to the evolving forms and role of dialogue in building peace. *Grins* could enjoy a more formal status and potential links to power in the post-conflict context, a privilege once enjoyed by *agoras*, however the familial nature of the space and the demand for the type of learning and social support prevent the *grins* from evolving into larger spaces such *agoras*.

Conclusions

In Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, street discussion spaces acted as important sites of learning and living both during and after the political crisis. This paper demonstrates that moments of dialogue existed which helped members to adapt to and survive the political crisis. Framing these exchanges in discussion spaces as dialogue enhances their value in teaching and learning and also underscores their potential role in inciting social transformation in the post-conflict era. Furthermore, this paper argues that dialogic concepts of learning are relevant and useful within the broader concept of daily life and social transformation. For example, learning in *grins* and *agoras* often accompanied political activism and local-level attempts at improving livelihood, essential components of dialogue. More so, understandings of relationships and their role in fostering dialogic exchanges is essential to framing learning within the context of daily life. While moments of dialogue must be understood alongside the *grins*' and *agoras*' role in reifying social divisions, as dialogic encounters generally occurred between members of same political and religious groups. Nonetheless, the dialogic framework provided by both Freire and Buber indicates that continuous dialogue cannot be a permanent state and that seeking out and encouraging spaces with possibilities of dialogue is essential. In conclusion, street discussion spaces in Côte d'Ivoire provide an interesting example of how learning experiences in daily life can be viewed through a dialogic lens and indicate possible pathways to a more peaceful and just society.

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Notes

- 1 The administrative capital is Yamoussoukro, a change enacted in 1983 by Houphouët-Boigny to bring his hometown to national prominence.
- 2 See also Honeywell, 2007 and Irwin, 2012.

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