Watermelon is Spoiling on the Vine: School Exclusions and Race

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children"[1]

"Children are not things to be moulded, but are people to be unfolded"[2]

This paper explores school exclusions in the United Kingdom in the context of race and the phenomenal growth of student exclusions in Britain driven by so called "*zero tolerance*" policies.[3] This is of particular concern for Black people and other minority communities, given the social reality of disproportionate school exclusions of their children. We examine issues of race, class and gender at the intersection of Educational processes in the United Kingdom. The issue of exclusion of young Black boys from school is an essential concern given the interconnection between education and social mobility.[4] In this regard, it has been indicated that the way we talk or do not talk about race are themselves part of the practices which "*create and embed*" inequality.[5] However, it is important to have this conversation which constitute the "first steps to ceasing to perpetuate institutionally racist structures and systems.[6]

Anna Carlile points out that officially, in England, a "*permanent exclusion*" is made as a final step when a school has "*tried everything available*" to support the "*continued inclusion*" in mainstream school of a child or young person. She indicates that this may have included "*academic and emotional support*" in school from learning support assistants and learning mentors and may also have involved "*assessment and intervention from outside professionals*", including an educational psychologist, a child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) professional, a social worker

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[1] Nelson Mandela (1995): Speech by Nelson Mandela at the Launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund. Nelson Mandela Foundation. Available online:
<http://db.nelsonmandela.org/speeches/pub_view.asp?pg=item&itemid=nmS250&txtstr=mahla
[2] Jess Lair. Cited on the Compassion Website <https://www.compassion.com/poverty/famous-quotes-about-children.htm>
[3] Cecile Wright, Debbie Weekes and Alex McGlaughlin (2000): Race, Class and Gender in Exclusions From School. Falmer Press, London
[4] OECD (2018): Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility. OECD. Available online < https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264073234-en.pdf?expires=1571830592&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=409C58D78A468BB98199F6D1AB70B5B0>; Erzsebet Bukodi and John H. Goldthorpe (2018): Social Mobility and education in Britain: Research, Policy and education. Cambridge University Press; Mohammed Jakhara (2019): "What Works? Improving Social Mobility Through Educational Partnership". In the fe.news.uk Website. Available online < https://www.fenews.co.uk/featured-article/26351-improving-social-mobility-through-meaningful-partnership>; Shan Wareing (2019): "White Elephant #2: Talking About Race in Higher Education". In Hugo Dale-Rivas (ed.) The White Elephant in the Room: Ideas for Reducing Racial Inequalities in Higher Education. HEPI No.120
[5] Shan Wareing (2019) supra.
[6] Ibid.

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or a youth offending team officer, with the possibility that the child or young person may have spent time in a "*small supported classroom*" such as a "*learning support or pastoral support unit*" in or out of school, sometimes as part of a programme of support attached to a "*fixed term exclusion (suspension)*" from school.[7] She asserts that, over the last seven years in the UK, approximately 10,000 of the pupils for whom the "*mainstream 'inclusive' system*" was designed were "*permanently excluded from it*" - not to mention those who were "*unofficially excluded*", with an "*ineqitable proportion*" of those students being recorded as belonging within a "*black or minority ethnic*" category, revealing the threads of a "*tapestry of institutional racism woven throughout the system*". She further indicates that institutional racism may be "*exacerbated*" in cases of school exclusion, "*crystallised under the pressure of that critical incident*". She concludes that institutional racism in the education system in England must be "*acknowledged and challenged*" by those responsible for the "*policy and practice of schooling*".[8]

A central concern is that the increase of student exclusion reflects changes in demands on schools to become more marketable, with the British educational system placing greater emphasis on competitiveness. In an educational system that is influenced by "*market system rhetoric*", exclusion has been implemented as a form of "*regulation and selection*", with minority and low-income students more frequently perceived as "*undesirable*" and thus, more frequently excluded[9]. It has been indicated that, within a competitive school climate, minority and low-income students are more frequently perceived as "*undesirable*" and thus, more frequently excluded, underscoring the fact that, within an educational system that is influenced by "*market system rhetoric*", exclusion has been implemented as a form of "*regulation and selection*"[10]. In this context, "*racial and cultural incongruence*" in teacher-student relations impacts adversely on students who are from different races and cultures than the teacher[11].

According to official UK statistics in 2018, Black Caribbean pupils were excluded at 3 times the rate of White students.[12] In the period 2016/2017, 25.93 % of students excluded from school were either classified as Black Caribbean (10.20%), Black Other (5.84%), Black (5.65%) or Black African (4.21%). When taking account of children classified as Mixed White/Black Caribbean (9.69%) and Mixed White/Black (5.3%) the figure was 40.92%. Only Gypsy Roma (17.29%) and Irish Traveller (16.72%) pupils had such high rates of exclusions.[13]

Similar disproportionate rates of permanent exclusions were indicated with 1.47% being classified as either Black Caribbean (0.28%), Black Other (0.15%), Black (0.14%) or Black African (0.9%) and when taking account of pupils classified as Mixed White/Black Caribbean and Mixed White/Black (0.11%) the figure rose to 1.82%. This contrasted with the rate of 0.30% for those either classified as White Irish (0.14%), White (0.10%) and White British (0.10%). Again, only Irish Traveller

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[7] Anna Carlile (2012): "An Ethnography of Permanent Exclusion From School: Revealing and Untangling the Threads of Institutionalised Racism". In Race Ethnicity and Education, Volume 15 (2)

[8] Ibid.

[9] Cecile Wright, Debbie Weekes and Alex McGlaughlin (2000) supra.

[10] Cecile Wright, Debbie Weekes and Alex McGlaughlin (2000) supra.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Gov.UK (2018): "Pupil Exclusions" In Ethnicity, Facts and Figures. Available online < https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/education-skills-and-training/absence-and-exclusions/pupil-exclusions/latest >

[13] Ibid.

(0.45%) and Gipsy Roma (0.36%) students had such disproportionate rates of permanent exclusion.[14]

In Primary schools, 1.6% of children classified as either Black Caribbean (0.7%), Black Other (0.4%), Black (0.3%) or Black African (0.2%) were permanently excluded. When taking account of students classified as either Mixed White/Black Caribbean (0.8%) or Mixed White/Black African (0.4%) the figure increased to 2.8%. This contrasted with the rate of 0.7%% for those classified as White/British (0.3%), White (0.3%), or White Other (0.1%).[15]

Similar disparities in permanent exclusions in Secondary schools were revealed with 1.35% being classified as either Black Caribbean (0.53%), Black Other (0.33%), Black (0.29%) or Black Other (0.2%). The figure increases to 4% when one takes account of children either classified as Mixed White/Black Caribbean (0.8%) or Mixed White/Black African (0.4%). This contrasts with 1.4% for those students either classified as White Irish (0.29%), White Other (0.15%), White/British (0.3%) or White (0.3%). Again, only students classified as either Irish Traveller (1.42%) or Gypsy Roma (0.94%) had similar disproportionate rates with 2.36%.[16]

This data confirms the assertion that UK education, at best, replicates and at worst, exacerbates existing societal inequality and that, as educational opportunities have increased so has social inequality, and that as social inequality has grown, there has little social mobility.[17] This is reflected in the fact that the UK has the worst record for social mobility in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.[18] In this regard, it has been indicated that the problem of racism in British schools remains of concern after over 30 odd years following the publication of the Swan Report.[19] This is compounded by the evidence of "*everyday racism*" in schools and colleges, with teachers from so called Black and Minority Ethic (BME) backgrounds experiencing:

 "*discrimination, harassment, ostracism, lack of pay progression and being held back for promotion*".[20]

In a US context, research by the Yale Child Study Centre has clearly demonstrated that "implicit bias" is the driving factor behind these profound disparities in exclusion rates. Arguing that, implicit biases take the form of "*subtle, sometimes subconscious stereotypes*" held by white teachers, which are the result in "lower expectations and rates" of "gifted program referrals" for Black children, with these biases being

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Becky Francis and Billy Wong (2013): "What is Preventing Social Mobility?: A Review of the Evidence". In the ResearchGate Website. Available for download
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272164028_What_is_preventing_social_mobility_A_review_of_the_evidence>

[18] OECD (2010): Viewing the UK School System Through the Prism of Pisa. OECD, Paris; D. Hinds, H. Blears and C. Tyler et. al. (2012): Key Truths About Social Mobility: The Interim Report of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility. All Party Group of Social Mobility; Becky Francis and Billy Wong (2013) supra.

[19] Lord Swan (1985): Education for All: The Report of the Committee of Inquiry Into the Education of Children From Ethnic Minority Groups. Her Majesty's Stationary Office, London; Patrick Roach (2016/2017): "Race and Education" In the HuffPost WebBlog. Available online
< https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-patrick-roach/race-and-education_b_10064778.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29v…>

[20] Patrick Roach (2016/2017) supra.

directed at much younger children than previously thought, and being present in black and white teachers' behaviours beginning as early as pre-school.[21]

It has been pointed out that a common perception in the community is that things are "*still as bad as they were fifty years ago*" and that, frequently, when a black child has been excluded, parents feel as if it's a case of "*history repeating itself*" with very little having changed with the exception of the "*language of exclusion becoming more polite*".[22]

Further, it has been indicated that excluded children are often the "*most vulnerable*" are twice as likely to be in the "*care of the state*", 4 times more likely to have "*grown up in poverty*", 7 times more likely to have a "*special educational need*" and 10 times more likely to suffer "*recognised mental health problems*".[23] It has also been pointed out that other challenges confronting excluded pupils with reintegration include finding it difficult to settle back into a culture that has rejected them and that sometimes the experience of exclusion can be so "*demoralising and harmful*" for a pupil that they can lose the motivation and appetite for education and also lose sight of aims and ambitions, with some pupils having:

> "*Negative experiences in Pupil Referral Units that can lead to further feelings of worthlessness and a 'what's the point?' attitude; It is not uncommon for some pupils to feel that they have been labelled by schools and that some members of staff are on their back; Some pupils feel strongly that the system is against them and that, regardless of how hard they work, they will not be allowed to succeed*".[24]

Marc Lorenzi asserts that there is strong statistical evidence linking school exclusion with entering the criminal justice system, with up to two-thirds of excluded pupils becoming known to the police and a third ending up in court because of involvement in "petty crime, vandalism and abuse of alcohol or other drugs". He points out that many parents face "*complex and challenging problems*" with their children's education, particularly when their child is facing difficulties at school from "*unmet special education needs*", "*bullying*", "*disengagement*" and "*behavioural issues*" as well as permanent/fixed-term exclusions.[25] He indicates that parents, "*particularly those on low income and/or single parents*", whether working or unemployed, have a "*myriad of complex needs*" such as poor health, inadequate housing, difficult relationships, isolation, unemployment, financial difficulties and lack of family support.[26] He adds that there may also be "*parallel negative experiences*" of school which are "*transmitted to their children*". All these often result in a "*breakdown of effective communication*" between parent and child, and parent and school, which contributes, ultimately, to the failure of the child in school either through "*disengagement, academic underachievement or exclusion*", which has so often

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[21] Yolanda Young (2016): "Teachers Implicit Bias Begins in Preschool Study Finds". In the Guardian, October 4. Available online < https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/04/black-students-teachers-implicit-racial-bias-preschool-study>

[22] Marc Lorenzi (2013): "Fighting School Exclusions". In the Institute of Race Relations Website. Available online < http://www.irr.org.uk/news/fighting-school-exclusions/>

[23] Kiran Gill, with Harry Quilter-Pinner and Danny Swift (2017): Making the Difference: Breaking the Link Between School Exclusion and Social Exclusion. Institute For Public Policy Research; Children's Commissioner (2019): Exclusions: Children Excluded From Mainstream Schools. Children's Commissioner For England, London

[24] Marc Lorenzi (2013) supra.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

been shown to lead to delinquency, crime and imprisonment and future unemployability.[27]

This is a crucial concern given the conclusion, in an American context but equally relevant in our present discourse, that, "*social-psychological perspectives*", Black boys and young men have yet to achieve "*comprehensive mattering*" in social and educational contexts.[28] On this issue, Carey asserts that Black boys and young men find their social and school lives "*framed by marginal mattering*", which is realized through social and educational practices that "*criminalize, dismiss, and propel them into school failure, and partial mattering*", where only some of their skills and abilities are "*cultivated and heralded*".[29] He further contends that due to "*neoliberal reforms and stakeholders' structural incapacities*" to imagine and do otherwise, educators fail to "*construct contexts*" in which Black boys and young men can "*robustly infer their comprehensive mattering*", with educators and researchers missing "*relational opportunities*" to support Black boys and young men in imagining alternative lives that compel their "*fullness of interests, latent talents, and subsequent worth*".[30]

This reflects a wider failure by schools to appreciate the dire consequences of exclusion or to either understand or support the educational and behavioural needs of children being excluded from school.[31] As pointed out by Danielle M. Gonzalez, there is a further underlying failure to engage in "*difficult conversations about race*" leading to a lack of ability to define "*equity*", which is about closing achievement gaps between "*White Students and Students of Colour*" and between those with upper and lower income, as well as improving "*graduation and college attendance rates*" and the way in which funding is allocated for "*resources*", including "*funding, teachers and materials*".[32] She points out that, fundamentally, equity means giving each student "*exactly what they need, when they need it*" and that only then will all students, regardless of their background, have a chance to reach their "*true educational potential*".[33] Gonzalez asserts that true equity is about more than resources and needs to be tackled with "*race at the centre*".[34] She concludes that true educational equity is about providing "*learning environments*":

> "*where all students feel a sense of belonging and purpose in school. All students should be able to see themselves represented in the content and in the people around them and should be able to engage in meaningful work that's relevant to their aspirations, their communities and their humanity*".[35]

It has been indicated that school environments for "children of colour" do not get enough of the "*good stuff*", that is to say:

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Roderick L. Carey (2019): "Imaging the Comprehensive Mattering of Black Boys and Young Men in Society and Schools: Towards a New Approach". In Harvard Educational revies

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Children's Commissioner (2019) supra.

[32] Danielle M. Gonzalez (2018): "Why We've Got to Talk About Race if We Want to Achieve Education Equity". In the Education Post WebBlog. Available online < https://educationpost.org/why-weve-got-to-talk-about-race-if-we-want-to-achieve-education-equity/>

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

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"*Great Teachers; rigorous coursework and advanced opportunities; aligned and culturally relevant textbooks, assignments and materials; extracurricular options; Counsellors, social workers and school nurses*".[36]

In contradistinction, they get too much of the "*bad stuff*" such as:

"*armed guards; oppressive/restrictive dress code and behaviour management policies; suspension and exclusion; low expectations; racism. Collectively these messages – both implicit and explicit – communicate to students of color that they don't belong and are not valued*".[37]

It has been pointed out that, in recent years, the issue of "*race in education in the UK*" has been "*submerged in wider discourses of diversity*", leading to an *"invisibility of the quotidian experiences*" of marginalised peoples in educational institutions.[38] It has been indicated that, "*deep seated racial inequality*" have led to "*entrenched disparities*".[39] This ethos was confirmed in a UK Government Racial Disparity Audit which revealed "*deep-seated racial inequality*" and exposed "*entrenched disparities*", with "*significant differences in the life outcomes*" of "*British ethnic minority and white People*" prompting then Prime Minister, Theresa May to urge institutions to help "*ensure race is never a barrier*".[40] This report "*prompted*" campaigners to urge ministers to:

"*Lead the way in tackling the inequalities, but also to acknowledge that society as a whole must change to ensure a level playing field*".[41]

In response to this Government audit, the Equality and Human Rights Commission called for a "*comprehensive and coherent race equality strategy*" and its chairman, David Isaac, said:

"*The findings of the race audit do not come as a shock to us. Only by taking focused action to tackle race inequality can Britain become a fair country in which individuals can reach their potential and our communities can live and work together to create a strong economy and a cohesive society*".[42]

Director Omar Khan of the Runnymede Trust asserted that, after this audit:

"*No one can be in any doubt that racial inequalities is a major issue that requires real effort to fix, not just from government but also action by employers, schools, and individuals……We have had decades of reports into the problem - many from the Runnymede Trust. The time for talking is now over, we must now move to debating solutions.*"[43]

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Christine Callender and Paul Miller (2019): Race, Education and Educational Leadership in England: An Integrated Analysis. Bloomsbury Academic, London

[39] May Bulman (2017): "Racial Inequality in UK: The Appalling Reality of How a Britain's Ethnicity Affects Their Chances of a Good Life". In the Independent, Tuesday, October 10

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

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As asserted by Simon Woolley, director of Operation Black Vote, some findings make "uncomfortable reading", but unless these things are "laid bare we can't begin to resolve them".[44]

In this regard, it is important to consider that "*repeated experiences of stereotype threat*" inevitably lead to a "*vicious circle*" of "*diminished confidence, poor performance, and loss of interest*".[45] As we are advised by Gonzalez, to make "*substantive progress*", we must look beyond academics and rather focus on the "*social and emotional domains of learning*", looking towards "*fixing the learning environment*" and not "*fixing the student*". Here, the students, families and communities themselves must set the "*vision for education*", with a "*nothing for them without them*" approach, looking beyond the "*safe space*" of "*income inequality*" and begin a discussion about "*race and racism*" in schools and the education system.[46]

It has been pointed out that "*later life influences*" only build on what has been established early in life.[47] In this respect, it has been indicated that education has a pivotal role in the "*intergenerational transmission of social exclusion*".[48] This is a crucial concern if social equity in education is ever to become a reality. Social exclusion policies need to be placed under constant review through the lens of race and steps taken to ensure that trend of disproportionate use of exclusion against Black children is reversed and a more wholistic and sensitive approach be taken to ensure that all children are within the ambit of an ethos of inclusion rather than exclusion and that the ongoing exclusionary dislocation of many Black youth in the education system is reversed.

It is time to explore the impact of the exclusion of Black children and to devise ways of ensuring that Black children are not subjected to social exclusion through educational processes that result in what has been described as "*death at an early age*".[49] This is particularly important given the obligation under the **_UN Convention on the Rights of the Child_** which mandates states parties to take "all appropriate measures" to ensure that children are protected against "all forms of discrimination or punishment" on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians or family members".[50] Further, under Article 28 of the Convention, education should be directed at "*developing the child's personality and talents*", preparing the child for "*active life as an adult*", fostering respect for "*basic human rights*" and developing respect for the child's own "*cultural and national values*" and those of others.[51]

Article 2 of the First Protocol of the **_European Convention on Human Rights_** casts a similar obligation on States parties declaring that the right to education shall not be denied and that such right to education applies to all people without

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Danielle M. Gonzalez (2018) supra.

[46] Ibid.

[47] M. Wadsworth (1991): The Imprint of Time: Childhood History and Adult Life. Clarendon Press, Oxford

[48] Social Exclusion Unit (2004): The Drivers of Social Exclusion: A Review of the Literature for the Social Exclusion Unit in the Breaking the Cycle Series. Social Exclusion Unit, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Available online <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/research/pdf/driversSummary.pdf>

[49] Jonathan Kozol (1995): Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro School Children in the Boston Public Schools. Plume, New York

[50] *Article 2(2) UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.* Available online <https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf?_ga=2.212267732.1170770236.1571913799-334809109.1571913799>

[51] **Article 28** *Article 2(2)* **_UN Convention on the Rights of the Child_** supra.

discrimination.[52]In this regard, it has been contended that "*teachers, parents, communities, school authorities and other stakeholders*" involved in the educational systems across European countries can serve as "*valuable resources in support of inclusion*", with inclusive education being about "*improving learning environments*" but also about "providing opportunities" for all learners to become successful in their learning experiences.[53]Aguilar points out that strategies that promote inclusion are also strategies that promote meeting children at their "*individual developmental level*".[54]

As we are advised by Maya Angaelou, each child belongs to all of us and they will bring us a tomorrow in direct relation to the responsibility we have shown to them.[55] Frederick Douglass pointed out some time ago that it is easier to raise strong children than to repair broken men.[56] Erik Erikson asserts that:

> "*Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit; for such mutilation undercuts the life principle of trust, without which every human act, may it feel ever so good and seem ever so right is prone to perversion by destructive forms of conscientiousness".[57]*

Pearl Buck reminds us that exclusion is always dangerous and that inclusion is the only "*safety*" if we are to have a "*peaceful world*".[58] In the context of our present discussion about exclusionary education policies, we can conclude that if we desire communities which are peaceful and prosperous then we need to insure inclusivity and an ethos of non-discrimination and equality of opportunity. This is an essential because:

> "*Peace comes from being able to contribute the best that we have, and all that we are, toward creating a world that supports everyone. But it is also securing the space for others to contribute the best that they have and all that they are".[59]*

Martin Luther King Jr poignantly summarizes this reality when he indicates that:

> "*Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly and I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality*".[60]

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[52] **Article 2 *First Protocol to the European Convention on Human Rights***. Available online <

[53] Ingrid Korner, Sonja Uhlmann and Bernhard Schmid et. al. (n/d): Towards Inclusive Education: Examples of Good Practices of Inclusive Education. Inclusion Europe. Available online < https://inclusion-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Best-Practice-Education_EN-FINALWEB.pdf>

[54] Erin Aguilar (n/d): The Benefits of Inclusion. Blake Foundation Document Library. Available online < https://www.easterseals.com/blakefoundation/shared-components/document-library/the-benefits-of-inclusion.pdf>

[55] Maya Angelou (2010): Facebook post <https://www.facebook.com/MayaAngelou/posts/131582156872586>

[56] Cited in Andrew Rowland (2014): "It is easier to raise strong children than to repair broken men". In the Andrew Roeland WebBlog. Available online < https://drandrewrowland.wordpress.com/2014/04/25/it-is-easier-to-build-strong-children-than-to-repair-broken-men-frederick-douglass-1817-1895/comment-page-1/>

[57] Erik Erikson (1993): Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History. Norton, New York

[58] Pearl Buck (1963): A Bridge for Passing. Methuen, London

[59] Hafsat Abiola (n/d): "Hafsat Abiola Reflects on Working Towards Peace". In the Architects for Peace WebBlog, Markkula Centre for Applied Ethics, Jesuit University in Silicone Valley. Available online < https://legacy.scu.edu/ethics/architects-of-peace/Abiola/essay.html>

[60] Martin Luther King jr. (2003): Letter From the Birmingham Jail. Providence Forum

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