
Necessary Spaces by Saundra Murray Nettles

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Necessary Spaces

Sandra Murray Nettles (2013).

Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc., 98 pages.

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There is a racial divide in American schools that is reflected in the disproportionate number of African-American children suspended and expelled from school, as well as the disproportionate number of African-American students in special education (Losen and Skiba 2010). In her book *Necessary Spaces*, author Sandra Murray Nettles provides an ecological model to develop connections between schools, families, and communities to bridge the divide and close the disparity gap. Nettles, the daughter of educators, both with advanced degrees, grew up in the segregated South. Her father was the principal at Dr. Martin Luther King's alma mater in Atlanta, Georgia and her mother was a kindergarten teacher. Nettles' experiences as a young girl growing up in a middle-class African-American family in segregated neighborhoods are reflected in throughout the book. Presently, she is a scholar of human development, specializing in resilience in children and adolescents, the development of African-American women and the impact of community and neighborhoods on the academic development of children. She holds a BA in Philosophy, a Master's degree in Library and Information Sciences, and a Ph.D. in Psychology.

Using the old South as a backdrop, the author takes the reader to a time before integration, to African-American neighborhoods that were rich in culture, resources, and connections. This idyllic backdrop is based on segregated middle- and upper-class communities. She provides the context in which learning occurred in natural environments with many "teachers" in all aspects of school, community and family life. Throughout the book, adults share childhood memories that describe learning activities in informal settings where the community existed as the school, parks as playgrounds and community members as teachers.

The author supports Bronfenbrenner's ecological model that posits that optimal development occurs when the micro-system—the child and family, and the macro-system—the community members, are intricately linked and vested in the child's success (Bronfenbrenner 1979). It is Nettles' assertion that these "necessary spaces" of individual and collective memories, which provide insight on connections between home and school, are the key to rebuilding strong neighborhoods and igniting children's passion for excellence and learning.

Chapter One, entitled "Home Ground," offers a glimpse into the world of African-American families during the 1950s. The shaping of educational values during this period included themes that adults conveyed to children: (a) communality, (b)

aversion to Whites, and (c) the disparity between their own neighborhoods and those of White children. Culture and ethnicity were also promoted in the home environment by displaying cultural artifacts, ethnic music and books that reflected African-American culture.

Chapter Two, "Curriculum of Place," is described by the author as the place where Black children found "support for being who we were, and where we rehearsed for roles we might undertake in the future" (22). The environment was a segregated place where lessons in History, English, Math and Sociology took place. These lessons occurred on street corners and in homes where adults shared ancestral stories, corrected grammar and conveyed academic and social expectations. Schools, local businesses, community libraries and neighborhood parks were also learning spaces.

Schools in segregated communities are described as places that celebrated the history of African-American children while offering opportunities and presenting possibilities beyond the confines of the neighborhood. Black history was integrated in all aspects of the curriculum as children were encouraged to dream and challenged to grow. Although textbooks were silent on the achievements of Blacks, teachers in these Southern segregated schools shared and celebrated the accomplishments of notable men and women of African descent. The author points out the importance of these history lessons in inspiring and motivating Black youth to seek educational excellence.

Chapter Three, "Landscapes of Resistance," describes the activities of rebellion and opposition to oppression in isolated neighborhoods in the South. It is noted that African-American families discussed race and racism as a part of everyday family life. Children were taught about issues such as discrimination and Jim Crow laws and were encouraged to one day challenge and change the inequitable system. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to integrate schools, new problems arose for Black children. They brought to school the culture and values of their homes and community, which were quite different from the culture of the White teachers who were now teaching in schools in Black communities. The author explains that behaviors once embraced and encouraged at home were not valued or understood in integrated schools. In the 1970s as schools in Black neighborhoods began to deteriorate, movements for healthy schools were created to address issues that impacted child health and education outcomes. This chapter provides an example of a school where community members and teachers worked together to ensure children's success in spite of the adverse conditions and low parental involvement.

The last chapter of the book summarizes the effectiveness of informal, non-formal and formal learning environments. The author shares her vision "for interconnection of grassroots, academic and service resources as networks for lifelong learning in African-American communities" (89). In order to build and restore community networks for learning, collective memory is presented as a viable solution. These collective memories can be used as a catalyst for building community networks for learning. An example is the memories of community

coaches who can spark the practice of learning in informal settings as well as modeling appropriate behavior in everyday situations.

The author's vision is consistent with current research related to the implementation of culturally responsive practices in addressing the achievement gap and decreasing disparities in disciplinary practices. Research reveals that White teachers are less capable when teaching African-American students compared to White students and confirms the necessity to understand the culture and needs of African-American children to be effective educators (Chang and Sue 2003).

Necessary Spaces gives the reader a glimpse into a time when African-American communities thrived, against all odds. It provides a rich history of family values, community connections, and the value of education. This history can serve as a guide for first steps towards building successful schools and viable neighborhoods. The reader is inspired to wonder, act and reflect on what worked in order to develop a plan of action, based on the possibilities provided by Sandra Murray Nettles.

Review by Rosemarie Allen

Rosemarie Allen has over 30 years of leadership experience in early childhood. Since 2007, Rosemarie has served in directorship roles with the Colorado Department of Human Services, most recently in the Division of Youth Corrections and from 2007-2012 as the Director of the Division of Child Care. In that role, she oversaw the State's child care licensing program, the federal child care assistance program, the redesign of the State's quality rating and improvement system, the implementation of the State's professional development plan, and assisted in the creation of Colorado's early learning guidelines. Prior to her role with the State, Rosemarie served for 10 years as the Director of Children's Programs for Front Range Community College. And, since 1997, she has taught core classes in early childhood education at two- and four-year institutions throughout Colorado. Rosemarie holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Ethnic Studies and Child Development from California State University, Long Beach, a Master of Education degree in Curriculum and Instruction from Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is currently completing coursework toward her Doctorate in Equity in Education at the University of Colorado, Denver. She currently serves as the Executive Director of the Colorado Parent and Child Foundation.

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