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Jaesook L. Gilbert
Northern Kentucky University

Helene Arbouet Harte
University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College

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Jaesook L. Gilbert, Northern Kentucky University
Helene Arbouet Harte, University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College

Abstract

This paper shares the process and experience of a university community partnership to improve the quality of care and education in the region by enhancing teachers' early childhood knowledge. A hybrid course for both university students and childcare providers, The Academy for Early Childhood Excellence sought to provide intense and supportive professional development for early care and education providers as well as access and an introduction to the university setting. The hybrid format necessitated some level of competence with technology and more emphasis on writing as a mode of communication. Some of the Academy participants, especially the more experienced and older providers, were not as comfortable with different computer software needed to open information provided or to complete the assignments through the Blackboard system. For some participants, navigating the online sessions was a bit difficult and they had to seek assistance from others about how and where to go on the Bb site for their postings. Participants reported increased reflection and intentionality in practices. Challenges included navigation of and access to technology as well as lack of university orientation for the transition to the university setting after the course ended. The paper ends with recommendations for higher education institutions thinking about offering professional development courses.

Keywords: promoting excellence, early care, education providers, teacher education

Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, and Howes (2002) found that teachers with more formal education or training displayed more sensitivity when interacting with young children. Teachers with more education also created and maintained classroom environments that reflect children's developmental levels and engaged in activities that promote children's creativity, language development, and complex play (Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS, 2006). Vu, Jeon and Howes (2008) add additional support to prior research by asserting that the quality level of the early childhood classrooms depended on teachers' education level, ongoing professional development and positive support of the program directors. Vu, Jeon and Howes (2008) further state that teachers with bachelor's degrees in child care and Head Start programs provided "feedback for student learning and creat[ed] classrooms high in sensitive teacher-child interactions and classroom materials" (p. 500) as compared to less educated teachers in these settings.

Hestenes, Cassidy, Shim, and Hedge (2008) observed teachers with more education engaging in more appropriate teacher-child interactions with all children in inclusive preschool classrooms. In a comparison study of inclusive and non-inclusive classrooms, the higher education levels and more education positively affected "the language and literacy environments" (Grisham-Brown, Cox, Gravil, & Missall, 2010, p. 34). Chung, Marvin, and Churchill (2005) found the importance of a specific degree, as opposed to just more education, in teachers as a critical factor in facilitating quality when they observed teachers with early childhood education or child development baccalaureate degrees being more competent in establishing positive interactions with children.

The review of the literature demonstrates that early childhood teachers with higher levels of education engage in more developmentally appropriate

interactions. As a response, the early care and education profession is striving to increase the level of education. The National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), one of the largest early childhood professional organizations, increased the educational requirements for childcare teachers and administrators for its national accreditation for childcare. The latest requirement consists of at least 75% of the lead teachers working on an associate's degree or higher, while the program administrator possesses a bachelor's degree with a minimum of 24 credit hours of specialized coursework in early childhood education, child development, elementary education or early childhood special education and at least nine hours in administration, leadership or management (NAEYC, 2007). The federal Head Start program also raised its expectations for lead teachers' educational level to a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education or Child Development by 2013 for at least 50% of all Head Start lead teachers (Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007).

The problem is that many early care and education practitioners still need to obtain their degrees. Currently, only 13 to 21 percent of the child care workforce have a bachelor's degree or higher (Marato & Brandon, 2012, as cited in Rhodes & Huston, 2012) and 57 percent of Head Start lead teachers possess bachelor or higher degrees (Schmit, 2012). The challenge for teacher preparation programs is to ascertain variables that will encourage practitioners to take college courses in their pursuit of baccalaureate degrees. The authors, who are early childhood education program faculty, set out to address this gap in providers' knowledge in the region through the creation of an Academy for Early Childhood Excellence—a pilot program at a four-year institution targeting the education level of

licensed childcare and Head Start program teachers. This paper focuses on the implementation process, results, and implications for future directions for universities in supporting practitioners' professional development efforts.

The Academy for Early Childhood Excellence

The existence of the Academy for Early Childhood Excellence (referred to as the Academy) became possible due to the commitment from the university and community partners. One year prior to the implementation of the Academy, the university sent out a call for proposals for internal grant projects that involved university-community partnerships. The authors approached two agencies about the grant and obtained their support: the local child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agency, which provides professional development, coaching and technical assistance related to child care licensing issues to early care and education providers; and the regional training center (RTC), which provides training and technical assistance for state-funded preschools in public school districts in Kentucky. The next step was to find out about educational needs for the child care and education workforce in the region from the CCR&R and the local Head Start program. Afterwards, the Academy was born. In addition, the CCR&R sent flyers about the Academy to all providers in the area and provided their conference room for the Academy face-to-face sessions. The RTC provided technical assistance and materials for the Academy. These partnerships allowed the university to introduce college coursework to the practitioners in a familiar community setting.

Goals

The primary goal of the Academy was to increase the early childhood education knowledge of teachers in licensed early care and education programs in the region. The specific objective was to provide one 3-credit hour course that focused on developmentally appropriate curriculum, activities, and interactions. A secondary objective of the Academy was to provide the participants an option, as well as to encourage them to use the 3-credit hour course to begin working towards a four-year degree in early childhood education at the university.

Participants

More than 40 early care and education providers called to inquire about the Academy, and 11 came to an informational/orientation meeting. However, only eight providers registered for the Academy. Six participants were from the Head Start program, and two participants were from community child care programs. Two of the eight participants were administrators. All of the participants were females, and they ranged in age from late 20s to mid-50s. All have been in the early childhood education field at least eight years. The maximum number of years in experience was over 20 years.

Format

In order to meet the primary objective of providing one 3-credit hour course that focused on developmentally appropriate curriculum, activities, and interactions, the authors chose a semester-long, undergraduate-level course on preschool programming for the Academy. This existing course was re-formatted as a hybrid course, however, using a combination of face-to-face and online (i.e., Blackboard course management system) components. Additionally, the student population of this course consisted of a mix of the Academy participants and current early childhood education (ECE) major students at the university.

The Academy consisted of five face-to-face sessions. In between the face-to-face meetings, students engaged in online conversations with their designated team members. Each online team consisted of a minimum of one Academy participant, if not two, and one university ECE major student. The face-to-face session duration was three hours, and these sessions took place at the CCR&R conference room, a location that was already familiar to the Academy participants. Typically, there were two or three weeks of online sessions between each of the face-to-face sessions. Material for each class session, regardless of delivery format, was posted on the Blackboard system site using a folder system. Each folder was organized according to the class session date, and each folder contained content notes, questions and resources.

Session Content

The first session focused on the Academy participants getting to know each other and the university early childhood major students, as well as offering an orientation to the Blackboard (Bb) system. At this session, the Academy participants learned about the university Bb helpline phone number and the availability of peer assistance from the ECE major students (referred to as the ECE peer assistants) who volunteered to help the Academy participants with any Bb-related challenges. The Academy participants received the ECE peer assistants' contact information verbally during class so that Academy participants could access contact information through Bb after class. The contact information provided consisted of phone numbers with best time to call and e-mail addresses, which allowed Academy participants to choose the most comfortable option for them when

contacting the ECE peer assistants about any Bb-related issues. The combined available hours of the four ECE peer assistants covered all seven days of the week as well as the majority of hours during the day and night.

The topics for the second, third, and fourth face-to-face sessions were child observation/assessment and classroom environment evaluation; language and literacy activities; and an overview of early childhood curricula, respectively. For the language and literacy session, an early childhood literacy specialist from a local library came and shared activities and materials (especially books), as well as explained services available to the community child care programs that are free and delivered onsite to child care programs. Additionally, the early childhood literacy specialist rectified misinformation that the community child care providers had in terms of available services and library policies. The combination of theoretical foundations, instruction for accessing local library supports and resources, and modeling of strategies and activities provided opportunities for participants to obtain a holistic picture of what to do in the classroom, why to engage in these practices, how to implement practices and where to find the resources for implementation.

The topic for the last (i.e., fifth) face-to-face session was development of an integrated lesson plan, the collaborative in-class group final. For this final, students had to develop an integrated lesson plan packet (based on the actual children the Academy participants and the ECE major students observed during the semester) as well as complete child assessment reports. The integrated lesson plan packet consisted of five components, which each group had the entire three hours to work on and turn in at the end of the session. The five components were: 1) description of one preschool curriculum model group selected; 2) a weekly plan that reflects the selected curriculum model; 3) daily schedule; 4) lesson plan for one activity from the weekly lesson plan; and 5) a note or letter to families explaining the weekly plan as well as what supplemental activity families can do at home. The purpose of the integrated lesson plan packet was to facilitate application of content learned throughout the semester and to translate child assessment reports into intentional planning for preschool classroom.

For online sessions between face-to-face sessions, the content information included PowerPoint slides of chapters, additional resources such as video clips of applicable topics in the assigned chapter(s), and external links to early childhood professional organizations. The expectations for Academy participants and ECE major students were to read the assigned chapter(s), view other online content for the appropriate week, and try one teaching strategy suggested in the chapter(s) followed by a response post on the Bb discussion board. The Bb discussion board was set up for each team so that only the members on the same team could access and react to the postings. Team members were to post their reactions to one of the "Questions for further thought" at the end of each chapter and describe the results of implementing one teaching strategy of their choice suggested within the assigned chapter by midnight Thursday. Afterwards, the other team members were required to post their comments to their group members' reflections by 9 PM Friday.

Impact on the Academy Participants' Cognitive Increase. With regard to the primary goal of the Academy, which was to increase the early childhood education knowledge of providers in licensed programs in the region, the Academy participants learned about being

intentional in their practice after completing the Academy. If the participants were classroom teachers, they learned to be more thoughtful and cognizant of their teaching practice as expressed by Jane (a pseudonym) in her final reflection below:

> As a teacher that has been in the classroom for quite a few years, I think we sometimes fall into the habit of just doing things the same old way. Everything is pretty routine and comfortable so we often don't take the time to step back and take a new look at the things we are doing. Taking this class has helped me to be more aware of the things I am doing in the classroom. Even though I usually have a new group of children each year, I should not do everything the same. I have started to look at my lesson plans differently. Instead of doing a new theme every week, I have started looking at taking longer and expand[ing] on what I am doing with the children. The children I have are two and three years old and I feel they can grasp expanding certain themes. An example would be the theme of spring and planting. Instead of just planting some flower seeds with them, we have included making a graph of how long it takes for the seeds to come up and when we see the first signs of growth. Another area we are looking at is outdoor learning area. I am working along with the teacher of our three and four year olds and we are planning on expanding some of the areas we have outside. One plan we have is to bring more of our art activities outside. We are also working on our dramatic play area to do some different areas such as a store or post office. I have looked at my art area a little differently, and I

> am having more things on the shelf that are left out most of the time. I have more markers and some water colors that the children use very independently.

As Jane described above, she realized how important it is to be more purposeful with her teaching in order to avoid becoming complacent. Jane noticed her habit of "doing things the same old way" even though she has a new group of children each year. Jane also began to examine her practice of "doing a new theme every week" and observed that she needed to allow her children more access to materials and different types of topics as well as time for processing information. She stated that she is having "more things on the shelf that are left out most of the time" and "more markers and water colors that the children use very independently" in her classroom. Another change Jane implemented in her classroom through the Academy is "taking longer and expand[ing]" on what she and her children are learning about so that the experience becomes an educational, not just fun, activity. Jane talked about making a graph of the life of a seed based on observations of the seeds she and her students planted, thereby incorporating science and math into the activity. She indicated not only increased intentionality, but also the integration of curriculum areas in meaningful ways, with the children actively engaged in the learning process.

Increased Sensitivity to Children. Another theme that emerged from the Academy participants who are classroom teachers is the notion of becoming more child-focused and less teacher-guided, which Jane already alluded to above when she discussed allowing children more access. Below is Sara's (a pseudonym) rendition of her evolution in becoming more sensitive to her children:

> *I have taken look at how I run my classroom, and there were some things that need[ed] to change. I did a lot of adult guided experiences with the children. As the school year pressed on, I began to try more of a child guided approach along with the adult guided experiences. [I found that] the children that we deal with on a daily basis are smarter than they seem. They have taught me a few things along with learning something themselves.*

Sara's realization that her children were more capable than she perceived and that they could teach her as well was only possible when Sara began to provide more opportunities for children to lead the activity rather than always guiding the experience herself.

Nancy (a pseudonym) talked about her intention to facilitate her children's ability to become more independent and own problem solvers instead of always relying on the adults' assistance:

> *I will continue to become a better intentional teacher by listening more, giving and using words to the children they may not know to help them solve their own conflicts without aggression. I will be giving them more opportunities to become more independent and creative in choices. By using more child-adult guidance instead of adult-child guidance, more opportunities will be open to the child's interest areas [and] work [children's interests] into themes along with the unites that we are required to provide.*

Thus, the impact of having attended the Academy for Nancy was the reminder to herself to continue sharing control of the classroom with her children by placing the word "child" first in the phrase "child-adult guidance instead of adult-child guidance."

Increased Enthusiasm for Teaching. The hybrid format of the Academy allowed for an increase in the participants' excitement for their teaching and growth in self-confidence as early care and education providers. The online sessions provided the Academy participants time to process the information, implement teaching strategies or activities they selected in their classrooms, and work on different required course assignments. The face-to-face sessions focused on specific training and skills needed to complete assignments (e.g., classroom environmental rating scale or different types of child observation) as well as to facilitate Academy participants' grasp of online materials or their practices through the invitation of guest speaker. Thus, combining online and face-to-face formats facilitated participants' capacity to connect the course information to practice; thus generating enthusiasm for teaching. As illustrated in one of her Bb postings below, Amy (a pseudonym) notes what happened when she tried out ideas shared by the speakers from the third face-to-face session on Language and Literacy:

> *The speaker from the library mentioned writing the words out to the songs we use every day in our circle time. I did this and I was amazed at how quickly the children picked up recognizing some of the words. It has been exciting to see my twos and three years olds in the dramatic play area with the clipboard and pencil making marks on the paper.*

Amy used "exciting" to describe her teaching experience with her children in her excerpt above, and she continued to grow in her enjoyment of teaching as demonstrated in her final reflection below:

> *I can honestly say that my group's response helped me to step back and focus on the little things. I started to*

enjoy myself more and relay that experience to the children. My group's responses were positive and encouraging in nature and really bolstered my confidence in what I am doing.

As Amy became aware of her strengths through her team members' comments during their team dialogue and exchanges, Amy began to have more fun as a teacher and have more fun with her classroom children. Thus, not only did Academy participants gain confidence in their competence as professionals from their teammates, they also experienced regeneration of professional enthusiasm and enjoyment as they fostered children's learning through active engagement and shared control.

Creation of Learning Community. Hill, Stremmel, and Fu (2005) assert that a teacher needs to engage in an inquiry of the self and the practice, while Epstein (2007) states that a teacher's purpose is to "play a vital educational role by creating supportive environments and using instructional strategies to advance children's thinking to the next level" (p. 2). The perspectives of Academy participants who were classroom teachers demonstrated how the Academy provided the impetus for an increase in their knowledge, which then led to positive changes within themselves and their classroom environments. For the two Academy participants who were Head Start administrators, the Academy provided an avenue to be reflective about practices they see at their centers and analyze what they can do to facilitate their teachers' continual professional growth. One of the issues both administrators responded to for their Bb weekly discussion board was the need for in-service opportunities for teachers. May (a pseudonym) was the first administrator to post her response:

Training on setting up an effective classroom would be [what] I would highly recommend for the teaching staff. Year after year, they place the learning centers in the same areas because it is comfortable for them. It may have worked the year before, but now there are different children or the returning children have new interests. During the course of the school year, an in-service opportunity would be to have someone from outside the center come in and observe the classroom or interactions from the children and the staff on the usefulness of the set up. Change is good. There may be an area that is not being utilized to its fullest, but the staff does not see it because they are so used to the way the room is. You have to keep the classroom interesting or everyone gets in a stalemate.

June (a pseudonym), the other administrator, responded to May with,

I agree with you about training for the teachers [on how] to support intentional teaching. Just like the class we are taking now, I feel that our teachers would benefit greatly from training just on this book - of course with a lot of hands on activities for support.

May then posted,

June - when summer planning time gets here, together we need to do some type of in-service with the teaching staff and utilize the rest of those already in this class. Together, I think the six of us could and would do a great service for the rest of the teaching staff. We may even be able to get some of the other ladies from this class to help out.

Thus, the Academy became a means for participants to better connect with each other

through regular dialogue and to develop in-service strategies for taking their staff knowledge and skills to "the next level" (Epstein, 2007, p. 2) through an analysis of what currently happens at their own centers. The Academy served as a professional learning community, allowing providers to reflect on as well as make changes to their professional practice.

Discussion

According to Fukkink and Lont (2007), specialized training can influence a teacher's disposition. Weber and Trauten (2008) also assert that training which is focused, thorough, and continued over time with opportunities for individualization is more likely to influence teacher behavior and influence program quality. The Academy for Early Childhood Excellence was such a training as it focused on the topic of developmentally appropriate curriculum, activities, and interactions through a semester-long, 3-credit hour course on preschool programming. The Academy also provided opportunities for peer mentoring through online team designation and online posting of reflections. The use of the hybrid format allowed for self-reflection as well as group inquiry process.

The Academy participants' perspectives from the prior section illustrated the positive impact of the Academy on the participants' beliefs and behavior. The classroom teacher participants became more purposeful and intentional in their teaching as they began to respect children's competencies, recognize children's individual needs, share control, respond to children's interests, and view the classroom as a space for respect and co-learning. The center administrator participants became more reflective of current practices among their classroom teachers and the next steps needed to facilitate improvement within teachers and

their classroom environments. Additionally, four (two administrators, one Head Start teacher and one community child care program) of the eight Academy participants used the 3-credit hour course from the Academy towards their four-year degree in early childhood education at the university.

Conclusion

Higher education overall is sometimes viewed as an isolated ivory tower, separate from and unaware of shifts in the real world. Bringing coursework to the community in collaboration with, rather than in competition with, existing agencies provides opportunities for meaningful community engagement as well as building positive working relationships or connections. Partnership between universities and communities is the perfect opportunity to build upon Rigor, Relevance and Relationships (Daggett, n.d.; McNulty & Quaglia, 2007). Connected to the latest research and evidence in the field, university faculty can provide rigor, challenging and engaging participants with high expectations for learning. Embedded in the community, professional development organizations and workplace educators supply the relevance with an awareness of the daily concerns, issues and strengths in a profession. Relationships are strengthened all around as the university becomes connected to the community and employers. With positive relationships, partners are able to not only go to each other for resources, but also support and make referrals that may benefit one another.

The Academy of Early Childhood Excellence provided opportunities for participants and university students to obtain early childhood content knowledge and apply strategies in their classrooms. Relevant, intensive, and supportive coursework resulted in participants expressing an eagerness to use knowledge

and skills developed in the course as intentional, competent educators. The Academy addressed the issue of access and outreach identified by the National Child Care Information and Technical Assistance Center ([NCCIC] (2000) as important components of successful professional development through the coordination of community and university resources. Firstly, the hybrid format of the Academy made it more feasible for the participants, who were mothers, grandmothers, and daughters who had custodial duty of elderly parent(s), to balance the demands of the Academy, work and their families. Secondly, use of the local CCR&R conference room, where participants typically receive their required annual in-service training hours, as the face-to-face location made the Academy less intimidating to them, as they did not have to navigate logistics like directions or parking at the university. Thirdly, the academic focus (a 3-credit hour course on preschool programming) made the Academy more relevant to the participants because the course essentially counted twice—addressing one of the identified areas of training needs for the local Head Start and child care programs as well as satisfying one of the required courses for the bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. Academy participants interacted with other early care and education providers and engaged with university ECE major students, course instructors and speakers through face-to-face sessions and Bb discussions in respective discussion board teams during 16 weeks. The Academy participants took part in a specialized and in-depth professional development as they completed assignments and projects for the Academy alongside the university ECE major students who were completing the preschool programming course for their bachelor's degree.

However, the same three solutions to access and outreach issues from above created some challenges for the Academy participants. The hybrid format necessitated some level of competence with technology and more emphasis on writing as a mode of communication. Some of the Academy participants, especially the more experienced and older providers, were not as comfortable with different computer software needed to open information provided or to complete the assignments through the Blackboard system. For some participants, navigating the online sessions was a bit difficult and they had to seek assistance from others about how and where to go on the Bb site for their postings. Another issue that arose related to technology for one participant was the financial cost of Internet service. This participant could only afford dial-up service for her computer at home, so she had to resort to using a computer at her program after business hours, which reduced her ability to manage her home, work and school.

The physical location for the face-to-face sessions at the local CCR&R, while convenient, did not help ease the transition of four Academy participants who decided to continue pursuing a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. These four participants had to figure out the university system logistics (e.g., where to park and where to go for their classes) on their own. Additionally, many Academy participants experienced challenges fulfilling the expectations of a university course after a long hiatus from high school graduation or experience at technical or community colleges. Similar to research on non-traditional students (e.g., Bowl, 2001; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2008; Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012; Griffiths, Winstanley, & Gabriel, 2005), one of the biggest struggles for all Academy

participants was competence and confidence in their writing. Many were not used to writing academic-style papers where the participants had to provide evidence for what they said or conduct research on a particular subject. Many participants, because they had been practicing so long in the field, had difficulty articulating the theory behind their actions or practice and transferring their practical expertise to the course assignments and projects.

Implications for Higher Education: Lessons Learned

The basic components of this project apply to any discipline, as professionals across disciplines participate in professional development. Partnership between community professional organizations and university faculty may result in many positive benefits, such as allowing accessible ways to obtain college credit and improvement in job performance. Universities benefit if more students enroll in classes. Community agencies benefit when they can cut costs or obtain financial support from the university. Employers benefit when job performance is enhanced. In pursuing a partnership with community organizations, a few points should be kept in mind in order to maximize gains:

- Selection of coursework topics must be relevant and based on identified needs in the area if the practicing professionals are to deem a semester-long professional development worthy of their time and effort. Collaboration with local agencies can help identify the area of training need and the demand for the area. After the identification of the area of need, the university can review existing courses to determine if any course is appropriate for the identified training need. If none of the existing courses fit, the university has the option of

creating a pilot course that encompasses the needed focus or topic if there is enough demand by the practicing professionals.

- The advertisement of the determined professional development course will be more successful if the university collaborates with local agencies. The practicing professionals will be more likely to consider college coursework if they can make connections through a familiar route rather than approaching an unknown and seemingly distant entity like a university. Therefore, the partnership with community agencies allows for mutually beneficial opportunities in determining the needs of the area and sharing information across agencies. The partner agencies could provide coaching and technical assistance in the areas related to coursework as well.

- Practicing professionals, even though they are veterans in the field, may be novices to semester-long professional development with college-level expectations. Any new activity requires a transition period, and mentoring could facilitate that transition process. The focus for mentoring should include assistance with writing academic papers and navigating the university system. The specific supports can include university resources like the writing center or the library, but establishing a peer mentor system between the early care and education providers and the university students within the major will offer more targeted assistance to the practicing professionals. The peer mentor system will facilitate building

relationships with university students who can provide technical assistance as well as continued supports for the professional. One way of establishing a peer mentor system is to designate online or face-to-face teams consisting of university students and practicing professionals. Each team member will then be able to foster deeper relationships with each other through weekly discussions and sharing of reactions. As members become more comfortable with each other, informal mentoring can result where the practicing professionals can ask the university students about logistics related to the university system or course and the university students can seek advice regarding practice from the veteran practicing professionals. Therefore, a peer mentor system may foster a sense of community where early care and education providers can feel a sense of belonging in the foreign entity, the university system, as they learn to figure out the new system through their peer mentors while contributing to the development of their peer mentors simultaneously.

Therefore, teacher preparation programs as well as other university programs can create courses beneficial not only to current students, but also to community providers by coordinating with local agencies and community programs. Use of existing community resources and collaboration with local agencies creates a comfortable context for recruitment as well as professional development. It also creates mutually beneficial opportunities to determine the needs in the area and share information across agencies. The partner agencies could provide follow-up or introductory trainings to prepare students for learning or build on previous learning. The partner programs could also provide coaching and technical assistance in the areas related to coursework in the future.

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Jaesook L. Gilbert is Associate Professor, Northern Kentucky University.
Helene Arbouet Harte is Assistant Professor, University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College.