

## “Taking Risks” with Literacy Acoustics

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On May 28, 2015, National Writing Project (NWP) aired a conversation with Newbery Award-winning author Kwame Alexander about contributions he made to yearlong professional development collaboration between K-8 teachers at Hill Central in New Haven, Connecticut, and [Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield University](#). The interview, [A Talk With Kwame Alexander](#), is available in its entirety via [BlogTalkRadio](#). Kwame Alexander was awarded the 2015 [Newbery Medal](#) by the Association for Library Service to Children, a division of the American Library Association, for distinguished authorship of *The Crossover* (2014).

For purposes here, the NWP interview with Kwame Alexander is highlighted in context of scholarship and research that led to the yearlong professional development design. Teachers at Hill Central used Alexander’s *The Crossover* (2014) and *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band* (2011) to enhance a community of writing that challenged dominant framings of urban youth as non-writers (Fisher, 2005; Haddix, 2009; Mahiri & Sablo, 1996). Alexander’s children’s book and young adult text were emphasized during professional development to explore language and student identities (Hadaway, Young, & Ward, 2012). Support was provided through the U.S. Department of Education’s Title II program and a [National Writing Project \(NWP\) Supporting Effective Educator Development in a High-Need School](#) grant.

***Celebrating 30 Years in Connecticut.*** The Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield University is one of three [National Writing Project](#) sites in the state. It is currently celebrating its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Connecticut is known for socio-economic divisions and high achievement-gaps in writing ([NCES, 2011](#)). In line with the National Writing Project’s mission, however, CWP-Fairfield has set out to (1) build teacher-leaders, (2) use knowledge and research to improve the teaching of writing, and (3) celebrate voices of student writers and teachers. NWP’s model is a professional development model that works (Applebee & Langer, 2009, 2011, 2013) and that *matters* (NWP & DeVoss, Eidman-Aadahl, & Hicks, 2010; NWP & Nagin, 2013). Teachers who participate in National Writing Project programs find the support transformative (Whitney, 2008,

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2009), because the professional network (Lieberman & Wood, 2003) promotes inquiry (Whitney, et. al, 2008) and advances K-12 literacy for college and career success (Carnegie Council, 2010).

*“The Challenges That Were Hill Central.”* Hill Central Academy is a K-8 public school in New Haven, Connecticut that, at the time of the partnership, was home to 441 students, 32 teachers, and 10 teaching assistants. Principal Glen Worthy and Vice Principal Lillian Fontan contacted CWP with a vision to improve reading and writing across content areas at the school. At the time when the collaboration was initiated, 93.8% of Hill Central’s students received free and reduced lunch and over 40% were English language learners. Demographics were 75% Hispanic and 25% African American. In the words of Donna Delbasso, SRBI (Scientific Research Based Interventions) Leader, during the NWP interview (05/28/15),

I couldn’t grasp my mind around the challenges that were at Hill Central. This was a failing school that was among competing magnet schools. We ended up in a turn around model. Fifty percent of our staff was reassigned. The very first day that I was working there and I was at the photocopier and making copies, a rat went across my feet. It was quite the experience at every level. The behaviors were challenging. The teachers were tired. It was difficult.

Mr. Worthy [principal] had this fabulous vision to incorporate a shared leadership model, a teacher leader model, and [brought on] a new administration. The current administration, Lillian Fontan and Tina Mitchell, are carrying on the vision and it really has become the basis of who we are. I find it unbelievable and I’m proud to say that nine years later, we’ve really become a model school in many areas. We’ve come a long way and are making great strides.

At the time the school contacted CWP, only 14% of 8th graders, 4% of 7th graders, 20% of 6th graders, 26% of 5th graders, 28% of 4th graders, and 23% of 3rd graders demonstrated writing proficiency on state assessments. Similarly, reading scores were below state and district averages and only 25% of the school’s students read at grade level.

Because of low scores on state assessments, administrators at Hill Central contacted CWP-Storrs and CWP-Fairfield for support. Before receiving the 2013-2014 SEED grant, 100% of Hill Central’s faculty attended workshops on teaching writing that included an introduction of genre studies, the writing workshop, and an alignment with Common Core State Standards. During the 2012 [National Day of Writing](#), for example, every student at the school responded to

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a prompt that asked, “Why Write?” (see appendix) and teachers spent part of the year looking at student work (Blythe, Allen, & Powell, 2007) through analyzing their responses. This initiated a conversation about the desires, needs, and worries of student writers at Hill Central and provided a foundation for the 2013-2014 SEED High-Need School grant application.

In the data collected from the first year, teachers reported they trusted CWP’s professional development and desired more. Specifically, they appreciated the ways the administration team looked at their reflections of the professional development to design next steps to meet their pedagogical needs. Nicole Brown, Academic Leader, shared how the experience started.

A lot of this work began with the vision of Principal Glen Worthy and the whole leadership team. We found the writer’s workshop was in practice. It was well defined and most of the literacy teachers were well trained in it. You’d see in certain classrooms pockets of excellence with writer’s workshop. We even had teachers trained by Teacher’s College and they went to Saturday reunions. They knew a lot and had a good foundation. We still lacked rigor in the classroom and with the teaching of writing, though. We needed to focus on the engagement of students. Over time teachers can become complacent and go along with the status quo. We needed to bump it up. We realized we needed to include other forms of writing instruction. We needed help.

Hill Central’s administrative team and CWP-Fairfield worked of teacher feedback to create a list of 2<sup>nd</sup>-year objectives. These were used to apply for the 2013-2014 NWP SEED in a High-Need School grant.

***Digital Acoustics: Yearlong Professional Development.*** During the second year of partnership between Hill Central and CWP-Fairfield, school leaders used the grant to establish ways to write across the curriculum and to build a stronger K-8 writing community. Principal Glen Worthy’s vision included an establishment of a cross-curricular, collaborative culture for literacy where *all* teachers would feel as if they were *part of* the school-wide effort. Kwame Alexander’s [\*Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band\*](#) was chosen as a text to use as teachers thought strategically about shared CCSS goals. A 2<sup>nd</sup> year of professional development began when every teacher received a copy of Alexander’s text. *Acoustic Rooster* was used to promote K-8 literacy goals and allowed teachers to make stronger cross-disciplinary connections (e.g., in History, discussing the Harlem Renaissance; in PE, exploring different types of dance and

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movement; in Art, examining the use of images to tell a story).

As noted, the administrative staff desired to build a stronger writing community at Hill Central, as well. In [\*Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band\*](#), Acoustic Rooster finds rhythm from working with, partnering with, and playing amongst other talented animals. Designers of the yearlong project wanted Hill Central’s teachers to see the talents and expertise each had and to, metaphorically, form ‘barnyard bands’ of their own as they discovered interdisciplinary possibilities. In addition, Eric Komoroff of [\*Community of Unity\*](#) was brought to Hill Central for his expertise. His work emphasizes the ‘song’ every child brings to the classroom – that is, the way an individual child focuses, becomes self-aware, demonstrates integrity, uses senses of humor, builds self-esteem, and takes on responsibilities. The notion of a “song” paralleled the musical theme of Kwame Alexander’s text, too. During professional development days and within vertical team meetings teachers worked to compose a personal essay based on the “song” they sing as an educator. Essays (and writing processes used to create them) initiated dialogue about teaching writing at the school.

The work used activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen & Punamäki, 1999) as a framework throughout the year, too. The professional development and writing workshops emphasized each classroom as a writing activity system (Russell, 2009, 2010). Teachers were asked to think about students (*subjects*), instruction (*tools*), work expectations (*outcomes*), getting the work done, (*division of labor*), subject-area genres (*rules*), and ways the young writers interacted with one another (*community*). The framework offered shared language to discuss practices across grade level and content.

**Timing of *The Crossover*.** Release of Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover* provided an unexpected and welcomed layer to the Hill Central collaboration. *The Crossover*, a young adult novel written in verse and featuring Josh Bell, tells a story of one teenage boy who is *crossing over* into adulthood. Knowing that Kwame Alexander was scheduled to visit the school to highlight *Acoustic Rooster*, the administrative team added *The Crossover* to the partnership. More specifically, Alexander’s poetic narrative fit perfectly in a language arts unit at the middle school level. Themes of *The Crossover*, it was hypothesized, would appeal to middle-grade students. The story of Josh Bell – his relationship to a twin brother and parents, to literacy and words, to being part of a team, and to finding his way in the world – fit nicely with the skills teachers were already discussing through *Community of Unity*. Cornelius Eady (2014) wrote [in](#)

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[his New York Times review](#), “The biggest surprise of “The Crossover” is that, for all the bells and whistles of a young man’s game, it is most boldly and certainly a book about tenderness.” *The Crossover* was a ‘tender’ way to hit several literacy goals in relation to writing, teaching writing, and building a writing community at the school.

*The Crossover* and *Acoustic Rooster* and *His Barnyard Band* were excellent models, as well, for teachers to jazz-up writing instruction and to tune lessons during weekly vertical team meetings. The books helped Hill Central build an interdisciplinary, cross-grade level writing community. As a teacher discussed, “The professional development this year has been more aware of our needs because *we*, the teachers, help one another to find out what *we* need next. The PD isn’t some *fly-by-night* program.” The hard work of the teachers was recognized by Kwame Alexander, too, as evident from a post on his Facebook page (04/08/14) after his visit,

There is nothing like visiting a super prepared school; where a five-minute documentary on your books and the student's reception to them airs before your presentation; where every student has read your book; where a gourmet vegan lunch awaits you after three hours of reading and talking and dancing and laughing. Such was the case yesterday at Hill Central K-8 where the K-4 read *Acoustic Rooster* and the 5-8 read *The Crossover*. It was a complete school-wide Kwame Alexander takeover and I've never felt more special. Alexander’s visit to Hill Central and the yearlong professional development collaboration was, indeed, special.

The following is partial transcript from *A Talk with Kwame Alexander* that aired on NWP radio. Editing, here, was done for clarity and to outline the specific “risks” taken in support of content area literacies through the NWP SEED grant. Young adult literature, when partnered with effective writing instruction, helps teachers to move beyond constraints of traditional pedagogy (Kaplan, 2005) as they discover new frontiers (Daniels, 2006) and are inspired to make social action (Stover & Bach, 2012).

### A Talk with Kwame Alexander

**Tanya:** We’d love to hear the story of the work. Bryan [Crandall, director of the Connecticut Writing Project at Fairfield University], I thought maybe we’d start with you. I understand that you read *Acoustic Rooster* and invited Kwame Alexander to be a Keynote for a 2013 [Writing Our Lives-Bridgeport](#) conference. Can you tell us a little bit about that event?

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**Bryan:** Yeah, I was in Central New York and met Kwame Alexander at a 2012 conference talking about *Acoustic Rooster*. I drove him to a friend’s high school and realized quickly we had a lot in common. We stayed in touch. I wrote a grant through Bank of America, and hosted a *Writing Our Lives-Bridgeport* conference. I asked the author to come and be the keynote.

The *Writing Our Lives* conference was based on work I did at Syracuse University with Dr. [Marcelle Haddix](#) (see also, Haddix, Everson, & Hodge, 2015). Such conferences are designed for youth-empowerment, and we knew that Kwame’s voice would be dynamic. He came to Connecticut and did his thing. When we learned of the SEED grant offered by the National Writing Project, we thought, “Wouldn’t it be interesting if we brought Kwame Alexander back to Connecticut, but we did it around professional development to build content literacy based off *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band*? I was already working with teachers at Hill Central in collaboration with CWP-Storrs and Jason Courtmanche. Principal Glen Worthy contacted us to say he wanted to build a stronger writing program at the school. I tapped the 12 years I had with portfolios in Kentucky and 8 years I had with research at Syracuse University and Fairfield. I explained to teachers at Hill Central about what the National Writing Project does and about teachers leading teachers and teachers teaching teachers.

We started planting seeds about writing workshop and collected data on what would they [the teachers] wanted for the following year. At the time that Kwame was arriving to Fairfield University for the *Writing Our Lives-Bridgeport* conference, the Supporting Effective Educator Development grants for High Needs Schools were announced. It seemed logical to go back to Hill Central and ask, “What if we listened to what the teachers want for professional development in the upcoming school year?” We wrote the grant together. We used the book, *Acoustic Rooster*, to guide writing instruction. It made a lot of sense. The principal was on board, Fairfield University was already on board, CWP was on board, and the teachers were on board. The missing ingredient was getting Kwame Alexander on board, so I asked, “Hey, would you be interested in a collaboration?” Of course, Kwame’s a ‘say yes’ man. We put the grant in and, lucky for us, were awarded.

**Tanya:** I wonder if Donna and Nicole could tell us more about the yearlong professional development proposal that was co-written with the Connecticut Writing Project.

**Nicole:** The year before Hill Central had the collaborative project we received support from Bryan at Fairfield, and Jen Dolan and Jason Courtmanche from Storrs. We felt, though, it was

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time for the next step. We’ve had our introduction to writer’s workshop and were in a good place. We felt it was really time to bump these efforts up. We decided we wanted to focus on content area writing, which was something we were really lacking at the school. Writing in content areas was isolated --- sort of like, you teach writing when you teach writing, you teach reading when you teach reading, you teach science when you teach science. There was no *crossover*. We wanted to spread literacy connections among content areas as one of the foci.

Another objective we had was *including all teachers*. This came from Mr. Worthy. He really helped our faculty along to show us where we needed to be. We’re still growing, of course, yet focusing on all teachers: the content area teachers, the specials teachers, the science teachers, the math teachers, and the social studies teachers, included everyone in the work. With Mr. Worthy’s whole-school vision in mind, enter Bryan to help us with a collaborative project to invest in yearlong professional development.

**Tanya:** I think we could say hello to Kwame and welcome him to the show. I think he’s here.

**Bryan:** Well, that’s actually perfect timing, Mr. Kwame Alexander, the Rooster himself. Cocka-doodle-doo, my friend. I was just about to discuss *Acoustic Rooster*.

**Kwame:** Wow! I made it! Hello!

**All:** Hello! Hi! So nice to hear from you!

**Kwame:** Thank you so much for doing this interview. I am such a big fan of the National Writing Project and, in particular, I’m a huge fan of Bryan.

**Tanya:** We have that in common.

**Kwame:** (laughing) Exactly. I wrote *Acoustic Rooster and the Barnyard Band* to teach my daughter about jazz music. I wanted to figure out a way to get her interested and knowledgeable about history and the amazing activist and artists who created the first pure form of American music. When she was a year old and she’d start to cry, I wanted to get to her stop. One time, when my wife was at the hairdresser, I didn’t know what to do. I put on Ella Fitzgerald, and she stopped. Her eyes got all big, and that was the beginning for me. That is where the idea began.

**Tanya:** Bryan was just about to tell us about how Kwame intersected with Hill Central around this idea of his book, *Acoustic Rooster*. Bryan, tell us a little more about how you built up this professional development idea.

**Bryan:** During the *Writing Our Lives* conference where Kwame came and keynoted, he read parts of *Acoustic Rooster*. He did what Kwame does best and pulled Attallah Sheppard on stage

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and challenged her to an impromptu spoken-word battle. His dynamic personality rocked the Bridgeport, Connecticut world, and I immediately went and got *Acoustic Rooster*. I read it and realized there was much potential for providing teachers instructional opportunities. Not only does it teach the history of jazz in a playful way, it’s illustrated by Tim Bowers, which is beautiful. Kwame’s language, of course, is rhythmic and fun and there’s great musical vocabulary throughout the book. There are wonderful puns like “Bee Holiday,” “Ella Finch-Gerald,” and “Duck Ellington.” In the book, they also provide a historical, jazz timeline. I thought it was perfect to introduce conversations about content area literacy that didn’t only belong to the language arts classroom. Literacy belongs to all teachers.

Administrators at Hill Central and I got the idea of buying *Acoustic Rooster* for every teacher in the building. We began having a conversation with ourselves that asked, “What if we had an acoustic takeover? What if we began thinking about digital acoustics and writing our own 21<sup>st</sup> century stories? How would we use the sounds that we learned from Kwame’s excellent writing and the sounds we hear from musical instruments to put together digital stories? How might we teach our students to do this, too?” Kwame’s text was perfect to accomplish this. I think Kwame should give us lines from the text. Nobody does it better than he does.

**Kwame:** Oh, way to put me on the spot. I love it! But Bryan, how perfect is this? Jazz music is all built around improvisation and riffing. It is sort of ‘being in that moment’ and sort of ‘taking off’ and running with it. I think that’s another thing *Acoustic Rooster* teaches children – they should be willing to take risks. The reward on the other side can be phenomenal. *Acoustic Rooster* doesn’t win the talent show, but we know he has the world’s best friends. They’re able to develop and build something bigger based around that friendship and based on their own amazing skills.

*Acoustic Rooster sat outside strumming his bass guitar,  
he practiced jazz all summer long so he could be a star.  
Now every year about this time, farmer announces plans,  
to hold a barnyard talent show and find the farm’s best band.  
Acoustic Rooster asks to join Thelonius Monkey’s crew,  
but farmer’s rules prevented that because they lived at the zoo.  
Mules Davis led an orchestra that features three cool cats,  
Ella Finch-Gerald had a trio, but Rooster couldn’t scat.*



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Then, of course you have to go buy the book to read the rest. Oh yeah!

**Bryan:** This is a good opportunity to riff and syncopate off my buddy. In our professional development, we wanted the riffing that Acoustic Rooster and his friends did musically for this contest. We asked ourselves if riffing was something we could teach teachers to do, too. Content area teachers often work within different silos at their school, away from the other parts of the barn, the farm, and the yard. We wondered if we could align a project together that would build upon talents of everybody in the barnyard and at the school.

During the first year, the one thing that was evident was teachers were invested in building a writing community. They had a lot of effective writing practices in place and their administration was totally behind them. The kids were starting to get on board, too. When I reflected on my research and teaching experiences in Kentucky, I realized the most important thing for reaching better outcomes in writing was to build a stronger *community* of writers. We have writing *tools* and we have *rules* that we follow. We *divide the labor* up. But the most important thing that brings all of us together is that writers write for other writers.

I contacted Eric Komoroff of [Community of Unity](#), and asked him came to visit the school. He introduced teachers to his philosophy that we all have a *song* within us. We don't know what that song is until we've lived a bit of life. Our job as educators, then, should be to help young people (and our colleagues) find their songs within. Komoroff says a song is an individual's unique purpose for living a life. To get there, we need to focus on skills: a sense of humor, self-awareness, responsibility, lots of self-esteem, empathy for other people, integrity, and having a focus. Administrators and I introduced these words to the teachers and asked, “Why don't we write about these skills? As a teacher, what means the most to you? Sense of humor? Having a focus? Having empathy for others?” We gave teachers a writing prompt that asked them to choose one of the life skills to define (see Appendix, *Sparking a Personal Essay*). We let the teachers riff. They *syncopated* off the words in a variety of ways. Some of the art teachers drew their words out. The music teachers began to sing them out. A few history teachers took a historical approach on those words. That's when we began singing a song within the school. The goal was to listen to the writing and/or the wisdom of our colleagues and their particular content-area expertise. Teachers began teaching *Acoustic Rooster* to every kid at Hill Central, but each teacher approached the book from their content areas. This made it really fascinating because it unified the whole crew of students, teachers, and administrators together.

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Teachers reported that they wanted to know more about teaching persuasive writing. They wanted to know what do we do with the Common Core States Standards of speaking and listening? They wanted to learn 21<sup>st</sup> century tools like digital stories. We wondered: how can we take our kids’ writing and turn it into an essay that brings in visuals and music, sort of like the acoustics of the barn? Our goal was to figure out a way to digitize the acoustics of the school as we made a community of writers. The teachers came together teaching writing. The professional development circulated around that. We bought digital recorders, invested in teachers to go to conferences so that they could build teacher-leadership within the school. We tapped Hill Central’s already-aligned vertical content teams. Teachers collaborated together every Friday. We had *Acoustic Rooster*. We began to build the community, and spring was coming for Kwame’s visit. Still, we were looking for a way to celebrate writing with the upper classman. I knew Kwame was coming out with *The Crossover* and wondered if it would be possible to get copies of the book as soon as it went into print. Hill Central already hosted a phenomenal poetry event each spring – a spoken word event – that I knew would couple nicely with Kwame’s new YA novel. I’m sure Donna can speak more about that.

**Donna:** Oh, I would love to! If you really wanted to talk about an event that gives me goose bumps, it would be this one for sure. The poetry slam is a tradition we started at Hill Central four years ago. We call it “Voices of Hill Central” and it’s our spoken word event. We were inspired by a group of young men and women in the movie *Louder Than a Bomb*. It was actually put together by Oprah Winfrey. They are a relevant spoken word team, and we brought the video to school and shared it with the kids. From there, it kind of took on a life of its own. We decided to attempt a poetry slam for ourselves.

The most unlikely kids – the one you wouldn’t think would have been or had the courage to give themselves a voice publically – signed up for the event. They wrote unbelievable poems. They were able to get up and slam the poems with such ease. Every year, there is not a dry eye in the audience. It’s the proudest day for us. Even for what some call ‘low achieving kids’ – the ones that are seen without ‘having a voice’ socially or academically, have become shining stars at the event.

We involve community members, too. We invite the mayor. We have district supervisors. We obviously invite individuals like Bryan and Attallah to come to our school to support the kids. Bryan said to me one day, “Thanks for letting us be part of this tradition” and I said,

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“You’re not a part of it, you’re the heart of it.” Because that is exactly what happened, Bryan and Attallah hadn’t even made it through the door on the day of the slam and the kids were running up and shouting out heart wrenching, slamming poems. They couldn’t wait to share with them and get their approval. They knew that Bryan valued that type of work and they were anxious to share it with him. It was such a beautiful thing to see.

And then there was Kwame’s book *The Crossover*, which Bryan just briefly mentioned. *The Crossover* is a culturally relevant text (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It certainly inspired spoken word poetry for our students. Anybody that might have been on the fence about poetry – not sure if they were able to do it – changed after reading Kwame’s book. While studying it in their English classrooms – we put a poetry unit around it actually – the students started a [Glogster](#) campaign where they made bulletin boards relating personal connections with Kwame’s text. This digital work also brought kids on board with the slam. It was a beautiful thing. I hope long after we’re retired we can remember the slam as a legacy Nicole and I have left behind.

**Bryan:** I love the quote, “We’re not just a part of it. We’re the heart of it.” This is what the NWP has been for many. NWP is that the heart of it. It invests in teachers to do excellent work. At the heart of it has always been a mission of “Let’s invest in educators, so they can invest in kids.”

One of the things that is wonderful about meeting Kwame Alexander is that Kwame just gets it. He gets kids. He’s promotes their excellence and challenges them to be creative in ways that our curriculum does not. When I first read a pre-publication of *The Crossover*, I was like, “This is the missing link. This is the book I wish I had when I was teaching high school in Louisville, Kentucky. This is the book I wish I had while working with youth in Syracuse, NY. *The Crossover* is going to take off. It is going to be celebrated. People are going to talk about this book for a very, very long time.

I think the first 200 copies of *The Crossover* were delivered to Hill Central. We knew Kwame Alexander was coming to talk about *Acoustic Rooster*. We actually exploded *The Crossover* at the school because we wanted to tie it with the spoken word slam. I realized I needed to get this book in the hands of kids as soon as possible. The books arrived two weeks before he did. Kwame thought he was coming to Hill Central to talk about *Acoustic Rooster*, but the middle school kids read *The Crossover*, too. We put extra copies in the library, and they couldn’t keep them on the shelves. The kids were reading it, which I knew they would.

In preparation of Kwame Alexander’s visit, the administrators and I took some of the

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SEED money to host a daylong spoken-word writing workshop for the middle school students and teachers. I immediately contacted Attallah Sheppard from New London because, like Kwame, she worked with CWP-Fairfield on the *Writing Our Lives-Bridgeport* conference. I also contacted a student group called *Performing for Change*. They theatrically use poetry on our campus to communicate injustices, but they rarely left the University. I wanted their talent in schools. I asked them to perform with Attallah at the workshop. While I mentored and coached students to write poetry, Attallah and the other performers modeled what it could look like in performance forms. We took a community that already existed at Hill Central and coupled it with the kind of writing the kids really wanted to do. Through the SEED grant we conducted the workshop. We had two weeks. Kwame was coming. We also knew the slam was coming.

**Tanya:** I just cannot imagine for kids who have been told, “Yeah, their school is failing, but that they have the first 200 copies of this book.” They have Kwame Alexander, they have Attallah Sheppard, and they have these kids from Fairfield University coming to their school. This was all to celebrate them.

**Donna:** It has never been? a *normal* or acceptable practice for kids at our school to be scrambling for books in the library. I’m just going to put that out there. Fighting over books is not a typical behavior of our students. Our kids were totally engaged. We did *The Crossover* unit with the eighth grade group. They had the reputation that they were rather difficult, even more than other classes at the school. Several students challenged us all. There was not very much engagement in schoolwork. You had to see it to believe it. They couldn’t wait to get to the next chapter. They were everywhere talking about the relationship of Josh Bell and his parents. They talked about the jealousy of the brothers. They even got the poetic metaphors in the book. It was really, really a site to see.

**Tanya:** Attallah, we haven’t heard much from you. I wonder if you’d like to tell us about the work you’ve done at Hill Central.

**Attallah:** Hill Central is definitely a special school. These kids were awesome. The spoken word slam they do each year – it really does leave you with tears. It leaves you emotional. It leaves you feeling empowered. When Bryan called and said, “We’re going to do a writing conference with these kids at Hill Central. The teachers want them to write poetry,” I knew I was on board. We encourage students and tell them, “Use your voice and tell your stories before somebody else tries to tell them for you.”

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When we walked into the doors of Hill Central, the students already had their pens ready. They had their pencils out. They had their paper, and they were ready to write. As Kwame mentioned before, it is all about taking risks. There is such energy at the Hill Central, where students feel comfortable voicing what they have written for one another. The awakening is powerful. I sat on the judge panel of the spoken word slam and watched these brave kids. It's not just five or six kids. It's like 20-30 of them slamming confidently. They have their movements down. They have their words memorized. They have their facial expressions rehearsed. They understand the importance of performance and of getting the message out. It really is something magical...something that is powerful. It's inspiring for us older artists or educators. It let's us know we are doing something right.

**Donna:** Attallah's the Diva. She's been a role model to so many of our girls. You don't know how many kids have asked, "Can I have her number? Can I text her? Can I call her?" She's quite an inspiration.

**Attallah:** And they do. They text me and write me on Facebook. They send me their poetry via email and ask, "What do you think of this?" It's a continuation after that moment in time, they are still working on their craft and that's inspiration.

**Nicole:** And a lot of those students aren't necessarily the students who performed in the poetry slam. I know three or four girls, who didn't want to participate in that way, wanted us all to know that they were *Writing their Lives*.

**Bryan:** Attallah came to Hill Central to perform. I offered writing instruction lessons with the teachers at Hill Central who were also invested in the project as part of the professional development for building a community of writers at the school. We all collaborated to debut *The Crossover*. It was built out of *Acoustic Rooster* and Kwame's excellence as a writer.

**Attallah:** And the energy of it all.

**Tanya:** If we are going to talk about her Diva-ness, her strength and power, and how she inspired girls, I'd better ask for a poem. Otherwise I'm going to be in big trouble with our audience. So, Attallah?

**Attallah:** I'll share a little bit of a piece. It's called *Dreams Are Not Legal in the Ghetto* written for students who come from low-income and under-achieving areas. I wrote it to empower them to dream. (She performs)

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Dreamers,  
Realists, and  
Action Seekers must meet...

Which one are You?

Which one is Me?

Tell them, Dreamers,  
Realists and  
Action Takers must meet...

Which one are You?

Which one is Me?

The young man said,  
“Dreaming is my weapon of choice, see...  
When my dreams are narrated it’s my voice, I hear,  
Believe me,

I believe in where my dreams can take me.

So, I escape street violence willingly,  
I switch restless days for sleep-filled nights, proudly,  
Don’t think less of me because I can imagine me.

Because where I’m from,  
dreams defer frequently.”

Spotlight on the youth in the park praying freely.  
The gaze in their eyes is somewhat, sort of dreamy...  
A young voice from the sidewalk screams,

“Teach me how to dream-

Show me how to think life’s

not all that it seems.

When eyes close, I sleep,

When sleep comes, I dream,

but I’m still being told that dreams

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are illegal in the ghetto,  
so what does my future hold?”

The elders hear the childrens’ cries  
as a result of these neighborhood lies.  
They begin to struggle internally  
because they know their youth are being stifled mentally...

"If it is illegal to tell them to dream while they sleep  
that’s like telling them  
when they’re scared, don’t weep,  
when they're hungry, don’t eat.  
To not dream while you sleep leaves  
minds wandering aimlessly;  
minds taken down by  
hurtful nightmares of false truth  
because they can’t be fought off  
by innocent dreams of the youth."

Manifest destiny of dream stealers festers.  
Pulsing praises to dream catchers  
breaks under pressure  
and dream stealers reveal themselves as our leaders.  
Now, I can’t say all your troubles  
can be gone by one dream at night  
but for one moment of peace, I dream  
for one moment for me, I dream  
for one moment of what happiness can really be, I dream,  
and know that knowledge is power  
and that I can’t say dreams are illegal like some coward  
because they’re all I’ve got.

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To keep hope alive,  
Search for that gleam to  
Fight to shine your light on the world.  
Fight for your dreams.

**All:** Woo Hoo!

**Bryan:** What happened at Hill Central was sparked by the collaboration with the Hill Central community, the timeliness of *The Crossover* coming out, and the magic of bringing in creative people, like Attallah Sheppard, to the school. The SEED grant allowed us to invest in creative teachers like those at Hill Central to re-empower a disenfranchised community with multiple obstacles standing in the way. The whole thing was magical.

**Tanya:** (laughing) It’s a practical magic. It’s amazing that as each of you has spoken you’ve been completely aligned about the powerful vision of everyone involved, whether it was the kids or the teachers. And I’m going to cry. Really, I’m going to cry.

**All:** No. Nah. No. Don’t do that

**Tanya:** Let’s talk about *The Crossover* more. It seems that the timing of the book was pretty magical, too. Kwame, I’m sure our audience would love to hear more about the book and how it came to be.

**Kwame:** Well, I guess what I want to say is, first of all, I didn’t know that Attallah was on the phone call. Oh my goodness. That girl is no joke.

**Tanya:** She is no joke.

**Kwame:** And then the second thing I would say is if I just wrote books for teachers at Hill Central and Bryan, and sold them to them for the next 20 years, I could make a pretty good living. Why did I write the book? What it’s about? I think it’s a story of family, brotherhood, jealousy, first love. It’s the story of friendship...a story about betrayal. It’s a story about basketball.

I really wanted to write a book that I felt I would read when I was 12 years old and not be able to put down. For the most part, publishers told me that boys *weren’t* going to read poetry and girls *weren’t* going to read about basketball. Nobody really wanted to publish this book. And I get it. I mean, I got it, I understood. It makes sense when you think about the publishing *business*. But, I always felt like poetry is the bridge to get young people to appreciate literature and language. I think it is the easiest, sure-fire way to get kids excited about reading and writing.



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I’ve found it really interesting over the past 23 years of doing this work that nobody quite gets that. I have to convince people of that. Sure, there are people like Bryan who get it, but from my experience, he’s the exception rather than the rule.

My work has always been about trying to create a rule where teachers, librarians, parents – everybody gets it. I believe the kids already know it. Kids who aren’t reading *aren’t* reluctant: they’re just uninterested. Let’s give them something that interests them. I tried to write a book that would be interesting to boys and girls, whether they are in Hartford or Bridgeport to Sioux City, Iowa or Los Angeles, or San Antonio, or DC. I felt like I could write that kind of story. Now, how I did it? I have no idea. I don’t know how it happened. If I could duplicate the process again...Oh My Gosh, I’d do it right now.

**Tanya:** (laughing) That is the most honest, writerly answer I have ever heard.

**Kwame:** It’s the truth, sister. I do know this. I put five years of work into it to make sure (a) the poetry was good and (b) the poetry told a story and (c) that after you read it, you would be able to feel something significant. I wanted readers to feel something different than they were feeling when they started it. I knew I wanted that to happen. That was important to me.

I’ve written 18 books and I’m a pretty good gage of whether people like what I write. Writers are always concerned about whether or not people like their work. I know whether people *like* my books, or *love* my books, or *can’t stand* my books. I sent this book to friends and colleagues, and even family. My father told me he *actually* read it and he hasn’t read any of my previous 17 books. My father is a Ph.D. from Columbia and has written 16 books! But he’s not that, quote, “into poetry.” But, he couldn’t put *The Crossover* down. He was moved by it. Bryan, in all of his fervor and before it even came out, said, “*The Crossover* is the one. This book is going all the way.” What responses am I hearing from people across the country? Teachers are saying boys are fighting over the book. Teachers are saying that boys who don’t read are reading the book. Teachers are saying girls can’t put the book down. And so it really makes me feel that the work I put into the book for 5 years actually worked. What I was trying to do, it worked! That is pretty gratifying.

**Bryan:** Kwame, I’m going to jump in. Another key ingredient to achieving a written outcome is motivation of that individual. Marcelle Haddix was one of my mentors at Syracuse and wrote a piece in 2009 that argued that our kids *DO* want to write. The deficit construction placed on them, however, is a systemic problem. It’s not the kids. The kids have talents and motivations.

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The kids want to read. The kids want to learn. The problem is that in our schools we do not provide a system that captures that. We don’t promote what motivates young people.

When I read *The Crossover*, I thought, “This is the missing link.” Much of the school curriculum I taught in Kentucky was not boy-oriented. This was true for the books I saw teachers teaching in my research at Syracuse University, too. Most curricula are not interested in the lives of the young people we teach. Yet, you, through your poetry and the story of Josh Bell, brought an intellectual character to life. He has a strong mother and a strong father. They emphasize strong academics and encourage emotion. As an educator who works with kids, I’ve always wanted a book to help me unleash conversations with them.

Everyone I give it to – I think I’ve handed out 300 copies – call me and say, “You didn’t tell me it was so sad at the end.” I say, “It’s not sad. It’s beautiful. Kwame’s written a beautiful book for human beings to connect with other human beings.”

**Tanya:** Kwame, I wondered if you’d be willing to share a poem or two from the book.

**Kwame:** You know, what’s interesting is, like, when people ask you that question, you really can’t say no (laughs out loud). I’d come off like some sort of crazy dude. So, I guess the answer is yes.

**Tanya:** It was a carefully constructed question, I know.

**Kwame:** Well done. Well done. You want a poem from *The Crossover*? It’s already on the 12<sup>th</sup> printing. Bryan, I think you all have the first printing, the first edition.

**Tanya:** Holy Moses.

**Kwame:** Josh Bell

is my name  
but *Filthy McNasty* is my claim to fame.  
Folks call me that  
‘cause my game’s acclaimed,  
so downright dirty, it’ll put you to shame.  
My hair is long, my height’s tall.  
See, I’m the next Kevin Durant,  
LeBron, and Chris Paul...

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...Mom says,  
*You're dad's old school,*  
*like an ol' Chevette.*  
*You're fresh and new,*  
*like a red Corvette.*  
*Your game is so sweet, it's a crêpes suzette.*  
*Each time you play*  
*it's ALLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLL net.*

If anyone else called me  
*fresh and sweet,*  
I'd be mad as a flame.  
But I know she's only talking about my game.  
See, when I play ball,  
I'm on fire.  
When I shoot,  
I inspire.  
The hoops for sale,  
and I'm the buyer. (pp. 4-5)

**All:** Cheers. Whoops. Hoots.

**Donna:** Snap. Snap.

**Tanya:** Thank You. Kwame, can you tell me your feeling about the collaboration with the teachers and students at Hill Central?

**Kwame:** You know, when you go and do school visits, the reception you receive ranges from, “Oh, great, we have Kwame Alexander here students. It's going to be a wonderful day, to “Um, yeah, we have a poet here. Y'all put your hands together,” to “I don't really know that much about this guy so I'm just going to let him introduce himself.” I went to a school recently where the school librarian didn't even know which book won the Newbery medal this year. I thought that was crazy, but I never said anything. She was like, “Yeah, come on in.” She was nonchalant and could care less.

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I remember walking into Hill Central and seeing this homage to my work. There was this huge rooster banner and several of the teachers and me took our photograph underneath it. I remember wall art of *Acoustic Rooster* and *The Crossover* was everywhere. I remember the poems on the wall and a student reciting her poem before I could even get in the front door. I remember a whole energy around the school that said, “This is a literate and a literary school. This is a reading school. They are bound, interested and intimate with literature.” There were all kinds of signs of *Acoustic Rooster* and *The Crossover* around the school. I remember feeling really good and happy to be there.

I also remember there being basketballs in the gym and a whole bunch of excited and engaged students listening to me talk about *The Crossover* for the first time. I remember the librarian telling me that she never had students *that* interested in reading before. As a writer visiting schools, you want to feel excited and inspired to share and to offer something that you hope is meaningful. In order to do that, it really helps when you get a lot of energy and when you’re fed that energy. I remember there being a lot of energy. Hill Central was an environment of empowering community through literature. I remember that being really exciting for me.

**Tanya:** Thank you, Kwame. I think it would be nice now if Donna and Nicole could tell us about the long-term effects of Kwame Alexander’s visit on their school.

**Nicole:** The first thing to mention is not academic. It is something about how much fun it was to have Kwame Alexander at our school. The kids had such a great day and enjoyed having him. If you asked the kids now – and he was there over a year ago – “Do you remember the day Kwame came?” They respond, “Oh, yeah! We had basketballs. We read *Acoustic Rooster*.” They remember everything.

I think having an author, especially a Newbery award-winning author (now that we all know), in our school made a huge impression on the students. It’s been a long-lasting one, for sure. *The Crossover* is officially part of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum at our school. It is the perfect text to springboard our poetry slam every year in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As so many before me have said, “They just don’t want to put *The Crossover* down.” I don’t know about anyone else, but I’ve rarely walked into an 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts class where, at the end of the period, kids whine, “Awwwwwwww,” when they’re done reading it for the day.

And that’s something that we see with *The Crossover*. That’s the norm when reading that book. Kwame’s visit was a special time, a special piece, and a special day in our lives. We really

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appreciated having him there and can't thank Bryan enough for bringing him into our lives. He has definitely changed the way students *Write their Lives* at Hill Central.

**Bryan:** It was good working with teachers at Hill Central, too, even though we didn't quite finish all the objectives we wanted. State testing is affecting all of our schools, mostly in negative ways, because there is more testing time than instructional time. Our goal with the SEED grant was that we wanted to have every teacher write their own essay and create a digital story so they would have a personal model to showcase with their students as Hill Central became more of a digital environment and writing community. All the teachers did write essays and we finally made it to the computer lab, but we had to fight against the state tests. Assessment needed to use those computers for the tests. The first year I came to the school, Principal Worthy said the teachers really didn't use the Apple Lab. In year two, I showed them I-Photo, I-Movie, and PhotoBooth. Immediately they started taking pictures. They didn't know they had these machines in their school. It became like Christmas morning for them while they were learning all these digital tools. We didn't get to the full digital story creation. A few did, but most did not. Still, I feel we planted such a tremendous seed for upcoming school years.

Another testimony to the success of the yearlong program came in the creation of writers' notebooks for the school year following our SEED work. We asked art teachers to share artwork from their students. We collected a K-2, 3-5, and 6-8 piece of student work and designed a sticker that we put on composition notebooks (See Appendix, *Writing Our Lives Sticker*). Although the SEED grant ended, Kwame's influence was still there. He wasn't going to be back, but the history would go on. Writing would continue in the hands of the teachers who dedicated the time to this project all along.

Going back to a point of what Kwame said earlier, it's all about syncopation. Our yearlong work was all about making jazz. We cannot syncopate off one another or make jazz if we don't tap our own talents and teach kids to tap into the skills they already have. We can guide the songs that already exist within them. It's that easy.

**Nicole:** I want to point out that, no, the writing success didn't end there. I know Bryan mentioned that we were fighting to get time in the computer lab, but we certainly, definitely, planted a seed for what digital stories can do in the classroom. Many of the teachers were able to finish and publish their stories the following year. We're still spreading the work. I happened to be in a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class yesterday and as I was walking by I saw these two little girls in the

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hallway with the teacher’s I-Phone. I thought, “Why do they have this I-Phone in their hands?” and they’re 7...8 years old? It turned out they were actually recording a digital story. They were learning about life cycles in their classroom and each student, or little group, had to focus on a different subject. They were creating digital stories about their animal and recording it. Ms. Fontan, the current Principal at Hill Central, said she found students today from the same classroom starting looking for images that could be included in their stories. We’re definitely seeing the seed growing. It’s definitely growing.

**Tanya:** Kwame, congratulations on your very well deserved honor. Thank you so much for sharing your work with us today.

**Kwame:** Oh, you’re very welcome. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate all of the writerly love and support from everyone. I’m grateful to be a part of this conversation.

### **The *Crossover* Toward *Acoustic Possibilities* in Other K-8 Schools**

School-wide professional development on teaching writing in a K-8, high-needs school required foresight of listening to teachers about instructional challenges and a backwards-design of yearlong goals (Wiggins & McTighe). Early on, the leadership team named objectives for building a stronger writing community, developing cross-grade level and interdisciplinary writing opportunities, and supporting 21<sup>st</sup> century digital writing (Hicks, 2013) in support of student outcomes. Pairing these particular goals with a children’s book and a young adult novel written by Kwame Alexander helped to support individual pedagogies of teachers in a variety of ways, while offering effective strategies for teaching young writers of Hill Central.

**Offering literacy support for K-8 writing achievement.** In summary, the National Writing Project’s Supporting Effective Educator Development in A High Needs School grant helped CWP-Fairfield and literacy leaders at Hill Central provide 74 hours of professional development to 42 educators and 480 K-8 youth. The partnership met its goals of offering support for teaching writing across the content areas, building a school-wide writing community, and providing opportunities for using digital platforms to enhance the success of student writers at the school.

A year after the collaboration, the investment of instructional practices can still be viewed throughout the school. Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover* is now standard curriculum in the middle school and used for launching the annual poetry slam. *Acoustic Rooster* continues to be a favorite for teachers and students at the school. The Hill Central community has extended its

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exploration of digital tools in support of student writers, as well. As noted, the administrative leaders recently came upon 2nd graders using their teacher’s I-Phone. They heard the young writers recording their informative essays after partnering to do research, and writing about life cycles of frogs, seasonal changes, trees, and other selected themes. Young writers referenced text, collected images for essays, and composed digital stories that were debuted for parents, teachers, and peers at the school. They used digital acoustics to inform and educate an audience.

The yearlong work reestablished the importance of designing professional development with input from teachers. Sharing *Acoustic Rooster and His Barnyard Band* and *The Crossover* by Kwame Alexander was innovative and rewarding – it put teachers on the ‘same page’ and validated their professional expertise. The model texts initiated ongoing conversations about effective practices for teaching writing across grade levels and content areas. Inviting the author to the school, too, helped enhance a writing community that was desired. The goal was to support literacy growth through innovative, collaborative instruction. Kwame Alexander brought magical acoustics to the school and helped them to *crossover* towards success. The *risks* taken brought many awards, and the NWP SEED grant made it possible.

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*Kwame Alexander* is a poet, novelist, mover and shaker who has published over 18 books (and is preparing for more)

*Attallah Sheppard* is a spoken word poet, youth activist, and teacher from New London, Connecticut.

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