

## **Problematizing Literature Circles as Forums for Discussion of Multicultural and Political Texts**

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*Literature circles are a time-tested instructional strategy, but they are not without limitations when critical literacy is the goal.*

In 1989, Eeds and Wells promoted a new strategy for engaging students in literary texts: literature circles. They found that literature circles—typically defined as small, student-led discussions of student-selected texts (Daniels, 2002)—provided egalitarian, student-centered spaces for "grand conversations" that contrasted sharply with traditional teacher-led recitations, or "gentle inquisitions," that forwarded authoritative interpretations of texts' meanings.

Since Eeds and Wells's (1989) study, scholars have praised literature circles for enabling students to select and discuss texts that are of genuine interest to them and for moving beyond instructional practices traditionally used in English language arts (Daniels, 2002; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Short & Pierce, 1990). The widespread enthusiasm for literature circles as an instructional strategy is not surprising given empirical studies confirming that they can lead to increased academic achievement. For instance, Ain-Iasi (1995) found that higher level cognitive growth occurs in interpretive, student-led literature discussions to a greater extent than in teacher-led discussions. Likewise, Sweigart (1991) established that participation in literature circles improves comprehension. Furthermore, Blum, Lipsett, and Yocom (2002) determined that literature circles bolster students' academic problem-solving and practical decision-making skills.

Despite the enthusiasm for literature circles, scholarship has highlighted some of their complex and thorny aspects by considering how readers' responses to texts are driven by

and located within a host of social practices. For instance, several studies have found that literature circles are intensely power-laden spaces in which students position one another socially in terms of ability level (Allen, Moller, & Stroup, 2003) and gender (Clarke, 2006; Evans, 1996). Other studies established that literature circle discussions sometimes reinforce stereotypes rather than engage students in democratic practices (Alvermann, 1995; Orellana, 1995), calling into question egalitarian assumptions about this instructional approach.

Our goal in this article is to highlight further complexity with respect to literature circles, specifically when they are used as forums for engaging students in discussion of multicultural or political texts. We describe a six-week literature *circle* unit implemented in DeAnn's (the third author's) classroom, focusing on one group of students who discussed Dorothy Allison's (1993) autobiographical novel about class hierarchies, *Bastard Out of Carolina*—a text DeAnn imagined her students might identify with, because they themselves came from a socioeconomically polarized community. We present data suggesting that, by criteria used previously to judge the success of literature discussion, this literature circle was successful. We highlight several key moments that point to the limitations of literature circles as they are typically implemented for engaging students in the full critical depth of multicultural and political texts—even texts that seem relevant to students' lived experiences. Finally, we offer suggestions for rethinking literature circle pedagogy that aim toward offering students a more nuanced and robust experience with multicultural and political texts.

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## Background on the Study

Data discussed in this article come from a larger ethnographic study of 90 tenth-grade students' literacy practices. Amanda and Megan (the first and second authors) were researchers and participant observers in DeAnn's classroom.

### *Context*

The study took place at Creekside Junior/Senior High School (names of places and participants are pseudonyms), a school located five miles outside of a large city in the 'U.S. northeast. Creekside is a predominantly white school that serves two primarily middle and working class communities, Mapleton and Venice, and draws from their two elementary schools.

Both outsiders and community insiders perceived Mapleton to be rich and Venice poor. Creekside makes a concerted effort to dispel this perception, in part by organizing an annual overnight retreat for fourth to sixth graders designed to unify students from the two elementary schools. Interviews with students in our larger study suggested that after attending this retreat, some believed that social class differences between the two towns were mere myth. One student explained the retreat was where "Mapleton and Venice people come together, and I think that's where everyone started to notice that it's really not that different." Another common belief voiced among students at Creekside was that people in the two towns were really all the same—with the exception of people who lived in upper Mapleton, who they perceived to be very wealthy. For instance, one student said, "Everyone knows that if you live on top of the hill, you're richer and you're allowed to act snobby, and it's just accepted." As these comments suggest, a primary means of coping with social class tensions in this

community was to downplay class differences rather than to look for more nuance within the perceived binary of the two towns.

### *The Literature Circle Unit*

DeAnn chose to enact a literature circle unit to give students a choice in their reading and to introduce them to texts with resonant political, social, and cultural perspectives. Because few such texts were approved for general classroom use at her school, a literature circle unit seemed a logical choice; students were able to select any book from the list of 24 texts that DeAnn provided, as long as the choice was approved by a parent or guardian. Students selected their top five texts, with the result that most were placed in groups where one of their top three selections was read.

Groups met twice weekly for approximately 30 minutes per session. Students were encouraged to develop unique and even personal interpretations but were asked to maintain a focus on the text itself rather than using their reading as a springboard for relating tangential stories of their lived experiences. In the interest of this goal, students were assigned rotating roles for each meeting based on Daniels' (2002) model (e.g., "discussion director," "literary luminary," "connector"). Each week students were given class credit for completing "role sheets." For instance, the "literary luminary," who was expected to locate and discuss the author's use of literary devices, was given a role sheet with a chart for documenting literary devices, recording relevant quotations and explaining the significance of the devices in conveying meaning.

Groups often moved through a recitation of the work they completed for their roles within the first 10 or 15 minutes of their meetings and then engaged in impromptu discussion of their thoughts and questions on the text or became distracted by off-topic

discussions. Although the literature circle discussions were primarily student centered and directed, DeAnn, Amanda, or Megan joined each group at various points during the unit with the goal of monitoring group progress, keeping students on task, and encouraging students to elaborate on their interpretations.

### *Bastard Out of Carolina*

Given the class tensions in the community, DeAnn chose several texts that addressed and critiqued class hierarchies, including *Bastard Out of Carolina*. The novel is the story of Ruth Ann "Bone" Boatwright, who is the "illegitimate" daughter of Anney Boatwright, a member of the hard-drinking, rough-hewn Boatwright family. Pregnant at age 15 and widowed with two daughters soon after, Anney wanted nothing more than to support her children and provide them with a good home. Anney had high hopes for the future when she met Glen Waddell, a man from a middle class family. However, these hopes disintegrated when Glen was unable to find steady employment and began sexually abusing Bone. Caught in a cycle of poverty and abuse, Anney found herself unable to leave Glen despite the toll that her marriage took on her daughter.

*Bastard Out of Carolina* is a text that invites many critical readings but is most commonly recognized as presenting a little-told story of social class in the United States. Allison is widely cited and even canonized as a "working-class writer" (Coles & Zandy, 2006). Likewise, much literary criticism of *Bastard Out of Carolina* focuses on Allison's honest and complex depiction of the experience of poverty and the shame associated with being labeled "white trash" (Bouson, 2001; Friedel, 2005). Indeed, Allison (1988) explained that a goal in her writing was to shed light on the myth of the "hardworking," "noble," "honorable" poor and to illuminate class experiences that are often hidden or misunderstood.

### *The Focal Group*

We became interested in the group that selected *Bastard Out of Carolina* because its discussions appeared unusually text focused in comparison with other groups in the class. Like most of the other groups, this group was quick to move through role-based recitations, but following this, the students rarely required prompting to stay on task. This group became even more compelling as we read the transcripts of their discussions. We found that while their primary topic of conversation was the seemingly relevant theme of social class, their discussions did not take up textual invitations to critically examine social class hierarchies and inequalities. Against this backdrop, we chose to conduct a close analysis of this group.

The group of students that selected *Bastard Out of Carolina* included four white students. Rebecca lived in Venice, while Kari, Jess, and Jake lived in Mapleton. Based on their parents' occupations and levels of education, Rebecca, Kari, and Jess could be considered working class, while Jake could be considered middle class. However, using a more nuanced and fluid definition of social class that takes into consideration tastes, dispositions, attitudes, consumption practices, and access to institutional power (Bettie, 2003), we noted that Rebecca, Kari, and Jess performed a variety of different working class identities.

For instance, our individual interviews and ethnographic observations of the focal students led us to see Rebecca as most closely identifying with the traditional working class (Willis, 1977), preferring not to participate in school-based activities and dressing in black sweatshirts and men's jeans most days—clothing choices associated with rejection of popular, middle class culture in this school. Kari also identified herself as working class but said that she saw her position in the school and community as one of a typical girl who got along with everyone—except students from upper Mapleton, who "stay in their cliques and

have their certain groups of friends." Finally, Jess performed a middle class identity dressing in preppy, athletic clothing associated with middle class norms in the community, actively participating in a number of athletic and extracurricular activities, and maintaining nearly exclusively middle class friendships. In short, the students in this group represented a nuanced cross-section of social class diversity in the two towns.

## Method

We conducted two analyses in our investigation of the focal group. The first aimed to determine the overall productivity of the discussions based on criteria described in the literature as useful for judging the quality of literary discussion. The second helped us examine the content of the students' discussions.

### *Productivity of Discussions*

We transcribed our recordings of the group's discussions, separating text-related talk from talk unrelated to the reading. We divided text-related talk into "utterances," which Eeds and Wells (1989) define as "a remark or group of remarks which could be reduced to an essence which we later assigned a more general category" (p. 8). Next, we coded all utterances for response type, with the goal of judging the interpretive quality of students' responses to literature. Table 1 provides an overview of each coding category, which we adapted from Bean and Rigoni (2001) and Newell (1996).

Following Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), all text-related student questions were coded for uptake and authenticity, two factors found to be indicators of dialogic, substantively engaged student talk. Uptake was evidenced by clear integration of interpretations and ideas

voiced in the preceding discussion. An authentic question was one without a predetermined answer.

### *Content of Discussions*

In our analyses of discussion content, we separated students' text-related discussions into episodes—what Lewis and Ketter (2004) define as "a series of turns that all relate to the same topic or theme" (p. 123)—which we then coded for the major themes that emerged.

### Findings

#### *Promising Discussions*

Of the 1,674 total utterances over the course of the 12 literature circle discussions, students' utterances accounted for 1,448 or 86.5%, with 13.5% provided by the teacher and researchers. Of the student utterances, 1,033 (71.3%) were text related. The majority (50.9%) of these were coded as "interpretive," as opposed to "evaluative" (16.5%), "descriptive" (14.8%), "lived-world associative" (7.7%), or "intertextual" (7.7%) (see Table 1). Only four of the 80 student questions were coded as inauthentic (5%). The majority (51.2%) were also coded as containing evidence of uptake.

These findings confirm not only that the students in this group spent most of their time talking about the text, but also that their discussions aimed toward making real meaning of characters and situations rather than simply summarizing or describing events in the text. Likewise, these findings establish that students rarely used the text as a springboard for discussion of tangential lived-world anecdotes or of other texts. Further, the findings reveal that students listened to one another and posed questions that were both genuine and grounded in issues that emerged organically in the literature circle. [Table 1]



Finally, an analysis of teacher and researcher participation in this group suggests that the students determined the interpretive, text-based focus of their discussions themselves. We found that not only did teacher and researcher utterances account for a relatively small percentage of talk in this group, but a majority (76.1%) did not aim to redirect or challenge students' ideas. Instead, the teacher and researchers asked for clarification of or elaboration on interpretations or simply supported participation. In other words, teacher and researcher participation may have increased the total amount of time spent on interpretation but did not direct the students toward their interpretive responses. Therefore, this literature circle could be characterized as productive and successful in terms of meeting both DeAnn's expectations for text-focused discussion and previously established criteria for successful literary discussion.

### *Problematic Interpretations*

Despite the seeming productivity of students' discussions, our second level of analysis provided a different perspective on the success of the literature circle.

In our thematic coding of the data, we found that 36 of the 90 text-related episodes (40%) contained talk related to social class, including tastes, dispositions, attitudes, consumption practices, income, occupation, educational attainment, or access to power structures. Although other themes (such as sexuality, sibling relationships, self-esteem, and gender roles) also emerged in our coding, social class was the most prominent. Further, most other themes overlapped with social class in multiple episodes.

As noted previously, social class seemed a logical theme to emerge, given the content of the novel and the relevance of social class to students in this community. However, rather than taking up the critical perspectives on social class that many critics believe Allison's

novel invites (Bouson, 2001; Friedel, 2005), all four students in this group most often constructed interpretations of the characters that reinforced rather than challenged common storylines and myths about social class in the United States. For the purposes of this article we illustrate this finding by focusing on just one such interpretation forwarded primarily by Kari and Rebecca, who were notably the two students in the group who most strongly identified as working class. These two students interpreted the Boatwrights as "normal," hard-working people, rather than as a family that had experienced systemic oppression over the course of several generations.

Throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina* characters repeatedly refer to the Boatwrights as "white trash," a label that is depicted as painful for Anney and Bone. Rebecca and Kari discussed the meaning of this label, concluding that it was inappropriate given that they saw the Boatwrights as "normal":

Rebecca: People always criticize—call people "white trash" and everything like that.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca: And it's kind of fun to read about to see what they actually mean by white trash.

Because really they [the Boatwrights] don't seem like that.

Megan: What do you think they seem like if you're not thinking of white trash? Like, what do you think white trash means?

Rebecca: I think it's more of—I don't think they're white trash. I think white trash is more like people who are dirty.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca: Who can't take care of themselves hygienically or something like that. But I mean—I think they are just normal people, just minimal wage-makers basically. They can get food, just not the greatest food. They have a house to live in. They have clothes on their back.

Kari: Yeah. I just think they do what they can.

Rebecca: I mean they do what they can. I don't think they're white trash.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca reserved the term "white trash" for people who lack basic necessities and the ability to maintain hygiene—people with whom she likely had little experience in Mapleton or Venice. Constructing an interpretation of the Boatwrights as a normal family seems a logical, personal response to this text given the belief on the part of many students in this community that class distinctions do not exist. The girls' response to the term may also be located, in part, in its frequent use in the community. Rebecca and Kari may have viewed unpacking this term and pointing out that being poor does not make one "white trash" as important given that, as working class students, they were at risk of being labeled with this term.

Although Rebecca and Kari's response takes the text seriously and reflects their lived experiences, it also runs counter to some of the critical elements of this text. Their response positions the Boatwrights as classless, hard-working Americans who fit within the mythology of the noble poor. As Allison (1988) herself stated, this is a mythology that she hoped to deconstruct through her writing.

In other instances, Kari and Rebecca positioned the Boatwrights as "normal" by contrasting them with "high class" families, which they characterized as judgmental,

deceptive, and abusive. For example, in a discussion about Glen's motivations, Kari and Rebecca deduced that his tendency toward abuse was related to his upbringing in what they saw as a wealthy family. The girls outlined general characteristics of wealthy people that they believed make them more likely to be abusive:

Kari: I think [abuse] might be even worse in a high class, because a lot of high class people like to make it out like their family's perfect, like they're so much better than everyone else, and I think they hide it so much more than—I think it might be worse.

Rebecca: ...People who have money become kind of stuck up with themselves most of the time and think they're better than everyone else-

Kari: Yeah, and they have a standard to live up to because everyone—

Rebecca: They're high maintenance.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca: I don't like people like that.

This negative construction of wealthy people as primarily interested in keeping up the appearance of perfection and superiority was one that Kari and Rebecca continued to draw upon to bolster their interpretation of the Boatwrights as a normal, good family:

Rebecca: Mama's family is better.

Kari: Yeah. I think they get along more and I think that Glen's family, if they had a problem, I think they'd hide it. They want to seem like they're perfect.

Rebecca: And they expect too much out of each other.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca: And Mama's family doesn't, like, try to expect them to do anything.

Kari: Yeah.

Rebecca: They make better decisions and don't criticize people like Glen's family does.

Amanda: Can you think of an example of when they made a better decision?

Rebecca: If it was Glen's kid stealing something, I think he'd...

Kari: I think he would have been totally embarrassed.

Rebecca: Yeah.

Kari: I think Mama was just like, it happens. She's more understanding about it.

Rebecca: Or when they're at the party and Glen's sister's kids are making fun of the girls—

Kari: And they're all calling them trash and stuff and talking about their car.

Rebecca: And Glen just kind of walked away from the situation. I think if it was the other way around, I think those girls would have went and got someone.

In this excerpt, Kari and Rebecca directly compared the Boatwrights to Glen's family.

Echoing the previous excerpt, the girls interpreted members of Glen's family as perfectionists who hide their problems, are overly critical, hold family members to unfair expectations, make poor decisions, are embarrassed by their children, and ignore bad behavior. By contrast, the girls interpreted the Boatwrights as people who get along well, accept one another, make good decisions, and properly parent their children. In other words, the girls interpreted them as good, normal people.

Kari and Rebecca's interpretation of differences between the Boatwrights and the Waddells, between those who are normal and those who are wealthy, again seems a logical, personal

response related to their experiences with social class in their community. Most of the people in Mapleton and Venice were neither very wealthy nor very poor. Therefore, students in this community had limited experience with wide-ranging social class diversity. The most noticeable social class difference perceived by students was between people from upper Mapleton, who many saw as wealthy, and people living in the rest of the community. Given the push from the school to downplay social class differences among middle and working class people in the community, Kari and Rebecca may have felt more comfortable pointing out differences between the wealthy and others rather than noting more nuanced differences between shades of middle and working class.

However, while reasoned and consistent with the girls' experiences in this community, this interpretation is limited in the depth with which it considers critical invitations from the text. Although the Boatwrights are depicted by Allison as a loving, loyal family with many positive attributes, they are also portrayed as having experienced many painful consequences of institutional oppression. Given Allison's (1988) desire to represent an authentic picture of poverty and oppression that is rarely seen in literature, the girls' contention that the Boatwrights are representative of a "normal" American family seems to evade an important aspect of the text related to social class hierarchies. Further, although there is certainly merit in Kari and Rebecca's desire to establish that being poor does not make one abusive, we argue that the girls missed an opportunity to examine associations between abuse, generational poverty, and oppression. Such an examination could have led them to consider how Glen's abuse of Bone may have continued because Anney was not financially able to leave Glen or gain access to the legal institutions necessary to pursue a divorce. Likewise, a critical examination of this text might have led the girls to consider whether Glen's turn toward abuse

was associated not only with what they considered to be his wrong-thinking family, but also in part with his frustration at his inability to support his family through a well-paying job.

Rebecca and Kari's interpretation of *Bastard Out of Carolina* represents a telling personal response associated with their experiences in a socioeconomically divided community. However, it also exemplifies the limitations of personal response in a literature circle for fleeting the goals of a critical multicultural pedagogy.

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## Discussion

The literature circle unit aimed to engage students in discussions of current, relevant political and multicultural texts. Literature circles seemed a logical space for this instruction not only because they are designed to provide students with greater interpretive freedom than occurs in teacher-led contexts, but also because the texts selected for this unit were approved for literature circles but not for general classroom use. Overall, the discussion that occurred in the focal group could be characterized as dialogic, interpretive, and engaged—a successful literature circle discussion by many standards. We argue, however, that despite the logic of this instructional approach and the seeming success of the discussions, DeAnn's goals for critically engaging her students with a relevant novel were actually subverted, given that the focal students primarily interpreted *Bastard Out of Carolina* in ways that reinforced their status quo stances toward social class.

The problems DeAnn faced in this unit illuminate a broader issue relevant to the use of literature circles for teaching multicultural and political texts. Literature circles, as they are

typically enacted with a basis in experiential models of literary response (see, e.g., Probst, 2004; Rosenblatt, 1995), do not provide challenges to students' initial personal responses or an impetus for students to experiment with alternative stances. Thein, Beach, and Parks (2007) argue that helping students "develop perspective-taking as a habit of mind through which they acknowledge, respect, [and] understand...alternative perspectives" is a primary goal in critical instruction of multicultural literature (p. 59). Additionally, a number of scholars have questioned an experiential or aesthetic model of response for engaging students in multicultural literature, contending that without troubling students' initial personal responses to these texts, readers tend to dismiss characters with whom they feel they cannot relate (Beach, 1997; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1997), over-identify with characters with whom they share little in common (Lewis, 2000), or construct counter narratives that resist political messages (Dressel, 2005).

Even when students are presented with multicultural or political texts that feature characters with whom they share broad cultural or demographic traits, teachers cannot assume that students will be able to relate fully with or take up critical stances toward those characters (Brooks, 2006). The problematic interpretations made by Kari and Rebecca support these findings. Although Kari and Rebecca are both white, female, and from what could be described as the working class, this cultural and demographic similarity on its own did not sufficiently support the girls in understanding Anney and Bone's nuanced class positions or the critical political messages Allison hoped to convey in her text.

In sum, if teachers choose to enact literature circles in their purest form—with no teacher interference and free choice of topics for discussion—then students cannot be



expected to take up any specific stances or perspectives toward texts. Moreover, if teachers want students to move beyond initial personal responses to a text, a typical literature circle is not likely an appropriate space for this work. [Table 2]

### Rethinking Literature Circle Pedagogy

Our goal is not to advise that literature circles are without worth in literacy classrooms. Rather, we propose that revisions to traditional literature circle pedagogy are warranted for teaching multicultural texts.

Although scholars have previously suggested that students be assigned literature circle roles as "training wheels" for learning to participate in literature discussions (Daniels, 2002), we argue that roles such as "discussion leader" and "literary luminary" do not provide sufficient scaffolding for teaching students to engage in critical discussions of multicultural and political texts. Instead, one useful modification to literature circles is providing students with discussion tools—based in scholarship on critical pedagogy and critical multiculturalism—that elicit critical rather than personal responses (see Table 2).

Our examination of this literature circle has also led us to reconsider the role of the teacher in literature circles. Some scholars advise that literature circles be entirely student run, assuming that without adult interference, students will have more academic freedom and personal agency to respond (e.g., Daniels, 2002). Others suggest that no literature circle is devoid of power hierarchies and that excluding teachers by no means guarantees that students will speak freely (Clarke, 2006). In the current study, teacher and researcher participation in the literature circle encouraged students' exploration of interpretations but did not overtly challenge their perspectives. Such challenges could have been useful in

helping students to take up more fully the interpretive and critical depth of this text.

Therefore, we argue that when the instructional goal of a literature circle is a critical examination of a text, more—not less—teacher guidance may be warranted. In this same vein, we encourage scholars to consider undertaking additional research to investigate the effectiveness of revised student roles and increased teacher participation in literature circles involving multicultural texts.

Literature circles are an important element of the literacy teacher's instructional repertoire. They serve as key spaces for students to gain agency and authority in constructing interpretations of texts. If teachers want to engage students meaningfully in multicultural and political texts, literature circles can be a worthwhile option. However, they require careful consideration and preparation if they are to be implemented in a manner that pushes students beyond the personal and toward the critical.

### Take Action!

In order to effectively teach multicultural and political texts in literature circles, teachers may need to provide more—not less—guidance, scaffolding, and modeling. We suggest that teachers join student-directed literature circles, participating in the following ways:

1. Model productive participation by using nonjudgmental language ("I wondered...", "I noticed...", "I wanted to know more about...") and employ tentative thinking and language ("I can see several sides..", "I've changed my mind about...", "I'm not sure what I think about...", "I have questions about...").
2. Listen carefully and then ask authentic questions to prompt elaboration ("Can you tell us more about why you don't see the Boatwrights as white trash?"), seek clarification ("I wonder what you mean when you use the term 'white trash'?"), or request detail and support from the

text ("I wonder what kinds of actions or language on the part of Glen's family led you to think they were secretive?").

3. Encourage consideration of alternative perspectives by soliciting them from students ("What are some viewpoints a reader might take on this?"), voicing various prototypical stances ("Some people might say...", "Another way to think about this that we haven't considered is..."), or imagining characters' stances ("If you were Reese, how would you feel about...").

4. Challenge students' use of status quo language by critiquing the discourse but not the intention ("What might others believe you are conveying when you use the term 'normal'? Is that what you mean to convey? Would another term better suit your intentions?").

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**Table 1 Summary of Students' Text-Related Utterances in Each Response Category**

Response category	Primary purpose	No. of utterances	Utterances as a percentage of total ( <i>n</i> = 1,448)	Utterances as a percentage of text related ( <i>n</i> = 1,033)
Interpretive	Make sense of, speculate about, or make predictions about the actions and motives of characters or events in the text	526	36.3%	50.9%
Evaluative	Express a personal judgment about a character or situation in the text or about the text on the whole	170	11.7%	16.5%
Descriptive	Retell plot-related events	153	10.6%	14.8%
Lived-world associative	Make tangential associations between the text and one's lived experiences	80	5.5%	7.7%
Intertextual	Make connections between the text and other texts	24	1.7%	2.3%
Miscellaneous	The utterance occurred within the context of talk about the text, but was either inaudible or incomplete	80	5.5%	7.7%

**Table 2 Possible Student Roles for Literature Circle Discussions of Multicultural Texts**

Role	Description	Example in discussion of <i>Bastard Out of Carolina</i>
Problem poser	Locates and poses key problems or dilemmas that arise in the text for which there are no easy answers	The problem poser might ask why many women in the novel stay in unhappy or unhealthy relationships. What difficulties would these women face in trying to leave? What might be some consequences of leaving? What would be gained or lost?
Perspective taker	Tries on and represents the perspective of a character whose actions are problematic or confusing	Anney dresses the girls in their best clothes to visit Glen's middle class family, only to be treated poorly and called names. The perspective taker might try on the perspective of Glen to consider how his relationship with his family influences his interactions with Anney and the girls.
Difference locator	Points out differences between groups of people represented in the text, paying attention to how they are constructed and maintained and noticing "differences within difference" (Grobman, 2004)	The Boatwrights are viewed negatively in their community and labeled as white trash. The difference locator might notice that the men are granted a degree of respect that the women are not for being tough and dangerous—leading to an exploration of intersections between social class and gender.
Stereotype tracker	Locates and "talks back" to dominant discourses or stereotypes that the author evokes intentionally or unintentionally in the language and structure of the text (Enciso, 1997)	The stereotype tracker might point out and discuss ways that even as Allison hopes to dismantle the myth of the noble poor, she also forwards stereotypes about the Southern poor as white trash.
Critical lens wearer	Considers the assigned reading through the lens of a relevant critical literary theory (e.g., feminism, Marxism, new historicism) (Appleman, 2009)	Drawing on feminist theory, the critical lens wearer might consider Anney's actions in prostituting herself to buy food when Glen is unemployed. Is this empowering for Anney or degrading? Does this say something about Anney's sexuality? Her view of marriage or parenthood?