Our goals are to:

1. Analyze the language and transform the frameworks we use to teach, talk about, and measure children.

2. Develop three lenses through which we examine relations within our profession. The lenses are at first glance heavily intellectual, but they have been shaped by decades of engagements with schoolchildren.

3. Apply the three lenses to professional discussions about our work in the class, in STEP, and in the broader society, all with an eye to making the lives of children and teachers more workable, whatever problems they have, whatever problems we have given to them. All discussions should lead back to the lives of children and teachers in classrooms.

This class is about the local level politics of education. By local we mean the stuff in your head and the words in your vocabulary. Over the next ten years, you are going to meet an amazing array of students and situations, and you are going to have to think and talk about them with words borrowed from other situations, some with a long ugly history, some tied to lovely dreams about how things should be. The words we are given to understand children often hinder our efforts to make things better and to live our dreams. Class bias, racism, sexism, and homophobia are as much problems of the tongue as of political economy. And twentieth century schooling has brought us new and mostly bad words for the conversation. Aptitude, ability, intelligence, motivation, skill, and success are all easy to use, easy even to measure, but all misleading as well. The last set has been doing us in, and in educational settings they are stand-ins for the jobs done by more traditional devils like race, class, and gender. They get in our way when we are thinking about children.

"...all one’s life one struggles toward reality, finding always but new veils. One knows everything in one’s mind. It is the words, children of the occasion, that betray."  
William Butler Yeats 1932

You will hopefully leave this class with three places to stand in relation to most educational struggles. With three ways of thinking at your disposal, you should be able to analyze and transform the influence of received categories on your activities as teachers not just in classrooms, but in faculty meetings, policy discussions, and teacher gossip rounds. As teachers, you will get a daily education on how to think about what is wrong with kids. On a good day, you will find ways of excusing them for their problems. These are the first two places to stand, and we hope to develop, with your help, a third place that allows us to rethink the first two.

The first instinct is to blame the kids for everything, sympathetically, of course, but that they wear
the problems of their upbringing makes them difficult to deal with. This stand is rampant in schools.

The second instinct is to blame society, which is a more enlightened approach, but not of much help. It is not too welcome in teacher rooms, and there is a reason why. At the very least, it is hard to find “society”, and worse, talking about it usually leaks back into blaming those with the fewest resources.

The third vantage point (in no way instinctual) transforms the first two by putting US—teachers, educational researchers, policy pontificators, funding agencies, hiring agencies: helpers and hurters of all kinds—back into the picture. The unit of analysis in the study of children, and in any engagement with social problems, is not just the people in trouble, but the people who are in various ways misunderstanding and often prospering on the troubles. We are all involved, not because we want to be, and not because we understand what we are doing, but because of the way things are organized.

The three vantage points don't rule each other out, but they give everyone involved a few ways of looking at and confronting the problems in both their most visible and most hidden layers. Figuring out how to use the three places to stand is the job that faces us. We start with the assumption that we all love kids, that school is a great place to get them many tools they need in life, and that the things that get in the way can be challenged and removed. The rewards for doing this kind of work are colossal, but it ain’t never easy.

More on easy and hard. Everything we are giving you to read is in some ways hard. This is not because we are trying to be annoying. Nor is it because we are show-off academics—okay, okay, we are often heavily bookish, but we are not just show-off academics. There is more at stake. You have entered a difficult field. Teaching is a tough job, and armed with nothing more than American commonsense, you will not outrun the forces that are keeping our kids and their teachers in such difficult situations. So we are giving you some “hard” stuff to read, not Hegel, Marx, Derrida, Foucault hard, but hard in the sense, in the hope, you will have some new resources while you are working on the practical problems of managing and teaching children. That’s our excuse. The children are in infinitely better shape than schools sometimes make them appear, but we have to think hard and move fast if we are to deliver them the world they deserve.

We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium.


Another Take on the Course

Words like equity evoke our most fervent hopes for education, prompting us to imagine how schools might just be in the best of worlds. Before we follow through on our equity impulses, with the luxury of a year in STEP, we get to tune our ideas about practices and responsibilities to the real-life complexities of teaching and learning. With equity in mind, the goal of this course is to encourage a growth in our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of the classroom and its relation to the rest of the world.

We strive for responsible descriptions of what is really going on in real lives with real people. This means that we have to interrogate our conventional understandings, including the conventional concepts we use to think and talk about school. We proceed as if we should revise our personal dictionary of terms for kids, learning, community, intelligence, and so on, as part of our work for equity. Perhaps we need to figure out an altogether new vocabulary if we are to get our way.

We are not the first people to take on such a project. We use the work of others to help us think, talk, and act collectively in more responsible ways. Rather than direct our readings and discussion exclusively toward the search for immediate “best practices”—always as unsatisfying as they are simplistic—we will work with each other to identify ideas that are useful and/or problematic; for the next month, yes, but for ten years from now as well. Overall, the course ought to be good, hard fun.

A More Aggressive Take on the Course
Throw a topic on the table—say, tracking, level playing fields, bell curves, abilities and disabilities, race and social class, caring and fairness (these last two are often pitted against reality)—and people will go at them with great regularity. Each problem will be taken seriously, opposing sides will get defined, policies and reforms urged, and moral fibers questioned and asserted. At the end of the day, the year, and even the generation, if all goes well, the changes will have been subtle (not trivial, but subtle), and the overall production and distribution of cultural and economic resources may look terribly like they always have. As teachers, our victories will be small, local, and, to that extent, heroically important.

Our course is designed to contribute to the subtle changes by interfering with our—yes, our—knee-jerk responses to the ways educational problems are usually defined and confronted. Our three main goals are perhaps in the opposite order than you might expect.

Our first goal is to transform the discussion of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and surprise!, ability and cognitive capacity differences. We have five weeks to solve problems that can’t be solved in five years. This is not an excuse to stop trying. The magic bullet thing ain't happening, but we can get the conversation started. If we are good, if we really struggle to say what is on our minds, or stuck in the back of our minds, we just might develop a new place to stand in relation to the educational fair (and unfair) usually thrown our way. As a people, it took us decades to notice that Wonder Bread is awful; and so we might do the same for its educational equivalent, say: the SATs (cookie-cutter questions, with little sustenance or taste). If you leave the course knowing that everything is political, we will have succeeded.

Our second goal is directed to how you think about the problems right in front of your face in your classrooms and teacher-room discussions. What are you going to do with the first child you don't like, or want to give up on, or find one hundred reasons to forget? Or what will you do when you hear teachers bashing children you love. You will not be alone in these problems. They happen everywhere called educative. As the problems of the children you are asked to save and nurture, they are also your problem. Better said, they belong to everyone. How are you going to worry about them? If you leave the course with a few different ways of talking about and responding to our own investments in the production of the very troubles we are trying to solve, we will have together made a contribution to subtle change.

Theory and Practice

What a drag. We are going to have to deal with the theory and practice divide. It is an annoying game that teachers and researchers have been using to beat each other since the rise of schools of education. By the rules of the game, practice starts on Monday morning and ends with a standardized test, and theory starts when researchers talk down their noses at teachers. We will do our best to move beyond the battle, and in that way, perhaps, to do both of them a little better. So here is a position to consider.

One great trap in human thought is to divide knowledge into theory and practice. Our take, and so too Dewey (and later in the course, Horton and Freire): no theory, no practice; no practice, no theory. So the question always is how to do better theory and better practice. If your practice is not theoretically interesting, don’t bother; if your theory doesn’t apply to practice, don't bother (or call it a hobby).

No theory, no practice. Even dumb practice is driven by a theory, likely a lousy one. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way, at least not in a self-proclaimed democracy, to maintain a sophisticated replication of injustices and inequalities. Without a theory and practice split, there would be no way for school people and researchers (also people, of a kind, although not always kind) to not learn from each other and to leave the vast darkness of the teaching and learning business so thoroughly unobscured.

Safe

We like to promise a classroom in which everyone will be safe to say what is on their minds. At the very least, we will not be yelling at each other much. Whatever anyone says becomes part of the data for the class to work with. We are more interested in what people find necessary to say than in who says it.

We cannot promise a class where everyone will feel comfortable. If you are not uncomfortable now
and then you are missing out on the opportunity to rethink difficult issues. You are here to help change the world. So get used to a little risk. Don’t be safe with yourselves. We are all loaded with racist, sexist, class biased, and homophobic tendencies. It is in our language and institutional pathways. Cleaning up is the work of a lifetime. Just think about how invested you are in being smart (or afraid of not being smart). Can you be smart without being unjust? It should be possible, but can you do it in a society well organized to use school performance (smartness) to divide the whole population into those with and those without access to rewards. Rearranging your relation to race, class, intelligence, and so on, will make you uncomfortable.

**Assignments**

There are a number of assignments that you are expected to complete. Come to class ready to talk, argue, and question. Please don't be easy with us. If you are going to make change in the world, you are going to have to be tough. Might as well get some practice shots.

**Readings** – Please complete the readings listed before each class. These will be integral to participation in activities and discussions each day.

**Small-group Scenarios** – In every section, a small group will come up with scenarios highlight connections between the week’s readings and practice. Specific instructions about scenarios will be provided in class.

**In-class Writing** - There will be daily “quick-writes,” journal entries, exit slips and other such writing assignments during the section time.

**Final Reflection (to be further explained on Day 3).** The final assignment will call upon you to reflect on your journey in this course in relation to events in classrooms since you have arrived at STEP. Drawing from the readings, you will write a reflection on where you were at the beginning of the course, where you are now, and how you hope to go beyond.

**Final Reflection Presentations** – During the last day, groups will present their ideas for their reflections to the rest of the group.

**Adjustments** – We want to leave room for adjustments, particularly ones suggested by you. We can do this in class and/or in our informal coffee meetings that are a great place to say what has to be said.

**Schedule**

*All readings can be found on Canvas:*

(1) Monday, 17 August:


The Goodwin paper is a strange entry for an education course, but in some way central. This course is not about your opinions. There is a way of speaking that says we do not care less about your opinions than about what you do. Goodwin has mined a level of description that reveals the constraints people put on each other as members of professions, constraints that can organize your behavior and make mince-meat of your opinions. We can use Goodwin to make explicit the constraints put on new members of the teaching professions.

The concept of professional vision unites the various topics covered throughout the course.
Professional vision "... consists of organized ways of seeing and understanding events that are answerable to the distinctive interests of a particular social group" (p. 606). The professional vision of educators and shape how interactions with students, families, colleagues, community members and other stakeholders in the educational system. It is our hope that through making the dominant professional vision of education explicit, we can learn to out-think it.

Dewey’s School & Society: Here it is. In the U.S., if you are not doing Dewey's version in education, Dewey is the thing you are not doing; nothing else quite counts like that, not Piaget, not Vygotsky, not Skinner. With that influence comes the strange circumstances of Dewey's educational vision: that few teachers have ever gotten the chance to carry his formulations to completion, and, despite all the talk, almost no one reads him, not even many of those who cite him in educational research. It is essential that you read him.

(2) Thursday, 20 August:

There sure is plenty of diversity in the world, and we sure find a surprising number of ways to cut it up conceptually and institutionally. In the US, we divide by race, gender, sexual orientation, class (always operative, but not always articulated), and often, without even noticing the problems we cause, cognitive power (or just cognitive speed). In each case, the popular effort is to describe, and blame, the differences on nature, taken one person at a time, right down to their genes. Other cultures do it differently enough to alert us to the arbitrariness of our own ways of proceeding: height, fertility, strength, memory demand, spiritual tendencies, and supposed beauty have all taken their place as a focus for socialization and sorting in various places and various times. With so much variation to work with, how do we so consistently reproduce the same social structure over and over. Notice the words here: how do we do it. We are all involved.

(3) Monday, 24 August:
Read: 1. McDermott (2013)

These exercises offer three ways to treat educational problems. We will use them throughout the course. We hope they might be helpful in your work over the years.

Can the concept of culture help us out? Whose culture? And whose concept? And what might culture have to do with learning, particularly with learning as it seems to happen – and not happen – in the head? Wait: Whose culture? And who says?

(4) Thursday, 27 August:

Fifty years ago, a culture of poverty theory of school failure. Poverty, it was decided (and backed by much research) can interfere with human development. Children raised in poverty, it was thought, would be short of stimulation, direction, role models, vocabulary, delay of gratification, and motivation, and they would hit school not just behind, but maybe unable. Arguments about the culture of poverty dominated education policy for a decades. Linguists, anthropologists, renegade psychologists raised objections and produced better research. By 1980, the term was gone. Some of us thought it was over until recently. The culture of poverty is now back. These two papers are bookends for the debate: one from 1963, the other from 2010. We will grasp their details and loo for alternatives.

How hard is it out there, and are there ways to not make it worse?

(5) Monday, 31 August:

Sure is hard to imagine how to teach to and/or around all the difficulties Morrison explores. Are they problems or opportunities to think and rethink? Whose problems are they? Did Morrison get it right? Whatever might “right” mean? How many people are involved in our being where we are today?

**How are students and teachers conditioned, even against their will, to see the world?**

(6) Thursday, 3 September:


**What does it mean to be a transformative force in schools and beyond?**

(7) Thursday, 10 September:

Today we get to ask how Horton and Freire would handle the problems described by Deutsch, Wilson, and Morrison. Why did they have to work so hard at doing what would seem to just common sense? Why did both of them serve jail terms for their beliefs. Their version of common sense is going to be terribly difficult to operate on – it will be uncommon – in the public schools of California. What are our alternatives?

(8) Monday, 14 September:
Read: Pick from a list of samples we will give you.

(9) Thursday, 17 September:
Sharing final reflection projects, developing toolkits, & celebrating