

L4) Geography Education. By Dr Robert Rose

Geography in Steiner Education is an integrating subject in that it involves a way of bringing together subjects from nature studies and the humanities. In this sense, geography also partially belongs to the nature and science side of the curriculum, but it also includes human geography in terms of economic, political and cultural perspectives. In this way, geography is a unifying subject in **space** just as history is a unifying subject in **time**.

For this subject during this module you will also need to read:

Avison, K & Rawson, M (eds) (2014): *The Educational Tasks and Content of the Steiner Waldorf Curriculum*, Floris Books. Chapter 17, Geography.

Steiner, R (1919): *Practical Advice to Teachers*, Chapter 11, Anthroposophic Press.

The Aim of Geography: Encouraging Loving Relations between the Peoples of the Earth

Steiner envisaged geography in ways that transcend its normal scope. For him, geography also involved a higher purpose than just knowing about the spatial relationships between things: its aim was to encourage an understanding and loving relationship between the peoples of the World:

“If we teach geography clearly and graphically, we place the human being within space, and we especially cultivate an interest in the whole world. The effects will be seen in various ways. Individuals taught geography in this way will have a more loving relation with their fellow beings than those who have not learned about spatial relationships. They learn to take their place next to other human beings, learn to be considerate. These things strongly affect the moral life, whereas the neglect of geography results in an aversion to loving one’s fellow beings. Even a superficial observation will confirm this. The connections are there, even if they are not noticed. Today’s unhappy cultural phenomena are the effects of such follies”. Steiner, R (1921): Education for Adolescents, Anthroposophic Press, p. 56.

The reference is to the first World War which occurred just a few short years earlier. The role of the absence of a proper geography education was evident to him: a true interest and moral relationship between the peoples of the World could have helped prevent this catastrophe happening and much that happened thereafter.

Teaching Geography Holistically

For Steiner geography should be taught in a way such that the whole human being was involved. Rather than merely presenting facts and ideas to the children, it was also important to teach with real feeling:

“History, geography, geology, and so on must be taught with **real feeling**. The latter subject is especially interesting—to feel deeply about the rocks beneath the earth. Goethe’s essay on the granite can here be of great help. I strongly recommend it to you. Read it with feeling, in order to see how a person could humanly relate - not **merely in thinking**, but in his **whole being** - to the primal father, the age-old, holy granite. This approach must, of course, then be extended to other subjects.” Steiner, R (1921): Education for Adolescents, Anthroposophic Press, p. 39/40.

In teaching from “whole being”, the teacher makes it possible for the children to engage with their “whole being” in relation to geography: learning is not just a thinking activity, but one that also engages the feeling and the will. This would manifest in terms of the way ideas are presented and the emotional tone and activities carried out in the process of teaching and learning.

Geography in the First Sub-Phase

The teaching of Geography does not begin formally in the first sub-phase of the lower school, it is rather an implicit part of the education from the perspective of imaginative anthropomorphisms as discussed in module 3:

“Therefore it is important to speak of everything that is **around the children** - plants, animals, and even stones—in a way that all these things talk to each other, that they act among themselves like human beings, that they tell each other things, that they love and hate each other. You must learn to use anthropomorphism in the most inventive ways and speak of plants and animals as though they were human.” Steiner, R (1924): The Kingdom of Childhood, Anthroposophic Press, p. 31. (My bold)

As can be seen from this, plants, animals and stones are to be presented in the education through imaginative anthropomorphisms whilst maintaining the connection to the “Laws of Nature” as discussed in lecture 1a of this module. These three types of being constitute what is perceived in the spatial world and in that sense, is also the first beginning of geographical understanding as well as of nature as such.

Later on he argues:

“We might indeed say that from the **seventh year to about nine-and-a-half or nine-and-one-third** children take everything in with their soul. There is nothing that a child would not take in with its soul. The trees, the stars, the clouds, the stones, everything is absorbed by the child’s soul life.” Steiner, R (1924): The Kingdom of Childhood, Anthroposophic Press, p. 31. p. 109/10. (My bold)

The scale of this concept is inclusive of all that exists and Steiner is making the case that the child in this sub-phase absorbs the beings of nature through its feeling of oneness with the world. In this particular context of Geography, implicit in this is the **spatial arrangement** of all the kinds of beings which exist in the World, or one may say here, the Universe: not only are plants, animals and stones considered in this implicit spatial organisation, but also stars (including the Sun) and clouds. Essentially then: all that exists **spatially** and in **time** can be taught using this method.

Geography in the Second Sub-Phase: Awareness of the Local

Geography as a main lesson proper begins in the second of the three sub-phases of the lower school, that is when the children are in their 10th year. Steiner points to at least two things here, the first is the **extent** of the curriculum and the second is the appropriate **method** for this second phase:

“I have told you that geography is first introduced during the second of the three stages between the ages of seven and fourteen. We can very well begin with it when the children have reached the age of nine, **but it must be approached in the right way**. Geography must encompass much more in the future than it does now for children up to fourteen, fifteen, and older. It is pushed too much into the background these days, treated like the stepchild of education. In geography the achievements of all the other lessons should meet and flow together in all sorts of ways. And though I have said that mineralogy is not taken up until the third stage, when the children are about twelve, it can be woven into geography in a **narrative** way, combined with **direct observation**, during the previous stage”. Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 143. (My Bold).

The teaching process in Geography represents the growing consciousness of the child from that which they know in their immediate environment and expanding gradually outward into the greater neighbourhood:

“It is particularly important in geography that we start with what the children already know about the face of the earth and about what takes place on the face of the earth. We endeavour to give the children, in an artistic way, a kind of picture of the hills and rivers and other features of their **immediate surroundings**.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 143. (My bold)

The way to help this is, as stated, through an artistic approach which aids the transformation from the direct experience of a landscape to the creation of a map “viewed from the air”. Included in this map is the coloured painting or drawing of natural objects in the landscape: rivers, hills, mountains, fruit trees, coniferous trees, cornfields, meadows and pasture land. In other words, everything that can be experienced spatially in the local environment. These are also then connected to how people live.

From Local Geography to Economic Foundations

Steiner was keen that the children be introduced to the economic foundations of human society that may arise from the natural geography of a local place. In this sense, he wanted the education to show the transition from natural geography to economic geography. This would then later on lead over into human, social and cultural geography. At this level though, these dimensions of geography were to be treated as a whole and in their interconnections:

“From this map the children gain some sort of overall view of the economic foundations of the neighbourhood. We also start pointing out that there are many things like coal and ore inside the hills. We show them the way in which the rivers are used to transport things from one place to another place. We unfold for them much of what is connected with this economic structure of the district.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 145.

He goes on to mention the importance of transport used in industry and in the movement of goods. From this, a consideration may be made as to how this affects peoples lives. In his day, transport not only included railways but also canals. Today of course, the transport network has a greater number of options, such as shipping and lorries, which may be included in the geography curriculum.

From Local to National Geography

Once the geography of the local regions has been covered it may then be extended to the Wider Regions and the Nation .

“Here in our district, for instance, after developing the necessary concepts from familiar stretches of land and helping the children find their bearings in their own neighbourhood, we can widen their horizon by telling them about the geography of the Alps. We can extend the mapmaking already taught by drawing a line showing where the southern Alps meet the Mediterranean Sea. You also draw the northern part of Italy, the Adriatic Sea, and so on, saying there are great rivers there and drawing in the courses of the rivers. You draw the Rhône, the Rhine, the Inn, and the Danube with their tributaries and then add the different arms of the Alps. The children will be extraordinarily fascinated when they discover how the rivers separate the different arms.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 146.

Steiner proceeds to describe how from out of this basic geographic formation of the Alps, a map could be made and then, as we will see later, extended to develop the mineralogy of the different regions outlined by the rivers. In this way Steiner’s approach is to go from whole landscapes to individual rocks and then to the individual minerals within those rocks.

From a Geography of the Living to that of Human Life

For Steiner, geography also included a mapping of the living realm interlaced with that of the mineral and leading on to the economic sphere:

“Then you go on to describe to the children (**you have already prepared for this in your nature lessons**) what grows down in the valley, what grows higher up the **mountainside**, what grows even higher up, and also what does not grow at the summit. You paint a **vertical picture of the vegetation**. Next you begin to show the children the ways in which human beings establish themselves in a countryside dominated by massive mountains. Help them picture to themselves a really high mountain village and what people must do to live there. Mark it on your map. Then you describe a village and the roads of a valley and a town at the confluence of a river and one of its tributaries. You characterize in this wider context the relationship between the natural configuration of the land and the way humans establish their economic life. Out of the natural surroundings you build up a picture of human industry, drawing the children’s attention to the places where ore and coal can be found and to how settlements are determined by such things.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 146/7. (My bold)

He then goes on to describe the polar opposite of this mountainous landscape, namely the **flat plain**. This is to include the structure and composition of the mineral element as well as nature of the soils, and the types of crops that grow there.

Up until this point, Steiner suggested that geography remain in the transition from the **local to the national** (or a little wider). He does however recommend that the global horizon be introduced for the period up to the 12th year:

“Until they are twelve, introduce them chiefly to economic conditions and relationships and make these clear. Concentrate more on describing the geography of their own country than on giving them a complete picture of the Earth. Let them, however, gain an impression of how vast the ocean is. You started drawing it when you showed where the southern Alps meet the Mediterranean. Draw the sea as a blue surface, and draw the outlines of Spain and France, showing that there is an immense ocean to the west. In a way that they can understand, introduce gradually the idea that America also exists. They should have a mental picture of this before they are twelve.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 148.

The aim here is not to provide a systematic approach to global geography but to create an anticipation of a wider vision of the World. The process consists in developing first an imagination of local geography, expanding this to the nation, or a little broader, and then offering a sense, or impression, of the Globe. **Naturally, the specifics of the geography chosen by the teacher will depend on where they are in the World. It is not suggested here that one merely follows the examples that Steiner gave.**

Geography in the Third Sub-Phase: Systematic Global Geography

It is in the third sub-phase of the lower school that a more systematic approach to geography is recommended by Steiner:

“If you start with this good foundation, you can count on the children having sufficient understanding when they are about twelve for you to proceed more **systematically**. You will take less time to give them a picture of the **Earth as a whole** by teaching them about the **five continents** and the **oceans** (more briefly than has been your method up to now) and describing the economic life of the different continents.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 148. [Note: today it is considered that there are seven: Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe, and Australia. (Europe and Asia are sometimes considered a single continent, Eurasia.)]

It is quite clear here that Steiner intended that that this sub-phase should cover **World Geography** systematically. Proceeding by means of the continents and the oceans and leading on to the economies of the embedded countries.

But then this goes on further:


“When you have drawn together in a picture of the **whole Earth** all the knowledge you have given the children about the **economic life** of humans and **when you have also taught them history in the manner described** for about six months, you can transfer your attention to the **cultural environment** made by the people who inhabit the different continents. **But do not go into this different sphere until you have made the children’s souls somewhat pliant through their first history lessons...** From this point, we lead on to an understanding of cultural and spiritual matters pertaining to different peoples. Then, while saving the details for later, we merely **hint** at what goes on in the **rights sphere** of the different nations, letting only the very first, most primitive concepts peep through the economic and cultural life. The children do not as yet have a full understanding for matters of the rights sphere, and if they are confronted with these concepts too early in their development, their soul forces will be ruined for the rest of their lives because such concepts will be so abstract.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 149/50. (My bold).

The teaching process then consists in a movement from the **natural** geography of the world to the **economic** and the **cultural** geography.

The Rights or Political element of society Steiner considered to be more appropriate for a later age. He did think however that they could be covered in an elementary way in the lower school:

“Thus, between ages nine and twelve, we describe economic conditions and external affairs in our geography lessons. From this point [from the 12th year], we lead on to an understanding of cultural and spiritual matters pertaining to different peoples. Then, while saving the details for later, we merely hint at what goes on in the **rights sphere** of the different nations, letting only the very first, most **primitive concepts peep through the economic and cultural life**. The children do not as yet have a full understanding for matters of the rights sphere, and if they are confronted with these concepts too early in their development, their soul forces will be ruined for the rest of their lives because such concepts will be so abstract.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 150/1. (My bold).

The reason for this is only hinted at here. It may be recalled that in Steiner’s conception of child development, abstract intellectual thinking was more appropriate for the age range after about 14 years old. For him, this was the age when the powers of independent thinking emerged from the young person. Prior to this age, it is more that imaginative thinking is more active. In this sense, the concept of Rights is best developed after the young person has developed independent abstract thinking.



We also have in these last two quotes a picture of the scope of what geography should cover. So it is not just about the spatial occurrences of **nature** events, but also about the **human social realm** in terms of **economics, rights/politics and culture**. This is a theme we will return to and link it on to Steiner's conception of the threefold social life. We will consider this in the next module.

Geography between the Wholes and Parts

As can be seen from previous slides, geography can be taught as a process in which the child's consciousness can grow with increasing wholeness: from the Local which is a part of the National which may be seen as one type of whole. The National is also a part of the Global whole. In turn, this is embedded in Astronomy as an even larger whole as was shown in the appendix to "Discussions With Teachers". In a sense, this process is a parts to wholes relationship in the geographic awareness and knowledge of the child:

Wholes

Astronomy

World
Geography

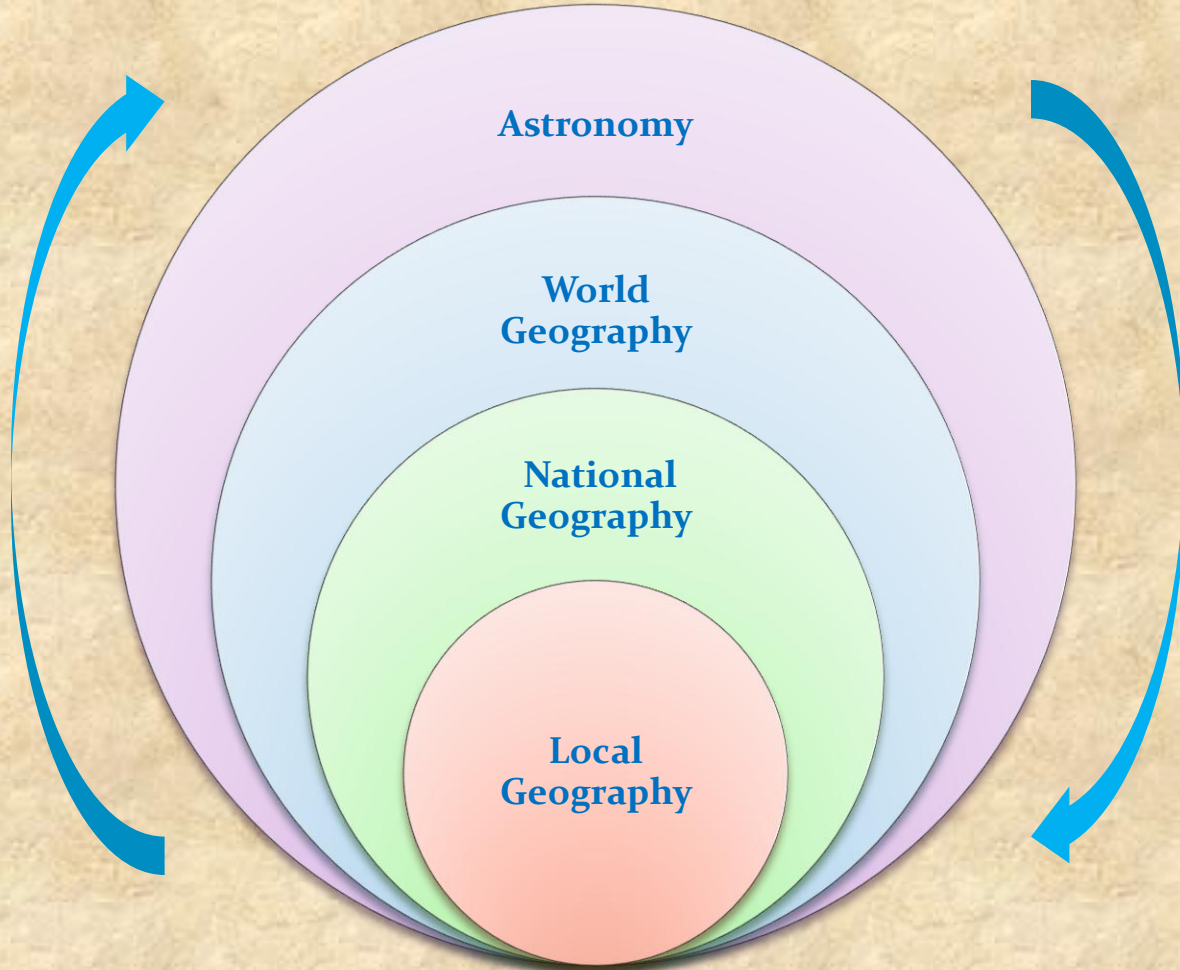
National
Geography

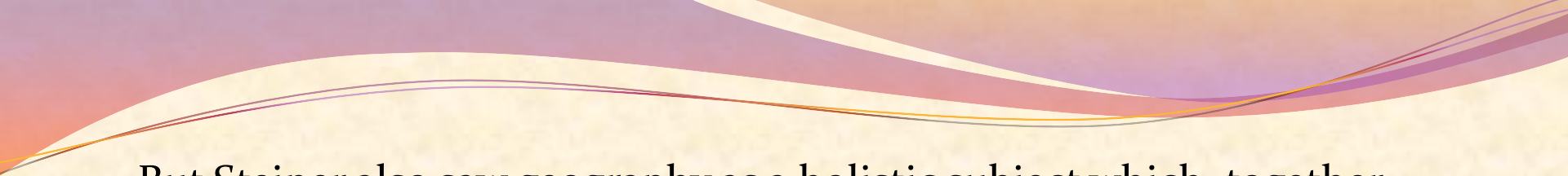
Local
Geography

Parts

Synthesis

Analysis





But Steiner also saw geography as a holistic subject which, together with history, is a means to unify the different subjects for the main lessons:

“You see that a great deal must be incorporated into teaching geography, so that it can become a kind of summary of everything else we do with the children. And so much can flow together in geography. Toward the end, a wonderful interplay between geography and history will be possible. Because you embrace many subjects in your geography lessons, you will then be able to draw on them for many lessons”. Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 149.

As can be seen, this is a dual process in that Steiner thought it possible to also evolve other subjects from out of the geography – history unity:

Wholes

Geography
Space

History
Time

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Humanities
Subjects

Natural
Science
Subjects

Synthesis

Analysis

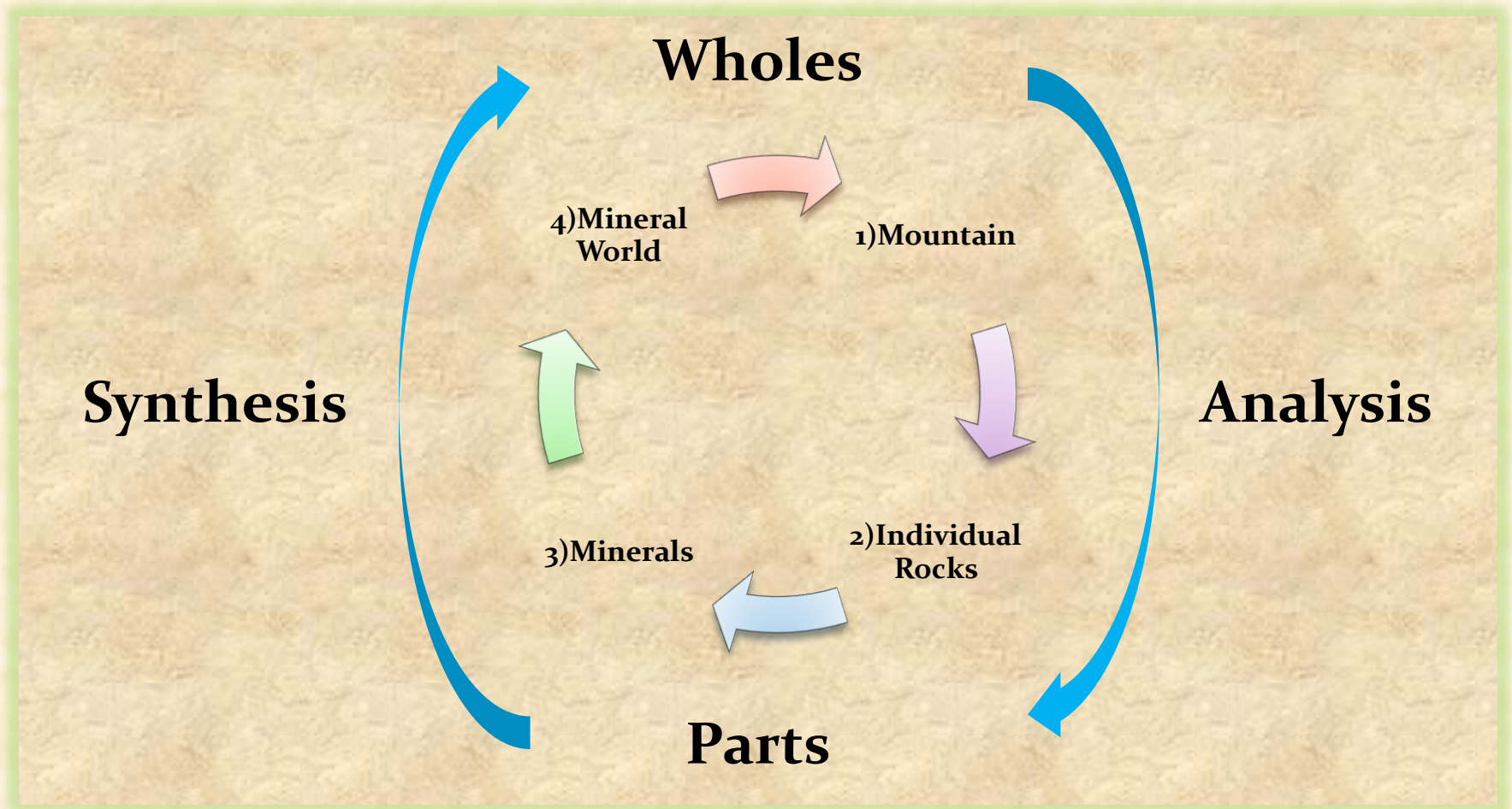
Parts

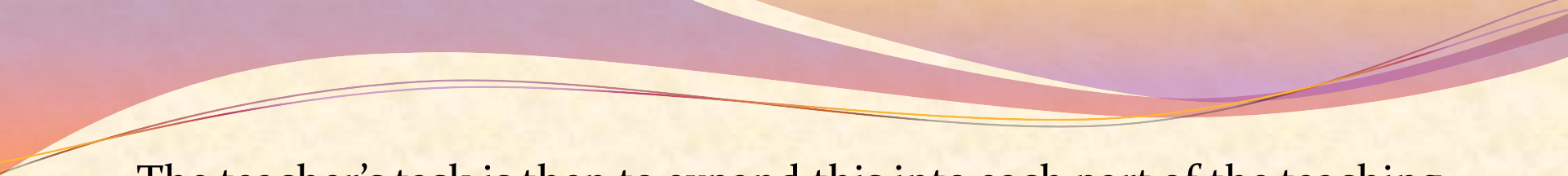
Moreover, he applied this type of thinking to the physical aspect of geography too. He goes on to develop this idea further:

“Geography really can become a great channel into which everything flows and from which a great deal can also be derived. For instance, in the geography lesson you show the children the ways in which limestone **mountains** differ from granite mountains. Later you can show them a lump of granite[i.e. A granite **rock**] and point out that it contains different **minerals**, including a substance that sparkles. Then you show them a piece of mica and tell them that what they see sparkling in the granite is mica. Next you can show them all the other substances hiding in granite. You show them a piece of quartz and try to unfold the **whole mineral world** out of a lump of rock. This is another good opportunity for adding a great deal to the children’s understanding of the ways in which things that belong together as a **whole can be divided into their separate parts.**”

Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 152. (My bold)

As discussed in lecture 1, Steiner advocated a teaching methodology of moving from the whole to the parts and then back to the whole. In this case, we see a kind of movement from a “mountain as a whole” to a “rock as a part” which then becomes a whole for a “mineral as a part”. This included identifying the type of rock (limestone, granite) or mineral (quartz, feldspar, mica). The task then is for the teacher to then build up the “mineral world as a whole”:

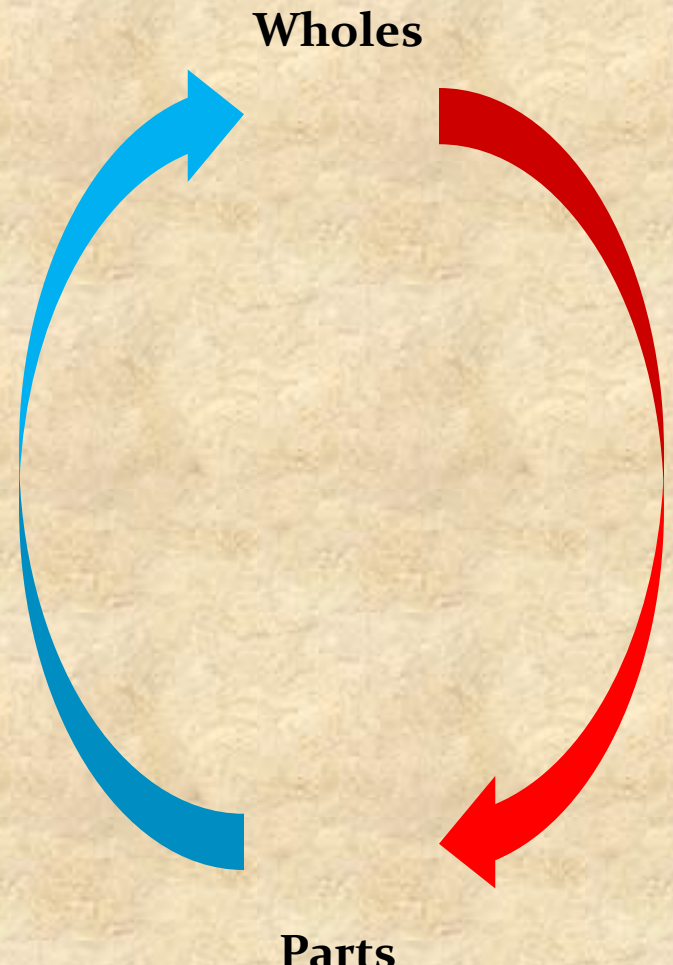




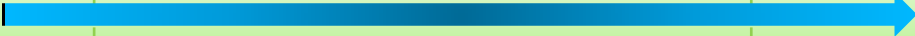
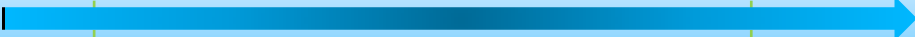
The teacher's task is then to expand this into each part of the teaching as well as outward to the economic realm:

“Again linking mineralogy with geography, we must not omit a discussion of how all the things of **economic value we find in nature** are used. Referring to what we have said about the stony structure of the mountains, we discuss all the substances, such as coal, that we have a use for, in industry and elsewhere. We depict these things in a simple way, but the **starting point is our discussion of the mountains**. Nor should we neglect to describe a sawmill when we are dealing with the forest. **We start with the forest**, move on to a discussion of wood, and come finally to the sawmill.” Steiner, R (1919): Practical Advice to Teachers, Anthroposophic Press, p. 153.

One can see in this a number of different “wholes to parts” teaching processes: Mountains to Minerals; Forests to Wood; each of these is then lead over into the economic realm. As we have see, this can then grow into the cultural perspective and then the beginnings of the rights sphere. Together with our previous discussions this leads to an extended and holistic picture of the geography curriculum in the lower school:

Type of Geography	Elements of Geography	Increasing Wholeness
Human:	Cultural	 <p>Wholes</p> <p>Parts</p>
	Political	
	Economic	
Life:	Agriculture Crops, Nature Life forms	
Physical:	Sun Weather Rivers Oceans Soils Rocks / Minerals	

Summary of the Geography Curriculum of the Lower School with Interpretation

Sub-phase 1: 7 th – 10 th yrs			Sub-phase 2: 10 th -12 th yrs			Sub-phase 3: 12 th -14 yrs	
Pedagogy / Methodology:							
Imaginative Geographic Stories:			Characterisations:			Understanding:	
							
1) Imaginative Stories as introducing geographical relationships.			Geographic Narratives / Descriptions of local places, processes and events and their extension to nation:			Systematic Geography of national & global places, processes and events:	
2) Creating a story of a geographical situation, event or being.							
Curriculum Content:							
Imaginative Geography			Local and National Geography			World Geography	
							
Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Class 7	Class 8
Imaginative Geographic stories of the kingdoms of nature.	Imaginative Geographic stories of the kingdoms of nature.	As per class 2 and as per class 3.	Local Geography, Geography and the foundations of the economy	Wider Local Geography, Geography and the broader foundations of the economy	As per class 5 and as per class 7.	From National Geography to the Beginnings of Global Geography Geographic Foundations of the economy, culture and the beginnings of rights questions.	From National Geography to the Beginnings of Global Geography Geographic Foundations of the economy, culture and the beginnings of rights questions.

Focussing on the Content of the Curriculum:

Geography Curriculum in the Lower School with Interpretation

Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Class 7	Class 8
Awakening to the surroundings. Familiar animals, plants, and soil formations, or to local mountains, creeks, or meadows.	Description of surroundings continuing from grade 1.	Meadows and woods and so on to business relationships, composing business letters. Making mortar from earth materials and the building of houses. Manuring, tilling and the growing of crops. Animals and Plants in the landscape.	Local Geography and local agriculture. Connection to local industry.	Wider local Geography. Climatic conditions. Astronomical Conditions (for example, "Earth to Sun" relationship in different locations).	Expanding to different parts of the Earth including the climatic and astronomical conditions.	Expanding to different parts of the Earth including the climatic and astronomical conditions.	Expanding on Earth to astronomical conditions. Cultural and Spiritual (e.g. Religious) aspects of Geography. Connecting to the economic dimension to Geography.

Exercises

- 1) Go for a short nature excursion where you live and make a mental picture of your local geography. From this create a small map of the natural phenomena of your excursion and their connections to the local economy. Remember to use coloured paintings or drawings.
- 2) Try to create a map for Britain or the country you live in. Obviously, this can only be in outline. Remember this is intended as an artistic creation as well.
- 3) Explain how you would understand the differences between: Imaginative Geographic Stories, Geographic Characterisations and Geographic Understanding. Give some examples.
- 4) Using a short example, describe the connections between natural geography, economy, culture and rights.

In these cases, use the principles introduced in this module.