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## Teaching the Past and the Present

Lucy Sprague Mitchell

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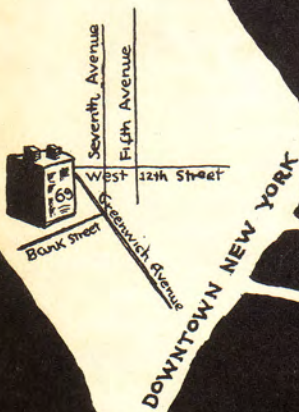
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NUMBER 1

TEACHING THE PAST  
AND THE PRESENT  
by LUCY S. MITCHELL



CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN  
CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR  
TEACHERS AND PARENTS . . .

COOPERATIVE SCHOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS  
HARRIET JOHNSON NURSERY SCHOOL  
BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

69 bank street · new york city

TEACHING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Lucy Sprague Mitchell

A Report of Informal Discussions on Curriculum  
by Teachers of Nine- and Ten-Year-Old Children

Last winter and for many weeks during the spring a group of teachers of nine- and ten-year-old children met with me to discuss our common interests - children of these ages, "our changing world," and with both these aspects in mind, the actual programs that they were at that moment working out with their groups in their schools. Out of the mass of questions which turned up during our discussions, I give a few which seem to represent a common curiosity though probably my geographic interests are unduly weighted.

How can we experiment to find out what nine- and ten-year-old children can take in the way of social experiences? To what extent is their thinking still dominated by that of their "group" - particularly their family? Can we teach these ages history - the heritage of the past - and still preserve a vital relation with the present-day world? Do we know the answer unless we ourselves have worked out our own relations to the world we live in?

When do children see the relation between land conditions and culture? What younger levels of significant relationships should precede those of human geography? How should one begin an historical program with nine- and ten-year-old children? With image source materials (photographs of the country, art in museums, pictures, stories, etc.) which run readily to dramatic play and art? Or with source materials which show how the cultural development has been conditioned by the physical environment (locational geography, climate, soil, natural resources, neighbors, etc.) which lead to intellectual understanding? What specific tools can these ages use to further their own discoveries, not merely to understand the findings of others?

As in any discussion of the maturity levels of children or of specific programs, general questions on curriculum kept coming up so that again and again we found it necessary to orient ourselves as to what we meant by the educational process before we could determine specific points. Moreover, we found our discussions often revolving around ourselves as individuals and as teachers and discovered that educating ourselves was as much a part of our job as educating children. Of course, we never came through to a complete agreement; - what eleven people ever did? Nor at the end of seventeen meetings could we pigeon-hole a nine- or ten-year-old as neatly as does a Binet test. Where and how we agreed or disagreed, what lines we thought significant, where we thought we needed further experimentation, seem of sufficient interest to warrant an analysis for ourselves which perhaps others might share. In keeping with the spirit of these news bulletins, this analysis does not purport to be final thinking. Rather it is our "thinking up to date," the kind

of thing we might gossip about with other teachers if they should chance to stroll into Bank Street instead of reading this modest sheet. Of the six schools represented in the discussions, two were located in cities. Four were in suburban towns - one of them approaching a genuine country setting and two having access to ocean and beaches.

In a general way, all of the teachers, whatever their specific programs, were trying to give the children an emotionally satisfying as well as an intellectual experience dealing with a past or a distant culture. One of the ten groups represented was studying Egypt; two Greece; one Mediaeval history; one the American Indians; two explorers; one the Colonial period; one transportation beginning with the present and running back; one Mediterranean culture but with the historic content growing out of the central activity of a practical store. Thus the informational material largely concerned two areas - the Mediterranean world and North America, largely the United States in their early cultural days. And nine of the ten concerned historic cultures. Of necessity, much of the cultural material was found in secondary sources and even when it was in original, uninterpreted form, it could not be gathered by direct observation in the immediate environment. But all excepting one of the groups had had field work through trips in "the here and now" in their earlier programs and thus had developed what might be called scientific habits of work. The children demanded evidence; they thought in images rather than in abstractions, they thought in terms of the work patterns of the community, though they did not use or know this expression. Also in the younger programs these children had freely turned the information gathered through trips and other avenues into concrete images through dramatic play, painting, modeling, craft products and still earlier, through block building. The chief problem we faced was how to continue this close interaction between "intake and outgo," so that the children lived the past, not merely learned about it; how to have vicarious source material continue to present the same challenge to thinking in relations as does direct material gathered at first hand; and how to continue "experiences" in the present after the children's interests have expanded to include the social implications of their physical environment and of our work techniques. On the one hand, the problem resolved itself into questions of geographic and social source materials and tools for studying them appropriate for nine- and ten-year-old children; and on the other hand into the emotional needs of nines and tens and the most satisfying media of expression.

We plunged directly into a consideration of the actual content accessible to the children with emphasis on the method of presentation and the tools - maps, books, play, etc. - which the children used in interpreting the material. These problems clarified themselves only after some fumbling discussions of "historic method," the stuff of which concerned our own points of view as much as it did the children's. Why were most of these schools choosing to base their chief experiences for their nine- and ten-year-old children on the past? Even the teachers who started with modern transportation and with the running of a school store found themselves in the ancient Mediterranean world. Did such

programs provide for a continuity of experiences in the now-a-days world? Did we wish such continuity?

The teachers all repudiated the theory that history was chosen because beauty lay more in the past than in the present; nor did they think that the traditions of institutions of learning guided the choice. One teacher maintained that we should profit (socially and practically) by the valuable lessons which the past held for our present problems. Another challenged this attitude as putting a premium upon the perpetuation of the mores regardless of their intrinsic value or present-day appropriateness, and as an influence in keeping the educational group conservative stand-patters. She cited the recent Russian practice. When the Soviet government wished to break with the past, it refused to allow history to be taught in the schools until new habits of work and standards of significance had been established.

Both of these attitudes implied such a close identification with the past culture as to obstruct intellectual understanding of it. Indeed, another teacher suggested that through early dramatic programs, an identification might become so intense as to persist as an emotional prejudice later on much as does a family, racial or other group affiliation. Children who, for instance, had lived through a Colonial Period at six or seven might be such ardent Puritans that they could not estimate by modern standards the "rum and molasses" situation when they came to it at eleven years. This was a disconcerting suggestion which, if true, undercut our whole educational approach. But we concluded finally that the identification which comes through dramatic play does not lead to emotional conditioning which carries over to older ages and prevents a fresh approach on a more mature level. Because, normally, the identification is not so irrevocable that the children do not return currently to themselves and to their own standards built up from living in the modern world. Indeed, that return to the present should be a part of every program - the children should be scientists as well as artists. If the children should develop conflicts because of early dramatic identification, it means that they were not mature enough to handle the material in their earlier experiences. This is really the reason why we keep most children in the "here and now" through seven. By that time they have usually acquired a method of work and of thinking by using first-hand materials and will not be thrown out of balance by vicarious material, as for instance they often are by great intimacies with fairies, magic, dinosaurs or Eskimos at four, five or six years of age.

With this ghost laid, we were not afraid to say that we believed in historical programs for children of nine and ten because these programs brought these ages such intense satisfaction as well as stimulating intellectual problems. We speculated about changing the emphasis in our programs. Could the complicated mechanized present be as dramatic to a nine- or ten-year-old as heroic individualistic periods of the past? Could a central activity such as running a store, a post office or a travel bureau establish a real and an illuminating relation with the

present? We agreed that such a central activity was a genuine educational set-up if it represented a real situation, but that the present-day economic and social set-up made it very difficult to tie young children in with genuine work except on the chore level. More experimentation with central activities seemed indicated.

As an opportunity for thinking, for seeing significant relationships, we concluded that the problems of dealing with a past culture was no different from that of dealing with our own. In both cases we were trying to understand rather than to sit in judgment, trying to see how things had taken this course rather than another, what environmental forces had conditioned or were conditioning the development of peoples' habits and thinking. One teacher observed that it was "easier to manage the past than the present." This is surely true. Time has weighed and selected the material. Causes have worked their way through to effects. Nevertheless, the present and the future remain our chief adult concerns. This desire to understand social behavior through studying factual evidence seemed to us to be the basis of the present impulse towards regional studies both in historians and human geographers. (I am using "regional" in the modern geographical sense to denote an area which some physical or social characteristics make an organized not an arbitrary unit as, for instance, the great plains region or the tenant farmer region.)

So we turned challenging eyes to the factual evidence which we were giving children in our history programs. Specifically when we examined the books, maps, pictures or the material which we gave to children, we asked ourselves whether they were direct, that is, uninterpreted as, for instance, the Odyssey, Greek vases, old records, photographs of land, ethnological studies; or whether they were secondary, interpreted as in Breasted's histories or Sumner's and Frazier's myths where the evidence for the interpretation is given; or whether they were removed from the original sources three or four times as in the ordinary text books. The opportunity which a program gave the children to handle direct sources and experimental materials, we thought one of the chief considerations in determining its appropriateness.

How were we to know if nine- or ten-year-old children in handling source materials were discovering the vital connections between environment and culture - their own or a past? What use could they make of such a relationship? What evidence of emotional satisfaction had we as teachers gathered from the children's behavior? One teacher felt that for these ages, the dramatic expression from the children was her best guide. "I feel successful when my children burst into dramatic play and let down when there is no burst." Language as a medium of expression has not come into its own at ten. All agreed that ten-year-old children were adventuresome and romantic (not in the movie sense!) and had a great desire to identify themselves with an heroic situation that was not theirs; that, in short, they wanted to feel "grand!" Not before eleven years, the group agreed, had children a dominating group feeling rather than the individual feeling of adventure, and so were ready for a cooperative program such as producing a magazine. Both these conclusions

concerning the interests and maturity levels of tens and elevens were the same as those reached by a group of school directors in a similar discussion at Bank Street some years ago.

But I have jumped ahead to our final discussions in giving conclusions of this sort. We came to them gradually through a consideration of the concrete programs or concrete source material. As I have indicated, that is where we began. We took for granted that there is a significant relation between the external physical environment and the thinking and ways of living of human beings. So we tried to make impromptu but concrete regional studies first of parts of the Mediterranean world and then of North America, or more specifically, of the United States. In our geography laboratory at Bank Street we have made a good beginning on a library of source materials relating both to the present and to ancient cultures. This collection includes maps, photographs, current and local industrial material as well as books. When a member of our group raised a question, I pulled out relevant source material from which the group sought an answer. We examined a wealth of material concerning the external physical world - topography with its geologic background; climate including rainfall, temperature variations, winds, ocean currents, etc.; natural resources such as vegetation, distribution of animals, minerals, soil and stone. Separate maps and discussions of these objective data abounded. We chalked on large oilcloth maps, or on modeled relief maps superimposing many of these factors found on separate maps - for example, rain over elevation, natural vegetation over both. We used some of my sets of transparent cellophane and celluloid maps to superimpose a variety of regional characteristics.\* We found that the Mediterranean world and North America behaved with charming logicity and, provided we used the proper elements, we could actually work out regional physical relationships even to the point of prophesying where we should find rain, wind, trees, grass or coal. Here, obviously, was plenty of available material; photographs, scientific data, maps. But the map material was not assembled conveniently on a scale large enough for children; and most of it was expressed through highly intellectual symbols not suggestive of the real world, not evoking images of rough and smooth land, of mountain passes, of dryness or verdure. There is such a dearth of these "tool" maps - paper, oilcloth, transparent or plastic relief maps on which one factor can be superimposed directly upon another - that teachers for the most part must make their own after gathering the requisite source materials.

\*These are maps which I have worked out for the study of geographic relationships. For instance, let us say there are two maps, one indicating the number of inches of rainfall in deepening shades of blue and one indicating the number of inches of frostless months (growing season) in deepening shades of yellow. By superimposing the growing season map upon the rainfall map, you can read simultaneously in shades of green the two most important factors in climate for agriculture. This may be done for any number of geographic conditions.

Most of us felt that the basic relations in this physical material - relation of elevation to soil, to drainage, to icecap, to rain, to temperature, etc. - were appropriate for nines and tens, though some said they had not adequate tools with which to experiment. Also, we agreed that the habits of thinking developed in previous programs were a distinct factor in determining whether or no a group of children could work out certain of these relations, even with good tool maps and adequate sources. Furthermore, we agreed that nines and tens could use such material only when and after they were in the dramatic swing of a program, and that information was of little value unless it was used. In this matter of source materials and tools for seeing relations in the physical world, we felt we know what we wanted, but agreed that it was not on the market in any organized form. To me, at least, this was a direct encouragement to work on an atlas for children and teachers.

But when it came to the subtler process of superimposing a past culture upon this physical environment, we found ourselves lacking more than tools. We began naively with the Egyptian culture, though we were all aware that naive methods often prove more than is tenable. We made a list of the significant cultural mores, trying to see how these particular patterns of behavior functioned in this particular environment - or to put it into reverse, how this particular environment had conditioned (not caused) the cultural mores. Later we made the same attempt for the United States. Almost automatically the emphasis was placed on the work habits of the people, on our old friends food, roads, shelter and clothes. In these matters the relation to the conditioning environment was relatively clear, and jumped with the kind of thinking the children were used to following in their own environments. For example, the overflow of the Nile tied up directly with rain conditions (mountains plus climate) on the physical side, and with the strip of cultivated land and methods of raising water on the cultural side. We hunted for a map which would give us the native habitat of cotton, wheat and flax, of the cow and horse. This led us to the migration of animals and plants, to early land, water and climate conditions, to the making of soil. In the same naive way we looked at a war chariot. Where did the Egyptians get the horse, where the metal, where, for that matter, the wheel? We found ourselves snowed under with genuine first-hand and secondary source material, and longing for time to trace the fascinating history of each thing - above all, the way they wove themselves into a cultural pattern. This rough chart of relationships between the physical environment and the cultural mores we worked out on the board. (see appended chart.)

But weapons, vehicles, tools are still external, though man-made. They are subtle indices of the cultural level but certainly do not tell the whole, perhaps not the chief, story. The art, the architecture, not merely the shelter; the religion, not merely the temples; the standards of law, of justice and individual rights, the ideals of government, not merely the sequence of political events. What place had those in a regional study? How were they related to the environment? We found ourselves rereading Sumner and wondering about the unrecognized myths and



traditions in our own lives. Years ago Veblen had startled us when he exposed some of those. How far were there historic or cultural lags in our thinking about the family, the nation, property, adulthood and childhood, education, indeed in all matters which embodied our cultural standards of significance? Could we as adults go back and forth from the past to our everyday world in standards of right and wrong, of beauty, of design, of religion, of property, just as we could in objective processes or techniques of work? Could nine- or ten-year-old children comprehend the standards of their own culture, of an alien culture?

These and similar questions brought us face to face with social source materials not merely for children but for ourselves. We agreed that we needed more experimentation with nine- and ten-year-old children to determine their maturity levels in social thinking. The evidence brought in by the various teachers as to the interests of nines and tens in such questions as slavery, standards of right and wrong, trade unions and Hitler was conflicting. Apparently homo standards still dominated in social judgments; though we found cases where interests and understanding in social matters varied with the groups irrespective of home interests. Social maturity levels did not emerge as clearly with nines and tens as with adolescents or with children under seven who are still in the play stage. At this age, nine and ten, as in all transitional periods, the individual equation bulks large.

Insufficient classroom experience with these ages was not the whole trouble, however. Part of our difficulty, we felt, was our own slight acquaintance with anthropological, ethnological and sociological material. It was the old question inherent in the teaching process, of needing to experience on our own level before we could plan for children's experiences. We were aware that we ourselves need to have a wide variety of orientation in the present if we are to be wise enough to choose for children strategic experiences and help them to mold these experiences into organic appreciation of past and present. We went back to Boas and Wissler, two anthropologists who have tried to apply anthropological thinking to our present culture. Most of us felt appallingly inadequate. We needed more varied social experiences ourselves, first-hand if possible, if not, then vicarious, brought home to us dramatically as well as intellectually. Could we do for ourselves what we wished to do for children?

Closely likened with our desire to understand the world around us was the pressing need we all felt for some social planning in America. We had already examined our country and tried to see the use made of it by Indians, explorers, colonists. On a big oilcloth map, we had divided the United States into seven rough regions through the study of physiographic data. Then we found that Wissler had also divided the 700 Indian political units into seven types of culture. When superimposed on the oilcloth maps, the physical and Wissler's cultural regions were in rough agreement, and finer attention to details and vegetation would have made the agreement closer. Boas's map of Indian language, on the

other hand, did not coincide with our regions. The discrepancies indicated the movements of the tribes who carried the languages with them; but changed their cultural patterns to fit the physical environment. We seemed to have in our hands a genuine tool for discovering relationships. Would it work for the complicated present? We decided to try the experiment of superimposing a current plan, such as Secretary Wallace's farm plan, upon various outstanding physical characteristics of the United States.

How much of the past history of the land was necessary in order to understand and judge of a present-day plan? The answer to this particular query we sought through a study of a few transparent cellophane maps. Inadequate as they were, through them familiar old facts took on new meanings. The heroic settlers of New England turned out to have chosen marginal or submarginal land for farms, where soil is thin and modern farming methods can seldom be applied. Their location was an historic accident rather than a geographic choice. Back to the native forests or to the new "recreational industry" must go the land of the Puritans! The western pioneers had chosen good land, but abused it. The map of erosion coincided faithfully with the stretch where native forests had been cut down or where the thick native sod had been plowed and left for rains to wash away. The map of exhausted soil marked the path of the tobacco and cotton growers as they pushed west to fresh land. It also marked the site of tenant farming and in part, of negro population. This was suggestive. Once again I vowed to work for tool maps and an atlas which should show trends, social as well as physical, instead of the usual static picture. More and more varied social experiences. Closer acquaintance with methods of handling social data. More tools to help in discovering relationships between natural environment and the regional cultures which develop within them. All this in order to educate ourselves as technicians, as teachers of the past and the present, aside from further experimentation with the maturity levels of social thinking in children. Surely the modern teacher has no light job!

From the mass of notes of our discussions I find I have chosen largely those relating to geographic thinking which represents my own deepest interest. We did discuss along other lines which I can only mention. And of course, we left realms untouched! At one point we found ourselves involved in questions of emotional satisfaction to the point of using partly understood psycho-analytic terms. We called for help and Elizabeth Healy, a member of the staff with psychiatric training, came to answer our questions as to what analysts and psychologists had to contribute to our thinking on emotional age levels. Another time we found we wanted to know more about the actual technique of developing dramatic play. Charlotte Perry, another staff member, came and developed it in us in the space of two hours. Again Ellen Steele, Director of Rosemary Junior School, helped us to see how a program for nines and tens could be integrated around the dramatic approach. Each one of these subjects deserves an article by itself.

We also discussed among ourselves where the general idea of evolution and the environmental response of living things belonged, both in relation to an historical program and to the maturity of the children. We pondered over the destructive impulse as shown in their ready response to bloodshed and war, and wondered how far it could be taken care of through dramatic expression. We talked about the place of specialists, the need for a central activity as opposed to chores (sometimes confused!), the need for phantasy life (which some of us called play, we discovered), the vitality of the social experiences gained by children living together in a classroom situation. We planned social experiences for ourselves, and collections of source materials for ourselves and for children dealing with strategic past and present situations; we examined books and other material used by teachers and children, made lists of needed maps and bibliographies. We talked and we worked and we played. And at the end, of course, we decided that our job as teachers was the hardest and most fascinating in the world. Perhaps the two adjectives belong together!

#### BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SOURCE MATERIAL

This bibliography selected from the books discussed by the group is intended to show the range and type of source material relevant to an environmental study of the present and the past. The classification follows our discussion but is, of necessity, somewhat arbitrary. Books pertaining to special programs, such as Egypt, Greece, Colonial History, Modern Transportation are omitted; first, because of space limitations and second, because at Bank Street we are preparing such special bibliographies in mimeographed form. Atlases and maps also are omitted because of our mimeographed list of such sources suitable for classroom use.

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Bowman, Isaiah: Forest Physiography: John Wiley  
Brooks, C.E.P.: Climate Through the Ages: E. Benn, Ltd, London  
Hulbert, A.B.: Soil: Its Influence on the History of the United States: Yale Univ. Press  
Huntington, E.: Civilization and Climate: Yale Univ. Press  
Johnson, D.W.: Shore Processes and Shoreline Development: John Wiley  
Johnstone, J.: An Introduction to Oceanography: Univ. Press, Liverpool  
Kondrow, W.G.: The Climates of the Continents: Clarendon Press, Oxford  
Marmer, H.A.: The Tide: Apploton  
Newbigin, M.I.: Animal Geography: Clarendon Press, Oxford  
Pirsson, L.V. & Schuchert, C.: Textbook of Geology: John Wiley

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Geology: Holt
- Scharff, R.F.: Distribution and Origin of Life in America:  
Constable, London
- Warming, E.: Oecology of Plants: Oxford Univ. Press
- Wegener, A.L.: The Origin of Continents and Oceans: Methuen Co.,  
London
- Whitney, M.: Soil and Civilization: Van Nostrand
- Zon, R. & Sparkaw, W.N.: Forest Resources of the World: McGraw  
Hill

II. THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT: Community Work Habits and Cultural Mores  
Interpreted by History, Anthropology, Ethnology, Economics,  
Psychology and Human Geography.

A. Original Sources: Little and no interpretation.

- Breasted, J.H.: Ancient Records of Egypt  
The Bible  
The Book of the Dead  
Scribner: Original Early Narratives  
Homer: Odyssoy  
Plato

B. Secondary Sources: Interpretation but with direct reference to  
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- Breasted, J.H.: Ancient Times: Ginn & Co.
- Brunhes, J.: Human Geography: Rand McNally
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- Huberman, Leo: We the People (for children): Harpers
- Hulbert, A.B.: Historic Highways of America: A.H. Clark
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- Mead, Margaret: Coming of Age in Samoa: W. Morrow
- Mitchell, Lucy S.: Horses Now and Long Ago (for children):  
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- Ross, Edward: Social Control: Macmillan
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- Smith, J. Russoll: North America: Harcourt Brace
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- Veblin, T.: Place of Science in Civilization: Viking  
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Van Loon, Hendrik W.: Story of Mankind: Boni & Liveright  
Geography: Simon & Schuster  
Wissler, Clark: Man and Culture: Thomas Y. Crowell

D. Secondary Sources: Largely factual.

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E. No Trace of Original Sources

Most text books

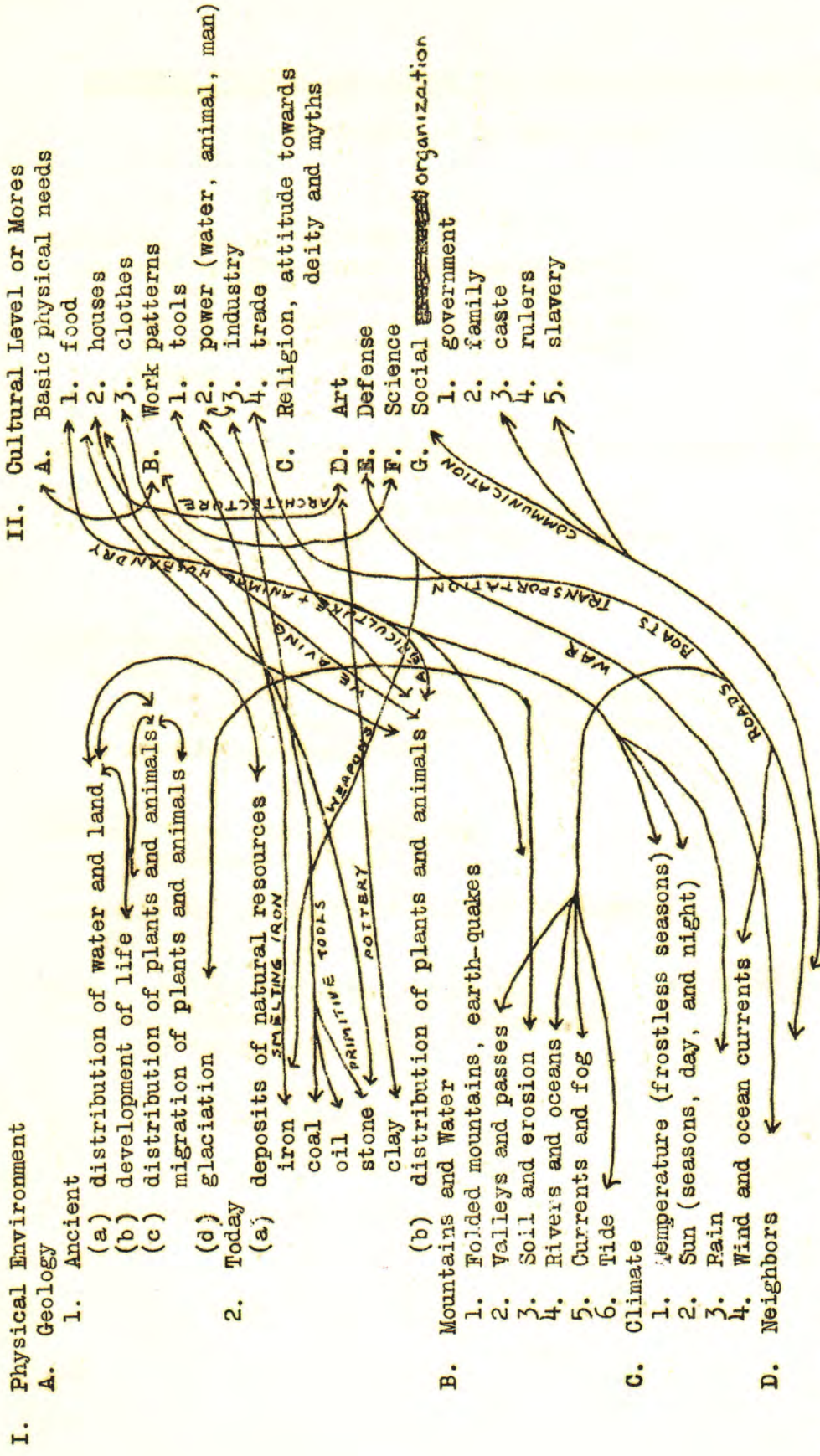
III. TYPES OF MODERN STUDIES OF REGIONS AND EPOCHS

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Baker, O.E.: Agricultural Areas of North America: U.S. Dept.  
of Agriculture  
Bowman, Isaiah: Pioneer Fringe: American Geographical Society  
Josephson, M.: The Robber Barons: Harcourt Brace  
Lewis, Sinclair: Main Street: Grosset & Dunlap  
Lynd, Robert & Helen: Middletown: Harcourt Brace  
Norris, F.: The Pit: Doubleday Page  
Odum, H.W.: An American Epoch: Holt  
Prescott, W.: The Great Plains: American Geographical Society  
Sinclair, Upton: The Jungle: Doubleday Page  
Strachy, G.L.: Eminent Victorians: G.P. Putnam  
Sullivan, Mark: Our Times: Scribners  
Vance, R.B.: Human Geography of the South: Univ. of N.C. Press  
Wallace, Henry: New Frontiers: Reynal & Hitchcock

RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS CHOSEN FROM MRS. MITCHELL'S WRITINGS

- obtainable at 69 Bank Street -

- MANHATTAN, NOW AND LONG AGO \$3.50  
By Lucy Sprague Mitchell and Clara Lambert  
A fascinating account of the emergence of  
America's largest city, illustrated with  
stories, photographs and maps. Macmillan  
Company, 1934
- NORTH AMERICA, THE LAND THEY LIVE IN FOR THE CHILDREN WHO LIVE THERE \$3.50  
By Lucy Sprague Mitchell  
A geography story and picture book for  
children of nine years and up. Macmillan  
Company, 1931.
- YOUNG GEOGRAPHERS \$1.00  
By Lucy Sprague Mitchell  
In two parts: I. Geography and Curriculum.  
II. Map Making. 104 plates, illustrated.  
John Day Company, 1934.
- MAPS ANNOTATED FOR CLASSROOM USE \$ .15  
By Lucy Sprague Mitchell
- MATERIALS FOR MAP MAKING BY AMATEUR GEOGRAPHERS \$ .10
- NATURAL REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES: \$ .25  
Their Work Patterns and Their Psychologies  
By Lucy Sprague Mitchell



We came to the conclusion that everything had some bearing upon everything else. What are the significant relations? What relations can be studied through "tool maps"?

*cooperating schools*

WOODWARD SCHOOL · BROOKLYN · N.Y.  
MOUNT KEMBLE SCHOOL · MORRISTOWN · N.J.  
ROSEMARY JUNIOR SCHOOL · GREENWICH · CONN.  
HARRIET JOHNSON NURSERY SCHOOL · NEW YORK · N.Y.  
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