

STORY OF AN INSPIRED TEACHER

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First published in 1946, *My Country School Diary* by Julia Weber Gordon, remains a classic in educational literature, and has profound relevance today. Soon after it was published the book went out of print unnoticed, unsung. Then it caught the notice of the great American educationist John Holt who revived it.

The situation of American Schools in the 1930's was quite akin to the situation of present Indian schools. Most schools in far flung areas were devoid of infrastructure and resources. Many were single teacher schools. This is the story of a very enlightened and enthusiastic teacher – Julia Weber Gordon who was sent to one such school on a “punishment” posting. But Julia was not the sort to crib. She soon seized the situation and used her ingenuity and resourcefulness to create a richer and more varied learning experience, one that would awaken interest and enthusiasm in children and that would give them a "sense that school was a part of the real world, not just a place where you did meaningless things today, so that later you might go out and do some other meaningless things somewhere else."

This book has great meaning for us. Is not an insipid critique of the educational system but one which offers a ray of hope like our own Gijubhai Badheka's book *Divaswapna* (published by the National Book Trust) that no matter how difficult the situation, how insurmountable the problems, one single inspired teacher can make a world of a difference. This is the “power of one”.

Buildings, fancy furniture, air-conditioned buses; expensive computer labs unfortunately do not make a good school. The best investment a school can ever make is in the teachers. This book bears ample testimony to this belief. In the 1930's Miss Weber was sent to a far flung rural school in a remote corner of the USA. She was the only teacher in the school with over 30 children. She had to teach all the subjects to all grades from I to VIII. It tells what a single teacher was able to accomplish when she was given a fair chance and freedom. Her situation looked hard and uncompromising. Her school was a small, far-flung, one-room country school in a poor and declining, poor rural community. As there was little money so she chose teaching materials which she or her students or the friendly local community could make.

Several of the children in Miss Weber's schools disturbed the class and some were retarded but she never complained about them. Her classes had mixed age groups, children with different capacities and abilities. But she took this in her stride and did what she could do best – make learning interesting. For her every child counted. In her class everyone grew, everybody learned.

Her experience also falsifies one popular myth – that big schools are good. The plea for big schools is that they can have specialized labs, can hire out “experts” to teach special courses etc. This is what we have been told and sold. And it is this notion of childhood and schooling which has prompted us to build gargantuan monstrosities which look more like corporate offices than schools. And for all practical purposes we run them like prisons or armies.

Miss Weber shows us eighty years back that this need not have been so. In less than a month she and her pupils were already able to make the tiny school in its impoverished rural community a more beautiful and richer learning environment, full of interesting things to look at and work with and think about. Today there are many resources available – science centers, mobile libraries, mobile laboratories and of course the internet which a resourceful teacher can tap on. But even

without this kind of support Miss Weber was able to create a learning environment of great variety and richness.

When she and her students needed a book or some piece of equipment, they found out who might have it and then tried to borrow it. They used other schools, the state university, the state agricultural experiment station, and the industrial Arts Cooperative Service in New York. They got some skilled carpenters to help the older boys build a playhouse for the younger children. The school did not have many interesting books. So, in the span of one year the children of her school borrowed over seven hundred books from the local library – more than 20 books per child per year! Few of our big schools ever use their libraries so effectively. In most schools libraries the books are simply inaccessible to children locked away in cupboards.

The book contains another important lesson. Children need to grow in and into a community of older people that they can at least in part see, think about, and understand. They learn and grow best when their school is part of such a community, when their community comes into the school, when their learning touches at many points the lives, work, needs, and problems of people outside the school building. Where did Miss Weber learn this?

Anyway, she was able to get her children out into their community and to think about its history and life and work. And she was able to get the older people into the school, and to make them feel that it was a part of their life, not just a place where they left their children for a few hours every day. She brought life into the school by making it an integral part of the community.

Miss Weber was able to do a wide variety of things. She wasn't an expert in any one of these but what was important was that she knew how to get children interested and get them started. The bare list of these things is eloquent. She could play the harmonica and the piano; do folk dances; sing songs; help build playhouse; make and operate puppets; play a number of games, make paper windmills; make scale drawings; identify many trees and plants; do Indian dances; grow flowers; make a rock garden; tell something about geology and identify rocks; tell Indian legends; sew; cook; make salt crystals; weave pot holders from rags; make furniture for the playhouse; design and make easels; identify and compare fabrics; work with clay; make pottery; draw and paint in various media; make plaster casts of animal tracks and identify some of them; sing carols in many languages; weave on simple looms; spin thread. This was the richness she brought to the school.

The inspiring story of Julia Weber Gordon can be read in full in the book *My Country School Diary* on <http://arvindguptatoys.com>