Part II

In this section, I will examine the cultural narratives that negatively affect school performance among boys in Sweden. As Crapo (2013) describes it, “An emic description or analysis—that is, an insider’s or native’s meaningful account—may be written for outsiders but portrays a culture and its meanings as the insider understands it” (p.27). In his article, *Boys’ Anti-school culture? Narratives and School Practices*, Jonsson (2014) conducts an ethnography of two secondary schools in Sweden to better understand boys’ attitudes toward school. Boys are influenced by their peers, teachers, and by stereotypes about how male/female students typically act.

There is a danger to assuming that the behavior of boys and girls can be categorized and applied to all members of the same gender, but in terms of overall performance in all subjects, girls out-perform boys in Sweden (Jonsson, 2014). Similar results are seen in America, where the performance gap is most pronounced in language courses and smallest in math courses (Voyer and Voyer, 2014). Evidence suggests that, in America, there are deeply held stereotypes
regarding the superiority of boys in math, such that teachers, students, and parents all believe that boys are inherently better than girls at math, even though recent studies show that girls and boys perform similarly in math, with girls even outperforming boys in some recent studies (Lindberg, Shibley Hyde, and Petersen, 2010; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). It is only recently that this gender-based gap in math performance has closed, indicating that stereotypes and cultural narratives can have a strong role in influencing school performance.

Conversely, in Sweden, Jonsson (2014) investigated the cultural narratives and stereotypes about boys that can negatively affect their performance in school. Jonsson argues that there is a “master narrative” that boys in Sweden draw upon which indicates how they ought to act in order to be perceived as cool and popular. Working hard in school and getting good grades does not fit with the rowdy, independent, and rebellious traits that this narrative promotes. This cultural narrative is constructed and reproduced within individual schools, and stereotypical characters emerge, such as the “relaxed, cool, and rowdy boy” and the “ambitious school girl” (Jonsson, 2014, p.278). These stereotypes are reinforced and largely unchallenged, even when students do not fit into these one-dimensional characterizations.

Good students are characterized as doormats who are quiet, well-behaved, subservient, and more likely to be female. Some of the boys Jonsson (2014) interviewed noted that they were not brown nosers, and so they, “are unable to achieve higher grades [...] and there is no point in studying more than they already do” (p.287). From their perspective, they simply do not embody the right
characteristics to be good students, so there is no point in even trying. Jonsson (2014) also tells the story of Daniel, who is seen as a rule-breaker and a poor student. Daniel notes that he is often summoned to the principal’s office and singled out for questioning. His classmates recognize that he is a “rowdy boy,” but it doesn’t seem to gain him friends or popularity as the master narrative would suggest. His classroom disruptions instead seem to give him an excuse for poor performance in school; he just doesn’t care to conform to the rules.

Although boys and girls are not homogeneous groups, cultural stereotypes play a role in socializing them into certain roles, normalizing certain behaviors to the point where even teachers expect different behaviors based on the student’s gender. Students both conform to and do not conform to this narrative, and students’ behavior is sometimes contextualized within the expected role for the student, as Daniel’s treatment by authority figures seems to reinforce his negative behavior. Although many boys may fit into the stereotype of the “rowdy boy,” from their perspectives, there are a variety of reasons to behave this way and sometimes even conflicting desires to both do well in school and also not be seen as a “doormat” or “brown noser” by their peers.

Remember to include a full reference entry at the end of your paper for each source you have cited in this section.