



Who's American?

PEOPLE OFTEN USE terms like “black” and “Latino” to categorize Bronx students. But students are more likely to ask of a new acquaintance, “What are you?” In this section, you will read ten responses in which students describe their family backgrounds.

Questions 1–10 ask you to infer from each description the student’s own beliefs about culture, ethnicity, or national allegiance.

→ ALLEGIANCES AND IDENTITIES

Read the ten passages on the following pages, and answer the question that follows each passage.



ERIC

When people ask, “What are you?” you don’t say, “I’m American.” You say your heritage. I say I’m Puerto Rican, other people say Dominican, and so on, but we don’t refer to ourselves as American.

1. Which statement best reflect’s Eric’s view?

- a. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans both come from the Caribbean, so they share a heritage.
- b. Culture matters more than nationality.
- c. Puerto Ricans aren’t really American.
- d. None of the above

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JOSEFINA

When people ask me what I am, I say, “I’m Hispanic, but I was born here.” I’m born in America, but I’m still Dominican, and Dominicans dance bachata and merengue and salsa. But I’m also half Panamanian, and we dance kumbi; my family taught me how to do it. When I go to a party and they play that, I feel good actually knowing how to dance it. I could be one of the only ones dancing. Nowadays, they play all kinds of music—and if I was only able to dance one type of music, I would feel weird. Being bicultural, you can listen to music or television from here and you can also listen to it from where you’re from. You might feel closer to one, but you could switch back and forth, speak the language from here or the language from there. If you’re with people from the Dominican Republic, you’ll speak that way. And if you’re with people from here, you’ll speak another way.

2. Which statement best reflect’s Josefina’s view?

- a. You should only call yourself Hispanic if Spanish is your first language.
- b. If you were born in America, you should call yourself American.
- c. Every culture in your family can and should be a source of pride. You can call on each in its own context, and you must learn to move easily among multiple cultures.
- d. None of the above

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IDALIA

My mom is an immigrant and she married a Mexican immigrant, and he has two kids here that are immigrants also. Actually, my stepfather broke up from his wife in Mexico when he came here, but he never really got a divorce, so now he can't get married because he could really get in trouble. It's hard—my mom has her green card, but her husband, he doesn't, so he has to always be careful what he does, because he could be sent back to Mexico. So my whole family, everybody that we live with, they're all immigrants. My brothers and I are the only Americans in the house, since we were all born here. And college is hard for immigrants. My stepfather's sister's daughter is going to college right now but because she's a Mexican, they don't give her financial aid. My mother was born in Panama, she came when she was two. She's a permanent resident, she went to college, but she didn't get no financial aid.

3. Which statement best reflect's Idalia's view?

- a. As long as you're a legal immigrant, you have what you need in order to succeed in the United States.
- b. Even within one home, a family's individual members may fall into very different categories, which significantly affect their experiences of life in the United States.
- c. If you're American, then the others in your family are, too.
- d. All of the above

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HARALD

I have brothers and sisters that live in Africa, they were born there to my father. Since the year 2000 we've been trying to get my oldest brother to come to America. He's trying to get to school so he can have a better life, because he's not doing so good over there. You have to pay a lot of money, for the documents and everything, and then my father has to go on interviews and show proof that he's his legal father. The thing that happened now, that's actually delaying us, is that we found out my brother is not really my brother. They took a DNA test, and my father's not really his father. So all of this money that my father paid to get him to come, and all the documents that he's been through, and everything that he's been doing for the past six years, has gone to waste. Now my brother or half-brother—whatever he is to me now—can't come to America, because we don't know who his father is, we don't know if his father is a citizen. All of his plans—everything has gone to dust, now!

4. Which statement best reflect's Harald's view?

- a. Legal immigration requirements do not always take into account the realities of familial attachments.
- b. Once some family members get established in the United States, it's pretty easy for the others to follow.
- c. Everyone from the extended family of an immigrant to the U.S. wants to come to America, too.
- d. All of the above

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DINAH

Everybody came without papers, so it was very difficult for them to get jobs and everything like that. My mother had to do housecleaning, walking dogs, any kind of job she could get in order to support herself. She was 19, a college student, but my auntie had come up here a couple of years before, and my aunt told her to come up here and visit her. She was supposed to go back to Jamaica, but on your visa they give you a certain amount of time you can stay, and she overstayed, and if she went to Jamaica, it would be impossible for her to come back. So she stayed in America and met my father.

5. Which statement best reflect's Dinah's view?

- a. Immigrants get to the United States any way they can, then stay on hoping to beat the immigration system.
- b. Opportunities are always better in the United States than in other countries.
- c. A person may have immigrated to the U.S. as much by accident as by intention.
- d. None of the above

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DEBBIE

I have a green card, but I am not an American, and I don't want to be an American! I like the country, and I think the country has a lot to offer me—that's why I'm here. But personally, I love my country, I love where I'm from like crazy. I miss where I'm from, crazy. And I don't have much fun here. I think I'd have a lot more fun where I was born, but I think I just have a lot more opportunities here. There's a lot more educational opportunities here, jobs . . .

6. Which statement best reflects Debbie's view?

- a. Getting the green card is the first step on the road to the American dream.
- b. Practical and emotional factors compete in an immigrant's attitudes toward the new country.
- c. Immigrants come to the United States to escape miserable conditions in their home countries.
- d. None of the above

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ADEYEFA

Legally, I am American, but I come from African descent. There are three generations since my family came from Africa. To be an American is to have advantages, get all the opportunities here, find truer happiness and all that other stuff. I don't like to be labeled "African-American," because that's like putting "I'm an American" before "I'm an African." So that's why I like to say I'm a African, born in America. I'm African heritage first. I'm from Nigeria. My father is an African priest, he studies the religion of Oitungee, the oldest African tribe. So there's a lot of African things we do in our house. I learn how to drum, and I learn African dancing, and cooking, and a lot of African culture.

7. Which statement best reflect's Adeyefa's view?

- a. How you name your culture is important, because it makes a statement about how you live.
- b. Hyphenating your ethnic identification is the best way to express your cultural allegiances.
- c. To call yourself an African, you should have been born in Africa.
- d. None of the above

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SEAN

My father is Cherokee Indian, and his father was African-American. My mom is Jamaican, but I don't say I'm Jamaican, because I'm not! I was born here, so I say I'm American. Sometimes when they ask me on paper, I say I'm African-American, because that's the only place they have. My great-grandmother was Cherokee Indian, and my great-grandfather was half Cherokee Indian and half black. And my grandmother is half Cherokee Indian and half African-American. She has a Indian name and all that. But I don't get involved in all that stuff. I could, if I wanted to! But I'm not going to do it and I'm not going to be true to it. I don't have the time to.

8. Which statement best reflects Sean's view?

- a. In order to represent yourself as part of a culture, it's important to have the time and interest to learn about it.
- b. If you look black and you are an American citizen, you are African-American.
- c. Five choices as to race and ethnicity on the U.S. census form are enough to represent most Americans.
- d. All of the above

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CRYSTAL

I consider myself black. Because both of my parents is from the South. People from down there, they consider people as just being black—as in “nothing else.” No Dominican, no Spanish, no nothing, no mix, just black. My parents come from South Carolina. I really don’t know when they came up here. When people ax me, I say I’m black, I don’t say nothing else.

9. Which statement best reflect’s Crystal’s’s view?

- a. African heritage is the primary cultural identification of African-Americans.
- b. People are largely going to identify you by the color of your skin, not by your ethnicity.
- c. America is color-blind.
- d. None of the above

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DINAH


Everybody in my family has some kind of different race. So I can't say, I'm just black, I'm just white, I'm just Chinese, I'm just Venezuelan. I'm everything! I was born here, so I am an American by law, but I don't consider myself as an American. I put myself in every category. I'm a little bit of you, I'm a little bit of everything! If someone said, "Are you Dominican?"—I have some, somewhere!

10. Which statement best reflect's Dinah's view?

- a. The United States is more of a melting pot today than it ever was before.
- b. You should identify yourself as whatever ethnicity makes up the greatest part of your gene pool.
- c. Even when someone is born in the U.S., the term "American" does not convey the richness of the person's cultural heritage.
- d. All of the above

A B C D





ANSWER
KEY



1. b
2. c
3. b
4. a
5. c
6. b
7. a
8. a
9. b
10. c

FOR DISCUSSION



Questions for youth:

- When people use terms like “black,” “Latino,” or “American” to identify you, what parts of your identity might they be leaving out?
- How does your ethnic background affect you at school? Can you suggest ways to bring aspects or strengths of your culture into the classroom?

Questions for adults:

- Based on the passages in this section, how is the definition of “family” affected by biography and geography among students in the Bronx? Among students in your own classroom?
- What resources and strengths might be overlooked in a multicultural classroom? How might those resources and strengths affect how students relate to school?