

Brooklyn International Students on 'Being American'

Part 2: Amsterdram and NYC: How Schools Handle Assimilation

[by Beth Fertig](#)



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NEW YORK, NY April 17, 2009 —In this 400th anniversary year of Henry Hudson's voyage on a Dutch ship to what would become New York, Amsterdam and New York City are celebrating their shared history. Both are multi-cultural cities with immigrants from more than 150 countries. But there are challenges, too. Especially in the schools - where immigrants and their children often run into trouble. Yesterday, WNYC's Beth Fertig reported on a school in Amsterdam that's trying to raise expectations for children of Muslim immigrants. Today, she takes us to a Brooklyn high school that's been successful with newcomers.

[Slideshow: On 'Being American'](#)

REPORTER: It's one thing to write a highly personal essay for your high school English class. It's another thing altogether to stand up and read it to your classmates.

MUKTA: I don't understand one thing: Why do people have to talk about sin when they don't actually follow every single rule in the Koran? My best friend is one of these people.

REPORTER: Seventeen-year old Mukta Mukta sounded confident while reading her essay about rejecting Islam. Her 11th grade classmates at the International High School at Prospect Heights listened courteously, even if they didn't all share her religious skepticism.

BOY: Like, what you mean when you said there's no such thing as God? MUKTA: I believe there is no such thing as God, meaning there is no power that is controlling us.

Mukta is originally from Bangladesh; she moved to Brooklyn with her family five years ago. She describes herself as living in a jar, or a closed culture, before she came to the United States. Sixteen year-old Musheer Mazeab from Yemen sees it differently, though he thinks she wrote a good essay.

MUSHEER: I, like, disagree with what she say, cause it's my religion. But even her parents they cannot change what she want. So I cannot do nothing.

REPORTER: Mukta says she welcomes conversations like these in her school.

MUKTA: Everyone cares about everyone in here. They don't mind who believes in what, I think.

REPORTER: That climate is what distinguishes the International High School at Prospect Heights. The school has more than 400 students from 47 countries. The goal is to create an atmosphere for students to discuss their different cultures while learning English and acclimating to life in America.

ANORMALIZA: Part of what we need to do for immigrant students is to teach them to be advocates for themselves

REPORTER: Alexandra Anormaliza is the school's principal. She was one of its original founders five years ago. As an immigrant from Ecuador, Anormaliza knows the challenges facing English Language Learners.

ANORMALIZA: You see so many times immigrants in general being not treated very well by different aspects of society be it the schools, be it the hospitals, be it whatever. And so we felt it was very important for our students to be able to speak up for themselves. To be able to not just know the language, cause that's important, but then what to do with it. What is it that middle class people do that gets them heard?

REPORTER: Though many immigrants succeed, she says those without much education find it especially hard to navigate the system, and advocate for their children. This explains, in part, why English Language Learners have some of the lowest performance levels in the New York City schools. Just about a quarter of them graduate high school in four years.

TEACHER: So wood without the S, just wood, is the thing they make the table out of. It's like a tree. But what if it has the S? Woods?

REPORTER: Prospect Heights is one of nine international high schools in New York City. The first one opened in Queens during an immigration boom in the 1980s. They take teens who arrived in the U-S within the last four years. The goal is to ease the cultural side of assimilation while teaching them English. Classes last more than an hour instead of the standard 45 minutes, and students work in small groups. They're also given mentors and internships. The program is paying off. Two thirds of students at the international high schools graduate in four years - which is better than the citywide average.

Public schools have traditionally been the place where immigrants blend into the American melting pot. But each generation of immigrants has had to struggle with what that means. Especially as New York - and other cities - become increasingly non-white. Musheer Mazeab, a junior from Yemen, says he doesn't always feel welcome.

MUSHEER: A lot of people they call me Arab terrorist and stuff like that. Guess keep ignore them.

REPORTER: Really, people say that?

MUSHEER: A lot of people say that. Especially I work in corner store and they be like 'you got the bomb in your shoes,' they say like that 'you're Arab terrorist.'

REPORTER: Other students at the school say they've also experienced hostility or ignorance. Tenth grader Wen Si Wu moved to Sunset Park five years ago, where she says a lot of Chinese people keep to themselves.

WEN SI: I hear a lot of racist, racist stuff like not only one times but many times like 'you are Chinese go back to your country.'

REPORTER: Wen Si says she DOES want to go back. But, as we sit at a table with a few of her classmates, who are all on the debate team, others take comments like that in stride. A boy from the Dominican Republic says he laughs when people call him an Arab. Fifteen year-old Mesbah Uddin, of Bangladesh, says people have different definitions of being American.

MESBAH: Somebody think like being American citizen makes them American, which is a social status. Or somebody might think that if you're not born in America you're not American at all. So it depends on perception. So for me I feel like to be an American is to come here, get a touch of the culture, keep your culture, blend in like both of them, and be a person.

REPORTER: But what do call such a person? An immigrant? Or, in Mesbah's case, a Bangladeshi-American? In Amsterdam, people of non-Western European origins are frequently called "blacks" regardless of skin color. Livenski Talcus of Haiti thinks that's wrong.

LIVENSKI: Those people should be called by their ethnicity or they should be called Turkish or Morocco, whatever. Not being called black as a whole group. Cause even though you're blending them together but they're still not going to be considered Dutch, and when that happens that's a prescription for violence.

REPORTER: Five years ago in Amsterdam, the killing of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic militant prompted a lot of soul searching about whether the tolerance the Dutch are known for was actually more like indifference. Schools are now trying to bring Muslim immigrants, in particular, into the mainstream. And the Netherlands government uses ethnicity, instead of skin color, in its demographics. As the Brooklyn students debate these terms, Daniela Pimentel, of the Dominican Republic, says New York isn't so different from Amsterdam.

DANIELA Here we call white and black Americans. But we all were born in this country so we have the right to be called Americans. Not whites or not black Americans.

REPORTER: But Daniella and her classmates have mixed views about being defined by their ethnicity. Seventeen year-old Wander Castillo wears a red T-shirt that says I love the D.R. I ask if he's Dominican or American?

WANDER: I can say both because I'm in America.

REPORTER: Anthony Georges agrees.

GEORGES: I would say both. I'm Haitian and Ameircan. Yeah.

REPORTER: Just as the students in Amsterdam said, joining the mainstream doesn't mean giving up your ethnic identity. That concept may be more familiar in America, where the national identity is based on people from different lands coming together. And those roots date back to the Dutch settlement of New York 400 years ago - a port of commerce that was unusually diverse for its time. As the two cities now celebrate their shared history, and the challenges of multi-culturalism, Mesbah suggests a new way of looking at people of different backgrounds without referring to color or origin.

MESBAH: We don't need to use those general terms, just call them people, people and people you know? Why don't we call them by their names?

For WNYC I'm Beth Fertig.

[Part 1: Amsterdam's Challenge: Helping Muslim Students Adapt](#)

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