

When is an African American student not Black?

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One day in pre-calculus, my friend turned toward me and asked, "Why do you act like that?" "Act like what?" I responded, genuinely confused as to what he was referring to. "You know," he said. "Like, not Black."

I was flabbergasted that he would ask me this question because he was black as well. Little did I know that this was the beginning of me being labeled as "Asianized."

When I was in middle school, I was hooked on "League of Legends," causing my overall GPA to be average. Sitting at my middle school graduation made me realize that I couldn't take my academics lightly anymore, because the consequences would be more severe in high school. I had taken into account that my academic performance would follow me for

the rest of my life. I made a vow that I wouldn't receive anything less than an A in high school. So, I put my "gaming career" on pause, and my days prioritizing "League of Legends" came to an end.

Two years into high school, I hadn't broken my promise. Maintaining straight A's wasn't easy and required hard work. When I didn't understand a topic, I stayed after school for tutoring or sought outside resources like Khan Academy or YouTube. I asked the most questions in class, attended office hours where I was often the only one present, and reviewed lectures in my free time while taking notes.

I thought what I was doing was normal, until my African American peer questioned, "Why do you care so much about your schoolwork? You've been Asianized. Guys, Zewdi has been Asianized!"

He shouted this loudly two or three times until I told him to stop. He was the first of many to label me this way. To my African American classmates, being "Asianized" meant that I had been brainwashed to "academically perform" as an Asian student would. I was never referred to as a high-achieving African American student.

This label impacted my performance drastically. I didn't want to be called "Asianized," so I stopped raising my hand in class and decided to take notes in pencil because doing them in rainbow was "extra." I also left my friends who were the "nerds" of 10th grade and tried to be a part of the "popular" students.

I felt ashamed to be myself, knowing that anyone could call me "Asianized" and others would hop on the bandwagon. I resorted to isolating myself because I knew that I was living up to their expectations.

I no longer wanted to be the "the most Asianized Black person" in my

grade.

I wasn't aware of how much my mentality affected my academics until I received my progress report. My grades weren't what I was used to getting, and the vow I made in eighth grade came back. I thought: "What am I doing?"

It was then that I decided to ignore my classmates labeling me as "Asianized." I turned their negativity into motivation, pushing myself to work even harder to show them that you didn't have to be "Asian" to excel.

I taught myself to tune out laughter when I asked a "dumb" question, and I began to notice that my confidence was rising and I was able to understand the material on a deeper level. Redefining who I am and being comfortable in my own skin allowed me to thrive. I reconnected with my old friends and my GPA skyrocketed. I attended Girls Who Code and discovered my passion for computer science.

To this day, I'm occasionally called "Asianized," but I'm proud of my accomplishments, knowing the challenges I've faced. I'm able to distinguish who is rooting for my success and who isn't. Cutting out individuals who don't want me to succeed allows me to ignore the drama and focus on what matters.

I'm extremely happy with what I've accomplished in high school and often celebrate my achievements by devoting a day to "League of Legends," or spending the day in the park catching up with friends. Even though my classmates may claim that I'm "Asianized," I know I'm a high-achieving African American student who is realizing her potential. If my peers wish to label me, so be it, because I am rising to the top.

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