

Analyzing an Everyday Situation Using the Levels of Racism

Narrator: Tony is an African American student about to begin high school. He wants to be the first in his family to attend college and hopes to be a biologist. He did well in middle school and took advanced math. But he didn't score well on the school district's new high school placement exam. Compared to white students, most Black and Latino students don't score as well on this exam. The students of color mostly come from two middle schools, known as the worst schools in the district in the poorest part of town. They're overcrowded and have the least qualified teachers. When Tony enrolled at the high school, he was referred to Mr. Perez, the guidance counselor. He was happy Mr. Perez was Latino since most teachers at the high school are white.

Mr. Perez: Tony, you seem like a good student but I'd recommend that you enroll in the Pre-Algebra class instead of the regular Algebra class.

Narrator: Mr. Perez, for years, has been routinely advising most African American and Latino students to take Pre-Algebra because a lot of them fail regular Algebra.

Tony: But I've already taken advanced math class in middle school. And I know that Algebra is a requirement before I can take any science classes.

Mr. Perez: I'd really like to help you, but the school district has new testing policies—if you don't score well on the placement exam, you can't take Algebra. That's the rules.

Narrator: Mr. Perez didn't have the heart to tell Tony that his chances of getting into the local college were not good because you need three high school science classes. If you take Pre-Algebra freshman year and regular Algebra sophomore year, you'd have to take all three science classes in your last two years of high school. After meeting with Mr. Perez, Tony talked to his friend Jason, one of the few white students who attended the same junior high school as Tony.

Jason: Are we gonna be in Algebra class together?

Tony: I guess not. They're making me take Pre-Algebra because of my placement test scores. It's the new policy and I don't have a choice.

Jason: Those tests are messed up. Guess you can't do much about it if those are the rules.

Narrator: Jason didn't tell Tony that he had just overheard his white friends in the hallway saying, "since mostly whites got into Algebra class, it proves they must be smarter." Tony then talked to his friend Nary, who is Cambodian, and one of the few Asian Americans at the school.

Nary: I have to take Pre-Algebra, too. I don't have the brains to pass the regular Algebra class anyway. Who needs advanced math, anyway? I can get a better grade in home economics.

Narrator: As the day went on, Tony realized that most white students had, in fact, gotten into Algebra, while most students of color were assigned to Pre-Algebra. He felt angry, disappointed and embarrassed about his test scores. He wasn't sure if there was anything he could do. His excitement about beginning high school quickly began to fade.

Source: *Racial Justice Leadership*, by Terry Keleher, Applied Research Center (Revised 3/08).