

Mexican Whiteboy in The New York Times**Racial Lens Used to Cull Curriculum in Arizona****By Michael Winerip****March 19, 2012**

TUCSON — Ana Verdugo is a fan of Matt de la Peña's young adult novels; she read his *Mexican WhiteBoy* in two days.

Like the lead character, Danny, Ana is a Mexican-American whose family does not have much, is being raised by her mother and has a father who spent time in jail.

Like Sofia, the lead female character, Ana, a high school junior, is hoping to go to community college, where she wants to study accounting. "Most books I read, I don't know the people," Ana said. "This book is the truth."

Last fall, she had the idea of inviting Mr. de la Peña to Tucson High. "I didn't think he'd say yes," she recalled, "but maybe he would."

For the next several months, Ana and the school librarian, Amy Rusk, worked to raise \$1,000 for his speaking fee. It was not easy — their most successful bake sale netted [*earned*] only \$124.

Still, on Tuesday morning at 8:30, Mr. de la Peña walked into the Tucson High library, although there was a surprising plot twist.

On Jan. 1, after a new state law targeting Mexican-American studies courses that are perceived as antiwhite was upheld, it became illegal to teach *Mexican WhiteBoy* in Tucson's classrooms. State officials cited the book as containing "critical race theory," a violation under a provision [*condition*] that prohibits lessons "promoting racial resentment."

For those who have read the book, like Ana, it is hard to figure. In *Mexican WhiteBoy*, the hero's hope is to become a pitcher on his school's baseball team.

The novel's story is pretty much the American dream.

Andrew LeFevre, a state spokesman, said that while the Education Department had found the Mexican-American studies program out of compliance [*obedience*] with the law, it was the Tucson district's job to decide how to enforce the ruling. "I think the district said: 'Let's be safe and collect this material. We don't want a teacher from Mexican-American studies to use it in an inappropriate fashion,'" he said.

Comprehension check: Why did it become illegal to teach *Mexican Whiteboy*? _____

The conflict dates to 2006 when [Dolores Huerta](#), a labor activist, gave a speech at Tucson High, telling students “Republicans hate Latinos.”

Tom Horne, the state education superintendent at the time and a Republican, sent his deputy to the high school to convey their concerns. But students saw the visit as an attack on free speech, and 200 walked out in protest.

Ka-boom. Mr. Horne accused the district’s Mexican-American studies program of using an antiwhite curriculum to foster *[encourage]* social activism. At the time, the program served 1,400 of 53,000 students in the Tucson district, which is 60 percent Latino.

In 2010, after several attempts, the Republican-controlled Legislature and the Republican governor passed a law prohibiting classes that (1) advocate *[support]* overthrowing the government, (2) are designed for students of one ethnic group or (3) advocate ethnic solidarity *[unity]* instead of treating pupils as individuals. The state wanted Tucson’s Mexican-American studies program disbanded *[broken up]*.

When Tucson officials resisted, the attorney general’s office issued subpoenas *[official order to send a person or evidence to court]*. Investigators obtained textbooks, PowerPoint presentations, teachers’ college theses, exam prompts, poems and lyrics from hip-hop songs.

Class lessons were singled out over apparent political bias, among them “From Cortes to Bush: 500 Years of Internalized Oppression.” Seven texts were ordered removed from all classrooms, including “Chicano! The History of the Mexican-American Civil Rights Movement” by F. Arturo Rosales and “[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)” by [Paulo Freire](#).

Mexican WhiteBoy fell into a category of books that could no longer be taught but could be used by students for leisure reading. To get an independent assessment of the program, the state hired a consultant, for \$110,000, to conduct an audit *[official inspection]*.

The audit found that while some aspects of the program needed changing, it was doing a good job. It noted that students who took Mexican-American studies were more likely to attend college, and that the program helped close the achievement gap. The state ignored the audit, calling it flawed.

John Huppenthal, the new state superintendent, told a reporter that he was fighting a war. “When we encountered this situation, we did what Hannibal did to the Romans,” he said. “This is the eternal battle, the eternal battle of all time, the forces of collectivism *[group priority]* against the forces of individuality.”

In January, facing a \$15 million penalty from the state for failure to comply *[obey]*, the Tucson resisters threw down their arms. Administrators went from room to room, collecting hundreds of copies of the seven textbooks.

Reflect: What surprises you from this section of the article? _____

Mr. de la Peña's visit, which began in October as a literary event, had political implications [consequences] by March, although little he said was directly political.

Mostly, he told the 300 students his story of reluctant reader to successful writer. He explained that, half-Mexican, half-white, he had grown up speaking no Spanish; too white for Mexican kids, too brown for whites.

He got to college because he could play basketball. His hope was to play professionally until, in one of his college games, he guarded Steve Nash. (Nash: 36 points, 4 assists; de la Peña: 3 points, 1 assist, 8 turnovers.)

He told them that if they were serious about writing, they had to be ready to accept lots of failure. He once wrote a poem for a girl he liked, but after reading it, she never spoke to him again. His goal as a writer, he said, "is to give grace and dignity to people from the other side of the tracks."

"If you are Mexican-American, embrace it," he said. "If the classes are offered, take them; if not, try to get them back."

Mr. de la Peña donated his fee to buy 240 copies of his books, which he gave to the students. "I want to give back what was taken away," he told Samantha Neville, a reporter for the school newspaper, The Cactus Chronicle.

As for Ana, this may have been the greatest day of her life. Having finished all four of Mr. de la Peña's novels, she is now reading "The Lucky One" by Nicholas Sparks, about a Marine's search for a mysterious woman in a tattered photo he finds, who turns out to be strong but vulnerable.

"It's not the same," Ana said. "I don't know anybody like that."

Think: Why might students like Ana relate to *Mexican Whiteboy*? (Hint: look back to the beginning of the article if you need help).

Think: What might be the danger in banning specific books from schools?
