

III: A Liberal City in the Midwest

Equity Spotlight Vodcast Series

Mila González, Student - University of Arizona

Dr. Taucia González, MAP Center Equity Fellow - Wisconsin

TRANSCRIPTION

Taucia: You started high school in Madison, Wisconsin, and I know Madison's known for being a very liberal city, and also trying to implement culturally responsive pedagogies in schools. So I'm curious, what was it like when you started high school in Madison?

Mila: High school was very difficult for me. Freshman year when I walked into my history class and I was confused because when I walked in it was all students of Color, and the teacher was a teacher of Color.

Taucia: That's pretty unusual in Madison?

Mila: Yeah, she was my first teacher of Color in Madison actually, but only for a few weeks. Yeah. And I was excited because I'm like, "these are actually people that look like me, and I feel like I could connect." Like I heard all these languages, and I'm like, "Oh my God, this is going to be a good class." And when I sat down...actually this person came up to me and actually he was like, "Do you speak Spanish?" And I'm like, "No." And he's like, "Oh, okay." Like he was so confused.

Taucia: Okay.

Mila: I remember it was so funny. And I'm like, "No, I don't." And he's like, "Okay." And he sat back down and when she handed out the syllabus, I looked at it. I was reading through it and then all of a sudden I saw ELL.

Taucia: English Language Learner?

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Mila: Yes. And everything clicked in my head. And I'm like, "Oh, of course." And I knew I couldn't stay in that class, even though I wanted to, because I felt like I had a real connection there. That was not the class for me. And we talked to the admin and the counselors and everything, and they told me that it was my mistake, that I chose that class eighth grade year. And I remember sitting in my US history class, eighth grade year selecting my courses, and I remember checking through them and I'm like-

Taucia: I'm guessing you didn't put down ELL?

Mila: Yeah, no. And my counselor even checked through it and said everything was good, so I knew it wasn't my mistake because my first language is English.

Taucia: And you've never been classified as an ELL?

Mila: Yeah. And admin never apologized, and I feel like I really needed that apology freshman year, for me to feel like I belonged there. And once I moved into my new history class, this girl from my previous ELL history class told me the same thing happened to her. And I realized that it wasn't just a mistake that, after it happens two times its-

Taucia: Why do you think the two of you got placed in that class?

Mila: Because of our last names, I feel like.

Taucia: González?

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- Mila:** Even though they didn't see us, they “saw” us already and made judgments about us.
- Taucia:** But you still liked school your freshman year, like you were still excited about learning?
- Mila:** Yeah, I was really excited about my honors biology class freshman year also. But when I stepped into that classroom, it was just weird because my ELL history class was on the bottom floor.
- Taucia:** In the basement?
- Mila:** Yeah. And my history class was all the way on the top, my... Sorry, my honors class was all the way at the top. And just little things like that, it just struck me like why do I have to go all the way to the top to take this honors class? And that just threw me off. And then as soon as I walked in, there was one other student of Color in that class. So I was one out of two students of Color in that class. And I already knew it was going to be hard. The teacher was explaining her way of teaching and how she wanted the students to advocate for themselves, so she didn't want the parents coming to talk to the teachers or anything like that.
- Mila:** So that cut off that connection between the teacher and parent, and that's really different for me because in Phoenix that was an important connection for me to feel comfortable at that school. And in Madison, in my honors class, her cutting off that connection was different for me. I had to get used to it because she's not going to change the rule for one person—even though it was culturally not what

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I'm used to. I don't know, when I first started the class I was asking myself, "do I really belong here? Do I really want to stay in this class?" This is going to be one of my hardest classes ever because I don't have the support I needed from my teacher or the school.

Taucia: What kind of support did you want from her?

Mila: I felt like for her, race wasn't an issue, it shouldn't have been an issue. You know? But of course-

Taucia: Maybe the issue is doesn't see Color?

Mila: Yeah.

Taucia: Okay.

Mila: And of course it's an issue when I'm the only one out of two students of Color in an honors class. I needed that support from her, seeing that it was hard for me to be a student of Color in her class. Seeing people that look like you, that are in the same class, matters. Because when I always in my ELL history class, everybody looked like me, and that acts-

Taucia: Like a sense of comfort?

Mila: Yeah, and that shows that, "I'm supposed to be in the ELL class because I'm a student of Color, not in the honors class because everybody else did not look like me."

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Taucia: But do you still believe that? That you don't belong in that honors class?

Mila: No, I was definitely smart enough to be in that class. Probably even smarter. I was definitely supposed to be in that class. There were a lot more students of Color that were supposed to be in that class.

Taucia: In the honors class?

Mila: Yes. The school did not...I don't know if they noticed it or just swept it under the rug, they never pushed students of Color to be in honors or AP classes. Like my counselors, when we're rescheduling my history class, she asked me, "Do you want to drop the honors class?"

Taucia: And you weren't even there about that?

Mila: Hmm?

Taucia: You weren't even asking her about your honors class?

Mila: No. She was like, "Oh, are you sure you want to continue with this honors class?" And I was already thinking about dropping that class because I didn't feel like I had the support I needed there to continue that class, and when she said that, I didn't know what to do. I was just like...I didn't understand why she was bringing up my honors class when we were trying to switch my history class. And that just pushed me down even more after we had that meeting with the counselor. I stayed in that

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class, it was a struggle for me, but I did pretty good in that class. But after that, I never took an honors class after that.

Taucia: Until this year?

Mila: Until my senior year.

Taucia: Now that you're back in Arizona?

Mila: Yes.

Taucia: Well that's a shame.

Mila: Yeah. And when I signed up for my AP class, the counselors asked me again-

Taucia: Here?

Mila: Yes. "Are you sure you want to continue with this AP class? We can drop you down to a less rigorous course." And I'm like, "No, there's no need." And I pushed back, I had a voice this time and was able to push back saying, "No, there's no need. I can do this." And yeah.

Taucia: I'm glad you found that voice.