

IV. Racial Justice Work as a Turning Point

Equity Spotlight Vodcast Series

Mila González, Student - University of Arizona

Dr. Taucia González, MAP Center Equity Fellow - Wisconsin

TRANSCRIPTION

- Taucia:** So Mila, it sounds like high school went from starting off as something you were excited about, to being a really tough space for you. I know your grades started plummeting, and you really started struggling with your mental health also, to the point where you didn't want to be in school. So, what was the big turning point for you? Because I know you eventually did find your voice again in your agency.
- Mila:** Yeah, high school was hard and I remember telling my mom, "I'm not going to college." That was it. I was just done with school and I just kinda gave up.
- Mila:** Yeah. So I started going to an alternative school, which was a lot smaller and still predominantly white. But the teachers had a deeper connection with the students and really cared about us. And everything was more lenient. So, we were able to do our own work throughout the class, but still stay on topic. And I had this history teacher and he pushed me to do more. I started doing research projects and presentations on racial justice and education. And it clicked, I knew that this was something I wanted to do.
- Mila:** While I was gaining this connection with this research I was doing, we had an issue with the teachers. They created a diversity task team meant to recruit students of Color to join this alternative school, and they approached it in the wrong ways. There was just a lot of things that went wrong with what they did. And we did group shares and circles explaining...and almost every student of Color went to these meetings and expressed how they felt. It was really hard because, the small things add up.

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- Taucia:** I know you've talked about racial microaggressions, is that what you're talking about?
- Mila:** Yeah, they posted stock photos of Black and Brown students for the school website instead of using us. And they put ads in newspapers for Black and Brown people. And they created a diversity task team with an all-white staff and never got one of our opinions. Or never asked for any help, or never asked for-
- Taucia:** Your expertise?
- Mila:** ...Yeah. And so, it's kind of hard to do diversity work when you don't have the other side. One of my history teachers, the one that was pushing me to do more with racial justice work, he had an idea for me to create a course for that school. And there was 50 million things I could do this on. I could have made this class for the students of Color, but I knew that that's not what we needed right now. Right now we needed to fix and heal, what needed to be fixed. We needed to have a safe and strong foundation at our school before we could make anything for us, I felt like. So this course was designed for white students who were willing to learn and be open about race, and just everything about race. And so I developed this course.
- Taucia:** Did it have a name?
- Mila:** *Let's Talk About Race.* And this course was basically, from the beginning, "how do you identify?" ...and when we asked that at our alternative school, we do pronouns. How we present ourselves. Where our name comes from or something like that. And so when I made this it was for, "who are you? What is your house

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like? What is your culture like?" Not just how you identify yourself. Of course that's important, but we needed to dive deeper.

Taucia: So at that point there wasn't a lot of talk about who people were racially, ethnically, culturally?

Mila: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. That's just something like, "we don't see color."

Taucia: There's a theme there.

Mila: Yeah. And so that was just the beginning, to have this entry level and then further move on. And it was just showing just everything about race and education. How we didn't have that support and not acknowledging that as white students, they could be allies to us and support us and-

Taucia: Understand your struggles a little more?

Mila: ...Yeah. And another important thing was, not just to be not racist, but anti-racist. And I did have readings for that class, books that we could read throughout that course. And yeah, I was very excited about creating this whole course around it. And for the final, it would have been to go and make a change next. Actually go out into your neighborhood or into your school and do something to create awareness. Bring awareness to racism. Yeah. They had to go record this themselves.

Taucia: Yeah. That's healing.

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Mila: Doing that work. I had a lot of fun. And again, throughout we were having these circles about the diversity task team and how we can solve this. And I realized that even though I had the support from my teacher, he was also a white male, so I didn't have that other level of connection with him and understanding. So, I needed the support from the other students of Color at that school, so I decided to create an affinity group for students of Color. I felt like a lot of the other students of Color needed it also.

Mila: Of course it was hard in the beginning because you have to give up your lunchtime to go to this group. But also another problem we had was, friends that had white friends that wanted to join the group. And I had to explain to them, saying that we needed just a space, it's only once a week, just a space for us students of Color. Because in Madison there's not really anywhere just for us. And, there was a few people that got it. And the other people that didn't, they just moved on. But the people who did get it, like the white students, their friends, they explained that, "Oh yes, you should go, you need this," and understood that there's a friend of Color needed that support from us.

Taucia: That's amazing.

Mila: And, yeah so, I started that club, and throughout the semester it went on once a week. I met this person at school, he was in the office one day and I said, "Hi." And I didn't know who he was at the time, but then I realized he worked in the school district and I told him what I started and he asked for me to explain more. And we were just talking about it. And then he was like, "Oh, let me know if you need any help with anything." And gave me his email and we were emailing back

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and forth and he decided to give me funding for my club. And so once a week, when we met, we got food.

Taucia: Food's good.

Mila: Yeah, and each week we'd do a little survey. I would send out a survey saying, "What do you want for lunch?" And it'd be either Indian or Mexican or like something. And it was just nice to have that connection. I miss Mexican food sometimes so, it was nice to just have that connection again. And the club was great. In the end, you walk in, you hear the music playing, I felt like everybody felt like they had a voice in there. And, it became a nice support group for us. Yeah.

Mila: And later on I started going to ... one of my friends in that support group dragged me to a superintendent's meeting, and I had no idea what I was getting myself into. But I decided just to go and support her and I realized that this is where I can make a change. I'm meeting with the superintendent. I have a chance. And I don't know, she heard us and she saw us. It just made a real difference knowing that the people higher up in education actually cared about this. And then I continued going to those meetings until we moved.

Taucia: It sounds like you did some really important work in your district.

Mila: Yeah.