



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

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## EPISODE 40: KATHERINE BARKO-ALVA – LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

When you really love something, then you are vulnerable, then you're compassionate, then you're open.

### **Phil Wagner**

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome listeners to yet another episode of Diversity Goes to Work, the podcast where we center real, human-lived experiences that shape and guide our approach to DEI in the world of work. I'm joined today by my friend and my colleague, Dr. Katherine Barko-Alva, who's an assistant professor and the director of the ESL Bilingual Education Program here at the William & Mary School of Education. As a bilingual scholar herself, her research agenda is rooted in classroom practices and explores how dual language bilingual education educators make sense of language in culturally and linguistically diverse k through twelve contexts. She's a passionate DEI advocate. She's actively involved at our university, in our community, across the state, in the nation, and she's just a rock star in the purest sense of the word. So it's a true honor to welcome my friend, my colleague.

### **Phil Wagner**

Thank you for joining us today. So excited to chat with you here.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

Muchisimas gracias, Phil. It's such an honor to join you today and have this conversation that. I think creating spaces where we can just figure out how this works in real life it's so crucial and significant, too. Yeah, I mean, today is my grandmother's birthday.

### **Phil Wagner**

Happy birthday, Grandma.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

Yes.

**Phil Wagner**

Happy birthday.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Excited to be doing it. En el día de mi abuela. So on the day of my grandmother.

**Phil Wagner**

Great shout out there. Look, you do so much, and I've tried to give a little bit of an appropriate bio, but why don't you, in your own words, tell our listeners a little bit more about who you are and what you do, what you study?

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Well, let's see. So it sounds like a lot. I often say that, but it's all rooted in community and classroom work. I'm a teacher and I love writing, and I love researching, but my heart is in the classroom. I was an English learner, emerging bilingual multilingual learner. When my family and my parents, my sister, and I decided to move to the States, it was really difficult. Right. We had the privilege that we came in with green cards. We won the green card lottery. We don't know how that happened. I mean, it's a long story. We don't have the entire time. To make story short, we didn't even put for our paperwork. I think my godfather did it just to see.

**Phil Wagner**

Wow.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

And to get it in the family. And then my mom's name got picked, but because of my mom was married to my dad, all of us got it. And I just wanted to put that out there because I work with populations who have to suffer through the whole immigration process, and it's not easy. And even though my family and I came with a green card, which facilitated so many things, it was still very difficult in terms of how to understand a school, the positionality of a school, how to navigate school. I came in when I was 15 years old. I spoke a little bit of English, but I also took French in high school. But while my first language was high in terms of language proficiency, I didn't have, quote-unquote, the English. And we're going to talk about that to take my SATs, ACT, the SSI. I remember the first book I was given was *The Scarlet Letter*. And I'm like, what am I going to do? I'm so used to making good grades. And I'm telling you this little story so that just to locate and emphasize how difficult it is for an immigrant family, for a multilingual family, to make sense of their space in school and how much support they need, but at the same time, how many resources our families bring to the table.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

And that we're not capitalizing. So that's the work that I do. I try to make sense of language in classrooms and fantastic multilingual educators and how they perceive their roles as language and content area teachers in bilingual classrooms. Also, how we teach preservice teachers, how we teach in-service teachers, as well as how to bring our families into the fold. Right. How to break those barriers so that we're not just sitting around expecting our families to come into the school, but us reaching out and going into the communities and understand that resources our families bring to the curriculum.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah. And I appreciate that you lead with that story from your own family. So we know that identities are groomed and developed in family systems and in educational systems, but I think we often just sort of situate those as two different silos. And in your work, you're kind of the perfect person to speak to this because your book looks specifically at equity in school and parent partnerships. So can you share a little bit more about how those systems interact in this space? I know there's a heavy DEI connection there, but can you speak to some of that work, perhaps?

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

It is, and this is, a work of love that it was created with my two fantastic colleagues, Dr. Socorro Herrera from Kansas State University and Dr. Lisa Porter from JMU. Lisa is a sociologist, Socorro educator, and also mentor and think about DEI representation. She was the first Latina professor that I met long after I graduated from my Ph.D. program. Well, I had a fantastic advisor and advisor and fantastic professors. I was so excited to meet another Latina Latina faculty member and the mentorship and the love. And when I say love is love because it's looking at our histories as K Twelve teachers, as members in family units, and the positionality of it and experiences in schools with families, with teachers, with students, and putting that together in this notion of authentic *cariño* from Venezuela Bartolomé, and then radical kinship.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah, I love that.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

Gregory Boyd and thinking about working from the margins, right? The work of Bell Hooks and also Paulo Freire, and putting that together in vignettes, in theoretical frameworks to kind of uncover those fossilized practices that we have experienced in a school, break those barriers down, and again, hoping that our families become the center of our curriculum. So it's a transformative work in the sense of its not just teachers dictating what our students are learning, but it's a stepping back, being very humble, learning who our families are, learning who our students are, which biography during instruction, and let that dictate how we teach. How wonderful.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. So I love that you nod to our friends Paulo and Bell, right? I mean, we're talking about parent and school interactions, and we look to Bell Hook's, *Feminism is for Everybody*, or Paulo Freire's, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Those very concepts.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Right. Like, we always go with *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

**Phil Wagner**

Right.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

*Pedagogy of hope*, *pedagogy of love*, and his open *concientizaciones* is, like, what guide us and what should guide us.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah. I think so often we think about the context of parent-school relations, sort of based on the narrative we see playing out in the media. Here in Virginia, we know that our last election for governor was very heavily impacted by the discourse of parental involvement in schooling. And I'm curious how your work, your insights, your research might help us better understand that relationship and the role that each of those systems play in developing well-rounded children, students, citizens.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Yes. So one of the things that comes to mind, and it's also informed by the work of Freire and all the greats, right? Is this notion of authentic reflection on both sides and authentic listening, I think, from a very humble place, being a teacher for so long and now in higher ed, we have forgotten that we need to listen to each other. There is no connection. Right. One of the items that I often reflect is the fact that we have put so much emphasis on the standardized testing, and teachers are up to here, and I know we're in a podcast, but up to your neck on demands, scores, meetings, paperwork, and then they don't have time to establish authentic relationships.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, yeah.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Families, there is no communication on who the teacher are, their positionalities, or where the families are coming from. So when there isn't that conversation, when there isn't trust, what's going to happen? You're going to have to see a rupture.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Right. And so I think looking at the literature and looking how we have envisioning, how we have shaped family engagement up to this point, and there are amazing people doing similar work is one of the main concerns, is that we're not talking to each other, meaning schools and families and their community. Right. We don't trust each other. There is huge lack of trust and just the lack of knowledge of what every single pillar is doing because you cannot teach the child if you don't have the support of the teacher. You don't know where the community is from. Then you don't understand what the family is coming from.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, I love that. Trust. Yeah. This is about trust and active listening and creating space to maybe have uncomfortable conversations, but with some guardrails, may be right that we're all in this together, which is for the betterment of child.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

It's not easy. Right. So these trainings they need to happen at the teacher preparation program, how do we get our preservice teachers to that point where they feel comfortable to engage with conversations with their families and then during in-services? So when they are in the classroom, they're working at their school level, the professional development of that nature is not happening. So we're asking a lot from teachers, we're asking a lot from parents, we're asking a lot from students, and we're not providing any structures of support. And I feel as though we're operating from a position of fear rather than authentic love. Because when you really love something, then you are vulnerable, then you're compassionate, then you're open to have those discussions.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah, that's good.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

And that's what we're missing.

**Phil Wagner**

That's so good. A lot of your work to that theme speaks of the importance of community. So can you offer any insights on how we should think about the importance of community just in the broader realm of DEI work? Right. Community informs so much of what you do. Any insights on community in this broader context?

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Community is everything. We can't do the I work if we don't step back from a very humble, right this, notion of cultural humility from Tervalon and Garcia. If we're not listening to what the community has to say if we're not learning from the community. Right. Sometimes we have these overarching ideas of how DEI should look like in our structures, how it should look like in the classroom, how it should look like in general. But it's going to change, and it's going

to vary according to the context. And the context is shaped and is born in the community with the good and the bad. Right. We're not romanticizing the idea of community, but that's what is born. That's what it emerges and as researchers and teachers, and practitioners. I think that's where we need to start. If we're thinking about curriculum, we shouldn't be in a room sitting right next to seven people who think like us and then hoping that that curriculum is going to teach this other sector of the population that sometimes we don't know anything about.

**Phil Wagner**

What do you do when two communities are in conflict with each other? Right. You might have a dominant community or an underrepresented or a stoically exploited community, and the values or the goals or what they're reaching for seem to be in conflict with each other. How do you reconcile competing notions of community?

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Oh, my goodness. If I had the answer to that.

**Phil Wagner**

I know, right?

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Right, if we had the answer to that but think about it. And I'm just going to share a little bit of my background. I was raised Catholic, but from a very liberal liberation theology, had a lot of connections with Jesuits, Franciscans, and amazing nuns, and plus my grandmother, who was the strongest woman, two grandmothers, but one of them was the strongest woman I've ever met. So a lot of my work is informed by that. And in this notion of dignity, we can have different perspectives, we can have different sets of knowledge, but it all boils down to the fact that I, Katherine, understand that you, Phil, you're a human being, and you have dignity, you're ascension being, and that brings dignity to your universe, right? So when I engage in conversation with you, that's my starting point. That's my initiation point. So I can't be mad, I can't attack you, I can't go after you because your dignity brings me compassion, brings me patience, and brings me vulnerability. Does that make sense?

**Phil Wagner**

It so does. And we've talked about it on this podcast before. I go back to dignity every single time. That's the sort of foundation for my own approach to DEI work. Donna Hicks work is just like wonderfully informative to me here. We even have another episode in season two about dignity as well. So no, I love that answer. Hard to do in practice, but as a North Star, really cannot serve you wrong. When you lead with dignity, you see the world through a completely different lens.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

You know what? We may messed up like first times that we try to do it, and we try that approach. It's going to be difficult, but it does not mean that we shouldn't try, because what's

the alternative? What is going on right now that we cannot even sit in a room and talk to each other? And also, once we have those parameters, we have to understand the historical backgrounds of populations which has been and are currently excluded. Right.

### **Phil Wagner**

I want to look at some of the other facets of your work. One of the things that I love that you focus on are what you call fossilized practices in the educational system that devalue histories or contributions and, in some cases, just devalue people from historically underrepresented or minoritized backgrounds. Can you share on some of those fossilized practices and then your insights as a researcher on how we can better address them?

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

To the practice-level things that schools do? Right. And once again, it's not just Lisa, Socorro, and I talking about this. There's fantastic people doing this type of work too, but little things. It all comes back to the ground level. Daughter father dances, for instance, or I know they have donuts with dad, right? Things like that that are basically excluding families who look different, who have different structures. I often ask, look around your PTA and then look at your student population. What voices are being represented? What voices are being left out? Look at your curriculum. And right now in Virginia, this is very difficult to my preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and I'm going to keep saying it. Look at your classroom library. What stories is that library telling? What stories is it not telling? And those are the fossilized practices of that notion. And I think you've heard it before. We've always done it this way. Right? We've always had the parent-teacher night, which is probably 06:00, without thinking that parents may have two jobs, without thinking that parents may not speak the language of the dominant culture. Without thinking that parents may not have transportation, without thinking that our children may not live with their parents. Could be unaccompanied minors that are here with uncle, aunt, or maybe their older siblings. Right? And granted, I'm not saying that there is this evil system that is operating like this to keep people out because I know how overworked the system is in K-12, and teachers are doing their best with very little resources. But what if we shift? What if we understand that that hasn't worked? And now transformation, talking about Freire and critical pedagogy transformation, needs to happen. And breaking those fossilized practices and, instead of expecting the community to come into the school, letting the school go into the community and live in community.

### **Phil Wagner**

I really appreciate that framing, because what you do is you strike a balance and you don't overly romanticize what that educational system is there to do, but you really reveal the stakes. I think of, again, so much of our identity is developed in those systems and in those places. You look at inequity in the educational system and we know that the inequities that we deserve I'm sorry, the inequities that we observe there we go, in that space, those have felt consequences.



**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Inequities that we allow, too. Right?

**Phil Wagner**

Allow, yeah, that's good.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Yeah, without even thinking of it like we see it, it's there, and then we don't do anything to it. So I often say reflection, reflection, and then action, action, and action.

**Phil Wagner**

So if you're like me and you have two kids in the public school system, and it looks like everybody's being treated equally, you might think, I mean, haven't we addressed this? We're past inequities. There's lunch programs, breakfast programs. Can you speak as a researcher in this space on some of the current realities of inequity in the educational system and maybe why that's a current issue that we should really be or a pressing issue that we should really be really laser-focused on?

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

So going back to your examples of lunch programs, right? Because that's one of the things that I would do for my students. I would fill out that form if you don't have access to language. And access to language is an issue of linguistic equity and inclusion. Right. Parents are not able to fill out that form. Just right there and then having somebody on staff and because my work is in multilingualism, having somebody on the staff who can sit with the parent and say, this is how we're going to do it, and this is how you fill it out, like teaching. That is a game changer. Right. And if we know that this particular form is no longer working or meeting the needs of our families, why do we keep it? And sometimes people are going to be, oh, but we have it translated in five or six different languages. A lot of our parents have other types of literacy, not necessarily the literacy that is going to be represented in that form.

**Phil Wagner**

Yeah.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Right, I'm just giving you a very good example of some of the things that we see in the classroom. The fact that and my husband has a Ph.D. in science education, too, and he used to work in a Florida school, public school, and we would always talked about, you just have to drive, say, 4 miles, and you see a completely different infrastructure, access to books, lab material for public education. And this is the work of Kozol, right? Kozol talks about this from one group of students who look a very particular way who sound a very particular way as opposed to the other group of students. So I truly believe in public education. I'm a product of public education back in Peru and then here in the United States, but not in that level. To that level, not everybody's being treated in equitable ways.



**Phil Wagner**

And it seems to me, then, that also puts an undue amount of emotional labor or extra labor on bilingual educators. Right. I mean, so you're sitting there in addition to your day-to-day duties, then working with parents. That definitely is then a labor of love. It's above and beyond the expected sort of line of duty. Right.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

And up until now, I often joke around like everybody in the community has my phone, and I get phone calls from parents. Right. I'm a professor at William & Mary, but I get phone calls from parents about bus schedules or getting into programs, and I often tell them like I may not have the answers because I'm not directly in the school system, but I don't know. I know the person that I can reach out. Right. And I can be a language bridge, but it comes back to my family. Somebody did that for them.

**Phil Wagner**

Oh, wow. Yeah.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

Because I was basically told in a very kind way that I was never going to be able to go to college or university because I didn't speak English and that they couldn't help me. Right. And the entire reason for my parents to come to the States was so that my sister and I would be safe, would be alive, and we could go on to college. That was it. And so I remember those days. I lived those days. And every time I encounter our communities, I work from that perspective, right, which is very powerful because those are the voices, those are the narratives of thousands and thousands of people who come to this country just to work and just like my parents did.

**Phil Wagner**

I love that. I love that. Starting and ending with your story here, I think, is just so profound. It just keeps the main thing, the main thing. I have one final question for you, and it's pie in the sky. It's heady. One of the things I really appreciate about this podcast is it's a vehicle to just share different perspectives with our listeners, many leaders within organizations, but just differing perspectives. You are a researcher who has done research on a very specific aspect of inclusion and community. And I'm wondering if you can just provide any insight from your lens, from your perspective, insights to our listeners on how they can truly make the world and the world of work a more just, equitable, and inclusive place for all.

**Katherine Barko-Alva**

And I think I've touched upon with our conversation a little bit of those themes throughout. Right? But I truly believe there is a lack of conversation and lack of communication between policymakers, researchers, and then practitioners, at least in K-12 settings, or the policy is not translating in the way that it's supposed to be back to the classroom. So once again, if we were to operate from a space of vulnerability and humbleness, understanding that we don't have all the answers and that those conversations have to be ongoing, even when policy has been

implemented, we have to go back and evaluate to see if it makes sense or not and if it's making sense for the populations that those policies are meant to serve. Right? We often don't do that and then seek those answers through collaboration in classrooms. And when I give talks, I talk about the three big C's, right? Collaboration, communication, and compassion. And that should guide our work because that's going to lead to those answers. Identify and create spaces where we know and we are able to say these are the voices that are being silent and not only how to include them but how to highlight those voices. Because for the longest time, those narratives have been excluded. Listening to others con el cuerpo entero, which means with your entire body, because what do we do when we engage in conversation? And this is from my sociolinguistic background. My students are like, well, we're often thinking about what we're going to say, which means that we're not really listening to our partner, right? So I often tell them if you're going to be a language teacher, you have to listen with your entire body. We have four language skills listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The ones that in the classroom we often don't practice is the output, which is the speaking part, and then the listening component.

### **Phil Wagner**

For sure.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

You have to train your ear. Right. But in my mind, when I say escuchar con el cuerpo entero or listening con el cuerpo entero is your entire soul comes into those conversations. And I'm not going to get tired of doing this. Everything that we do, we have to do it from a point of hope and compassion. And this is taking Friere's work and not hope that it feels like, oh, qué lindo, like go inside. No, but hope, understanding that there are several things that we don't know and how are we going to get to the next level where we learn those things and we can keep moving forward. Right. And we can take reflection. So it's this idea of concientización or concientization, too.

### **Phil Wagner**

Yeah. I love that. Bringing your whole soul into everything that you do. I look at you, and I see that's what you do. You bring your whole soul into everything that you do, every conversation. I love it. I really appreciate the soul behind what you do and the fact that you've given up your time to speak with us today. Katherine, my friend, thank you for a great conversation and for sharing more about your work. Always a privilege to speak to you, but particularly here. Thank you so much.

### **Katherine Barko-Alva**

Gracias. You all have a good, good afternoon.

### **Phil Wagner**

Thanks for taking a second to listen to Diversity Goes to Work. If you like what you heard, share the show with a friend. Leave us a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen to

podcasts, and reach out because we're always looking for new friends. And if you'd like to learn more about any of our programs or initiatives here in the business school at Women & Mary, be sure to visit us at [mason.wm.edu](http://mason.wm.edu). Until next time.