



00:00 Anisha's Journey Begins

Welcome to Shedding Light on Child Life, a podcast associated with Chidlifewithanisha.org by Anisha Reza. You can find content here presented through the lens of a person of color, career changer, from medicine to child life, exploring the intersection of diversity, student experiences, and psychosocial health and advocacy for children.

Not that you need to know this, but this is my fourth or fifth take trying to start this. So I'm just going to do it. So bear with me as I have a learning curve with the speed of talking and delivery because I have no script with me. I'm just going to let it roll. So I think it's important with this launching that you know one of kind of my villain origin story, except I don't see myself as a villain. I see myself as a passionate person who uses those experiences and stories to try to make things a little less painful for anyone who stops to listen.

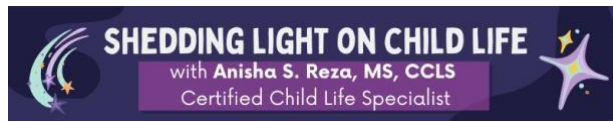
So it kind of all started for me in fifth grade at a new school. My school graciously set up new students with a summer buddy so that you didn't start out with absolutely zero friends and knowing literally no one, obviously. But unfortunately on my first day, my summer buddy wasn't there. So I am nervous and I grew up being a very painfully shy kid. I really didn't have many friends and I don't know, it's tough being an immigrant kid. It was my first day at school. We had the morning classes or whatever and it's lunchtime. So I get my tray of food and I noticed some girls from class sitting at the table nearest to me. So I figured I could sit with them.

So I found an empty seat and I put my tray down on the table and before I could sit down, all eight, about eight girls stood up simultaneously, grabbed their trays and moved over to the next table, leaving me there alone. So it felt like a movie, like a classic Mean Girls movie. And I just sat down trying not to cry. It was literally the first moment in my life where I realized I was not going to be accepted for just being Anisha, but that I was kind of the only... not kind of, I was the only...non-white student that I could see in the whole cafeteria. So yes, we had some diversity, like hand-picked diversity in about a class of 70 to 80. I went to a private school. But once I really looked around, I was one of the very, very few in the whole middle school, so fifth to eighth grade. So in that moment, it was pure rejection. Not knowing how to handle it, tears welling up in my eyes, and three girls came and sat with me and we ended up being best friends through middle school and I'm still in touch with one of them to this day. So all of that to say...

It's one, it's context for a lot of the struggles I've had becoming an adult and all of my struggles now as a recovering people pleaser, perfectionist, and I worked so hard to try to get approval and all of that stuff that I talk to my therapist about. That stuff started at that moment.

04:25 The Impact of Diversity and Inclusion

And so to rope in why diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility is such an important topic to me is that my parents didn't really have the vocabulary or ability in, perhaps partly because of the immigrant mindset, partly the generational trauma, partly it's just hard to know what to say to your kid who's getting bullied for not being white.



I think this is why it's important to address these topics as adults, because adults are the caregivers. You're the ones who are going to raise children and be their teachers. Their adults in their lives, the people that they regularly interact with. That's why it's so important that we as adults who are hopefully functioning members of society who protect children and work with them and teach them and see them in the grocery store, whatever that is, we have to equip ourselves first to be able to better support children who have different backgrounds than we might have.

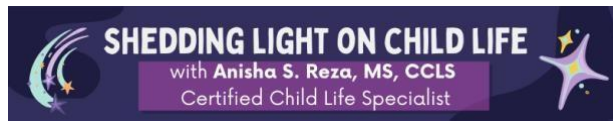
So looking back and processing continuously in my adult life, I don't think my parents had the language in terms of emotion language and kind of the psychosocial background that I have now to help me through that. And I didn't have the school counselors or anyone really in my school to talk about just straight up bullying, let alone racially motivated bullying. This rejection at the lunch table was in about August of 2001 and September 11, 2001 was shortly after and I grew up in Alabama so I'll let you make your assumptions there but I didn't realize how much the way kids treated me may have been influenced by what they're hearing at home and what they're hearing on the news. Kids absorb a lot of things, so that's why it's really important to actively address their questions and teach them before they become a full-fledged adult who doesn't have the ability to emotionally regulate or to express themselves or to ask questions in a safe environment.

So in college, I remember reflecting upon my middle school rejection at the lunch table and it dawned on me, like, well, not just dawned on me, it hit me like a train, that events that happen in society influenced my day to day because September 11th rocked our whole country. I think a lot of people made assumptions of my family... so my dad is Bangladeshi and my mom is South Korean and I grew up never discussing my home life or cultural values with my peers. I wrote about it all the time in essays. I think I got like an A plus on a sixth grade paper.. I haven't thought about this in years, but I wrote a descriptive essay about seeing my grandmother on my dad's side praying on a prayer rug and described like the beauty of the threads and things like that and **even then, in fifth grade, I knew that my story was important, but I didn't have the adult encouragement or validation or teaching to help me develop that.**

And so, flash forward to now, where I'm a Certified Child Life Specialist, if you don't know what child life is...The summary is that child life specialists support children and families in stressful situations with a psychosocial lens. So with mental health, emotional health, and we try to understand the family in their context and to be able to meet them where they're at. And it's trauma informed, it's family centered, it's preparing children for what to expect. We are trained in grief and bereavement and it's a really special and important work that I feel really thankful that I have found now.

09:16 Tough Moments Growing Up

But one of the weaknesses of this field is its diversity and according to stats that I've seen since I've entered the field, it's somewhere between 94 to 97 % white female. I will be super honest because you're going to get a lot of honesty here on this podcast and in my posts on my website.

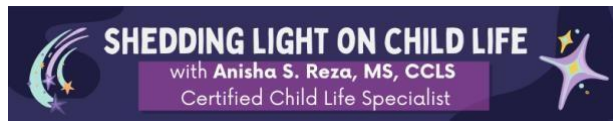


I'm not sure if I would have fully committed to this career if I had known that before I applied to a graduate program and kind of got into that first class. It was an online program, so I remember it very clearly. I joined the class and was like, oh my gosh, I'm the only one again. And that was a real thought. That was, what, two, three years ago? And I hadn't felt that alone since probably middle school. Like it just felt like I flashed right back. That's a tough pill to swallow. And since then, it's tough. I'm not going to lie to you. And that's part of why even though I've only I certified in the March 2024 exam. So I'm very fresh in the field, but I don't feel fresh as a professional because I've really been through quite a lot in my time as a student and personally as well being a Person of Color.

So you can probably see one of my overused headshots somewhere, but for context, I'm not super dark, but I'm tan, so I have brown skin. It's just something that you can't hide. You can't hide that identity. You can't hide how you appear. And those of you who believe that you don't see color, we will probably have to dissect that. And to be relevant right now. Wicked is absolutely destroying the box office. Are you really gonna say you can't see that Elphaba has green skin? No, like, you see that, but if you notice in the film, if you saw it, Bowen's character says, "I don't see color". That's really problematic because, okay, I get your intention behind that, but you're also denying everything about my lived experience if you try to say you don't see color. Especially if we're not acquaintances at all. Like, I have gotten comments from strangers and we'll also get into that, like how to know when is an appropriate time to ask curious questions and who are those right people because someone you just met in the grocery store or wherever you might be out and about, that's not the time or place. It's people that you get to know and that's something I've always said. You do not need to ask me my background. Once we talk for a bit, I'm going to naturally reveal where my parents are from and that I'm very proud of it. I've this is also one of my like running jokes that I've never met anyone else with my mix except my brother.

So I'm really, really proud of my background because it's unique. It's who I am. It defines a lot of my personal values. I have influence from a collectivist society, which really emphasizes family values and honoring and respecting your elders. And there's just things that have been instilled in me because of that background. And growing up in the Southeast with that context of just kind of being the only one for a long time and even if some other South Asian kid or Black kid joined our class, it really did not ever feel safe. And I never knew really who I was. I was always trying to just survive it.

So flash forward to high school, these girls who I had attended school with for years now. My senior year, I remember walking up to the locker hall and overhearing one of my classmates say, "Who would ever name their kid Anisha? What kind of name is that?" And it was like a dagger because culturally for me, Southerners really like double names, so it's not first, middle, it's a double name. And I did not ever know that was a thing. I never bashed it though, because that's a cultural thing for people in the South, and that's where I found myself, and so I accepted it as something that is common in their culture. We weren't like best friends or anything, but



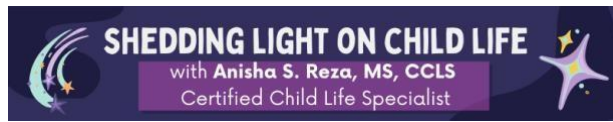
hearing that at 17, 18 years old from someone you've gone to school with since fifth grade, I mean, these kind of things are examples of what I carry with me and...

I try to guard myself, but I'm just like anyone else who wants to be accepted and understood and seen. Now flash forward to college. I went to Boston area for school. And I remember at the end of freshman year looking around at my tight friend group and realizing I had found myself surrounded with Asian-American slash Asian immigrants slash Asian kids from all over the world as my friend group and it just showed me that from growing up never feeling like I was understood, I think I really needed that friend group to find some security in the fact that other people do get me and think my mix is really cool and asks questions about what I eat at home, which literally no one ever asked me about in school growing up. So it helped foster more of a pride and knowing that there are people who are interested in my story and not just because they're like, quote, what are you? First of all, I'm human, so do not use the word "what".

16:26 Navigating Identity and Microaggressions

Since I brought it up, a good way to ask someone is to say, "What is your ethnic background?" That's what I go for. When you say, where are you from? There's a million comedic videos out there about why that's problematic. One of my favorite moments of this. I'm laughing because it is funny, but it's literally the worst interaction I've ever had with this topic, but I was on a training shift as an emergency room scribe in Alabama. They had travel people to train, so it's not like they were from the Southeast, I don't think. But we were kind of getting to know each other. It was the beginning of a 12 hour shift, night shift. So I'm stuck with this guy. I think his name was Kyle. Let's call him Kyle. Kyle asked me a little about my background and depending on my mood, which usually I just go ahead and give them what they want, which is my mom is from Korea, my dad is from Bangladesh, grew up here, that whole spiel what I really want to say is that I'm from Alabama. But anyway, So I gave him that spiel and then he said, "Your dad is from where?" I said "Bangladesh." He said, "Where?" I said "Bangladesh". And he said, "Are you sure?" [laughter]

Wow, that still amazes me every time I say it. Like, what do you mean are you sure? I met you like five minutes ago. YES, I am pretty sure I know my literal dad's country of origin. That is an example of if you feel like you aren't sure about something, maybe Google it later because depending on if I know you well or if we're, you know, having a good conversation, I can tell you're asking with genuine curiosity and not with judgment or you're just like fascinated like, ooh, you're so exotic or whatever other thing you're thinking that can be honestly problematic, to think people are exotic. That's not the right language. Just the fact that he made me question my own family when he had literally nothing to do with that and it wasn't truly relevant to anything and then I was stuck with him for 12 hours. We had like trainer evaluations at the end of the shifts. You better believe that I said I felt uncomfortable for the duration of the shift.



So I'm just rambling about random stories that are coming to mind and I can't even keep count of how many I've already mentioned and this is just kind of the reality of being a Person of Color and actually, my mentor this year encouraged me to try to reframe how I call myself, which I really struggle with because I used to always say I'm minority, but that's like a negative framework to put it in. So she encouraged me to say Person of Color of color versus non-white, but I'm still struggling with those terminologies. And diversity, equity, and inclusion is a term I use all the time, DEI, but I've been trying to use DEIA to include accessibility because I was reading a little bit about it yesterday and it was definitely insinuated that DEI included those with disabilities and advocating for their needs, but because of some of the overlooking that gets that people have been pushing for DEIA. So, you know, I'm here, I'm still learning. I do feel like I have a lot to learn in terms of accessibility. I definitely think that's a big growth area for me. So we'll learn together.

And again, these are not stories that I share lightly. These are trying to put a person behind some of the stuff you might see because it's so easy to get lost in the jumble of the comments because comments are just not conducive to healthy, deep conversations that some people are trying to have with strangers on the internet. So that's kind of why we're here on this podcast is to give some voice to those stories.

Fast forward to medical school where we're training to become healthcare providers of a very, very diverse patient population. I remember being super stoked that we were having a panel with students and professors about basically a diversity panel. I was really excited that we were talking about it, even though it was long overdue and probably needed to be way more frequently done. But people were submitting anonymous questions. And I remember someone asked, like, what is a microaggression? And we are in the most, I mean, getting into medical school you're like top 1 % of the country and they're asking what is a microaggression and we're like in the Deep South and they're asking their Black classmate who has dreadlocks what is a microaggression I mean I was I won't sugarcoat it. I was appalled that we didn't even know what that term was at that level of education.

So what is a microaggression? Doing some basic Googling on that is a great place to start, after you listen to this episode. For the purpose of this episode, I am going to give a personal definition of it because I'm not quite sure what my approach is going to be in general of defining things and getting into the nitty gritty of some of the topics. But from just a quick Google search, microaggression is defined as a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. So an example of microaggression is pretty much every single story I've told in this episode...

One is just, saying I don't see color or there's only one race, the human race or asking someone about their hair and without their permission touching it or commenting on it. Basically, my approach to microaggressions is it's something I'm not expecting in my day-to-day life to be discussing with someone that I don't want to talk about it with, but I'm being put in a very



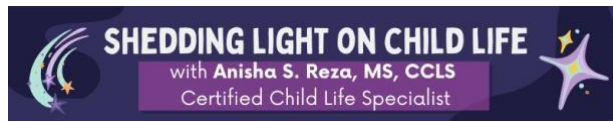
uncomfortable position where I'm being forced into a conversation and also being forced to explain something when I don't want to and I don't feel like I have to, and I might even be turning inwardly a bit to protect myself because I'm not sure where the conversation is going because usually it's a stranger. And it can also be microaggressions from people who you have put your guard down and they say something that because you thought they were a safe person, they suddenly out of the blue make a comment about your skin color or your culture...That's a very basic approach to it.

I ended up distancing myself from this group of friends. So it was a game night in medical school and we were supposed to guess the word Japanese and this Jewish guy, I say that for context because we hurt each other. All marginalized groups can hurt each other. We're all guilty of biases and misconceptions and stereotypes. So he, I can't believe he did this. He actually made a slant eyes with his fingers. In a past life, I would have just been fuming at home and let it go. But in the moment I called it out like, are you kidding me? You could have done anything else. You could have mentioned a car type, a TV company, food, sushi, literally why did you do that action? And I don't think anyone in that group was prepared for my immediate call out. And the fact that they kind of didn't have issue with it the way I did was a huge, huge red flag. So I distanced myself because I didn't. That was a game night during medical school when I was struggling and needed a place to decompress and my place to decompress made me feel awful. That's not it.

25:55 The Importance of Representation

I guess I will kind of wrap up this story time with I think it is so, so, so important that we talk about these topics openly with children and I have heard the argument like, we should protect them from those topics, like it's really hard and it could get political with that, and that's not my goal here at all. But please consider why did I have to contend with that as a fifth grader? Because I was getting bullied for my skin color, but the bullies didn't have to face that. How is that fair? And it's not. That's the answer. It's not fair. Diversity celebrates differences, equity acknowledges that we do have differences that in order to have an equal playing field you have to acknowledge that we do not have the same experiences in society.

Just know that every time I struggle with feeling excluded or misunderstood or not seen for who I am, it comes back to that day in the lunchroom where those girls moved to the next table because every day prior to that I was just Anisha and after that I realized that's not enough to survive in a society that's built around white privilege. So if we can't acknowledge that and the reality of how I might show up in 2023 to a graduate program and be shocked that I'm the only person in the class that's not white and feeling like I'm not sure I can handle it or want that. I mean, that's a real it's still hard and **just because I'm better at dealing with it doesn't mean it's any less scary to walk out every day, not sure if someone will unintentionally or intentionally cause me harm. And that's why it's really hard to be your authentic self because you've had experiences where you were your authentic self and you were torn down from that vulnerability.**



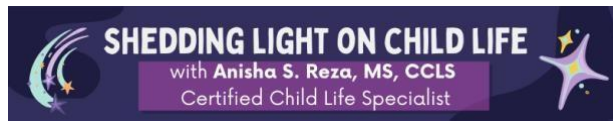
I hope that you can hear me on why it's important to talk about these things and hopefully something comes through to you as I continue to share stories and put a spin on it for professional growth of why making someone feel a little safer in a classroom or in any setting, but for child life specialists, often in community settings or in hospital settings. **It's just so powerful to think of how I would have had an easier time if someone who looked like me helped me realize that it gets better.**

And I think that touches on something I want to talk about more later about the power of representation. Representation in the media is a big one for me. I remember when the Mindy Project came out and it's just a silly rom-com, but I hadn't ever seen a brown girl on TV not being an absolute nerd or barely having lines or what have you. And I remember just bawling when Mindy Project finished up and I was like, "What is going on?" And I realized, this is the first time I got to just watch a silly show. I mean, it's a really good show, don't get me wrong, but just watched it for entertainment versus like watching some historical drama or some heavy, traumatic, you know, documentary or what have you. Like, I just got to enjoy it to enjoy it and not have to feel like the one person was tokenized.

30:18 Reflections and Future Aspirations

I've touched on quite a few topics here and these are just some of the things that I may dive more into and share about, but **I really do pride myself in where I've come from and while the experiences I've had were definitely hard and things I wish I didn't have to carry, it does make me who I am today and equips me to be a better clinician, to be more of an advocate** because if you are white in America, you will not understand this feeling. But there is this unknown comfort and unknown rapport that you build with a patient who, when you walk in the room and they see you're not white, they feel a little more seen. And obviously we can't change that, but there are a lot of ways that you can make an extra effort to make sure that they feel seen. That could be attempting to learn a word in their native language or just giving it a little extra time. And I know it takes more time to use interpreters, but it is absolutely essential.

I've watched my mom translate for Korean, for all kinds of people in her community, for doctor's office visits, for really anything you need to do on the day to day. And she's not a trained interpreter, but that's kind of the importance of having immigrant communities because thankfully my mom is able to advocate for herself way better than some of the people she translated for, but she's not confident in her English, even though I talk to her pretty much like the way I'm talking to you guys right now. Maybe change a few vocabulary words here and there, but the confidence it takes to go somewhere where you're not sure you're gonna fully understand everything, and it's for your health. Like, you need to know what the doctor's saying.



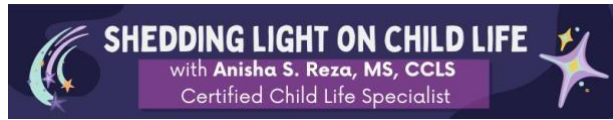
So just imagine maybe thought exercise, you're traveling abroad, you have an emergency, everyone is talking a million miles a minute, you have no idea what's going on, you're in pain, it's scary. That's kind of what child life specialists do for the kid, but imagine that for an adult too, it's scary when you don't know what's going on and no one takes a moment to just help you understand what they're talking about and it directly affects you.

Ultimately, all of these topics require you to pause and have some empathy as to why people have a hard time engaging in these topics who are People of Color, because it is literally something we think about subconsciously every day, but sometimes consciously when some random person decides to ask you really deeply personal questions when you're just trying to like check out at the grocery store. That was a real story. I realized subconsciously I was kind of sharing that. That person was like, "Oh wow, do you know this friend of a friend of a friend who might have been from Bangladesh?" I was like, "No! I don't. Can you please just give me my change". So it's funny because I have to cope somehow, but it's ridiculous. I wouldn't ask you being a white person like, "Oh! I met a white person once like five years ago in this place. Do you know them?" It sounds ridiculous, right?

So with all of these little stories and experiences, I hope that gives you a little insight as to why I personally am passionate about this, but also why I'm passionate about it in my professional experiences and kind of where this publication came to be. I struggled as a student who didn't have someone to go to. And navigating college being the oldest cousin in the US and a lot of different elements, it felt like I was winging it and my academic history kind of shows it that I had a hard time and it's hard to ask for help when you're supposed to always be perfect and be that model minority, which is a myth. That will definitely be a topic later. But it's kind of difficult to survive a world that might have it out to get you, but I hope somewhere in there you can see glimpses of why I'm doing this and why it informs my professional passions for students who might not know what they're doing. I hope that you can learn from me and I can mentor you so you don't have to struggle so hard.

I just hope that you will be able to find peace and confidence in being who you are and knowing what you have to offer and to pursue those things and not shy away from what made you who you are today. And I'm thankful that I can use some significant negative experiences to make myself stronger but also to better understand those who might have it harder than I have. And that's why a lot of my academic work is about immigrant experiences because it's personal to me, but it's also something that I don't think gets as much attention as a group in the diversity diaspora so to speak. I'm excited to share some of those things I've learned from scholarly work, but also apply it to some of the experiences I've had growing up in an immigrant household.

I'm not sure how to wrap this up here, but I hope that you can kind of get a taste or glimpse of my approach to these topics here. We'll figure it out together of ways that are more helpful to illustrate some of the points I might make, but I'm glad you're here listening and please contact me if you have any ideas or questions or topics that you would like me to discuss.



I guess I will leave you with this. Maybe look up what microaggressions you might have unknowingly spoken to someone and confirm that it is one, or consider a way you can ask people questions more politely and in a more cognizant way. Or if you have experienced microaggressions yourself, perhaps forgive yourself for how you reacted or how it felt because we're all just trying to be humans for the first time. So I hope that you learned something here today and thanks for listening.