Chapter 1

ASE Theory: Introduction and History

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Chapter 1 Abstract

Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) is a theory of practice that was developed specifically for school counseling professionals. In this chapter, ASE theory is introduced as a systems approach to working with individual students, groups of students, educators, and other school-related stakeholders. As an approach to practice, adherents to ASE theory provide direct services to students and the people influential to their lives as co-determinants of experience. In this chapter, the basic philosophical and practice priorities are introduced, as is the brief history of the theory development.

School environments are constituted by groups of students, educators, administrators, guardians, policy makers, and other community members. These individuals coalesce in schools as dynamic systems, where each constituent ingredient of the school is affected by the whole, and the whole school environment is affected by each part (Parsons, 1959). In this manner, interventions in schools that are intended to cultivate student development or promote school and societal successes must be performed in ways that are relevant to individuals and the total school system as co-determinants.

School counselors are professional educators and mental health service providers in schools (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021). Traditionally, many school counselors were trained to use practice approaches primarily concerned with intervening with a student or adult individually, but not how the various systems affect personal and social co-determinants of experience. In recent years, authors have posited frameworks intended to inform school counseling practices from an ecological or systems perspective (e.g., Bryan & Henry, 2012; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019; McMahon & Mason, 2019). Relatedly, several recommendations have been made for school counselors to pursue social justice outcomes, including anti-discrimination and equity praxis (e.g., Griffin & Steen, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). One ecological and social justice approach to school counseling is the Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) theoretical framework (Lemberger, 2010; Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019). ASE has been utilized in several empirical studies, demonstrating desirable outcomes for K12 students and educators (Bowers et al., 2020; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021; Lemberger-Truelove et al., in press; Molina et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2019). Adherents of the ASE approach propound that school professionals intervene with students and adult stakeholders in corresponding ways such that each individual

and the total school system ripen into co-regulated experiences and outcomes (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019).

The ASE theory of school counseling is patently an ecological-systems approach (see Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Systems approaches are concerned with the influence of various social structures on individuals and groups. Yet ASE is also be associated with the various liberation psychologies (e.g., Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970; Martín-Baró, 1994). Liberation psychologies are dialogical in that they are attentive to societal forces (particularly those that marginalize and oppress) and yet offer insights for how an individual can transcend being entirely consumed by social influence. As a liberatory systems approach to school counseling, the primary concern of ASE practitioners is how one can support the development of students' personal and learning capacities while pursuing more socially just and facilitative environmental conditions.

ASE theory operates from a dialogical epistemological base (Bakhtin, 1973), hence the phrasing of student-within-environment. Dialogical suggests that there is some nonreductive concept of a unique self or personal identity that is generally material. At the same time, this concept of self is distributed amongst several social influences and iterations over time and across circumstance, held together loosely by various memories and stories (Hermans, 2014; Hermans et al., 1992). Therefore, the student is wholly constituted by the various systems of influence and yet becomes different as those systems converge into first-person experience. As such, it is reasonable that any intervention in a school must be germane to the student and the features of the school environment as co-determinants of experience.

A school counselor practicing from ASE theory intervenes to help students master aptitudes stifled by restrictive environments (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019). Such aptitudes include cognitive abilities, including executive functioning (i.e., self-monitoring;

emotional control; task initiation, organizing, monitoring, shifting, and completion), which are regulatory activities necessary to pursue intended goals (Diamond, 2013). By addressing targeted aptitudes, co-regulatory relationships can form between students, school professionals, family members, and members of the broader society. Co-regulation is a term often utilized in traditional family systems work and refers to the bidirectional oscillating of communitive and emotional channels between partners (Butler & Randall, 2013). This co-regulatory relationship begins in infancy between mother and child as they form a relationship through behavioral and emotional synchrony (Butler & Randall, 2013; Tronick et al., 1978). Within the school setting, a co-regulatory relationship occurs as students or members of the school community engage in purposive solidarity intended to co-determine learning and social development (McCaslin, 2009).

Through ASE, students, family members, school professionals, and relevant community members increase awareness of their unique social functioning and create connections with others, feeling as though they are not alone in their unique situations that can otherwise appear extremely isolating. Students that feel more connected to their schools have greater academic outcomes (McClure et al., 2010). Furthermore, those students who feel a greater sense of belonging attribute those feelings to teacher support and positive personal characteristics (Allen et al., 2016; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). At home, students who reported having supportive relationships with their parents were found to have better personal adjustment (Malecki & Demaray, 2003). For parents of school-aged children, interventions that engage families in school activities can result in those parents reporting more educational involvement, greater amounts of parent-teacher communication, and more encouraging parental attitudes towards their children's school environment (Chen, Anderson, & Watkins, 2016). In a similar way, teachers who report feeling connected to their schools have increased job satisfaction, and, in turn, their

students generally perform better academically. Together, these studies illustrate how tightly bound school systems affect people's experiences and school-related outcomes.

Approaches to school counseling that focus primarily at the single-student level tend to neglect the profound influences of the various systems that affect students. Conversely, a singular focus on social systems neglects the primary concern of most schooling interventions, that is how does one support the development of the student. The student internalizes the various social forces in and beyond the school environment as the most relevant and viable agent to change the school and other social systems. There are also ethical and pedagogical reasons to support student-within-environment. It is entirely laudable for a school counselor to pursue change at the systems level on behalf of students. In so doing, that school counselor inadvertently becomes the arbitrator of what is just and appropriate for that student. Relatedly, the student is not necessarily empowered to define and pursue change, which seems shortsighted given the inevitability of change in the system (e.g., the student will eventually graduate or leave the school, or social forces might evolve over time). The student is not fully responsible for personal or social change, yet the student is always embedded within systems. Therefore, any intervention must engage the student and members of the school environment in appropriate and empowering ways.

A Brief History of ASE Theory for School Counseling

There exist hundreds of approaches to counseling and that, across these various approaches, the client outcomes are generally consistent and promising (Laska et al., 2014). Adding one more log to the flame might appear superfluous with such an abundance of helpful frameworks. Yet we (Matthew and Hannah) believe there is a unique urgency for theory

specifically tailored to how school counselors support K12 students and other people in school environments.

Across the various theoretical approaches of counseling, select scholars have identified common factors that contribute to desirable client outcomes across all the various approaches (Cuijpers et al., 2019; Wampold, 2015). Given these empirical findings across thousands of counseling studies, one might erroneously assume that theory has little utility in a school counselor's work, especially considering the various clear educational and uneven mental health roles and responsibilities associated with the profession. Peering into these common factors it becomes increasingly clear that the common factors do not necessarily suggest that one become theoretically agonistic or even a practice chameleon. Instead, the common factors literature suggests that the various approaches to practice can contribute to similar desirable outcomes and that one's choice of theory to inform practice should fit the needs of the anticipated client and setting.

Unfortunately, many school counselors entirely disregard theory, or it only vaguely informs one's preferences as a practitioner (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020). It is no wonder that many school counselors and the people we serve are confused about the type and magnitude of mental health service provided by school counselors. In the absence of a clear and germane framework, practice can become ambiguous or even irrelevant. Alternatively, returning to the common factors literature, qualities such as belief in the capacity of the client to develop in intended ways, the cultural appositeness of the practice approach, and the shared agreements in treatment each indicate that having some theory that is specifically attuned to the client context is vital.

Certainly, each established approach to child development and counseling theory is at least minimally relevant to school counseling (ASCA, 2019). Alternatively, one might question if these classical frameworks provide a thoroughgoing relevance to the school as a setting for treatment, the disposition of students as clients, and the roles and responsibilities of school counselors as interventionists. While classical approaches inform, they might not provide precise insights that capture practice behaviors or empirical scholarship for school counseling. Also, many of the classical theories were developed for clinical settings and greatly influenced by a medicalized way of treating the individual client or patient (Hansen, 2008), which contrasts with the suggested focus of professional counselors who are concerned with development, prevention, wellness, and social justice (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021; Myer, 1992).

The fitness of theory on practice and professional values also potentially extends to its empirical relevance. Classical theories may or may not necessarily align with the practice language that occurs in schools (e.g., classroom guidance counseling, which is generally psychoeducational interventions delivered to entire groups of students in classrooms) or all desired outcomes (e.g., academic achievement). For example, students exposed to counseling might experience actualization (person-centered counseling or existential) or develop more adaptive thoughts (cognitive behavioral therapy), but how these concepts pertain to education-specific operations such as a student's executive functioning (i.e., capacities contributing to emotional and cognitive regulation for goal-focused behavior) can be unclear. Furthermore, the language used in counseling or psychological theories might not track on the nomenclature used by educators or other school stakeholders. For these and other empirical reasons (e.g., treatment fidelity in school settings), it is no wonder that school counseling intervention studies only constitute 0.1% of the counseling literature (Griffith et al., 2019).

ASE theory was developed to specifically account for the nuances of school counseling. Each of the concepts found in ASE can be found in the works of other theorists or scholars, yet as they converge into a single kaleidoscopic framework. these concepts manifest into something uniquely fit for school counseling practice. This emergence is consistent with an assumption baked into ASE itself: prior influences come together in ways that both reflect their influences. Yet, the assemblage of these conceptions is altogether unique as they converge.

Matthew and ASE Theory

Akin to many of the historical approaches to counseling, the infancy of ASE theory can be traced back to the personal history and preferences of the initial architect of the theory. For me (Matthew), ASE is undoubtedly related to my personal and professional backgrounds. My father did not make it out of middle school, and my mother struggled with reading and education her entire life. From an early age, I experienced how ruptures in education, social and family strife, and economic struggle affected my personal, social, and learning development. Although I did well during my school years, throughout my life I have often wondered how things might have differed had there been greater educational and personal support.

The influences of my youth certainly catalyzed many of the concepts found in ASE, but there was a single moment when those ideas started to take shape as a formal system. As an undergraduate, I enrolled in a graduate-level course on the philosophy of education. In that course, I was exposed to the ideas of Dewey (1916), Freire (1970), and Vygotsky (1978). I was roused by their ideals but suspicious that their postulates could be vivified in contemporary classrooms. I pondered, "What kind of educator builds the learning and social capacities of the student while challenging the various social structures that limit equitable and just education?" As I reminisce about those questions, I cannot accurately recall the ideas that contributed to my

resolve. However, I was convinced that school counselors were these underutilized educators with the professional dispositions and access to bring life to those philosophers of education. So, I did my best to identify the school counseling professors most closely aligned with my developing values.

Initially, I could not find too many intervention articles in the literature, which I chalked up to my shortcomings as an undergraduate. Undeterred, I continued to probe the literature, and I finally found one article that was published the year I was graduating (Brigman et al., 1999). In the article, Brigman and colleagues discussed findings from an intervention targeting students' attending and self-regulatory, learning, and social strategies. I packed up my modest belongings and relocated to Florida to start a master's program in school counseling under the tutelage of Dr. Brigman.

The timing could not have been more serendipitous as Dr. Brigman was in the early stages of developing a comprehensive manualized school counseling intervention across K-12. I was his first graduate assistant supporting what would become the Student Success Skills (SSS) suite of interventions, which includes small and large group student counseling activities and consultation services to teachers and guardians (https://studentsuccessskills.com). Independent scholars have evaluated SSS and considered it one of the few evidence-based interventions with outcomes specifically attributed to the work of school counselors (Carey et al., 2008).

As a comprehensive theory for school counseling practice, ASE is compatible with the manualized SSS curriculum and yet does go beyond in many important ways. For example, SSS does suggest that school counselors pursue collaborative and helpful classroom climates, whereas ASE places systemic advocacy as a central value and practice behavior for school counselors. Also, while SSS includes various strategies and practices that can be reduced to

broader school counseling practice, the intervention is mostly specific to the contents of the various SSS manuals. ASE, on the other hand, is compliant to manualized interventions, including and beyond SSS. However, as a comprehensive theory, it includes a distinguishable epistemology, suppositions about student or systemic wellness and deficit, and practice behaviors that are generalizable to various settings and circumstances in school systems.

The first writings about ASE theory occurred during the last semesters of my master's program (circa 2001), but it was not until almost a decade later that these ideas started appearing in published works (e.g., Lemberger, 2010). The initial concern was to highlight the importance of working collaboratively with students and educators, as opposed to one or the other discretely. More recently, most ASE-related publications have been randomized controlled trials considering outcomes on students or their teachers (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021; Lemberger-Truelove et al., in press). Looking to the future, there is no intention for ASE to be reified as a stable theoretical approach; instead, the hope is that more individuals will challenge and improve the theory, practice, and empirical investigation of ASE, with the ultimate goal that it can stable enough to provide helpful guidance to practicing school counselors but also prove adaptive enough to continue to support changes in future student and school cultures.

For me (Matthew), the real need for the development of ASE was to provide school counselors with an approach specific to working with children as students in schools. From a young age, school systems did not serve me or many of the people I grew up with in my neighborhood. I wanted to recruit school counselors as allies who could empower students while simultaneously challenging schools to be more relevant and helpful. ASE is intended to be a complete theory for school counselors, and yet it will never be fully finalized; instead, to remain

pertinent to complex students and school systems, it is intended to be a framework that evolves with different voices and demands.

Hannah and ASE Theory

My relationship with ASE theory mirrors many of the readers of this text. That is, I joined a movement of thought that transformed my practice personally and professionally. For me, ASE is like putting on glasses that finally have the right prescription, when for years, I had been squinting, trying to read the letters on the page. However, it is all a journey, and I have learned that professional practice often intersects personal experience and genuinely experiencing challenges leads to the most remarkable growth.

I have always been conscious of systemic influences throughout my life. As a young adolescent, I witnessed my mother's transformation as she engaged in personal therapy to better manage relationships. Her therapeutic process began a journey of reflection and transparency of relational patterns, almost to a point where the behaviors of those within my family appeared predetermined. Watching my mother's growth from a co-dependent caregiver to an extremely independent woman, challenging sociocultural norms that defined her generation, was remarkable and awe-inspiring, illuminating the power of the therapeutic process.

While experience led to interest, my master's degree in marriage and family therapy provided a foundation of knowledge about systems, beginning with the basics of scientific thought applied to family functioning from Gregory Bateson (1941) towards pushing the boundaries of how knowledge is constructed by Kenneth Gergen (1985) and the evolution of family therapy as the field transformed through the waves of behaviorism, cognitive, to post-modernism, and social justice. Foundationally, my perspective of the world remained unchanged (if not more post-modern): We are a product of the systems by which we live. While I could see

such truths clearly from my own experience, it was not until that first real-world counseling opportunity that I immersed myself in educational disparities.

Working with a group of adolescent males required to complete counseling through the juvenile court system, I felt hopeless. Who was there to help these boys, who often lacked familial support and encouragement, who often expressed that no one cared about them at home or school. While employing evidence-based practices at this level, I wondered if a change would occur for any of these young men. Matthew provided me with a viewpoint, but I was not ready to embrace it at that time.

When I was first presented with ASE, I honestly had to sit with it. Matthew had just successfully published his first conceptual ASE manuscript during my first semester as a doctoral student. I was too novice in my counseling experience and lacked the confidence to challenge what I already knew. However, through continued experiences working with students as a school-based counselor and school counselor, I began to make sense of ASE. I became more mindful of our dialect, seeking to understand the student from their viewpoint and join them in their world. Goals were not directed by the school or parents but rather for themselves. In going a step further, I began attending health and wellness meetings to advocate for the student, engage in conversations with parents from a perspective of curiosity, as well as provide advocacy to encourage dialogue at home. My practice focus shifted, still maintaining a systemic perspective as I moved into the role of a school counselor and eventual school counselor educator, but with a focus more so on advocacy. I wanted students, who often felt so isolated and alone, type-casted into a specific social group, or struggling with symptoms of mental health or neurodiversity, to learn skills to become stronger and to advocate for themselves.

The intersection of experience and knowledge is where ASE lands for me today. While Matthew has provided the foundation, others have contributed perspectives that push ASE to new horizons (e.g., Johnson, et al., in press; Liu et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2020; Zyromski et al., 2022), providing intentionality behind each decision. As a school counselor, ASE is grounded in the mission and vision of a school counseling program, focused on providing all students with the skillsets that promote success in school and life. I embrace ASE not just as a counselor or counselor educator but also as a mother. Advocacy for my neurodiverse children is profound, as well as co-regulating experiences within the home to ensure they can practice and develop the skillsets needed to succeed in their future. While my conscious experience began with systemic awareness, growing into ASE has shifted from theory into a way of being.

The Present Book

The current book intends to provide readers with a basic primer on the assumptions and practice priorities related to the ASE school counseling theory. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 explain some of the most foundational assumptions of ASE and provide some general suggestions for practice. These chapters are mostly organized around the 5Cs of ASE theory, a memory device intended to inform how a school counselor assesses students and school systems, pursues practice and advocacy behaviors, and evaluates anticipated outcomes. The 5Cs of ASE include curiosity, connectedness, co-regulation, compassion, and contribution. Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 include applications to specific educational contexts. These topics are not necessarily exhaustive, but they might provide school counselors with more specific ideas on ASE in practice with certain student or school system concerns. Finally, in Chapter 9, we discuss some of the recent empirical studies performed using ASE as the theoretical guide and provide school

counseling practitioners and scholars with recommendations for empirical practice as informed specifically by ASE theory.

This text should elucidate the spirit of ASE. Schools are systems that are influenced by various personal and social forces. Students, educators, and other people affiliated with schools are also systems in that they have been profoundly influenced by external and internal forces. The stance of ASE suggests that the most influential approach to school counseling requires support directly to the student and at the school system levels as co-determinants of experience.

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