Chapter 1:
An Introduction to the Advocating Student-within-Environment Theory for Middle and High School Counselors

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Schools are incredibly complex communities, abounding with students, educators, and various other professional and non—professional individuals. Beyond the people themselves, there exist elaborate webs constituted of academic and social expectations, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal influences that each influence the lives of all people involved in schooling. Running alongside the people and dynamics are school counselors who support both individuals and the school as a whole. One approach intended to inspire how school counselors engage with the interacting determinants found in schools is the Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) theory (Lemberger, 2010, Lemberger & Hutchison, 2014; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2024).

At its core, ASE theory focuses on cultivating each student's capacities to thrive in and beyond the school environment. In parallel, adherents of ASE embrace that school counselors address the immediate needs of individual students but also advocate for systemic changes to create a more supportive and inclusive environment for all students. This dual focus aims to foster a school climate where all members of a school community can flourish by developing the agency and the skills necessary to navigate learning, social, and vocational opportunities and challenges.

ASE theory contends that personal and social experiences are interwoven, shaping each individual in profound ways. It emphasizes *prior determinants of experience*—including all biological, psychological, cultural, and environmental factors—that influence students' individual experiences and trajectories (Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023). While building a

supportive environment, ASE does not prescribe how communities should ideally manifest; instead, it fosters an adaptive, reflective approach, allowing individuals and communities to emerge organically and reflexively.

Practitioners working from an ASE perspective acknowledge that, while schools are intended to support individual growth, they have at times failed to serve the best interests of all groups. School counselors practicing ASE theory consider both the immediate and the long-term roles of students, educators, and other school stakeholders within and beyond the school. While traditional interventions may focus on improving students' current functioning, ASE encourages a broader perspective, asking how students might also influence and shape various communities they reside in throughout their lives. This approach highlights the importance of fostering critical consciousness, or "sapience," which equips students with the wisdom and awareness needed to navigate and transform limited, oppressive, or restrictive environments. ASE aims to empower students to transcend limiting social structures and influence broader social systems in propitious ways (Freire, 1970; 1973).

ASE theory asserts that while schools are designed to activate students' inner capacities, the counselor's role is also to challenge and support the larger system by creating conditions for growth. Counselors work to develop students' executive functioning and other generalizable skills that are applicable across various areas of life. These capacities are bolstered by improving school conditions—such as teacher-student relationships, school climate, and inclusion practices—which allow all students to flourish. ASE-informed interventions aim to be preventative, developmental, and reflexive, supporting the personal and social conditions that lead to lasting wellness.

In advocating for both individual and systemic change, ASE theory recognizes the concept of "governors," which are influences that either contribute to or detract from a student's well-being and development. Unlike the term "determinants," which implies fixed outcomes, "governors" suggest that these influences are variable and adaptable. By identifying and addressing contributory and detracting governors, ASE counselors help students to navigate their environments in ways that are both personally meaningful and socially beneficial.

ASE is rooted in the belief that students benefit from the enhancement of both personal capacities and supportive environments. Central to ASE theory are five core conceptual and practice values—Curiosity, Connectedness, Co-regulation, Compassion, and Contribution. Together, they foster a sixth and seventh values, Composition and Community, which unites individual strengths within a shared environment. The primary goal is to prepare students for future opportunities and challenges, emphasizing the importance of nurturing capacities rather than focusing solely on specific ways of being or behaviors. This perspective suggests that personal and social development is more than merely complying with current norms, rather students and school personnel are encouraged to build adaptability that is pointed at continuous growth and wellness at the personal and societal levels.

ASE and the Developmental Fitness with Adolescence

Adolescence is a critical developmental period, generally punctuated by youths' urge to establish a distinct identity while at the same time forging important social connections. As such, ASE theory emphasizes the complex interactions between an adolescent's internal characteristics (e.g., personal history, mental health, and self-concept) and the external influences of their environment (including family, peer groups, culture, and school systems). This holistic perspective informs how school counselors work with adolescents, emphasizing that advocacy

activities performed by the counselor can create more facilitative environments to complement and amplify students' personal development achieved in counseling or other growth intended experiences.

A unique conceptual consideration for counselors in ASE theory is the emphasis on adolescent identity development. Adolescence is a crucial period for self-exploration and identity formation, with students beginning to solidify their personal beliefs, values, and goals. ASE theory encourages counselors to view each adolescent as actively shaping and being shaped by their environment. In practice, this means facilitating discussions that help students explore and define their identity, while also considering how factors like culture, peer influence, and school dynamics impact their sense of self. Through ASE's student-centered approach, school counselors help students build a sanguine, self-aware identity that supports both their social and academic well-being.

For many adolescents, individual development requires someone who servs as an advocate for systemic support and change. ASE theory holds that adolescents are embedded within broader systems that can either support or hinder their growth. Recognizing this, school counselors are encouraged to advocate not only for individual students but also for systemic changes that promote inclusive and benefiting environments. For example, counselors might identify patterns of stress or exclusion experienced by certain groups of students, such as those from marginalized backgrounds, and advocate for school-wide interventions, like inclusive policies or culturally responsive teaching. In practice, this might also involve consulting and collaborating with teachers, administrators, and families to create supportive networks that address specific needs and foster resilience.

A key practical consideration in this theory is the importance of cultural competence and sensitivity. Adolescents come from diverse backgrounds, and ASE theory emphasizes that counselors must understand and respect these unique cultural contexts to support students effectively. Counselors can apply cultural competence by creating a safe, nonevaluative space where students feel validated and respected for who they are. For example, counselors might incorporate culturally relevant materials, practices, and examples into their work with students to foster inclusivity and trust. By approaching each student's cultural background as an integral part of their identity, counselors can help adolescents feel seen and supported, which is essential for effective counseling relationships.

Finally, ASE theory highlights the importance of developing self-regulation and executive functioning skills intended to promote adolescent growth. These skills are crucial for navigating the demands of adolescence, from academic responsibilities to social challenges. In practice, counselors can work with students on goal-setting, time management, emotional regulation, and decision-making. The type of self-regulation endorsed by ASE theory is not to be confused with requiring compliance in the student; instead, these regulatory and executive control skills are intended to sharpen the innate capacities of adolescents so that they can be their own best arbitrators of their social positionality and life pursuits. By equipping adolescents with strategies to manage their emotions, organize tasks, and solve problems effectively, counselors not only support their immediate academic success but also build long-term resilience. The focus on self-regulation aligns with ASE theory's emphasis on fostering students' ability to thrive within complex environments, ultimately preparing them for future challenges and opportunities.

ASE and the Fitness to Adults Affiliated with Middle and High Schools

In ASE theory, teachers, school administrators, parents and guardians, community members, and policy makers are seen as integral components of the student's broader environment, acting as both participants and potential advocates who directly influence students' academic, social, and emotional development. Rather than viewing teachers and administrators solely as facilitators of instruction or enforcers of school policies, ASE theory emphasizes their roles as active participants in creating a supportive, responsive, and inclusive school culture. This orientation recognizes that teachers and administrators have a profound impact on shaping the school environment, thus placing them in key positions to advocate for students, address their unique needs, and foster a culture that supports holistic development.

In practice, a school counselor who adopts ASE theory will deliver direct interventions to youth in various school settings, and at the same time expose relevant adults to the content of these interventions in appropriate, ethical, and student-centered ways. This approach is intended to establish reflexivity between students and members of the school context. Capacity development by the student requires awareness, reinforcement, and value at the systems level to persist and grow beyond the aspirations of the original counseling intervention.

With this orientation, school counselors work with educators and other adults to foster nurturing relationships and promote classroom environments that are inclusive and responsive to diverse student needs. ASE theory encourages all adults to view themselves as advocates who understand the complexities of each student's environment, both within and outside of school. This approach might involve adopting culturally responsive teaching practices, differentiating instruction to cater to varied learning needs, or fostering an open and respectful classroom where students feel safe to express themselves. When school professionals see themselves as advocates

for their students, they play an active role in helping students develop confidence, resilience, and a strong sense of belonging, all of which are essential for academic and social success.

The 3C + 5C = 2C Framework for ASE Theory

As a theory to inform the practice of counseling youth and the people who influence their schooling experiences, ASE includes features to accomplish the following: 1) assist how a school counselor might conceptualize the individual student and the school as a dynamic system embedded within a larger sociocultural context; 2) inspire values and behaviors that are germane to individual student development and systemic transformation; and 3) posit a flexible and adaptive outcome that is considerate of and desirable to the diverse and changing needs of students and school systems. To this end, ASE theory employs the 3C + 5C = 2C framework, which was conceived to exhibit how school counselors can work in a theoretically intentional manner that is germane to various types of students, events, and learning contexts.

Figure 1

ASE Conceptual Map

ASE 3C & 5C = 5C Framework					
Heritable/ Originating	**Counseling Practice Priorities & Student Experiences/Development**			**Intentional/ Emerging**	**Heritable/ Emerging**
Culture	Curiosity	Co-Regulation	Curiosity	Community	Culture
Constitution	Connectedness		Connectedness	Composition	Constitution
Circumstance	Compassion		Compassion		Circumstance
	Contribution		Contribution		

3Cs for Conceptualization

Human development is generally dictated by various prior governors of experience, which include various factors established before and during one's upbringing and persist throughout one's lifespan. These governors include the biological, familial, cultural, socioeconomic ingredients shape a child's environment and experiences from an early age. In

order to conceptualize the profundity of factors that make up students, educators, and other school related persons, ASE-informed school counselors consider the assorted aspects of culture, constitution, and circumstance for all people that they support in schools, with awareness of the intersectional nature of these factors.

These cultural, constitutional, and circumstantial features are dynamic and ever-changing aspects of experience. Just as the colored crystals in a kaleidoscope shifts to create new and complex patterns with every turn, a person's life is continually shaped by shifting interactions between personal, social, academic, and systemic factors. ASE theory emphasizes that counselors must consider these constantly evolving patterns to fully understand each student's needs and challenges. The ASE kaleidoscope metaphor underscores the importance of seeing students as multi-dimensional individuals, whose development and well-being are influenced by a complex and fluctuating blend of internal and external elements. This perspective encourages counselors to approach each student holistically and adaptively, recognizing the fluidity of their experiences within the larger school and societal environments.

Culture

Culture plays a vital role in understanding the diverse backgrounds and experiences that shape students' identities and interactions within the educational environment. Culture encompasses the beliefs, values, customs, and social norms that influence how individuals perceive themselves and their place in the world (Lehman, et al., 2004). By acknowledging the importance of culture, counselors and educators can develop a more nuanced understanding of the factors that impact students' behaviors, motivations, and academic outcomes. This cultural awareness allows for the creation of more inclusive and responsive educational environments that celebrate diversity and empower all students.

Alongside personal culture, school culture is understood as a dynamic and complex environment that encompasses the values, norms, relationships, and practices shaping students' daily experiences and development. The ASE theory emphasizes that school culture is not static; rather, it is continually evolving as students, teachers, staff, counselors, and administrators interact and influence one another. This orientation sees school culture as a powerful determinant of student well-being, academic engagement, and social-emotional growth, recognizing that a positive, warm, and inclusive school culture can be a protective factor for students facing various challenges. ASE theory encourages a holistic view of school culture, seeing it as a system that should actively support each student's development within a web of social, emotional, and academic contexts.

Within this theory, culture is not seen as an inert force, rather it includes and fosters the multiple aspects of human experience that impact all people and systems in an ongoing manner. School counselors can work with students to explore and navigate the cultural influences that shape their experiences and choices. By acknowledging how students are affected by their multiple intersecting cultures, school counselors can empower them to critically assess which influences are helpful and which may be detrimental to their well-being. For instance, if a student feels pressure to meet high family expectations that contribute to stress, a school counselor might work with them to balance these expectations with their own goals and needs. This process helps students build self-awareness and agency, as they learn to identify and manage external influences in a way that supports their growth. Understanding culture as a set of powerful influences that can be challenged encourages students to become active participants in their own development, giving them the tools to make decisions that align with their values and personal aspirations.

Utilizing culture in the ASE framework involves recognizing and valuing the varied and distinct backgrounds of students and educators as foundations for building strong, supportive relationships. School counselors work with students and educators to explore their complex cultural identities, which includes helping them articulate their unique experiences and perspectives. This exploration fosters self-awareness and confidence, allowing students to connect their cultural backgrounds to their academic and social lives in and beyond the school context. For instance, a counselor might incorporate culturally relevant materials and practices into their small group counseling sessions, creating an environment where students feel seen and validated. By honoring cultural identities, counselors help students develop a positive sense of self and belonging, which is essential for academic success and emotional well-being.

Furthermore, an ASE-oriented approach to school culture advocates for empowering students and educators (and family members) by actively including them in decision-making processes and fostering agency within the school system. School counselors advocate for the creation and maintenance of activities where students have a voice in shaping school policies, practices, and events. This participatory approach gives students a sense of ownership over their school experience, helping them develop leadership skills and a commitment to the well-being of their community. In an ASE-informed culture, students are seen as active contributors rather than passive recipients of the school environment. This inclusive, student-centered culture fosters adaptability and confidence, supporting students as they develop personally, socially, and academically.

Finally, school counselors and school leaders advocate for policies that support cultural diversity and equity within the school system. This includes establishing partnerships with families and community organizations to enhance cultural competence and awareness. Engaging

with families from diverse backgrounds can provide valuable insights into the specific needs and challenges faced by students, allowing for more targeted support and resources. Furthermore, schools can promote events and initiatives that celebrate cultural diversity, fostering a sense of community and belonging among students and families. By integrating culture into the ASE framework, school counselors and other educational professionals can create a learning environment that not only supports individual students but also transforms educational systems to be more equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the rich diversity of the student body.

Constitution

If one's culture is the sum of one's ecological determinants of experience, then constitution is the amalgamation of the complex, multi-dimensional interplay of internal factors (such as personality traits, emotional well-being, and cognitive or physical abilities) and social influences (including family dynamics, cultural background, and school environment). This orientation emphasizes that students cannot be understood in isolation; rather, they exist within a web of relationships and contexts that significantly influences their experiences and growth. By viewing students and educators holistically, ASE theory recognizes the uniqueness of each individual and the importance of considering their personal narratives, strengths, and challenges as developing people.

This student-centered orientation can be utilized to support student development by promoting personalized approaches to education and counseling. School counselors work closely with students to understand their individual needs, aspirations, and circumstances. For instance, by conducting assessments that explore a student's interests, motivations, and challenges, counselors can tailor interventions that resonate with the student's personal context. This might involve creating individualized learning plans, facilitating goal-setting exercises, or

implementing mentorship programs that connect students with role models who reflect their backgrounds and aspirations. By recognizing the individuality of each student, school counselors can foster an environment that nurtures personal growth, adaptability and responsiveness, and self-efficacy, ultimately helping students pursue their potential.

Moreover, the individual student orientation within ASE theory encourages schools to adopt a more inclusive and responsive approach to educational practices and policies. Schools can implement systems that prioritize student voice and agency, allowing students to actively participate in shaping their educational experiences. This might include initiatives such as student led groups, feedback surveys, or participatory decision-making processes that empower students to express their ideas and concerns. By valuing students' perspectives and involving them in the decision-making process, schools can create a culture of collaboration and respect that honors each student's individuality and contributions. This shift toward inclusivity not only supports student development but also enhances the overall school environment, making it more engaging and responsive to the needs of all students.

Circumstance

While culture and one's constitution are profoundly influential one one's experience in and beyond a school environment, neither individually nor together do they dictate total experience. Circumstance describes the immediate, changeable conditions influencing a person's current situation; while culture includes persistent shared values and norms, and one's constitution is define as dynamic yet continuous individual, intrinsic qualities. Together, these elements interact to create a nuanced understanding of a person's needs and behaviors in ASE theory. The emphasis on circumstance is essential because it highlights that students' or educators' behaviors and challenges are often responses to the conditions that influence

experience and behavior. For example, a student experiencing academic difficulty may be impacted by stressors such as family instability, financial hardship, or social pressures. By considering these circumstances, counselors can identify the root causes of issues rather than focusing solely on surface behaviors or symptoms. This perspective allows school counselors and other school allies to respond with targeted interventions that address the underlying needs of students, ultimately leading to more lasting and meaningful change.

Additionally, ASE's focus on circumstance empowers school counselors and educators to advocate for systemic changes that support all students within their specific contexts. Since students' circumstances can often reveal inequities or barriers within the school environment, such as limited access to resources, cultural biases, or inflexible policies, this awareness enables school staff to address and modify these systemic factors. For example, if certain students are disproportionately affected by disciplinary practices, counselors can work to implement restorative approaches that consider each student's unique situation. By addressing these systemic barriers, ASE theory helps create a more equitable school environment that adapts to the diverse circumstances of all students.

Lastly, the importance of circumstance in ASE theory aligns with the goal of fostering adaptability. By understanding and validating students' lived experiences, school counselors can help them develop coping strategies and skills that enable them to navigate their circumstances effectively. This might involve teaching self-regulation techniques, helping students connect with support networks, or developing personalized plans that respect each student's unique needs. Emphasizing circumstance not only allows for a more compassionate approach but also empowers students to understand and respond to the factors shaping their lives, ultimately supporting their growth and resilience within a complex world.

5Cs as School Counseling Values and Behaviors

Drawing from the kaleidoscopic metaphor intended to illustrate the various governors of experience, the ASE informed school counselor commits to certain values and practice behaviors intended to inspire new and more prosperous outcomes for persons and systems. This developmental process recognizes that change is not linear; rather, it involves a complex interplay between individual factors—such as emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—and environmental influences like social dynamics, school culture, and family systems. Inspired by Vygotsky (1978) who posited that, "the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study" (p.65), the ASE informed school counselor will adopt five practice values that anticipate five related capacities that might be refined and matured in students and educators. These five values and practices include curiosity, connection, co-regulation, compassion, and contribution, abbreviately known as the 5Cs.

Each of the 5Cs are aimed at the establishment of a strong, trusting relationship between the counselor and the student or educator. This relationship serves as a foundational element that fosters openness and vulnerability, enabling recipients to explore their thoughts and feelings in a safe space. School counselors can utilize active listening, empathy, and validation to create an environment where students feel comfortable discussing their challenges and aspirations. Ultimately, the therapeutic change process within ASE theory highlights the interconnectedness of individual growth and environmental factors, emphasizing a holistic approach to student well-being and success.

Curiosity

Central to ASE is the understanding that school counselors must advocate for the student not in isolation, but as part of a larger ecological system that includes external influences and

supports. As a value for school counselors to embody, curiosity encourages school counselors to broach each student without presumption, exploring the unique environmental factors that contribute to the student's challenges and strengths. Through this lens, curiosity becomes a pathway for gaining deeper insight into the student's background, culture, and personal experiences, fostering an empathetic understanding that can lead to more personalized support and advocacy.

As a counseling outcome that can be experienced by students, educators, or other school pertinent individuals, curiosity is understood as *sapience*. Sapience is wisdom and capacity for deep understanding that one develops as they learn to navigate and make sense of their experiences within various social, academic, and personal contexts. Sapience, in this context, goes beyond simple knowledge acquisition—it involves insight, discernment, and the ability to make thoughtful decisions that reflect an awareness of both internal values and external influences. ASE theory emphasizes that fostering sapience equips recipients with the tools needed to critically analyze their environments and make decisions that align with their well-being and long-term goals. Furthermore, as a value and outcome, curiosity suggests that there is a discernable lived experience that is veritable and reasonable and, yet, at the same time there are various interpretations and perspectives to consider for deeper sapience.

Curiosity as a practice behavior suggests that school counselors encourage sapience by guiding individuals in reflective practices that foster self-awareness, critical thinking, and ethical decision-making. School counselors can also use curiosity to facilitate a safe space where students feel understood and valued. When school counselors display genuine curiosity about students' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, they signal openness and respect, encouraging students to share more authentically. This curiosity-driven approach helps build trust, making it

easier for students to explore their struggles and aspirations. By asking open-ended questions and actively listening to responses, school counselors validate students' perspectives and empower them to become more introspective. In practice, curiosity might lead school counselor to inquire not only about students' academic performance but also about their peer relationships, family dynamics, and emotional well-being, forming a more complete picture that can guide interventions and support strategies.

Curiosity within ASE harkens to the 3Cs that the school counselor or student utilizes to conceptualize the various prior determinants of experiences. Prior determinants are not necessarily fixed causal ingredients, rather they are conceived as contributory governors (assets) or detracting governors (impediments), that influence experience rather than wholly dictate it. Governors can include a range of social, cultural, and institutional influences—such as family expectations, peer dynamics, cultural norms, and school policies—that shape the way students perceive themselves and interact with their surroundings. When school counselors and students consider the influence of governors, they can used to explore and navigate the influences that shape experiences and choices. By acknowledging how these external factors affect students, educators, and other social forces affecting schools, counselors can empower individuals to critically assess which influences are helpful and which may be detrimental to school climate and well-being.

Connectedness

A prerequisite value and practice behavior to enact curiosity is to establish connectedness between oneself and others. When one experiences connectedness, they generally feel safe, valued, and purposeful. From an ASE lens, connectedness can be a powerful strategy to support students holistically within their unique environments. ASE theory emphasizes that a student’s

challenges and strengths are shaped by their broader social contexts, which include relationships with peers, family members, teachers, and the school system itself. Counselors focusing on connectedness can foster meaningful relationships with students, creating a supportive space where students feel valued and understood. By building these genuine connections, counselors help students develop a stronger sense of belonging, which research consistently links to improved mental health, academic performance, and resilience. Through intentional connectedness, counselors validate students' experiences, encouraging them to actively engage with their school environment and to feel more supported within it.

Connectedness also encourages students to develop healthy interpersonal skills and relationships within the school environment. When school counselors' model and emphasize the importance of empathy, active listening, and trust, students learn to cultivate these qualities in their relationships with peers, teachers, and family. This approach not only reinforces students' social skills but also fosters a greater sense of community and shared responsibility within the school. By feeling connected, students are more likely to engage positively in school activities, seek out help when needed, and build a network of support. For example, a school counselor may facilitate peer support groups or mentor programs that connect students with similar interests or challenges, providing both relational support and a sense of community that extends beyond the counseling office.

For school counselors, fostering connectedness goes beyond individual relationships and includes building bridges within the broader school system. School counselors can act as liaisons between students, teachers, and administrators, facilitating open communication and a sense of unity within the school environment. This can involve collaborating with teachers to address student needs, working with administrators to create inclusive policies, and fostering

relationships with families to ensure students receive consistent support across home and school settings. By connecting various stakeholders in the student's life, counselors create a web of support that reinforces the student's growth and well-being, aligning resources and efforts to create a nurturing environment. ASE-driven connectedness, therefore, benefits not only individual students but also strengthens the school community as a whole, making it more inclusive and responsive.

Furthermore, connectedness allows counselors to advocate for systemic change in ways that prioritize inclusivity and equity within the school environment. By understanding students' experiences and connecting with them on a personal level, school counselors can identify patterns of inequity that may affect certain groups. Through these insights, counselors can work to promote systemic reforms—such as culturally responsive curricula or accessible mental health resources—that address these inequities and support all students. When school counselors engage with both students and school systems in this way, they ensure that their advocacy efforts are informed by real, human experiences, creating a sense of collective responsibility and shared purpose within the school. Connectedness, therefore, becomes a foundational aspect of advocacy under ASE, as it empowers school counselors to create supportive environments that reflect the needs and voices of every student.

Co-regulation

Co-regulation is when two or more self-aware, intentional individuals draw from various cultural, social, and personal sources to inform and influence behavior (McCaslin, 2009). As a value and practice behavior for school counselors inspired by ASE theory, co-regulation contributes to students' emotional and behavioral needs by acting as calm, supportive figures within the school setting. Co-regulation involves a school counselor's ability to help students

manage their emotions and stress by providing a stable, empathetic presence. ASE theory views students within their broader environmental contexts, understanding that external pressures from home, peers, and school can significantly impact a student's ability to self-regulate. By enticing mutual co-regulation, school counselors help students develop the skills needed to navigate challenging emotions, especially those stemming from environmental stressors.

Co-regulation in ASE is associated with the concept of *allostasis* (Sterling, 2012), which pertains to the various predictive regulation strategies pulled from a person's prior experiences (i.e., cognitive, emotional, behavioral, cultural) and used to establish ongoing personal and social adaptability in response emergent events or environments. ASE theory acknowledges that students' challenges are often influenced by environmental factors, making stress a significant component of their day-to-day experiences. School counselors who use an allostasis-based approach help students understand and manage stress effectively by teaching adaptive strategies that enable them to achieve balance in the face of academic, social, and personal pressures. The focus on allostasis is different than the pursuance of homeostasis; consistent with ASE theory, the goal is not to inspire compliance or conformity in schools, rather the intent is to support students' volitional capacities for self-definition and social transformation. This sentiment is best articulated in the following quote from the ASE related literature:

> "To best prepare young children in poverty for later life challenges, professional counselors must make every attempt to improve social conditions; however, it is equally important that young children's internal capacities be strengthened either to accommodate improved social conditions or to maximize resilience in the face of persistent adversity" (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018, p. 299).

Co-regulation can be established when students feel comfortable expressing their feelings and vulnerabilities. In a co-regulatory relationship, the school counselor's calm and empathetic demeanor helps reduce a student's stress and anxiety, allowing the student to feel seen and

understood. By listening actively and validating students' emotions, school counselors help them understand that their feelings are both acknowledged and manageable. This fosters trust and security, which encourages students to be open about their struggles and seek support as needed. For instance, a school counselor might notice a student displaying heightened anxiety or frustration and respond by engaging in calming activities, deep breathing, or grounding techniques, allowing the student to experience a calming influence in real time. This co-regulation practice not only addresses immediate emotional needs but also teaches students valuable strategies for future allostasis.

Beyond individual interactions, co-regulation can also extend to support the broader school environment by influencing the ways teachers and staff approach student interactions. School counselors trained in ASE can model co-regulatory techniques in their collaborations with teachers and staff, encouraging them to adopt similar calming, supportive approaches with students. This may include training sessions on emotional de-escalation, providing resources on managing challenging classroom behaviors, and promoting empathetic communication with students. Recognizing that stress often arises from systemic issues like academic pressures, inequitable access to resources, or family challenges, ASE-informed school counselors can work with school leaders to make structural changes that benefit student well-being. This might include advocating for learning accommodations, promoting equitable access to mental health resources, or implementing trauma-informed practices that support students facing adversity.

The concept of co-regulation further illustrates the challenges implicit to personal and social change. Even if a student amplifies their initiative and abilities, without parallel preparedness for development in the school environment there is little incentive and support to maintain or continue development at the individual student level. This is the central dictum of

ASE theory, sustaining and impactful change must be shared between the student and relevant aspects of the school environment, or it is unlikely that development will sustain nonetheless flourish and adapt continuously throughout the lifespan.

Compassion

The prefix "com" reflects the central value and practice of ASE theory, namely that all relationships exist *within* contexts. Passion alludes to the ontological *being* for students and educators (biological, psychological, cultural) to exist in a school, in their given role, and in relationship with the various environments in their spheres. Considered together, from an ASE perspective, compassion is the value and practice of personal and social acceptance with discernment. From an ASE perspective, this version of compassion is articulated in the following quote:

> Counselors who use SEL [sic; i.e., social and emotional learning] and MBI [sic; i.e., mindfulness-based intervention] activities do not assuage students, especially those who have experienced personal or social harm. Instead, mindfulness-based nonjudgment, for example, refers to students' experiential discernment and the inclination to suspend pernicious identification or evaluation of these experiences. Stated otherwise, students from disenfranchised communities do not accept inadequate or deleterious social conditions; instead, using social–emotional and mindfulness strategies, they accept their cognitive and affective reactions and respond with clearer intentionality. (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2018, p. 299)

Compassion suggests that being (as student, as educator, or as parent) results in a complex self who is tethered to various competing systems and influences. Therefore, compassion is the practice of discerning prior causes and effects of experience in a benevolent and focused way that is protective of one's wellbeing and ongoing development.

ASE emphasizes that students' struggles often stem from external factors like family challenges, peer pressure, or systemic inequities, which means effective support requires a deep understanding of these influences. When school counselors approach students with compassion,

they acknowledge and validate these contextual influences, showing empathy and kindness that fosters a safe and trusting relationship. Compassion-driven counseling and education under ASE allows students to feel accepted and understood in a non-judgmental space, encouraging them to express their true selves and explore solutions collaboratively.

Compassion also empowers counselors to provide tailored support that considers each student's unique experiences and needs. By listening intently and responding empathetically, counselors can identify not only the issues a student faces but also the strengths and resilience they possess. This compassionate approach enables school counselors to help students see their own worth and capabilities, encouraging self-compassion and self-acceptance. For example, if a student is struggling with self-concept due to academic pressures, a compassionate counselor might help them reframe their challenges as opportunities for growth, emphasizing that their value isn't solely tied to academic achievements. This kind of compassion-centered guidance is particularly powerful for students who may feel marginalized or misunderstood within their environments, as it provides them with a counter-narrative of acceptance and support.

In addition to supporting individual students, compassion as a technique can influence the broader school system by shaping the way teachers, staff, and administrators engage with students. ASE-aligned school counselors can model compassionate practices and offer training or resources that encourage staff to adopt a compassionate, student-centered approach in their daily interactions. For instance, a school counselor might advocate for restorative disciplinary practices over punitive measures, showing how compassionate approaches reduce negative outcomes and support students' emotional and social growth. By promoting compassion at a systemic level, school counselors help build a school culture where empathy and understanding are prioritized, creating a more supportive and inclusive environment that benefits all students.

Compassion-driven advocacy within the ASE framework enables school counselors to pursue systemic changes that address inequities impacting student well-being. Recognizing the barriers some students face—such as discrimination, limited resources, or social stigma—compassionate counselors actively work to create a more equitable school environment. They may advocate for policies that ensure equal access to mental health support, inclusive curricula, or additional resources for underserved students. Through this compassionate advocacy, counselors become powerful allies in creating a school system that recognizes and responds to students' needs holistically. Compassion, as used in ASE, thus extends beyond individual interactions to influence the school environment itself, fostering a culture where students feel supported, valued, and understood.

Contribution

As an approach intended to cultivate individual agency and pursue social transformation, it is essential that ASE theory includes formal values and counseling activities that inspire overt behavioral expressions. The final C of *contribution* suggests that the school counselor join with students and educators to enact tangible behaviors that result in personal and systemic development. As a value, contribution represents a commitment to mutual acts of solidarity and responsivity. As a counseling technique, contribution is a material way to encourage purpose and belonging within their school communities. ASE emphasizes understanding and supporting students within the context of their environments, which includes their connections to peers, family, school, and society. By encouraging students to make meaningful contributions—whether through helping others, participating in projects, or engaging in extracurricular activities—counselors can help students feel more connected to their environments and recognize the positive impact they can have. This sense of purpose fosters

self-worth and social agency, as students see themselves as valuable members of their school community, capable of making a difference.

Through contribution, school counselors can also help students develop important social-emotional skills such as empathy, teamwork, and responsibility. By encouraging students to participate in group activities, community service, or peer support programs, counselors create opportunities for them to practice these skills in real-life settings. For example, a school counselor might suggest that a student struggling with self-confidence join a mentorship program where they can help younger students with academic or social challenges. This opportunity to contribute to others helps students shift their focus outward, building empathy and connection while reinforcing their own strengths and abilities. In this way, contribution fosters both personal growth and social connectedness, supporting ASE's focus on students' development within their broader social environments.

Contribution as a counseling technique also extends to shaping a positive school climate. School counselors can work with teachers, administrators, and student leaders to create programs and initiatives that allow students to actively engage in and contribute to their school environment. Activities like organizing school events, participating in student-led committees, or contributing to a school beautification project empower students to take ownership of their school community, cultivating pride and a sense of belonging. By facilitating these opportunities, counselors help create a school culture where all students feel that their input is valued and that they play a meaningful role in shaping their school. This approach aligns with ASE's emphasis on advocacy and creating supportive environments that encourage student agency.

2Cs that School Counselors Pursue

The ASE approach to school counseling is generally concerned with providing students and other participants in school systems with opportunities to develop and thrive in ways that are not fully dictated by prior determinants of experience. Although there is no predetermined- or ideal-self assumed in ASE theory, there is some proto version of the person that can emerge if consistently engaged in supportive conditions for development. As such, the final 2Cs in the ASE framework illustrates how personal (i.e., composition) and environmental (i.e., community) outcomes can vary and evolve across individuals and conditions.

Composition

In ASE theory, the composition of one's personal character is viewed as a dynamic, holistic expression of personal wellness that arises through the nurturing of curiosity, connectedness, co-regulation, compassion, and contribution. This is related to and yet different from one's constitution, which is personal and yet almost fully inherited outside of the conscious control of the person. To illustrate this distinction, the etymology of constitution comes from the Latin constitutus, which means "set up" or "established" whereas composition in Latin (i.e., componere) is translated as "put together." Therefore, it is critical that the school counselor differentiate the inherited constitution from one's composition, which is emergent from various complex governors experienced throughout development.

Composition highlights the integration of internal strengths and external supports, framing development as a collaborative and fluid process rather than a static acquisition of traits. In this manner, ASE theory avoids the individualistic and potentially deficit-oriented lens of traditional character education. This approach emphasizes adaptability, collaboration, and advocacy, ensuring that students are supported as whole individuals rather than being judged by narrow or universal standards of "character."

ASE theory suggests that wellness is not just an individual achievement but an outcome of constructive interactions within one's social environment. Through this lens, character formation is seen as a continuous process, shaped by the student's internal attributes and interactions with peers, teachers, family, and community. Leading with curiosity, connectedness, co-regulation, compassion, and contribution as guiding elements of practice, school counselors help the student develop a well-rounded personage that is capable, socially aware, and actively engaged in personal, academic, and vocational growth.

Community

For ASE theory, community is defined as a dynamic and emergent network of relationships and interactions that shape students' experiences and contribute to their development. Community in ASE theory goes beyond the physical or geographic boundaries of a school; it includes the social, emotional, cultural, and academic connections that exist between students, educators, families, and the broader societal context. This perspective views community as a supportive system that actively influences and is influenced by each member, reflecting the theory's emphasis on the interplay between individual students and their environments.

If culture includes the total of one's inherited social influences, then community are those social experiences that are crafted. The distinction is important because while culture may exert passive or unexamined influence over a student's environment, community is largely an intentional, actionable process that allows for agency and transformation.

Community in ASE theory is foundational to fostering a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. Students thrive when they feel connected to a larger supportive network, which enhances their engagement, motivation, and emotional well-being. The school is

seen as a central hub within the community, one that brings together diverse individuals who each contribute to an inclusive, respectful, and empathetic environment. At the individual student or educator level, community is understood as endogenous, that is the within aspect of student-within-environment. School counselors who apply the concept of endogenous can work with students to identify and develop their internal strengths, such as self-confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience. By focusing on these qualities, counselors help students cultivate a strong sense of self-in-environment that enables them to handle academic pressures, social challenges, and personal setbacks. By fostering personal and social connections, ASE theory emphasizes the importance of community as a protective factor, especially for students who may feel isolated or face challenges in their personal lives.

ASE as an Evidence-Supported Approach to School Counseling

In a content analysis study that included all school counseling intervention studies published in counseling journals from 2003 to 2022, ASE theory was the most used school counseling theory in those school counselor-led intervention studies (Kim et al., 2024). Examples of ASE trials performed in K12 schools highlight gains in areas such as students' executive functioning, feelings of connectedness, curiosity, and academic achievement outcomes on standardized reading, math, and science tests (Bowers et al., 2020; Ceballos et al., 2021; Lemberger et al., 2018; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021). Across the ASE studies, the samples include ethnically and economically diverse students across various educational settings, spanning both rural and urban schools. Consistent with theory, scholars evaluated how educators were affected by ASE interventions including outcomes that demonstrated improvements in teachers' stress management, mindfulness, and the quality of teacher–student relationships (Molina et al., 2022). These results are particularly compelling given the misbelief that

secondary school counselors are limited in their capacity to deliver direct services in schools. Whereas the theoretical language of ASE promises transformation, these emergent empirical results demonstrate that when school counselors, students, and school-related adults commit to creating more prosperous school environments, both students and educators benefit in ways that are personally and socially meaningful.

Conclusion

Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) theory emphasizes the holistic understanding of students as individuals deeply embedded within a complex web of environmental influences. Students cannot be viewed in isolation; rather, their behaviors, emotions, and academic outcomes are shaped by the interplay of internal factors (such as personality and cognitive processes) and external factors (including family, cultural context, and school environment). This comprehensive perspective encourages educators and counselors to consider the myriad influences that affect a student's life, ensuring that interventions and support systems are tailored to meet each student's unique circumstances.

A crucial aspect of ASE theory is the emphasis on advocacy. Counselors and educators are seen as advocates for students, working to promote their well-being within the school system and broader community. This advocacy involves not only supporting individual students but also addressing systemic barriers that may hinder their success. By recognizing the social and environmental factors that impact students, counselors can work collaboratively with families, educators, and community organizations to create supportive networks that empower students. This commitment to advocacy ensures that students receive the resources and opportunities necessary to thrive, fostering resilience and promoting a sense of agency in their own lives.

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