# The Role of Education Support Professionals in Supporting the Whole Child: A Capabilities Approach

**A Summary of My EdD Dissertation from the University of Glasgow**

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## Introduction

In the research for my Doctorate in Education (EdD), I set out to explore the work of education support professionals (ESPs) in primary and secondary public education[1] in the United States. The term "education support professional" is taken from the National Education Association (NEA), which uses it to encompass nine job categories of school district personnel:

- Clerical Services
- Custodial and Maintenance Services
- Food Services
- Health and Student Services
- Paraeducators
- Security Services
- Skilled Trades
- Technical Services
- Transportation Services.

In the United States, as many as a third of the adults working in a school district are ESPs.

In setting out to design my research, I was responding to the charge from my degree program to identify a problem in education that was embedded in my professional practice. This meant drawing from a practice that has focused on building connections, relationships, and collaborations among stakeholders in schools to support education and health equity. The problem I identified was that ESPs were frequently absent from this work, despite their numbers in the work force and their importance in schools.

And while there are some examples of how this is slowly changing (see, for example, the *Healthy Schools Toolkit* from Health Equity Works, Washington University St. Louis

[1] While ESPs also work in higher education, this research did not address them and therefore makes no claims about their work.

or the work of the Ohio Partnership for Excellence in Paraprofessional Preparation), too often the prevailing discussions only consider what teachers and administrators could or should be doing. In describing my research problem, I noted that many see the current school climate as marrying increased pressure for academic outcomes as measured by test scores with significant opportunity gaps for many children because of poverty or other family challenges. I proposed, as part of my research problem, that in such an environment, it made no sense to continue to ignore one third of the adults working in the schools in considerations of what is to be done.

Having identified the problem I wanted to address, I then turned to the questions of how to frame and conduct my research. I chose an approach to my research based on three concepts that I viewed as being layered upon each other–like a quilt with its base, batting, and top--and held together with the metaphorical thread of the participant ESPs engagement with each concept.

**Capabilities Approach**

The first component was Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (2006, 2011). Nussbaum, an American philosopher currently at the University of Chicago, proposes a version of the Capabilities Approach[2] that offers a way to think about basic justice and centers on the question, "What is each person able to do and be?" (Nussbaum, 2011: x). To detail what "a decent political order must secure to all…at least a threshold level," she offers ten Central Capabilities that encompass a whole life and describe what each of us should have to be able to live a life that she views as worth living. A full list of those capabilities can be found in Appendix One.

While the Capabilities Approach has been used in many contexts to explore issues of human flourishing and well-being, my work was one of the first pieces of research to apply its normative stance to a consideration of primary and secondary education in the

[2] It is important to note that the first articulation of the Capabilities Approach was in the developmental economics work of Amartya Sen. Nussbaum built on that work to create her normative theory. Other scholars have used both Sen and Nussbaum to explore a variety of issues including comparisons of quality of life within and across countries.

United States. In this work, I introduced participant ESPs to the Capabilities Approach and with them explored its relevance to their work and to the way schools can support students. The discussion led me to conclude that the Capabilities Approach can serve as a useful tool for considering what policies, programs, and practices should be in place in our schools and for examining the ones that are in place.

**Whole Child Approach**

The second component underlying my research was the idea of a holistic outlook on the education and care of children, which is often referred to as a "whole child" approach to education. While the term "whole child" may mean different things to different people, for the purpose of this research, I chose to use ASCD's Whole Child Approach, a policy framework that breaks the concept into five tenets (see Attachment 2). I made this choice because the Whole Child Approach has been endorsed by many of the leading education organizations in the United States, including the NEA. Since its launch in 2007, it has served as reference point for educators, families, and policymakers seeking an alternative to a high-stakes, test-based accountability system of education. In this research, I found that participant ESP's understood their work in ways that align with the five tenets of Whole Child Approach, even if they were not personally familiar with it.

**Views and voices of the ESPs**

The third component in my research was a consideration of the views and voices of ESPs. I went into this research with the belief that engaging directly with ESPs was critical to any consideration of their work, particularly because of their absence from much of the research and discussion. I also explicitly adopted NEA's view that the nine disparate job categories of ESPs share common responsibilities for students that transcend specific job descriptions. In other words, as a member of the education workforce, a bus driver or a food-service worker, for example, has, a certain responsibility for children's welfare that a bus driver or a food service worker who works in a different environment usually does not have, This view, in turn, required that I explore the question of what it means to be a professional in education. As I will discuss below, while professionalism in education can be defined in a few different ways, I

concluded that ESPs, when given the opportunities and skills as needed, can and will act in ways that are considered professional. I also noted that their value in the school is not contingent on this designation, but is greatly enhanced when they are viewed and view themselves in this way.

**Broad findings**

In the completed EdD, I offered two broad findings. Each of these was supported not only by the results from the focus groups but with additional conceptual research throughout the process. This conceptual research included not only Nussbaum's writings, but also the writings of many others who have contributed to the literature of the Capabilities Approach. It also included consideration of the work of ESPs in research in the United States and abroad, with a special focus on questions of how they are included or not included in the discussion.

My first broad finding is that Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach can serve as a useful tool for engaging people who work in schools, as well as parents and students, in considering what schools should be like and how they should treat students. Applying it to the Whole Child Approach or other policy frameworks can offer a better understanding of what is needed for students to have real opportunities and to develop the capabilities they need for adulthood.

In the second broad finding, I argue that ESPs are integral members of the school staff, and, through their consideration of the questions raised in this work, show that they can act in ways that would be considered professional in education. This was demonstrated primarily by their reflections and discussions regarding their practices and ethical responsibilities in light of the concepts I presented.

## Research Methodology

Because I was starting from the premise that ESPs' voices have been left out of education research, I chose to conduct this research through engaging with ESPs directly using focus groups. Focus groups and interviews both offer the researcher the chance to engage directly in conversations with the participants. While each method has strengths and weaknesses, I chose focus groups specifically for the opportunities for interaction between the participants. Basch (1987) notes that group members' responses to each other provide the researcher with a chance to learn about beliefs, attitudes, and values that may not emerge though individual interviews. Research by Easter (1987) and Ritchie, Herscovitch, and Norfor (1994) found that focus groups work well in drawing out participant discussion on topics that may be new or unfamiliar to them. By using focus groups, I hoped that the discussion would center on interactions among the participants, not on me, and that participants might feel less put on the spot or that they were being "researched on," to use the term coined by Ritchie, Herscovitch, & Norfor, (1994). This hope was realized.

To allow the groups to draw on the widest range of participant responses I incorporated two activities. In the first, I asked participants to create a drawing in response to the prompt, "How does your job support the whole child?" In the second, I gave the participants a set of cards containing the ten Central Capabilities, and they then used these cards to express their thinking about the Capabilities Approach and schools. I chose to incorporate these activities because, as Basch (1987) notes, one of the limitations of focus groups is that not everyone is comfortable with discussion. The activities were structured to allow each person to work briefly on their own, then to share their work.

Following approval of the research design and activities by the University of Glasgow's College Ethical Approval Committee[3], I worked with USEA and three local affiliates to schedule and recruit for the focus groups in November 2017. USEA contacted local

[3] Comparable to the Institutional Review Board in a U.S. institution of higher education.

leaders whom they felt would be willing to support this work, and the local affiliates extended an invitation by email to their members and arranged for space and refreshments. At the start of each group, participants were given an informed-consent form that they signed and returned. All of the groups were audio-recorded with participant consent, and the audio recordings were then transcribed. For the purpose of analysis, all participants were given an alias in the transcription and record-keeping. Across the three focus groups, 22 ESPs from six of the nine ESP job categories participated. It is important to acknowledge here the debt of gratitude I owe to the leaders, members, and staff of USEA in supporting this work.

## Research Findings

The themes that I identified in the focus-group discussions and a sample of the responses follow, organized around the three broad questions asked in the groups:

1. What is the most important thing about your job?
2. How does your work support the whole child?
3. What is your reaction to Nussbaum's Central Capabilities, which (if any) of the capabilities should schools be part of creating and developing, and which ones do you think your job impacts?

### What is the most important thing about your job?

Several broad themes emerge:

- Relationships. Many of the participants talked about their work in terms of the relationships they build with students. One paraeducator, talking about her colleagues said,

  *We think the most important thing is a good relationship with our students.*

Participants stated that these relationships have value in and of themselves, but also in how they help students connect to school.

> *I believe kids need to want to be there and if I can give them a break…some of the hardest kids, the teachers can't deal with them, but they can come and I can razz them or whatever.* (Custodian)

- Safety. Participants talked about both physical and emotional safety. In particular, custodians and bus drivers recognized that their jobs included promoting both.

> *In my training, I was told that I may be the first person they see in the morning and I may be the last person they see at night, so you want to make sure a child knows you care about him.* (Bus Driver)

- Responsibility and Values. Across all three groups, participants talked in a variety of ways about helping students to develop community-oriented values and a sense of responsibility.

> *I try to teach the kids at my school to be responsible for their own messes they make and have them learn to try and keep their areas and their places clean. And they're learning responsibility, so when they grow up and go to other schools they know they are supposed to respect other people's property.* (Custodian).

- Feeding Children. Across all three groups there was only one food service participant. But she was not the only one who was unequivocal that the school meal programs were among the most important thing that happened in schools.

- Money and Programs to Support Students. In one of the groups, four of the six participants did not work directly with students. Rather, they worked in the district offices helping to administer the federal and state programs that support students, such as Title I. These participants spoke of the importance of this work and saw it as more than office work or bookkeeping. They talked about "their" programs, displaying a deep sense of personal ownership of what the grants funded.

**How does your work support the whole child?**

About half of the participants said they had heard the term "whole child." Participants talked as a group about what the term meant to them, and then responded to a drawing prompt on how their work supported the whole child. While each participant had a slightly different perspective, there was a general sense that supporting the whole child meant seeing them as individuals and focusing on their needs beyond test scores. Some participants also incorporated families in their ideas of the whole child.

> *…we care about the individual child, from the time they get up to the time they leave us…So basically, their whole being as far as are they safe, are they leaning, are they having equal access to things that other students have, and are we being fair? Are we treating them with respect?* (Clerical)
>
> *[W]hen you say the whole child, you also have to put in the family. We guide parents to resources, grandparents to resources…The whole child becomes the whole family.* (Paraeducator)

While none of the participants made specific reference to ASCD's Whole Child Approach, their responses could be interpreted as reflecting the five tenets below.

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.

  > *Every kid's got to eat, and not every child has breakfast in the morning.* (Bus driver)
  >
  > *The first thing I want to do is make sure the kids are in school and the school provides breakfast.* (Paraeducator)

- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.

  > *…providing a clean and safe environment for the students, staff, people who come to school.* (Custodian)
  >
  > *It's the same stuff—we try to make our room the safest place in the building.* (Paraeducator)

- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to school and community.

  *I think traditionally kids come to school and they're, like, math and spelling and subjects, and there is so much more that kids can experience being in the classroom. There's the social aspect of being around the students and other adults and experiences they have.* (Custodian)

- Each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified and caring adults.

  *We recently had a speech therapist in the building along with us. We just had a training on how speech and language, really, that it impacts their learning so much.* (Paraeducator)

- Each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.

  *You have to get creative with what those skills that they are going to need.* (Paraeducator)

**What is your reaction to Nussbaum's Central Capabilities?**

In the final part of the focus groups, I introduced participants to Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. Each participant received a set of cards, each of which contained one of the Central Capabilities and its definition. In each group, we discussed the idea of the Capabilities Approach and the Central Capabilities. While participants had a range of reactions, in general, the ideas resonated with the participants:

*They are all useful. They could all be put to use somewhere.* (Custodian)

*It correlates with life.* (Custodian)

*It's all about humans. It's about us. People, kids.* (Clerical)

The discussion was followed by an activity in which each participant spent a short time with the cards and identified those that they thought were important in some way to schools. The instructions for this part were intentionally open-ended to allow participants to formulate their own views. While there is not space in this summary to do justice to the rich discussion that resulted, the comments below capture the spirit of the activity and discussion, which included linking Capabilities to the idea of the whole child. While participants had a variety of views on which capabilities were most important, all the capabilities resonated with all the participants:

> *I feel like all of these have to do with school or they lead into life after school. That's why we learn to have these, practical reason and control over one's environment. That if you've learned everything and that the goal of teaching is to be able to do that—to have life, a quality life.* (Paraeducator).
>
> *I kind of put mine in a few different orders, as I was thinking about what the schools should be supporting. And you know, mine was, like life and play and the senses and the emotions and the affiliations, and it all really comes together with school. But then the others are a big part of that, and as we talked the whole child and the community and the family, all the other aspects come into it also.* (Clerical)

Three of the participants took the entire set of cards and created narratives of interconnection between the capabilities that I have called *Capability Pathways.* In these narratives, the three participants expressed their views of how achievement of one area of capabilities supports achievement of other capabilities. While there is no room in this paper to explore these in depth (as I did in the dissertation), it is worth noting that each pathway was different, but expressed a view of life and the role of schools in supporting the development of capabilities that warrants further explication.

In the discussion, participants reflected on how policies, programs, and practices in their schools influenced students' capability development. From their discussions and my additional research, I drew the conclusion that as a normative idea, the Capabilities

Approach offers a powerful tool for determining how schools can and should support students. When applied to the Whole Child Approach, I suggest that it offers four principles to inform discussion and decision-making:

- Resources should not be deployed equally—rather, they should be distributed with attention to individual needs, including how students can convert those resources into real opportunities for education.
- The dignity of the individual should underpin all polices, programs, and practices in our schools.
- Each of the tenets of the Whole Child Approach (or any other policy framework) must be understood as contributing to a view of student flourishing that goes beyond test scores.
- All members of the school staff have a role to play in supporting this approach and should be involved in the development and implementation of the appropriate policies, programs, and practices.

Each of the tenets can be strengthened if seen through this Capabilities-informed lens. And as policy frameworks evolve or change, the normative stance of the Capabilities Approach can offer a way to consider what needs to be done and if/how the framework can support student well-being.

## Implications for Professional Practice in Schools

While there are a variety of implications for professional practice in schools stemming from this research, I want to focus on two: the education of students with special needs and the meaning of the term “professional” in considering the work of ESPs.

### Education of students with special needs

This research did not set out to focus on students with special needs, although Nussbaum has paid attention to those with special needs in her work (2006, 2011). Nevertheless, many of the participants saw the needs of these students as important.

There were probably a couple of reasons for this. First, several of the participants were special education paraeducators. Second, the federal *Individual with Disabilities Act* (IDEA) has created opportunities for more students with disabilities to attend general-education schools. This means that staff, such as custodians and bus drivers, who otherwise might not have worked with special-education students are now are doing so. In discussing various capabilities, participants talked about what each meant for students with special needs.

> *I have a student who is in really poor health, but she still wants to come to school, she still wants to participate, she still wants to do, she still wants to live her life.* (Paraeducator discussing the capability of Bodily health)
>
> *I work with kids who are not able to move, and when someone touches their wheelchair, they are violating their space.* (Paraeducator discussing the capability of Bodily integrity)
>
> *They have to feel that they may have control over something…they all aspire no matter how "low functioning"* (air quotes), *or whatever, to owning property, having a job…they still have hopes and dreams that go with that one—controlling your environment.* (Paraeducator discussing the capability of Control over one's environment).

The connections that the participants made to students with special needs leads me to suggest that considering what "should be" for these students can be an entry point to considering what "should be" for all students. A normative approach such as the Capabilities Approach must work for all. Within that approach, ESPs have important roles in supporting capability development for all students.

**Claiming professionalism**

The other area where issues of professional practice emerged was in the consideration of what it means that ESPs are professionals. While we did not address this question

during the groups[4], it was clear to me in writing up this work that it was necessary to address what it means to be a professional in education and what that designation would imply for ESPs.

NEA's claim to the term "professional" as part of the ESP identity can be understood as central to their efforts to improve the status, working conditions, and pay of ESPs. Within the context of education in the United States, this is a necessity. But more importantly, claiming professionalism for ESPs argues that there is a significant difference in this type of work when it is done within schools. ESPs, because they work in schools, have a responsibility for the well-being of students and therefore should be part of the discussions and decisions about what is best for students and how to provide it.

There are many elements to what constitutes professionalism in education, including engaging in professional reflection and taking part in consideration of the ethical implications of decisions and actions (Carr, 1992, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000; Schön, 1983). Though the research of these scholars focuses on the work of teachers, it offers examples of how all educators, including ESPs, can act in ways that can be considered "professional" in an educational environment. In particular, my research suggests that ESPs can consider ethical and programmatic issues that arise in the development and implementation of the policies, programs, and practices of their work. This has implications for how they are engaged in their workplace and by NEA. It requires that ESPs have opportunities to practice these professional skills.

## Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research

In this exploratory work, I tried my best to conduct research that offers an interpretation that accurately reflected the participants' views, but like any study, it has limitations. Time, or lack of it, was one of these. Each focus group was only 60 minutes. This meant that there was not always time to dig as deeply as might have been possible. The

[4] This leads to an additional set of research questions.

research design did not allow for follow-up with individual participants, so I was not able to explore more deeply certain points.

With the small-scale nature of this work, it was not possible to explore how elements of personal identity might have shaped participants' perspectives. At this time in the U.S., it is hard to think of an issue that is not potentially shaped by personal identity. The philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us that our identity gives us "contours, comity, values, and a sense of purpose and meaning" (2018:32).

These limitations lay the groundwork for a range of future research. This research can fall into two broad (but not mutually exclusive) areas:

1. Further exploration of the use of Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach to inform education policies, programs, and practices. This might take the form of work with specific groups of stakeholders such as ESPs, teachers, or parents. It might also include building-level or communitywide explorations that include multiple stakeholders. It could also use other methods such as surveys or interviews to explore these questions.
2. Further consideration of the questions of how professionalism for ESPs is defined and put into practice. This might include a deeper examination of the various frameworks that define professionalism, as well as dialogs with ESPs about how they understand professionalism. It could also include research on what policies, programs, and practices are in place that operationalize professional practice for ESPs.

## Conclusion

Regardless of how this research is carried forward, it is my hope that it can further the field's understanding of how a normative framework such as Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach can inform and improve educational policies, practices, and programs. It is also my hope that it can advance our consideration of the value and work of ESPs and support their deeper engagement in the work of their schools and districts.

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## Appendix One: Nussbaum's Central Capabilities

From Nussbaum, 2011, 33-34

1. *Life*. Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length; not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living.

2. *Bodily health*. Being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.

3. *Bodily integrity*. Being able to move feely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction

4. *Senses, imagination, and thought*. Being able to use the sense, to imagine, think, and reason — and to do these things in a "truly human" way, a way informed and cultivated by adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one's mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.

5. *Emotions*. Being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to experience longing, gratitude, and justified anger. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety. (Supporting this capability means supporting forms of human association that can be shown to be crucial in their development.)

6. *Practical reason*. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life. (This entails protection for the liberty of conscience and religious observance.)

7. *Affiliation*. (A) Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another. (Protecting this capability means protecting institutions that constitute and nourish such forms of affiliation, and also protecting the freedom of assembly and political speech.) (B) Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others. This entails provisions of nondiscrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, caste, religion, national origin.

8. *Other species*. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature

9. *Play*. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.

10. *Control over one's environment*. (A) *Political*. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) *Material*. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods) and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

# Appendix Two: ASCD's Whole Child Approach

From ASCD, http://www.wholechildeducation.org/about/

**Whole Child Tenets**

- Each student enters school **healthy** and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally **safe** for students and adults.
- Each student is actively **engaged** in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is **supported** by qualified, caring adults.
- Each student is **challenged** academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment and participation in a global environment.