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What Does it Mean to Act Professionally? Ideas of Professionalism Within Medical, Police, and Social Work Education

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Abstract

Professionalism is a crucial element of curricula in many profession-oriented higher education programmes. However, defining and working with professionalism-oriented learning objectives can be challenging. Comparative perspectives on professionalism across educational contexts are often missing. This study explores educators' ideas on what students need to learn to effectively navigate and manage their professional practice within three professional education programmes: police, medical, and social work. The analysis captures how professionalism is portrayed in documents and interviews with teachers. The findings highlight shared ideas of professionalism across educational boundaries. The concept is described as multi-dimensional and complex, necessitating more communication about what can be expected of students and how teaching and assessment should be designed.

Keywords

Professionalism, professional education, medical education, social work education, police education

Introduction

This article explores how those involved in professional education define professionalism and examines prevailing ideas on what students need to learn to navigate and manage their professional practice effectively. The study describes and analyses how professionalism is conceptualised in higher education within three professional education programmes: police, medical, and social work.

Professional education programmes aim to enhance students' ability to act professionally. This task is complicated, as professionalism is an elusive and contested concept that is difficult to define (Burford et al., 2014; Fenwick, 2016). The challenge is further complicated by changing societal demands on professionals. The knowledge students are expected to have regarding professionalism is regulated and articulated in various documents, which must be interpreted and translated into action by those involved in higher education. A crucial aim of professional education is to develop professionalism, requiring all parties involved to understand the concept. Policymakers and teachers need to know what to teach and assess.

Professionalism is widely recognised as a core element and a significant goal of curricula across many higher education disciplines. However, it can be contested, challenging to teach and learn (Neve et al., 2017), and surrounded by ambiguity (Friedman, 2019). This is particularly true for curricula designed to prepare professional practitioners in fields such as medicine, teaching, management, engineering, and various health and social care professions (Fenwick, 2016). In these contexts, the curriculum concerning professionalism is often disputed and linked to issues such as a lack of consensus and uncertainties about the core of the subject (O'Sullivan et al., 2012). A common ground is crucial for professionals to convey meaning and create a shared identity (Abbott, 2014; Birden et al., 2014). Important aspects of such definitions include competencies, behaviour, beliefs, values, ethics, and adaptability to different contexts (Barnhoorn et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2023; Hodgson & Watts, 2017; Korthagen, 2004).

Given that professionalism is difficult to define, educators are tasked with teaching a concept without an accepted definition. Previous research has explored ways to address this issue. One perspective views professionalism not as a subject but as a process of identity development, influencing teaching and learning (Cruess et al., 2019). Conversely, others stress the importance of frameworks and standardised definitions of professionalism to enhance course quality and ensure fair, transparent assessments (Barnhoorn et al., 2019; Berger et al., 2020). Courses on professionalism often rely on practical and implicit knowledge, which differs from the knowledge that university teachers typically handle, complicating clear definitions (Bradbury et al., 2015).

This introduction clearly shows that professionalism-oriented learning objectives can be challenging to work with and define. Comparative perspectives and interdisciplinary studies on how professionalism is understood in educational settings are often missing (Barbarà-i-

Molinero et al., 2017). Traditionally, professional programmes have researched professionalism in isolation, limiting cross-disciplinary learning. Bradbury et al. (2015) highlighted that professionalism education is often domain-specific, leading to isolation within each professional field. This 'siloing' of knowledge results in minimal sharing of insights between professions, and there is a lack of understanding regarding common themes, differences, and challenges in teaching professionalism across various fields.

As professional education aims to develop students' professionalism, understanding the underpinning ideas is crucial. While much literature addresses professionalism conceptually and theoretically, empirical studies can provide insights into how educators interpret professionalism in practice across different contexts.

This article explores educators' ideas on what students need to learn to navigate and manage their professional practices effectively. By comparing three professional education programmes—police, medical, and social work—similarities and differences can be identified. This study is guided by the research question: *What ideas about professionalism exist in documents and among educators in three distinct educational programmes?*

Addressing this question offers insights into the significance of the logics underpinning professionalism, how they are understood and applied in different contexts, and the implications this may have for education.

The elusive concept of professionalism in educational settings

In today's society, the concepts of profession, professionalism, and professional conduct are of great public interest. Carr (2014) highlights two reasons for this. First, professions seek professional recognition as a marker of occupational status, fiercely protected by established professions, while other occupations strive to attain it. Second, professionalism implies elevated occupational standards, meaning 'professional' conduct meets the highest moral and technical criteria. Evetts (2011) argues that defining professionalism has lost its relevance, suggesting it is more interesting to explore why people find it meaningful. In higher education, the drive for professionalisation has increased demand for specialised knowledge and skills. Consequently, higher education institutions have developed professional education programmes where professionalism is central (Al-Eraky & Marei, 2015; Harrison et al., 2021; Nordberg & Andreassen, 2020; Tong & Hallenberg, 2018; Williams et al., 2019).

Professionalism is an elusive concept influenced by changing societal, historical, and contextual expectations. In medical education, it is seen as a key aspect of practice (Morrison et al., 2009), encompassing clinical competence, behaviours and attributes (Wearn et al., 2010), ethical conduct, and social justice (Mueller, 2015; Symonds & Talley, 2013). Barnhorn et al. (2019) highlight the importance of a multi-level framework for professionalism, noting that focusing solely on behaviour or competencies is insufficient. Environmental factors should

also be considered. Medical students and residents often encounter a mechanical, unreflective version of professionalism that lacks deeper ethical and humanistic aspirations (Brody & Doukas, 2014). Al-Eraky and Marei (2015) emphasise the need for a global model of professionalism, and the challenges in addressing it in medical education, including whether to conceptualise it as a list of attributes or a belief system. Differences in perceptions of professionalism complicate the task of nurturing it (Ong et al., 2020).

In contrast to medical education, professional capability frameworks in social work are comprehensive, covering values and ethics, knowledge, intervention skills, adaptability, leadership, commitment to social justice, and critical reflection and analysis (Brown et al., 2023). Weiss et al. (2004) highlight the role of social work education in shaping professional identity by providing individuals with the necessary knowledge, skills, behavioural norms, and values. However, there is little consensus on the specifics of these elements. Bair (2014, 2016) compares professionalism across different fields and argues that social work education tends to foster a more collective and extended view of professionalism than contexts such as education or nursing. These studies suggest that professionalism in social work education is a multifaceted and dynamic construct that is shaped by various factors.

Tong and Hallenberg (2018) and Williams et al. (2019) discuss the role of education in the professionalisation of the police force, with Tong and Hallenberg highlighting the need for sustainable approaches and Williams emphasising the importance of officers' sense of professionalism. Fielding (2018) provides a historical perspective, tracing the evolution of professionalism in policing where scientific police management—and contemporary issues like private policing and procedural justice—influences training. These studies underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of professionalism in police education, considering broader societal and technological changes. To meet the demands of rapid societal change, police education must focus on generic competencies, such as critical thinking, reflection, communication, and analytical skills (Bäck, 2020). Research on police officers, teachers, and social workers describes collegiality, based on trust in the knowledge and authority of professionals, as fundamental to professionalism (Löfgren & Wieslander, 2020). Wallner et al. (2024) describe personal ethics, educational standards, and professional practice as three dimensions influencing students' development of professional judgment.

Research on professionalism in professional education is complex, encompassing teaching and learning about various phenomena. A recent review by Snell et al. (2020) focused on professional identity and socialisation within the health sector and identified several interrelated concepts: professional identity, professional socialisation, professionalisation, professionalism, professional behaviour, and professional role. These concepts are often assumed to be synonymous and used interchangeably. Harrits (2016) explores different logics underpinning professionalism: one logic is based on formal knowledge and training, seen as function-specific, and the other is grounded in values, feelings, and intuition, described as personal and relational. When combined, these logics characterise professionalism as blended and hybrid.

Despite the chequered history of the concept of professionalisation in educational contexts, its importance is increasingly emphasised, as practitioners' perceptions of professionalism are initially shaped through professional education (Al-Eraky & Marei, 2015; Evetts, 2009; Nordberg & Andreassen, 2020). The vague definition of professionalism contributes to difficulties in constructing teaching frameworks and raises assessment questions (Birden et al., 2014). Wilson et al. (2013) show that limited awareness of professionalism's purpose among teachers negatively impacts students' understanding in higher education, making it challenging for teachers to teach and assess this domain (Bryden et al., 2010; Hammer et al., 2000).

In summary, the literature on professionalism in professional education highlights its multifaceted nature and the importance of context-specific approaches. Professional education shapes practitioners' perceptions of their roles, underscoring its significance. While some comparative studies exist, gaps remain in understanding common themes, differences, and challenges in teaching professionalism across various fields. This study identifies similarities, differences, and challenges in different educational contexts, offering educators a deeper understanding of how to effectively convey professionalism to students and providing opportunities for cross-professional insight sharing.

Methods

The study employed a theory-building approach to address a research question on the contested concept of professionalism, which lacks a unified definition and has multiple theories (Eisenhardt, 2021). This approach allowed for theoretical sampling across three professional educational settings in Sweden: the medical, social work, and police programmes. The focus was on undergraduate courses designed to develop professionalism. Interviews and document analysis were conducted to investigate ideas of professionalism empirically.

A comparative approach was adopted, examining shared and unique aspects of professionalism across different educational practices. This involved selecting cases where the central subject of study was expected to be present and designing them to highlight parallels and disparities, contributing to theoretical development (Eisenhardt, 2021). Such considerations typically intensify the empirical focus on the central subject, reduce the possibility of alternative interpretations, and enhance the applicability of findings.

Study setting

The organisation of professional education in Sweden varies across programmes due to differences in time allocation and financial resources. In medicine, professionalism is taught as a separate course throughout the programme. In social work, it is integrated into other courses. Both include theoretical and practical elements, such as reflection and role-play. Police education differs, with a theoretical course on professionalism at the end of the final semester and similar elements throughout the programme, though not explicitly stated.

Medical education consists of 12 semesters of full-time study, leading to a medical degree with a general licence to practise medicine. Social work education leads to a Bachelor of Science in Social Work after seven semesters, including one practicum. The police programme, regulated by an agreement between the Police Authority and the university, includes four semesters of full-time study without an academic degree. To become a warranted police officer, students undergo six months of probationary training under supervision at a police department.

Since professionalism is a multidimensional concept, its development does not only occur in separate courses or course elements. However, explicit courses in the medical and social work programmes were seen as good samples to capture this phenomenon (Eisenhart, 2021). The police programme, lacking specific courses, took another approach. The curriculum was examined for ideas underpinning the slogan: “We educate professional police officers!”. The selection was based on sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006) associated with professionalism. Previous research identifies that these concepts include professional behaviour, professional approach, empathy, ethics, and self-awareness.

Data collection

Data collection was conducted in two steps. Firstly, documents that broadly cover and describe the written ideas of professionalism within the programmes were collected to gain an overview of the content and provide context. These included documents related to courses or course elements aimed at developing professionalism.

The latest versions of each syllabus were obtained from the programme websites. Access to course platforms was provided by study administrators, and a total of 1070 pages of documents were collected (course syllabi, study guides, lecture plans, schedules, instructions, and handouts). Thereafter, all course syllabi for each semester were reviewed, and learning outcomes linked to professionalism were selected for an in-depth review.

In the second step, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted (ten women and eight men) with teachers of professionalism courses: six on the medical programme, five on the social work programme, and seven on the police programme. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, lasted for 60—120 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim. An interview guide was used to outline two themes for discussion: (1) Ideas about being professional; and (2) What is the development of professionalism in “your” education? The first theme contained questions designed to capture teachers’ views of both professional and non-professional behaviour of students and professionals, and how being professional is talked about within the work teams. The second theme concerned the content, what professionalism courses consist of, and what students will learn.

Table 1

Data in the Present Study

	Documents	Interviews
Medical Education	434 pages; Syllabus, study guides, lecture plans, schedules	6 teacher interviews
Social work Education	407 pages; Syllabus, study guides, lecture plans, schedules	5 teacher interviews
Police Education	229 pages; Syllabus, study guides, lecture plans, schedules	7 teacher interviews

Analysis

This study employed an iterative inductive approach, in which analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This approach is based on the premise that when theoretical reading, data collection, and analysis occur simultaneously, they reinforce each other. An empirically driven thematic analysis inspired by Gioia et al. (2013) was used to analyse documents and interviews.

Early in the analysis, documents and interviews from each programme were examined with the intention of constructing a concept map of the written ideas about professionalism that underpin its development and to map teachers' conceptions about professionalism. Following Gioia et al. (2013), this analysis organised codes into emerging categories and later into theoretical dimensions to explain how professionalism was defined, both in documents and by teachers.

To develop the data structure, I first conducted data-driven coding, where codes were close to the material. These were constructed "using informant-centric terms and codes" (Gioia et al., 2013, p.18). This initially resulted in a large number of codes. To reduce the number, I sought differences and similarities among them, and new labels were given to the codes. In this way, I constructed first-order concepts that closely mirrored content, illuminating explicit areas of professionalism.

Following Gioia et al. (2013), the analysis focused on how first-order concepts could be merged into themes to describe and explain the observed phenomena at a higher level of abstraction. This was done by grouping codes with similar content, thereby constructing second-order themes. The first-order concepts and second-order themes were refined into aggregated dimensions of professionalism. This led to the construction of two concept dimensions: interpersonal and contextual. The interpersonal dimension involves self-awareness and

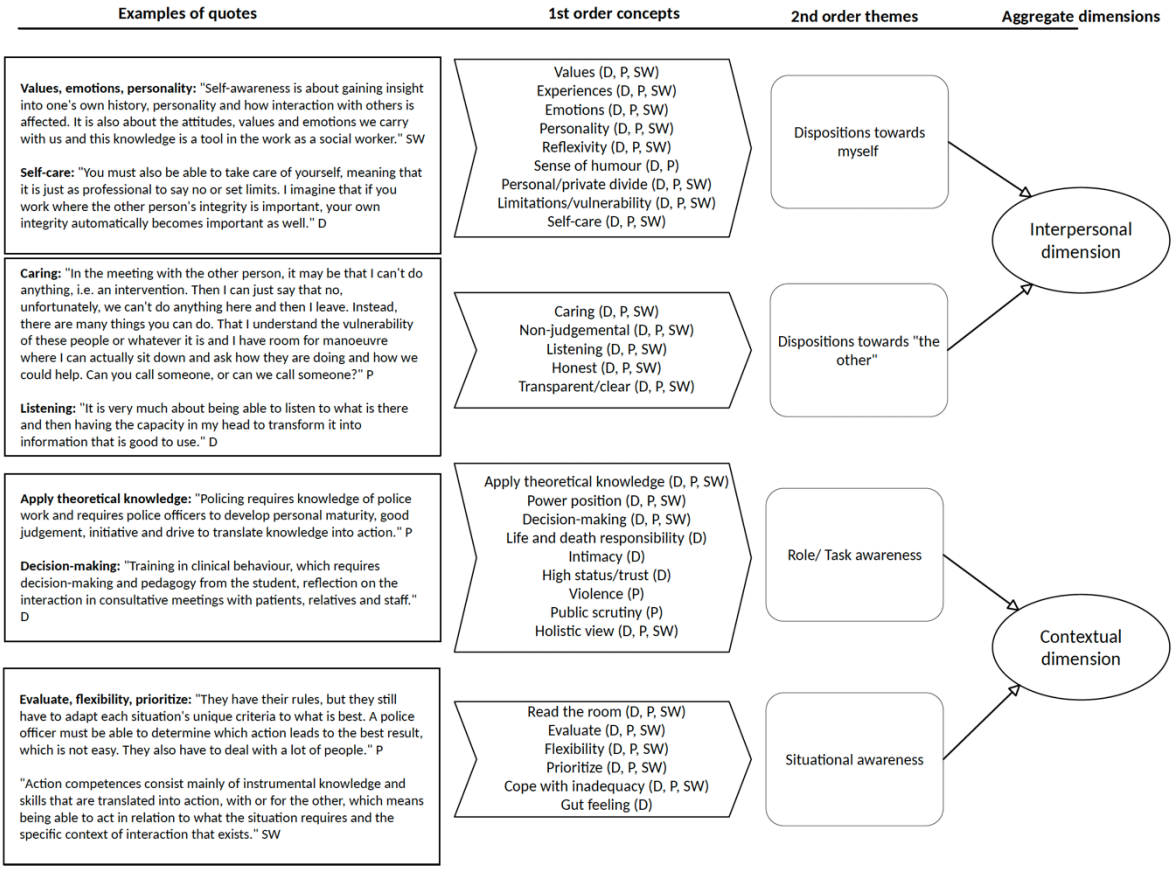
understanding how to relate to others. In contrast, the contextual dimension involves role and task awareness, and situational awareness. To visualise the different steps of the coding process and how the analysis progressed from data to theorising, a data structure was created (see Figure 1). Finally, codes, categories, and dimensions were compared to determine whether there were categories unique to any of the programmes.

Findings

The findings present ideas of professionalism in three professional education programmes. The data structure provides an overview of these ideas reflected in documents and teachers' narratives (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Ideas of Professionalism: Data Structure Containing Example Quotes, Concepts, Themes, and Aggregated Dimensions of Professionalism



As depicted in Figure 1, numerous ideas about professionalism are shared across the programmes. Specifically, two central dimensions of professionalism are *interpersonal* and *contextual*. These dimensions can be further operationalised into *dispositions towards oneself*, *dispositions towards the other*, *role and task awareness*, and *situational awareness*. The following sections describe in more depth how these dimensions are constructed.

Interpersonal dimension

According to interviews and documents, the interpersonal dimension concerns self-awareness, or 'dispositions towards oneself', and understanding how to relate to others. Many teachers emphasised the importance of interpersonal relations, requiring reflexive ability and a range of social skills to understand how emotions and beliefs influence communication and actions in professional encounters.

Dispositions towards oneself

The first theme, *dispositions towards oneself*, is strongly linked to self-awareness and reflexive abilities. Teachers repeatedly stated in interviews that reflecting on one's actions is crucial for developing self-awareness and understanding the reasons behind one's actions and decisions. For instance, a teacher from the police education programme underscored the importance of self-reflection in enhancing professionalism:

> Professionalism involves not only how you communicate and discuss various topics but also how you carry out your actions. To me, it largely centres upon self-reflection. By gaining a slightly different perspective, you can better understand your own actions. You'll be able to interpret situations more effectively and critically examine your role in them. (Teacher, police education)

This belief was also expressed by teachers in other programmes. Similarly, self-awareness as a prerequisite for reflection was described in many documents. Specifically, self-awareness is described as fundamental for professionals to manage social relations and to know what actions to take in variable situations. This theme pertains to the student as an individual, requiring an awareness of the emotions, norms, values, and cultural anchors a professional carries in relation to others. This complex portrayal of self-awareness was particularly emphasised in the medical programme, as highlighted in the excerpt below from teaching guidelines:

> [this course focuses on] understanding human behaviour, knowledge about how we interact with each other, psychological understanding of the importance of the patient and our own behaviour in the patient-doctor relationship. The focus [in this course] is on increasing the student's self-awareness. The content involves the human being from different psychological perspectives and in social contexts, stress, crisis, and crisis management and the connection between psyche and soma. (Study guide Professional development, medical education)

A common way to contextualise self-awareness and reflection in all three programmes was through an emphasis on social issues such as domestic violence, addiction, LGBTQ+ matters, illness, death, and crisis. Similarly, the importance of self-awareness was emphasised in documents for critically examining one's position in relation to social stratification aspects like gender, class, ethnicity, power, disability, and age.

Building on this, many interviews underscored that reflexive ability involves recognising one's limitations, both in terms of knowledge needed for continuous development and vulnerability. Teachers emphasised identifying triggers, or 'key issues' that cause stress reactions. This mental preparation was particularly stressed in the police programme but was evident in all three. For example, stress management and coping strategies were described as crucial aspects of professional behaviour, enhancing the ability to navigate future professional roles.

Documents clearly state that students should deepen their self-awareness and reflective abilities in relation to their values and future professional roles. They emphasise the need to continually update one's ethical compass throughout one's professional life to uphold democratic values. An excerpt from teaching guidelines for social work education underscores value alignment and ethical awareness: 'The social worker's professional mission includes safeguarding the profession and the ethical guidelines that require awareness of the norms and values that should apply, ensuring that the social worker's own values are in line with these values.'

Self-awareness involves identifying, analysing, and discussing ethical dilemmas in professional practice, such as police use of force or dealing with death or other difficult decisions. Teachers believe that applying professional conduct' helps students address problematic aspects and uphold values in citizen interactions. Another aspect discussed in interviews was the boundary between personal and private matters, emphasising the need to set aside personal perspectives in counselling and relationship-building. Teachers stated that excessive personal involvement can hinder assistance, so maintaining distance is key. They emphasised that students should use personal traits as tools for solutions. One police programme teacher noted: "Being humorous in a difficult situation can be very professional at times and solve a lot in the moment."

Dispositions towards the other

A second interpersonal theme and a central tenet of professionalism was *dispositions towards the other*, which encompasses relational skills. These skills are described as closely linked to empathic ability and values, such as understanding another person's feelings, putting oneself in their situation, showing respect, and being non-judgemental. Further, these skills must be exercised while maintaining personal boundaries. Teachers in all contexts described these skills as essential to professionalism. A teacher within the police programme illustrated this point succinctly:

> The rule of law and the equal value of all people require us to always act on these principles. While I understand that there are necessary exceptions in the police profession, it remains crucial to treat people well. Acting professionally as a police officer means treating everyone equally, regardless of their identity. (Teacher, police education)

This quote emphasises the importance of seeing the person behind the situation. By this reasoning, a professional approach requires recognising and appreciating the uniqueness of individuals and their situations, respecting their knowledge and experience, and allowing for empathy and participation. Teachers across all programmes noted this is particularly significant in encounters with vulnerable individuals, such as those with mental illness, addiction, or in situations involving death or domestic violence. Meaningful contact also involves understanding how professional communication impacts others, requiring awareness of how body language and emotions can escalate or de-escalate situations.

Teachers widely agreed that caring is crucial in encounters, especially when influence is limited. A police teacher described it as "going the extra mile" for someone else:

> In the meeting with another person, it may be that I can't do anything, that is, intervene. Then I could just say that no, unfortunately, we can't do anything here and then I leave. Instead, there are many things you can do. That I understand the vulnerability of these people or whatever it is, and I have room for manoeuvre where I can actually sit down and ask how they're doing and how we could help. Can you call someone, or can we call someone? To show that you care. (Teacher, police education)

Teachers emphasise that making a special effort to help or comfort someone means going beyond usual expectations or norms, which costs nothing but gives a lot to the other person.

According to teachers, respect is crucial because all three professions involve authority and decision-making, which can sometimes be unfavourable. Thus, there is a strong emphasis on professional manners across all educational contexts, visible in course assignments and teachers' statements. This involves ensuring the other person feels respected, and their values and wishes are considered during decision-making. A medical education teacher highlighted the importance of honesty, clarity, and transparency:

> What patients want is for you to be crystal clear. They often want to know yes or no to questions that can't be answered with yes or no. You have to express yourself as far as you can, so you can be as clear as possible. You can never say "I think this patient will die the day after tomorrow." We can never predict that. But I can answer that question by saying "yes, it's possible" or "it's possible that he'll die within a week or a few days." As a professional, it's important that you don't withhold information from patients. (Teacher, medical education)

This quote describes a challenging situation where the professional must balance being too blunt and direct or too vague and unclear. To find an appropriate balance, teachers emphasised the importance of being an active listener and connecting with others in a way that makes them feel respected and acknowledged. This involves being attentive, balancing speaking and listening, and reading situations to know when to move on or step back.

As described in the empirical material, dispositions towards the other involve understanding the patient's or client's situation, identifying their needs, and meeting those needs as far as possible. According to documents and interviews, much professional work is primarily about the interpersonal dimension between the professional (oneself) and the individual encountered (the other).

Contextual dimension

In addition to the interpersonal dimension of professionalism, a 'contextual dimension' includes role, task and situational awareness. This dimension focuses on the professional's role, relevant knowledge and skills, as well as understanding the context, including time, place, and space. In both documents and interviews, these contextual factors are considered central to informing a professional's decisions and predicting outcomes in their work.

Role and task awareness

The third theme, *role and task awareness*, was described in both documents and interviews as involving an understanding of the institutional context of the role and the organisation in which a professional works. Documents like the medical programme curriculum highlight the ability to ethically analyse and reflect upon one's role as a doctor and decision-maker in relation to patients, relatives, co-workers, and other professionals within and outside the healthcare system. Teachers from all three education programmes also stressed the ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practical action, using acquired knowledge and experience to benefit those served. Several documents from the police programme emphasise the profession's duty to serve the public and underscore the importance of the professional role in various encounters, particularly with individuals in vulnerable situations, such as those experiencing mental health issues, addiction, bereavement, or domestic violence. This involves understanding both the other person and oneself within the specific context of the encounter, and having the capacity to make informed judgements about appropriate interventions, taking into account relevant scientific, societal, and ethical considerations. The approach adopts a holistic view of the individual, with strong emphasis on making well-informed decisions while upholding and respecting human rights. Interviews also mirrored this perspective, with teachers noting a high demand for this orientation in professions of power, where crucial decisions affect people's lives. Teachers across all three programmes stressed the importance of a holistic approach to decision-making to ensure decisions are well thought-out and substantiated, maintaining trust in the profession.

At first glance, the word 'power' characterises the contextual orientation within all three professions. However, its interpretation varies between contexts. In medicine, teachers described power as the relationship between professionalism and the responsibility for life and death, trust, and intimacy. Firstly, doctors have the knowledge and power to make life-and-death decisions, which comes with significant responsibility. Secondly, they hold high status

and are trusted by society, requiring respect and humility. Thirdly, as illustrated by the quote below, doctors can become very close and intimate with others:

> It's the uniqueness of being able to get incredibly close to a human being in half an hour… intimately. You have both physical intimacies, the ability to touch, and also the opportunity to talk about things. How do you feel at home in bed? I mean, you can meet a complete stranger for thirty minutes, and that's totally unique. It's as if society has invested in us. That's why it works. So, even though I may not be perfect, society has invested in me, and that allows me to be this intimate with a stranger. Because that person trusts me as a representative. They know I have a long education. They hope I've had professional training, and they're essentially putting their life in my hands. (Teacher, medical education)

Teachers noted that intimacy is achievable due to the trust between patient and doctor, which must be managed with great care. They highlighted the importance of remaining humble and downplaying the powerful role of making life-and-death decisions to avoid becoming intoxicated with power.

In contrast, teachers on the police programme linked power to the use of force. The right to use violence compromises strong human rights values, necessitating ethical considerations. Teachers highlighted the unique relationship in policing between professionalism, the monopoly on violence, exposure to risk, and public scrutiny. This involves understanding when and how to use force professionally, being aware of the consequences, handling violent and high-risk situations requiring rapid and difficult decisions, and managing frequent public scrutiny. Teachers noted that this scrutiny creates high, often unachievable, public expectations of professional behaviour. Actions deemed professional by police can be viewed negatively by the public, leading to perceptions of unprofessionalism.

In social work, within course syllabi, power is associated with the complexities of exercising public authority, focusing on legal certainty, investigative procedures, and needs assessments for appropriate interventions. Teachers highlighted the complexity of balancing being a helper and an authority figure, which requires a holistic perspective for all decisions, as described in documents and interviews. In the interviews, the ability and competence to recognise that everything around a client affects them in different ways was underlined as important when exercising power, necessitating an understanding of the social systems influencing individuals.

Situational awareness

The theme of *situational awareness* involves understanding how time, place, and space influence actions. In interviews, this was described as the ability to "read a room," identifying both obvious information and subtle cues. Teachers noted that this awareness requires evaluating

and prioritising while remaining flexible and open to reversing decisions if necessary. Situational awareness was also described as being present and mindful of both the situation and the person encountered. A teacher in the social work programme described it as the ability to interpret the multitude of 'signals' a person sends out and relate them to one's strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills:

> Being professional and having mastery competence involves the ability to read and interpret a situation. I draw upon my knowledge of cancer care, the specific workplace, and the individual's cancer type. Additionally, I consider psychological and social challenges, as well as typical reactions. This evaluation helps me determine the urgency of the situation and prioritise how I can provide assistance. (Teacher, social work education)

This quote focuses on flexibility. A teacher in the police programme also reflected upon the importance of the ability to evaluate and prioritise in relation to the context in which one finds oneself:

> On the one hand, I think it's very context dependent. We have the big context of working as a police officer. It's kind of an overall context, but then there are a lot of different contexts where the requirements for what's professional differ somewhat. It can be one thing when you're on traffic control, another when you're dealing with a plaintiff or a suspect in an interrogation situation. (Teacher, police education)

As this quote shows, diverse contexts are particularly evident in the role of a police officer, demanding professionalism in various situations.

In many interviews, situational awareness was described as involving the ability to cope with inadequacy, which is essential for professional behaviour. Rather than relying on strict rules, teachers stressed that professionalism includes improvisation based on experience, knowledge, and situational interpretation. A police education teacher highlighted the importance of interpreting and applying regulations in defining professionalism:

> For me, professionalism is about the fact that there are always laws and rules to be applied and they will always be interpreted in some way among people and groups and individuals. How you interpret something and how it should be done, that's the discussion you need to have in order to think about what it is to be a professional. The legislation provides practice or space for this to be done. But there's always room for interpretation because these are situations you end up in when working with people. (Teacher, police education)

This quote illustrates that decisions in these situations must be interpreted and guided by intuition. A teacher in the medical programme expressed it as: "You have to trust your gut feeling, and trust that feeling if you're congruent, present, and attuned to what's important."

In summary, situational awareness was primarily described as the ability to 'decode the environment', perceiving and interpreting both explicit and implicit aspects. Teachers highlighted that this involves assessment and prioritisation skills, along with the flexibility to alter decisions when necessary.

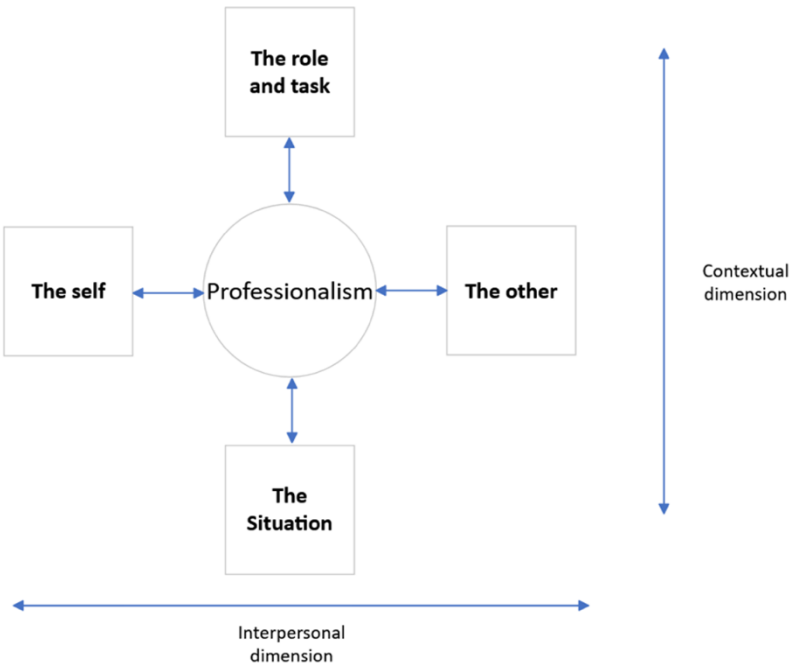
Discussion

This article explores educators' ideas on what students need to learn to effectively navigate and manage their professional practices. A key role of educators in professional education is to teach and develop students' professionalism. The results show that professionalism was discussed in terms of dispositions towards oneself, the other, the role, and the situation. These themes were constructed as two aggregated dimensions, meaning that professionalism is enacted in both an interpersonal and contextual dimension. I will now discuss these results from two perspectives. Firstly, I will examine how the themes and dimensions of professionalism are interrelated. Secondly, I will address how this view of professionalism can pose challenges for professional education.

The following model (see Figure 2) maps the themes and dimensions described in the findings. It provides a visual representation of central and shared meanings associated with professionalism in the studied contexts. The model aims to explain the breadth of the focal phenomenon, and reveal the core logic of the reasoning that emerges.

Figure 2

Model of professionalism



This model of professionalism combines two important dimensions, contextual and interpersonal, highlighting similarities between the programmes. The first dimension relates to contextual factors, where profession-specific knowledge and values are crucial. The second focuses on the people involved and interpersonal values. These dimensions intersect in four aspects: the professional role and task (e.g., relevant theoretical and practical knowledge, obligations), the context (e.g., jurisdiction, assignment, type of encounter), the self, and others (e.g., self-awareness, lived experiences, life situations, values, current states).

The results reveal the importance of professionals considering the context while also accounting for interpersonal dynamics, the specific characteristics of a situation, and the professional knowledge base. This means adapting actions and behaviours to situational demands.

The findings present a complex view of professionalism and support previous research. For instance, Neve et al. (2017) identified professionalism as a contentious concept, while Burford et al. (2014) highlighted its complexity due to various elements related to attitudes, identity, behaviour, status, and patient expectations. The dimensions described in the model can be understood as logics shaping the concept of professionalism. This combination aligns with Harrits' (2016) description of blended, hybrid professionalism as "a logic based on formal and practical knowledge and a personal, relational, and emotion-based logic" (p. 12).

The contextual dimension aligns with previous research on formal-scientific knowledge of professionals (Abbott, 2014; Harrits, 2016; Parsons, 1991). Unlike many studies, this dimension is implied rather than explicitly emphasised as part of professionalism. Across all programmes, the interpersonal dimension and relational skills are consistently highlighted. Given the focus on "people professions" (Fenwick, 2016, p.3), it is logical that the relational aspect and the interactions between clients and professionals are considered significant. Unprofessional behaviour can damage relationships and erode trust in a profession (Barnhorn et al., 2019). However, both dimensions shape ideas of professionalism, particularly when teachers discuss the interpersonal dimension in relation to societal trust and authority. Balancing authority with citizens' needs is crucial for maintaining public trust.

The comparative analysis revealed differences between the programmes. Each profession is aware of an inherent power dimension, but its expression varies. In medicine, it involves avoiding the projecting of superiority associated with high status. For social workers, power involves making life-changing decisions and requires a holistic perspective, considering both the helper and authority roles. In the police profession, power is clearly linked to the monopoly of violence, creating tension between the right to use force and potential human rights violations, complicating decision-making.

Another distinction is the context in which power is exercised, with varying degrees of transparency in the actual practice of each profession. Medicine has little transparency, as interactions occur between doctor and patient. Social workers, by contrast, operate in both private

and public contexts, while police officers frequently work in the public eye. These levels of transparency affect how professionalism is scrutinised.

The study highlights dimensions or logics underpinning educators' ideas on what students need to learn to effectively navigate and manage their professional practices. Using a comparative approach, it examines shared and unique aspects of professionalism across educational practices. Unlike Burford et al. (2014), who argued that views of professionalism vary between and within professional groups, this study reveals more similarities than differences. The underlying ideas of professionalism appear to hold true across all professions. These findings have implications for professional education, which will be discussed further.

Challenges for professional education

The findings of this study have implications for teaching professionalism. Previous research shows that courses on professionalism often rely on practical and implicit knowledge, making them different from other higher education courses and more challenging to teach (Bradbury et al., 2015). Moreover, students often perceive the content as "fuzzy" and unclear (Leo & Eagen, 2008) or abstract and irrelevant (Fulchand et al., 2014; Neve et al., 2017). This study nuances these criticisms, suggesting that professionalism is a multidimensional and complex concept that encompasses a broad range of content. Additionally, professionalism is expressed through actions, with an emphasis on professional-citizen relations, making both teaching and assessing it particularly challenging.

Previous research (Liljeholm Bång et al., 2024) has identified a tendency among educators to avoid assessing professionalism in practice, opting for written examinations over practical ones. This approach may contribute to students' feelings of fuzziness and abstraction. Professionalism involves skills that require years of experience to develop, yet professionals are expected to master them early in their careers. In professional education, both teachers and recruiters serve as gatekeepers to the profession (Lindberg, 2013). The image of professionalism portrayed sets exceedingly high standards. Those involved in professional education should consider whether it is reasonable to expect students to be professionals before starting their careers. One way to address this is to focus on developing skilled professionals "in the making" (Lindberg, 2013, p.432), emphasising professional ideals without imposing the same expectations as on fully qualified graduates.

As previously noted, despite variations in the structure and content of professionalism courses, the overarching ideas of professionalism across programmes are remarkably similar. However, there is diversity of ideas within individual programmes, indicating that teachers differ in how they interpret and define professionalism. They expressed a need for more internal discussions to refine their perspectives and to clarify, both for themselves and their students, what their expectations entail. It is crucial for students to understand the purpose and significance of professionalism. Otherwise, they may downplay its importance compared to subject-specific content (Leo & Eagen, 2008; Neve et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2013).

Previous research on professionalism has often been isolated within each professional domain and presented as specific to each profession (Bradbury et al., 2015). While context is recognised as crucial for acting professionally, this study demonstrates that ideas of professionalism are more similar than different across professional contexts. In human-service professions operating within dynamic environments, generic skills are emphasised as essential for professional conduct. Adaptability and flexibility are key, especially in personal interactions, as the interpersonal dimension was prominently highlighted in the findings. Rooney et al. (2015) also highlight the importance of developing flexibility, or agility, for practitioners who must respond effectively to unfolding situations. These critical skills are neither easy to teach nor straightforward to assess, underscoring the need for deeper discussions across educational boundaries.

Conclusion

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature on professionalism. Firstly, it highlights that professionalism is widely understood as a multidimensional concept, comprising skills and abilities requiring extensive professional experience to develop, regardless of the specific profession. Secondly, it underscores the importance of communication among educators within each educational programme to clarify their ideas about professionalism and discuss reasonable expectations for students with no prior professional experience. These shared understandings form the foundation of both teaching and assessment. Thirdly, the study reveals that educators across different professions encounter similar challenges in translating the concept of professionalism into teaching and assessment. This underscores the value of broadening discussions across professional fields to learn from each other.

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