

PERSPECTIVES OF PROFESSIONAL SKILLS IN SPEECH-LANGUAGE PATHOLOGY

by

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism is expected of speech-language pathologists across day-to-day interactions and is further expanded in professional development activities and courses. In comparison to other fields where there are multiple examinations of professionalism, there are limited examinations of how professionalism relates to speech-language pathology. In this qualitative study, 12 speech-language pathologists were interviewed regarding their perspectives and experiences related to professionalism and core values. Through a phenomenological framework, the interview transcripts were transcribed and coded using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were identified within the interviews: (1) commitment to ethical standards and professional excellence, (2) fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and ongoing development, and (3) effective communication and relationship building. How perspectives aligned with and diverged from previous research are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Professionalism, core values, speech-language pathology

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism can be conceptualized as a set of moral principles, actions, and procedures reflecting high standards of competence and conduct within a profession. It encompasses ethics and quality standards important in shaping career formation, development, and education (Hudson & DeRuiter, 2021; McGinnis et al., 2016). Professionalism is shaped beginning in entry-level education while acquiring field-specific knowledge and skills encompassing a sense of responsibility to one's profession and the services provided (Wynd, 2003). In healthcare fields, higher levels of professionalism are demonstrated by meeting certification, regulatory, and education criteria (Adams & Miller, 2001). Inadequacy of professionalism skills may negatively impact job performance and longevity (Foster, Wiczer, & Eberhardt, 2019). Professionalism is expected of clinicians across healthcare professions, including physical therapy and nursing, and is central to building strong, successful client-clinician relationships (Breen & Murphy, 2009). In speech-language pathology, aspiring clinicians attend graduate programs in which field-specific skills are developed. Professionalism is further developed with increasing career and work experiences as well as through the influence of individual beliefs, organizational culture, and societal expectations (Cusack et al., 2019; Wynd, 2003).

ASHA is the professional organization for speech-language pathologists (SLPs), audiologists, and speech, language, and hearing scientists (ASHA, n.d. c). This organization specifies the standards for professionalism for speech-language pathology and audiology with its

core values and Code of Ethics. ASHA upholds its 228,000 members across the United States to its standards to ensure the best quality of care for clients, in part by requiring practicing SLPs to complete Continuing Education Units (ASHA, 2023; ASHA, n.d. b). ASHA members are required to complete a minimum of 30 professional development hours every 3 years to maintain their Certificate of Clinical Competence (CCC). Professionalism is central to the field of speech-language pathology from graduate students to practicing SLPs.

Role of Professionalism

Despite the concept of professionalism being ubiquitous across accreditation organizations, regulatory bodies, and universities, finding an exhaustive list of professional behaviors associated with any empirical data is challenging. The professional qualities of a successful SLP are often referred to with multiple wordings in different contexts, including *professional qualities*, *important qualities*, *personal characteristics and attributes*, and *soft skills* (Baylor University Robbins College of Health and Human Sciences, 2023; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; College of Education & Human Development, 2021; 2023; Shollenbarger, 2019). For the purposes of this study, professionalism will refer to the professional qualities and skills, beyond direct assessment and intervention skills, that are required for interacting with clients, other professionals (including inter-professional collaborators), students, supervisors, and community members. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023) identifies and defines six important qualities of a SLP — compassion, critical thinking skills, being detail oriented, listening skills, communication skills, and analytical skills. These specified qualities encompass both the scientific and interpersonal aspects of speech-language pathology and contribute to evidence-based practice (EBP), the coalescence of clinical expertise, evidence, and client values (ASHA, n.d. a) that helps SLPs execute professional practice. Exploring descriptions,

applications, and evaluations of professionalism across disciplines provides a useful context for understanding professionalism in speech-language pathology.

Professionalism in Physical Therapy

In physical therapy, professionalism is described as embodying the actions and values of the field. Professionalism encompasses clinical content knowledge and the characteristics of professionalism to provide the highest possible quality of care for patients. Schafer et al. (2007) identified themes of professionalism in clinical practice and entry level education — specifying that the background of physical therapy work is based on professionalism. Educators are encouraged to find ways to teach students the value of professionalism in physical therapy programs (McGinnis et al., 2016). The American Physical-Therapy Association (APTA), the United States professional body and source for standards of ethics and professionalism for physical therapists, offers various resources for their members to advance professionalism, including online courses, self-assessments, and descriptions of core values. The APTA Guide for Professional Conduct states that physical therapists will engage in professional development and lifelong education, guided by the APTA core values (APTA, 2012). The core values include accountability, altruism, collaboration, compassion and caring, duty, excellence, integrity, and social responsibility (APTA, 2019). In sum, the APTA makes clear for clinicians the standards of professionalism expected and integrates these into daily expertise.

Professionalism in Nursing

Cusack and colleagues (2019) and Wynd (2003) identified the significance of addressing the attributes that advance nursing professionalism, which foster public trust and reliable patient care. Cusack and colleagues (2019) conducted a scoping review of attributes and definitions of professionalism in nursing. They concluded that professionalism is threefold, consisting of: (a)

individual values and beliefs, (b) interpersonal relationships, and (c) the wider cultural contexts of an individual's life. Individual values and beliefs, such as empathy, duty, and knowledge, are difficult to measure, yet they are necessary to professionalism in nursing. Interpersonal relationships encompass individual behavior, including communication, patient-centered care, and adherence to code of ethics. Cultural contexts refer to an individual's organizational, social, and regulatory frameworks. The American Nurses Association (ANA), the predominant professional nursing organization of the United States, defines standards of professional performance as a part of its scope and standards of practice (American Nurses Association, 2015). These standards include ethics, culturally congruent practice, communication, collaboration, leadership, education, evidence-based practice and research, quality of practice, professional practice evaluation, resource utilization, and environmental health. The ANA professional performance standards are expected by all members of the organization.

Professionalism in Speech-Language Pathology

In speech-language pathology, there has been an increase in discussions regarding professionalism in the past decade that specifically relate to fostering the qualities in students and practicing clinicians that create strong relationships with clients (Breen & Murphy, 2009). Breen and Murphy (2009) explored how to incorporate professionalism into the preprofessional development of communication sciences and disorders program curriculum, based on informal conversations with program directors, faculty, and graduate students. However, their research has no quantitative data to support their ideas. They advocated for graduate education regarding professionalism to shift indirect modeling and observation to a more direct approach, such as a systematic self-assessment tool. Although graduate programs typically focus on knowledge of the profession, an area that can continue growing throughout one's career, teaching foundational

professional skills in clinical work settings is important to future career success (Foster et al., 2019). Although ASHA offers professional development courses online with topics varying from behavior management to literacy for elementary school students, there are no clear, agreed upon definitions of the professional qualities of SLPs. This ambiguity makes the fulfillment of professional standards inconsistent and vulnerable to subjective interpretations.

Core values refer to specific qualities and behaviors of an organization, its staff, and associated members (ASHA, n.d. c). They are an essential aspect of professionalism as the behavior expectations that form the basis of professionalism in healthcare professions. Embodying the values of one's profession is intrinsic to professionalism and to setting expectations (McGinnis et al., 2016). As discussed in Cusack and colleagues (2019), professionalism results from a complexity of core values and other factors.

ASHA's Role

ASHA aims to empower SLPs through furthering science, cultivating excellence in practice, and providing support for the members and the individuals they serve. The ASHA Code of Ethics (COE) details the principles, scope of practice, and standards that hold speech and hearing professionals accountable (ASHA, 2023). This framework leads speech and hearing professionals to emulate professional conduct throughout day-to-day decisions. The COE is divided into four main principles of responsibility: (1) those served professionally, (2) one's professional competence, (3) the public, and (4) professional relationships. This document is also based on the principles of duty, accountability, fairness, and responsibility (ASHA, 2023). For graduate students, the Council on Academic Accreditation (CAA) in Audiology and Speech-Language Pathology is the entity within ASHA that accredits graduate programs in these fields of study. To graduate and gain clinical certification, students must reach the set of standards that

encompass knowledge, skills, and practicum requirements (Council of Academic Accreditation, n.d.).

Certified ASHA members are required to complete 30 professional development hours every 3 years. Two of these hours must be in cultural competency or diversity, equity, and inclusion areas. One of these certification maintenance hours must be in ethics. ASHA specifies approved course content, such as the integration of professional ethics and business ethics, to satisfy these requirements, which may be met through online seminars, conferences, and other resources. Engaging in professional development focused on professionalism topics is one way to advance professionalism. However, benefiting from and applying the knowledge gained from these activities requires a foundation of professionalism. This application of professional development content illustrates the necessity for the understanding of professionalism in speech language pathology (ASHA, n.d. b).

ASHA Core Values

Core values are the basis of forming professional behaviors in practice. ASHA defines core values as a group of qualities that are clearly specified, bolster the organization's strategic goals, and are displayed habitually by all involved with the organization (ASHA, n.d. c). Values guide and influence a person's decisions, thus shaping other people's judgment of what is valued to a person or a group of people. The incorporation of core values with work is necessary regardless of the setting whether it is the classroom, lab, clinic, or other context (McGinnis et al., 2016 & Cornett, 2006). Essential to professionalism is assuming the profession's values and long-term goals, showing the necessity of having core values (McGinnis et al., 2016). ASHA has identified its core values as collaboration, diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, and integrity. (ASHA, n.d. c).

An Empirical Study of Core Values

The seven core values of the American Physical Therapy Association are accountability, altruism, compassion/caring, excellence, integrity, professional duty, and social responsibility (APTA, 2013). McGinnis and colleagues (2016) conducted a qualitative study to gain knowledge of the formation of physical therapists' professional core values and the incorporation of their values into clinical work. The participants of this study included 20 practicing physical therapists with a range of clinical experience from less than a year after graduating from a Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program to those with over 30 years of experience. Before conducting interviews with each participant, several documents were collected including the following: (1) a demographic questionnaire, (2) the APTA Core Values Self-Assessment (CVSA), and (3) the participant's resume. The CVSA (APTA, 2013) is a self-assessment tool for the APTA's seven core values, evaluated through 68 indicating statements that align with one of the core values. These indicators are scores on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from "always" (5) to "never" (1). Overall, these three sources along with literature regarding professional development and core values shaped the semi-structured interview questions asked to each participant. The interview sessions were each about 60 minutes long and were conducted in person. The interviews comprised three main sections: (1) clinical logic questions to determine how client perceives the relationship between professional core values and patient care, (2) resume sort to separate each item into categories of most to least important in the formation of professional core values, and (3) professional development questions to examine what aid, barriers, and change to core values they each had experienced thus far in their professional careers. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

The authors identified three main themes from the data. First, professional core values are based on personal values. Of the 20 participants, 15 noted that compassion/caring guided them to join the physical therapy field. Second, career experiences mold professional core values, pointing out the additional value of positive mentors and role models. Third, personal and professional core values are fused into practice regardless of one's career path and practice context. Overall, the clinicians identified integrity, compassion/caring, and accountability as their top three areas of current strength. The most identified value to further develop was social responsibility, chosen by 19 of the 20 physical therapists. The study demonstrated the validity of the CVSA for intentional reflection and professional development for physical therapy students and clinicians.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore practicing SLPs' perspectives on professionalism. This foundational exploration through qualitative inquiry is designed to provide initial descriptions and preliminary examples of professionalism in speech-language pathology.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Design and Theoretical Perspective

Qualitative inquiry grounded in a phenomenological approach was used to explore SLPs' perspectives and experiences related to professionalism. Phenomenology explores the perspectives of human experiences, focusing on an individual's perception of objects, events, or experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology was appropriate for this study because the aim was to explore the shared perspectives of individuals related to a specific phenomenon, which in this study referred to definitions and descriptions of professionalism in SLPs (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research Checklist (COREQ) was used to guide and to report the methodological components of this study (Tonga et al., 2007).

Researcher Characteristics

Researcher reflexivity is an important characteristic of qualitative research to acknowledge the experiences and role that the researcher brings to the study. The author is a graduate student studying communication sciences and disorders who has a background and training in leadership and professionalism through a business perspective. These experiences provide broad context to this study. Researcher notes and reflection were used to ensure the study accurately and fully reported the participants' perspectives and experiences, rather than being influenced by the researcher's interpretations of the interview questions. By thoroughly

engaging with the interview transcripts, the researcher aimed to fully understand the ideas and concepts shared by participants, ensuring their voices were faithfully represented.

Participants and Ethical Issues Pertaining to Human Participants

This study was reviewed and approved of this study by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia (IRB PROJECT00008812). All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study.

A total of 12 practicing SLPs holding the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech-Language Pathology (CCC-SLP) participated in this study. Participants were recruited through multiple methods including online communities (e.g., ASHA Special Interest Groups) and professional contacts. As part of the purposeful sampling strategy, SLPs were recruited and selected to represent a range of work settings and varying amounts of time since completing graduate school.

Table 1

Description of Participant Demographics

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
M = 38.9; (range 26 – 52)		
Gender		
Female	12	100%
Race		
White or Caucasian	11	91.7%
Black or African American	1	8.3%
Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino Origin		
No	12	100%
Highest Degree of Education		
Masters	11	91.7%

Research Doctorate	1	8.3%
Years of Experience		
M = 14 (range 2-29)		
Employment Status		
Full Time	11	91.7%
Part Time	1	8.3%
Doctoral Student		
No	11	91.7%
Yes, Research Doctorate	1	8.3%
Work Settings		
Early Intervention (birth to 3)	2	7.4%
Hospitals (e.g., acute care, rehabilitation, and psychiatric hospitals)	4	14.8%
Nonresidential Healthcare Facilities (e.g., home health agencies)	1	3.7%
Preschool	3	11.1%
Private Practice		
School (K-12)	4	14.8%
Residential Health Care Facilities (e.g., nursing and assisted living facilities)	5	18.5%
	4	14.8%
Other	2	7.4%
Telehealth	1	3.7%
Virtual Therapy Preschool, High School	1	3.7%
States of Practice		
Arizona	1	6%
California	2	13%
Colorado	1	6%
Delaware	1	6%
Georgia	4	26%
Kansas	1	6%
Minnesota	1	6%

North Dakota	1	6%
Tennessee	1	6%
Texas	1	6%
Washington	1	6%

Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews that lasted between 30 minutes to 45 minutes were individually scheduled with each participant at a time convenient to them. The interview began with greetings, an introduction to the interview, and then the interview questions. The interview questions focused on (a) the ASHA core values of collaboration, diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, and integrity, and (b) definitions, descriptions, and examples of professionalism. The interview protocol was designed utilizing the model and framework for qualitative interview questions provided in Creswell and Creswell (2023). Three practicing SLPs reviewed the interview script as part of content validation, and changes were made accordingly. See Appendix A for the interview script.

Materials and Software

Zoom

Zoom is a virtual communications platform that connects participants through video and audio conferencing (Zoom Video Conferencing, Inc., 2024). Otter.ai is a Zoom feature that transcribes what is said during the meeting in real-time for all participants to view, while indicating who is speaking (Chen, 2022).

NVivo

NVivo is a software for qualitative data analysis (QSR International, 2021). This software program helps organize the theme development and analysis process.

Qualtrics

Qualtrics, the web-based survey tool that is offered to UGA students, faculty, and staff, was utilized to collect participant consent forms (UGA Enterprise Information Technology Services, n.d.).

Procedures

The interviews were conducted via University of Georgia approved Zoom videoconference platform with the Otter.ai recorder during the Spring 2024 semester. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and included open-ended questions that were not provided to participants prior to the interview. Digital conferencing technology helped reach SLPs from a broad geographical area. The Otter.ai recorder was used to automatically transcribe the interviews and indicate which participant was speaking. The transcriptions from Otter.ai were manually checked by one researcher then uploaded to Nvivo for analysis.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Creswell (2023) described the process of data analysis for qualitative studies as involving multiple levels of analysis – this multistep process was used in this study. The researchers transcribed and organized the data as previously described. Next, researchers reflected on the overall meaning of the data by closely reading it and noting general thoughts and codes. Then, the codes were examined to identify themes of the data, which revealed major findings. These themes were also shaped into a general description of the data, aligning with the phenomenology framework. Inductive and deductive coding were both utilized during this process by beginning with a few broad codes based on the interview questions, which were expanded and edited, as necessary, upon data examination. Other codes were added throughout the data analysis process to further reflect shared participant perspectives. Inductive coding

focuses on labeling categories from the bottom up by building abstract units of information. (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Techniques to Enhance Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of data and member checking. Triangulation of data involved building themes from multiple sources of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Specifically, themes were constructed based on patterns of similarity or divergence in the data across multiple participants, allowing the researcher to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives. In member checking, the reviewed interview transcripts were sent via email to the participants for verification and to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Participants were asked to respond to the email if they felt the transcript did not accurately reflect what was discussed their interview. No participants responded to that email correspondence.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Primary analyses focused on defining and describing professionalism and core values in speech-language pathology based on participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions. The participants were asked questions regarding how they view the role of professionalism related to various vested parties, including clients, supervisors, community partners, interprofessional colleagues, and continuing education activities. Other questions focused on participant perceptions of ASHA's stated core values of collaboration, diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, and integrity. Additionally, participants were asked if they would include other factors in that list. The majority of the participants (10 of the 12) indicated that additional core values should include excellence, *"how we treat others,"* empathy, open mindedness/kindness, compassion, relationship-building, being work appropriate, authenticity, and evidence-based practice. Given that participants consistently shared that professionalism and core values "go hand in hand," highlighting that "whatever you value is going to affect the type of professionalism that you are going to show," the central finding of this study is that core values and professionalism are integrated constructs. Therefore, the following findings are described from that perspective.

Overall, participants described professionalism as *"made up of different characteristics as opposed to... a straight definition."* They emphasized that it involves *"doing the right thing,"* *"being able to listen to other people's points of view,"* and is *"based on what everyone's individual goals are."* Furthermore, professionalism entails, *"treating the people that you work*

with – colleagues and clients – professionally and respectfully.” A few participants noted that they do not view professionalism as, “a one-to-one correlation between professionalism and being good at your job or skill at your job,” but rather as, “a marker of how good you are at your job.” One participant explained, “I think it helps people trust your skill. It makes people more willing to work with you. It makes colleagues and clients more willing to work with you.”

Three central themes were identified from the thematic analysis, including: (1) commitment to ethical standards and professional excellence, (2) fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and ongoing development, and (3) effective communication and relationship building. These themes and corresponding subthemes are listed in the below table.

Table 2

Identified Themes and Corresponding Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme: Components
Commitment to Ethical Standards and (Professional) Excellence	Ethical Standards: Integrity, Responsibility, Trustworthiness, Honesty, Upholding core values Professional conduct: Timeliness, Dress code, Model example Quality of Practice: Evidence-based practices, High standards of practice
Fostering Inclusivity, Collaboration, and Ongoing Development	Diversity and Inclusion: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Fairness, Open-mindedness, Teamwork Personal and Professional Development: Preparation, Knowledge and expertise, Innovation, Adaptability, Continuous learning

Effective Communication and Relationship	Foundation to Build Connections: Honesty,
Building with Colleagues and Clients	Respect, Trust, Boundary setting, Calmness
	Manner of interacting in relationships: Manner of
	speaking, Sensitivity, Advocacy, and
	Understanding

Theme 1: Commitment to Ethical Standards and Professional Excellence

Commitment to ethical standards and excellence involves actively and respectfully engaging with clients and colleagues, being dependable and transparent, accurately applying clinical and professional knowledge, and tailoring communication and interventions to individual needs. Participants often described components of displaying their standards and excellence in practice with clients and colleagues. One participant shared:

You really have to know what you stand for. I'm a rule follower. I always have been a rule follower. That was easy for me...In order to be that professional, there are things that you can do to help clients and things like that. But I will never sacrifice my ethics, and I would never sacrifice anything that would betray that as a professional. Ethics is like kind of the bottom line for me.

From this main theme, three subthemes emerged: ethical standards, professional conduct, and quality of practice.

Ethical Standards

This subtheme included concepts such as integrity, responsibility, trustworthiness, honesty, and upholding core values. One participant noted “*when you have integrity, then everybody's welcome, and we're embracing diversity. And we're learning new things. And we're,*

you know, I think integrity is sort of the glue that holds all of those [core values] together.”

However, another participant noted the difficulty of upholding core values, stating:

I think it's hard in our field. In the world of business, because so much of our like livelihood is based on reimbursement. So you get that crossroads. And I think one of the trickier things is like keeping that core value at the center of your life. Like, okay, I came into this because of ethics and patient care... remembering to keep that core value in the middle of everything like narrow vision.

Professional Conduct

Building on the foundation of ethical standards, professional conduct encompassed timeliness, appropriate dress, and serving as a model for others. Multiple participants shared the value of “*looking the part*,” emphasizing:

We are endorsing a brand... So we're like all out talking about how great speech therapy is, talking about the business, and why it's what you want to choose from a business owner's perspective. We're dressed professionally. We're talking professionally.

Quality of Practice

Discussion of quality of practice centered on evidence-based approaches and supporting high standards. Participants often linked evidence-based practice and high standards to enhanced professionalism. One noted:

By continuing to stay like knowledgeable on recent research... you're providing the best treatment assessment for your patients, building more well-round knowledge for yourself. And then in turn, you'll likely be more professional and... come across more professional to your patients and their families.” Another added, “*we are both just like on this high level every time... we like shift everything and it becomes 100% about the patients... And*

that is exactly the goal. It's the same goal and it is to be as professional and on top of things as we can be.

Theme 2: Fostering Inclusivity, Collaboration, and Ongoing Development

The theme of fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and ongoing development emphasizes embracing diversity to deliver high-quality, interprofessional care. It involves valuing different perspectives, leveraging individual strengths, and addressing areas for growth. Over half of the participants cited that professionalism includes being able to collectively gather and integrate diverse sources of information, including insights from colleagues or professional development resources. These insights are beneficial to cultivate *“those working relationships and those trusting relationships with other professionals who may know things that you don’t”* and to understand, *“what’s important to those professional colleagues, how they are best trying to support our patients, and how our goals mesh at times.”* Two sub-themes emerged from this main theme of fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and ongoing development: diversity and inclusion and personal and professional development.

Diversity and Inclusion

When discussing diversity, equity, inclusion, fairness, and open mindedness, participants frequently expressed overlapping ideas. Several described diversity using terms such as, *“respecting,” “embracing,”* and *“welcoming”* emphasizing that it relates to *“physical characteristics or beliefs... their lifestyles.”* Nine of the twelve participants mentioned the importance of *“treating everyone equally”* and *“being offered the same opportunities”* as key factors in promoting equity in speech-language pathology. Responses regarding inclusion varied from *“including all the appropriate other professionals”* to *“being inclusive in terms of what*

you provide, and also advocating for those who might not be able to advocate for themselves.”

Participants highlighted that open mindedness plays a significant role in professionalism, noting:

I've developed some good relationships with the physic physicians that I work with and just our openness to learn about our field and their openness to like, listen to my recommendations, and also, like, respond back with questions just demonstrates a lot of professionalism to me because they are. They are willing to admit that they don't know it all, and that they have some questions.

Conversely, participants shared experiences where a lack of open-mindedness and teamwork led to challenges, resulting in *“a lot of emotions involved on both sides,” “impedance on the entire team,”* and *“separation between therapists.”*

Personal and Professional Development

Personal and professional development, including preparation, knowledge and expertise, innovation, adaptability, and continuous learning, were identified as beneficial for core value formation and overall professionalism. Participants noted that effective collaboration with other professionals, such as physicians and nurses, requires, *“consistently educating myself or maintaining the knowledge base as times change.”* Innovation was described as the ability to *“come up with new ways and new processes”* to meet and adapt to the unique needs of each patient, as it is deemed *“necessary to keep moving forward,”* preventing stagnation in activities and materials. However, this progress hinges on having the knowledge and expertise to *“effectively diagnose, treat, and interact”* with clients and colleagues, ensuring that *“what you’re doing is going to be helpful for the patient.”* Preparation further supports innovation and professional development by ensuring that professionals have, *“all their materials that they need around them... instead of like scrambling to find the materials and things that they need”* and

“being knowledgeable enough that you can certainly answer questions.” Participants noted that a lack of preparation *“impedes our ability to move forward in different things.”*

Theme 3: Effective Communication and Relationship Building with Colleagues and Clients

This theme emphasizes the importance of communicating transparently and appropriately, following through on commitments, avoiding inappropriate conversations, and responding respectfully without overreacting. It also involves advocating for speech intervention when necessary and maintaining an open mindset about the challenges and circumstances others may face. Throughout discussion, participants highlighted the components that they viewed as essential to effectively communicate with clients and colleagues to foster trusting relationships, which was referred to as the *“foundational piece”* of professionalism and core values. One participant elaborated, stating that, *“you also build relationships through, inclusivity... integrity. All of those are ways that you can build relationships. A lot of those [ASHA] core values are ways that you foster that relationship building as well.”* Four of the twelve participants tied relationship building and *“developing rapport”* into many of their interview responses either using those terms expressly or sharing narratives that highlighted the importance of trusting relationships. For example, one participant shared that when that *“human connection”* is lacking, *“I can't pretend to be somebody I'm not and still hold that professionalism. For me, I've tried. It doesn't work well for me.”* Furthermore, a participant stated:

It all boils down to the people we treat, right?... You know, we can do our job, no matter what that looks like, no matter what age you work with. But if you don't relate to who you are working with at their level, I don't think it is as... professional... you can really do some damage if you don't take care of how you present yourself and how professional you are when you're working with your population. I think that's just it in a nutshell.

Foundation to Build Connection

Honesty, respect, trust, boundary setting, and calmness were each specified as key players in to effectively manage challenging contexts with clients and colleagues. For example, one participant shared that:

Sometimes families are upset, and it's not even necessarily about what you said. It's about something else that happened. And they're... concerned about their loved one. Just being able to keep your cool, being able to offer resources... that's the big thing... and just know that a lot of times this isn't necessarily directed at you... you just might be the person that's getting the message.

These challenging contexts are where boundary setting largely comes into play. As one interviewee noted, *"when you're in a formal IEP meeting... you kind of have to take that friend hat off and you have to put the teacher hat on,"* highlighting the need to distinguish between personal and professional interactions, while another emphasized that *"this isn't daycare... we are rehabilitative service,"* underscoring the importance of clarity in roles. To foster relationships and reliance in the clinical expertise of SLPs, respect is necessary, whether it be related to *"shar[ing] therapy spaces," "other people's professional judgment, their opinions, and being able to listen,"* or simply, *"showing common decency, common respect... to build that rapport so that they can trust you and your services."* Honesty, trust, and respect were discussed together by four participants. One participant specified the relationship between them in the context of speech-language pathology as:

Being honest when you don't have... an answer, but trustworthy in what you're saying... again being respectful... Being a woman of my word, being a therapist of your word being a person who is trustworthy because you do what you say you're gonna do.

Additionally, *“the way you carry yourself, the way you represent yourself the way you treat others, whether that's your patients, their families, coworkers, other disciplines like just treating everybody with respect, and then in return, you will get that respect.”*

Manner of Interacting in Relationships

The way clinicians interact with others through their manner of speaking, sensitivity, advocacy, and understanding each uniquely contributes to a SLP's effectiveness. Sensitivity is particularly crucial in emotionally charged situations. One participant noted:

Sometimes it's easy to kinda use just like jargon... say it the way it is, but you have to... being aware that this is their kid... the most special thing in the entire world and you want to... say just as many positives as you do negatives. You just have to be careful how you word things.

When foresight is lacking, the repercussions can be significant. Another clinician reflected:

I probably could have done a lot more to educate politely, like, being that team player, and yet kind of sneak in my professional knowledge as opposed to just being kind of like, they're not doing what I'm doing, so I'm gonna go this way. I still... think, yeah, that could have been better. It was a learning experience for me.

In striving for professionalism, clinicians also must carefully navigate interpersonal dynamics. As one participant emphasized:

you don't wanna come across rude... abrasive. You obviously want to..., give appropriate advice and feedback... in a sensitive way... People are not gonna want you to work with their kids if you're not being sensitive to their emotions while also being truthful... a big part of being professional [is] reading the room a little bit and knowing... how to communicate with your families, and other coworkers.

Four participants discussed the importance of understanding others in various contexts such as being clinical fellow supervisors or managing conflict. One participant recounted,

When I was in grad school, I had a tricky supervisor that really liked pediatrics... she said, 'You don't look like you're enjoying yourself in these sessions. What are you gonna do when you get into the schools?'... That was just such a reflection that she didn't know me, that we were not on the same page with professionalism as like future colleagues... I said, 'I will never ever be in the schools, but I will try my hardest to look like I'm enjoying myself. I'm really sorry'... Once we had an understanding of what the other was looking for, then we could achieve that professionalism that we were both striving for.

Additionally, six of the twelve participants shared experiences where they had to advocate for themselves or others. Several discussed the challenge of advocating for speech-language pathology intervention, with one stating:

Speech gets kind of pushed away because nobody can really quite define what we do. Because it's not tangible, right? ... I've worked in hospitals, acute care, and critical care, my entire career. And so, I think... being able to relate to physicians because they're giving you orders but being able to kind of hold your own and make sure the profession doesn't get downgraded.

Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

When I walk into a patient's room, [I say] "Hi, I'm the speech therapist," or "I'm the speech-language pathologist." "Oh, my dad doesn't need you. He talks fine." Okay, your dad is also choking at mealtime all the time. I can help with that. And so, there is that professionalism is being able to do that explanation of, "Here's

what we do. And here's what that looks like. Here's how I tailor that to your specific situation.”

The shared experiences of these participants highlight their perspective that effective communication, sensitivity, and advocacy are essential elements of professionalism in speech-language pathology, ultimately fostering trust and collaboration among clinicians, families, and patients.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore practicing SLPs' perspectives on professionalism. The central finding was that core values and professionalism are integrated constructs. Participants emphasized that professionalism involves making ethical decisions to cultivate trust in clinical practice. Participants indicated that professionalism is characterized by various traits and is influenced by individual goals. They perceived professionalism and core values as deeply interconnected, with one's core values directly shaping the type of professionalism exhibited. Three themes emerged from the interviews: (1) commitment to ethical standards and professional excellence, (2) fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and ongoing development, and (3) effective communication and relationship building.

First, commitment to ethical standards and professional excellence involves actively and respectfully engaging with clients and colleagues, being reliable and honest, effectively applying clinical knowledge, and individualizing intervention to meet client needs. This first theme is made of the subthemes of Ethical Standards, Professional Conduct, and Quality of Practice.

Second, Fostering Inclusivity, Collaboration, and Ongoing Development, which highlight the importance of valuing everyone's perspectives and strengths to provide high-quality, interprofessional areas of care while also addressing areas for personal and professional growth.

The second theme encompasses the subthemes of Diversity and Inclusion as well as Personal and Professional Development. Third, Effective Communication and Relationship Building with Colleagues and Clients, underscores the significance of appropriate communication, maintaining

professional boundaries, following through on commitments. The subthemes for the third theme are Foundation to Build Connections and Manner of Interacting in Relationships.

Findings Related to Professionalism in and beyond Speech-Language Pathology

The current study supported that professionalism is central to strong, client-clinician relationships, as noted by Breen and Murphy (2009). Building on this theme, participant narratives highlighted how their professionalism extends to interactions with other vested parties outlined in the ASHA Code of Ethics, including those served professionally, community partners, supervisors and supervisees, and interprofessional colleagues (ASHA, 2023). Professionalism is particularly crucial for rapport building, conflict management, and helping prevent miscommunication. As Cornett (2006) shared, professionalism reflects one's abilities as a clinician and is essential across diverse practice settings. The participants in this study – who represented work settings of schools, private practices, hospitals, and skilled nursing facilities – echoed this sentiment, including pointing out variations in roles within the same work environment. For example, they discussed challenges related to clinical versus business logistics, further underscoring the complexities of professionalism in practice (Cornett, 2006).

Aligning with ASHA's definition of core values, participants emphasized that ASHA's values are essential to achieve team goals and must be demonstrated throughout the organization (ASHA, n.d. c). Responses indicated that a lack of core values may negatively impact job performance and undermine trust in speech-language pathology interventions and assessments, as discussed by Foster et al., (2019). Foster and colleagues also noted that individuals who fail to meet job-related expectations can have detrimental effects on team dynamics. Participants specifically mentioned that a lack of professionalism led to heightened emotions, division among colleagues, and obstacles to the goals of the entire team, ultimately impacting client care.

To further explore professionalism in the context of speech-language pathology, it is important to relate it how professionalism has been described and studied in related healthcare fields. Participants in this study expressed similar sentiments found in existing research on professionalism in nursing and physical therapy. For instance, similar to the findings of Cusack and Wynd (2019), participants in this study defined professionalism as a blend of individual values and beliefs as well as adherence to ethical standards. Likewise, in alignment with McGinnis and colleagues (2016), participants in this study recognized a close relationship between core values and professionalism. Collectively, these studies highlight that clinicians perceive professionalism as essential to building trust with clients and delivering high-quality care.

In McGinnis and colleagues' 2016 study, participants frequently described social responsibility as a core value needing further development and focus for physical therapists. In contrast, participants in this study highlighted other important topics for speech-language pathology including excellence, empathy, open mindedness, kindness, compassion, relationship building, authenticity, and evidence-based practice. These insights suggest a broader understanding of core values that could enhance ASHA's existing framework of diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, collaboration, and integrity.

Limitations

Although this inquiry aligned with qualitative design standards, there are limitations of this study that should be considered when reviewing and interpreting its results. Inherent to qualitative methodology, the theme development process was susceptible to subjectivity of the researchers. Similarly, the results should not be broadly generalized to the population of SLPs but instead viewed as a starting framework for understanding to lead to increased focus on

describing and defining professionalism in the field. In addition, each speech-language pathologist in the sample identified as a female, 91.7% of participants were white, and the age range was 26-52 years. Although this combination reflects the demographics of speech-language pathologists in the United States, it will be important to collect perspectives from a diverse sample of participants (ASHA, 2024). Future researchers should also consider purposefully recruiting bilingual SLPs and those working in predominantly rural areas. Although this study did not exclude bilingual SLPs, none of the participants were bilingual. Professionalism in speech-language pathology may be influenced by a combination of the above factors (e.g., cultural, linguistic, geographical), so it will be important to provide guidance for future research.

Future Directions

ASHA defines core values as a group of qualities that are clearly specified, bolster the organization's strategic goals, and are displayed habitually by all involved with the organization (ASHA, n.d. c). Currently, there is not a clear agreed upon set of definitions for the listed core values and professionalism, so it is difficult for providers and community members to determine whether these values are being carried out. This leads to subjective interpretations that potentially places SLPs at risk for not aligning with the core values because of ambiguity. Given the lack of clear descriptions, it is not surprising that there are no known previous qualitative explorations or empirical examinations focusing specifically on the role of professionalism in speech-language pathology.

Likewise, there are no current published measures or tools for self-assessment and reflection of professional skills and core values for SLPs. Having established, agreed upon definitions of the construct of professionalism are important because of the risk for inconsistent and subjective interpretations of these standards. Specifying these terms could lead to clarity in

graduate and preprofessional education and guide the development of self-monitoring and evaluation, similar to the purpose of the APTA CVSA (APTA, 2013). Creating a self-assessment tool would help provide a framework for understanding and applying foundations of professional skills in clinical settings, encouraging intentional reflection, and guiding professional development activities. Such a tool would offer students and clinicians a clear, actionable way to assess their own progress and identify areas for growth. Breen and Murphy (2009) previously discussed the value of integrating a systematic self-assessment tool into graduate education within communication sciences and disorders programs, sharing that it could shift the focus from passive observation and indirect modeling to more active, reflective learning. By incorporating regular self-assessment, students and clinicians could track their own development over time, identify gaps in their professional skills, and take responsibility for their growth. Future studies could expand on the understanding of ASHA's core values to contribute to the formation of well understood and agreed upon definitions. Those definitions could serve as the framework for developing a self-assessment tool for professionalism and core values. Following initial content validation, the tool could be used as a self-reflection and outcome measure with a larger number of SLPs.

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Appendix A: Interview Script

I'll be asking you a series of questions related to professionalism in speech-language pathology.

Section 1: Professionalism and Its Impacts

- What does professionalism mean to you?
- Why is professionalism important in speech-language pathology?
- Does professionalism relate to any specific experiences you have had?
- If supervising a student, colleague, etc., what skills and attributes do you consider when thinking about professionalism?
- These questions are about how you perceive professionalism with individuals you may interact with:
 - How do you perceive professionalism when interacting with clients and their families?
 - How do you perceive professionalism when interacting with supervisors and supervisees?
 - How do you perceive professionalism when interacting with interprofessional colleagues?
 - How do you perceive professionalism when interacting with community partners and advocacy groups?
 - How do you perceive professionalism related to professional development activities, such as when giving or obtaining Continuing Education Units?

- Tell me about a time when you or someone you interacted with displayed strong professionalism.
- Tell me about a time when you or someone you interacted with displayed weak professionalism.

Section 2: Core Values

- Core values can be described as principles, values, and beliefs that underlie a profession and guide practice.
- How do you view the relationship between professionalism and core values?
- How would you describe core values that you attribute to your professional work?
- ASHA has a list of core values in their Strategic Plan. They are collaboration, diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, and integrity.
 - Let's start with collaboration. How would you briefly describe it?
 - How would you briefly describe diversity?
 - How would you briefly describe equity?
 - How would you briefly describe inclusion?
 - How would you briefly describe innovation?
 - How would you briefly describe integrity?
- How do you think collaboration, diversity, equity, inclusion, innovation, and integrity relate to professionalism collectively or one of them individually?
- Are there core values that are important to you outside this list?