Partnership for practice change and knowledge development*

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Abstract
Objective. This article presents and evaluates the results of an educational initiative at the occupational therapy programme at University College Lillebaelt in Denmark. The objectives of the initiative were (A) to establish institutional partnerships between the educational institution and various practice fields and (B) to develop students’ competences in practice research and collaboration, thus building up a framework in which research-based change in occupational therapy practice can be pursued through students’ practice research. The practice research undertaken in the students’ bachelor’s projects had a theoretical and methodological foundation in critical psychology. Method. Four bachelor’s cohorts with a total of 29 students participated in the educational initiatives from 2008 to 2011. Nine groups conducted practice research projects, wherein they collaborated both with occupational therapists in the practice field and with citizens, and later drafted written reports and communicated their results Concurrent with this, they received special education and counselling from teaching staff. Results. The initiative was evaluated by analysing focus group interviews, questionnaires and the students’ bachelor’s theses. Results of the evaluations showed that (A) the developed institutional partnerships promoted the goals of the initiative, including research-based proposals for change in the practice field and that (B) the students acquired competences in practice research and collaboration. Conclusions. On top of what students learned through the initiative, all of this was to the benefit of the university college, the occupational therapy program, and the practice fields and citizens. The results point toward a continuation of the educational initiative.

Key words: theory–practice relation, student–practitioner–teacher collaboration, practice research, institutional partnership, bachelor’s thesis

Introduction
The development of Danish occupational therapy education programmes during the last half-century has been characterized by increased research into the theoretical foundations and underlying paradigm of the profession (1). The theoretical assumptions of the occupational therapy profession have been developed nationally and internationally, and occupational therapy practice is increasingly founded on theory, scientific research, and evidence, thus strengthening the relation between theoretical understanding and current practice. The development of theory and new methods contributes to increased mutual exchange of knowledge and learning between the practice field and theory.

In 2007 the Danish Ministry of Education established seven university colleges, the educational programmes of which are founded on a professional and developmental knowledge base built up in collaboration with users and researchers (2). The three elements – practice, theory, and research – are known as the Knowledge Triangle (3). In 2009, the university colleges formulated a policy concerning knowledge-based education programmes that incorporated the goals of meeting the current needs of citizens, of being
innovative, and of developing practice (3). In line with the OECD understanding of applied research, the policy has placed stress on the importance of identifying, exploring, and solving challenges in the modern welfare society. University colleges and the practice field are encouraged to work closely together and establish partnerships that can address the challenges encountered in the interface between the two. Thus the strategy to establish a partnership on practice development can be a source of specific goals that can direct students’ learning as they prepare for becoming professionals when they finish their education. Such strategies have wide implications for higher education learning, which has to prepare coming professionals in health and social studies— including occupational therapy students—for navigation in the complexity of the modern world (4,5). This applies to any profession or field. New knowledge must be applicable in both theory and practice. Moreover, it must contribute to developing the competences of students, lecturers, and professionals in the practice field, and thus positively affect the development of the relevant practices and professions (3,6). Research shows that researchers, practitioners, and students can become agents of social change when partnerships are conducted in a community setting fostering collaboration between the partners, and if the agents involved are open to making such changes and the practical context allows for them (7).

The University College Lillebaelt has been the institutional context for a strategic plan for occupational therapy education (8). The initiative aims at framing the students’ bachelor’s theses as practice research: a theory-based approach to practice change and development that utilizes concepts from “critical psychology”, as developed by Holzkamp and Dreier from 1970 until today (9,10). Critical psychology emphasizes the relevance of knowledge for practice— primarily knowledge for change—by researching the scope of possibilities and constraints in order to capture the critical element in identifying what limits as well as what might help the development of research (9).

Research results and experience speak in favour of practice research and related approaches as having the potential to develop professional practice. The literature shows the positive results of practice research based on critical psychology and other similar approaches to practice research used in both health and social science by nurses, social workers, psychologists, physical therapists, etc. (10,11). Used in educational contexts, such research shows the importance of students’ involvement and understanding of the research process and the development of students’ research competences (11-13).

In occupational therapy, researchers such as Elizabeth Townsend, Ann Wilcock, and Gary Kielhofner conduct “participatory research” and “participatory action research” with similar approaches to basic epistemological questions conceived as practice research (14-17). Kielhofner argues that participatory research can narrow the gap between research and practice (18) and that participatory research should be based on a broader concept of knowledge (17). These occupational therapy researchers stress the close link between user-oriented occupational therapy practice and user-oriented research.

Practice research is—like critical psychology in general—based on a science of the subject incorporating the first-person perspective (9). The social practices of, for example, occupational therapy are studied from the perspective of situated subjects rather than the outside perspective of researchers. The practices involve many different subjects: professionals, citizens, relatives, and others, whose diverse perspectives on the issues and processes are included (9). Research highlighting previously neglected subject positions makes other aspects, issues, and possibilities of social practices stand out. Practice research uses a number of theoretical concepts in order to analyse problems in practice and to identify possibilities for dealing with them and overcoming them (10). The concept “critical” draws attention to the fact that the psychological aspects of a situation are inseparable from the social practices in which actors participate, meaning that research must stand in a reflexive relation to those practices (9,10,19). Research shows that practice research is a suitable approach to the critical examination of relations and processes in rehabilitation practice, which is central to professional occupational therapy practice— and also in the practice fields included in this initiative (19).

The overall purpose of this educational initiative was to develop an institutional partnership between the occupational therapy education programme at a university college and two practice fields, as a framework for students’ practice research. One practice field was a municipal activity and rehabilitation service, and the other a municipal activity and social service. Within this framework, bachelor’s theses aimed at contributing to a research-based change to the occupational therapy practice fields and to the development of professional and research competences in all stakeholders (students, occupational therapists from the practice field, and lecturers).

This article focuses on the parts of the project aiming:

- A: to evaluate the development of institutional partnerships between an occupational therapy education programme and two municipal practice fields as a framework for research-based change in occupational practice through students’ practice research;
Partnership for practice change

Table I. Special course with topics and theory related to practice research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Didactic method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical subjects</td>
<td>Theoretical presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical psychology (9,10,19)</td>
<td>Dialogue-based education with lecturers, senior researchers, occupational therapists from the practice field, and fellow students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rehabilitation (19)</td>
<td>Group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizen perspective, learning (19,25)</td>
<td>Short theoretical presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory and methodology (9,10,16,17,19,26)</td>
<td>Dialogue-based education with lecturers, senior researchers, occupational therapists from the practice field, and fellow students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two workshops on the concrete projects of the students</td>
<td>Group discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The topic of the first workshop was the empirical work in practice research</td>
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<tr>
<td>The topic of the second workshop was analysis of the empirical data in practice research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselling of bachelor groups</td>
<td>Group-based dialogue with lecturers, educators, and fellow students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examination</td>
<td>Individual with external examiner</td>
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</table>

- B: to evaluate students’ competences in practice research and collaboration.

Material and methods

Prior to the educational initiative, lecturers, senior researchers, and the steering group, including representatives from the practice field, collaborated in drawing up a project description. Additionally, guidelines for the bachelor’s thesis were made specifying how to carry out practice research (20). Requirements were added to the guidelines for students entering into dialogue with the stakeholders in the practice field concerning current problems and possible changes as a result of the research, as well as how these changes should be implemented. The requirements were adapted to meet both paradigms in practice research and national guidelines for bachelor’s theses (21).

Over a period of three years, nine bachelor’s projects with a total of 29 students participated in the project. Participation was voluntary and motivated and students had to apply to be part of the educational initiative. The groups of bachelor’s students consisted of two to four students. Together they conducted practice research supervised by the lecturers, drafted written reports, communicated results, and entered into dialogue with the practice field regarding proposals for the change in occupational therapy practice. Six occupational therapists from clinical practice were contact persons during the project. Additionally, occupational therapists and citizens from the practice fields participated.

The students passed their exams individually with an external examiner in accordance with Danish ministerial orders. In the bachelor’s theses the students complied with the special requirements to practise research by developing and formulating research-based proposals for the change in practice on the basis of the collaboration with stakeholders in the practice field.

Ad A. Development of partnerships

Partnership agreements were made between the occupational therapy education programme and the two occupational therapy practice fields: a municipal activity rehabilitation service and a municipal activity and social service. The target group was adult citizens with somatic and psychiatric conditions, who needed rehabilitation to help them with the activities of their daily lives. The practice fields have – through participation in a steering group established by the educational initiative – collaborated on defining the practitioners’ needs and preferences for development and change in daily occupational therapy practice. Needs and expectations were made explicit by written contracts of collaboration between involved leaders in the practice fields and the occupational therapy education programme. Written contracts of collaboration between students and occupational therapy practitioners in the practice field clarified concrete problems.

Ad B. Bachelor’s students’ development of competences

The bachelor’s thesis is the last part of the occupational therapy education programme. The students’ educational basis for the thesis includes theory and competences acquired throughout their education, a bachelor’s course in theory of science and methodology, and (as shown in Table 1) a special course with topics and theory related to practice research. The course is composed of both theoretical subjects presented in lectures and workshops where the students present their material and are guided by lecturers, senior researchers, and fellow students. The didactic methods used are mostly dialogue and discussions.

Participation in practice research projects where current practice and understanding thereof is challenged by new knowledge and opportunities for change can be regarded as a form of participation in learning communities (25). This situated learning
stresses the importance of collaboration between all stakeholders (students, occupational therapists from the practice field, and lecturers) (25). Analyses of the empirical data from practice research will often include criticism of one’s own as well as others’ perception of the current practice. However, the aim is to combine such criticism with new and unprecedented possibilities for change. By changing and expanding the set of issues commonly referred to in research and practice, the influence and insight of the involved parties will increase. The students are responsible for their own bachelor’s thesis and for making the collaboration between stakeholders work. The learning processes include the acquisition of occupational therapy competences, of theoretical and methodological competences, as well as development of the ability to collaborate in practice research. The senior researcher and the lecturers were responsible for education and counselling of the students.

Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical course of the research initiative, divided into 16 steps. The loops of the process indicate that the passage of the steps in the practice research loop can be repeated as long as the passages generate new research questions. The smaller loop at the top of the figure illustrates that the practice field is influenced through close cooperation with the research projects and goes through a similar development to that of the students, lecturers, and senior lecturer. All participants learn from their participation and from the continuous evaluations, and new knowledge is then included in the new research questions.

**Organization and analysis of evaluations of (A) and (B)**

The evaluation was made between 2008 and 2011. The evaluation comprised students, leaders, and occupational therapy practitioners from the practice field. Evaluations focused on two areas:

A. The development of institutional partnerships between the occupational therapy education
programme and practice fields as a framework for students’ practice research, including the students’ research-based proposals for change in occupational therapy practice.

B. The competence development of students in practice research and collaboration with the practice field.

**Organization**

Evaluation (A) was carried out continuously throughout the process. Four focus-group interviews were undertaken with the students between 2008 and 2011. An interview guide was applied incorporating themes related to the students’ collaboration with the practice field. Of the 29 students, 21 participated in these evaluations. The methodological approach to data collection was thus qualitative using focus-group interviews (26). Additionally, qualitative open-ended questionnaires (27) as well as focus-group interviews were used with leaders and contact occupational therapists. Eight leaders and contact occupational therapists participated in one focus-group interview and three occupational therapists from the practice fields responded to the qualitative open-ended questionnaires.

The choice of qualitative methods allowed insight into the subjective perspectives on changes in practice and the partnership between leaders and occupational therapists. In addition, at the steering group meetings, a continuous dialogue was held on the development of partnerships and the collaboration between education programmes and practice fields. The use of several methods (typically called “triangulation”) to gather empirical material was particularly useful for understanding issues where the perspectives of several parties on the same issue needed clarification.

The students’ science-based proposals for changes to practice were identified in the bachelor’s projects and summarized by two researchers independently. Each of them carefully read the nine bachelor’s theses and noted the students’ research questions drafted in collaboration between the students and the practice field and the research-based proposals for change of practice. The two researchers then met and aligned their assessments, which resulted in the contents of Table II.

Evaluation (B) was carried out with the students continuously throughout the process. Four focus-group interviews were undertaken between 2008 and 2011. An interview guide was applied incorporating themes related to the students’ competences, their participation in the process, and the collaboration with the practice field. Of the 29 students, 21 participated in these evaluations. By collecting the empirical data continuously it was possible to adjust the initiative to improve the students’ learning process as well as the overall aims of the initiative. The methodological approach to data collection was thus qualitative using focus-group interviews (26). The method was chosen to gain insight into the students’ subjective perspectives on their own competence development (26).

**Analysis**

The combined empirical material consisted of nine practice research theses, five focus-group interviews, three responses to questionnaires, and five sets of minutes from steering group meetings. From the point of departure in critical psychology, the empirical material was used to identify the subject perspectives of the involved parties on the two different areas (A and B). The analyses highlighted problems in the practice field as identified by the subjects involved; the different subjects’ various reasons and arguments for proposing changes; and the actual proposals for change to occupational therapy practice (9,10). Evaluations (A) and (B) were based on the focus-group interviews, the qualitative questionnaires, and the minutes from meetings. These sources were written documents based on reports written and validated in collaboration between researchers, students, and representatives from practice; the sources were thus not based on transcripts of recorded material. During the analyses the themes presented below were established by involving several researchers; qualitative software was not used. One researcher read the material carefully and through a process of open coding this researcher identified important themes. The remaining researchers then added their interpretation, and the final themes were formulated through discussion in meetings. The results obtained were thematized in relation to (A) the developed partnerships between the institution, including the students’ research-based proposals for change in occupational therapy practice, (B) the students’ competence development in practice research and collaboration.

**Ethics**

By choosing a theoretical approach to human mental processes understood from the perspective of the individual subject, an effort was made to assure an ethical attitude towards the informants’ perspective. The ethical considerations in relation to this study are based on the fundamental assumption that all the agents involved, as humans, are interdependent. Ethics is about managing this dependence in the best possible way (28). All the informants gave written consent to participating and all sensitive information is anonymized.
Table II. Presentation of research questions and results of bachelor projects.

| June 2009 | Municipal activity and rehabilitation service
<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Which promoting and inhibiting factors can influence the value of transferability from group-based training to the everyday life of the citizen?</td>
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</table>
|           | Municipal activity and rehabilitation service
|           | How do three stroke patients perceive the effect that the participation in a group-based rehabilitation programme in Odense Municipality may have on their lives? |

| June 2010 | Municipal activity and rehabilitation service
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What is the experience of citizens in a rehabilitation group when their relatives are involved in the rehabilitation process? And what do citizens and relatives believe is the best way to involve relatives in the rehabilitation process in the rehabilitation group?</td>
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| January 2011 | Municipal activity and rehabilitation service
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does the citizen perceive the quality of the rehabilitation training and which changes has participation caused for the individual citizen and her/his everyday life?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

|           | Municipal social and activity service
|           | How do users who have been referred to the Activity House experience coherence and involvement in the rehabilitation process based on the framework in the thinking about rehabilitation, and which factors are promoting and inhibiting? |
|           | Municipal activity and rehabilitation service
|           | When considering a case concerning assistive technology for a patient in Odense Municipality, what experiences will relatives and occupational therapists get when the case is seen and understood from the perspective of a citizen in her/his surroundings? How do these experiences affect emotions, the contexts of action, and life trajectories of the citizen, relatives, and the occupational therapist in their overall life trajectories and trajectories of participation? Do these experiences lead to suggestions for changes when taking the case into consideration? |

|           | Students’ research-based proposals for change of practice
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The purpose of rehabilitation should be made clear to the citizen, relatives and other professionals. Moreover, the occupational therapist should, to a larger extent, ensure that the citizen focuses attention towards her/his own everyday life and at the same time support the citizen in transferring activity from group-based training to everyday life.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The communication between citizens and occupational therapists about goals and expectations should be strengthened. It should be made clear how to work with the citizen’s goals and that training according to these goals does not only happen when using exercise equipment, but also when performing activities in the home.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The inclusion of relatives can be strengthened by initial talks in the citizen’s own home and by collaboration agreements between the citizen, relatives, and staff. Moreover, the citizen, relatives, and staff should at joint meetings define how the relatives could support the citizen in her/his rehabilitation. This can be further strengthened by giving the relatives the opportunity to attend the rehabilitation training, e.g. by offering special open house arrangements, and in this way to gain a better understanding of how training can be practised in the home. Finally, the inclusion of relatives provides the opportunity to counsel relatives on the management of concrete situations in the home.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Citizens should contribute to the formulation of goals and know the plan for rehabilitation. Furthermore, the views, experiences, and interests related to the “outdoor life” of the citizens should be included in the planning of rehabilitation. Citizens should be offered more choices to engage in activities that are meaningful to them. Finally, citizens should be supported in taking risks since such a choice of activities may lead to development.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The purpose of the citizens’ participation in the rehabilitation training should be made clear. Proposals for change will help the citizens to participate in patient associations and to return to the labour market as well as increase follow-up visits with the rehabilitation group at a public exercise facility.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Structured talks between staff and citizen can be improved by clarifying the purpose of the dialogue about collaboration, lifeline, week schedules, and growth model. When establishing a plan for collaboration, clear communication with the citizen about coherence in and across elements in the plan is essential.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A leaflet could be made and handed out to the citizen before the first meeting. This can prepare the citizen for general considerations concerning wishes and needs for assistive technology. It is proposed that the citizen and the occupational therapist together fill in the initial forms and that the relatives are involved to a larger extent. Finally, the time perspective of the case consideration should be made clear to the citizen.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table II. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions of bachelor theses drafted in collaboration between the students and the practice field</th>
<th>Students’ research-based proposals for change of practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2011 Municipal activity and rehabilitation service How does the citizen perceive ownership of her/his own goals for rehabilitation and how does the citizen perceive these goals in connection with her/his own life trajectory?</td>
<td>It is recommended to align mutual expectations between the citizen and the therapist concerning rehabilitation at the first contact (by telephone). COPM is suggested for determining the citizen’s values, interests, and trajectories of participation to make it clear which activities will be meaningful to the citizen as well as strengthen ownership of her/his own goals. Such consolidation of ownership can also be obtained if the citizen is given a written description of own goals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The rehabilitation of young users can be supported by clear action plans and adequate information about services in the “Activity House”, e.g. by improving their website, by offering activities that catch the interest of the young users, and by ensuring that they understand the purpose of the activity. Moreover, the young users can be supported through work-related activities and by assistance to establish social contacts, e.g. through mentor arrangements at the educational institution and the workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal social and activity service How can the “Activity House” support young users’ rehabilitation concerning work and education through meaningful activities in their own daily contexts of action and life trajectories?</td>
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</table>

All the bachelor theses’ have been reported to the Danish Data Protection Agency.

**Results**

**Establishing productive partnerships**

Occupational therapists and leaders in the practice field experienced the collaboration as a process that shed light on the problems they experienced in their everyday practice. They also had a major influence on the problems explored in the students’ bachelor’s projects. The clear framework established around the collaboration was an important prerequisite for the possibility of changing of practice, and it has ensured a common platform and clear involvement of the practice field and the interests of its participants. The relevance of the themes explored has thus strengthened both the practice and the students, as well as creating ownership for all parties involved in the project. Recognizing the students’ contributions, a professional said: “the considerable outcome is a gift”.

Important results of the partnership and collaboration between the educational institution and the practice fields were the outcomes of the students’ bachelor’s projects: the proposals for change in occupational therapy practice. These proposals were grounded in the students’ collaboration with citizens and professionals in the practice field concerning relevant problems and presented to leaders and occupational therapists in the practice field in question. In Table II the students’ research problems and the research-based proposals for change in the nine bachelor’s theses are presented.

**Developing bachelor’s students’ competence through practice research**

The students’ reports on acquiring new competences through conducting the practice research project are presented below.

**Practice research competences.** The students generally experienced that they had acquired a deeper and more elaborate insight into practice research theories and methods: “I am now aware what a practice research project is and I will find it easier to do it again.” Furthermore, students were motivated to participate in similar projects in the future. The process of carrying out the bachelor’s theses created knowledge of what practice research is, and how to organize it, as well as strengthening theoretical and methodical thinking: “I have gained more knowledge of research and how to go about it.”

Several students have realized the importance of pre-understanding: “I have acquired a methodological approach to open my eyes and disregard [my] own pre-understanding and look critically/openly at practice . . . and I have increased my attention to what choice of method can do to the result.”

More statements were made concerning the improvement of competences in acquiring skills, maintaining an overview of a process, staying calm when conducting a project, and maintaining faith in one’s own abilities to take on a responsibility.
One student said: “I have gained a better overview of the process concerning the development of project competences.” The students expressed confidence that they had come to understand the demands connected with change processes, especially changes in the practice field. The students emphasized that they had acquired the competences needed to identify initiatives for change, and to be able to communicate such initiatives to collaborators in the practice field, which gave a sense of confidence. Students reported that to communicate and manage a project “makes me more certain of my knowledge and also of how I positively communicate what I see but do not yet understand”. Several students further reported that they had been inspired to participate in projects and to collaborate with students when they themselves later worked in the practice field after graduation. One student said: “I am really enthusiastic about doing research and developing practice. I could easily imagine myself getting a practice research project going.” In general, many students felt encouraged to engage in developmental projects.

Furthermore, many students experienced their occupational therapy competences as being strengthened. One student said, “I am stronger professionally . . . I have got a stronger view of the activity and its use in practice”. Another student said: “I have become more conscious of my role as an occupational therapist.”

Other occupational therapy competences mentioned were: strengthening of the students’ view on client-centred approaches; greater consciousness of values embodied in the work as an occupational therapist; increased knowledge of the Canadian material (on client-centred practice); and a better understanding of young people with mental conditions. Students also felt that the topics of the bachelor’s theses would be useful to them in the future: “I can use the theme I have worked with in the practice research project myself and use it in a job as an occupational therapist.”

General methodological competences were also mentioned, such as being better at reading material, being critical, searching and finding literature on new knowledge, scientific validation of literature, conducting and improving skills when interviewing, and being better interpreting the data collection.

**Collaboration competences.** The students found it important to align expectations between the involved parties, to inform the practice field of the purpose of the educational initiative, and to define a clear distribution of roles and responsibilities when establishing the partnership. It was found to be an advantage that the practice field was engaged both in shaping the bachelor’s theses and in communicating research-based proposals for change. Generally, the close collaboration with the practice field has provided the students with collaboration competences in relation both to the practice field and to the citizens involved in the bachelor’s project. The students mentioned the importance of knowing how to organize the collaboration practically. They also reported the importance of being humble towards the practice field and the citizens as well as being on equal footing with employees in the practice field. One student said: “I will contact the practice field even more now and make sure we are not taking a wrong path.”

Another student said: “Specifically, I will be better at using the collaboration process – I have learnt to relate myself to work in practice.” The students also reported that in future they would be better at using the resources in the practice field as well as engaging in conflicts with the practice field. The students experienced general openness and interest from practitioners and citizens when presenting the research-based proposals for change.

**Discussion**

Although the study and the results are based on limited material, the evaluation of the educational initiative points to important discussions with implications for promising future strategies concerning productive partnerships between occupational therapy programmes (at university colleges) and occupational therapy practice fields. The approach to practice change and development taken by students’ practice research in bachelor’s projects shows the potentials for bringing together individuals from the community and the occupational therapy programme to work on common goals. Citizens, occupational therapy professionals, occupational therapy lecturers, researchers, and students who collaborate and share risks, responsibilities and resources, are able to make use of theoretical and research-based constructs in real-life settings.

**Citizens and professionals as students’ research partners**

As a focus point of practice research, citizens are included as agents with their situated perspectives and positioned concerns. The analysis centres on questions as to how and whether the occupational therapy service and interventions depend on the ways that clients conduct their everyday lives in and across the various contexts in which they take part. Just as the everyday lives of citizens are of central importance in occupational therapy, so too are they important for practice research.

The citizens’ perspectives offer a view on the occupational therapy interventions from outside the
occupational therapy profession. And, comparing professional frames of interpretation with studies of clients’ everyday lives, occupational therapists are reminded that professionals are not the only source necessary for understanding what clients do with the professional services in their everyday lives. In the practice research process this approach contributes to a realistic identification of problems and proposals for the change of professional practice. And it may offer a critical corrective to existing regimes of knowledge and professional frames of interpretation (9,10,19). For students at the beginning of a professional career, this way of doing research shows possibilities for connecting criticism of practice with ideas for developing forms of practice which better fit the needs and possibilities of clients in their everyday lives (9,10,19).

The professionals in the field also contribute to the practice research process with perspectives from their respective subject-positions. The students involved in practice research realize that practitioners’ understanding of their practices is grounded in their position as practitioners. Instead of producing decontextualized accounts, the situated analysis of work practices offers insights based on the plurality of professionals subject-perspectives. The practitioners’ frame of interpretation makes up a practitioner’s “theory-in-use” of her/his professional practice. It offers practitioners ways of coming to terms with their positioned experiences, responsibilities, problems, and scopes of possibilities. It affects what the students come to know through practice research and creates advantages as well as limitations for the processes and outcome (9,10).

Shared commitment and joint responsibilities

During the students’ practice research process the participating institutional stakeholders have been supportive. This was important for realizing the project, both for its success and for fostering the experience of ownership of the kind referred to by Suarez-Balcazar et al. (29). Professionals in the practice field have realized that collaboration between the educational institution and the practice field has proved to be a good strategy for promoting and enriching a desired practice development. The educational institution has realized that participating students can acquire a combination of scientific and practical competences relevant to the practice field. The students find themselves in a challenging position: in “the middle”, between partners at the educational institution and the practice field. Furthermore, they are vulnerable in this relationship because these linking partners both hold powers over students to pass or fail them on their research. This situation has not, however, been reported to have an influence on their engagement in doing practice research. As also stated by other researchers (15-18), all involved found that practice research reflected the core of occupational therapy professional practice and plan to make the scheme a permanent arrangement.

A challenged concept of knowledge

The change and development of practice, knowledge, and competences achieved through bachelor’s projects can be credited to the students’ efforts and the efforts of all the parties involved who brought their concerns into the projects. The initiatives for change were recognized as research- and knowledge-based by the involved lecturers and researchers, by the professionals involved in practice, and in the students’ final examination. The analysis of the students’ proposals for change and the theoretical and methodological approach leading to the results revealed, however, that the concept of “knowledge” relevant to the practice research projects is broader than the concept of “knowledge” implied by the governing standards of knowledge-production in the biomedical and natural science traditions. Practice research embodies a broader epistemology recognizing that knowledge is generated among participants; that experiential and process-oriented knowledge is important (9,10,17,19); and that emotions, reflections, and actions are additional routes to knowledge, and thus important parts of a research process (25,29,30). As argued by Kielhofner and Taylor, knowledge needs to be understood here as situated in contexts, as bodily, and as integrated in action; its relevance being decided by contexts, and the positions and interests of participants in a practice (17). Biomedical research aims at advancing general and universal knowledge independent of contexts. The broader epistemology suggested here integrates more sources of knowledge than are recognized in biomedical research, though it also makes use of evidence-based biomedical and epidemiological knowledge.

The general movement towards generating broader types of research and knowledge is carried further by the specific approach to practice research presented in this article, an approach aiming at producing knowledge that supports the participants in their efforts to control their own conduct, and the conditions of this conduct, in everyday life (9,10). This point of view complies with the university college policy on knowledge development by aiming to meet the needs of users, to innovate, and to develop practice. The conception of knowledge that runs through the bachelor’s theses corresponds with this. In the bachelor’s theses, change of practice was stressed, but the effort to maintain research-based theory development was also inextricably linked to the work.
Future perspectives

At the University College Lillebælt in Denmark, inter-professional groups have acknowledged the educational initiative presented in this paper. The initiative has led to new discussions on professional didactics and the application of practice research as a theoretical methodological approach to practice change and development. There are differences between educational institutions and municipalities, but structurally, pedagogically, and professionally there are many similarities, meaning that the research results presented here could be highly relevant to the wider field.

Alongside continuing support for traditional evidence-based projects as a source of knowledge development, there are tendencies in the academic and professional literature to search for forms of research-based development that produce broader types of knowledge that can contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice, and which include citizens and professionals from the practice field to a larger extent. The practice research presented here is an illustration of some of the benefits of the latter approach.

Institutional partnerships between occupational therapy education programmes and practice fields based on bachelor students’ practice research has considerable potential in creating research-based change to occupational therapy practice and in developing professional and research competences in all stakeholders.

1. The concept ‘applied research’ refers to the international term “Applied Research”, in the Frascati-manual (OECD 2002) defined as: ”[...] original investigation undertaken in order to acquire new knowledge. It is, however, directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective”.

2. The students’ presentations were evaluated in accordance with the ministerial order on bachelor examination (22). The bachelor theses were evaluated in accordance with the current ministerial order on examination (23) and the national order of the occupational therapy education programme (24), which requires that the education programme is research-based (20).

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