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Publication date:
2013

Document Version
Pre-print: The original manuscript sent to the publisher. The article has not yet been reviewed or amended.

Citation for published version (APA):

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Connecting theory and practice in physiotherapy education – challenges for the clinical educators

Presenting results and perspectives from the master thesis “The Clinical Educators perspective on Competency Development in Clinical Education”

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Background: Clinical education forms a key component in the education of physiotherapy students. The clinical educator plays an important role in regard to the student’s development of professional competences in the clinical education – during clinical education the students must acquire the knowledge and skills that are needed to meet the demands of the basic education, but at the same time be part of a community of practice with highly specialized work tasks. The clinical educators are thus challenged to meet the demands of the basic education as well as the demands of a highly specialized clinical practice.

Objective: The purpose of this study is to contribute to the discussion about, how the relation between theory and practice in physiotherapy education can contribute to the student’s development of professional competences. This study aims to add the clinical educators perspective to this discussion.

Methods: 2 focus group interviews with clinical educators from the physiotherapy education in Denmark were conducted. There were 3 participants in each focus group. They all worked at larger hospitals. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with an phenomenologen approach. 6 main themes were identified through this process and they were then analyzed on the basis of the theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: Pär Nygren & Halvor Fauskes’ theory on the development of professional competence and Illeris’ competence formula which describes engagement, practice and reflection as key concepts in development of competence forms the theoretical framework for the analysis of the empirical data and the understanding of the clinical educators role in regard to the physiotherapy students development of professional competences.

Main conclusions and perspectives:

- The clinical educators define their main objective as helping the students understand the relationship between theory and practice in the physiotherapy profession by supporting and facilitating the student’s ability to reflect in and upon their actions and develop competence in regards to being a reflective practitioner.
- The clinical education is important in regards to learning the role as a therapist and being able to form professional relations with the patients. The clinical educators therefore find it important to present the students to a broad variety of patients and give them supervision on how they conduct themselves as therapists.
- The highly specialised hospital forms a challenge as a clinical setting within an education, which aims to give the students basic competences. The clinical educators therefore find it important to bring the students to a broad variety of patients and give them supervision on how they conduct themselves as therapists.

Results: The 6 main themes and their conclusions are presented in the boxes below:

1. Coherence between theory and practice in a fragmented education – challenges for the clinical educators form, that they have an important role to explain the different theories and the process student experience when working in the clinical settings. The clinical educators experience that the deviation of the educational setting from the theoretical framework makes it even more challenging for the students to use the knowledge form the education in their education in general.

2. Reflecting on a learning strategy and the practical reality as a contrast to being a student and learning – challenges for the clinical educators experience that the opportunity to practice at the level of the professional setting, even if they had enough time to reflect on their own practice and learn from it.

3. Basic education in highly specialized hospitals – socialization into the profession in a complex hospital practice – challenges for the clinical educators experience that the clinical education gives the students the opportunity to be socialized into this profession and during their professional identity through participation in the community of practice. They also need to introduce the students to different settings and areas within the profession, but this can be difficult when the clinical education takes place in the hospital setting with highly specialized departments. If a student was being assigned to only one department and is a part of the healthcare system, the socialization process would probably be better – but this is not possible in an educational setting. Because the learning environment is highly specialized, it is important for the clinical educators to give the student basic competences within a broad variety of settings within the profession.

4. Learning how to be in a therapy – engaging in professional relationships with the patients. The clinical educators experience that this is highly challenging for the students. The therapeutic role and engaging in professional relationships with the patients can be difficult and challenging, because it is a difficult transition from a school setting. The clinical education must therefore incorporate the opportunity to structure the clinical education in a way that gives the students the opportunity to engage in professional relationships with different patients.

5. Identifying the student’s needs and personal skills – structuring an individual learning pathway – challenges for the clinical educators experience that they have an important role in structure the clinical education in a way that gives the students the opportunity to learn individually and to support the students learning either individually or in small groups.

6. Cohesion between theory and practice in a fragmented education – challenges for the clinical educators experience that they have an important role to explain the different theories and the process student experience when working in the clinical settings. The clinical educators experience that the deviation of the educational setting from the theoretical framework makes it even more challenging for the students to use the knowledge form the education in their education in general.

References:

Diagram:

- Professional competence is developed through participation in different communities of practice and is specific to the context in which it is developed. Nygren & Fauske (2010).

- The figure to the left illustrates Illeris’ contemporary theory of learning.