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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 phenomenological 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 Fauske’s 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 student 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 to get to know the student, so it is possible to structure an individual learning pathway. For this to be possible it is important to get to know the students individually and provide the students with a learning pathway that is individually adapted. The clinical educators experience that it can be very difficult for the students to identify personal learning goals that are not directly related to the learning objectives and that are not directly linked to the education. It is therefore important that the clinical educators are able to support the students in identifying personal learning goals.
- The clinical educators finds it important that they are able to present the students to a broad variety of patients, as this is given high priority. The clinical educators find "time to be a student and learning" extremely important. "The opportunity to practice at the level of the authorized physiotherapist", since this could give enough time to reflect on ones own practice and learn from it.
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