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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: Pår 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.

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

1. Coherence between theory and practice in a fragmented education

2. Reflecting on a learning strategy and the practical reality as a contrast to being a student and learning

3. Identifying the student’s needs and personal skills – structuring an individual learning pathway

4. Basic education in highly specialized hospitals – socialization into the profession in a complex hospital practice

5. Learning how to be a therapist – engaging in professional relationships with the patients

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 need to take into account the barriers that this setting presents in regard to the students socialization into the profession by being included in the professional community of practice.

• The results of this study highlights the need for further research in how the relation between theory and practice can be enhanced through a closer collaboration between the theoretical educators and the clinical educators.