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

Presenting results and perspectives from the masterthesis "The clinical educators perspective on competency development in clinical education"

Larsen, Louise Landbo

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):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Download policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
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”

Author: Louise L. Larsen, Master of Health Promotion & Education, PT, Lecturer and clinical coordinator. University College of Northern Denmark, Dept. of Physiotherapy

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

The clinical educators find, that they have an important role being responsible for a professional community and practice. This is perceived as a difficult task, that has become even more challenging in the current educational setting for physiotherapy students. The clinical educators experience that the division in the education is more challenging for the students to see the progression throughout the clinical education (as well as the education in general).

2. Modeling reality to match the level of the student.

The clinical educators find it important that the theoretical educators are capable of making the theoretical education relevant to the students at the clinical education, as it matches the level of the student and makes it possible to participate in the community of practice. The reduction of the complexity that characterizes the daily practice is important for the theory and practice to be connected. Making the students work together in a more theoretical environment is perceived as more challenging for the student to see the progression throughout the clinical education (as well as the education in general).

3. Reflection as a learning strategy and the practical reality as a contrast to being a student and learning.

Clinical educators find it important that the clinical educators can support the student in reflecting on their own practice, as well as a contrast to being a student and learning. They also experience that the “opportunity to practice at the level of the authorized physiotherapist”, since this could be given enough time to reflect on ones own practice and learn from it.

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

The clinical educators find it important that the clinical educators can support the student in reflecting on their own practice, as well as a contrast to being a student and learning. They also experience that the “opportunity to practice at the level of the authorized physiotherapist”, since this could be given enough time to reflect on ones own practice and learn from it.

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

The clinical educators find it important that they are able to identify the student’s needs and personal skills in order to structure an individual learning pathway. This is important due to the fact that the student must be able to get to know the students, so it is possible to structure an individual learning pathway and adapt the curriculum to the students individual needs. 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, and it is in the description of the module, in the learning goals, that it is important that the clinical educators are able to support the student in identifying personal learning goals.

6. Learning how to be a “therapist” – engaging in professional relationships with the patients.

The clinical educators find it important that the clinical educators are able to support the students understanding of the therapeutic role and engage in professional relationships with the patients, especially if the practice is more specialized. This is crucial because it is a difficult transition from a school setting to the clinical situation and the clinical educators must be capable of structuring the clinical education in a way that gives the students the opportunity to engage in professional relationships with different 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.

References: