Abstract

This paper aims to describe the policies and procedures of the use of assistive technology (AT) to support education and social inclusion of children with disabilities in Cyprus, through the investigation of four case studies. The paper initially presents the setting of the use of technology in inclusive and special education, as very recently developed and shaped in the last five years in the Cyprus educational system. Then, each one of the four case studies of pupils, from different educational settings (primary inclusive education, primary education special unit, secondary inclusive education and special school) is discussed. The case studies are presented aligned in the following axes: demographical characteristics, educational setting, type of difficulties and characteristics of disability, procedures of referral and assessment for AT, development and implementation of AT for communication, present and future threats, ethical considerations and challenges. Findings highlighted six areas related to AT in Cyprus, that need further research and development: teacher training and support for system use; consistency of and between people involved (especially educators and therapists); on-going assessment and follow-up procedures; multi-disciplinarity of support teams in and out of school; home use of systems and devices (related to funding); technical support, development and maintenance.

Main findings

In centralised educational systems such as Cyprus's, the Ministry of Education is the social organisation. Ideally, social organisations' policy decision processes involve a balanced relationship between resource systems (professionals, funding and technology organisations) and user systems (pupils with disabilities across educational levels). Based on the findings, this paper highlights six areas of further research and development in countries such as Cyprus, where AT is an emerging social and educational provision. These areas concern:

- professionals' (mainly educators') training and support for system use;
- consistent approaches and reliability between people involved (especially educators and therapists);
- on-going assessment and flexible standardisation of follow-up procedures;
- multi-disciplinarity of support teams in and out of school;
- provision for home use of systems and devices (related to funding); and
- technical support, development and maintenance.

Teamwork is vital for successful AT policy and practice implementation in educational settings. Collaboration among professionals must start with initial referral and assessment and continue during the whole implementation, follow-up, feedback and re-evaluation process. Research findings show that where a team's presence was strong from the beginning, professionals were willing to 'own' AT plan implementation and take responsibility for supporting students in gaining skills. This sharing was seen to foster increased awareness and appreciation of other team members' skills and their perceptions and knowledge of the student. Likewise, teamwork affects effective AT inclusion in pupils' individual education plans, as well as its successful implementation in the mainstream

classroom setting as a whole-school approach. The study's findings highlight the need for collaboration among professionals and also the importance of parents' participation in the decision-making and implementation team. The study emphasises the effect of families being part of the team, as well as increased respect for them from the team and the system. Not all parents want to participate in assessment and implementation processes, but they definitely appreciate being involved in decision-making.

Generally, the need for an effective AT technology policy framework is evident. Existing legislation provisions were designed and decided without considering technology parameters in the education of children with disabilities. The fact that AT is framed and absorbed by these existing provisions overlooks specific, important factors and creates contradictory statements and issues. Regulation and legislation coupled with technology practice has been an important policy tool in making ICT available to the public and to people with disabilities. In Cyprus this is unclear or inconsistent and creates difficulties in both AT implementation and development to support differentiation and inclusion. Therefore, another issue that needs to be considered is reconstructing the relevant policy to be more flexible but include clearly guided procedures. Prior to the evaluation of the existing legislation about inclusive education, articles that refer specifically to AT provisions and other accessibility accommodations should be added and/or clarified. It is important that this be performed, firstly, in alignment with European (and international) accessibility guidelines, especially in education, and, secondly, with the input of AT professionals from other countries that have already gone through the initial stages and gained experience in introducing such provisions.

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