



Borg, S. (2010) *Identifying best practice in the assistive technology evaluation of individuals with cerebral palsy*. Post Graduate Thesis.

Abstract

This qualitative study aims to identify the key factors considered to be best practice by an assistive technology team when evaluating the need for assistive technology (AT) for students with cerebral palsy (CP). In Malta, AT has received much more attention recently with the development of a new service provided by the Access to Communication and Technology Unit (ACTU) under the Directorate for Educational Services (DES). This service was set up in September 2006 (Psaila, 2007). Since it is still being developed, it was deemed important to analyse the key factors identified by AT teams when assessing the AT needs of individuals with CP. Professionals with expertise and/or experience in the AT field were invited to participate in the study. Individuals with CP who have undergone AT assessment during the period 2006–2009 and their parents were also invited to participate in this study. Face-to-face semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted with the parents and individuals with CP who make use of AT. A focus group was also conducted with the professionals who have expertise and experience in the AT field.

Main findings

The themes that emerged from the study indicated that a quality AT assessment for an individual with CP should be based on a client-centred approach that considers individual skills, abilities and needs and matches these needs to the AT equipment. The assessment should be conducted by a team of different professionals who work with the child, together with a team of professionals who have expertise in the AT field. This multi-professional team should follow a trans-disciplinary model. The assessment should be considered within the context in which the desired activity will take place.

Environmental constraints that were highlighted by the study's participants include financial and funding issues and it was stated that these should be given attention by the AT team. The AT team should also provide a range of support services, including provision of trial periods to ensure that the AT system is suitable for the AT user. The availability of trial periods is proposed because such a service can ensure that the AT really facilitates the activity and thus meets the AT user's needs.

Other services that should be provided include equipment loans and training of family members and professionals to support the AT user in using and maintaining the system. It is also recommended that professionals working in the AT field keep up-to-date with new developments so as to be able to make sound recommendations based on research. In addition, users must have the opportunity to try the latest equipment during the assessment. This will be possible if service providers allocate budgets for the purchase of new equipment.

Participants also suggested that a database be created, showing the AT equipment and software that is available in different organisations so that everyone will be able to check what AT is available throughout Malta. This will be helpful for trials.

The themes that emerged from this study can be considered inter-related, as they present concepts that play a unique part in decision-making for AT consideration. Moreover, the concepts mentioned above fit well within the components of the Human Activity Assistive Technology (HAAT) model, which is specifically designed to ensure that the AT evaluation process is systematic and complete (Swinth, 2001; Cook & Hussey, 2002). If the components represented by the themes are considered, a comprehensive understanding of the user's uniqueness and the complexity of technology devices and services is



obtained. This information is crucial to the decision-making process – a process that culminates in a match between the user and the AT (Cook & Hussey, 2002).