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The use of Assistive Technology Devices in Mainstream schools: The Students' Perspective

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Introduction

Assistive technology devices (ATDs) have been adopted in some educational settings to enable children with physical disabilities to participate more fully in various activities. Although it is evident that ATDs can enhance school participation, research indicates use is far from optimal.

Objective

The objective was to investigate the use and non-use of assistive technology devices in school by students with physical disabilities and to describe the students' experiences of using these devices. In particular, this investigation included the characteristics of the ATDs students want to use, as these devices might be the ones that support participation in school.

Methods

A mixed methods approach with predominantly qualitative methods was used to collect and analyse the data, which included a) observations of and interviews with 20 students with physical disabilities aged 10-19 years, b) the number and type of assistive technology device provided, including whether students wanted to use these devices or not.

Results

The analysis showed students wanted to use 71% of 125 ATDs provided in school although they only used 58%. In particular students wanted to use provided Information and Communication Technology (ICT) more than they used them. The interviews revealed that it is vital that devices must be integrated in educational practice and students must experience immediate benefits for their function in everyday school activities without detrimental effects on their social participation if they are to use the devices provided. The latter was often more important than being able to perform activities independently. The main characteristics of ATDs that students appreciated and wanted to use in school are the ATD's integration in teaching and learning and the students' experience that the ATD enables functioning in everyday school activities without threatening or complicating their social participation with peers.

Conclusion

The students adopted both a functional and a psycho-social perspective to their devices and providers and school staff should neglect neither.

Contribution to practice

Providers of ATD in schools need in-service training regarding psychosocial effects of using ATDs, including how to cooperate effectively with schools so that the ATDs provided can be used efficiently by students.