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Narrative Inquiry of Practitioners Applying Matching Activities to Develop Cognitive Skills in Children with Intellectual Disabilities

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to explore the experience of practitioners of Children with Special Needs in implementing matching activities to support the cognitive development of children with intellectual disabilities. This study uses a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews and supporting documentation, then analyzed using thematic narrative analysis to understand the meaning of professional experiences in learning practice. The results of the study showed that matching activities were carried out systematically and gradually, by adjusting the readiness and characteristics of the children. Its success is influenced by bonding, learning comfort, and practitioners' ability to adapt strategies. These findings are not only procedural, but also reflect the essence of narrative inquiry, which is the meaning of experiences that arise from the interaction between children and practitioners during the learning process.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the number of school-age children (5-14 years) reaches approximately 48.5 million. According to United Nations estimates, approximately 10% of this population, or approximately 4.8 million children, are classified as Children with Special Needs (ABK). However, accurate data on the exact number of ABK is still limited. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection noted that only approximately 1.5 million children are currently registered as ABK (Irawati, 2023). Meanwhile, data from the Ministry of Education and Culture shows that there are still 62 districts/cities that do not have Special Needs Schools (SLB), and only approximately 18% of the total 1.6 million ABK have received inclusive education services. A total of 115,000 ABK receive education in SLB, while approximately 299,000 others attend regular schools with inclusive programs. Several provinces, such as West Java, Jakarta, and South Sulawesi, have established policies as providers of inclusive education from 2012 to 2016, and the number of inclusive schools has continued to increase over time (Mukti et al., 2023).

However, the main issue in inclusive education lies not only with access and policies, but also with the quality of classroom learning practices. In the context of children with intellectual disabilities, this urgency becomes even more significant because intellectual disability is a developmental disorder that involves impairments in intellectual and adaptive functioning in the conceptual (understanding and applying concepts), social, and practical domains. Impaired intellectual functioning includes the ability to reason, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning, and experiential learning, as confirmed through clinical assessment (APA, 2013) as cited in (Soebroto & Djuwita, 2021).

Impaired cognitive functioning is typically associated with difficulties in almost all areas of functioning in children with intellectual disabilities, such as learning in academic contexts, social interactions, and practical tasks related to the daily lives of children with intellectual disabilities (Spangenberg et al., 2016 as cited in (Elshani et al., 2020). Intellectual disability is neither a disease nor a mental health issue; it requires special education or other support. Although there is no cure for intellectual disability, there are indications that with patience and time, children and adults with this condition can achieve and accomplish many things in life and school (Jin & Hyun, 2023). Although subgroups of children with special needs may have different pedagogical needs, these differences are not systematically documented. This highlights that all children have the same educational needs, although the way these needs are met must be tailored to each individual's cognitive abilities (Norwich & Lewis, 2007) as cited in (Stahlhut et al., 2025).

Cognitive learning for children with intellectual disabilities should be delivered by teachers using concrete, easy-to-understand materials, simple examples, accessible language, and supplemented with teaching aids or learning media. This is because media plays a significant role in the learning process in fostering students' understanding of the material (Wulandari, 2024). Visual media is a relevant alternative because it relies on sight as the primary channel for information processing. Visual-based information is easier to understand than abstract verbal instructions. Visual media also helps clarify the meaning of concepts through concrete symbols and representations. Therefore, the use of visual media needs to be systematically integrated into learning strategies (Farhan, 2026). One learning activity that can be implemented to support the cognitive abilities of children with and without intellectual disabilities is matching (Mackay et al., 2002) in (Morro, Mackay & Carlin, 2015). Matching is comparing to determine whether something matches or not. Entering the age of 3-4 years, children begin to develop an understanding of the concept of counting. With the concept of counting already possessed, children will be able to develop the concept of matching. Children are able to match shapes, colors, sizes, numbers, patterns, and so on. Teachers can provide examples with demonstrations such as pictures of animals, fruits, vegetables by pairing the numbers that correspond to the number of objects (Susiana, 2023).

The scaffolding method, also known as the guidance method, is an approach long used by several inclusive schools in Indonesia. It has been successfully used by students to develop various abilities, including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills (Archer in Friends, 2015) and (Jayanti, Sowiyah & Siswantoro, 2020). The learning method commonly used by teachers, parents, or other adults in teaching children with special needs (intellectual disabilities) is the scaffolding method. Santrock defines scaffolding as a learning technique that involves changing the support provided to children during a learning session to suit their ability level. When a new task is given to a child, the assistance provided by an expert can use direct instruction with more assistance. Meanwhile, as the child's abilities improve, less guidance is provided (Astinah, 2022). Matching activities function not only as simple matching activities but also as an effective medium for implementing scaffolding to train attention, conceptual understanding, and the ability to follow instructions. Furthermore, through this matching, children also begin to develop executive functions. Executive function refers to a set of higher-order cognitive processes that control and modulate cognition under constantly changing and diverse task demands. Executive function plays a central role in early childhood, is related to and predicts important cognitive achievements, and has been recognized as a crucial aspect of school readiness. This study examined the effectiveness of a group-based intervention for 5-year-old children that focused on the fundamental components of working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility (Traverso, Viterbori, & Usai, 2015).

The life skills developed by children with special needs are enhanced by prompt support. The primary task of teachers is to support and guide children to achieve optimal learning outcomes in accordance with their potential, including learning outcomes for self-development and life skills (Widajati & Mahmudah, 2022). A prompt is a method or training that helps a behavior emerge. A verbal prompt is assistance in the form of giving verbal instructions to someone to produce a behavior. A physical prompt is assistance provided by one person physically to another (Srimardayeti & Rahmahtrisilvia, 2022). Special schools for children with intellectual disabilities currently address the diverse developmental characteristics and educational needs of children, making it urgent to differentiate the curriculum to suit these needs (Hae-ran, Chang-un & Jin-suk, 2020).

Although Indonesia has adopted inclusive education policies across all early childhood education institutions, several studies have highlighted implementation challenges caused by limited institutional readiness, inadequate training, inadequate infrastructure, and inconsistent monitoring systems (Lestariningrum, 2017; Nurani, 2019) cited in Ashlan, 2025. Many teachers and schools are unaware of and fail to provide special education services tailored to the needs of children, particularly those with intellectual disabilities (Widiastuti & Winaya, 2019). Schools play a central role in translating inclusive education policies into practice by building an institutional environment that supports and facilitates inclusive teaching and learning. Teaching practices are another important dimension influencing the effectiveness of inclusive education (Widajati et al., 2026).

However, studies specifically exploring the experiences of practitioners with special needs (ABK) in implementing specific learning strategies, such as matching activities, to support children's cognitive development are still relatively limited. This condition indicates an empirical gap between inclusion policies and concrete learning practices in the field. In the context of inclusive learning, the success of a strategy is determined not only by the method design, but also by the complex interaction process between children and practitioners, including children's responses, emotional dynamics, and contextual and situational strategy adjustments (Ferreira et al., 2022). These aspects (which are difficult to capture in depth through a quantitative approach) are still relatively limited. Therefore, a narrative inquiry perspective is important because it allows for exploration of the meaning of practitioners' experiences, how strategies are implemented, modified, and interpreted in real-life practice, and how these experiences shape understandings of children's needs. This research uses a qualitative approach based on narrative inquiry, a design chosen for its ability to explore and convey.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) in (Wei, 2023) the understanding of narrative is the study of the way humans experience the world. In the context of education, the study of education is the study of experience, which is also the study of life. Therefore, educational education and research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories in education by educators along with the researchers involved. Therefore, the responsibility of narrative researchers in education is to describe these stories, collect and tell stories about them, as well as write narratives of experiences, so that the stories experienced and told, revived and retold, can educate themselves and others in society in a meaningful way.

2.2 Participants and Setting

Exploring the experiences of children with special needs practitioners in implementing matching activities to support the cognitive development of children with intellectual disabilities. The narrative inquiry approach was chosen to understand how practitioners interpret their professional experiences, interpret learning practices, and reflect on strategies used in the context of real learning. The research participants consisted of 3 children with special needs practitioners who had experience teaching children with intellectual disabilities in a total of 7 people in non-formal educational institutions. Participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique, with the criteria of having at least 1 to 3 years of experience in assisting children with intellectual disabilities, having applied matching activities in the learning process, and willing to share professional experiences in depth. This research was carried out at the Bengkulu children with special needs Therapy EDUfa Institute

Table 1. Participant Background

Practitioner Initials	Educational background	Tenure
NAG	Psychology	3 Years
DPA	Psychology	1 year
AAQA	Social Welfare	2.5 years

Instruments

The primary instrument is the researcher themselves, assisted by interview guidelines, documentation, and field notes. The following is a draft instrument that can be included in a research article or appendix.

Table 2. List of Interview Questions

No	Aspects unearthed	Questions
1	Participant background	Can you tell us about your experience in accompanying children with intellectual disabilities?
		How long have you been working as a practitioner for children with special needs?
		What are some of the cognitive challenges that children with intellectual disabilities often face?
		How do you identify your child's cognitive development in learning?
2	Matching Implementation Experience	When and how do you start implementing matching activities on children?
		What media or tools are used in matching activities?
		How are matching activities designed before they are implemented in the classroom?
		Can you tell us about the steps in the implementation of matching activities?
3	Strategy adaptation	How do you adjust matching activities to each child's ability?
		What obstacles are faced in implementing matching activities?
		How is the support of institutions or colleagues for the implementation of matching activities?
4	Professional Reflection	How do you interpret the experience of implementing matching activities in learning?
		Are there any changes in the child's cognitive abilities after participating in this activity?

2.3 Procedure

Data collection was carried out for 1 month, the researcher conducted an in-depth interview with a duration of about 30-60 minutes. The entire interview process will be recorded by the researcher. Follow-up interviews are conducted when necessary to clarify or deepen certain information. It is then transcribed verbatim as the main material in the data analysis stage.

2.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis through several stages, namely reading and studying interview transcripts thoroughly, identifying important statements related to the application of matching activities, coding to find key themes, compiling a systematic narrative of participants' experiences, and interpreting their meaning in the context of supporting the cognitive development of children with intellectual disabilities. The analysis focuses not only on learning strategies, but also on the meaning of experiences, challenges, and adaptations made by practitioners. Then this study uses the member checking technique, which is reconfirming the findings and interpretation to participants to match their intended experience.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

thical considerations were maintained throughout the research process to ensure the rights, privacy, and confidentiality of all participants. Institutional permission to conduct the research was obtained from the EDUfa Institute for Children with Special Needs in Bengkulu before data collection began. Informed consent was obtained from the three practitioners (NAG, DPA, and AAQA) after they were informed about the research objectives, procedures, and their voluntary participation. To protect participants' privacy, initials were used instead of their real names in all research records and publications. Children's identities were protected by avoiding the disclosure of their real names, photographs, and other identifiable personal information. The collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

3. RESULTS

The research findings were obtained through an in-depth analysis of interviews with three practitioners who had experience working with children with special needs. The analysis was conducted by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts, identifying meaningful statements, grouping and coding the data, and then developing themes based on similarities in meaning emerging from the participants' experiences. Based on this analytical process, six main themes were identified: changes in practitioners' perspectives in understanding children; attachment and comfort as the foundation of learning; the systematic and gradual implementation of matching activities; challenges related to children's behavior and self-regulation; developmental changes in children following implementation; and collaboration and institutional support The following is documentation of the interview between the researcher and the practitioners, as shown in Figure 1.

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the process of repeated reading of interview transcripts, identification of meaningful statements, and grouping of the meaning of experiences, several main themes were found as follows:

Changing Practitioners' Perspectives in Understanding Children

The analysis shows that the experience of assisting children with special needs has encouraged practitioners to shift their perspectives on understanding their learning process. Practitioners recognize that children's abilities, responses, and ways of understanding learning are not always comparable to those of adults. Therefore, practitioners need to understand children's characteristics and find strategies that are appropriate to each child's abilities and circumstances. This is evident in AAQA's experience, which states

> *"The challenge lies within myself, because my perspective on learning materials is certainly different from that of children with special needs.... If I look at things from my perspective, the children I work with will naturally have difficulty understanding them. Therefore, I have to think hard to find 'gaps' to change the children's way of thinking...."*

This statement demonstrates that the learning process not only requires children to adapt to activities but also requires practitioners to adapt learning strategies to the children's characteristics. This experience fosters a reflective process in practitioners in determining how to deliver instructions, select media, and organize activities to make them easier for children to understand.These findings demonstrate the importance of a learning approach centered on child characteristics and needs. Children have different abilities and response patterns, so learning strategies need to be flexible. Changing practitioners' perspectives is crucial for creating more adaptive learning and enabling children to engage according to their abilities.



Figure 1. Interview Documentation

These findings align with Piaget's constructivist theory, which emphasizes that children actively construct their understanding of the world through interactions with the physical environment and cognitive adaptation processes. From this perspective, learning cannot be forced to follow adult thought patterns because children have different stages of cognitive development at each age. Meanwhile, Vygotsky highlighted the important role of social and cultural interactions in the formation of knowledge. This is important because an appropriate approach will help children feel safe, valued, and more active in the learning process (Siska, et al., 2026).

Building Attachment and Comfort as the Foundation of Learning

The second theme indicates that attachment, a sense of security, and comfort are the foundation before a child participates in learning activities. Practitioners do not immediately provide matching activities, but first pay attention to the child's readiness to receive instruction and engage in the activity. This readiness relates to the child's emotional state, compliance, and comfort during the learning process. NAG explains that matching activities are conducted

> "….*at the beginning of the activity in a playful atmosphere or after compliance has been established and they are ready to learn…."* Meanwhile, AAQA explains: *"We establish a comfortable position for the child, especially when the child is still young... still playful, active, and adaptable to new environments. So, it doesn't have to be formal…".*

This statement indicates that the learning environment and position are tailored to the child's needs. Learning does not always take place in a formal setting, but can begin through a playful atmosphere that makes the child more comfortable. Thus, emotional readiness and comfort become part of the strategy before the child is directed to the matching task. These findings demonstrate that children's engagement in learning activities is influenced not only by the form of media or instruction, but also by the relationship established between the practitioner and the child. When children feel safe and comfortable, they are more ready to accept direction and participate in activities. This reinforces the importance of an approach that addresses children's emotional needs as part of the learning process.

This finding is in line with Abraham Maslow, known as the pioneer of humanistic psychology. Maslow believed that humans are driven to understand and accept themselves as much as possible. His theory, which is very well known to this day, is the theory of the Hierarchy of Needs. Humans have 5 types of needs, namely physiological needs, safety and security needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Siska, F., 2026). In the context of learning for children with intellectual

disabilities, fulfilling emotional needs is the first step so that children are able to accept direction and engage in learning activities.

Matching Activities Are Implemented Systematically and Gradually

The analysis results show that matching activities are not presented directly as complex tasks. Practitioners structure the activities in stages based on the child's abilities. The stages begin with simple activities, then the level of difficulty is increased once the child demonstrates consistent ability.

> *"Matching activities are carried out in stages, with each stage carried out in formation....The initial formation, which is given to the child, is only one object without disturbance, and the position of the object to be matched remains fixed...."*

The practitioner further explained that once the child is able to match consistently, the position of the object begins to be moved and then disturbances are introduced to increase the level of difficulty. This practice demonstrates that matching is designed with the child's developmental abilities in mind. *Furthermore, the DPA explains a simpler step by providing one example card and several options*

> *"Place* one *example card on top, provide 2-3 options below it. Give a simple instruction: 'Match.' or 'Find the same.' If the child is unable to do this, help with hints...."*.

The findings indicate that matching activities have a clear structure, starting with providing examples, offering choices, simple instructions, providing assistance, and finally reinforcement. This strategy demonstrates the adjustment of the level of assistance based on the child's abilities. Gradual implementation allows children to gain learning experiences from simple tasks to more complex ones. Assistance provided in the initial stages can then be reduced as the child begins to perform the activity independently. Thus, matching activities are not simply about pairing two objects, but rather become structured activities that train attention, understanding instructions, and recognizing relationships between objects.

These findings align with Lev Vygotsky's theory and concepts such as ZPD and scaffolding in children's cognitive development (Kurniati, 2025). Lev Vygotsky's scaffolding emphasizes that children learn optimally when they receive assistance or support tailored to their ability level. This support is provided gradually until the child is able to perform tasks independently.

Challenges in Children's Behavior and Self-Regulation

Interview results indicate that implementing matching activities faces various challenges. These challenges include difficulty understanding instructions, being easily distracted, selecting cards without paying attention to the object, refusing the task, refusing to sit, and exhibiting behaviors such as grabbing or tearing media. *The DPA described several obstacles encountered during the activities*

> *"Obstacles include children not understanding instructions; children being confused when asked to 'find the same'; being easily distracted; ... refusing or throwing tantrums; children refusing to sit or do the task; too many choices."*

Meanwhile, the AAQA revealed that children's interest in media can also be a challenge

> *"The most common obstacle I encounter is 'children's desire to reach for the picture/color/letter cards….'"*

These findings indicate that challenges in implementing matching activities are not only related to the ability to understand concepts, but also to attention, behavioral control, and the ability to follow instructions. A large number of choices or attention-grabbing media can make children more easily distracted, so practitioners need to manage the number of choices and the form of media provided. These conditions indicate that learning strategies need to consider environmental management and children's responses during activities. Simple instructions, an appropriate number of choices, gradual assistance, and positive reinforcement are all part of practitioners' strategies to help children participate in activities.

This aligns with the psychoanalytic theory developed by Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson, which considers it important for children to release their emotions and develop self-esteem through gaining control over their bodies and certain social skills (Hayati & Putro, 2021). When children are unable to manage their emotions effectively, behaviors such as refusing instructions or throwing tantrums can emerge as expressions of discomfort or frustration.

Furthermore, children who are easily distracted and have difficulty following rules can also be understood through the behaviorist theory of Burrhus Frederic Skinner. He observed that reinforcement can increase the likelihood of a particular behavior being repeated, while punishment actually decreases the likelihood of that behavior occurring again (Siska, et al., 2026). From a behaviorist perspective, children's behavior is influenced by environmental stimuli and the reinforcement they receive. Therefore, educators need to provide positive reinforcement, consistent direction, and manage a conducive learning environment so that desired behaviors can gradually develop. When children are given appropriate responses to their behavior, their ability to follow instructions and self-control can develop better.

Changes in Child Development After Implementing Matching Activities

Interview analysis revealed changes experienced by practitioners after children participated in matching activities. These changes were primarily seen in focus, concentration, compliance with instructions, understanding of basic concepts, and independence in completing tasks.

> *"Matching activities help improve children's concentration, compliance, understanding of early learning concepts, and gradually increase their independence when completing tasks by matching cards…."*

> *"Children tend to be more focused, more self-directed, and able to understand basic instructions, namely, 'do' according to the instructions and learning program media…."*

This statement indicates that practitioners viewed matching activities not only as related to the ability to match objects, but also as providing experiences that support several basic skills in children. Perceived changes included the ability to maintain attention, follow instructions, understand the concepts of color, shape, and objects, and complete tasks more independently. These findings align with the analysis that matching activities provide children with opportunities to directly observe differences and similarities between objects. Repeated and gradual activities allow children to gain concrete experience in understanding basic concepts. Thus, matching can be a learning activity that supports children's cognitive development as well as adaptive behavior.

This theme reinforces the significance of matching as a fundamental intervention in the development of cognitive abilities and adaptive behavior. Piaget stated that in the pre-operational stage, there are four fundamental abilities that require attention: transformation ability, reversibility ability, classification ability, and asymmetrical relationship ability (Novitasari, 2018). Matching activities provide children with direct experience in distinguishing and matching objects, thus fostering the development of classification skills and understanding basic concepts.

Adaptive behavior is a person's ability to adapt to the norms or standards prevailing in their environment (Balqis, 2021). If someone is able to behave in accordance with the norms prevailing in their environment, then it can be said that the individual exhibits good adaptive behavior. Not everyone is capable of adaptive behavior, as adaptive behavior is influenced by the environment, intelligence, emotional intelligence, and social support. Therefore, matching can be interpreted as a fundamental intervention that not only supports cognitive development but also helps shape adaptive behavior in children with intellectual disabilities.

Collaboration and Institutional Support

The final theme indicates that the implementation of matching activities is not carried out individually by practitioners, but is supported by the institutional environment and collaboration with other parties. This support takes the form of coordination between practitioners, provision of learning needs, and parental involvement in supporting children's learning processes.

> *"….is very supportive and provides basic learning for children."*

"contribute to each other's child development activities."
"We are very structured, organized, and communicative. We complement each other because the institution supervises us as employees and they facilitate our needs."

These findings indicate that institutional support is a factor contributing to the sustainability of matching activities. Coordination between practitioners allows learning strategies to be tailored to the child's circumstances, while institutional support helps provide the necessary resources for implementing the activities. In addition to institutional support, collaboration with parents is also part of the practitioners' experience. One practitioner explained the importance of working with parents so that practice can be continued at home. This suggests that child stimulation will be more sustainable if there is continuity between learning experiences at the institution and support provided in the home environment.

Overall, these six themes demonstrate that matching activities are not a stand-alone learning process. Their success is related to the practitioner's ability to understand the child's characteristics, establish comfort, structure activities in a phased manner, address behavioral challenges, observe changes in the child's development, and obtain support from the institutional and family environment. These findings reinforce the understanding that matching activities can be an adaptive learning strategy when designed and implemented according to the child's needs and readiness. This collaboration strengthens the continuity of practice both in the classroom and at home. In line with research (Nurfand, Simamora, & Meilana, 2021) collaboration between teachers and parents in differentiated learning for children with special needs (ABK) has a significant positive impact on student development, both academically and behaviorally. Children with special needs require an educational approach tailored to their needs and potential.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the narrative inquiry approach, the application of matching activities in children with intellectual disabilities not only functions as a cognitive exercise, but also becomes a reflective process for practitioners in understanding children's learning ways. The success of this activity is influenced by bonding, learning comfort, and systematic and gradual program design. Despite obstacles such as distraction and rejection, the results showed increased focus, adherence to instructions, and understanding of basic concepts. Educators are advised to implement matching activities gradually and according to the individual needs of children. Institutions need to provide adequate media support and supervision, as well as involve parents so that stimulation is consistent at home and at school. Further research can test the effectiveness of these activities in a more measurable way.

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7. DECLARATIONS

Author Contributions

The first author was responsible for conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data collection, formal analysis, and writing-original draft. The second and third authors contributed to supervision, validation, and interpretation of the findings. The fourth and fifth authors contributed to literature review, data analysis, and writing-review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used AI to assist with English language refinement, academic wording, and manuscript organization. The authors reviewed and edited the

generated content and take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the published work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Institutional permission to conduct this research was obtained from Universitas Negeri Surabaya through an official research permission letter. The research was conducted at the EDUfa Institute for Children with Special Needs in Bengkulu, Indonesia. Written informed consent was obtained from all three practitioner participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. To maintain confidentiality, participants' identities were protected using initials (NAG, DPA, and AAQA) throughout the research and publication process. Information concerning children with intellectual disabilities was treated confidentially, and identifiable personal information was not disclosed.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Access to interview transcripts and other research materials is subject to confidentiality and privacy considerations.

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