Exploring the lived experience of students with partial visual impairments in Primary School at Ambo town: A phenomenological perspective

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Esplorare l'esperienza vissuta degli studenti con disabilità visive parziali nella scuola primaria di Ambo: una prospettiva fenomenologica

This study explored the lived experiences of students with partial visual impairment (SWPVI) in Ambo Primary Schools using a phenomenological approach. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten purposively selected SWPVI. The qualitative analysis revealed four overarching themes: support services, challenges, strategies for overcoming challenges, and coping mechanisms. Findings indicate that SWPVI face challenges related to attitudes, lack of school support, isolation, and insufficient differentiated instruction. Notably, self-empowerment emerged as a crucial strategy for overcoming school-related challenges, while adaptation to the existing school system served as a common coping mechanism among participants. The article concludes with implications for improving the educational experience of SWPVI.

Questo studio ha esplorato le esperienze di vita degli studenti con disabilità visiva parziale (SWPVI) nelle Scuole Primarie di Ambo utilizzando un approccio fenomenologico. Sono state condotte interviste in profondità con dieci SWPVI selezionati appositamente. L'analisi qualitativa ha rivelato quattro temi principali: servizi di supporto, sfide, strategie per superare le sfide e meccanismi di coping. I risultati indicano che gli SWPVI affrontano sfide relative agli atteggiamenti, alla mancanza di supporto scolastico, all'isolamento e all'istruzione differenziata insufficiente. In particolare, l'auto-empowerment è emerso come una strategia cruciale per superare le sfide legate alla scuola, mentre l'adattamento al sistema scolastico esistente ha funzionato come un comune meccanismo di coping tra i partecipanti. L'articolo si conclude con implicazioni per migliorare l'esperienza educativa degli SWPVI.

Keywords: Self-advocacy; Environmental adaption; Self-resilience; Assistive technologies; Inclusion.

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1. Introduction

This paper is a study of the lived experiences of students with partial visual impairment in primary schools in Ambo. One of the issues that need to focus on globally is to work on and raise awareness about students with partial visual impairment (SWPVI), especially in developing countries such as Ethiopia (Ferede *et al*., 2020). Despite significant progress in the direction of inclusive education, there is still a gap on schooling of students with disability (Amin *et al*., 2021). Managing the complex experience of students with disabilities in the context of inclusive education is crucial (Imaniah & Fitria, 2018). It has been stated that visually impaired students face particular difficulties (Amin *et al*., 2021), as well as success when trying to enter and succeed in the educational system (Temesgen, 2018). In the Ethiopian educational context, which is hanging on the wall, the tangible experience of students is often not visible (Zelelew, 2018), or people want to speak and act without understanding, but this issue is a key point to be kept in mind (Zelelew, 2018). Despite its poor understanding in Ethiopia, primary school is said to be fundamental to both educative and psychological development (Wita *et al*., 2023), which is why creating inclusive education requires awareness and hard work on the complex realities faced by visually impaired students during this critical period. By amplifying their voices and shedding light on their unique primary school journeys (Wita *et al*., 2023), the study aims to pave the way for informed policies, practices, and interventions that prioritized equity and inclusion (Baepler, 2023).

This study is oriented towards a qualitative inquiry that includes observation, interviews, and analysis to sharpen the complex layers of the lived experiences of visually impaired students in primary schools in Ambo Town. By centering on their stories, challenges, and triumphs, the broad idea of this study is to contribute to a deeper understanding of inclusive education and advocate for support systems that empower visually impaired students to develop academically and socially (Wita *et al*., 2023). The exploration of coping mechanisms and coping strategies used by students with visual impairment to navigate the difficult primary school years provides ideas and insights to enhance the experience and educational outcomes of visually impaired students (Temesgen, 2018). The schooling experience of students with partial visual impairments needs investigation in Ethiopia (Zelelew, 2018), Therefore, this paper focuses on the lived experiences of students with partial visual impairment in primary schools in Ambo Town from a phenomenological perspective (Flick, 2022) and examines the lived experiences of students with partial visual impairment in grades 5-8, specifically the daily experiences of these students navigating the educational environment of primary schools in Ambo. The impact of school policies, support services (Ferede *et al*., 2020) and other educational initiatives on the educational experiences of students with visual impairments has been identified.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

A phenomenological methodology was chosen to investigate the lived experiences of students with partial visual impairments at Ambo Town Elementary School. The primary aim of a phenomenological study is to explore how individuals perceive and make sense of specific experiences in their daily lives, with a focus on their lived experiences and personal meanings (Chinyere & Val, 2023). Accordingly, the entire study process, from participant identification to data analysis, was guided by the principles of phenomenological inquiry. We made concerted efforts to identify students with partial visual impairments who could share their authentic lived experiences. Our goal was to document and analyze the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings of these students regarding their educational experiences. Importantly, the perspectives of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon were paramount to our analysis. Then, we put specific effort in documenting the experiences and personal meaning of the participants.

2.2. Participants

In phenomenological research, the number of participants in the study is 5-25 (Creswell, 2014). Therefore 10 students with partial visual impairments in 5-8 grades were selected purposively for this study. The purposive sampling method was used as the initial method for selecting the participants. Demographic data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of students with physical impairments (SWPI) who participated in the study.

Name	Gender	Grade	Types Disability
P01	Male	7	Partial Visual Disability
P02	Male	8	Partial Visual Disability
P03	Female	5	Partial Visual Disability
P04	Male	5	Partial Visual Disability
P05	Male	5	Partial Visual Disability
P06	Male	6	Partial Visual Disability
P07	Male	6	Partial Visual Disability
P08	Male	6	Partial Visual Disability
P09	Female	6	Partial Visual Disability
P10	Female	6	Partial Visual Disability

2.3. Procedures of data collection

First, the researchers received a support letter from Ambo University's Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education. After that, the schools of Addis Ketema, Awaro, and Liban Mecha were contacted. Lastly, some students with physical impairments were identified to obtain their consent.

In-depth interviews were utilized to gather data for this study. During interviews, the researchers used open-ended prompts to encourage students with physical impairments to reflect on their experiences and articulate their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These prompts are designed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts that capture the nuances and complexities of the schooling experience (Creswell 2014). After an in-depth interview was conducted the researchers analyzed data through thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in participants' lived experiences, and finally, interpret findings to understand the essence of the phenomenon under investigation, with particular emphasis on the perspectives and personal meanings of the participants in relation to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

2.4. Methods of data analysis

As indicated above, the study involves a detailed and interactive process of analyzing individual cases to understand the lived experiences of participants (Chinyere & Val, 2023). Open coding was employed during analysis to break down qualitative data into meaningful codes and concepts. This allowed the researchers to identify important themes and ideas that arose directly from the experiences of the participants. To develop a deeper and accurate understanding of the phenomenon by analyzing the interactions between various themes, the researchers then employed axial coding, which involves finding connections and relationships between the initially coded concepts. Selective coding then focused on improving the main themes and bolstering the overall interpretation of the data.

The data interpretation involved a deep immersion into students with partial visual impairments narratives, focusing on identifying key themes and meanings related to their personal experience of educational challenges and opportunities. To gain a thorough grasp of participants' lived experiences and the significance they attach to a given phenomenon, the researchers coded, categorized and analyzed it.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Creswell (2009) outlines several strategies for enhancing trustworthiness in phenomenology studies (Chinyere & Val, 2023). While Creswell's work primarily focuses on qualitative research in general, many of his strategies apply to phenomenological studies. Ensuring dependability involves establishing a clear and coherent process for data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Alase, 2017). The researchers documented their methods thoroughly to allow for replication and verification of the findings. In this study, credibility was ensured; to enhance credibility, researchers were engaged in prolonged engagement with the phenomenon under study (Adler, 2022). This entails devoting enough time to fully comprehend the research setting to have an accurate comprehension of the experiences of partially visually impaired school students.

Additionally, researchers used two types of data sources, such as interviews and observations, to triangulate findings and corroborate interpretations (Tsang, 2014).

In this article, transferability was ensured. While phenomenological studies often focus on the unique experiences of specific individuals or groups, researchers strived to provide rich, detailed descriptions of the phenomenon to enhance transferability. By providing thorough contextual information and vivid descriptions of participants' experiences, researchers enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts or populations (Adler, 2022).

Conformability was guaranteed in this study. The degree of objectivity and impartiality of the study results is referred to as conformability (Tsang, 2014).

In phenomenological studies, the researchers critically reflect on their own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions to minimize their influence on data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Techniques such as bracketing, peer debriefing, and member checking will help mitigate researchers' bias and enhance the conformability of the findings (Adler, 2022).

In this study, authenticity was ensured. Authenticity involves presenting the research findings genuinely and truthfully. The researchers strived to accurately represent the experiences and perspectives of schooling students with physical impairments without imposing their interpretations or agendas (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Maintaining transparency throughout the research process, including disclosing potential conflicts of interest and acknowledging limitations, contributes to the authenticity of the study (Yin, 2013). By incorporating these strategies, researchers enhance the trustworthiness of their phenomenological studies and contribute to the validity and credibility of qualitative research findings (Khan, 2014).

Triangulation was used by the researchers to obtain high-quality data. To assess the correctness of the data, the researchers triangulated it according to the qualitative research technique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The method of solving an issue in research by making use of several datasets, researchers, theories, and/or processes is known as triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By using this research methodology, the validity and dependability of findings may be increased and the impact of any biases is reduced (Noble *et al.*, 2019).

2.6. Ethical considerations

Because phenomenological research entails closely examining people's lived experiences, ethical considerations are essential (Vicars *et al.*, 2015). Consent was acquired from each participant. Before they participated in the study, participants gave their informed consent. This involves giving participants thorough information on the goals of the study, methods, potential risks and rewards, confidentiality safeguards, and their option to discontinue participation at any time without incurring any fees. Participants were given the chance to ask questions and make well-informed choices regarding their involvement in the study (Creswell, 2009).

This article guaranteed confidentiality: the identity and personal data of the participants were kept anonymous by the researchers (Noble *et al.*, 2019). To avoid unwanted access or disclosure, data must be anonymized and securely stored. To preserve the participants' privacy, the researchers refer to them in any papers or publications using codes or pseudonyms (Noble *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, there was no coercion or pressure on the participants; participation will only be voluntary (Noble *et al.*, 2019). The

study is completely voluntary, and individuals can discontinue participation at any time without facing any consequences.

3.   Results

A thorough analysis of the educational experiences of students with partial visual impairments (SWPI) revealed intricate themes and subthemes that shed light on the challenges faced, the support received, and the strategies employed to overcome obstacles. Each of the major themes is accompanied at least by one sub-theme, where all of them can be traced back to the interview data of one or more of the study participants.

Table 2. Main emerging themes and sub-themes.

Group	Categories
Theme	**Support provision**
Subtheme	Home support
Subtheme	School support
Theme	**Challenges**
Subtheme	Attitudes
Subtheme	Isolation
Subtheme	Lack of school support
Subtheme	Differentiated instruction
Theme	**Ways of overcoming the challenges**
Subtheme	Self-empowerment
Theme	**Coping mechanism**
Subtheme	Adapting to the School system and environment

3.1.   Theme 1: Support provision

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews to obtain detailed information on support services for students with physical impairments. Under this theme, two sub-themes emerged: support from family and support services from the school.

Home support stands to the assistance that family members provide to students with partial visual impairment. Nearly all participants in the study indicated that family members played a crucial role in helping them to engage with and benefit from their educational activities. Participants viewed their family members as the foundation of their current educational endeavors, as they offered psychological, material, and academic support. The following two excerpts illustrate this perspective:

> For me, my family has been a pillar of support, they have been encouraging, understanding, and providing practical help when I need it… They support me to the best of their ability… (P04)

> The support I am receiving from my family are exceptional they are poor. Support from my family is the only reason I could continue with my education… The support I am getting is limited to the special support I am receiving from my family and a few close friends in my circle. Except this, I have not received much support from others. (P05)

The excerpts above highlight the critical role that family support plays in the schooling experience of visually impaired students. While the students express gratitude for their families' encouragement and practical assistance, they also emphasize a scarcity of broader support networks, which underscores the reliance on familial relationships in overcoming educational barriers.

School support is another crucial aspect that visually impaired students have reported in their educational journeys. Participants emphasized the irreplaceable role schools are expected to play in facilitating

access and supporting visually impaired students throughout their schooling years. However, almost all participants highlighted significant gaps in their respective schools when it comes to creating accessible and supportive learning environments. For example:

> I am in grade 7 and haven't a mother, all the time I need support from others, my school is not well equipped with educational material, but there are alit few resources for me... I think my visual impairment affects how I engage with learning materials and move through the school environment. (P02)

> My situation significantly impacted by my learning. I have trouble reading texts, comprehending pictures, finishing assignments correctly, and contributing to class discussions. There are insufficient instructional resources at our school, including books, handouts, and scientific or mathematical instruments. Nevertheless, I try to utilize what is accessible. It's difficult to move about the school even physically. I find it challenging to get about, especially when there is change in classes. I usually ask my peers for assistance. I occasionally require help moving around the school compound as well... (P03)

> Lack of accessible materials limits my opportunity to engage learning activity and other class participation. (P05)

These excerpts highlight that schools often adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, disregarding the unique needs of visually impaired students. There seem to be no systematic efforts to create pathways that would allow these students to learn alongside their peers, resulting in significant limitations in the accessibility of the learning environment and materials. School facilities are often not accommodating, and learning resources are ill-suited or entirely lacking for visually impaired students, leaving them without adequate support from the institution. As a result, participants frequently seek assistance from friends or their own social networks when they require help.

For example, one participant shared the following about the support from her peers:

> A few of my friends have also been contributing to my support. They connected me with other friends, showed me empathy, and accepted me in their team. They treat me fairly and include me in social activities. Their support revolves around social interactions and connections in the school community. They have played a big role in my meaningful life, and have supported me in having great opportunities to meet people. (P05)

In sum, schools tend to be neither reactive nor proactive in addressing the special needs of students with visual impairment. The inaccessibility of the physical school environment and learning materials profoundly impacts these students' lives and educational activities. Despite these challenges, the students demonstrate remarkable resilience by leveraging available resources, relying on peer support, and developing coping mechanisms to engage in their education.

3.2. Theme 2: Challenges of schooling for students with partial visual impairments (SWPVI)

Table 3. Education related challenges experienced by students with partial visual impairments.

Challenge	Sample quotation	Source
	… Some misconceive us and ignore our case. This like attitude	P06
	affects our schooling experience	P05
Attitude	*…barriers like societal misconceptions or inadequate supports limited my participation are affecting my overall learning experience…*	P02
	Some teachers and friends are unknowingly ignoring me because of my situation. They underestimate my abilities but I know I am not inferior though such feelings could sometimes discourage me.	
	I feel I am facing discrimination in different forms including low expectation, access to school supplies, and participation in social activities.	P09
Isolation	*I couldn't engage in academic and extracurricular activities on an equal basis with my peers…*	P04
	I am not getting support I need from teachers, I am feeling excluded…	P01
	The school has the same facilities for all students… I get no special treatment…	P010
Lack of School Support	*My school does not provide the necessary assistive resources such as Braille materials or audio-based instruction, which are crucial for students like me. As a result, I often find myself depending heavily on others or missing out on critical information, making my educational journey unnecessarily difficult…*	P08
	I firmly believe that every person, regardless of their physical limitations, deserves access to quality and equitable education… But my school is not providing support for accessing learning materials, accessible route within school compound and inclusion in social activities…	P09
Differentiated instruction	*…few teachers studied my needs and gave me extra support I need…*	P01
	…lack of teachers who understand my situation… impede my learning progress …	P07

The table illustrates the multifaceted challenges faced by students with partial visual impairment in their educational settings. Participants express feelings of misunderstanding and underestimation from peers, teachers and school community in general. This negative attitude and societal misconceptions hinder the active participation of students in the learning process. This will definitely lead student with partial impairment to feel alienated. Moreover, the lack of necessary support and resources from schools leaves students feeling excluded from both academic and social opportunities, further exacerbating their sense of isolation.

Additionally, the need for differentiated education emerges as a critical requirement for improving the educational experiences of visually impaired students. The accounts indicate that while some educators may make efforts to understand their students' unique needs, these attempts are often insufficient, revealing gaps in teachers' awareness and effort. Overall, the reflections captured in the table underscore the urgent need for schools to adopt a more inclusive and supportive approach, ensuring that students with partial visual impairments receive the resources and understanding necessary for equitable access to quality education. Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for enhancing academic outcomes but also for fostering a more inclusive and supportive school environment.

3.3. Theme 3: Ways of overcoming the challenges of schooling experience of SWPVI

Participants were asked to reflect on their lived experiences and suggest possible ways to minimize the challenges faced by students with partial visual impairment. It is noteworthy that all participants focused on internal solutions rather than attributing their difficulties to external factors. This response may have stemmed from the way we addressed our question, specifically asking them to share solutions based on their individual experiences, particularly in relation to how they have gone through the challenges they described.

Self-empowerment has been commonly mentioned by almost all participants as a quick fix for the challenges they have been through. For example, one of them described the need of accepting once situation and work on it as opportunities towards change for betterment:

> I don't see my situation as a problem and let myself down... I instead consider it as opportunities for growth and recovery. For me, each challenge strengthened my determination and strengthened my belief in my ability to succeed despite my visual impairment. (P07)

Other participants added self-empowerment as a solution from the perspective of freely expressing once need and enforce others to act in line with their interest:

> I confidently express my needs and make the right accommodations to get the support and resources I needed for my academic activities... I engage with teachers and support staffs first to ensure my learning needs are met. Some teachers act according to my request and provide the support I needed... To that end, I know that the request has to be from me first. (P06)

> I am pursuing my studies recognizing the value of shared experience and mutual encouragement in overcoming challenges and actively seeking opportunities for collaboration and peer support and acting together. (P02)

Another participant presented self-empowerment as the students' perceived capability to fit to school system and endowed with such perception as a strategy to overcome challenges:

> By figuring out what strategies work for me and making adjustments as needed, I am making the most of my learning experience and developing my skills... I continually evaluate the impact of accommodation on my academic performance and overall health and seek feedback from teachers, peers, and support staff, which helps me to adjust myself to the required change in school system. (P04)

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of self-empowerment as a way of overcoming obstacles. Self-empowerment, in this context, refers to the participants' sense of recognizing their own worth and capabilities in creating supportive environments for themselves, while also facilitating pathways for others to contribute to these efforts. This focus on self-empowerment highlights not only their resilience in facing adversity but also the potential for fostering a sense of agency that can ultimately influence positively their educational engagements.

3.4. Theme 4: Coping strategies for the SWPVI school experience

Participants were asked how did they cope with educational related challenges despite the absence of a school system that allows the practice of inclusive education, where the one-fit-all approach seems to prevail. Accordingly, accepting and *coping up with the existing school system* was indicated either directly or indirectly by all participants. For illustration:

> Instead of embracing my sight problem and anticipate help from other, I approached challenges that comes to my life in this way and challenge it until I overcome it. I learned to adapt by changing my study strategies, and learning strategies... This approach in turn increases my academic performance and confidence. (P07)

> I am determined and flexible as well. This allows me to adapt myself to the school environment and work system. It is my responsibility to identify key challenges and work on... There are various coping mechanisms I have learned and keep on using them to effectively move through learning situations, and this is benefiting me as my path for life... (P04)

The analysis of the interview excerpts reveals that students with partial visual impairment often rely on adaptation to the school system as their primary coping strategy. While learning to navigate a new and demanding environment can foster critical thinking skills and encourage the use of existing knowledge, this reliance on adaptation places an unfair burden on these students and contradicts the principles of inclusive education. The education system should proactively provide accessible learning environments and materials, enabling students with special needs to engage in their education with their classmates, without the additional challenges that arise from inadequate support. Creating such inclusive settings is essential for ensuring that all students receive a fair and equitable educational experience

4. Discussion

The study examines the lived experiences of ten students with partial vision impairments (SWPVI) in grades 5-8 in Ambo Town, focusing on four main themes: school-based support provision, challenges faced in schooling, strategies to overcome obstacles, and coping mechanisms employed by SWPVI students.

School-based support. The study highlights the significant role of educational institutions in supporting SWPVI. While some students reported accessible learning resources, others faced challenges with inadequate accessibility. This inconsistency in resource provision underscores the need for schools to improve access to learning materials and ensure that school environments are physically accessible (Negash & Gasa, 2022).

Challenges. The study identified multiple challenges SWPVI encounter, including negative attitudes, discrimination, limited participation, and a lack of awareness within the school community. These issues often lead to social isolation and hinder academic inclusion. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, inaccessible learning materials, and financial constraints exacerbate these challenges, highlighting the need for schools to better accommodate students with visual impairments (Belay & Yihun, 2020).

Strategies. Despite these obstacles, SWPVI demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness. The study found that self-advocacy, commitment to overcoming challenges, environmental adaptation, and the use of adaptive strategies are key approaches employed by these students. By actively seeking appropriate

accommodations and adopting reflective learning approaches, students can access the support needed for academic success (Maesala & Ronél, 2024).

Coping. SWPVI in Ambo Town use various coping strategies to navigate their educational journey, including adaptability, proactive communication, self-resilience, and perseverance. They embrace challenges as opportunities for growth, which helps them not only overcome obstacles but also thrive academically and personally (Maesala & Ronél, 2024).

In conclusion, the study emphasizes the importance of improving school-based support, addressing challenges faced by SWPVI, and fostering resilience and self-advocacy. By creating more inclusive and accessible educational environments, schools can help SWPVI succeed both academically and personally.

5. Conclusion

The study explores the lived experience of ten Ambo Town students in grades 5-8 who suffer from partial visual impairments. Open coding was employed during analysis to break down qualitative data into meaningful codes and concepts. To develop a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon by analyzing the interactions between various themes, the researchers employed axial coding.

In this study four main themes emerge from the thematic analysis: school-based support provision; challenges of SWPVI schooling; strategies for overcoming the challenges; and coping strategies in SWPVI schooling experience. The findings highlight the importance of addressing the challenges faced by SWPVI students to adopt their academic success and social inclusion (having good relations with teachers and Peers). From this study we underhanded that educational institutions need to take proactive measures to ensure equitable access to educational materials and a physically accessible environment (classroom arrangements, toilet, playground). Besides, the findings revealed that the support networks and students themselves play a crucial role in overcoming obstacles through self-advocacy and resilience, which are very important for educational success and their lives in general. SWPVI face multifaceted challenges, including negative attitudes, discrimination, limited participation, and lack of awareness. However, they exhibit resilience through self-advocacy, adaptation, and perseverance.

The study highlights the need for proactive support from educational institutions and the importance of inclusive practices to ensure academic success and social inclusion for SWPVI.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations are put out in light of the study's findings. The reasearchers showed that in Ambo Town the school-based provision for students with partial visual impairments is very poor or not as the need of students with partial visual impairments deserves, so, educational institutions should prioritize the provision for accessible educational materials and ensure the physical accessibility of school environments for SWPVI.

Training programs should implement by educational stakeholders to raise awareness for teachers, the school community, and peers about the needs of SWPVI to adopt positive attitudes and make inclusive behavior. The finding of the study showed that support networks is vital in the schooling experience of SWPVI: school community, families, and peers should be actively involved in advocating for the needs of SWPVI within the school system. At school level, students with partial visual impairments need various support, so that, schools should encourage and facilitate self-advocacy among SWPVI, empowering them to articulate their needs and seek appropriate accommodations. This study addresses what and how students with partial visual impairments experience their schooling in Ambo town, but further research is needed to explore additional factors influencing the schooling experiences of SWPVI and to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving their academic success and social inclusion.

7.   Acknowledgments

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9.   Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Due to confidentiality and ethical considerations, some data may be restricted.

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