

Living the Shift: Lived Experiences in Implementing the Matatag Curriculum in the Philippines

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100701121>

Received: 09 August 2026; Accepted: 14 August 2026; Published: 22 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of five public elementary school teachers in one Schools Division of the Negros Island Region, Philippines, as they implemented the Department of Education's MATATAG Curriculum. The study responds to a gap in existing MATATAG scholarship, which has remained largely policy-descriptive and has left largely unexamined how teachers experience the reform at the level of personal and professional meaning. Guided by Van Manen's phenomenological approach and Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in English, Filipino, or Hiligaynon with teachers whose combined service spans well over a century produced a coding matrix of 150 coded statements mapped to twelve interrelated themes, organized here into four clusters: (a) encountering the reform through the weight of accumulated professional history and inadequate orientation, (b) absorbing systemic resource and design gaps through personal labor and improvisation, (c) undergoing emotional, agentic, and identity transformation largely without institutional accompaniment, and (d) redefining success, voicing policy advocacy, and confronting learner readiness as a systemic equity concern. Findings indicate that MATATAG's implementation strain reflects a policy design and support gap rather than a failure of teacher performance or commitment; teachers sustained the reform's delivery through what this study terms quiet custodianship, absorbing systemic shortfalls at personal cost so that their students would not feel them. As a small-sample qualitative inquiry situated in a single Schools Division, the study does not aim for statistical generalizability; its contribution lies instead in the interpretive depth and transferable resonance of the experiences documented. The study offers evidence-grounded recommendations for professional development redesign, binding material-delivery accountability, differentiation infrastructure, and formal channels for teacher voice in curriculum governance, and situates these within the broader literature on teacher agency and curriculum enactment.

Keywords: MATATAG Curriculum, hermeneutic phenomenology, teacher agency, curriculum reform, reflexive thematic analysis, Philippine basic education, teacher lived experience

INTRODUCTION

Education in the Philippines has undergone a succession of curriculum reforms over the past three decades, each a response to persistent and largely unresolved learning deficits. The most recent, the MATATAG Curriculum, was launched by the Department of Education (DepEd) in 2023 around seven reform pillars intended to decongest learning competencies, restore foundational literacy and numeracy, and promote learner well-being [11]. Its launch followed a stark evidentiary record: the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment ranked the Philippines near the bottom among 81 participating countries in reading, mathematics, and science [20], and national assessment scores had consistently fallen below DepEd's proficiency targets. These figures point not to a temporary setback but to a structural learning crisis that MATATAG was designed to correct.

What a curriculum intends and what it becomes in practice, however, are never quite the same thing, and the distance between them is occupied by teachers. A substantial body of research shows that teachers do not simply deliver curriculum policy; they interpret, adapt, and give it meaning through their professional experience and

classroom realities [21]. Yet Filipino teachers were largely excluded from MATATAG's design, and many received only a brief orientation before being expected to implement it in full [23]. Existing scholarship on MATATAG remains predominantly policy-descriptive, focused on structural features and administrative timelines, leaving largely unexamined how teachers experience the reform at the level of personal and professional meaning — their emotions, identity shifts, coping strategies, and sustaining motivations. International scholarship on curriculum change [15, 17, 22] has documented these dimensions in other national contexts, but such findings cannot be assumed to transfer directly to the particular institutional landscape of Philippine public schools.

This study responds to that gap by asking what it meant, day to day, for veteran public school teachers to carry MATATAG into their classrooms. It employed hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry grounded in Van Manen's [24, 25] framework for researching lived experience — an approach chosen precisely because it attends to the interior dimensions of implementation, the meaning teachers make of reform, rather than only the actions they perform in response to it.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study investigated the lived experiences of public elementary school teachers in one Schools Division of the Negros Island Region during MATATAG implementation, guided by the overarching question: What are the lived experiences of public school teachers in this Schools Division in implementing the MATATAG Curriculum? Four sub-questions structured the inquiry: (1) How do teachers describe their initial encounters with MATATAG, including their preparedness, first impressions, and emotional responses? (2) What challenges do teachers experience in day-to-day implementation, and how do they navigate them? (3) How has the transition influenced teachers' professional identity, agency, and well-being? (4) What meanings do teachers attach to their experiences, and what do these reveal about the conditions necessary for successful curriculum reform at the ground level?

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This inquiry is anchored in Van Manen's [24, 25] hermeneutic phenomenological tradition, which holds that meaning is co-constructed through a continuous, circular movement between the whole of an experience and its constitutive parts, and between the interpreter and the interpreted [19]. Rather than positioning institutional context as an input that feeds forward into a fixed set of teacher outputs, this framework treats teachers' lived experience of MATATAG as the interpretive site at which policy, professional biography, institutional condition, and relational context converge and are given meaning. This departs deliberately from conventional input–process–output models and reflects the study's central theoretical claim, consistent with ecological accounts of teacher agency [3, 21]: teachers are not passive conduits through which curriculum policy flows unaltered into classrooms, but active meaning-makers who interpret, adapt, and reconstruct the reforms they are asked to enact.

Four interacting dimensions organize the framework, corresponding to the study's sub-questions: teachers' initial encounters with and readiness for the curriculum; their day-to-day navigation of implementation under material and training scarcity; the transition's impact on professional identity, agency, and well-being; and the meanings teachers construct around curriculum success and reform advocacy. Consistent with Priestley et al.'s [21] ecological theory of teacher agency and sociocultural accounts of professional identity, these dimensions are treated as mutually constitutive rather than as separable, sequential stages: a teacher's emotional response to the reform's introduction is inseparable from how she subsequently navigates material shortages, which in turn feeds back into how she understands her own agency and identity.

The wider literature situates this framework empirically. International scholarship on curriculum enactment has long shown that teachers function as curriculum-makers rather than curriculum technicians [3, 5], and that professional development divorced from sustained, school-embedded support fails to build the conceptual understanding needed for teachers to adapt intelligently under pressure [1, 18]. Philippine-specific research on the preceding K to 12 reform documented comparable patterns of rushed orientation, delayed materials, and teacher-absorbed implementation gaps [2, 9], while emerging work specifically on MATATAG [12, 14] has begun to describe similar structural strains, though largely through policy review rather than in-depth

phenomenological inquiry into teachers' interior experience. Studies on teacher emotional labor [16] and professional identity under reform [10, 13] further indicate that curriculum change is a human transformation carrying real costs when institutions do not accompany the teachers asked to carry it out — a pattern this study's findings substantially corroborate within the specific context of MATATAG's rollout in Negros Island Region.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design situated within the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition of inquiry articulated by Van Manen [24, 25], selected because it is the methodology of choice when the aim is to understand and interpret the meaning of a lived experience rather than to classify participants' accounts from outside them. In hermeneutic inquiry, the researcher does not stand apart from participants' accounts but engages in a continuous interpretive dialogue with them, consistent with the reflexive stance advanced by Lincoln and Guba [19].

Participants

Five public elementary school teachers from one Schools Division in Negros Island Region, Philippines, participated in this study, identified as Participant 1 through Participant 5 to protect their privacy. Participants were identified through purposive criterion sampling, selected as individuals best positioned to illuminate the phenomenon under study. To be included, participants had to be permanent public elementary school teachers who had rendered at least five years of active teaching service and had direct, firsthand classroom experience implementing the MATATAG Curriculum. Their combined teaching experience spans well over a century, and together they have lived through nearly every major curriculum reform in Philippine public education, from the New Elementary School Curriculum through the Basic Education Curriculum, the Revised Basic Education Curriculum, and the K to 12 Program.

Data Gathering Instrument and Procedure

The primary research instrument was the researcher herself, consistent with the interpretive commitments of hermeneutic phenomenology, in which the researcher-as-instrument is understood not merely as a practical necessity but as an epistemological stance. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using a validated interview guide organized around the study's four experiential domains, anchored to the study's research questions while remaining genuinely open to the contextual detail that gives participants' accounts their interpretive depth and transferability [25]. Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained clearance from the institution's Research Ethics Committee and secured the necessary permissions from the Schools Division Office to ensure that the study's design, instruments, and procedures were consistent with regional research protocols; participants were identified through coordination with school principals and provided signed informed consent, having been informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw without penalty, and the use of audio recording. Interviews were conducted in English, Filipino, or Hiligaynon, whichever language or code-switching pattern participants were most comfortable using, and were audio-recorded in full with each participant's consent. Recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher rather than outsourced, consistent with phenomenological practice that treats close engagement with raw data as an early form of interpretive analysis, with instances of code-switching noted where meaningful to a participant's account; completed transcripts were verified against the original recordings a second time for accuracy. Interviews allowed participants the space to elaborate, reflect, and revisit earlier responses, and a member-checking process returned finalized transcripts to each participant to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's developing interpretations of their experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis procedure of Braun and Clarke [6, 7, 8]: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, construction of candidate themes, review of themes against the coded data and the full data set, definition and naming of themes, and production of the analytic

narrative. This produced a coding matrix mapping 150 coded statements to twelve final themes and their constituent sub-themes, building toward findings of broader interpretive and transferable significance rather than statistical generalizability.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was addressed through Lincoln and Guba's [19] four criteria. Credibility was supported through member-checking, in which analytic claims were shared with participants to confirm that the meanings drawn from their accounts matched their own understanding of their experiences, and through the researcher's sustained immersion in the same institutional context as the participants. Transferability was supported through purposive criterion sampling and thick, contextually detailed description, allowing readers to assess the resonance of these findings to comparable settings, while recognizing that qualitative findings of this kind are not intended to be statistically generalizable. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail spanning raw transcripts, first-pass coding, code-to-theme mapping documents, and analytic memos recording the researcher's decisions at each phase of theme construction, so that the process by which findings were produced remains available for external examination. Confirmability was pursued through reflexive bracketing: after constructing each theme, the researcher deliberately interrogated it against the full weight of the data, searching specifically for disconfirming or complicating instances rather than only for evidence that validated emerging interpretations. All participants took part voluntarily and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any stage; identifying details were removed or altered, and pseudonymous participant labels are used throughout this article.

RESULTS

Reflexive thematic analysis of the five participants' accounts yielded twelve themes, which are organized below into four clusters corresponding to the study's four research sub-questions.

Encountering MATATAG: Accumulated History and Inadequate Preparation

None of the five teachers encountered MATATAG as a blank slate. Participant 1, with over thirty years in the classroom, instinctively measured the new curriculum against the RBEC era she remembered as a time when materials arrived on time. Participant 5, with thirty-seven years spanning both private and public school contexts, admitted that her first reaction was weary skepticism after having been asked to change and then change back so many times before. Participant 4 felt the ground shift beneath a professional routine she had spent eighteen years perfecting, while Participant 2, relatively newer to the system, found herself mourning the familiar structure of K to 12 she had only just grown comfortable with. Participant 3's cross-sectoral career gave her a more explicitly data-informed lens, one she grounded in the EDCOM 2 findings rather than nostalgia alone. Teachers, in other words, do not simply implement a new curriculum; they interpret it through the accumulated weight of everything that came before — a weight that is not resistance but professional wisdom.

That encounter was compounded by the inadequacy of pre-implementation preparation. Five days was the typical duration of MATATAG orientation, and even those five days were described as rushed, slide-heavy, and disconnected from classroom conditions. As Participant 1 explained, the deeper problem was not merely the brevity of training but what was lost as it cascaded from national trainers, to division trainers, to school-level teachers: the conceptual reasoning behind MATATAG's design had been stripped away by the time it reached the classroom, leaving teachers the “what” and the “how” but rarely the “why.” Participant 4 described the resulting sense of institutional abandonment as being “sent into battle without proper armor or weapons.” Participant 3 received her own training only after she had already begun implementing the curriculum, an experience she summarized with a resignation that should unsettle anyone responsible for planning curriculum rollouts: “We don't really have a choice. We simply have to adjust.”

Navigating Implementation Gaps Through Personal Labor

The absence of instructional materials was not experienced as an inconvenience but as a structural failure that displaced teaching with scrambling. Every participant reported arriving at the start of MATATAG

implementation to find that required textbooks, teachers' guides, and learning resources had not arrived — a chronic problem, as Participant 2 noted in tracing her last complete textbook set to 2012, but one MATATAG appeared to worsen. Teachers absorbed this institutional gap through their own labor: sourcing materials online, editing them in the evenings, and, as Participant 3 described, finally teaching with purpose once materials did arrive — a before-and-after contrast the researcher interprets as direct evidence that material delivery functions as a curricular prerequisite rather than a logistical detail.

Layered onto this resource gap was a recurring, structural mismatch between what MATATAG assumes about its learners and what teachers actually encountered. Participant 1's account of five-year-olds who could barely hold a pencil beside seven-year-old classmates already tracing letters, together with Participant 2's account of a five-year-old who could produce only two of ten required sentences, point to a lowered Grade 1 entry age that outpaced the developmental readiness of a meaningful share of entrants. A second mismatch appeared in language: materials and assessments printed in English were, of necessity, taught in Hiligaynon, with test items intended to assess English inadvertently assessing vernacular reading instead. A third mismatch was infrastructural, captured in Participant 4's description of being asked to deliver ICT-integrated lessons with no ICT equipment — “teaching someone to ride a bicycle without an actual bicycle.”

Faced with these gaps, teachers built their own scaffolding rather than collapsing under them: online sourcing, Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions, peer mentorship, shared lesson files, and deliberate boundary-setting between work and family life. Participant 5 began batch-preparing worksheets two weeks at a time to protect her Sundays, while a mentor's advice stayed with Participant 3: “Don't let the guide teach your class — you teach your class.” These coping strategies represent not a successful system but extraordinary teachers compensating for one that had not met its obligations to them; the resilience observed was genuine, but it was compelled rather than chosen.

Emotional, Agentive, and Identity Transformation

The reform reshaped teachers' emotional lives, often without institutional accompaniment. Participant 4 described the first days of implementation as a rollercoaster of stress, confusion, sleep deprivation, and fear of failing her students — a fear rooted not in personal discomfort but in the possibility that her students would not learn what they needed because the system had not given her what she needed to teach them. Participant 1 described profound satisfaction when a Grade 1 student finally read independently, a joy that visibly counterbalanced her frustrations, while Participant 3, still relatively new to the DepEd system when MATATAG reached her grade level, said she genuinely felt lost until mentors at her school helped her find her footing. Across all five accounts, teachers were emotionally unaccompanied through the transition — not checked on, simply expected to perform.

Yet even within this constraint, teachers exercised genuine professional judgment rather than simply executing a script. Participant 1 adjusted pacing and complexity depending on whether a batch of learners was strong or struggling; Participant 2 modified nationally issued lesson exemplars while preserving the target skill; Participant 3 articulated the clearest internal rule of all five — she adjusts activities to fit her learners, but never the curriculum itself, a self-imposed boundary between legitimate adaptation and deviation that no MATATAG document had actually given her. Participant 4 experienced this discretion as an identity shift, describing herself as feeling “less like a taskmaster ... and more like a facilitator.” MATATAG, in this sense, did not just change what teachers did; it changed how they understood themselves, requiring identity renegotiations that happened largely without guidance, institutional support, or space for reflection.

Redefining Success, Advocacy, and Learner Readiness as a Systemic Concern

When asked what success looked like under MATATAG, no participant mentioned National Achievement Test scores or PISA rankings. Participant 1 described success as her Grade 1 students reading on their own by June — not because she drilled them with self-funded materials, but because the system gave her what she needed on time. Participant 2 described a student, once barely able to recognize letters in Grade 1, who was reading paragraphs independently by Grade 3. Participant 4 drew a distinction the researcher regards as central to any

policy conversation about MATATAG: the curriculum, she said, is currently “implemented” rather than “lived out” — and the distance between those two states is exactly where the reform is currently falling short.

Strikingly, every participant, without prompting, moved into the register of policy advocacy. Participant 1 called for longer dry-run phases before full implementation; Participant 5 asked simply that books arrive before the school year starts — a mandate that already exists on paper; Participant 4 challenged policymakers to visit a provincial classroom before launching a reform and assess whether existing infrastructure can support it. These are evidence-grounded recommendations from practitioners with decades of frontline experience, and the fact that such voices have not been systematically incorporated into MATATAG's governance is itself a finding.

What sustained all five teachers, finally, was their students. Participant 5 described her teaching as a calling understood as service to the learners entrusted to her care, while Participant 3 found sustenance in continuous self-improvement. This commitment is real, but its reliance as a structural substitute for adequate preparation and support is not sustainable; dedication is a gift institutions can either honor or exhaust. Finally, whether learners were ready for MATATAG proved to be less an individual classroom problem than a systemic one: Participant 3 widened the concern to socioeconomic terms, noting that families who can afford supplemental tutoring do so when a child struggles, while most public-school families cannot — a disparity that shapes learner readiness long before curriculum or teacher enters the picture. The accommodations that followed — peer tutoring, reduced-length tasks, picture cues, extra practice time — were built entirely from teachers' own improvisation, because MATATAG itself supplies no formal framework for differentiating instruction across a developmentally and economically uneven cohort.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these twelve themes point to a single overarching reality: MATATAG, as currently implemented, represents a gap between vision and delivery, and the people carrying that gap in their working lives are teachers. This finding extends, within the specific context of Negros Island Region, a pattern documented in the broader literature on curriculum enactment — that cascade models of professional development transmit procedures rather than understanding, and collapse the moment classroom reality diverges from the training script [1, 18]. It is consistent with prior Philippine research on the K to 12 rollout, which similarly found teachers absorbing delayed materials and truncated orientation through their own improvisation [2, 9], suggesting that this is a recurring structural feature of Philippine curriculum reform rather than a problem unique to MATATAG.

The emotional and identity dimensions of these findings corroborate research showing that curriculum reform is a human transformation and not merely a technical one [10, 16]. Where the present study extends this literature is in showing how teacher agency — exercised here as differentiation, localization, and a self-imposed discipline of adapting activities without abandoning curricular intent — functions as an unacknowledged subsidy from teachers to the system when it is exercised without any formal architecture of support or recognition (cf. [21]). This is consistent with ecological accounts of teacher agency, which hold that agency is not a fixed individual trait but an achievement that depends on the resources and relationships available in a teacher's professional environment; when those resources are absent, agency substitutes for institutional support rather than being cultivated as a deliberate feature of implementation.

The gap this study documents between teachers' own definitions of success — a child learning to read, a student choosing honesty unprompted — and the standardized metrics used to evaluate reform outcomes suggests that official measurement frameworks may be capturing an incomplete picture of what curriculum reform actually achieves at the classroom level. Similarly, the socioeconomic dimension of learner readiness identified here situates MATATAG's implementation strain within a wider equity literature on unevenly distributed forms of capital [4]: a curriculum's design assumptions about learner readiness cannot be evaluated apart from the economic conditions that shape whether a struggling child receives supplemental support outside school.

These findings should be read within the bounds of this study's design. As a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry involving five participants from a single Schools Division, the study does not aim for statistical generalizability; its contribution lies in the interpretive depth and transferable resonance of the experiences it

documents, not in claims about the prevalence of these experiences across all MATATAG classrooms nationally. The temporal frame of the study also captures the reform's earliest and most turbulent phase, and it remains an open empirical question how these experiences evolve as materials, training, and support structures mature.

CONCLUSION

Within the bounds of this inquiry, the evidence gathered from five participants does not show teachers resisting or refusing MATATAG. It shows teachers compensating extraordinarily, at personal cost and without adequate support, for a reform launched before the conditions for its success were in place. Beneath every theme uncovered in this study lies a single, unifying essence: for these teachers, implementing MATATAG revealed itself as an act of quiet custodianship — the sustained, often invisible labor of holding a system's gaps closed with one's own time, resourcefulness, and conviction, so that no child on the other side of those gaps would have to feel them. None of this was written into MATATAG's design; all of it was necessary for MATATAG to survive contact with a real classroom. What this study ultimately suggests is that the difference between MATATAG's vision and its delivery has, in practice, been made up by teachers themselves — one classroom, one child, one unrecorded act of care at a time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Grounded in the participants' own accounts, the following recommendations are offered to those whose decisions shape the conditions under which Filipino teachers work.

1. Rebuild professional development from the ground up.

The cascade model as currently practiced transmits procedures, not understanding. Teachers need sustained, school-embedded learning spanning an academic year rather than a five-day orientation, with explicit attention to the conceptual reasoning behind MATATAG's design.

2. Make material delivery a binding operational requirement.

Existing DepEd policy already mandates pre-year resource delivery; what is missing is enforcement through regional readiness audits, digital contingency materials, and accountability mechanisms for division offices.

3. Build differentiation, localization, and language-alignment tools directly into curriculum materials.

Lesson exemplars should offer developmentally scaled variants rather than a single fixed task, localization protocols currently improvised by teachers should be formalized and resourced, and language consistency between stated and printed instructional language should be verified in assessment materials.

4. Treat learner readiness as a systemic equity issue.

The Grade 1 entry-age policy should be reviewed against current developmental research, and diagnostic, differentiation, and early-intervention tools — alongside a funded public response to socioeconomic disparities in access to supplemental support — should be built into implementation guidelines as core infrastructure.

5. Pilot before scaling, and act on what pilots reveal.

A minimum two-year pilot phase across representative urban, rural, well-resourced, and under-resourced schools, paired with formal feedback mechanisms that reach curriculum governance bodies, is a prerequisite for implementation integrity.

6. Resource and protect school-based mentorship and LAC structures.

These informal supports sustained teachers when formal channels failed; they merit formal recognition, protected time, and compensation for mentor teachers.

7. Treat teacher well-being as reform infrastructure.

Annual school climate assessments that include teacher well-being measures, explicit management of non-instructional burdens during rollout, and structures that prevent institutional shortfalls from being reclassified as individual inadequacy are conditions of sustainable reform, not optional add-ons.

8. Prioritize foundational literacy and numeracy with adequate material and diagnostic support.

MATATAG's foundational literacy emphasis is well founded; it requires material support, diagnostic tools, and early intervention protocols built in as core infrastructure rather than optional supplements.

9. Create formal, binding channels for teacher voice in curriculum governance.

Annual feedback mechanisms, regional advisory panels composed of classroom practitioners, and provincial representation in national revision processes would draw on an irreplaceable and currently under-tapped source of implementation expertise.

10. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a qualitative, context-specific inquiry, this study's findings are not intended to be statistically generalized; its contribution lies in interpretive depth rather than population-level prevalence. The involvement of five participants from a single Schools Division, and the study's temporal focus on the reform's earliest implementation phase, are acknowledged limitations rather than design flaws, consistent with the aims of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. Future research would benefit from a multi-site design spanning multiple Schools Division Offices to enable comparative analysis of how regional resource conditions and leadership cultures differentially shape teachers' experiences of MATATAG; a longitudinal design tracking teachers across three to five years of implementation to reveal how these experiences evolve as materials and support structures mature; phenomenological inquiry extended to school administrators who mediate between policy and classroom; a quantitative or mixed-methods study relating professional development hours and material delivery timeliness to measurable learning outcomes at scale; and dedicated attention to how teachers themselves draw the line between legitimate localization and curriculum drift, as well as to the distinct experiences of beginning teachers who entered the profession during MATATAG's rollout with no prior curriculum for comparison.

Declarations

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations: This study received clearance from the author's institutional Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection and was conducted with the necessary permissions from the Schools Division Office and the informed, signed consent of all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participant confidentiality and anonymity have been protected throughout through the use of pseudonymous participant labels and secure storage of all recordings and transcripts.

Data Availability: The interview transcripts analyzed in this study contain identifiable and confidential information and are therefore not publicly available, in accordance with the confidentiality assurances given to participants.

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