

# Teachers' Perceptions of Teacher Supervision and Evaluation: A Reflection of School Improvement Practices in the Age of Reform

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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*This study examined how principals in eight high-functioning elementary schools provide teacher supervision and evaluation to promote high levels of student achievement. Perceptions of teachers were measured to provide an understanding of which specific principal behaviors translated into better instructional practices within the selected schools. Schools were chosen based on their performance on both state communication arts and math standardized assessments, which were in the top 10% of all elementary schools in the state. Data were collected from 74 teachers using an online survey tool to assess perceptions about principals' supervision within pre-observation and post-observation conferences. Quantitative analyses, part of a larger inquiry previously analyzed by the authors, revealed that 64% percent of the variability in principals' pre-conference supervisory effectiveness was accounted for by discussing how students will be engaged in their learning during instruction; 65% of the variability in principals' post-conference supervisory effectiveness was accounted for by building teachers' capacity to self-reflect about teaching. Overall, this study points toward the importance of teachers and principals working together to provide engaging instruction to drive increased student achievement while implementing school reform and improvement efforts.*

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## **Introduction**

Researchers argue teacher effectiveness is the most significant variable to student learning (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Crum & Sherman, 2008; Dinham, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). As a result, teacher supervision remains a high priority for school reform efforts (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Goldhaber, 2002; Marion, DePascale, Domaleski, Gong, & Diaz-Biello, 2012). Teacher supervision, in this context and for the purpose of this paper, is a means to improve education by developing the skill sets of teachers through supervisory practice and resource allocation, hopefully translating to increased student achievement (Sergiovanni & Starrat, 2002). Memduhoglu (2012) describes the purpose of supervision by stating “what lies in the heart of education supervision is guiding teachers and developing teaching process rather than error seeking and mere evaluation” (p.152).

Principals are those primarily charged with engaging in teacher supervision, merging this role with their responsibility to be instructional leaders (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Zepeda, 2012). In addition, there is a need for researchers to understand teachers’ views about effective supervisory practice (Memduhoglu, 2012), within the complexities of purposes, structure, and the application of holistic and fair supervisory practices. As a result, the purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ attitudes about supervisory practice in eight high performing elementary schools, and the lessons that can be learned to bridge the gap between theory and practice, as well as to better inform policy decisions regard school reform and improvement.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework which grounds this study is derived from school reform efforts centered on principals as instructional leaders (Crum & Sherman, 2008). Researchers who view instructional leadership as the primary role of principals argue that a shift is needed from traditional models which position principals as managers of schools, a transformation that has been influenced by research, accountability, and policy reform (Goodwin, Cunningham, & Childress, 2003; Prytula, Noonan, & Hellsten, 2013). The instructional leadership role for the purpose of this study is grounded within formative supervision that can lead to differentiated professional development opportunities and encompasses formative supervision, summative evaluation, and professional development (Zepeda, 2012). When principals engage in formative supervision, they attempt to increase the instructional capacity of teachers by providing structured feedback to teachers about effectiveness primarily as a result of classroom observations (Hill & Grossman, 2013; Marshall, 2010). As White-Smith (2012) posits, understanding how principals influence instructional excellence in schools is crucial to implementing school reform, and when principals use classroom observations to shape instruction, their leadership takes on an instructional role (Ing, 2009).

## **Teacher Supervision**

As principals engage in formative supervision, they collect data on teacher performance with the purpose of expanding teachers’ skill sets (Hinchey, 2010; Matthews & Crow, 2010), and this supervision should be a systematic sequence of frequent observations, both formal and informal

(DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Zepeda, 2012). Informal observations occur when teachers do not have prior knowledge they will be observed, while formal observations occur when teachers have prior knowledge they will be observed and typically follow the clinical supervision model (Hill & Grossman, 2013; Knoepfel & Blake, 2007; Oliva & Pawlas 2001; Ubben, Hughes, & Norris 2004; Zatynski, 2012). Clinical supervision is associated to the seminal work of Goldhammer (1969) and Cogen (1973) and includes a pre-observation conference between principals and teachers in which both discuss the upcoming lesson, an extended observation in which principals observe teachers instructing, and a post-observation conference in which principals and teachers discuss the observation, plan for future observations, and differentiate support to target instructional improvement based on professional needs (Range, Scherz, Holt, & Young, 2011).

Within the clinical supervision model, the pre-observation conference ensures both principals and teachers have a common understanding of what will occur during the extended observation, either teacher or principal directed. It is important for principals to attempt to develop trust between teachers during the pre-observation as principals are charged with providing non-evaluative feedback at the conclusion of the lesson, usually within the post-observation conference (Bouchamma 2005; Nolan & Hoover, 2008; Olivia & Pawlas 2001). Teachers are more apt to take principals' feedback seriously if they trust principals' skills in assessing strengths and weaknesses (Jacob & Lefgren, 2006). Although not inclusive, variables principals and teachers might discuss during the pre-observation conference include student assessment, student engagement, classroom management, and classroom climate issues (Range, Young, & Hvidston, 2013).

Conversely, the purpose of the post-observation conference is to review and reflect upon data collected during the extended observation and plan future professional development opportunities (Zepeda, 2012). Because providing feedback to teachers about their classroom performance is a primary purpose of the post-observation conference (Hoy & Hoy, 2003; Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Ovando, 2005; Ovando & Harris, 1993; Zepeda, 2012), feedback dispensed by principals should focus on qualitative and quantitative data collected during the scripted observation (Olivia & Pawlas, 2001). Principals also might acknowledge teachers for their on-going continuous improvement efforts and attempt to cause teachers to reflect about their practice (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Marzano et al., 2011; Ovando, 2003). The purpose of carefully planning feedback provided to teachers is that, as reflective practitioners, teachers should feel open to discuss their own strengths and weaknesses (Ovando, 2005; Zepeda, 2012). Finally, a purpose of the post-observation conference, which sets the course for future teacher growth, is identifying possible professional development opportunities (Zepeda, 2012), including both short and long term goals, as well as setting the instructional focus of the next extended observation (O'Rourke, Provenzano, Bellamy, & Ballek, 2007; Spillane, Healey, & Parise, 2009).

## **School Reform**

When *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, the message for a need to return to rigorous standards and accountability programs was conveyed so that "our nation could continue to be a productive world leader" (Squires, 2005, p. 49). Since that time the federal mantra of standards and accountability has been expressed by leaders of both political parties. In 2000, President Clinton began focusing on low-performing schools by directing the U.S. Department of Education to provide state agencies with support to improve school achievement (U.S. DOE,

2001). Measures of accountability were further encouraged by President George W. Bush with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002) by providing economic incentives for schools to increase performance on state standardized tests with the goal of increasing quality education for all American children. In 2010, President Barack Obama proposed reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in order to compete economically with other countries, arguing a collective education effort must be made to turn around our education system in order to compete on a global economic scale (U.S. DOE, 2010).

Clearly, the federal government has influenced, and continues to influence, the political system regarding the issue of public education reform (Fowler, 2013). America has a history of using public education policy as a vehicle to sustain a strong national economy that is capable of competing at a global level. The intertwining of social justice issues of equitable education for all Americans with efforts intended to strengthen the American economy creates a political issue that is capable of forging coalitions between conservative and liberal politicians. However, substantial school reform is unlikely to occur as a result of imposed standards on school systems in the hopes of producing increased student achievement (English, 2012). Despite nearly \$70.6 billion allocated to K-12 public education systems through the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (Garrison-Mogren & Gutmann, 2012), little research has been conducted to assess evaluation model improvement efforts and the supports required from schools, districts, and state agencies to improve instruction for underperforming teachers (McGuinn, 2012), and not simply hold teachers accountable for low academic performance. Conversely, few studies research and investigate the conditions present in high-functioning schools and districts to better inform policy decisions about what works in successful, high-achieving school buildings. Instead, many revamped teacher evaluation systems focus on increased accountability for teachers through the incorporation of student test scores into overall teacher evaluations (Donaldson, 2012), stopping short of the necessary support systems that will drive professional development and build capacity within state and local school systems.

If student achievement is to improve as a result of reform efforts, instructional practices of teachers must improve, which requires time, continual improvement efforts, resources, and the ability to combat teacher resistance to change (Lewis, Rice, Rice, 2011). Reform efforts have been made with regards to improving educational leadership preparation programs, specifically focusing on “the curriculum, instruction, and theoretical base of university preparation programs” (Brooks, Harvard, Tatum, & Patrick, 2010, p. 419). However, if school districts and principal preparation programs are to be able to navigate the current managerial-based reform climate (Bogotch, 2011), greater efforts must be made to reexamine the relationships between teachers and administrators to improve instruction, build school cultures that value ongoing learning in a non-defensive manner, and foster the importance of distributive leadership that values a shared decision-making process in addressing school improvement efforts (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Marks & Nance, 2007; Monk, 2008).

For school reform efforts to be successful, implementation must be sustained and institutionalized within school buildings and supported by school districts (Datnow, 2005), despite the fact these reform efforts are almost always mandated by state or federal education agencies. Thus, in order to address social inequities highlighted by disproportionate academic outcomes, and provide a learning environment that attempts to provide an equitable education for all students (Ishimaru, 2013), district leaders need to be able to facilitate and support systematic school reform in order to improve student achievement through strong instructional leadership based on the individual needs of schools within their respective districts (Rorrer, Skrla, &

Scheurich, 2008). Ironically, as school district leaders attempt to support school building principals in developing individualized learning organizations based on building-to-building needs, the “standardized reform movements legislate the content and micromanage the process of learning to such a degree that there is little scope for teachers to learn in what little time is left over” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 153). As a result there is a need to examine the teacher supervision and evaluation practices of principals in highly-effective schools, the perceived effectiveness of these practices by teachers, and the cultures, space, and time provided within highly-effective schools that target continual and ongoing instructional supervision that translates to increased student achievement so that other practitioners may attempt to replicate their efforts and successes.

### **Context of the Study**

As reported by the State Department of Education (SDOE), the school district selected for this study is the largest school district in a Midwest state with a population of just over 24,000 students, allowing the researchers to examine not only the characteristics of principals who are able to navigate large school district systems, but also the levels of support provided by the school district in order to foster continuous student achievement. The school district was selected because of its large size, its ongoing professional development to support new teachers, and its systematic approach to teacher supervision and evaluation. Additionally, the school district was selected due to its a) willingness to be studied and share the findings with practitioners in their organization, b) previous participation in an evaluative study, and c) desire to inform the practice and research of education.

### **Method**

This study, which is part of a larger inquiry previously analyzed by the authors, investigated the common leadership traits of principals in eight high achieving elementary schools from one urban district in a Midwest state and teachers’ perceptions about principals’ supervision practices (Range, Anderson, Hvidston, & Mette, 2013). The eight elementary schools were selected due to their high performing student achievement, as determined by the researchers, based on third and fourth grade communication arts and math assessment scores, which were in the top 10% of the state. To understand how the schools were successfully insuring high student achievement, four research questions guided the inquiry: 1) What are teachers’ perceptions about the pre-observation conference items; 2) What are teachers’ perceptions about the post-observation conference items; 3) What are the best predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness based on how teachers viewed the importance of pre-conference elements?; and 4) What are the best predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness based on how teachers viewed the importance of post-conference elements?

To begin data collection, an online survey was administered to teachers in the eight elementary schools assessing their perceptions about principals’ supervision within pre-observation and post-observation conferences. The survey was sent to the principals in each of the eight elementary schools by a central office administrator who asked principals to forward the survey to teachers. In sum, the instrument was e-mailed to 179 teachers and 74 teachers responded to the survey, a response rate of 41%. Thus, this study sought to inform the practice of teacher supervision and evaluation by examining and understanding the personal experiences

of teachers working in high achieving elementary schools in the largest school district of a Midwestern state.

### **Instrument**

The instrument used in data collection was adapted from a previous supervision and evaluation study (Clark, 1998), and was revised by the researchers. Ten Likert scaled items (1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree) were used for analyses in the current study. Four items on the survey asked teachers about principals' skills in conducting pre-observation conferences and included items about student assessment, student engagement, lesson objectives, and remediation instruction. Six items on the survey included items about principals' skills in conducting post-observation conferences and included items about identification of performance strengths, meaningful feedback, collective data analysis, agreed upon focus, teacher reflection, and collective identification of improvement. To establish internal reliability on the survey, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated on all items and was 0.98. Additionally, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated on the two sub-scales which included the pre-observation conference items (0.96) and the post-observation conference items (0.97). To establish content validity, the survey was reviewed by four administrators with approximately 60 total years of teacher supervisory experience.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

To address the primary research questions, quantitative analyses were used. Means and standard deviations for each of the 10 Likert-scaled items are presented in Table 1 (research questions 1 and 2). Regression analyses were used to identify the best predictors of principals' supervisory effectiveness from both the pre-observation conference and post-observation conference items (research questions 3 and 4). Specifically, two separate regression models were tested. The first model examined pre-conference predictors of principals' supervisory effectiveness, and the second model examined post-conference predictors of principals' supervisory effectiveness. Results of regression analyses for pre-observation conference and post-observation conference items are presented in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively.

Table 1

*Teachers' Perceptions about the Pre- and Post-observation Conference Items*

Statement	M	SD
<b>Pre- Conference Items</b>		
During the pre-observation conference, my principal and I discuss how I will assess students' knowledge	3.47	0.71
During the pre-observation conference, my principal and I discuss how I will actively engage students in learning	3.43	0.72
During the pre-observation conference, my principal and I discuss the objectives of the lesson	3.39	0.76
During the pre-observation conference, my principal and I discuss my plan for remediation of students who struggle with content	3.22	0.82
<b>Post-Conference Items</b>		
During the post-observation conference, my principal and I identify performance strengths	3.46	0.74
My principal provides meaningful feedback after observing my teaching	3.41	0.72
During the post-observation conference, my principal and I analyze data collected during the observation	3.37	0.79
During the post-observation conference, my principal and I discuss the things we agreed to focus upon during the pre-observation conference	3.35	0.78
During the post-observation conference, my principal builds my capacity to reflect about my teaching	3.35	0.80
During the post-observation conference, my principal and I identify areas in which I can improve	3.33	0.73

Note: Scale ranges from 1=strongly disagree to 4=strongly agree

Research questions 1 and 2 asked about teachers' perceptions regarding the pre- and post-conference items. In regards to the first research question pertaining to teachers' perceptions about the pre-observation conference items, teachers perceived all as important as all had means greater than 2.50. Teachers agreed most that *principals discussed student assessment issues* with

them (M=3.47; SD=0.71) and agreed least principals discussed the remediation plans for students who struggled with content (M=3.22; SD=0.82). In regards to the second research question pertaining to teachers' perceptions about the post-observation items, again teachers agreed with all items as all had means higher than 2.50. Teachers agreed most with *collective identification of teachers' performance strengths* (M=3.46; SD=0.74) and agreed least with *collective identification of areas in which teachers could improve* (M=3.33; SD=0.73).

### Leading the Pre-Observation Conference

The third research question asked “What are the best predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness based on how teachers viewed the importance of pre-conference elements?” To address research question three, regression analyses were conducted with the pre-observation conference items in order to identify significant predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness. The four pre-observation conference items were regressed onto the criterion variable, principals’ supervision efforts to improve teachers’ instructional practice. Table 2 shows the regression statistics for this item.

Table 2

*Regression Statistics for Pre-Observation Conference Items on Principals’ Supervisory Effectiveness.*

Statement	R <sup>2</sup>	p value
During the pre-observation conference, my principal and I discuss how I will actively engage students in learning	0.641	<0.001

Sixty-four percent of the variability in principals’ supervisory effectiveness was accounted for by one item, namely how students will be engaged in learning during the observed lesson. Thus, student engagement was the most important predictor of teachers’ ratings of principals’ supervisory effectiveness in helping improve teacher instruction during the pre-observation conference. This variable alone explained 64.1% of the importance of principals’ ability to help improve instruction, and at a highly significant level. None of the other pre-observation conference items contributed significantly to the model.

### Leading the Post-Observation Conference

The fourth research question asked “What are the best predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness based on how teachers viewed the importance of post-conference elements?” To answer research question four, regression analyses were conducted with the post-observation conference items in order to identify significant predictors of principals’ supervisory effectiveness. For the post-observation conference statements, all six items were regressed on the criterion variable, principals’ supervision efforts to improve teachers’ instructional practice. Table 3 displays the regression statistics for this item.



Table 3

*Regression Statistics for Post-Observation Conference Items on Principals' Supervisory Effectiveness.*

Statement	R <sup>2</sup>	p value
During the post-observation conference, my principal builds my capacity to reflect about my teaching	0.655	<0.001

Sixty-five percent of the variability in principals' supervisory effectiveness was accounted for by one item, namely the ability of the principal to build teachers' capacity to self-reflect about teaching. As a result, helping teachers self-reflect was the most important predictor of teachers' ratings of principals' supervisory effectiveness in helping improve teacher instruction during the post-observation conference. This variables alone explained 65.5% of principals' supervisory effectiveness in helping improve teacher instruction, and, as with the pre-conference item, at a highly significant level. The other five of the six total post-observation conference items did not contribute significantly to the model.

**Discussion**

This quantitative study was conducted to understand teachers' views about teacher supervision in eight high performing elementary schools, including how supervision practices supported high performance and thus might better inform school reform efforts and policy decisions. The results add to the literature concerning teachers' formative supervision and principals' responsibilities to engage in instructional leadership to build the capacity of teachers via pre- and post-observation conferences. In sum, the results can be summarized as follows: 1) teachers believed that all pre-observation and post-observation conference items were important but agreed most that principals discussed student assessment within the pre-observation conference and identified teacher performance strengths of the extended observation within the post-observation conference; 2) results of regression analyses suggested teachers attributed one variable as the most important predictor of teachers' rating principals' supervisory effectiveness in helping improve teacher instruction, namely discussions about *student engagement* during the pre-observation conference; and 3) results of regression analyses suggested teachers attributed one item as the most important predictor of principals' supervisory effectiveness in helping improve teacher instruction, which included discussions surrounding *capacity building to cause teachers to self-reflect* during the post-observation conference.

Teachers agreed that all pre-observation conference items were important and principals engaged in conversations about each, but the most important predictor of teachers' ratings of principals' supervisory effectiveness was the ability to engage in conversations about student engagement issues within the pre-observation conference. This finding reinforces an understanding of how student engagement guides instruction (Quinn, 2002), and as reported by

teachers, principals understood student engagement was an important conversation to have to foster greater organizational learning (Valentine, 2007; Yair, 2000). It also is a reflection of the data-driven focus of student achievement in the age of accountability and reform, as many walkthrough models, such as the *Instructional Practices Inventory* (IPI), are based on large data collections that are formative in nature to help teachers focus on improving student engagement in order to translate to greater student achievement (Valentine, 2010).

In regards to post-observation conference items, teachers' agreed with all items, however the most important predictor of teachers' ratings of principals' supervisory effectiveness was the ability to build capacity to self-reflect on instruction during the post-observation conference. This finding aligns to other studies that report the importance of building trusting relationships between teachers and administrators, as well as a school culture that values ongoing learning through a shared leadership approach to address school improvement efforts (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Marks & Nance, 2007; Monk, 2008). Moreover, Zepeda (2012) has written about the importance of principals building teachers' capacity to reflect on their own instruction during the post-observation conference, and principals' ability to acknowledge teachers for their efforts to continually improve their instruction through self-reflection is a central component of instructional improvement (Costa & Garmston, 2002; Marzano et al., 2011; Ovando, 2003). When considering reform efforts, specifically those that target instructional improvement, principals must be able to guide teachers through a self-reflection process rather than simply seeking to identify areas of deficiency (Memduhoglu, 2012). Additionally, principals who see themselves as instructional leaders can help teachers identify areas for future growth, infuse trust between teachers and principals into the school culture, and promote a shared leadership approach that provides power to teachers to improve their own instruction, rather than solely exercising power over them in an evaluator role (Mette, 2014).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

As currently written and often implemented, efforts to reform teacher evaluation systems primarily focus on increased accountability for teachers through more rigorous teacher evaluation systems (Donaldson, 2012), but they stop short of the components necessary to improve teacher instruction, such as time and resources to address continual improvement efforts (Lewis, Rice, & Rice, 2011). To improve school systems, districts must empower principals by building their capacity to improve instruction (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Perhaps just as frustrating is the standardized approach to many reform efforts that allow little time for teachers to reflect on learning and incorporate new learning into practice (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). Thus, despite billions of dollars in federal funding allocated to K-12 public education systems (Garrison-Mogren & Gutmann, 2012), there continues to be a disconnect between research, practice, and funding of public schools to produce high quality instructional environments to produce what all stakeholders desire: an educated public that contributes to a healthy society, a strong economy, and a more socially just world.

While providing high standards for both teachers and student are important, school reform will likely be unsuccessful by simply imposing standards on school systems (English, 2012). Specifically in this study, the researchers observed the importance of principals working with teachers to collectively target areas of instructional improvement. By viewing their principals as an instructional facilitator targeting student engagement, teachers from high achieving schools shared their perceptions of their principals who value a focus on self-reflection

of instruction in order to help meet the individual needs of students. As a result, these building administrators saw their role as instructional coaches by connecting the cycle of supervision, professional development, and evaluation to drive improvement efforts that build capacity within their teachers to impact student achievement. Due to their commitment to provide support to the instructional environment, as well as target differentiated improvement efforts, teachers perceived them as more effective supervisors, particularly in their ability to help teachers become more reflective about student engagement in their own instructional practices. These findings have a significant impact on how school reform efforts could be implemented in underperforming schools, particularly as this study focuses on the conditions present in high achieving schools within a large school district.

In order to provide better instructional environments for students, however, schools must be supported by school districts to not succumb to managerial reform efforts. Rather than reinforcing hardline approaches to teacher supervision and evaluation that simply increase pressure to produce high student achievement, it appears that school district leadership in this study provided support to the eight high achieving schools for building principals to build relationships with teachers that value continuous ongoing improvement efforts through shared leadership by valuing teacher input and allowing for teacher-driven reflection to promote high student engagement and achievement. In order to ensure a learning environment that addresses issues of social justice and equitable education for all students (Ishimaru, 2013), school district leadership must support the development and training of principals to differentiate supervision in order to facilitate systematic reform that meets the individual needs of schools within respective districts (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Moreover, in order for school reform efforts to become institutionalized processes, the reform efforts must be supported by district level leaders before they can be sustained within individual buildings (Datnow, 2005). Thus, through an instructional supervision lens, school reform efforts should have an increased focus on engaging students in their learning, as well as the need for the principal to serve as an instructional facilitator to help build self-reflection capacity among teachers in order to strive for continual improvement of instruction.

### **Limitations**

The study is limited in that data were collected from teachers in eight high-performing elementary schools in a Midwest state making generalizability difficult. Additionally, data were collected from schools considered high performing and none of the schools received federal assistance through Title 1 programs. Finally, only teachers were surveyed to collect quantitative data concerning teacher supervision. To further affirm the findings of this study, the researchers recommend future inquires do the following: 1) conduct follow-up interviews or focus groups with teachers to better understand their views concerning principals' supervision on the variables explored in this study along with others; 2) conduct interviews with principals to better understand their views concerning their own reflection of supervision and the variables explored in this study along with others; and 3) conduct interviews with district administrators to better understand their views regarding how they structure support for building principals to reflect on supervision and the variables explored in this study and others.

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