Learning and Adaptation During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Colleges of Education as Hubs for Leadership and Innovation[1]

Aprendizaje y adaptación durante la pandemia de Covid-19: Facultades de educación como centros de liderazgo e innovación

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Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic greatly disrupted educational systems around the world. Given their extensive stakeholder network, Schools and Colleges of Education played an important role in providing leadership across all dimensions of education throug-

Resumen:

La pandemia de Covid-19 interrumpió en gran medida los sistemas educativos de todo el mundo. Dada su extensa red, las Escuelas y Facultades de Educación desempeñaron un papel importante al brindar liderazgo en todas las dimensiones de la

hout the pandemic. This paper presents results from an interview-based study of Deans of Schools of Education in the United States with a special focus on how they sought to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion throughout the pandemic. Results show that while there was a great deal of variability in the responses of Deans and Schools of Education many promising practices emerged that are potentially scalable and shareable to other institutions.

Key words:
Schools of education; teacher preparation; educational leadership; diversity, equity, and inclusion; interviews.

educación durante la pandemia. Este documento presenta los resultados de un estudio basado en entrevistas a decanos de escuelas de Educación en los Estados Unidos con un enfoque especial en cómo trataron de abordar cuestiones de diversidad, equidad e inclusión durante la pandemia. Los resultados muestran que, si bien hubo una gran variabilidad en las respuestas de los decanos y las escuelas de educación, surgieron muchas prácticas prometedoras que son potencialmente escalables y compartibles con otras instituciones.

Palabras clave:
Escuelas de educación; formación docente; liderazgo educativo; diversidad, equidad e inclusión; entrevistas.

Résumé:
La pandémie de Covid-19 a fortement perturbé les systèmes **éducatifs** du monde entier. Compte tenu de leur vaste réseau, les **écoles** et collèges d'enseignement ont joué un rôle important en assurant le leadership dans toutes les dimensions de l'éducation pendant la pandémie. Cet article présente les résultats d'une **étude** basée sur des entretiens avec des doyens d'écoles d'éducation aux **États-Unis**, en mettant l'accent sur la façon dont ils ont cherché à aborder les questions de diversité, d'équité et d'inclusion pendant la pandémie. Les résultats montrent que, malgré une grande variabilité dans les réponses des doyens et des **écoles** d'éducation, de nombreuses pratiques prometteuses ont **émergé**, qui sont potentiellement extensibles et partageables avec d'autres institutions.

Mots clés:
Écoles d'éducation; formation des enseignants; leadership en education; diversité, équité et inclusion, entrevues.

1. Introducción

As the Coronavirus pandemic moved across international borders with incendiary speed, economies were radically disrupted, health service capacities were tested, and educational systems were transformed. Asia and Europe closed schools early on in the pandemic, and were soon followed by western hemisphere countries. What we knew as the traditional delivery of teaching on college campuses and in K-12 school classrooms changed overnight. Teaching remotely became the norm in the United

States and around the world. Brom et al. (2020) described the pivot to remote instruction as, "An unprecedented exercise in distance education that burdened families, schools, and students at all levels". While remote teaching and school closures have occurred in PreKinder and in higher education, distance education had never been instituted on such a large scale and on such a short notice worldwide (Quezada, Talbot, Parker-Quezada, 2020). The immediate effects of these changes on all levels of education exacerbated existing challenges and gave rise to a myriad of new problems, but especially for Schools of Education (SoE) whose responsibilities and stakeholder relationships cut across every dimension of schooling, including preparing new teachers, schools counselors and leaders for all levels of education (Quezada, Buczynski, Medina, Stolz, Fabionar, & Jez, 2020).

Given the unique position of schools of education (SoE), we set out to investigate the response of SoE's of Covid-19, the economic fallout from the pandemic, and heightened attention to the systemic and institutional racism that engulfed our country and indeed the world. The primary assumption driving our inquiry was grounded in the idea that SoE provide critical leadership, across a wide range of stakeholder communities and that within the context of these relationships SoE were innovating, leading, and problem solving in groundbreaking ways. Thus, we set out to test this assumption and to search for evidence of innovation and leadership in the context of the response of SoE to the pandemic.

The vital relationships held by SoE do indeed cut across many levels including: local, state and federal/national policymakers, school administrators (e.g., principals, vice principals, district leaders, etc.), higher education leaders, teacher educators, researchers, publishers, grant funders and philanthropists, in-service teachers, students in K-12, pre-service teachers, as well as families and communities. The triple-crisis (pandemic, economic challenges, and racism) greatly stressed each of these vital relationships, and provided a significant/critical opportunity to SoE across the nation and around the globe to innovate and reimagine education to impact all of these stakeholder communities, especially students in K-12 schools.

This study presents some of the innovative ways in which deans from SoE in their leadership roles rose to not only manage the crisis but to lead others and to innovate in these difficult times. It aims to highlight the change-leadership across SoE across the United States during the Co-

vid-19 pandemic for SoE of all types: public, private, large, small, urban, and rural. We also surface some of the pain points and the innovative adaptations that were initiated by SoE. Our ultimate research purpose was that through our study we could identify and share evidence-based innovative educational practices that emerged as SoE were navigating the pandemic, especially those that addressed issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as anti-racism as key components. Our hope is that the results of this study might help inform leaders, and to provide meaningful support and capacity development for those educational leaders and teachers who are supporting so many others in this historic time.

The results presented in the paper are drawn from an interview-based study of deans from SoE from across the United States. These interviews were conducted throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and into the Delta variant. Drawing on these interviews we provide a deep dive reflection on the knowledge and insights gained during this tumultuous time, and we share some of the innovations that emerged, the processes by which they were developed, and the role of leadership and collaboration in supporting teacher education and bringing these innovations to life. We seek to present results from our study to provide meaningful support to educational leaders in Schools of Education (Deans, Department Chairs, and Program Directors) with the aim of adding to the existing knowledge related to leadership in Schools of Education.

2. Theoretical Framework

To frame leadership and innovation with Schools of Education, we sought a framework that would help illuminate leadership in and beyond Covid-19 and in particular, one that would provide an analytic structure for our conversations with deans about their work related to DEI. This became particularly salient as our interviews and debriefs kept returning to the deans' expressed aspirations and in some cases examples of work in which they were engaged, which focused on striving for a more socially just education. Given this focus, we turned to Cochran-Smith's (2010) research that offered ideas toward a theory of teacher education for social justice in which she put forth the need to consider a (1) theory of justice, (2) theory of practice, and (3) theory of preparation (for teachers). According to Cochran Smith, "the bottom line of a theory of teacher education

for social justice– and the goal that subsumes all other goals and objectives– is promoting students' learning and enhancing their life chances in the world" (p. 462).

Inherent in our framing is the recognition that there is no one way to approach education for social justice and in fact, Cochran-Smith illustrated this by suggesting that some teacher education programs might focus on teachers' beliefs or identities, others on democratic or civic education, and still others on multicultural issues (Cochran-Smith, 2010). Since Cochran-Smith's publication there continues to be an increased effort to address systemic racism, improve inclusivity, or challenge traditional epistemologies. Regardless of focus, we know that there are tensions and challenges in thinking about education for social justice, and those are reflected in different conceptualizations of justice (Fraser, 2008; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 1990), in the intersectionality of different types of injustices that are faced, and in the ways that marginalized groups, who individually and collectively have different interests, values, and preferences, think about and take up social justice.

Cochran-Smith (2010) encourages an approach that integrates these three theories and she presents questions that have the potential to drive the work of SoE. According to the framework, in order to make explicit the goals of a teacher education program, SoE need to be able to describe what they mean by justice, be able to talk about the teaching and learning that happens or should happen inside their programs and lastly, focus on how educators are able to learn about and demonstrate their ability to teach for justice, both inside and beyond the teacher preparation program.

2.1. Theory of Justice

For a theory of justice, Cochran-Smith establishes two pairs of justice goals: distribution and recognition, and autonomy and identity, which she sees as in-tension with one another. The distribution side of the paradigm focuses on equality of individuals, their civic engagement, and a commitment to individuals that they can pursue their own definition of a good life (Rawls,1971 as cited in Cochran-Smith, 2010). The recognition side of the paradigm is about realizing that respect for different social groups is also part of addressing injustice. In essence, there needs to be a focus on equity of learning opportunity (challenging policies and prac-

tices that reify inequity), a focus on respecting and recognizing distinct social groups, and an acknowledgment that there are tensions between these and they need to be managed. She also suggests that a theory of justice for teacher education should incorporate multiple perspectives, be critical, and democratic, and also work toward anti-oppressive practices.

2.2. Theory of Practice

A theory of practice is what connects teacher preparation to justice. This goes beyond knowledge and teaching skills and involves the theoretical, practical, critical, and relational aspects of preparing educators for education for social justice. It includes an acknowledgment of the competing agendas or questions related to a theory of practice, the ways in which we prepare educators to make decisions as professionals, and the relationships that are built and established between teachers and families/communities.

2.3. Theory of Teacher Preparation

Finally, for the theory of teacher preparation, there is a need to know- What teacher preparation generates practices that foster justice? Cochran-Smith includes questions of selection and recruitment- Who should teach, both at the university and in our diverse schools? This involves questions about the diversity of future educators, but also recruitment of teachers of all backgrounds who have social justice goals. It also involves questions of what teacher candidates (and ultimately) students should learn. This includes an assessment of curriculum and pedagogy in schools of teacher education, but also conversations about what is left out or implied through the curriculum decisions that are made, including the messages that are sent about race, class, language, and ability. Cochran-Smith also looks at questions about how and from whom faculty and teachers should learn as well as how to assess the preparation of teachers. She argues that the work of schools of education needs to be transformative and collaborative and that we need to be working both within, and against accountability structures. The bottom line is that the work should challenge and disrupt the status quo.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

Data were collected and analyzed from interviews, resource documents, and memos, and triangulation (Saldaña, 2020) was achieved by analyzing recorded and transcribed interviews with the SoE deans (n=30). Interviews consisting of 10 questions were asked via a one-hour Zoom meeting. Some national and state licensure reports were provided by the deans, as well as anecdotal notes and memos which were then analyzed. Data were analyzed by all four researchers independently and in teams using both NVivo and thematic coding strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Codes from each data point were documented and we created a codebook for analysis. Coding was an interactive process that led to categorizing, which subsequently led to the refining and negotiation of categories and ultimately, theme development. Once data saturation occurred, analysis shifted from inductive to deductive, and the focus became checking for the existence of themed patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

To investigate the impact of different stages of the Covid-19 pandemic on the dynamic activity system of schools of education we chose to interview deans of schools of education. As Brenner (2006) notes, "One of the ways in which changes over time can be documented is through an exploration of the accounts by which members of a culture construe the significance and nature of educational practices" (132). Qualitative interviews are most often used to elicit individual differences in specific contexts, and in this regard we set out to interview deans across a spectrum of schools: public and private, large and small, urban and rural. Taken together our interviews provide information related to activities of schools of education in a time of stress, challenge, and difficulty.

Interviews of course do not provide a transparent window into human experience, but involve the mediation of language and interpretation during the interviews, as well as the transcription, analysis, and reporting processes (Rogers, 2008). As researchers we sacrifice a great deal in terms of scientific results by relying on interviews; yet, these accounts help us to make important strategic gains that may be useful in other forms of inquiry. To be sure, interviews alone are not a sufficient base for establishing a complete picture of schools of education during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, interviews are extremely valuable in understanding the values, beliefs, and attitudes of participants.

Our overall approach to research design was a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2015), that aimed to investigate the Covid-19 phenomenon within its real-life context and its effects as a result of the university and school closures, the transition to teaching in a remote/online distance education manner, and subsequent efforts made to return to face to face instruction. Our interviews began in September of 2020 and continued throughout the pandemic up until January of 2022. Data were collected and analyzed from interviews, resource documents (including some national and state licensure reports as well as anecdotal notes and memos) which were then analyzed with the primary data source being the recorded and transcribed interviews with the SoE deans.

The authors personally conducted all of the semi-structured interviews in one-hour Zoom video meetings. Deans were recruited to the study based on prior relationships, and through email communication. The data in this article is drawn from our interviews with Deans from liberal arts colleges of teacher education. We also sought to gain a broad representation of schools of education by including public and private schools, larger and small schools, and urban and rural schools.

The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions, which covered three broad categories (leadership, innovation, and K-12 partnerships).

(1) *Leading through Crisis* questions focused on:
- The most serious challenges of the pandemic;
- The critical learnings from the pivot to remote instruction;
- Dean's views on lasting changes and opportunities post-pandemic;
- Providing resources for faculty to meet the needs of their students in a virtual learning environment.

(2) *Innovation and Leadership* questions focused on:
- Well-being practices and programs for faculty, staff, and students;
- Decision-making frameworks;
- Responding to fiscal challenges
- Operationalizing DEI especially for our neediest students.

(3) *Revolutionizing Public Education*-questions focused on:
- Men of color and the teacher pipeline;
- Improving educational outcomes;
- Supporting young people as advocates for social justice and social change.

In our interviews we sought to adhere closely to our interview protocols (i.e., we read the questions verbatim as written), with only minor additions or clarifications. The interview protocols were developed and piloted prior to implementation. Questions were modified slightly to account for changes in the overall national response to the pandemic[3]. For example, questions early in the pandemic sought to address the pivot to remote instruction, where questions later in our interviews sought to address plans to return to face-to-face instruction--though the bulk of the questions remained the same throughout the study.

Data were analyzed by all four researchers independently and then collaboratively using thematic coding strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and NVIVO software. Coding was an interactive process that led to the refinement of various categories and subcategories and ultimately to theme development. Our initial list of codes reflected strongly the categories of our interview questions:

- Challenges
- Stakeholders
- Supporting Others
- Leadership
- DEI
- Promising Practices

Following an initial round of reading, coding, and discussion as a team we added the following items to our major coding categories:

- Communication
- Enrollments
- Unintended Consequences
- Unintended Benefits
- Well-Being

Once data saturation occurred, analysis shifted from inductive to deductive, and the focus became checking for the existence of themed patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). As we concluded the coding of our data, with all four members of our research team having coded and/or reviewed each transcript (multiple times), we centered our analysis on the intersection of three key areas that were at the heart of our inquiry:

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3 We received valuable input on the protocols from the principal leaders of the American Association of Colleges of Teachers Education.

leadership, DEI, and promising practices. In other words, we sought to identify promising practices that could be shared and potentially scaled or modified in other contexts that were grounded in deliberate and strategic leadership decisions that advanced DEI across stakeholder groups.

4. Results

In our analysis of DEI work and in other elements of leadership and innovation the Schools of Education represented in this study, we found a great deal of unevenness in schools' take up of issues and their responses. In this sense the schools, as represented by the deans themselves, could be placed on a continuum in regards to leadership, DEI, and innovation. Given our goal of surfacing promising practices this unevenness does not necessarily indicate neglect or the absence of activity, but instead reflects a variety of factors. For example, in regards to DEI, we found a broad range of activities and practices in Schools of Education that were linked to different timescales:

- short-term--addressing urgent needs in the moment
- medium range or intermediary--the development or continued investment in projects and programs
- long term--investments designed to create systemic change

In addition, there were differences in the degrees to which programs and projects were inclusive. Some practices were highly internal dealing with students, faculty and staff within the college, others were looking at influencing local K-12 educational ecosystems, while others were working at shifting state level policy and system wide change in higher education and K-12. In the end, our primary criteria for considering where to position practices of schools of education on a continuum was the degree to which programs were aimed at systemic change.

In the category of short term solutions we found a number of promising practices, which we would describe as Emergency Support Services: "stop-gap" measures designed to address the immediate academic, social-emotional, well-being based, personal and family needs of students, faculty and community members. Some of these activities included creating free access to Wi-Fi, providing laptops for students, providing information and access to new or existing university services (counseling,

emergency loans, or food). These non-trivial interventions were common and provided important sources of support for individuals and families especially for students, faculty, and staff in the schools of education. While not specifically framed as DEI interventions, these activities were crucial especially for people already struggling under other burdens and so have particular relevance to discussions of DEI.

The next tier of activity, the middle range work, represented a clear sense of a need to change and to respond to the growing awareness of systemic racism that was happening across the country and was a prominent topic of discussion across higher education and schools of education in particular. These activities included the hiring of outside consultants to review programs, a commitment to hiring diverse faculty (even in the face of hiring freezes), the formation of committees and working groups, the development of forums for discussion of DEI related issues, the conducting of equity audits across curriculum, courses, and programs.

The most systemic of these interventions, which in some cases emerged from activities in the middle range such as equity audits or the activities of working groups, represent an impressive array of activities being led by schools of education to improve DEI in schools of education and in the stakeholder communities they serve. These include dismantling and rebuilding existing programs and curricula, and the purposeful embedding of equity, social-emotional learning, and interdisciplinarity throughout the school. Examples also include the development of dual credential and bilingual credential models, hybrid and flex models (increasing access for people in rural areas), as well as a number of finance related interventions such as the creation of long term, regular stipends for DEI work (such as course redesign), the repurposing of existing grant lines to focus on DEI related issues, increasing tuition funding and support for BIPOC students, including specific funding for men of color in teacher education programs, and the development of internship programs that provide funding and teacher experience for students and communities in need. Other examples of DEI related innovations and promising practices included the development of new centers to support and train faculty and future teachers in social justice work, and to engage parents, K-12 students, and community members in advocacy for DEI, as well as investments in the development of a pipeline for "mindful leaders" superintendents and principals that encourages the disruption

of traditional practices through the implementation of evidence based, data-informed practices that support DEI.

The continuum of activity we saw corresponded with another phenomenon we identified in our interviews which we refer to as "Equity & Justice by Design". While reactive/responsive approaches to DEI are valuable especially in ameliorating immediate needs of individuals, these efforts do little to change the long term chances of improving DEI related conditions in schools of education or the ecosystems within which they work. In contrast, our interviews pointed to the ways in which strategic and intentional approaches to DEI cut across the entire ecosystem of the school including programs, courses, curriculum and instruction. As one Dean remarked, "When I say environment, that's not just the curriculum. That's the day-to-day interactions with faculty, staff, and students, and how you are living and breathing the DEI work. It's not supposed to be a statement that we just put on a website that no one ever cared about. It's supposed to continue to breathe into us." This integration of DEI issues into the center of the school's mission, identity, and culture we labeled a layered approach and was a hallmark of schools of education who were working with intentionality on issues of DEI.

Deans with whom we spoke also said that if we are serious about a socially-just education, we have to rethink the financial barriers that exist to be a teacher. As one Dean noted, "We have to transform the profession so that it is economically feasible for all students to do this." Financial incentives, fellowships, scholarships repurposed for first generation and BIPOC students, new residency models, creative partnerships with school districts, and flexibility in course offerings all could be put in service of promoting a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive educational system.

In addition to the emergence of these budgetary interventions in support of greater equity within the activities of schools of education, the successful integration of DEI work into schools of activity was ensuring that equality and justice issues were represented at the strategic level of the school of education by faculty leaders (sometimes with the title of associate or assistant dean) whose responsibility it was to ensure that DEI issues were inherent in all aspects of the school, as one of the dean's noted, "A year before the pandemic we created a new office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in the school. I think that has helped us a lot- to have someone, a team actually, really thinking about that and both doing

professional development and outreach programming, but also just having that perspective, solidly in the decision making and at the table has been really helpful." Some of the initiatives to emerge from this level of activity included determined efforts by leaders to acknowledge the pervasiveness of whiteness within and across the educational ecosystem, actively seeking input from first generation faculty members, advancing through grants, fellowships, and stipends faculty working on DEI issues, as well as partnering with school districts to advance equity work.

Our interviews surfaced a number of promising practices aimed very intentionally at advancing systemic change related to issues of DEI, and, in particular, efforts aimed at increasing the numbers of successful teacher education candidates and teachers of color. These practices included: partnering with Historically Black Colleges and Universities, recruiting teacher candidates from other majors, the development of culturally and linguistically responsive pipeline programs that begin in the early grades even back to kindergarten. These efforts also include efforts to remove systemic barriers such as removing the barriers created by standardized tests and instead creating multiple measures that could serve as mechanisms for meeting the standards. Finally, we saw a number of efforts aimed at shifting the public conversation regarding education especially as it relates to the professional standing of teachers.

5. Discussion

We do not take for granted that each of the deans maintained a commitment to their stakeholders, as they worked through what one of our participants described as "the storms." We return to Cochran-Smith's (2010) framework to re-examine the degree to which deans expressed work related to education for social justice, all the while recognizing the contextual circumstances in which they operated.

What is clear is that we heard a variety of approaches to issues pertaining to DEI and anti-racism. There are instances in which deans addressed issues of equity through distributive justice, by ensuring students had access to technology during virtual learning and by increasing funding for DEI+A initiatives or redistributing scholarship monies. We also heard deans speak to issues of identity and recognition, in terms of curricular changes they made, incorporating Ethnic Studies into their programs, re-

creating systems to center Black and ethnic minority students, or focusing on hiring/retaining teachers of color. In terms of a theory of practice, we heard deans discuss the knowledge that teacher candidates need to educate for equity and worked to bring in that knowledge through an "inside-out approach" of reconceptualizing their course curriculum. Deans were able to conceptualize aspects of a theory of teacher preparation in rethinking what assessment of teacher candidates should look like, being strategic and intentional about K12 and community partnerships, and focusing on the goal of a more diverse teaching force. These are positive trends and reinforce our belief in the innovative elements of SoE.

From our study, deans expressed what sounded like momentum toward a desire to address systemic racism and social injustice. Using De Wit's (2002) framework to guide us, we ask, however, to what degree is education for social justice centralized and systemic within SoE? What we concluded is that across the schools, there is a high degree of variability, which means there is a real opportunity to sharpen the consistency across SoE, learn from each other, and identify gaps in the work. We know Covid-19 put pressure on leaders, but the SoE that weathered the "storms" better than others were able to do that because they were prepared. In the case of social justice, the leaders who had been intentionally working on these efforts over time, were ready to advance this work, despite dealing with the triple crisis. Ultimately, these are the schools that are closest to ensuring this work is central and systemic to teacher preparation.

Using Cochran-Smith's perspective and in reflecting on what we heard and didn't hear, we offer up 5 questions that we hope will inspire more conversation in and between colleges of education.

(1). In what ways do we discuss/act on issues of educational equity *and* of recognition and respect?

(2). How are tensions/contradictions about the nature of justice acknowledged and managed?

(3). How do we build effective relationships with colleagues, students, and communities?

(4). What is the knowledge that future educators need and how can we prepare them to decide *what* to teach their students?

(5). How and with/from whom should teacher candidates learn? how can we learn from each other?

These questions can perhaps serve SoE or departments of teacher education. They have served us as we sharpen our process and questions related to our own research and they can perhaps be a first step toward more dialogue amongst teacher educators at different institutions so that we might continue to advance this critical work.

6. Conclusions

Given the complexity of the issues addressed, the number of important stakeholders, and the distribution of our interviewees across the country, the next phases of our work aim to provide SoE faculty and administrators with a greater sense of the practical details of how a diverse group of schools of teacher education deans' responded to a set of challenges that were shared in many ways across and within institutions, but which were also context and college-specific, along with the leadership attributes and activities that helped programs to navigate these challenging times. Our goal as researchers is to provide data-informed perspectives (based on the aggregation of our responses from across institutions) that can provide concrete examples of exemplary best practices, and specific steps that can help contribute to the leadership capacity, resilience, and effectiveness of faculty and administrators as they address ongoing and future challenges.

6.1. Implication for Action

In order to address the most pressing challenges we face as SoE and teacher educators, we need to work together. Our goal in conducting these interviews was to create a data-informed baseline for considering SoE as a network of leadership and innovation. And, while some have viewed SoE as bound by tradition and bogged down in compliance issues due to multiple accreditation agencies, our research demonstrates that leaders in SoE are on the leading and cutting edge of problem-solving and designing solutions that impact many lives. Undergirding our research is a vision of capacity development for leaders. In particular, our desire in our study was to identify the most urgent needs of leaders in order to provide additional input and guidance to others in the profession who are committed to developing leadership capacity and to better support

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leaders in ways that they need the most, as they provide support for so many others.

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