Tracking in Virginia: How state and district policies sort students

Abstract

Purpose

Our goal was to learn how state policies impact tracking, what tracking looks like in school districts, and the relationship between tracking policies and racial diversity. Tracking is the policy of sorting students into different levels of courses. Research has shown that the impact of tracking is to create racial segregation within schools but the relationship between tracking and school diversity is unclear. In addition, research on what tracking looks like in individual states has never been undertaken in Virginia. Virginia’s history of resistance to integration and of eugenics make it a critical case for understanding tracking today.

Design/methodology/approach

In this mixed methods study, we analyzed programs of study from 120 of the state’s 131 school districts along with state enrollment and policy information. We created metrics of number of levels of state-tested courses, analyzed language about tracking, and coded course prerequisites.

Findings

We found that state policies in Virginia, including specialized schools and diploma types, encourage tracking within the state. Individual districts and academic departments varied in the number of levels of courses offered and number and types of prerequisites for courses. Overall however the number of levels of state tested courses offered by districts related to the racial diversity of the district, so that more racially diverse districts offered more levels of state-tested courses.

Originality

This study draws attention to the importance of state-level policies in shaping tracking systems as well as the relationship between tracking and district level racial diversity.

*Key words:* Tracking, in-school segregation, Virginia

**Introduction**

Over fifty years since segregation formally ended in the United States, access to elite courses in our high schools remains segregated. Of students who entered high school in 2009, 6% of White students, 3% of Black students, and about 3% of Latinx students took advanced level courses in Biology, Chemistry, or Physics. White students were three times more likely than Black students and almost twice as likely as Latinx students to have Calculus be their highest math course while Black and Latinx students are more likely to have Algebra or Geometry be their highest math course (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). White students are similarly overrepresented in Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses that allow students to earl college credits in high school, while Black and Latinx students are underrepresented (College Board, 2014).

Through academic tracking, students at high schools across the United States are sorted into different levels of courses by perceived achievement, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005). Teachers of lower-level courses spend more time on discipline and teach less content than do teachers of higher levels of courses, making it hard for students sorted into low-level courses to ever move to high-level courses (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005; Watanabe, 2008). Once students with similar profiles are placed into different levels of courses, their academic trajectories diverge, with students sorted into high-level courses excelling relative to the students sorted into low-level courses (Oakes, 2005). Overall, students enrolled in low-level courses graduate from high school and begin college at lower rates than their peers (Beattie, 2011; Oakes, 2005). Tracking harms students in lower-level courses while offering few benefits to students in higher-levels (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005).

What makes tracking in the United States particularly concerning is its history as an instrument of segregation. Tracking began as a way to keep the children of wealthy families and the children of low-income, immigrant families apart in newly created comprehensive high schools (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). White and wealthy students were overwhelmingly sorted into high tracks while students of color and from low-income backgrounds were sorted into the lower tracks (Oakes, 2005). During the Civil Rights era, pushback against the discriminatory nature of tracking led to changes in tracking structures, in theory making tracking systems more flexible and less discriminatory (LaPrade, 2011).

Despite these changes, modern tracking systems continue to disproportionately sort white students into the highest levels of courses and their Black and Latinx peers into the lowest levels of courses (Burris, 2014; Corra, Scott, & Carter, 2011). After controlling for achievement of students in one school district, researchers found that there were about half as many Black students in advanced courses as there should be based on test scores (Corra, Scott, & Carter, 2011) and researchers have had similar findings for Latinx students (Oakes, Selvin, Karoly, & Guiton, 1995). Black and Latinx students are encouraged to enroll in advanced courses at lower rates than other students (Kuralander & Yun, 2007) and report actively being discouraged from enrolling in advanced courses and facing hidden barriers to course enrollment (Irizarry, 2007; Modica, 2015; Yonezawa, Wells, & Serna, 2002). While the racially discriminatory nature of tracking is clear, the relationship between the racial diversity of a school and tracking is less clear. In 2002, Lucas and Berends found that more racially diverse schools had more rigid tracking structures, where students were more likely to take courses at the same level, than did less racially diverse schools. In 2011, Kelly and Price found that in North Carolina, there was no relationship between the racial diversity of schools and the tracking structures outlined in their programs of study.

While different researchers emphasize different aspects of a school’s tracking system from the number of course levels to the severity of prerequisites, to the consistency in levels of students’ courses, it is clear that tracking remains common in the United States (Kelly, 2007; Lucas & Berends, 2002; Oakes, 2005; Schmidt & McKnight, 2012). In the 1990s, over 80% of American high school students took classes that were offered at multiple levels of difficulty (Oakes, 2005). In 2007, 92% or more of students in North Carolina attended schools with two or more levels of geometry and science courses (Kelly & Price, 2011). The number of levels of courses however varied between departments and over time. In 1997, 54% of schools studied in North Carolina offered 3 or more levels of English courses at each grade level. In 2007, only 33% of schools in the sample offered 3 or more levels of English. Conversely, in 1997 39% of the schools offered only one level of most Social Studies courses while in 2007 only 12% of the schools offered only one level of the course (Kelly 2007; Kelly & Price, 2011). There were differences between departments and changes over time in course offerings. Watanabe and colleagues (2007) found that the actions of a determined teacher could change the tracking structure of an academic department over time. Most of the data however on local tracking structures is over a decade old. What do course offerings look like today and what do they look like in a state other than North Carolina?

In addition, what are the formal barriers set for course entry? In 1997 and 2007, the practice of using prerequisites to restrict entry into high-level courses was common in North Carolina. Common prerequisites at the time included prior course work, grade point averages (GPAs), test scores, and teacher recommendations (Kelly, 2007; Kelly & Price, 2011). Schools also limited when students could change course levels and required co-requisite courses that further limited who could enroll in advanced courses (Kelly, 2007). Too much is unknown about what tracking looks like today. The purpose of this study is to learn about the relationship between high school course offerings and racial diversity in Virginia. Specifically, this study answers:

1. What trends exist across the state in district tracking systems and access to courses?
2. What is the relationship between racial diversity and access to courses?
3. What is the relationship between racial diversity and district tracking systems?

**Methods**

To answer our research questions, we chose a convergent mixed methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), using publicly available district, state, and federal documents.

**Context**

Virginia is a critical case for studying tracking because of the state’s history of eugenics and segregation. Virginia was a nationwide leader in eugenics and forced sterilization of those deemed unfit to parent (Lombardo, 1985). In addition, Virginia was a key participant in Massive Resistance to *Brown v. Board* (1953), with the state’s governor choosing to shut down multiple school districts rather than allow them to integrate (Lewis, 2006). Today, Virginia continues to struggle with racial disparities in graduation rates, in academic achievement, and in access to gifted and talented programming (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2017a; 2018a; b).Virginia’s long history of segregation and eugenics makes understanding its present practices of tracking essential.

Over a million students attend Virginia schools. Virginia has 131 different school districts, including the state’s consolidated districts. Districts in Virginia vary in size and in per pupil expenditures. Over 80 school districts have only one high school, 40 have three or more high schools, and five have ten or more (VDOE, n.d.), and enrollment similarly varies from over 100,000 to under 10,000. Similarly, per pupil expenditures range from $9,000 to $20,000 across districts, despite supplemental state funding for districts that receive less local funding (VDOE, 2018c). In this study, we used districts as the level of analysis for course offerings. In Virginia, each district creates a program of study, which is a document that lists graduation requirements, courses offered, and, often, information about tracking policies, course levels, and prerequisites. These programs of study apply to all high schools in a district, although some larger school districts will indicate if a certain course is available at only some of the district’s high schools. This, however, is rare and even high schools in larger districts will typically reference the district program of study for course information. As most programs of study in the state are located at the district level, we used district as the level of analysis for course offerings.

**District document analysis**

We analyzed programs of study from 120 of the state’s 131 districts to understand course offerings, prerequisites, and tracking structures at the district level. One hundred twelve districts posted a digital program of study and, when there was a choice of program of studies, we selected the 2017-2018 program to match the Office of Civil Rights data. We contacted the 19 districts without posted programs of study. Eight responded by sending copies of student enrollment forms or reading us their master schedules, leaving us with 120 district programs of studies to analyze, 91.6% of the possible districts in the state. Because some of the programs of study included only lists of courses offered in the district, we went to the websites and student handbooks of these districts to find supplemental information. For two districts, we were unable to find any information on prerequisites. This left us with 118 districts with prerequisite and course information and two districts with only course information.

Within each program of study, we focused on understanding the prerequisites and number of levels of state tested courses as these are courses that are likely to be offered at every high school and taken by large numbers of students in the state. The state test in Virginia is the Standards of Learning (SOL) tests, which in high school students can take in Biology, Chemistry, Earth Science, Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Geometry, World History 1, World History 2, Virginia and US History, and World Geography. For English, students in high school take reading and writing SOL tests at the end of tenth or eleventh grades, but not in 9th grade, although we counted all three courses as SOL courses because they prepare students for the test and because of the variability in when students take the reading and writing SOLs. World Geography is the only SOL tested course that we found to be rarely offered within the state and we found that, when it was offered, it was often offered in place of World History 1. When World Geography was offered in place of World History 1, we coded it as World History 1, which happened in 10% of districts. When it was offered with World History 1, we did not code the course to prevent double coding of the course. Similarly, for Fairfax County, we coded Geosystems as Earth Science due to similarity in tested content and in Falls Church, we counted as high school World History 1 an SOL tested 8th grade World History 1 class.

**Analysis.** We began our analysis by coding all 120 programs of study. Quantitatively, we counted the number of levels of SOL tested courses discussed above. To ensure reliability, we developed an *a priori* coding rubric and double coded 100% of the programs of study with 82% reliability. Qualitatively, we coded the types of courses being offered, their prerequisites, and statements related to tracking. We coded for the number of AP, DE, IB, honors, remedial, special education, virtual, and standard level courses in each district’s Social Studies, English, Math, and Science departments. We also coded the number and type of prerequisites for each level of a SOL tested course in each department. We summed the prerequisite information, including both the number and type of prerequisites, across districts and created percentages that allowed us to descriptively compare different departments and different levels of courses. Finally, we coded department and district level statements about course levels and about tracking using the qualitative software program *Nvivo*. To ensure that we captured all of the statements and prerequisites, we coded each program of study twice, once by hand and once using key-word searches. We also double coded each program of study, with differences between the two raters discussed and resolved.

**State document analysis**

In addition to gathering public information from districts, we also gathered public information from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), including district and school level information on graduation rates, urbanicity (rural, semi-urban, and urban), and diversity (racial, ethnic, and economic). We also gathered state level information on specialized programs, including Governors’ schools, alternative schools, and virtual courses.

**Analysis.** We analyzed information from the VDOE both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively, we used state information to create a diversity index using a metric of diversity from Kelly and Price (2011) to quantify the racial and ethnic composition of each district. In this metric, a minimally diverse school (d-index of zero) is a school with only one racial or ethnic group, whereas a maximally diverse school (d-index of 1) has equal proportions of all extant racial and ethnic groups in the state. Qualitatively, we analyzed the differences between diploma types as well as information on Governors’ schools, alternative programs, dual enrollment, and virtual courses which we then used as a frame of reference in looking at individual programs of studies.

**Comparing course levels and diversity**. To investigate the relationship between the number of levels of state tested courses and the diversity of the school, we ran a regression model using the diversity index to predict the number of levels of classes in districts. We included additional predictor variables including as covariates percent free and reduced-price lunch and the logarithm of student enrollment. We initially considered factors of urbanicity and per-pupil expenditure but excluded them when these factors proved not to be meaningful predictors. We used clustered standard errors on the eight regional divisions assigned by the VDOE to account for geographic effects and the heteroskedasticity produced by this clustering.

**Federal data analysis**

The final source of data came from the US Department of Education through their Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Civil Rights Data Collection project. Every two years, OCR collects educational and civil rights information from schools and districts across the country, which it collates and publishes publicly on its website (OCR, 2020). The data includes district and school level data on course enrollment including who enrolls in AP courses, who takes AP tests, who takes chemistry, algebra 2, and biology, and when students take algebra 1. OCR does not collect information on English or social studies courses and information is reported out by special education status and ethnicity but not by socioeconomic status. The 2017 to 2018 OCR data was released in October 2020.

**Analysis.** We downloaded and cleaned all OCR course enrollment data for Virginia districts and schools. We then looked at state level trends for each course, calculating the percentage of students from each ethnic group that took a course and comparing it to the percentage of students from that group in the. Then, we calculated d-indexes for each school and for each course within a school so that we could compare course and school diversity and repeated those analyses at the district level. We then calculated what percent of each course at each school was white and Black and compared those percentages to the overall percentage of students at each school taking that course using a heteroskedasticity-robust standard error robust model and controlling for the size of the school.

**Limitations**

Despite our efforts to collect complete data sets and to triangulate findings across data sets, the study has significant limitations. First, we drew exclusively on public records, which means that we do not have any student level data. We report trends at the school, district, and state levels, but the voice of students and individual student experiences are missing from the study as are staff perspectives on and insights into course offerings. Second, the data sets are incomplete. The federal OCR data does not have information on social studies and English courses or on socioeconomic status, which limits our abilities to do comparisons across data sets, and the program of studies data has missing districts. Third…….. Despite these limitations, we believe that the combination of the district, state, and federal data in this study create a novel picture of how course offerings and racial diversity interact in Virginia.

**Results**

**District tracking structures**

Districts make decisions about the number of courses to offer, the number of levels of offer for each course, and how challenging it is to enroll in any given course. Districts varied widely in the number of courses they offered that could give students college credit. Statewide, AP courses were offered in 110 districts, Dual Enrollment (AP) courses were offered in 106 districts, and IB courses were offered in 17 districts. The number of AP courses offered at districts ranged from 1 to 58, with an average of 21 courses while the total number of DE courses offered by districts ranged from 1 to 86. Both AP courses and DE courses were offered in person and online, although this was much more common for AP courses which were frequently offered as part of Virtual Virginia, a state platform for remote AP courses. Unlike college credit courses, almost every district in Virginia offers the SOL tested courses. The variation for these courses comes in how many levels of the courses are offered and how challenging it is to enroll in a particular class.

Across the state, districts offer an average of 1.90 levels of SOL tested courses (SD 0.53), meaning that most districts offer SOL tested courses like World History 1 at close to two levels. Typically, a district with two levels of a course like World History 1 are offering it at the standard, the default, and the honors, an advanced, level, although remedial levels are fairly common in the state for classes such as Algebra 1, which 77 districts offered at the remedial level. Across all districts, there were only a few incidences where the standard level was not offered for a course, which was not true for honors level courses, which were slightly less commonly offered. The third most common level was remedial, a course level typically reserved for students who have struggled with or might struggle with the standard version of the course. The fourth level in our analyses, and the least common, is a self-contained special education class, which is only taken by students with identified special needs. While most school districts offer co-taught special education courses where students with special needs are in classrooms with students without special needs, some districts also offer self-contained special education courses that correspond in name or content to SOL tested courses. As shown in Table 1, there was a wide range in the percent of districts and academic departments offering SOL tested courses at each level.

Overall, the number of levels of courses offered by districts ranged from one level per course to over four levels per course. Departments within districts varied in the number of levels of courses they offered (F() = 4.829, p = 0.003; see Table 1). In general, English departments offered more levels of courses than did other departments and Science departments offered slightly fewer levels of courses. In part, this variation between departments represents differences in how many students have access to the SOL tested courses. While all students have access to English 9, 10, and 11, not all students have access to chemistry, one of the three SOL tested science courses we looked at. In order to take chemistry, students in most districts have to have either passed or currently be enrolled in algebra 2. Taking algebra 2 in turn requires that students have passed algebra 1, which students in the state take in grades from 8th through 12th. As a result, while over 65,000 students in Virginia take biology, under 33,000 take chemistry. The tracking for chemistry primarily happens in access to the course rather than between levels of the course

**Table 1**

*Percent of Districts Offering Honors, Remedial, and Self-Contained Special Education Courses for SOL Tested Subjects*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Standard | Honors | Remedial | Special education |
| Overall | 98.3% | 59.8% | 17.2% | 6.1% |
| English | 100% | 85.3% | 15.0% | 12.4% |
| Math | 99.4% | 42.0% | 44.6% | 3.4% |
| Social Studies | 94.3% | 50.0% | 3.1% | 4.2% |
| Science | 99.7% | 61.9% | 6.2% | 4.5% |

Pre-requisites, the barriers that districts erect to course enrollment, in general vary widely across the state and between departments. Overall, 112 of the 118 districts in the sample included information about prerequisites for individual courses. Across districts, prior coursework was the most common prerequisite for course enrollment, required for enrollment in one-third of all SOL tested courses. The other common prerequisites were grade point average (GPA), teacher recommendation, and test scores. The number of prerequisites varied by department with social studies departments typically requiring fewer prerequisites for course enrollment than math and other departments requiring more prerequisites.

In general, most districts required one or no prerequisites for enrollment in SOL tested courses. However, this varied by course level. While 52% of standard courses had no prerequisites for course entry, only 22% of honors courses had no prerequisites. Inversely, 48% of honors courses and only 10% of standard courses required two or more prerequisites for course entry. The type of prerequisite as well as the number of prerequisites required for course entry varied by course level. While only 6% of standard courses required a certain GPA in prior coursework for enrollment, 46% of honors courses had the same requirement. Similarly, 4% of standard courses and 33% of honors required a teacher recommendation and 3% of standard and 24% of honors courses set a cut off test score for enrollment. Remedial courses had almost no prerequisites. Prerequisites in these districts limited which students had access to the advanced levels of courses, but not to the lower levels of courses.

**Racial diversity and course access**

Across the state, enrollment in AP courses, biology, chemistry, and algebra 1 and 2 varied by student ethnicity. Two primary patterns emerged in course access. First, white students are on more advanced academic trajectories than Black or Latinx students. Second, these disparities relate to students’ opportunities at more segregated high schools.

White students are on more advanced academic trajectories than Black and Latinx students as measured by disparities in diploma types, gifted identification, AP enrollment, and enrollment in chemistry courses. The Commonwealth of Virginia offers three different diploma types, including advanced studies and standard diplomas for all students and applied diplomas for students with special needs, with different coursework required for each diploma type. While some districts specified that students pursuing either the advanced studies or the standard diploma could pursue college, others indicated that only students pursuing an advanced diploma were on track for college. In Virginia, white students are 49% of the population but 64% of those receiving advanced diplomas while Black and Latinx students both receive advanced diplomas at disproportionately low rate compared to their percentage of the school population. This mirrors trends in gifted identification. At 49% of the population, white students are 58% of those identified as gifted while Black students are 22% of the population and 12% of those identified as gifted and Latinx students are 16% of the population and 10% of those identified as gifted. These trends are equally true in course enrollment where white students are overrepresented and Black and Latinx students underrepresented in AP and Dual Enrollment (DE) advanced courses.

The disparities exist only, however, in access to elite opportunities. When it comes to lower level courses and diplomas, Black and Latinx students are over, not under, represented (see Table 2 for detailed course enrollment information). At times, the racial disparities between groups relates to the timing of courses. White students are more likely to take algebra 1 in 8th grade while Black and Latinx students are more likely to take the course in 9th grade or even later. The timing of algebra 1 then impacts students’ timing for algebra 2. Black and Latinx students take algebra 2 at population rates, meaning that they are proportionately represented in algebra 2. Because Black and Latinx students, however, are taking algebra 1 later they are also taking algebra 2 later, which inhibits their ability to take advanced science and math courses later on.

**Table 2**

*Course Enrollment by Ethnicity*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | School population | Biology | Chemistry | AP classes | Algebra 1 8th grade | Algebra 1 9th-10th grade | Algebra 2 |
| Black | 22.39% | 23.46% | 16.24% | 12.40% | 17.65% | 29.59% | 20.10% |
| Latinx | 15.69% | 14.10% | 12.70% | 9.94% | 12.61% | 21.34% | 13.58% |
| White | 48.99% | 49.75% | 54.66% | 58.58% | 55.65% | 40.41% | 49.03% |

These disparities exist at the state level and are driven in part by disparities between schools. Overall, regardless of the diversity of a school, as measured by Kelly and Price’s (2011) d-index, advanced classes are generally slightly less diverse than the school as a whole. For chemistry, the difference is 0.07 on a diversity index of 0 to 1, a significant (p < 0.001), but very small difference in diversity. Lower rates of enrollment by Latinx and Black students attending mixed race high schools is not enough to explain the state level disparities—the state level differences in enrollment are too large to be explained by small disparities at racially diverse high schools. The differences in state level enrollment data seem to be driven by disparities at segregated high schools.

We compared the percentage of Black students at a high school to the proportion of students taking advanced courses like chemistry. We found that, as schools enrolled a higher proportion of Black students, a smaller percentage of students enrolled in advanced courses. If a school was 0% Black, 13.68% of students would be enrolled in chemistry while at a 100% Black school, only 8.31% of students would take chemistry, when controlling for the size of the school and using a heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors robust model (p > 0.001). That pattern is not true for biology. The percentage of students taking biology is essentially the same at schools that enroll higher and lower percentages of Black students. The pattern reappears when we look at algebra 1 in 8th grade, at . The disparities between ethnic groups in course enrollment is consistent across the state, regardless of school population. The difference is in what percentage of students at the school have access to advanced level course work.

**Table 2**

*Differences by School Composition in the Overall Percentage of Students Enrolled in SOL Tested Courses*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Theorized school enrollment | Biology | Chemistry | AP classes | Algebra 1 8th grade | Algebra 1 9th-10th grade | Algebra 2 |
| 100% Black |  | 8.31% |  |  | 25.39% |  |
| 0% Black |  | 13.68% |  |  | 17.97% |  |
| White |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Racial diversity and tracking systems**

In addition to course access, we found that racial diversity related to district level tracking structures in a different way that reflects the complexity of racial discrimination in America. We found that the number of levels of courses offered by a district is predicted by the racial diversity of the district (Figure 1). The diversity index from Kelly and Price (2011). describes a minimally diverse district (d-index = 0.00) as one that is entirely homogeneous and a maximally diverse district (d-index = 1.00) as one that has all racial groups in equal proportions. Districts across the state varied in how racially diverse they were, although no district in our data set was either maximally or minimally diverse. The least diverse district in the data set was Craig county, which reported that 99% of its students were White. The largest non-White group in that district were African American and Biracial students, each of which group represented 0.3% of the district. The most diverse district in Virginia is Prince William County, with an enrollment of 31% white students, 34% Latinx students, 20% Black students, and 15% of students from other groups.

We found that the difference between a d-index of 0.00 and a d-index of 1.00 is 0.71 levels per course when controlling for poverty and district size (Table 2). If either a minimally or maximally diverse district existed, we would extrapolate that the average difference between them would be 0.71 tracks per course offered. Given that no maximally or minimally diverse district existed in Virginia, we found that the more racially diverse districts offered half of a course level more in each SOL tested area than the least racially diverse district, when controlling for the size, urbanicity, and socioeconomic status of the district. In an additional model, we controlled for factors of urbanicity, using rural districts as a reference group. This variable proved to not be a significant predictor of course offerings when controlling for the remaining factors. Overall, districts with larger populations offered more levels of courses (p = 0.002). Finally, the percent of students within a district qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) was a significant predictor of number of course levels. In a district in which no students qualified for FRPL, our model predicted the district would have one half of a level morefor each course, on average, than a district wherein all students qualified for FRPL. That is, when controlling for diversity and size, districts with poorer students offer fewer levels of state-tested courses. Students’ racial diversity and income levels predict how many levels of courses their district would offer.

* School’s level of trackedness does not relate to….

OTHER TRACKING ANALYSES

**Discussion**

Tracking in Virginia is supported by state structures, varies across districts and departments, and is predicted by the racial diversity of a school district. At the state level, Virginia’s policies of multiple diplomas and specialty schools create state-level structures for tracking students. Tracking is a state and not just a district or school phenomenon.

Within districts, honors and standard level courses are available for most state-tested courses with some districts offering self-contained special education courses, remedial courses, and additional advanced courses as well. On average, districts offer almost two levels of each state tested course, with the most common levels being standard and honors. Some districts offer up to four levels of most courses while others only offer one, indicating that tracking practices vary across Virginia, as Kelly (2007) and Kelly and Price (2011) found was true in North Carolina.

In addition to variations between districts in the type and number of course levels in districts, we found differences between academic departments. Like Kelly (2007) we found that English departments offered the largest number of levels of courses. Unlike Kelly (2007), who found that social studies departments offered the lowest numbers of levels of courses, we found that in Virginia science departments offered the fewest number of levels of courses on average. In addition, we found that number and type of prerequisites set for course entry also varied, with social studies departments often requiring fewer prerequisites for course entry than other departments. Across all departments however advanced courses had more prerequisites than lower level courses and were more likely to require teacher recommendations, cut off test scores and GPAs than lower level courses. As Kelly and Price (2011) found, the variability of course levels and prerequisites across districts and between departments indicate that tracking structures are not fixed by state or by district.

Given the negative impact of tracking on many students (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005), our finding that tracking varies by place and by department indicates that these structures are not immutable. In 2007, Watanabe and colleagues found that one teacher could alter the tracking structure of a science department. That teacher and school do not need to be an isolated case. Our finding of variability indicates that there is room for change within departments and school districts.

Yet, our finding of the relationship between district racial diversity and the number of course levels offered also serves as a reminder of the racially discriminatory nature of tracking. Tracking evolved as a way to segregate students by race and class within schools (Oakes, 2005). During the Civil Rights era, activists pushed back against tracking because of the racial segregation it was creating within schools (LaPrade, 2011; Oakes, 2005). From the 1980s onwards, educational leaders advocated against tracking because of its racially discriminatory functions (Burris, 2014; Oakes, 2005). Despite this history of advocacy, we find that today not only are Black students in Virginia underrepresented in advanced diploma tracks and gifted programs, but also in districts that are more diverse, students are sorted into more levels of courses.

Our finding supports that of Lucas and Berends (2002) on the relationship between racial diversity and tracking and differs from that of Kelly and Price (2011). Given that each group of researchers looked at different subsets of courses and used different techniques, it is clear that we need more research on the relationship between racial diversity and school tracking. We need research that brings in the voices and experiences of students. This study is a surface level analysis of what is happening in Virginia. We did not interview students, study student records, or investigate the enrollment in courses in Virginia. Each of these is vitally important to understanding not just what is happening in the state, but why these things are occurring.

In a state and society where Black and Brown students continue to too often be offered a second-class education, research on the opportunities that students are offered or denied within their school districts is vital. In this paper, we were able to expose what is happening with tracking in Virginia and how it relates to racial diversity. We were able to uncover links between racial diversity and the number of levels of courses in the state and to find possibilities for change in the variations between departments and districts in the shape of their tracking systems. To address the problems within our schools however we need to know more about how these systems are maintained and change and how students perceive these systems. Our paper begins a new conversation on tracking in Virginia and has implications for people studying within school segregation in other localities. We hope however that this is just the beginning of a rich conversation that can lead to meaningful change in policy and practice.

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