DIBELS: An Effective Assessment Tool

Or a Political Push?

Megan E. Day

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Abstract
The Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) is an assessment tool used to determine children, grades kindergarten through sixth, at-risk of having reading problems. Critics claim that the DIBELS lack a strong scientific research foundation, a requirement made by the No Child Left Behind Act. The public has also questioned DIBELS political support regarding Reading First, a program that allocates grant money to States that meet certain criteria.

Keywords: assessment, DIBELS, scientifically base research, Reading First
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Created in 1988 by University of Oregon professors the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) has become a controversial issue, not only in the field of education, but also in the political realm, (Dessoff, 2007; Manzo, 2005b). In response to the “war on illiteracy”, DIBELS was designed to assess students at-risk for reading problems (United States Department of Education, 1999). Bursuck and Damer (2007) contend that at-risk students demonstrate one or more of the following characteristics: raised in poverty, parents did not read to them; have a learning disability; are English Language Learners; or were born prematurely.

Within the last decade, researchers have found that the earlier a child is identified with a learning disability, the greater the chances of decreasing the effects of the disability (Bursuck & Damer, 2007; Hintze, Ryan, & Stoner, 2003; Strickland, 2002). Assessing children with learning disabilities or other at-risk factors is crucial to prevention and remediation (Langdon, 2004). Kaminski et al. (2007) describe the intended design of DIBELS as a formative way to identify children struggling with the “acquisition of basic early
literacy skills” to offer reinforcement early in the child’s development in an effort to avert future reading complexities.

The University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning (2008) defines DIBELS as:

a set of procedures and measures for assessing the acquisition of early literacy skills from kindergarten through sixth grade. They are designed to be short (one minute) fluency measures used to regularly monitor the development of early literacy and early reading skills.

(para. 1)

Over 8,200 schools, across 2,600 school districts in 49 states and Canada utilize DIBELS as their primary tool to assess students (University of Oregon Center of Teaching and Learning, 2008). Critics argue whether the wide-spread use of DIBELS reflects its basis in scientific research or a political push to support the Reading First initiative (Riedel, 2007).

More than 1.7 million students in Kindergarten through grade three are assessed using this set of tests (Goodman, 2006b; Manzo, 2005a). Teachers use DIBELS to evaluate students’ progress based on the five main concepts of early literacy development: Phonological Awareness, Alphabetic Principle, Accuracy and Fluency with Connected Text, Vocabulary, and Comprehension (Elliott, Huai, & Roach, 2007; Goodman, 2006b;
Incorporating the five main concepts of early literacy development, DIBELS was designed to provide an assessment of the specific test given to a student. The University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning (2008) explains that:

DIBELS measures were specifically designed to assess the core components of reading: Phonological Awareness, Alphabetic Principle, Accuracy and Fluency with Connected Text, Vocabulary, and Comprehension. The measures are linked to one another, both psychometrically and theoretically, and have been found to be predictive of later reading proficiency. Combined, the measures form an assessment system of early literacy development that allows educators to readily and reliably determine student progress. (para. 3)

Even with the incorporation of the main concepts of early reading literacy skills, teachers, parents, and researchers still question the effectiveness of DIBELS as a reliable assessment instrument (Dessoff, 2007; Laser, 2006). A major concern regarding DIBELS is its validity in determining children’s reading ability based exclusively on one-minute tests
used to measure reading accuracy and speed (Goodman, 2006a; Pearson, 2006; Shelton, Altwerger, & Jordan, 2009).

Critics question the validity and reliability of the DIBELS, particularly the Nonsense Word Fluency and the Letter Naming Fluency subtests (Kamii & Manning, 2005). Elliot et al. (2006) state that the Nonsense Word Fluency subtest tests the student’s capability to correct blend sounds in order to read “unfamiliar phonetically regular words” (p. 147). The focus of this subtest is to teach alphabetic principles, or phonics (Tierney & Thome, 2006). Words featured on the Nonsense Word Fluency subtests include real English words—mum and wan—and words the look like real English words—ful (full) and fod (food) (Goodman, 2006b). Critics argue that students who score low on this subtest are trying to figure out the meaning of the nonsense word (Kamii & Manning, 2005; Medige, 2007).

In addition to the Nonsense Word Fluency subtest, critics query the Letter Naming Fluency (LNF), which measures student’s ability to recognize letters. Students’ scores are compared to their classmates; students in the twentieth percentile are deemed at-risk, and in need of reading intervention (Elliott, et. al 2006).

Kamii and Manning’s (2005) study of kindergarteners and first-graders examines the use of the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest and Nonsense Word Fluency subtest of DIBELS to
evaluate an instructional program. The authors of DIBELS state that the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest has the ability to predict future reading success; the goal of this study is to find out if the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency measure shows a relationship with current achievement in reading and writing. This study found that the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest and Nonsense Word Fluency subtest have little to no connection in kindergarten and first grade students’ ability to write words.

Manning, Kamii, and Kato (2006) found that students have the ability to write words at a moderately high level without having the ability to sound out words on the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest. Through a comparison of test scores on the Slosson Oral Reading Test and the DIBELS Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest, researchers concluded that it is possible for students to write words at a moderately high level without having the ability to sound out words on the Phonemic Segmentation Fluency subtest (Manning, Kamii, & Kato).

Critics also claim that the DIBELS tests tend to over identify students as having reading difficulties when they do not (Elliot, Huai, & Roach, 2007; Flurkey, 2006; Goodman, 2006b; Laser, 2006). According to Hintze, et al. (2003), using DIBELS only could result in “school districts’ unnecessarily allocating resources to children, and children being
inaccurately identified as ‘at-risk’ for early reading problems” (pp. 554-555).

DIBELS ability to assess reading comprehension comes under scrutiny by many critics, as well (Goodman, 2006a; Goodman, 2006b; Manzo, 2005a; Riedel, 2007).

In addition to the research opposing DIBELS, controversy surrounds DIBELS in the political arena. Much of the controversy stems from critics claiming a lack of scientific evidence to support the assessment, which is required under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Flurkey, 2006; Goodman, 2006a; Kamii & Manning, 2005; Laser, 2006; Manning, et al., 2006; Manzo, 2005b; Pearson, 2006; Tierney & Thome, 2006; Wilde, 2006). Reauthorized in 2001, NCLB has specific requirements that schools must meet in order to enhance the education that the United States provides students, specifically students with disadvantages (United States Government Accountability Office, 2007). No Child Left Behind Act (2002) also mandates that schools “use effective methods and instructional strategies that are based on scientifically based research” (p. 1473). This legislation also established via a grant system called Reading First (EPE Research Center, 2004).

Reading First is designed to facilitate scientifically founded reading programs for schools to include in the curriculum from Kindergarten through grade three (University of
The purpose of Reading First, according to the Office of Communications and Outreach (2008), focuses on:

- putting proven methods of early reading instruction in classrooms. Through Reading First, states and districts receive support to apply scientifically based reading research—and the proven instructional and assessment tools consistent with this research—to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade. The program provides formula grants to states that submit an approved application. (p. 155)

Upon submitting grant applications, many states were denied funding based on a lack of Scientifically Based Reading Research (SBRR) (United States Accountability Office, 2007). Some states felt urged by Department Officials to use specific assessments in their reading program in order to receive funding (Manzo, 2005a; Office of Inspector General, 2008).

However, according to the Office of Inspector General (2008), “The [Elementary and Secondary Education Act] ESEA does not advocate any particular reading program, assessment, or other product. In fact, Section 9527(b) of the ESEA prohibits the Department from endorsing, approving, or sanctioning any curriculum” (p. 5).
Part of the criterion states must include in their reading program is to assess students using scientifically based reading research (SBRR). The ESEA states specific characteristics of SBRR (2006):

- applies rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain valid knowledge relevant to reading development, reading instruction, and reading difficulties; and includes research that employs systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment; involves rigorous data analyses that are adequate to test the stated hypotheses and justify the general conclusions drawn; relies on measurements or observational methods that provide valid data across evaluators and observers and across multiple measurements and observations; and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by the panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review. (p. 4)

Along with critics claiming a lack of SBRR, critics cite conflict of interest within the Department of Education and the University of Oregon, especially. DIBELS authors were appointed to be part of the Department of Education (DOE) panel that handles the grant applications for Reading First (Dessoff, 2007). In addition to handling Reading First grant applications, a DIBELS author has further influenced the field of education by
conceiving the Dynamic Measurement Group (DMG), a business that sells DIBELS to school districts. DMG’s profits fund current research of reading assessment tools (Desso). According to the United States Government Accountability Office (2007) and the Office of the Inspector General (2006) University of Oregon professors created the manual, *A Consumer’s Guide to Evaluating a Core Reading Program*, which included a strong recommendation for the use of DIBELS; most states that used this manual chose to use DIBELS in the reading programs.

Further coercion to use DIBELS came from the United States Department of Education. The Inspector General of the United States Department of Education testified before the Committee on Education and Labor U.S. House of Representatives (2007) that Department officials intruded in the state’s decision-making process regarding reading programs and assessments. The Inspector General also states that participants at the Reading Leadership Academies received a handbook that included an article on a reading assessment, DIBELS, without mentioning any other assessment. The Department publishes a Guidebook listing various assessment tools, including the article on DIBELS from the Handbook.

Locally, the Buffalo Public Schools (BPS) use DIBELS along with a reading program from Harcourt to assess more than 37,000 students in 70 different locations (Medige, 2007). The BPS
serves students with “a high-risk demographic profile with approximately 82% of all students meeting federal poverty standards, 74% classified as minority students, and 18.1% of school-age residents classified as having disabilities” (Wireless Generation, Inc., 2009, para. 2). Thomas (2009) calculates that students attending BPS have a wealth ratio of 0.375 with 35% of the population living in poverty. The reading program, along with the use of DIBELS, requires teachers to eliminate all books from the classroom except those specified in the reading series. Teachers must adhere to the rigorous standards of the reading program and refrain from incorporating socially acceptable books or books independently chosen by the students (Medige).

BPS assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction fully endorses the rigid structure of the Harcourt reading program in conjunction with DIBELS, encouraging teachers to adhere to the program, leaving no room for creativity (Medige, 2007). BPS also pays consultants to observe the teachers and make sure that there are no deviations from the program. BPS Superintendent has appeared in advertising for DIBELS, publicly advertising their exclusive support for the program. He has strongly advocated for the use of DIBELS software, sold by DMG, as well (Wireless Generation, Inc., 2008-2009).
DIBELS has not only impacted the city of Buffalo, but the larger fields of education and politics, as well (Goodman, 2006a; Medige, 2007). According to Manzo (2005b), “DIBELS has become a catchphrase in the school house and the statehouse” (para. 4). This assessment tool has triggered corruption in the Department of Education, this assessment tool has produced confusion in the classroom, and this assessment tool has failed many young children, leading to a hatred of reading, and school in general (Goodman, 2006a; Inspector General of the United States Department of Education, 2007; Laser, 2006; Manning et al., 2006; Manzo, 2005b; Medige; Office of Inspector General, 2008; Pearson, 2006; Tierney & Thome, 2006).
References

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