

A photograph of four children running on a paved path outdoors. The children are in motion, with some blur. The child on the left is a girl with blonde hair, wearing a white Adidas t-shirt and black leggings. The child in the center is a boy wearing a white t-shirt and black pants. The child on the right is a boy wearing a Spider-Man hoodie and blue pants. The child on the far right is a boy wearing a red and blue superhero costume. The background shows a brick building and some trees with autumn foliage.

**Mandatory language assessment and targeted language interventions in Danish childcares. Opportunities and challenges.**

**Dorthe Bleses  
TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research  
Aarhus University**

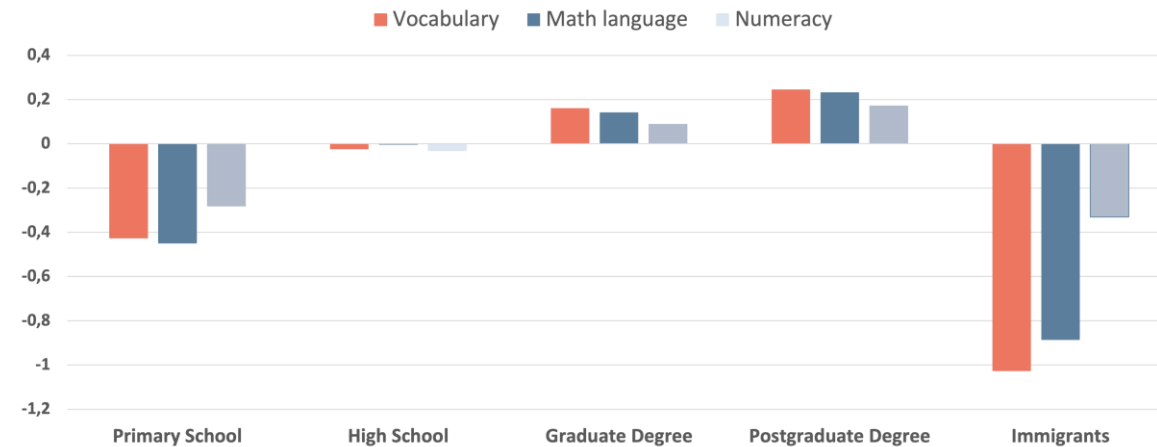
# Overview

- What is the challenge?
- What is the Danish national assessment program?
- How is the program implemented?  
(exploratory analyses of register data)
- What can we learn from Denmark?



# What is the challenge?

- **Early language skills foundational** for later skills, relations, health, well-being and economic success (Bleses et al., 2016; Chetty; 2011; Law et al., 2017)
- **Social bias** in language development - immigrant children most at risk for low skills (e.g. Hoff, 2013)
- Up to **25 % of children have language delay** - reduced learning opportunities or disorders (Hill et al., 2023)



Bleses et al., 2023 ( 2.884 3-5-year-old children)

## Dilemma!

Persistent low language skills hard to predict early due to non-linear developmental trajectories

Early language intervention can reduce the burden of language delay

(e.g., McKean & Reilly, 2023; Pace et al., 2019)

# Preventive programs

## Assessment *and* paired language intervention

- Some national screening programs
- Often embedded within primary care
- Often dichotomous approach focusing on identifying high-risk children
- Studies linking effectiveness of programs to subsequent improvement is limited
- Over- and under-identification unavoidable due to the non-linear nature of development

(Kaiser et al. 2024; Feltner et al., 2024; McKean & Reilly, 2023)





# What is the Danish national language assessment program?

**Embedded in national universal ECE programs, which is ideal**

- High enrollment ensures high reach of all children
- Takes place in a well-known and safe place for the children
- Can target a higher proportion of children with lower skills

In 2007 mandatory assessment of all 3-year-old children

In **2010** mandatory assessment of **3-year-olds who may need additional language stimulation**

**Teachers responsible** for assessment *and* the paired language language intervention in childcares depending on results

# Ministry-commissioned assessment instrument

- **Language Assessment 3-6 (LA 3-6)** is a norm-referenced assessment instrument based on a monolingual norm **developed to form the basis for targeted educational practices for all children** in ECE settings (# diagnostic) (Bleses et al., 2010; Højen, Bleses & Dale, 2022)
- Not mandatory, but highly used



## Central domains language

Oral language  
Preliteracy skills



## Research-based

Good validity and  
reliability (variation)

(Højen et al. 2022;  
Haghighi et al., 2019)



## Results in 3 paired intervention profiles

Specific (p<5)  
Focused (p6-15)  
General (p>15)

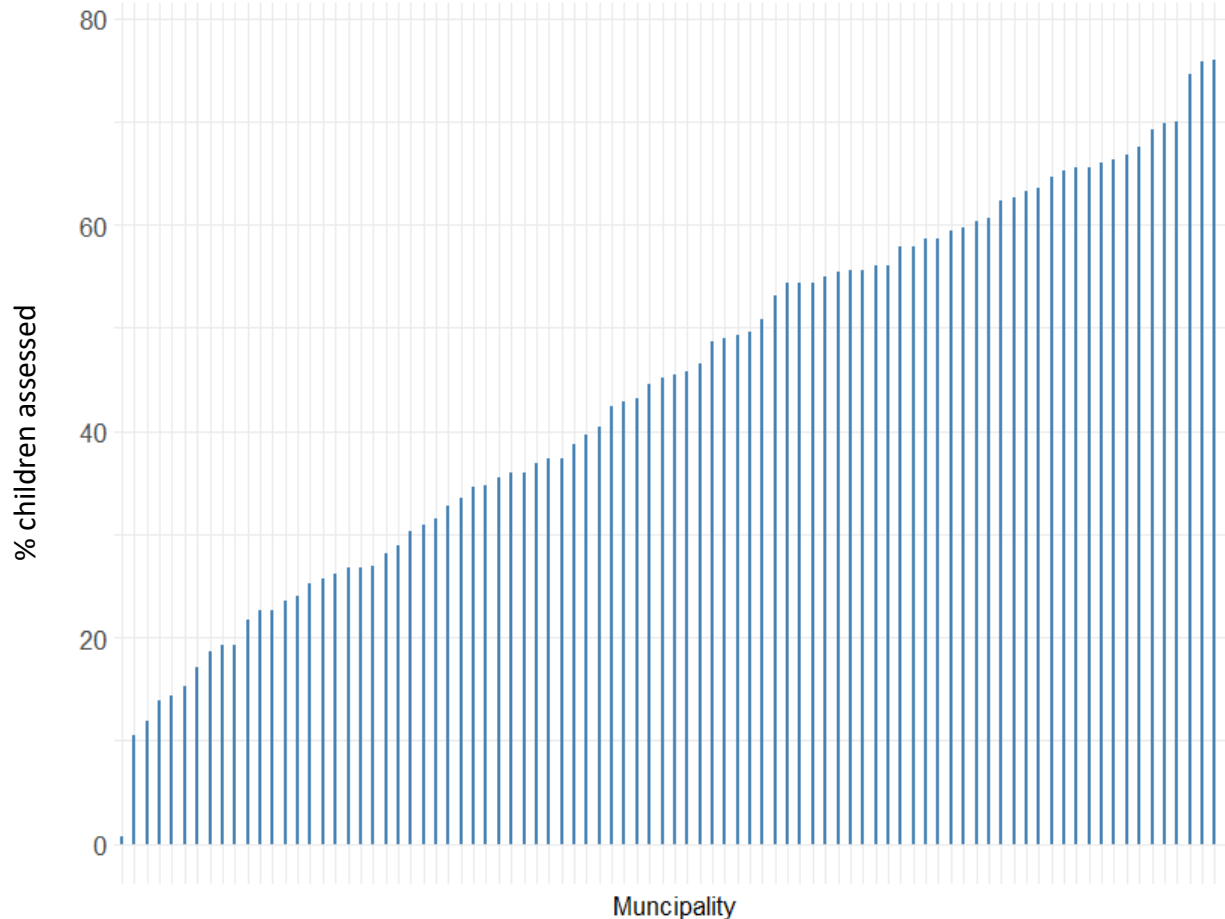


## Support educational language practice

No evidence-based  
program offered

# How is the program implemented?

## (1) How many children do municipalities assess?

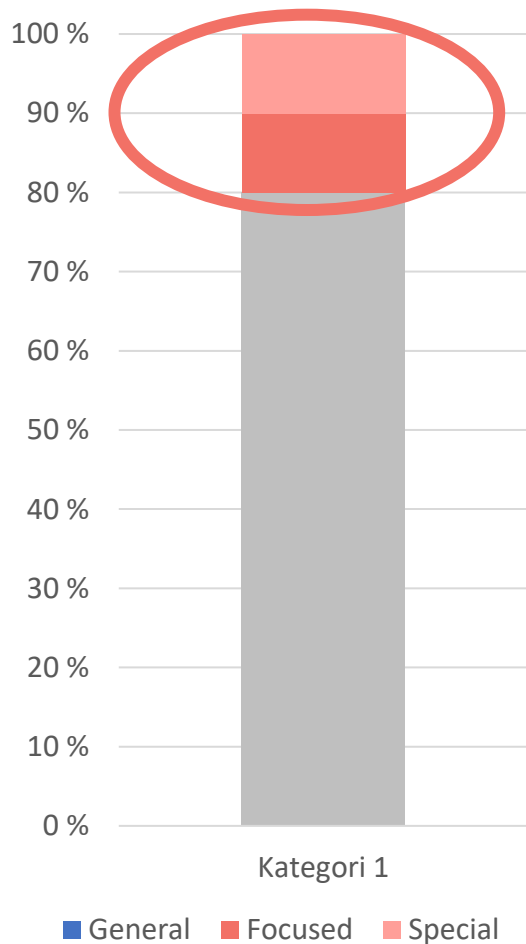


### Exploratory analyses part of larger study

- Register data from STIL (2019-2022)  
– no additional information
- 119.149 assessments based on *Language assessment 3-6* of 2;10-3;6-year-old children
- 89 municipalities (90 %)
- Municipality average across years (2-4 years)
- Large variation across municipality (<10-100 %)
- Positive trend: 60 % assess more than 50 %
- No clear relation to municipal demographics

# How is the program implemented?

## (2) How successful are municipalities in identifying children <p15?



20 % assessed →

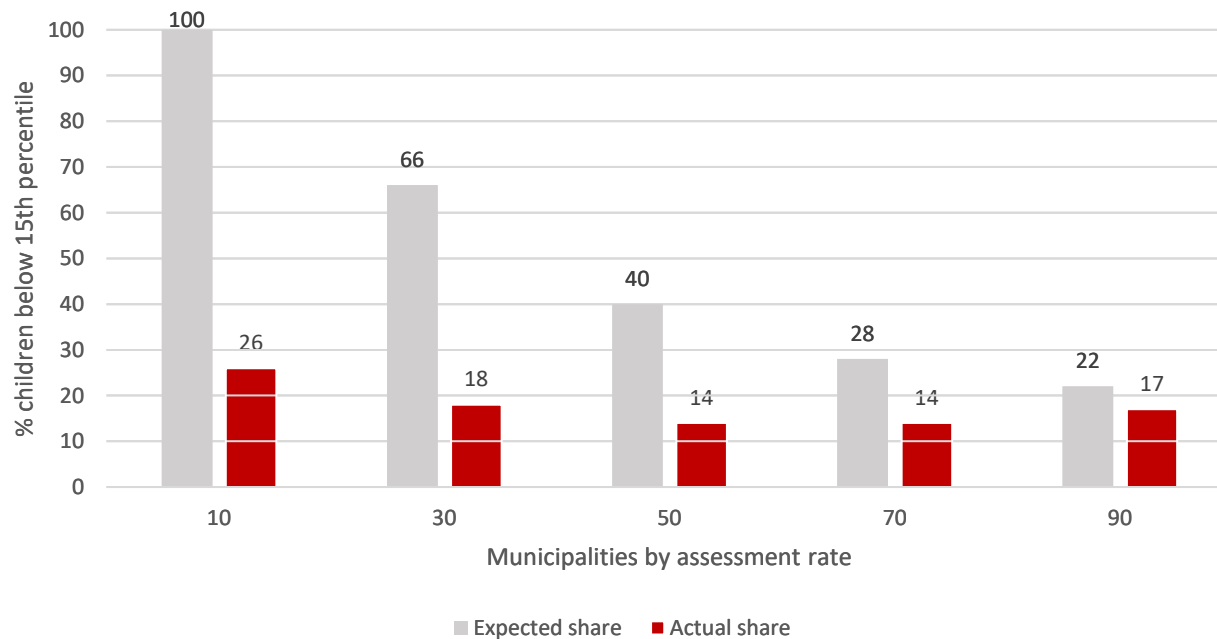
All children should be <p15  
(special or focused  
intervention profile)

- One summary score (<p15)
- 20 % of children <p15 (immigrants)
- **% identified children compared to norms in LA 3-6 to estimate if all children with low language skills (<p 15) are identified**
- The fewer children assessed, the higher % of children should be <p15 (= language delay)

# How is the program implemented?

## (2) How successful are municipalities in identifying children <p15?

Share of children <p15 identified by % of children assessed, expected (grey) vs. identified (red)



- Divided municipalities in five bins depending on % assessed children
- Expected % of identified children depending on % assessed children vs. identified
- Only assessment of all children result in similar % of identified children
- Currently many children with low language skills may not be identified
- Substantial differences across municipalities in the support children receive
- Other explanations *but* we lack information

# How is the program implemented?

## (3) Are the paired interventions effective?

- No available studies of the quantity and quality of paired language interventions!
- Higher assessment rates at age 3 predict fewer children with low language in Grade 0 (Indenrigs- og Boligministeriets Benchmarkingenhed, 2022)
- Higher quality of language environment in ECE settings linked to higher child language? (Slot et al., 2018)
- Recently considerable concerns about the quality of ECE settings (Lindeberg et al., 2025)



# Learning environments in ECE settings can be improved

## *We learn together*

Core elements and professional judgement to support **active playful learning** throughout the day

Sequence and scope in language, math, executive functions and social-emotional skills



Tools to support linguistic, conceptual and interactive quality



Open educational framework with teacher discretion



Practice reflection based on implementation notes and children's progression



- **Low-cost systematic approach** to enrich learning environment
- **Tested in three RCT studies** (Bleses et al., 2020; 2021; 2025)
- **Positive outcomes for language, math, and social skills**, regardless of age, gender, skill level, and parental background
- The higher the participation, the larger the outcome.
- High buy-in from staff, children, and parents
- Effects are fully or partially sustained in preschool and school (Bleses et al., 2024; Gensowski et al., 2024)
- Available for municipalities in partnership

Learn more from Esbjerg later

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**TrygFonden**



# What can we learn from Denmark?

## Early days as more knowledge is needed!

- + ECE setting, in principle, ideal for high reach and broader language support
- + Many municipalities find the program useful as they assess most children
- Only assessing at-risk children presumably result in under-identification
- Low quality of ECE learning environment a concern for paired interventions

**The national assessment program could be more successful in mitigating the long-term negative outcomes of early language delay across municipalities by**

- **increasing reach through mandatory assessing all 3-year-olds** (Reform Commission, 2023) with an upgraded instrument to reduce measurement errors
- **improving the quality of the paired interventions** (learning environment) though implementing low-cost approaches with documented language effects





**Thank you for the attention**

**ALTO THANKS TO**

**Countless colleagues**

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**Municipalities, educational staff, children and their parents**