For a department director at city hall, it can seem quite surprising that changes in public service delivery can come in suitcases. However, this is exactly what has happened in Aarhus, Denmark, where a research project on public language support in preschools has led to important changes.

The Department for Children and Young People in the city of Aarhus puts a lot of emphasis on giving all children equal possibilities in life. A differentiated public language support program for immigrant children in the public preschools is an important key to equal opportunity.

Children whose second language is Danish do not have the same linguistic starting point as children for whom Danish is the first language when entering school at the age of six. Inadequate proficiency in Danish hinders learning for many impoverished immigrant children in Aarhus, thereby placing them at serious risk for substandard future academic achievement.

This raises a very important question concerning public administration and public service: are there some public service delivery systems that could ensure better second-language development for children and a positive coproduction effect when the consumer producers (here, immigrant parents) have low socio-economic status (SES) and little or no knowledge of the second language?

The coproduction experiment conducted by Morten Jakobsen and Simon Calmar Andersen, described in “Coproduction and Equity in Public Service Delivery,” gives a positive answer to this question. And the answer comes in the form of suitcases.

Jakobsen and Andersen show that supplying immigrant parents with a suitcase containing children’s books, games, and a tutorial DVD about language development techniques has a remarkably positive effect on language proficiency for immigrant preschool children with the lowest SES background. The suitcase intervention reduces the proportion of children requiring special language support classes when starting school.

From a municipal point of view, Jakobsen and Andersen’s results are economically, linguistically, and socially of great interest.

- The results show that more effective public language support in preschool is in fact possible through targeted and economically manageable coproduction programs.
- The results also show that all parents can and will support their children's language development if given adequate tools.
- Finally, Jakobsen and Andersen’s study underlines that social educators at public preschools play a crucial role in ensuring the knowledge needed in order for parents to create a positive language environment at home.

Based on the Jakobsen and Andersen results, important changes in the public language support program for preschool children in the city of Aarhus have been implemented.

In order to ensure high second-language proficiency and an optimal language environment in the home at the earliest age possible, the original suitcase intervention (five to six years of age) has been further developed and adapted to immigrant parents with children up to three years old. Over the next five years, more than 1,000 of these suitcases are expected to be provided to immigrant families.

These new suitcases will be handed over to the parents by health visitors or language consultants in the homes, and guidance on the practical use of the content in relation to language development is given in the home. In this way, public language support has taken on a new physical platform, moving from the public preschool to the private homes of the children.
We expect this to entail an even more positive coproduction effect from the original suitcase intervention.

The original suitcases from the Jakobsen and Andersen study have been distributed among the public preschools in Aarhus. The suitcases are used in both the language support activities at the preschools and as a linguistic bridging tool between preschool and the homes of the immigrant children.

Social educators at the public preschools in Aarhus receive visits from public language consultants. The public language consultants give guidance to the social educators on how to improve the language environment in relation to the specific linguistic needs of immigrant children and how to continuously improve cooperation with the parents. Before the Jakobsen and Andersen results came out, each preschool received one yearly visit from a public language consultant. The results from the suitcase coproduction study clearly underline the importance of more targeted and more frequent visits at the preschools in order to give social educators the best pedagogical grounds for their parental guidance. Therefore, the number of visits from public language consultants has been doubled. Further, social educators are offered different courses focusing on giving them the skills needed to ensure better cooperation with and linguistic guidance of parents.

The Jakobsen and Andersen study has thus led to many changes in the preschool language support program in Aarhus—changes that are expected to give rise to a higher Danish proficiency level for the immigrant children of Aarhus when starting school, and changes that are expected to lead to future equality in educational possibilities and high academic achievements for all children living in Aarhus.

Without doubt, evidence-based changes emerging from studies based on partnerships between public administrators and social scientists will surface in many more public administration initiatives in Aarhus in the years to come.