

# A Study on the Strategies of Universality and Equality in Reading Promotion of Nordic Public Libraries<sup>\*</sup>

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Under the background of accelerated global cultural exchange and information dissemination, reading has become a crucial component of public cultural services. Public libraries in Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland) stand out by adhering to the core philosophy of “universal sharing and equal reading”, integrating reading promotion into national strategies, and constructing extensive service networks through sound legal guarantees and adequate financial support. This study identifies four key strategies for universality and equality in Nordic public libraries: covering all age groups, eliminating group differences, integrating digital and physical resources, and ensuring the right to read through legislative, financial, and other institutional support. These provide a reference for global public cultural services.

*Keywords:* Nordic public libraries, reading promotion, universality, equality

## Introduction

With the increasing frequency of global cultural exchange and the continuous acceleration of information dissemination speed, different cultures collide and blend with each other. Reading, as the core path for cultural inheritance and the improvement of citizen’s literacy, has become an important aspect of public cultural services in various countries. Public libraries, as the centralized gathering places of public reading resources and the main venues for reading activities, play an important role in promoting knowledge dissemination, enhancing citizens’ qualities, and driving social development.

From a global perspective, the public library systems of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland) have stood out due to their unique advantages. The Nordic countries have always adhered to the core concept of “universal sharing and reading equality”, deeply integrating the construction of public libraries into the national development strategy. Through sound legal guarantees and sufficient financial support, a library service network with wide coverage and complete functions has been constructed. An in-depth exploration of the strategies of universality and equality practiced by Nordic public libraries, and an analysis of the operational mechanisms and practical paths behind them, can not only provide new ideas for the innovative development of global public cultural services, but also bring extremely valuable references and lessons for promoting the fairness and inclusiveness of the reading cause.

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### **Full-Life-Cycle Reading Support for All Ages**

In the Nordic region, public libraries implement the concepts of universality and equality throughout all age groups. They design differentiated service strategies according to the cognitive characteristics and social roles of different life stages, and optimize resource allocation through long-term institutional and financial support, ensuring that reading promotion spans the entire life cycle.

For instance, many Nordic libraries have established specialized positions for children and adolescents to ensure their reading rights and experiences. In Sweden, from 2015 to 2022, there were 2,000 to 3,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff dedicated to serving children and adolescents, with the number remaining relatively stable—even showing a gradual increase during the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates that youth reading is regarded as a national strategic investment, with professional teams guaranteeing service quality.<sup>1</sup>

Under the condition of ensuring the number of service personnel, the Nordic public libraries have carried out comprehensive and diverse reading promotion activities for children and teenagers, ensuring that children of different ages and with different needs can benefit from reading. These activities are in a leading position globally both in quantity and quality.

Figures show that between 2015 and 2022, Swedish libraries conducted an average of 50,000 library consultation and information search activities, over 40,000 reading lectures, and over 30,000 library orientation activities for student groups each year. These activities integrate library education into the school education system, demonstrating the organization and operation of libraries to individual or group students and teaching them how to review, retrieve, and reference materials, cultivating “lifelong readers” from childhood.<sup>2</sup>

As shown in the figures, youth activities consistently accounted for more than 60% of total activities. Even during the pandemic from 2020 to 2021, this proportion did not decline significantly. Libraries maintained the proportion of teenagers’ participation in reading through other forms of activities such as virtual story-telling sessions and e-book recommendations, demonstrating the library’s firm attitude to conduct activities for teenagers and children.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, in Sweden, public libraries also collaborate with children’s health centers to introduce the importance of reading to parents from the moment children are born, forming a “hospital-library-parent collaborative model” (Dong & Gong, 2014, p. 21), making libraries the bases for parents’ education. For older children and teenagers, libraries cooperate with schools and teachers to provide abundant reading resources. They also carry out reading guidance and writing courses through reading groups, discussion groups, etc., to help children master reading skills and stimulate their interest in reading. Finland has launched the “Joy of Reading Program”, aiming to help teenagers enjoy reading. The Ministry of Education of Finland places public libraries at the core of the cultivation of reading literacy, gives full play to the advantages of the construction and guarantee of literature resources for minors in the Finnish public cultural system, and has formed a reading literacy cultivation model of “library follow up—library education—reading content construction—series reading course construction—regional linkage” (Yang, 2021, p. 54). Denmark has implemented a “Book-Start Program” to provide families with “reading starter kits” aiming to encourage parents and children to share books and inspire the joy and benefits of reading.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kb.se/>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.kb.se/>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kb.se/>.

For the elderly, Nordic countries also actively implement targeted reading promotion activities. Many studies have shown that reading has a significant effect on improving the cognitive function and quality of life of the elderly. Therefore, libraries in Nordic countries pay great attention to the reading habits and needs of the elderly. For instance, the public library on the Swedish island of Gotland believes that “the atmosphere inside the library is no less important than books”, so it invited artists to collaborate with nursing homes to build a library and design a “nostalgic theme space” to display some past newspapers, music, books, etc., providing the elderly with a more suitable reading space.

Some libraries in Denmark have collaborated with medical institutions and community associations to enable medical staff to understand the reading status of the elderly, recommend relevant nutrition and health books based on the physical conditions of the elderly, and test the effectiveness of health management through borrowing frequency to improve the health level of the elderly.

The rich and diverse reading activities carried out for the elderly have systematically improved the reading quality of the elderly group through the dual paths of intergenerational interaction and community connection. For instance, the Finnish library has launched reading workshops for young and elderly people. On one hand, this has reduced the sense of loneliness among the elderly; on the other hand, it has also cultivated young people’s awareness of old age. The Norwegian Library held a reading club with a variety of themes, gathering elderly people with common hobbies or experiences to reconstruct the connection between personal experiences and collective memories through reading. The Bergen Library in Norway has set up a “Coffee Reading Corner”, where the elderly can read and participate in the “Newspaper Summary Sharing Session” at the same time. Librarians summarize the key points of the day’s news in advance. The Tampere Library in Finland is holding the “New Reading of Old Books” exhibition, where old books are reorganized and re-displayed, etc. These activities transform elderly reading from a single act of knowledge acquisition into a comprehensive social solution of emotional support and cognitive maintenance, ultimately achieving a dual improvement in reading quality and quality of life.

### **The Guarantee for Equality to Eliminate Group Differences**

From a spatial dimension, the universality and equality of reading promotion in Nordic public libraries are reflected in their multi-level service network coverage. The Danish public library has constructed a “1.5-kilometer service circle”, with most readers living within 1.5 kilometers of a library, ensuring convenient access. For remote rural areas, libraries are equipped with mobile library buses that regularly deliver books, covering almost all villages and achieving balanced urban-rural service networks.<sup>4</sup>

For people with disabilities, Nordic public libraries have also taken a series of measures to ensure fair and equal reading rights. Marie Oestergaard, Director of the Aarhus Public Library in Denmark, stated: “Libraries are for everyone and we know that there are different barriers in using libraries that we need to break down.” (Tu & Oestergaard, 2021, p. 13). Therefore, Nordic libraries comprehensively consider the needs of special groups from architectural facilities to service processes, equally guaranteeing reading opportunities for different populations.

For instance, Sweden has established a dedicated library for audio books and Braille, TPB (The Swedish Library of Talking Book and Braille), which collaborates with public libraries to provide convenient reading

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.statbank.dk/>.

conditions for disabled children and teenagers. As a national library for audio books and Braille, TPB is networked with numerous public libraries, offering a wide range of audio books and Braille books, covering almost all visually impaired people in Sweden. The Apple Library in Gothenburg uses a digital accessibility information system to provide special audio books for children and teenagers with learning disabilities, synchronizing audio books with text highlighting and tactile feedback services to help them improve their reading ability. For visually impaired children, tactile picture books suitable for Braille reading are provided to cultivate their sense of direction. For deaf and mute children, libraries offer sign language story video discs and support them in shooting sign language videos on the online children's library website, forming a closed loop of reading, creation, and social interaction. In addition, libraries also provide barrier-free facilities and efficient and convenient book borrowing services for physically disabled children and teenagers. Besides hardware facilities, Nordic libraries also focus on improving service processes (Dong & Gong, 2014, p. 21). Many libraries offer door-to-door borrowing services for people with disabilities. Staff members, after professional training, can understand the reading needs of people with disabilities and provide them with reading services attentively and patiently, ensuring that special groups can also enjoy reading.

Beyond hardware facilities, Nordic libraries also focus on improving service processes. Many libraries provide home delivery services for individuals with disabilities. Staff undergo professional training to understand the reading needs of people with disabilities, offering thoughtful and patient assistance to ensure that special groups can also enjoy the pleasures of reading.

### **Deep Integration of Digital and Physical Services**

The deep integration of digital and physical services is also an effort made by Nordic public libraries to achieve equality and universality in reading. By actively promoting the digitalization of their collections, Nordic public libraries have established a comprehensive and multi-level reading service system for all. Through enriching online resource platforms, conducting innovative virtual and physical reading activities, and optimizing services based on data analysis, Nordic libraries have built a knowledge service system that is accessible to all. Through resource integration, technological innovation, and precise services, they have systematically broken down barriers to knowledge acquisition and achieved equality in reading rights.

In terms of resource digitalization, many Nordic countries have promoted the construction of digital resources covering the entire population through national strategies. Libraries in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and other countries have digitized many books and periodicals, developing vast digital book resource libraries. Through the libraries' digital platforms, readers of all types can search for and borrow e-books anytime and anywhere, and access various academic resources and online courses, greatly enriching the reading choices of the public. The National Library of Norway has carried out large-scale digitalization projects of cultural heritage, converting numerous ancient books, newspapers, and audio-visual materials into digital formats, allowing the public to access the country's precious cultural resources anytime and anywhere. Public libraries in Sweden include numerous academic and professional databases, as well as online courses and learning resources, which can meet the needs of people with different demands. Finland's "E-library" launched in 2024 is even more groundbreaking. This project integrates fragmented services across the country, upgrading resources originally scattered in 40 e-book collections and covering only half of the population into a unified platform with 29 alliances and over 7,000 multilingual books, achieving coverage of digital magazine resources for 97% of the

population (“Finnish E-library improved equal access to library services”, 2025) and fundamentally eliminating regional resource disparities.

In terms of service model innovation, Nordic libraries have achieved seamless integration of digitalization and physical services through technological means and service design. On the one hand, they have created a unified user platform that integrates physical borrowing, digital resource access, and participation in activities with a single account, lowering the usage threshold. On the other hand, they have embedded digital interactive elements in physical spaces, such as QR code navigation and digital screen recommendations, allowing readers to easily access related digital resources. Denmark has established a Citizen Innovation Center (CIC), inviting the public to participate in the design of public digital services, enhancing users’ sense of identity and participation in digital projects (“Libraries can help to increase public participation in digital welfare solutions”, 2022). At the same time, Nordic libraries have expanded their service radius through integrated online and offline reading promotion activities, such as live-streamed reading sessions in Swedish libraries, which retain the immersive experience of physical activities while breaking spatial limitations, allowing readers from different regions and with different mobility to participate.

In the field of precise services, Nordic libraries use data analysis to achieve universal service adaptation. The National Library of Norway uses multi-dimensional data such as borrowing history and search behavior to precisely recommend books and activities to readers and dynamically optimize the collection structure, focusing on purchasing books in popular fields such as environmental protection and mental health to improve resource utilization. Swedish libraries customize reading plans for different age and reading level groups, designing fun reading activities for teenagers and providing in-depth reading guidance for adult readers to ensure service coverage for all age groups.

The practices of Nordic public libraries prove that digitalization is not only a technological innovation but also a social project to achieve knowledge equity. By integrating resources to break down geographical and group restrictions, eliminating usage barriers through technological integration, and achieving service adaptation through data-driven approaches, Nordic libraries have built a non-discriminatory, all-age, and precise universal service system, providing a replicable innovative model for libraries worldwide to promote reading equality. In the future, with technological iterations, it is expected to continue leading the transformation of library service models in the exploration of balancing service inclusiveness and personalization.

### **Institutional Innovations in Universal Service Models**

The governments of Nordic countries have provided comprehensive support for public libraries through a series of policy measures such as legislation, financial support, and policy innovation, ensuring the universality and equality of public libraries and systematically converting the right to read into actual social welfare and even national strategic infrastructure. In terms of legislative protection, the Library Law of each country stipulates the openness of public libraries in legal form, eliminating regional barriers in library services at the institutional level, regarding the right to read as a basic cultural right of citizens, enabling residents in rural and remote areas as well as those in cities to equally access public cultural resources, and achieving universal service.

At the same time, local governments incorporate library operation funds into the fiscal budget to ensure the continuity and equality of services. The Nordic governments implement special tax reduction policies for libraries, significantly reducing the procurement, maintenance, and operation costs of libraries. The reduced taxes are directed towards expanding library book resources, developing digital resource libraries, conducting universal

reading activities, and improving spatial facilities. In addition, the Nordic governments allocate large amounts of foundation every year, widely applied to various aspects of libraries, including updating collection resources, purchasing new books, upgrading network service systems, improving borrowing experiences, and arranging reading spaces, comprehensively enhancing readers' reading experience and borrowing convenience.

For example, the Danish Electronic Document and Data Infrastructure Project (DEFF) originated in 1998 and was initially a five-year national plan aimed at facilitating scholars and students in universities and research institutions to access electronic resources more conveniently. The initial budget reached 200 million Danish kroner, mainly used for upgrading local library systems, purchasing electronic resource licenses, and digitizing traditional collections. At the same time, through centralized purchasing of electronic journals and database licenses, the project established a digital resource access network covering universities. In 2003, due to the significant achievements of the project in digital transformation, DEFF became a national permanent institution and was included in the national budget. The project's focus shifted from infrastructure upgrading to supporting the entire research process, including research output management, data and technology integration, and cross-disciplinary cooperation expansion. The development of DEFF reflects the transformation from "resource provider" to "knowledge management hub". This shift is not only an epitome of the modernization of Nordic libraries but also demonstrates how national systems can, through systematic planning, transform traditional academic infrastructure into a universal digital ecosystem (Danish Library Agency, Denmark's Electronic Research Library).

### Conclusion

Nordic public libraries have transformed the concept of "universal reading and equal sharing" into the social engineering practice through multi-strategies such as full-age service design, spatial equity guarantees, digital technology integration, and institutional innovations, systematically eliminating reading barriers caused by regional and group differences. From the collaborative chain between Swedish child health centers and libraries to the almost universal digital coverage of Finland's E-library; from Denmark's legislative guarantee of reading rights to data-optimized analysis services, the Nordic model proves that the realization of reading equality requires the synergistic effect of technology, space, and system. This approach of integrating reading rights into national strategic infrastructure provides important references for the world to break through resource constraints and promote the equalization of public cultural services. In the future, with the development of artificial intelligence and Internet of Things technologies, Nordic libraries' exploration of equality and universality in reading promotion will lead to more profound changes. Their experience also enlightens us that the essence of reading promotion is a cultural practice of social equity, and only by deeply combining technological innovation, institutional design, and humanistic care can we truly achieve the civilized vision of "equality for all in reading".

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