

Embedded Librarianship for Enhancing Information Literacy in Zimbabwean Theological Institutions

MUNYARADZI DECIDE MAGAZENI AND VIMBAI SUPERIOR GOREDEMA

Theological institutions in Zimbabwe face significant resource limitations, systemic barriers, and infrastructural underdevelopment, which restrict their efforts to provide quality education (Baloyi 2024). As a result, many continue to rely on conventional, teacher-centered methods that do not promote independent learning and development of information literacy (IL). Although IL is acknowledged globally as a vital academic competency, structured programs to teach it remain largely absent in Zimbabwean theological colleges. This reflects broader trends across sub-Saharan Africa, where technological limitations and weak policy frameworks hinder educational innovation.¹

Although librarians in these institutions acquire new competencies, their contributions are often constrained by a lack of institutional recognition and support. To bridge this gap, comprehensive reforms are necessary to embed librarianship within the teaching

and learning processes of theological institutions. This chapter analyses the international experience of embedded librarianship and its contribution to strengthening student engagement, research competency, and curriculum relevance. Theological institutions in Zimbabwe can draw on these global best practices in their local adaptations. Theoretical discussion on embedded librarianship is followed by empirical research conducted in Zimbabwean theological schools, offering insights into how embedded librarianship can be effectively implemented in this educational context.

Collaboration between Librarians and Faculty

Research indicates that embedded librarianship thrives when librarians and faculty collaborate, grounded in mutual respect and shared goals, an approach that faculty perceive as positively influencing student learning (Spangler and Casper 2023). Farrell and Badke (2015) also emphasize the necessity of cross-disciplinary trust and shared pedagogical responsibility to sustain embedded practices. In theological institutions, this collaboration can manifest through sermon-writing workshops,² exegetical research sessions, or thesis development seminars where librarians contribute to research skill-building. Treating IL as an ad hoc, stand-alone workshop or leaving it entirely to student discretion, as is often done in theological colleges, limits students' ability to conduct rigorous, critical theological research, especially in ministry preparation contexts. Farrell and Badke argue that the systemic integration of IL into discipline-specific curricula ensures students not only learn how to find sources but also develop scholarly habits of mind suited to their field.

Tewell (2018) highlights that when librarians are viewed as co-educators, they can effectively influence curriculum design and foster critical engagement with information across theological disciplines. This way, librarians become agents of pedagogical change, playing a transformative role by challenging dominant narratives and encouraging students to develop reflective and research skills. In theological education, where doctrinal authority and scriptural interpretation are central, embedding librarians into teaching teams creates opportunities to introduce Zimbabwean students to diverse interpretive traditions and scholarly inquiry, fostering deeper engagement with

theological texts and the application of critical information frameworks to faith-based study.

Farrell and Badke (2015) argue that librarians can reshape pedagogical approaches by integrating disciplinary literacy with academic inquiry, particularly in fields that rely heavily on tradition. Similarly, Abrizah et al. (2016) support the strategic placement of librarians within classroom contexts to foster intellectual independence and research competency. In spiritually oriented settings, librarians play a unique role in bridging academic rigor and affective engagement by supporting students' search for meaning and fostering ethical, critical interaction with information, as well as integrating emotional insight into instructional practice.

Institutional Support and Policy Development

For embedded librarianship to flourish in Zimbabwean theological colleges, sustained institutional support and enabling policies are essential. Abrizah et al. (2016) stress the need for structured embedded librarianship programs that include clear job descriptions, continuous training, and strategic alignment with institutional goals. Without such frameworks, even well-intentioned efforts risk becoming unsustainable or marginalized. In the Zimbabwean theological education context, the absence of formalized support structures often hinders librarians from participating fully in academic development, despite their growing expertise and willingness to contribute. Forming strategic partnerships with organizations such as the Association of Theological Education in Zimbabwe (ACTEZ) and the Zimbabwe Library Association to codevelop policies and training models will strengthen individual efforts.

Embedded librarianship presents a transformative opportunity for theological institutions in Zimbabwe to enhance the depth, relevance, and sustainability of IL instruction. By moving librarians into active pedagogical roles, theological colleges can cultivate student competencies in academic research, ethical information use, and theological inquiry. Tewell (2018) emphasizes that such integration not only enhances research skills but also promotes critical thinking and democratic engagement skills, which are vital for theological students who will assume roles as thought leaders and community influencers. For theological institutions in Zimbabwe, adopting a

curriculum-integrated, librarian-embedded model represents not only a pedagogical upgrade but also a strategic investment in the academic formation of future religious leaders.

Empirical Research

This study used a qualitative interpretivist research approach to investigate how embedded librarianship can enhance IL services in Zimbabwean theological institutions. It focused on capturing the nuanced experiences and perspectives of librarians, faculty, and students through semi-structured online interviews and focus group discussions involving participants from ACTEZ-affiliated institutions. A purposive sampling method ensured the selection of individuals with relevant insights into library and academic support. Overall, the explorative methodology aimed to generate practical insights to inform policy, curriculum development, and librarian training in theological education contexts.

Importance of Faculty-Librarian Collaboration

The study found that meaningful collaboration between librarians and faculty is critical for the success of embedded librarianship in theological institutions to enable the integration of IL instruction into academic programs. However, while faculty acknowledged the helpfulness of librarians, they remained uncertain about librarians' instructional qualifications, revealing ambiguity concerning the pedagogical role of librarians. Fleming-May and Douglass (2014) argue that this role ambiguity stems from a lack of organizational clarity, as librarians are often seen as service providers rather than academic partners. This leads to underutilization of librarians in curriculum delivery and strategic academic planning. Appleton (2021) advocates for a redefinition of the librarian's academic identity in interdisciplinary or spiritually oriented environments. Addressing role ambiguity through policy and awareness campaigns could empower librarians' full participation in instructional ecosystems.

Moreover, librarians reported being included in teaching roles based on prior relationships or at the discretion of faculty. One

participant stated, “Sometimes we are invited into classes because we have a good rapport with a lecturer, but this is not systematized,” which fosters dependency on interpersonal dynamics. Farrell and Badke (2015) argue that systemic, discipline-specific integration is crucial to establishing long-term instructional partnerships. Hope and Peterson (2002) also argue that embedded librarianship flourishes when there is a shared institutional vision that recognizes librarians as co-educators. Similarly, Withorn et al. (2021) show that the absence of formal frameworks in theological institutions often leads to inconsistent practices, limiting the role of librarians in pedagogical innovation. Institutional support is, therefore, essential to embed librarianship as an academic practice rather than a supplementary service.³ Theological accrediting bodies, such as ACTEZ, could promote best practices by issuing guidelines for embedded librarianship. These insights underscore the importance of theological institutions adopting formalized and strategically aligned collaborative models, thereby preventing the discontinuation of successful collaborations. Also, performance evaluation systems should reward faculty-librarian partnerships as part of teaching excellence to help transform informal collaboration into a stable academic norm.

Embedded Librarians as Agents of Pedagogical Change

As librarians consistently positioned themselves as facilitators of critical and theological engagement, the study revealed the need to redefine their roles. They reported involvement in classroom activities, particularly supporting exegetical assignments by teaching students to interrogate sources, assess authorial intent, and differentiate between doctrinal and academic interpretations. One librarian shared, “Our students often quote sources uncritically. We teach them how to question what they read, even sacred texts.” This aligns with Tewell (2018), who argues that librarians promote critical literacy and intellectual autonomy, challenging students to think deeply and reflectively. This evolving role marks a significant shift in the way librarians contribute to theological scholarship.

Faculty participants also supported the idea that librarian-facilitated sessions encouraged students to engage more rigorously with

theological literature, promoting critical IL. These sessions allowed students to explore alternative viewpoints, thereby enhancing their critical writing and academic reasoning skills. Tewell (2018) emphasizes that embedded librarianship can serve as a counterbalance to surface-level learning by encouraging deeper investigation of complex texts. Such engagement is crucial in theology, where information processing involves not only fact-finding but also interpretation and ethical reflection.

Librarians indicated their critical role in teaching ethical and theological information practices, helping students understand source credibility, citation ethics, and interpretive bias, thereby reinforcing both academic integrity and theological depth. Noted again was that students often struggle to differentiate devotional, polemical, and scholarly sources. This finding aligns with Elmborg's (2006) concept of critical IL as a means to challenge epistemological norms while fostering inclusive academic conversations. In this sense, librarians are not neutral facilitators, but active shapers of academic and theological integrity who strengthen students' ability to think theologically, ethically, and critically across multiple frameworks.

Institutional Support and Policy-Driven Reform

Participants emphasized the urgent need for institutional policies that support embedded librarianship as a formal pedagogical strategy, evidenced by librarians across institutions reporting limited structural support. One librarian shared, "We do all this on top of our normal duties. There is no institutional framework for teaching roles," underscoring the burden of dual responsibilities without institutional compensation or support. This aligns with findings that effective embedded librarianship hinges on strong administrative legitimacy, particularly in resource-constrained settings where the absence of financial and institutional support significantly undermines its viability (Munshi et al. 2024). Suggestions provided by respondents included embedding librarianship into institutional strategic plans, creating dedicated instructional roles, and incorporating teaching responsibilities into performance appraisals. Policy frameworks could be informed by partnerships between theological bodies, such as ACTEZ, and professional library associations.

Without policy alignment, embedded librarianship remains vulnerable to leadership changes and institutional inertia.

Another consistent finding was the lack of structured professional development for librarians in instructional roles. Participants expressed a desire for pedagogical training, classroom engagement strategies, and curriculum design skills for effective embedded practice. Saunders (2015) found that librarians often feel underprepared for teaching roles due to limited exposure to educational theory or teaching methodologies during their professional training. Participants proposed capacity-building workshops jointly facilitated by ACTEZ and the Zimbabwe Library Association, to not only upskill librarians but also signal institutional investment in their evolving academic roles. Participants further noted that in institutions where leadership was receptive, librarians were more involved in teaching and policy dialogue.⁴ This echoes Appleton (2021), who contends that institutional culture transformation, not just librarian enthusiasm and pedagogical development, is required to advance embedded practice. Therefore, embedded librarianship relies significantly on the support of institutional leaders to cocreate models that align librarianship with the goals of theological education.

Curriculum Integration: Current Gaps and Future Potential

The findings revealed that significant gaps persist in the integration of IL into theological curricula across Zimbabwean institutions. Many institutions continue to treat IL as peripheral, ad hoc, or optional workshops.⁵ One student noted, “We only go to the library when we need books; no one teaches us how to research.” This causes inconsistent research and writing competencies among students. Lincoln (2013) affirms that structured, ongoing IL training strengthens the sermon preparation and theological engagement skills that are foundational to ministry. When these competencies are absent or inconsistently applied, students struggle to critically engage with theological texts. Theological institutions’ goals of producing thoughtful graduates are undermined. Therefore, the most effective way to close this literacy gap is to embed librarians directly into curriculum development and course design processes.

Librarians also shared that early involvement in syllabus development helps them align instruction with learning objectives and assignments. This aligns with Abrizah et al. (2016), who advocate for curriculum-aligned literacy instruction. When IL is integrated across multiple levels, such as introductory courses, fieldwork, and thesis preparation, students internalize skills as part of their academic identity. Librarians expressed that although some classroom invitations led to meaningful impact, the lack of sustained curricular integration limited long-term learning outcomes. The sporadic nature of these sessions creates a perception that IL is auxiliary rather than essential. Participants suggested the development of cross-departmental committees, curriculum integration policies, and librarian-faculty teaching teams through administrative commitment, strategic policy formulation, and capacity building among librarians. For theological institutions in Zimbabwe, the transition from workshop-based to embedded literacy instruction would represent not only an academic enhancement but also a commitment to holistic, mission-driven education through embedded librarianship.

Conclusion

This study highlights the transformative potential of embedded librarianship in enhancing IL within Zimbabwean theological institutions. Insights from librarians, faculty, and students revealed four key themes: collaboration with faculty, pedagogical integration, institutional support, and inclusion of IL into the curriculum. Librarians are increasingly recognized as co-educators who contribute meaningfully to theological inquiry, although they often face barriers such as limited support and unclear roles. Despite these challenges, enthusiasm is strong among librarians and faculty for deeper integration of library services. The study recommends that institutions and bodies, such as ACTEZ, formally recognize librarians as academic partners. Ultimately, embedded librarianship represents a pedagogical shift that supports the mission of theological institutions by cultivating reflective, research-literate graduates.

Recommendations to Theological Institutions

- Formalize the role of librarians as academic staff by including them in curriculum development, teaching teams, and academic committees.
- Develop institutional policies that support embedded librarianship as a strategic tool for academic and spiritual formation.
- Invest in professional development programs that equip librarians with instructional and pedagogical competencies aligned with theological education.
- Foster partnerships with national bodies such as ACTEZ and the Zimbabwe Library Association to codevelop guidelines, training, and assessment tools for embedded literacy instruction.

Recommendations to Librarians

- Advocate for an instructional role by demonstrating the value of embedded practices through pilot projects, teaching portfolios, and documented student outcomes.
- Seek professional development in pedagogy, curriculum design, and theological literacy to strengthen the integration of librarians into teaching environments.
- Initiate collaborative relationships with faculty by proposing joint teaching sessions, codesigned assessments, and embedded workshops tailored to theological content.

Recommendations to Researchers

- Investigate student outcomes linked to librarian-led instruction in theological education to quantify the academic and cognitive impact of these embedded practices.

- Explore interdisciplinary collaborations between library science and theology faculties to identify models that enhance critical literacy through faith-based curricula.

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Notes

- 1 Vhembo (2019), in a case study of Murray Theological College, notes the lack of financial resources as a challenge to supporting core academic services such as book acquisition, research skill development, and infrastructure upgrades. Such resource scarcity restricts the institution's ability to support theological education effectively.
- 2 Lincoln (2013) highlighted that theological students demonstrate enhanced sermon preparation and scriptural engagement when equipped with structured training in research methodology and source evaluation.
- 3 Abrizah et al (2016) emphasize the importance of defining and formalizing the librarian's instructional role to ensure equitable participation in academic delivery. Without such recognition, the co-educator identity remains informal and inconsistently applied. Therefore, legitimizing this identity and pedagogical potential of embedded librarianship is critical.
- 4 This observation supports Hope and Peterson's (2002) argument that embedded librarianship flourishes in environments where leadership actively champions collaborative instruction models. Where leadership remains indifferent, librarians are relegated to marginal roles regardless of their expertise.
- 5 See also Julien and Barker (2009), who find that one-shot library sessions are insufficient for deep and transferable research skills and fall short of addressing research needs of students.

