

”LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND”

**A study of public libraries and community
work in southern Zimbabwe**

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Abstract

This Master’s thesis concerns librarians and community work in Zimbabwe, and investigates the ways in which librarians may be seen as agents of change. The focus areas are five public and community libraries in Matabeleland, southern Zimbabwe, where the first language is Ndebele. The libraries are situated in the city of Bulawayo, in suburbs, in a town and at rural sites. The study investigates what strategies librarians use to meet and engage community members in different learning activities, for corresponding to information needs of the communities. In the thesis three main challenges are identified for library and community work in the context. These are economy and funds, local language and literature services, and digital access. To enable change through literacy in the communities, the librarians tackle the challenges using strategies such as networking, learning by doing, facilitating activities and access to information, and mobility. The study discusses librarians as facilitators and reflects upon the creation of knowledge by the librarians and the community members, in terms of the Southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Stories of change are seen in the lives of community members, due to library work on literacy and innovation. However, there are still strategies to be developed to be able to overcome digital challenges and to create structures for access to local literature.

Keywords

Agency, Community work, Creativity, Facilitation, Information, Innovation, Knowledge, Language, Literacy, Postcolonialism, Public library, Strategy, Ubuntu, Zimbabwe

The quotation in the title is from Informant 9, working in a community library organisation. The quote is also part of a “mantra” by the current Zimbabwean government, “The second republic”, in national development policy: “...leaving no one and no place behind” (Matema 2023).

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1. Introduction

The library is my second living room. Not because of my current studies in Library and Information Science; it has been like that since childhood. I use the public library for reading, writing, studying, having meetings, joining book talks and writers' talks, making discoveries of new literature, and for finding inspiration. In my work as a culture journalist, project worker and translator, I read and write about the literary scenes in African countries. My curiosity about the use and roles of libraries in cultures where I have learnt to know the literature, has just been growing. Zimbabwe is one of those "cultures": Flourishing literary creativity, in the shadow of the challenges of society. What role do public libraries play there?

In this thesis the libraries in Zimbabwe are in the spotlight, featuring the community work performed by the librarians in mediating literature and information. The field of language and literature in Zimbabwe, has been investigated by the researchers Mavesera and Mutasa, who relate it to socio-cultural development. They state that language is a liberating force, empowering its speakers (2009). "In the information age, literature forms a reliable and consistent reservoir of a people's life experiences, which provides vital information and knowledge from one generation to the next" (ibid., p. 75). This captures my interest in viewing how librarians and communities shape the activities of public libraries in the contemporary Zimbabwean context, once a colony under British rule.

Libraries are centers for literature, but are also centers for the provision of information, to strengthen democratic processes and to overcome information inequalities, Harle and Tarrant urge (2011). And, information is of that great importance, so that in some countries, the governments need to suppress the access to it (ibid.) The researchers exemplify with countries such as Zimbabwe and Burma (2011, p. 122). At the same time, the public library functions as an actor of change in many countries (Horsfall 2023). So, how do the libraries function and how do they reach communities in the Zimbabwean context? In order to face the contemporary challenges, librarians need certain strategies to plan their activities. The challenges that permeate the contemporary Zimbabwean society are complex. To somehow describe them, and the strategies to overcome them, one needs an understanding of how colonialism still prevails today. By studying the libraries in Zimbabwe, many reflections can be made on library work in a Swedish context.

1.2. Aim of the study

I spent two months in different public and community libraries in Zimbabwe, to know more about the practice of library work when it comes to learning and community. The aim of the study is to increase the knowledge on the role of the public library for community change. I want to investigate how librarians work with learning activities in the communities, and what strategies they use for their work. The strategies are also seen as means to overcome the specific challenges in the Zimbabwean context, and thus leading to change. I am using a socio-cultural constructivist learning theory, that implicates that learning is contextually situated. Throughout the study, a postcolonial perspective is applied. The postcolonial perspective questions knowledge inherited from colonialism. In this thesis I discuss and try to understand the value of librarianship and community work in the Zimbabwean society, through relating to *Ubuntu*, a worldview hailing from Africa. Ubuntu philosophy originated about four thousand years ago, was pushed aside during colonialism, but is today applied in different disciplines, for example social work (Mugumbate 2023). It comprises knowledges, values and practices that are relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual (ibid.).

1.2.1. Research questions

I have interviewed librarians in five public and community libraries in southern Zimbabwe about their work (Appendix A and B). I have also taken part in, and observed, a number of learning activities arranged by the libraries. In order to fulfil the aim of the study, I will be guided by, and answer to, the overall research question:

In which ways can librarians be seen as agents of change in Zimbabwe?

In order to answer this question, I will investigate three areas within library and community work. These are the challenges, the learning activities and the strategies. The sub-questions that will lead to answering on the main one, are:

What are the main challenges for public/community library and community work in the context?

How do public and community librarians practice learning activities?

What strategies do librarians use to navigate challenges for community change?

1.3. Disposition

The disposition is as follows: I will start with a background to the specific context of Zimbabwe in general and of the library sector in Zimbabwe in particular. After this, I will outline some of the previous research made on library and community work, agency and change in an African postcolonial setting, as well as relating the themes to other global contexts. I attempt to place this study in line of that research.

The theoretical point of departure is to use a postcolonial perspective, as well as outline the learning theory of socio-cultural constructivism. The study is carried out with qualitative research methods, whereby I will explain which ones, and give perspectives on them all, in the methodological chapter. In the following chapter of result and analysis, I firstly describe the challenges for library and community work. After that I both describe and analyze the learning activities performed and how they are performed. I also identify and analyze the strategies behind them. Finally, the discussion brings together the locally founded worldview of Ubuntu, with perspectives on viewing librarians as facilitators in the creation of knowledge.

1.4. Background to the Zimbabwean context

I will here give a brief description on Zimbabwean society, history and education system. It describes history very briefly, but still intends to serve as an understanding to the particular field within the library landscape in Zimbabwe today, that I attempt to investigate in this thesis.

1.4.1. Contemporary society

Zimbabwe has a history of kingdoms. Great Zimbabwe was one of them in the 13th-15th Century (Southern African History Online 2024). Another one was the kingdom of Ndebele in the southern parts of present-day Zimbabwe (where this study takes place), having its height from the 1840s until the 1890s (ibid.). In 1895, the intrusion by the British led by Cecil Rhodes, led to severe war situations that forced the Ndebele king to exile. The area became a colony under British rule called Rhodesia, named after Cecil Rhodes (ibid.) During the years, a racial system similar to apartheid evolved. It continued when the colony in 1965, through Ian Smith declared itself as Rhodesia; an independent country from United Kingdom, under a white minority rule (ibid.) Zimbabwean history is imprinted by resistance and liberation wars, among others the first and second liberation wars called *Chimurenga* (ibid.) The second *Chimurenga* led up to independence in 1980. The impact of colonialism in society on many levels, not least language and education systems, involved conflicts between white settlers and Zimbabweans, but also between Zimbabweans of different ethnicities, such as between the two main ones:

the majority Shona and the minority Ndebele (ibid.). Robert Mugabe became the prime minister in 1980, and president in 1987. His 30 years of presidency ended in 2017 (ibid.). There are today still atrocities against the Ndebele people, that is not yet admitted by the government. In the *Gukurahundi*, an estimated number of 20 000 Ndebele in southern Zimbabwe were killed from 1982-1987 (ibid.). This very recent part of unsettled history is still present in society, and no one has been charged for the genocide of the Ndebele people (Francis 2023). Zimbabwe's president Emmerson Mnangagwa, belonging to the same party as Mugabe, Zanu PF, was the vice president 2014-2017, before becoming president after Mugabe. He was re-elected in August 2023, in an election that was accused of being rigged (Binley 2023).

Zimbabweans have since independence experienced an economy that has been both flourishing and reached the world's top level of inflation. From independence up to 2000, Zimbabwe was popularly known as the breadbasket of Africa with a great export of wheat and maize (Africa Business 2024). Although, some think that there is no clear evidence to make such a statement, such as Sibholo and Ntombela (2017). But, they do agree on that the economic situation in general changed from the better to the worse (ibid.), after the land reform programs in 2001, installed by former president Robert Mugabe (Africa Business 2024). Having been a self-sufficient country exporting agricultural products, the production of wheat and maize declined in the beginning of the 21st Century (Sibholo and Ntombela 2017). However, throughout the hardships after independence, Zimbabweans have managed to stay a very well-educated people, but the instability of economy makes it challenging for many people to pay school fees and school materials (Amh Voices 2023).

1.4.2. Literacy and education

In 2010, Zimbabwe had the highest literacy rate in Africa, of 92 % (Chisita 2011b). This is astonishing due to that the years of 2007-2008 the country had the world record of inflation (ibid.). Takaingehamo Collence Chisita, a Zimbabwean researcher in Library and Information Science, has investigated the role of public libraries for keeping the high rate of literacy during economical struggle: "Public libraries in Zimbabwe have used their resources to support access to education by all through complementing formal and informal education as tools for socio-economic redemption and helping previously marginalized groups realize their full potential as worthy human beings" (ibid., p. 5). Today, a decade later, the literacy

rate is still estimated to 90 % of the population aged 15 years and above, according to the World Bank (2024).

1.4.2.1. Language and educational system

The country's education system has regarded English as superior to indigenous languages (Mavesera 2009). Having attained independence in 1980, it was only in 2013 that the current Zimbabwean constitution recognised the country's 16 languages as official languages (Constitute Project 2024). The Zimbabwean school system is built on the English language, which since colonial times is the main language of education, business and government (Hungwe 2007). This means that still today every subject in primary and secondary schools, and at higher levels, are taught in English, except for the vernacular, that many children speak at home. However, the indigenous languages have certainly been important during history, but English has upheld its status as the language of "power and privilege" (ibid. ,p. 146). From 3 years of age, children can be enrolled in ECD – Early Childhood Development system, until they are five years. At 6 years one starts Primary School Education until 12 years. At 13 years one can start form one at Secondary education, and after four years one has reached Ordinary level, (O-level), (The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality 2024). You might then continue two more years in order to get Advanced level, (A-level), which enables you to apply to university. After O-level one can apply for vocational training (ibid.) There are also various options for adult education (ibid.)

1.4.2.2. New curriculum

In 2017 the curriculum was changed into The Continuous Assessment Learning Areas (CALA). A lot of criticism was brought up against CALA, one perspective being that it widens the inequality gap between privileged and disadvantaged communities due to that the emphasis on technology demands more money than previous curriculum (Amh Voices 2023). In the end of February 2024, CALA was replaced by a school-based projects model called Heritage-Based Education 2024-2030 (Chidakwa 2024). It puts emphasis on that learners are observed while performing more practical aspects of school, framed by technology and science (Pindula news 2024). The reasons are that students should be more prepared for making innovative solutions in today's society, and use the practice of "learning by doing" (ibid.).

1.5. Libraries in a Zimbabwean context

1.5.1. Brief history

The public library system in Zimbabwe was founded by the white settlers during colonialism in the 19th century (Chisita 2011b). The first library to open was Bulawayo Public Library in 1892. Later on the Queen Victoria Memorial Library opened in Harare in 1902 (ibid.; p. 3). These libraries were established mainly for the elites and for the educated whites (ibid.). Other city libraries were established in the same era in the other bigger cities of Gweru, Mutare and Masvingo (Chisita and Chibanda 2019). During all years of colonialism by the British, as well as under Rhodesian rule, libraries were mainly to serve the whites (IFLA/FAIFE 1998). However, some philanthropic initiatives were directed towards the black population, although the colonial government refused to co-opt Africans to their cultural activities (Chisita 2011b). After independence, municipalities have established support to high-density as well as low-density areas (ibid.), in line with historical divisions. The subscription libraries, once exclusively white, were and are, mostly for the low-density areas and the city centers, and the municipalities served the high-density areas (Atherton 1993). However, the government agency, the National Library and Documentation Service (NLDS) promulgated act no. 11 in 1985 (Chisita and Chibanda 2019). It incorporated various library services to one national library service, and obliges the government to support library services and to provide access to information to the Zimbabwean citizens (ibid.). The report from IFLA on freedom of expression considered the most challenging library provision, to be the service to the rural sites (IFLA/FAIFE 1998).

The educations in Library and Information started after independence, in cooperation with the City and Guilds of London Library Assistant's Certificate program (Chisita and Chibanda 2019). These were taught parttime at Harare Polytechnic and Bulawayo Polytechnic (ibid.) Before independence, most African librarians were trained outside of their countries, according to Raju (ibid., p.2). There is today university educations in Library and Information Science, as well as vocational training for librarians at colleges. This creates a discrepancy and confusion between the professional skills of the two (ibid. p.3). Chisita and Chibanda therefore argue that " ...there is little interaction between practitioners and educators. Under ideal circumstances, feedback from key stakeholders should automatically redirect the curriculums in library schools" (ibid.).

1.5.2. Library organisation

Zimbabwean libraries are run and partly funded by different responsible authorities. There are national libraries, local government libraries and libraries that fall under the private sector (IFLA 2024). In this study I will focus on public libraries and community libraries. One can make a distinction between the two, in that public libraries are run by the government or a local government, the last alternative being the case for this study. The community libraries are run by a board and funded by trusts and/or members or donors (IFLA 2024).

The National Library and Documentation Service, NLDS, falls under the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (IFLA 2024). Librarians from all sectors are organised in Zimbabwe Library Association, ZimLA. They are currently advocating to support the draft of a National Library Policy of Zimbabwe, in government ministries, according to IFLA (ibid.). They are also working towards a national information policy (ibid.). However, informants who are members of ZimLA, do mention the efforts of advocacy, but they also talk about the challenges that ZimLA has had to be recognized by the government as an organisation (Informants 8; Community library and Informant 11; Public Library, 2024-03-05 and 2024-03-07).

1.5.2.1 Need of advocacy

More needs to be done to acquire both resources and recognition. Chisita and Chibanda still think that there is a need for a road map to be created in Zimbabwe, that puts unity of librarians to the fore (2019). "Libraries and librarians in Zimbabwe can only develop and make an impact if they come together to share knowledge and build a united field" (Chisita and Chabanda 2019: 4). Besides the cooperating challenges on a national and regional level, there might be other demanding obstacles such as bureaucracy. On a wider geographical level, there is a pan-African regional association for librarians called AfLIA – African Library and Information Associations and Institutions (AfLIA 2024). Some of AfLIA's core objectives are to strengthen the access to information and to advocate for the importance of high-quality libraries in all sectors of society (ibid.). AfLIA also offers training that some of the informants in this study have participated in.

All over the world there is a development towards library consortia and inter library loans (Chisita and Dick 2017). In the modern era of information and communication technology, library consortia have the potential of contributing to national development, through the provision of access to information to their users (ibid). In

Zimbabwe, there is today a consortium within the academic libraries that gives equal access to electronic content, but there is no similar within public, community or school libraries (ibid. 2017). However, in 2023 a consortium was created for exchange of public libraries in Matabeleland, under AfLIA, as well as a school library consortium (Informant 12; Public library, 2024-03-07). Still, it does not mean that they share electronic databases. The public libraries and community libraries are in a challenging situation, not least in the rural areas of the country, where infrastructures are scarce and with less inter loan possibilities nor any shared electronic databases.

Libraries everywhere, are supposed to be the drivers of information and knowledge. In Matabeleland, the governmental National Free Library in Bulawayo used to be a pride among the Zimbabwean libraries. I am told that people were queuing to enter, during the 1990s. Today it is still a beautiful library, but with scarce relevance when it comes to digital access and up to date books (Fieldwork 2023).

1.5.3. Library and community

We have all kinds of users: Everyone can access. We have kids, adults and the braille section for the blinds and internet café. This is a public library so here people can get help with their needs. That is the difference: You get help with your problems. Many old people come to the internet café and young people who know the basics.

Informant 3; Community library

The informant describes the community members of their library. Libraries are for everyone, but research shows that the highest numbers of library users in Zimbabwe are the young ones and the young adults (Chisita 2011b). This correlates to how my informants describe their libraries as well. The activities of the libraries are often arranged for children and young adults. "In Zimbabwe the public library does complement the pre-school, primary, secondary and higher and tertiary education. The public library acts as an extension of the school library or the educational curricular" (ibid., p. 7). The library is a safe spot for children to come to, after school has finished. There is not any activity going on in the school after class, and most parents are at work.

Our children come from different backgrounds. They really need encouraging, more than the librarians can do for them. There are parents working abroad...you know the diaspora story. [...] They are reading but there is no reading at home. [...] Noone encourages them. Or the mother spend the whole day vending vegetables, in the evening she is tired.

Informant 13; Public library

The informant is talking about the situation of migrating Zimbabweans working in South Africa, which is connected to the economic situation in Zimbabwe (Chikovore & Maharaj 2023).

Librarian skills in information literacy is today highly requested, not least when it comes to communicate knowledge and engaging with the community. When it comes to digital access, the libraries are important. That libraries can give access to digital information is highly relevant, because not everyone can afford to buy data for their mobile phones, described by one informant:

I have Wi-Fi because I work here. What about the families who don't have access? Access is the biggest question.

Informant 3, Community library

However, it is not all libraries that have the possibility of providing digital access to information.

2. Previous research

In this chapter, I will give an outline of research that is connected to the main focus areas of this thesis, in the overall discipline of Library and Information Science. The research highlighted here, concerns how the librarians, work with communities in different societies and what change their work makes. This relates to my interests in this study of socio-cultural development and emancipation related to literacy and the librarian as an agent of change. Libraries face challenges all over the world, some of these being very substantial in postcolonial African countries. The societal conditions underlying librarianship are varying and contextual. I want to describe aspects of library and community work in contemporary research, to create an understanding of the field for this thesis.

2.1. Libraries, challenges and communities

It is quite common that books are in short supply and difficult to access in different parts of the world (Asselin & Doiron 2013, p. 103). Factors such as lack of funds for purchasing books and lack of infrastructures to embed books in the local culture, make literacy development challenging (ibid.). On the other hand, the authors claim, there are many examples where libraries, NGO:s, schools, communities or individuals have found systems to bring books into the communities (ibid.) It is also common that libraries struggle with the costs for the library buildings and to maintain good book collections (Harle and Tarrant 2011). However, libraries in most places still serve as important places for learning and studying, and to encounter books for reading and pleasure (ibid.)

How libraries engage with communities differ, as well as the level of community engagement varies, but Ashraf (2017) points out that public libraries enjoy a great potential to act as empowering agents for different sectors of society, in areas such as information literacy, content creation in indigenous languages, e-governance etc. (Ashraf 2017). In a global context there are studies on library and community work from many different angles and aspects, such as the field of social justice and library work (Bales 2018). Within the field one finds explorations of the librarianship itself, the library, or the community, as driving forces for change in the frame of national and global development.

2.2. Librarianship and change

Studies based in Africa explore for example rural libraries as social agents of development, in relation to the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (Mansour 2020). Mansour's study takes place in an Egyptian rural context and involved 34 rural public libraries who positively, but not sufficiently, contributed to the UN goals, despite the challenges of the society (ibid.)

Onaade-Oyo, a Nigerian researcher, proposes that one definition of sustainable development is the capacity to meet the social, economic and technological needs that the present time demands. He argues that "...to attain development, the roles of information and digital literacy cannot be ignored." (Onaade-Oyo in Asamoah-Hasan 2023: 182). Horsfall (2023), investigates the librarian as an agent of change for a sustainable library and information service, also in a Nigerian context, facing the digitalization of society (ibid.). Based on literature reviews of different types of library and information services, Horsfall describes how librarians can be seen as change agents. She pictures "change" as shift making, remodeling and altering: "A change agent is that individual, person, or group that undertakes the task of initiating and managing change in any organization, region, or state (the organization could be likened to a library organization)." (ibid. p. 116.). There are challenges for library work, such as inadequate funding and insufficient power supply (ibid.). However, librarians form strategies, such as staff development and networking (ibid.). She claims librarians to be important for development and sustainability in the digital age, and that they contribute to "...the creation of new communities academically, socially, economically, and politically for the growth of national development and the sustainability of their multi-dimensional job role." (ibid. p. 123).

2.4. Libraires and information technology

One could describe the ongoing global change from analogue to digital, as a paradigm shift (Harle and Tarrant 2011:134). Harle and Tarrant stress that the information divide and the technological dimension in certain places create great challenges in finding the right technological solutions (ibid.). Poor network configuration is common, especially when the hardware is older and the bandwidth lower (ibid.). One way to get around the difficulties with both electricity and digital access, and at the same time reach secluded areas, is the use of mobile library services. This can be exemplified with ICT-buses in Rwanda (Harle and Tarrant 2011), donkey-drawn libraries in Zimbabwe equipped with solar cells (Chisita 2011b) and camel-drawn libraries in Kenya (N'geno 2010). Chisita argues that:

“The main aim of mobile libraries is to provide information to the most remote rural areas and bridge the information divide or apartheid” (2011b., p. 7). He also finds the mobility relevant for the dissemination of indigenous knowledge. The economic challenges have made it difficult with alternatives for material collections other than printed (ibid.). However, lately there have been attempts to record and archive oral stories, as we will see in this thesis.

Since long time there are possibilities to undertake distance education. These types of courses have increased with the digital technology, and is very important in African countries, because of the possibility to work and do parttime studies at the same time (Nwezeh 2011). Both the academic libraries and the public libraries are important resources for the students of distance education. Research has shown that distance learners in Tanzania were even more dependent on the public libraries than the academic ones (ibid.). In Zimbabwe, the distance-based education is very popular and needed. This demands more skills of the librarians as well. The paradigm shift from analogue material to digital material, does not only comprehend the technological dimension, but also the human dimension. More particularly, it affects certainly the way that professional librarians work (Harle and Tarrant 2011).

Research shows that both libraries and new technology is important for the preservation of indigenous knowledge (Asamoah-Hassan 2023). Collence Takaingehamo Chisita, has investigated dissemination of information when it comes to indigenous agricultural information, suggesting librarians to create information in more ways than collecting printed material, to disseminate this important knowledge (2011a). He is one of the most prominent Zimbabwean researchers in the field of Library and Information Science. As a contributor to many international conferences for IFLA, Chisita describes the challenges of a complex postcolonial information society. As mentioned in the background chapter, he has researched the role that the public library in Zimbabwe has, for the high level of literacy which has been kept even during the severe years of high inflation (2011b). Furthermore, Chisita has, together with Chibanda, explored the circumstances that imply a need for a” road map” and a strive for a unified organization within the library sector to strengthen their position in society (2019).

2.5. Radical change agents

Contrasting with a Scandinavian context, Ohlsson Dahlquist (2019) investigates the democratic role of the public library in Sweden, realized by the methods of popular education. She performs practice-oriented research and finds that dialogue and reflection are essential tools in the space of the public library (ibid., p. 156). However, it is just as important that dialogue and conversation takes place within the library staff, about the democratic role and the conditions for upholding this open space, for democratic development (ibid.). She touches on the role of the public library in relation to “civic literacy”, which concerns the knowledge of society and the capacity to act daily as a national and global citizen (ibid. p. 182). David Lankes, American researcher in Library and Information Science, has written extensively on the topic of librarianship, agency and change. He promotes “a new librarianship” in seeing librarians as facilitators in the creation of knowledge to improve society (Lankes 2011), something I will return to, in the discussion chapter in the end of this thesis. Furthermore, Lankes finds that “librarians are agents for radical positive change who choose to make a difference” (2016, p. 1), which certainly pictures librarianship as being more of a mission than a job (2011). Scandinavian researchers such as Jochumsen and Mathiasson, have explored librarians in the role of proactive change agents when working, for example, towards the UN sustainable goals. They investigate the concepts of activism and social entrepreneurship in relation to librarians (2021). They suggest that the concepts help to nuance the understanding of librarians as radical positive change agents (ibid.). In line with this, Chisita proposes among other things, a more active role of public libraries in making use of indigenous knowledge: “...through repackaging information and facilitating access to this knowledge through talk shows and discussion. This will require libraries to be proactive and implement community engagement programmes that promote synergies between the young and the old through intergenerational dialogue” (2011a., p 5). This fits well with the activist and social entrepreneurship concepts. I find these aspects useful, in viewing the active role of librarians, and in how they act as facilitators.

2.6. Research access

Lastly, when investigating studies on information and knowledge, change and agency, the conditions for the visibility and accessibility of this research, differ. It depends apparently on where you are located. Nora Schmidt, German researcher in Library and Information Science, has investigated the lack of scholarly work from southeastern African researchers in European academic databases (2020). She

points out the inability to access scholarly work from southeastern Africa in Library and Information Science, as well as in other disciplines and explains different reasons for it (ibid.). This is something I have noticed during my research when making this study, the scarcity of research from the specific context. This study is a small contribution to raise general understanding and learning on the practice in libraries in south-eastern Africa and a hope for an opening to more collaborations and exchange within both academia and praxis across Northern and Southern cultures.

2.7. Summing-up

Thus, this study is situated in practice and agency-oriented research in Library and Information Science and will contribute with its focus on learning activities and strategies for learning between library and community in a postcolonial Zimbabwean context. It will be added to the field of librarians as agents of change for national and global development. I find the described research, useful for mirroring the findings made in the Zimbabwean context, when it comes to how librarians work as change agents. There are challenges, not least in countries where the digital infrastructures are scarce, and where economic instability makes daily practice difficult. But obviously, strategies are formed to navigate, for example networking (Horsfall 2023) and mobility (Chisita 2011b, Harle and Tarrant 2011, N'geno 2010), which I have found in the Zimbabwean context as well.

3. Theoretical approach

In this thesis I investigate the activities of public and community libraries performed by the librarians in the space of the library as well as in their outreach work. I also investigate the strategies behind the activities and the community work that they are doing. I will use an overall postcolonial perspective in my description of the context and in the analysis. Furthermore, when analyzing the interview material and the learning activities of the libraries, I will use a socio-cultural constructivist approach. I find the constructivism theory suitable, when finding out how the learning practices are carried out, and which learning components that are sustainable and lead to change in the Zimbabwean context. I will in this chapter also explain *Ubuntu*, because of its prevalence in the study. I look at Ubuntu as a foundation for the community in the Zimbabwean context and suggest how the strategies created for the community work and the activities, can be related and built on to this foundation. Ubuntu is pre-colonial, was disrupted by colonialism and has since the 1950s arisen to renewed importance (Mugumbate 2023). “It can decolonise and indigenise at the same time” (ibid., p. 21).

3.1. Postcolonial perspective

This study takes place in a postcolonial context, which indicates certain conditions when it comes to content, language, history, culture and heritage as described in the background. This research is viewed from an overall postcolonial perspective. Diana Brydon describes postcolonialism as cross-disciplinary and defines it as: “...a cultural phenomenon as well as an academic field, shaped by questions about how knowledge is constituted, evaluated and preserved” (2004, p. 9). I understand a postcolonial perspective to be a critical awareness of the impact of colonialism and an awareness of decolonization processes in the previous colonized contexts. In the library context I will highlight the question of knowledge and language from a postcolonial perspective. It means that *how* one learns at libraries is important, as well as *what* one learns at libraries. For example: The collections of library books are mainly British books, written in English, which is the language inherited by colonialism. How are librarians perceiving this? What can be done to change it?

3.1.1. Knowledge and language

Zimbabwean researcher Mavesera argues in her dissertation on African language and literature as empowerment (2009), that the African continent has been politically liberated, but remains under the bondage of linguistic imperialism. Her research shows that the majority of the interviewed Zimbabwean citizens think that if literature and media were distributed in their first languages, it would enhance the socio-cultural and economic development in the communities (ibid.). In the Zimbabwean library context, books and programs in local language and by local authors are highly demanded. Sometimes the local books need to be locked in, because the risk of getting them stolen (fieldwork 2023-2024). Writer and professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written extensively about language, knowledge and information. In *Decolonising the mind – the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), he writes about what he calls 'a quest for relevance' – indicating that it is not only about what literature is written, and what language it is written in. It is also about the teaching of it. He asks the hypothetical question: "...given that there is literature in Africa and in the world, in what order should it be presented to the child and how?" (1986, p. 87-88). How one relates to the choice of material, and how one relates to the attitude to that material, depends on one's worldview and what the worldview has been affected by (ibid., p. 88). This is exactly what the librarians are discussing in the Zimbabwean context, many of them wanting to promote the local language and literature more. They do it for example in activities. Wa Thiong'o argues that it is the duty of African producers of knowledge to constantly question the colonial heritage, to question what kind of knowledge that is learned and the consequences of it (2017). He claims that every language, no matter how many or few who may speak it, is a tool to organize the world and to theorize it (wa Thiong'o 2017). It carries a bank of memories of the world. To question the colonial heritage means to always relate and be aware of the European memory when organizing knowledge (ibid.). Ngugi wa Thiong'o suggests that the languages of English and French in the African countries, ought to be used for creating a dialogue to the African languages and make them more known in the world (ibid.). When discussing language and libraries, literacy is a term that ought to be decolonized, because of its connections to reading and writing the colonial language, argue Duchschers and Lenters (2024). The impact from the term, has devalued other diverse and important ways that people also use to communicate with each other and the world (ibid.) This is clear in the Zimbabwean library context, as we shall see when it comes to the scarcity of local language books.

3.1.2. Information and language

When discussing development globally, poverty is often related to the level of economic income. However, Harle and Tarrant (2011) are only two out of many who claim that poverty is rather a complexity of many different factors. Capabilities, freedoms or rights help us to understand the relations to poverty, and not least unequal access to information. Information is "...essential to economic growth, to improved social welfare and to the democratic process that underpin them" (Harle and Tarrant 2011: 121). Once again, we come back to the current postcolonial political situation where access to information in public libraries is not supported by the government in Zimbabwe. The country is in an economically challenging situation where the technology of information is upcoming but not fulfilling the needs of communities. There are also the challenges of colonial history. The access to information is not only about technology. It is also about language in a postcolonial context where the present language used in education, industry and business is still the former coloniser's. Many of the Zimbabweans speak it, but not everyone speaks it fully, and still: There are differences in expressing oneself in one's mother tongue than in a foreign language (Mavesera 2009). So how do the Zimbabwean librarians provide information? How are they approaching unequal access to information, and what are their strategies for changing the poverty factor of lack to access to information? This is how I will use the postcolonial perspective; in viewing ways to overcome challenges not least challenges that have its foundations in colonialism, such as the language.

3.2. Socio-cultural constructivism and librarianship

I will use the learning theory of socio-cultural constructivism as a tool to understand and analyse the activities of the libraries, and to figure out what strategies the libraries use to establish change, and at the same time navigate the contextual challenges. The constructivist approach was firstly developed in a European context. It has been developed socio-culturally by Vygotsky (Russia), but also by Freire (Brazil). The theory concerns contextually situated learning processes. I will do my best to mirror them in postcolonial perspectives and in the philosophy of Ubuntu. As we will see, in socio-cultural constructivism, learning is a collaborative process mediated by tools, language being the most important one. The learning processes include individuals as well as communities. Constructivists question learning from a top-down model, instead promotes dialogue as a tool for equal communication in the learning process (Freire 1993). The learning theory thus questions how knowledge is achieved in many places, not least from colonizer to

colonized. The mutuality of a dialogue learning process may be found in the values of respect and reciprocity, manifested in Ubuntu philosophy (Mugumbate 2023).

3.2.1. Constructivism

The learning theory of constructivism is revealing itself in its very name; it is about constructing knowledge while being active in the learning process. The 20th century researcher Dewey pragmatically founded the saying "learning by doing" (Burman and Sundgren 2010). Kretchmar explains that in constructivism theory, individuals are seen as agents with prior knowledge (2019). It is a learner-centered approach to knowledge, where engagement and collaboration is part of the learning process. Teachers can be seen as facilitating the learning process by providing suitable environments and activities (Kretchmar 2019). In the Library and Information Science field, constructivism has undermined the former model of how to send and receive information (Tuominen, Talja & Savalainen 2002, p. 275). The sender of information does no longer possess an authoritative role, instead the information user is also an active processor of information (ibid.) When it comes to constructivism in information processes, the focus is on how individuals interact with knowledge resources to construct meaning (ibid.).

3.2.1.1. *Socio-cultural constructivism: Language and tools*

Two bright stars in the 20th century, educational psychologist Jean Piaget and the often in pedagogics quoted psychologist Leo Vygotsky, paved the milky way on the constructivist sky. Their directions within the theory became twofold: Piaget was into cognitive constructivism, and believed the learning process could be separated from its social context (Berkely 2016). Vygotsky was convinced that the social and cultural context has a greater impact on a child's learning development than the individual learning process itself (Säljö 2014). "For Vygotsky, interaction and dialogue among students, teachers, and peers are key to how learners develop an understanding of the world and of the socially constructed meanings of their communities." (Illinois library 2020). The socio-cultural approach is not a universal approach on learning and development, Swedish education researcher Säljö argues (2005, p. 21). Processes of learning differ from context to context. To understand learning processes, one cannot separate individuals or groups from the socio-cultural context and its' social practices and/or technological tools (ibid., p. 22). The knowledge and skills learned in each society is contextually developed, Säljö writes (ibid.). Thus, a socio-cultural perspective insists that learning precedes development (ibid.).

The socio-cultural constructivist perspective highlights the importance of language. Vygotsky (1986) was convinced that tools assist us in the learning process, language being the most important one. Through developing one's language, one develops the thinking itself as well as social interaction (ibid.). Connecting this to a Zimbabwean context, we know that language is a complex issue since colonial times. English is the educational language, whereas people have other first languages- In the libraries, people are asking for books in their mother tongues. Vygotsky emphasizes both language tools and physical tools, as crucial for developing our way of thinking and creation of knowledge (Säljö 2014). Säljö refers to the use of computers (ibid.), and we can of course refer to other tools in a library, such as books, games, creative tools, films, storytelling, writing competitions and so forth. Lastly, for socio-cultural constructivists, motivation is seen as both extrinsic and intrinsic (Berkely 2016). The learner must have an inner motivation to actively construct knowledge, but since learning is often collaborative, rewards from the community are also motivating (ibid.) I will use Vygotsky when analyzing the learning activities and their component of literacy in different languages for the creation of knowledge.

3.2.1.2. *Freire: Dialogue and change*

I here want to bring in a later applicator of socio-cultural constructivism, Brazilian Paulo Freire. With an anti-colonial approach in pedagogy and learning, calling it critical pedagogy, Freire explored the dialogical relations between teaching and learning (Freire 1993). He criticized, as constructivists do, the traditional way of how teachers impose knowledge on learners, calling it the "banking model" in the meaning of storing knowledge into learners (Freire 1993). Instead, he argues, that the only way to go is to use dialogue, meaning that teachers are learners and learners are teachers, in a common learning process mediated, or facilitated, by the surrounding socio-cultural context (ibid: 100). It implies that both the teacher and the learner are subjects in the dialogue, and the surrounding socio-cultural environment mediate the subjects into actions leading to change (ibid.:109). The aspect of "change" involved in the learning process is important in this study. Change starts on the individual level. Change involves literacy in various aspects. Increased literacy is inevitably followed by social and cultural emancipation, Freire and Macedo argues (2015). Literacy is empowerment and education create personal and social emancipation (Freire and Macedo 2015). But change also involves being literate when it comes to information in general, concerning for example citizenship and society, the term called "civic literacy", explained by Ohlsson Dahlqvist above

(2019). I use Freire's perspectives on dialogue and change, when analyzing the agents in the learning activities. Dialogue demands two active parts, be it two humans or someone who is in dialogue with information channels.

3.2.1.3. *Libraries as spaces for learning*

How do we understand this then in relation to libraries? Libraries are spaces for learning, but librarians are not teachers. Freire and Macedo (1987) write that through library services children are given the possibility to learn independently. Rather than relying on a teacher, they can explore and construct knowledge and make unlooked-for discoveries (ibid). We could understand it in how librarians use dialogue with community members to access knowledge through artifacts such as books or computers. We could also understand it as librarians create conditions for using the socio-cultural environment of the library in obtaining knowledge, being an alternative space to school education, which might be more similar to "banking"; top-down learning methods. Freire promotes a view of the learning process as mutual and not hierarchical, and in creation. And it is important to add that librarians learn too. They constantly learn from the community members. This view lies very close to the European-framed concept of "bildung", translated and further developed by American philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum to "liberal education" (Nussbaum 1998). From my own contextual background, it is easy to apply "bildung" to the Zimbabwean context. But I could also interpret the Freire mutual dialogues in terms of *Ubuntu* – the African philosophy of interconnected humanness.

3.3. Ubuntu

Ubuntu is a philosophy, or worldview, originated in Africa, from black Africans from different languages groups, and these are still the custodians of the worldview, which might have different names according to language (Mugumbate 2023). What underlies the philosophy is the concerns of how to live the values of universal humanness and togetherness (Ngomane 2019). One often quoted translation of Ubuntu is made by Mbiti in 1969: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am", and referred to by Okere, Vincent and Mordi. They investigate Ubuntu in relation to mining companies, argue that Ubuntu "...stands in sharp contrast to the competitive and individualistic spirit widely associated with Western capitalist societies." (2018). South African researcher Khomba explores it in relation to business models (2011). He describes Ubuntu as "the capacity in an African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, humanity and mutuality in the interests

of building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual caring” (ibid., p. 128). Khomba refers to both Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela who brought Ubuntu forward (2011).

The key values of Ubuntu, are described as: Relations, culture, indigeneity, holism, justice and freedom, responsibility, community/collectivity, respect and history by Mugumbate (2023, p. 15-16). During colonialism, Africa was depicted as a continent without philosophy, religion or hope. African researchers in various disciplines, such as Mugumbate’s own, social work, got tired of it and reclaimed it: Social work in Africa needed to be philosophically and pedagogically grounded in African values (ibid., p. 12). Today ubuntu is used in various disciplines. It may be used as a decolonial framework or an indigenous research model, it may be used as the human factor in development theory or as education model or pedagogy (ibid. p. 19). I am not more familiar to Ubuntu than through reading, observing, and experiencing this worldview in its’ practice as a foreigner. I want to relate libraries and community work to Ubuntu because of that both learning components and strategies can be seen to have its foundation in Ubuntu values and to serve the wellbeing of the community. Contrary to a profit and capitalist interest, libraries and community members are working together for the development of the wellbeing of the community.

3.4. Summing-up the theoretical framework

I use the theories as if they are discussing with each other. The overall view is postcolonial, when discussing literacy, language, the library and how to do things as a librarian, since the education and the library as we know them, were installed by the British. When going deeper into each activity and identifying its learning components, and the active parts in each learning process, I use socio-cultural constructivist glasses, applied from perspectives of Freire and Vygotsky. Viewing the library as an alternative space for learning is part of this.

Ubuntu was developed way before colonial times, but is applied in a postcolonial perspective, since it is about reclaiming African values and questioning the colonial forced values, language, and knowledge systems. Thus, I intend to mirror the foundations of learning activities and their strategies in local values of Ubuntu.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative research

This study is based on qualitative research. My main methods are ethnographic ones combined with the use of relevant global and contextual literature. Two of the main ethnographic methods are participant observations and qualitative interviews (Bryman et.al. 2021). These methods are the main ones that I use for data collection, together with the collection of texts and documents collected in the field (ibid). My interviews are semi-structured and unstructured (ibid.)

4.1.1. What is my “field”?

I chose ethnographic methods because the topic I would like to study is situated in south Zimbabwe, and it would be difficult to approach both context and research questions, only by the means of literary studies. ”A field” could be limited to a certain group of people or a workplace, Ohlsson Dahlquist writes (2019, p. 96). Furthermore, the current use of the term fieldwork within social sciences, means the study of a field of practice (ibid.). I have approached my field by visiting and observing libraries and activities on a varying degree of participation. It has taken place in two different time settings in a timeframe of one month at a time. The first period (November-December 2023) gave me the possibility to get firsthand knowledge of the library landscape in Zimbabwe, the main library systems in use at the public libraries and a knowledge on how public and community libraries function in society. When one is interested in studying daily practice, the ethnographic methods are useful in the very environment of the practice, writes Ohlsson Dahlquist (2019, p. 95). I was very much agreeing on Ohlsson Dahlquist’s noted statement, and library staff had in advance agreed on the possibility for me to spend full days in different public and community libraries for following their daily work.

I have visited eleven public and community libraries all in all, in order to get a fuller picture of how libraries function in Zimbabwe. For my second visit (in February-March 2024) I could narrow my focus to five libraries in southern Zimbabwe: in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Matabeleland North Province and Matabeleland South Province. In these libraries I asked to interview some of the librarians and library management. The five libraries mentioned are all public and community libraries managed by different authorities; two are municipal city council libraries

funded by public funds, two are community libraries with a board and funded by private funds or member-funds, one is a rural community high school library, funded by different donors. Out of the remaining six public libraries visited, I use overall information from observations, but not interviews: One is a public city council library in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, one is a governmental library in Bulawayo Metropolitan province, one is a community school library set at a primary school in Matabeleland South Province, one is a municipal library in the Midlands Province and one community library is in Harare Metropolitan Province. However, the five libraries I have chosen to study more closely, are chosen because their work is both with communities inside the library and outside of the physical library and they are situated in different settings and are funded and governed differently. For practical reasons, I also needed to limit the geographical distance and chose libraries that were not too far from each other.

Type of library	Location in south Zimbabwe	Type of location
Public library (two): Two city council libraries with outreach programmes	Bulawayo Metropolitan Province	Suburbs
Community library (three): Library with outreach programmes Library with outreach programmes Library, situated on a high school	Bulawayo Metropolitan Province Matabeleland South Province Matabeleland North Province	City center Town center Rural site

4.1.2. Active observations

At my first visit I observed and took part in the daily practices and ongoing activities of two community libraries for seven days. One of the community libraries has a great deal of outreach work at rural sites, and these activities, such as joining the work of rural study circles, or rural community libraries, I joined for two full days. As for the other libraries, I spent a couple of hours at each and every one. Several hours were spent on visiting and knowing certain activities in the five chosen libraries for this study. I also joined librarians in training workshops for teachers or social workers, to handle micro-libraries. From all occasions I have taken notes and also written down what we have been talking about.

When I revisited the libraries at the second occasion in 2024, I continued to be an active participant while observing the library activities and the outreach work. I spent several days in three of the five libraries, where I followed the daily duties of the librarians or managers, such as joining a book bus for outreach work to peri-urban situated schools, joining the staff to rural community libraries that were part of the outreach programs of certain library organizations, joining full days of the training of "teacher librarians" in a certain program for installing micro-libraries. I also joined the activities performed by the librarians such as storytelling, spelling competitions, hospital visits etc.

4.1.2.1. Data collection from observations

Like in all observation methods, it should be conducted with an open mind and with no judgement to behaviour, work or to the field studied (Ramsden 2016). This might not have been fully possible for me (or anyone), but taking notes helped me out in that process (ibid., p. 13). There are various methods on how to collect data and take notes when performing observations. Ramsden suggests double entry note style, which means that you take notes on the actions performed in one column, and place your own thoughts about the actions in another column, in a way to separate what is happening to your own perspectives on it (ibid.). This was a useful tool for me when writing notes after every day's work.

4.1.3. Interviews

To be able to get closer to seeing from the eyes of the librarians I wanted to know more about, flexibility is of course necessary, not least when it comes to interview methods. Within an ethnographic approach, the researcher "does not need to develop highly specific research questions in advance", according to Bryman et.al (2021, p. 357). It means that the researcher can settle in the environment and develop her/his focus from the collected data from participant observation (ibid.). The same goes for qualitative interviewing (ibid.) This was useful for me. I used the first visit to develop my focus, and to locate informants. In the second visit I interviewed the informants.

4.1.3.1. Semi-structured interviews

I have used semi-structured interviews and open-ended or unstructured interviews since the community work in the five chosen libraries differs from each other. The semi-structured interviews have been used for interviewing librarians who are working in similar roles of practical library work. Ramsden writes that semi-

structured interviews usually are developed after collecting data from the field, and the questions could be descriptive and open enough for the respondent to elaborate on his or her answers (2016). Hence, I formulated the questionnaires after my first period in November-December 2023 and tested one out on a librarian in Zimbabwe, but who is not an informant in this study. For the interviews I started out from a questionnaire as the basis of semi-structured interviews. One was made for librarians (Appendix A), and one which was only slightly different, for the ones in overall management positions (Appendix B). Some of these questions were therefore similarly posed to all of the librarians or the managers, but depending on how the answers turned out, I was posing different follow-up questions.

4.1.3.2. Unstructured interviews

The unstructured interviews were used in a more spontaneous way during the workdays and consisted of discussions led by the respondent. When using this method, Ramsden points out that the goals of what the researcher wants to learn from the interview must be clear (ibid.). This is evident, and something that could be written down in advance to keep track. In reality, these conversations were written down as fieldnotes, as conversations on library topics. It turned out that I mainly use unstructured interviews with two informants. Both two informants have a tremendous experience of the library field in Zimbabwe, more than 30 years. Thus, these unstructured interviews were merely life stories (informant 1 and informant 13). Intertwined in the stories of their professional and personal lives, I could follow the development of society and technology related to their library experiences. This information, I found very valuable as an overall information and knowledge on libraries in a Zimbabwean rural context and in the growth of public city council libraries.

4.1.4. Choice of informants and delimitations

I have performed 18 interviews, but for this thesis I use the material of 14 interviews, due to the need of geographical delimitation and practical possibilities due to the limited time and size of a master's thesis. I have got connected to one of the libraries in the specific context of Matabeleland, through a Swedish librarian contact. Moving on from the first library, I needed to reach out to libraries within a reasonable distance, and got in touch with librarians within the area. This might have had an effect on the outcome. Nine of the interviewed are librarians or library workers engaged in work in any of these five libraries. From the management side, I have interviewed one chief librarian, one senior librarian, one from the

management of a community library and two directors of community library organisations (NGO:s). I decided that it is of interest to interview informants who work in the libraries on different positions, and of varying experiences. In that way, perhaps different perspectives would be revealed. The interviewed are all working in the five libraries and the majority is educated librarians. However, some professionals attached to the library work have other backgrounds. They are all employed by the library organisations and involved in the community work of the libraries, targeting the different focus areas of this study, and have different target groups. This, I have found out during my fieldwork in the first period, through spending time observing and participating in the different libraries. The persons are chosen because they work directly with different target groups both inside and outside of the physical libraries. For each interview, I have asked for permission of the responsible authority or manager/chief librarian for the interviewees to take part in the study (Ahrne and Svensson 2011).

<u>Informant</u>	<u>Type of library</u>	<u>Work experience</u>
<u>1. Librarian, manager of library organisation, male</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 30 years</u>
<u>2. Librarian, children's section, part of management team, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 5 years</u>
<u>3. Librarian, children's section, mobile team, part of management team, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 5 years</u>
<u>4. Management, accounting, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 30 years</u>
<u>5. Library manager, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 10 years</u>
<u>6. Librarian, children's section, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 20 years</u>
<u>7. Librarian, children's section, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 15 years</u>
<u>8. Librarian, in charge of outreach programs, male</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 5 years</u>
<u>9. Manager, education background library organisation, male</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>Less than 5 years</u>
<u>10. Library worker, education background, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 15 years</u>
<u>11. Librarian, responsible for branch library, female</u>	<u>Public library</u>	<u>More than 20 years</u>
<u>12. Librarian, responsible for branch library, male</u>	<u>Public library</u>	<u>More than 30 years</u>

<u>13. Librarian, responsible for all branches, female</u>	<u>Public library</u>	<u>More than 30 years</u>
<u>14. Librarian, responsible for school library, female</u>	<u>Community library</u>	<u>More than 5 years</u>

Ahrne and Svensson emphasize that it is not necessary to decide the number of interviewees from the start, when performing qualitative research (2011, p. 44.) One can start with a certain number, analyse the answers and then decide that one needs to continue. However, the authors suggest that a number between 10 and 15 is reasonable for a reliable study (ibid.), which is what I also found appropriate for this study.

4.1.5. Decolonizing approach on ethnography

Anthropologists who are the most prominent users of ethnographic methods have for a long time worked with both questioning the ethnographic methods characteristic for the discipline, as well as its colonial history. Bolles (2023) emphasizes “the importance of decolonization as a practice in anthropology”. Bolles mentions that a lot of work has been done when it comes to ethnographic methods, such as co-authoring with local scholars, community engagement and participatory research. She emphasizes the importance of making the research accessible and applicable for the communities involved in the study. This means to not merely use Western epistemologies but acknowledging and elevating local expertise and knowledge (Bolles 2023, p. 521). This is something I care to work towards and in the thesis I have done my best to involve local sources and literature as much as possible, as well as to find persons in the field that are not interviewed, and reflect with them on the findings. I am very open, should there be any chance, to co-write something with a local scholar. However, certain texts or topics have been difficult to find, when it comes to libraries in the local context.

4.1.5.1. Ethical aspect

However, although taking the decolonizing approach on fieldwork into account, it does not stop that I also put myself in the tradition of being a European trying to understand circumstances in an African context, writing the thesis in the language of the ones who colonized Zimbabwe. I will try to be aware of my bias from a Swedish-European context as much as possible in the writing of this thesis. And what else is my bias? One of the most important things when performing a field study is reflexivity, and to be aware of one’s own role and impact (Dahlberg, Drew

and Nyström 2001). I have been open with my informants, that my interest for the field of librarianship comes from a literary background. I have for several years written about Zimbabwean literature and collaborated with Zimbabwean writers. My interest and curiosity for the field of Zimbabwean libraries, come from viewing the libraries as hubs and treasures of free literature. Therefore, my bias towards a focus on the local literature is clear, but it does not mean that I am not open for other perspectives.

Being open and honest about one's fieldwork, includes being sensitive to what happens in the field, since it gives the researcher access to informants' personal lives and worlds, Dahlberg et.al. continues (2001). Therefore, I have tried as much as possible to be clear with my intentions, and that all responses would be kept anonymous. Furthermore, Dahlberg et.al write that meetings might create some kind of suspicion, and one way to avoid it is to stay in an open dialogue about the findings with the informants (ibid., p.181). I agree that it is important to involve informants, but in the same time openly explain what needs to be kept for the researcher by any reason (Dahlberg et.al. 2001). I view my role "in the field" as being both a learner of the context and a foreigner performing research. I have made clear of my intentions, my interests/biases and that I myself also work and do library practice in a Swedish context. I am interested in exchange both during the study and in the future and have tried to be in a regular dialogue with both informants and local researchers to avoid misunderstandings and to be able to reflect on both our different and common perspectives. However, there might be situations that I have affected with my presence, for example in the active observations, when I have taken part in the activities of different libraries. I have stayed in the background, since the activities have been arranged and led by librarians, but the presence of a foreign person, might still have an effect on how the activity is performed.

4.1.5.2. Language and concepts

Bolles (2023) also promotes the use of language when it comes to decolonizing methods – "decolonizing" might not be the best concept to use in the context. Thus, the researcher needs to find concepts used and experienced by the communities they work with (ibid.). Jansen and Osterhammel write that the language surrounding the word "decolonization" is varied (2017). These two historians could trace the use of the word to the 1950s (2017, p. 5). They compare it with words in different languages meaning "liberation", "revolution" or "self-determination" – words that illustrate that it is describing a process (2017, p. 3). Bolles concludes that in the end decolonization is all about reconceptualizing what it means to be human, and

who is included or excluded, she writes, with a focus on justice and equity (2023). Inspired by this, I am therefore keen on letting the ethnography be influenced by the local concept of Ubuntu, explained in the theory chapter. Since I focus on library and community work, I find the concept useful to bring in to the thesis, and to the research method as a guiding principle on library work and that we are all in it because we share common interests, such as literature, language, community, learning and knowledge.

4.1.6. Method of analysis

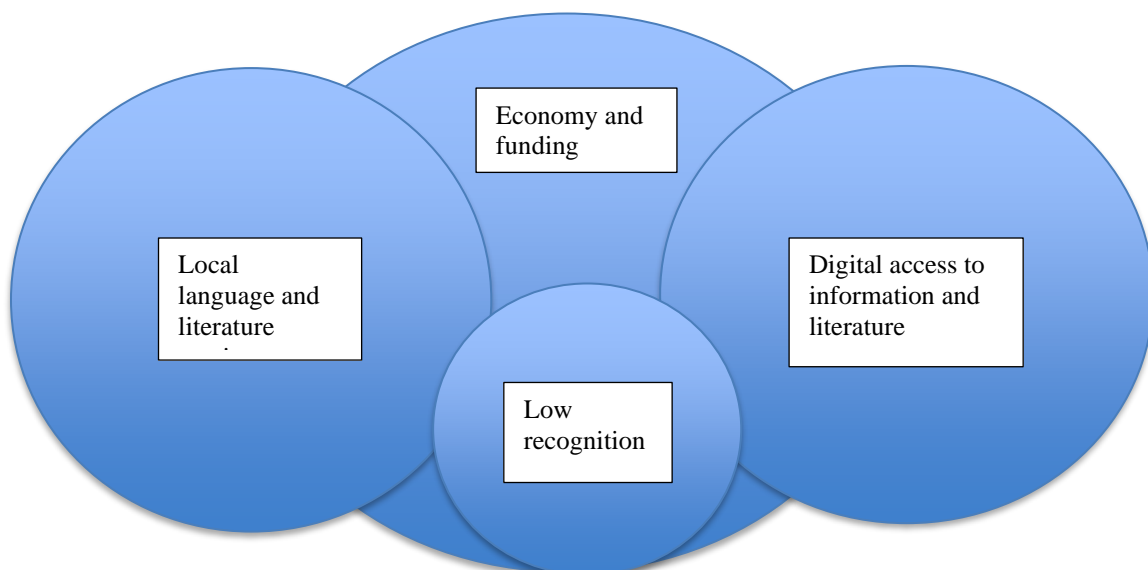
For the analysis of the material gained in observations, notes and interviews I will use a mix of techniques, a so-called *bricolage* (Kvale and Brinkmann 2010, p. 251). This implies that the researcher is free to understand and approach the material through a general impression, and from there decide what parts to visualize, or which parts of the stories that could be connected into a certain pattern or that corresponds with certain topics that are requested (*ibid.*). This can then be combined with a theoretical analysis, in my case, based in an overall postcolonial perspective and with applying socio-cultural constructivist theory. In this study, the learning activities performed and how they are described - will be analyzed through whether the learners and the librarians are acting as active subjects in the learning process and in the creation of knowledge. For finding the strategies, I correlate them to the results of the activities and to the interview material on overall community work. When using this freer way to go about the material, Kvale writes, the knowledge about the topic itself, is more important than to apply different techniques of analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann 2010, p. 251). It has also been of relevance to create a post-fieldwork plan (Pickard 2013, p.103). In between my two stays in Zimbabwe, I was able to get distance to the material, to unfold it a bit and be open for new literature and perspectives. The added material has helped me out to locate useful theoretical tools. Same goes for after the second visit; I made findings in the collected material that helped me get a clearer and fuller picture (*ibid.*). The study has therefore been of a flexible kind.

5. Results and analysis

In this chapter I will show the results of this study. Firstly, I present the challenges identified in the context, as a result from the interviews and observations. This will respond to the question: *What are the main challenges for library and community work in the context?* Then, I analyse the learning activities by identifying the active learners, or agents, and what learning components they are characterised by. I intend to answer the question: *How do public and community librarians practice learning activities?* Out of the activities and the components, with support from the interviews, I will describe the overall strategies identified, when navigating challenges and performing activities. This will answer to the last question: *What strategies do librarians use to meet challenges for community change?* This will lead us to see in what ways librarians are agents of change in Zimbabwe.

4.2. Challenges for library and community work

From my time spent in the libraries in southern Zimbabwe, from observations, interviews and out of my collected material, three main challenges stand out as the most comprehensive obstacles to get through to give relevant library services. These challenges have consequences for the libraries and their work with communities, and for the librarians themselves. The main challenge is economy and funding (14 of 14 informants). The effect is that the local language and literature services are scarce (12 of 14 informants), and that internet access is very challenging (12 of 14 informants). There is a fourth challenge too, that comes out consequently from the lack of economy and funding: the experience of low recognition as librarians in society (8 of 14 informants).



5.1.1. Economy and funding

The economic particularity still makes life challenging for most people in Zimbabwe. In April 2024 a new currency was established to tackle the inflation (Chingono 2024), called Zimbabwe Gold – ”ZiG”. This currency was not yet used while performing the interviews for this study, it was still RTGs dollar (Muronzi 2019). Inflation has been a long-term problem that the Zimbabwean citizens fight every day. It is crucial to be aware of the economic situation when trying to understand the learning activities and the strategies for community work of the libraries in Zimbabwe. The study takes place in southern Zimbabwe, where three different currencies are in use: US dollars, the Zimbabwean RTGs dollar that will now change into Zimbabwean Gold (Chingono 2024), and the South African Rand. However, the Zimbabwean currency is the main one that official authorities proceed from. It is of relevance for every activity and the underlying budgets of all libraries.

We put orders, and everything is ok. By the time we get the supply the price has changed because we are using local currency. But, it loses value every minute. Today I was in chock that the US dollar was 17 000! Tomorrow it will be 18 000. When you have reserved a fan, or ink – that requisition can't go through because there is no more money. Yet you are forced to use the money. There are rules. So there is the challenge.

Informant 13; Public library

The informant describes one of the consequences of the inflation in the daily library practice, the observation made the same day as the interview (Informant; Public library, 2024-03-07). This is a major challenge for library service in order to meet the needs of the community.

It's unbearable. We are short when it comes to resources themselves, we are unable to purchase resources, we are unable to give the best services to our readers because of the economic system.

Informant 11; Public library

Another side of the coin concerns funding to libraries from the government. The public and community libraries do not belong to any ministry and the funding from government is non-existent.

Libraries are not very prioritized. The government does not fund. It has to start with a change of mindset of the people in authority.

Informant 9, Community library

Another informant claims that “it is an ignorance from the part of our representatives in parliament – that libraries are not important.” (Informant 8; Community library, 2024-03-05). It inevitably leads to an experience of that librarians in general have low recognition in society. One librarian explains, and relates to her own workplace, a rural community library situated at a high school;

The Zimbabwean librarians are not being recognized as librarians, as professionals. Take this school for example – as compared to a teacher, you are under them. The teachers are better even if you are more educated than a teacher, the teachers are better. That is why I feel we are not being recognized. Other librarians pull out and start other professions or go out of the country doing something not related to libraries.

Informant 14; Community library

The lack of funding thus concerns an experienced lack of recognition of the professionalism of librarianship among eight out of fourteen interviewed librarians, regarding a general recognition in society.

5.1.2. Local language and literature services

Among all the public libraries and community libraries visited, it is obvious that most of the book collections consist of donated books in the English language. They are mainly from the British NGO Book Aid International, or from other donors such as the British Council, who has donated books to for example Harare City Library. Thus, the British books in English make up for a majority of collections. The literature of local writers in either local language or English is a minority in every library collection, out of the eleven libraries I visited. The reasons for this are complex and have both historical, cultural and economic reasons. Today the local Zimbabwean literary publishing landscape is struggling and is dangerously near to extinction, except for self-publishing. Self-publishing increases, not least with the new digital possibilities (Zvomuya 2023). There are writers, but some informants claim there is a lack of writers in local languages, at least a lack of access to them. Some claim that there is not a lack of writers, only lack of publishers. Due to increased self-publishing, there is no structure for the purchase of new local literature, nor funds to buy them since they are expensive. One locally produced textbook can cost 50 US dollars (Informant 14; Community library, 2024-03-11). Another informant with almost 40 years of experience from library work in Zimbabwe, describes the contradictions of the donations of books.

You know since we've been under sanctions the national book publishers walked out of Zimbabwe. They all went out. What the big international publishers have been doing is to work with local agents. They have to work with South Africa. That makes books expensive. So we heavily rely on Book Aid because contrary they are still sending us the books we can't find in the shops.

Informant 13; Public library

The political circumstances that implied that Zimbabwe left the Commonwealth, did not scare Book Aid International from cooperating with Zimbabwean libraries despite the politics (Informant 13; Public library, interview 2024-03-07). All of the informants would prefer their library content to be more varied, which means that

they prefer more of the local literature and authors to be there, both in local language and in English.

Zimbabwe, having been a British colony, still somehow displays how coloniality prevails within its libraries, as the majority of reading material is in English.

Informant 1; Community library

The lack of an updated and current national policy on libraries does not compel the government to allocate budgets for libraries and their development. One informant raises another perspective of the discussion and claims that it concerns more than the local language itself:

It's not only about locally published books or books that are written in local language – it's about our stories! Let's have our stories being told and given to the children to read.

Informant 7; Community library.

It is a burning topic throughout the thesis; how to develop the access to local language and local authors, and thus the local culture?

Our culture keeps dying. We need more Ndebele books for kids.

Informant 3; Community library

Could the recent changes in the education curriculum that emphasizes local heritage have an impact on the content of the libraries? Today it is a great challenge for the libraries out of different reasons:

The local literature is purchased from our own budget. You find it very slim. [...] Maybe 15 % of the content are local books. But those are the books they love. They love those books! Some books have been translated to Sesotho language. [...] Otherwise it is Ndebele.

Informant 8; Community library

The informant talks about an outreach activity called “Book Box” in South Matabeleland, where the library delivers books to communities in boxes. In the area three schools use the language of Sesotho, but most of them use Ndebele. All of the informants talk about the need of a greater variation of books in the library collections, they need textbooks and fiction that are local, as well as the British ones. About the donated books one of the informants says openly: “Because we can't purchase, we take whatever we are given.” (Informant 3, Community library, 2024-02-28). However, it is a complex issue. The content from Book Aid International is relevant in many ways, there are both new and relevant books and books that librarians find not so relevant. The opinions among the librarians are divided when it comes to the current collections. But everyone agrees on that more local literature is needed.

4.2.3. Digital access to information and literature

As described in the chapter on previous research, there are sometimes difficulties to find the right technological solutions (Harle and Tarrant 2011, p. 134). This is evident in the libraries I have visited. This means that in most public and community libraries, they use the Brown system for lending books, by the means of handwritten cards (Active observations during visits 2023-2024). At the time of the performed visits, internet with Wi-Fi for the community and library members was functioning at three libraries out of the eleven visited ones. Out of the five libraries where interviews are performed in this study, two of them have a functioning Wi-Fi. Two of them are waiting for it to get sorted out due to technological and funding issues. One is waiting for the possibility to get it installed. At times, the librarians express that the digital divide is wide open due to lack of infrastructural and financial support to the libraries. And still, the librarians are acting proactively in various ways to bridge the gaps and to make information available and the libraries known for community members.

Our internet is mainly used by people who pay. It is a source of income in the library. One pays 10 rand per hour [about USD50 cents]. They also get assisted by the guy to help them.

Informant 4, Community library

However, not everyone can pay, and libraries should be hubs for information for everybody. While many people do have digital smart phones, the library risks to be a relic if they cannot offer digital network or computers, nor relevant local literature. However, it is not only about Wi-Fi. One informant talks about that a certain amount of e-readers were donated to public city council libraries, but it was hard to use them due to lack of electricity.

We stayed almost a year without them. [...] Electricity was gone from 4 am to 12 at night. [...] Even now...electricity prices are high, families can't afford them so many stay at home in darkness. The gas is expensive, so what parents can only cook, then they forget about the use of machines in the evening.

Informant 13; Public library

The informant refers to that there is no possibility to use e-readers or computers when the power is gone. One of the public libraries still await the possibilities to get internet and computers. The librarian explains that many students come to the library with their own gadgets and bring their own internet connection. But that is not possible for everyone:

[...]...The older ones come only for reading space – they don't use our services because they are irrelevant for them. They want to do their research online.

Informant 11; Public library

Furthermore, there is an overall challenge when it comes to information and access:

Information is dangerous. Here they try to hide as much information as possible. But it's been like this for a long time. Here, if something is happening – the government can just shut down the internet. That is how information is handled. It has to be manageable.

Informant 3, Community library

Whether this point makes up for one of the reasons to the lack of funding and low recognition of libraries from the government, is not clear. Some think it has nothing to do with it. Some think the opposite, according to discussions during my visits. Clear is that most of the libraries lack digital systems for the access to information. However, as noted by one of my informants: Internet or the lack of it, ought not to take over our perspectives of “what a library can be” (Informant 1; Community library, 2024-11-17). The informant refers to the local concept of Ubuntu, the ethical philosophy from southern Africa mentioned in the Theory chapter. With more than 30 years of experience from establishing libraries in the rural sites of Zimbabwe, the informant is convinced:

Libraries must promote the human face. Libraries must promote *Ubuntu*.

Informant 1; Community library.

The informant explains that the libraries must continue to meet people in their realities (ibid.). Relating Ubuntu to people and literacy, to change and emancipation, means that change ought to involve both the individual and the community, because humanity is interconnected (Ngomane 2019).

4.3. Learning activities

I will below describe a chosen amount of nine learning activities observed at the five libraries that I have visited, and which I have also discussed in interviews with informants. I will describe how they are performed and analyze them from a socio-cultural constructivist approach. It implies that in every activity, I identify the active agents in the learning process, as well as what kinds of learning components that the activities develop. I also identify the librarians' strategies behind each activity. Firstly, I illustrate the results in a table where the activities are organized after the primary learning component identified. I will then explain the practice of each learning activity.

Primary learning component	Learning activity	Agents in the learning process	Librarian's strategies
Literacy of Ndebele and English	1. Storytelling in local language or English 2. Local language symposium, 3. Spelling competition for primary schoolchildren, 4. School involvements in rural and peri-urban communities, 5. Digitizing folk tales from elderly at rural sites.	Schoolchildren, youths, school teachers, community members, librarians	- Learning by doing - Mobility - Hosting competitions - Involving schools, community and sponsors - Archiving
Information literacy	6. Hospital and prison outreach with micro-libraries and activities 7. Study circles	Community members, library keepers, librarians	- Facilitate dialogue, discussion and access to information
Creativity, innovation and leisure	8. Innovation competition for secondary schoolchildren 9. Craft sessions for children	Secondary schoolchildren, younger children, Librarians, library workers	- Involve schools, communities and sponsors - Facilitate competitions and access to information - Learning by doing

5.2.1. Literacy of Ndebele and English

The first learning component is literacy. Literacy is a broad term that can be used in various ways with different meanings. Here in the first section, I mainly focus on the written and read language, both in Ndebele and in English, the last one being the main education language in Zimbabwe. In a definition by UNESCO, literacy is defined in broad terms. Here, I mainly refer to the first part of the definition; the reading, writing and contextual culture learning that comes with language.

Beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world.

UNESCO 2024

5.2.1.1 Storytelling in local language and English

Storytelling is a popular activity at all the five libraries chosen for this study. The storytelling sessions in the south Zimbabwean libraries are performed either in English or Ndebele. Here exemplified from one of the public city council libraries:

If you tell Cinderella it will be in English. And then the folk tales will be in Ndebele. We have a writer in Ndebele who comes sometimes and tell the folklore stories to the children. We also call for poets to come, just 20 minutes or so, then we buy some refreshments, sing and dance. It is praise poems. They play songs and the children enjoy.

Informant 11; Public library

The stories may connect to the location of the suburb library, many of the suburbs have the names of Ndebele kings and Ndebele nobilities, relatives of the king. The storytelling can be done with participative role-playing at different occasions, such as at Easter or at Christmas, the same informant describes. This specific library also invites the older children who visit the library in grade 6-7, to translate the Ndebele stories into English and vice versa:

Try and translate a story about baboons into English! Try to translate Pinocchio into Ndebele!

Informant 11; Public library

The older children are then encouraged to act as storytellers to the small children. In choosing to indulge in the local knowledge and language, librarians are attentive to the expressed needs of literature in local language. The local history strengthens local culture and identity, relating the first language to be carrying “memories of the world” (wa Thiong’o 2017) and relates to Ubuntu values of for example relations, culture and history. The librarians use dialogue and creativity when involving community members. In this activity, there is even a dialogue between the two languages and the different kinds of stories, manifested in the exercises of translating and retelling in the translated language. In the activity, both adults – the librarians and/or the invited poets - and youths are agents in the learning activity of creating knowledge. They act as storytellers, actors and as translators. The smaller children are agents constructing their own knowledge through role-plays and dance. The library space becomes an alternative to school education and enables creativity to have a prominent place (Informant 6; Community library,2024-03-05).

5.2.1.2. Local language symposium

The community city library arranges symposiums to highlight traditions and culture, through the teaching of proverbs in Ndebele culture, in Ndebele language. The symposium is for both children and adults, but the main participants are learners from primary and secondary schools. The schools are invited for joining the symposiums which are performed like competitions in proverbs. Since the curriculum in the schools was changed on a national level, vernacular is now to a greater extent in the curriculum. The children are trained to be knowledgeable of different aspects of local culture.

We had writers that came in to tell about proverbs and about your culture - what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do. And about how Africans are on culture, learning about your roots. We also had publishers coming in.

Informant 5, Community library

The symposium was thus created to support students in their studies of vernacular, according to the new curriculum. The activity is a supportive means to improve students' school results. One could find that the socio-cultural environment of the library space offers an alternative training, whilst at the same time acknowledging the socio-cultural environment of the society. The activity itself shows an acknowledgement and appreciation on how to construct knowledge through the first language and local history, as compared to the one that has often been described from the colonizer's perspective, the one gained "from the European memory" (wa Thiong'o 2017). By competing, the students are active agents, as well as the trainers/writers/publishers that the informant is describing. The librarians have a facilitating role during the activity. The activity relates to all the values of Ubuntu, most prominently culture in the way of valuing "the way we do things" (Mugumbate 2023, p. 16), such as language, beliefs, food and dress (ibid.) It also relates to indigeneity, that Mugumbate describes as valuing being black and from the African continent (ibid.). It also relates to Ubuntu values of holism, respect and history.

5.2.1.3. Spelling competition in English

Librarians at a community library in Bulawayo Metropolitan province initiated a certain spelling competition in English for the surrounding primary schools. The responsible librarian reaches out to schools to inform about the competition and the rewards. The children get snacks and drinks at the different finals held at the library, in addition to the honour of winning. For the rewards and the treats, the librarian has found and involved sponsors. Many classes sign up to learn both a new vocabulary and the spelling of it. The competition itself is facilitated by the

librarian, whereby children are first selected from within their classes, then their schools and eventually come to the library to compete in the finals. “These learners will blow your mind!” I am told at the interview (Informant 2, Community library, 2024-02-27). While joining one of these competitions at the library, for grade 5 and grade 6 from three different schools, I was very impressed by the learning that the children has made (observation, 2024-03-08). The competition is popular and has spread from Bulawayo to other parts of the region and the country. It all started some years ago with 8-10 schools and in 2024, a number of 40 schools participate in the competition.

The competition has made more learners go to the library, to read, to train, to compete. It gives them an achievement, a trophy. The price sponsors uniforms, your school fees, stationary pens, books to school...

Informant 2; Community library

Another staff member from the same library, in the management, expresses that it is the winning part she finds being the greatest motivation.

Everyone wants to win. If they lose, they still have the number one among them. But then they are motivated to win next year.

Informant 4, Community library

A third staff member from the same library, also from the management raises another issue about the activity. She means it motivates the children to find their ways to focus on the midst of the surrounding peer pressure and the increased problem of drug abuse among youth in the Zimbabwean society:

At least we try to draw them to the library: Be occupied with this! Grow your brain! Grow your mind!

Informant 5, Community library

At the occasion of the finals, the school classes, the teachers and the librarians are all present, which makes the library a safe space for encouragement and development. The main learning component is to advance one’s literacy in the English language. It also puts students in a very competitive mode. The skills in the language are important for the future, since all academic and vocational educations are in English. The “learning by doing” component here is not only spelling itself, but also the meaning and use of new words. Furthermore, the children develop the ability to challenge the pressure from within themselves as well as from the opponents, when competing in front of both teachers, one’s own class and other classes. But is competition always healthy? I see the knees shivering on a grade five-boy. He is among the five remaining competitive students in the very end of the competition. Co-learners have spelt wrong, and one by one they had to leave

the fellow competitors and go to sit in the audience (observation 2024-03-08). However, still it is appreciated and when it is over, the photo sessions of the winners in front of the school emblem, never stop (ibid.).

5.2.1.4. School involvements

The community city libraries and the public city council libraries are all very active in reaching out to schools in nearby and far off peri-urban and rural communities. The community library in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province runs the services of a *book bus* every day of the week. It goes to 30-40 schools in the suburbs and outskirts of Bulawayo city, from the western parts to the eastern. Every day it goes to different schools and returns to each school after 14 days. Children are allowed to lend books for these two weeks.

There is an issue of poverty. These kids at [name of suburb] will never come to town. We bring the books to them. We need to send information flows to these people in high density areas; those are the ones who don't access information and can't pay for information. There is a big deal to say you have a book in the house.

Informant 3; Community library

The librarian on the bus uses dialogue as a tool, all through the day with students and teachers, when the bus stops at each school. Other engagements with schools concern delivery of books so that the schools can have their own library. It started with an idea originally coming from Botswana national library service, as a reading awareness campaign, called *Book Box* (Informant 13; Public library, 2024-03-07). The running program consists of that the community town library delivers books to schools at rural sites. These books are placed in certain cabinets and are for all ages, children as well as adults who can use the library as a community library (Informant 9; Community library, 2024-03-05). After a certain number of weeks, the books are exchanged for new ones. The service is carried out from the main community town library. They serve 27 rural schools with book boxes and an increase is expected the coming year with 50 % (ibid.).

We will fund it through collaborations and request for more partnerships; the business community, the mining companies around us. We approached them and received some sponsorship last year. We make them visible through that sponsorship.

Informant 9; Community library

The British NGO Book Aid International is one of the partners in enabling the library outreach on other similar projects as the Book Box. These projects have the lifespan of a year, *Inspiring Readers* and *Pioneers*. The *Inspiring Readers* is about placing micro-libraries in steel cabinets in primary schools with 2000 books in each cabinet as permanent collections. This is carried out both from the public libraries

in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province and the community town library in South Matabeleland. Each responsible library will be called a hub library.

Each hub library is connected to five schools. Each hub has to train the teachers. But the first step is to receive the books, stamp them “Book Aid”, distribute and divide them equally and train the librarians. [...] After having trained the librarians, they have then to train the teachers.

Informant 13; Public library

So, the librarians are equipped by library and Book Aid trainers, to train the teachers at each primary school, to make them “teacher librarians”. Today 55 schools have been part of the project *Inspiring Readers* in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, and five schools in South Matabeleland (Informant 13; Public library, 2024-03-07).

In a similar sense, *Pioneers* is a project with permanent collections as well, but specifically for secluded areas that are difficult to reach (Informant 8; Community library, 2024-03-05). Today 43 rural schools are involved (ibid.).

The engagement with schools clearly corresponds to the needs of books at rural, peri-urban and secluded areas. It is literacy awareness and literacy promotion, considering that most of the children do not go into town and do not have a library close by. I joined the book bus and found the interest of lending books to complement school studies, as very high, which I was also informed, by the accompanying teachers (active observation and field notes, 2024-02-28). Bringing books to the children is a way of being an alternative to school education. The children are actively choosing, discussing and asking about different books, before lending. When it comes to Book boxes and the other services to rural sites, the increase of literacy and level of change is very high according to informants.

I think we have empowered a lot of children, just by introducing reading at a very early age. [...] The library has played a major role in cultivating a reading culture in rural areas. You can say that the library is an agent of change so much.

Informant 8; Community library

The component of literacy is the main one, which the informant describes as leading to change through establishing a reading culture of active citizens that know their way to navigate in society. I also attended several trainings of teacher librarians. Although the librarians are met with skepticism at first, the teachers agree during the workshops that it is not only about handing out books (Informant 12; Public library, 2024-03-07). Discussions become vivid and the training occasions include many relevant perspectives on local society challenges and students’ needs among the librarians and teachers (observation 2024-02-29 and 2024-03-01).

5.2.1.5. Digitizing stories and folk tales

One library organization works specifically with developing libraries in rural communities. Today there is an ongoing digitization of the library content, and a number of 30 libraries have been digitized. Currently the organization have found different ways of collecting and recording folktales told by mainly elderly in the rural sites. These stories will be made accessible to everyone in digital formats such as audio (Informant 1; Community library, 2023-11-17). The library organization wants to transmit the Ndebele culture to the young ones due to the slow extinction of local culture. There is also a gap between generations, both in language and knowledge that needs to be bridged (Informant 1; Community library, 2023-11-17). The community high school library which is among the five chosen libraries for this study, belongs to the same organization of rural libraries, and facilitates one part of the collection of stories. The librarian tells me that they purchase some books of Ndebele fiction, but they are put in the reserve section. “They can’t be lended, (sic) because they will get stolen”, she laughs (Informant 14; Community library, 2024-03-11).

[...] in our library most of our books are in English. We want vernacular and try to create those books through our grandfathers and grandmothers. [...] We have a WhatsApp-group with the community. We talk to the students about the group and that their community members can write and record voices [...]. Anyone can do it. It is not limited to age.

Informant 14; Community library.

The librarian is planning to archive the material and make a record of everything that is written or recorded by voice. It is clear that the socio-cultural surroundings shape the methods of the initiative. There is a clear identification of the needs of students and community members, i.e. that the books in vernacular are sought for due to the new curriculum, to the extent that they even get stolen. The librarians collect new stories and at the same time transmit the local culture and language. In the activity both librarians and community members are agents in the knowledge creation, in telling and making it accessible. The main component here is literacy, but creativity is of course a major component as well, in the storytelling itself.

5.2.2. Information literacy

In the following two learning activities, I find the literacy component to embrace many aspects of life. There are different aspects of information literacy and I here use the continuation of the UNESCO definition, from the above quote on literacy:

Literacy is a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life and is part of a larger set of skills, which include digital skills, media literacy, education for sustainable development and global citizenship as well as job-specific skills.

UNESCO 2024

5.2.2.1. Hospital and prison outreach

The community library in South Matabeleland provides micro-library services at the local town hospital and town prison. Staff at both places were trained to take care of the access to books for patients and inmates. At the hospital a cabinet of books is placed at the children's ward. At the prison, the micro-library has been appreciated so much that one of my informants list it as number one among the most successful community reading initiatives, and it was highlighted in the local paper 2023. The use of the micro-libraries is measured and evaluated every quarter of a year by evaluation tools carried out by the library organisation (Informant 8; Community town library, 2024-03-05). (Unfortunately I was not allowed to visit the prison.)

Moreover, two librarians visit the hospital twice a month for book talks, storytelling and information sessions for expecting and nursing mothers. They also do visits at the children's ward. I follow them twice to these sessions when they go to the hospital halls where expecting and nursing mothers wait for check-ups. Each time there are about 15 expecting mothers of varying ages, with or without small children in their laps, 6-7 nursing mothers with babies and then a varying number of children with parents at the children's ward (Active observations, 2023-11-22 and 2024-03-06).

The main aim of my visit is to teach them that the brain of a child develops at six months, when the baby is still in the mother's womb. Science proofs that. At six months the child will be hearing everything that will be happening in the outside world, so I will encourage mothers to read to their unborn babies.

Informant 6; Community library

During the visit the librarian informs, and then asks one of the expecting mothers to read a children's book loud for everyone. All are encouraged to come to the library for information:

[...] ... we've got books to help them maintain pregnancy, especially during the first pregnancy, some won't know what happens in their bodies. They do come to the library. We also got books to help them bring up their babies, take care of their babies. We realized that before when we gave birth, you used to stay at your elderly parents, maybe your aunt or grandmother, but these days it's no longer happening, they prefer to stay with their husbands.

Informant 6; Community library

The other librarian tells that in the children's ward, the main thing is to do some activity like colouring, read or leave some puzzles or toys. "It's important because it's something different from the hospital life" (Informant 7; Community library, 2024-03-05).

The needs of information and the value of it, is measured regularly by the organization's evaluation tools (Informant 8; Community library, 2024-03-05). It is a learning activity that through dialogue and encouragement, informs women on how they can learn more about the process of pregnancy and child development, take care of their bodies, babies and health during a challenging time. In the sessions, however, there is not that much of a dialogue. It is more of an information session mainly from the librarian, due to that the women are actually in line waiting for their appointment at the nurse. There are opportunities to ask questions, but there are not many women who do so. This might be because they are in the space of a hospital with other women of different ages. My own presence could be an affecting factor. But while being encouraged to come for more information at the library, the choice is in the hand of the women. It is a learning component of health literacy in the specific information activity. Mainly the librarians are agents here and they are doing their best to involve the community members by handing out books and encourage the women to read aloud and look in the books. The micro-libraries in the hospital and at the prison, are frequently used according to the evaluations (ibid.). The children at the hospital, who actively participate in storytelling or craft, are described to prefer using their creativity; drawing or painting, as a break from the hospital stay (Informant 7; Community library, 2024-03-05).

5.2.2.2. *Study circles*

Several study circles are created in communities at rural sites in South Matabeleland. Many of the community members are subsistence farmers who grow crops mainly for home consumption. These people are often the parents and relatives to the children who go to the schools that receive Book boxes, that makes up for the community library (Informant 10; Community library, 2023-03-06). The whole program is built on the tool called *theory of change*, "where information is a kickstart to development" (Informant 9; Community library, 2024-03-05). The study circles of 6-12 persons have come together on a topic they have a common interest in, for example goat breeding or vegetable production. They are encouraged to do projects by the community library organisation.

When we prepare the Book boxes we include reading material for projects, we encourage farmers to go to the libraries at the schools. If they don't get the right material, we source them from the main library. Some want to read Ndebele books, so we include these there.

Informant 10; Community library

In these groups, English might be a challenge and the staff is looking for more books in Ndebele. Some books on vegetable production and goat breeding have been produced locally, set in the climate of south Zimbabwe (informant 10; community library, 2024-03-05). The study circles start learning processes together with the community library staff, on for example how to organise their gatherings, such as constitution-making, roles and functions.

We ask them about their gaps and their interests. We deal mostly with information dissemination, we make sure that they study, read and discuss. Sometimes they use their own experiences, those old women and men do have experiences on how to monitor projects.

Informant 10; Community library

Today there are several gardens, called integrated gardens, with different kinds of plantations and some have built ponds for fish breeding. Some of the study circles run goat breeding projects or handicraft projects. The study circles are also encouraged to discuss other topics such as inheritance, HIV/Aids, hygiene, marriage, birth certificates and children's rights.

There is a great change. For example some women have improved a lot. When we started in 2008-2009, through discussions on hygiene and health issues in certain areas; they built toilets. Those women who do handwork; one of the ladies built a house for herself. They have now got property, they have got utensils, they have got blankets, they send their grandchildren to school.

Informant 10; Community library

The library staff is performing the learning activities, on the basis of what the groups and the people themselves want to develop. After deciding focus, they continue a dialogue and the learning process evolves as the community members put the studies into practice and start to make an income from them. "Learning by doing", as Dewey stated, can most certainly be seen here.

Once you empower people with knowledge that can actually sustain their livelihoods, they start focusing on reading things that can only improve them financially or sustain their families.

Informant 8; Community library

The mutual discussions and the dialogue as foundation of the learning activity (Freire 1993), can be related to both "bildung" or popular education and in a bigger perspective when considering the aspect of what the learning means for the whole community; Ubuntu. What I do see here, is how the libraries and the community together are drivers for change. It is clear that the component of information literacy, facilitated in different ways by the library organization has assisted in that

people create new knowledge and practices. It is the community members themselves that have requested what they want and need to learn, in which language, and if possible, by local writers based in the local agriculture in the Zimbabwean climate.

4.3.3. Creativity, innovation and leisure

5.2.3.1. Innovation competition

One community library has initiated another competition for teenagers, in secondary schools, based on innovation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Since CALA, and the recent new curriculum was installed, there is a strong focus on innovation as part of the STEM subjects (Pindula News 2024). The informants tell me that children struggle with the innovative parts. Just like the activity of the local language symposium, this activity supports students to embrace the new curriculum. Whereas the previous one supported the skills in vernacular, this activity supports the students in the learning processes of innovation. One informant describes that the library's activity is needed because children "don't have all the components at home, which is forced by the curriculum." (Informant 5; Community library 2024-03-01). This corresponds with the criticism against CALA, the previous curriculum; that it widens the inequality gap and makes it difficult for children in disadvantaged communities (Amh Voices 2023), and the library then tried to fill that gap.

The competitions are held at schools or at the library. Students are divided into groups of three and they get a task. Together they will showcase the creation, made out of whatever local material they can find.

We give them a topic and tell them to make for example an irrigation system and then everyone has to do that. But we say that this innovation must match the rural environment – the material should be found also by the people in the rural areas. They should also be able to use the innovations. We give them the marking points to what we are looking at, then they create it.

Informant 4; Community library

The concept of the competition has spread to a national level, as did the spelling competition. One informant in another province is a librarian at a rural community library located at a high school. She describes one of the STEM competitions where she followed a competing team from her school to the finals. At this occasion, the task had been to create sustainable sanitary pads.

I went there with three girls. They were making those pads as a team and came up with a lot of sanitary pads. It was important, some students can't afford to buy them so now they can be able to create their own, and also be able to recycle it. And even if they can afford, they can teach students who can't.

Informant 14; Community library

When asking about what makes the activity so popular and what motivates the students, one of the informants who was part of starting the activity describes:

I think it is the learning component, they think outside the box. It's more of a practical thing. It's different from being in class. Learning whilst you're seeing makes it easier and better, it explains things you see in the writing and reading. [...]

We asked children to do sanitary pads for themselves, it is something you are not taught at school, it is creativity that is done. It increases their awareness to say; Ok, I can do this in case I don't have money to buy them. So we are trying to give even life skills to these children.

Informant 5; Community library

The last example touches an important part of basic needs for girls when it comes to hygiene. Many girls, especially in rural communities, do not go to school during menstruation due to lack of sanitary facilities (Informant 9; Community library, 2023-03-05). The process of creating knowledge together, and learning by doing, make the children active agents in the learning process. The innovative component corresponds to contextual socio-cultural circumstances and needs. The children also need to collaborate during the whole process, and present what they have constructed together. This demands dialogue and collaboration in many different steps. To be able to create change in ones' life, one needs to find strategies to overcome the daily challenges. This is what the activity promotes, through the means of creativity, thinking outside the box, and to collaborate in order to innovate. The librarians then function as facilitators at the very occasion for the exposition of innovations.

5.2.3.2. Craft activities for children

In four of the libraries, there are sessions for children based on craft and creation. One of the community libraries offer for example "Wonderful Wednesdays". When asking the two librarians in the children's section of this particular community library, about the children's preferences at the library, one of them exclaims: "The puzzles! The toys! That is their most need!" (Informant 6; Community library, interview 2024-03-05). The activities on Wonderful Wednesdays are based on drawing, painting and creation, as well as outdoor physical activities in the garden of the library. The library also receives regular school visits, and I took part in a visit of a grade one, from a nearby school. It began with that the children are

choosing books to read and look in. After that it was storytelling time. One of the librarians told a story from a book in a very big size and shows the pictures to everyone. The story circled around a girl with different things in a basket to deliver. After the session, the children would create their own baskets out of colorful paper, glue and scissors. Then they could bring their baskets home.

I have found, when I observed, that there were many helpful tools to access, such as scissors, glue, paper etc., that assisted the children in finding their own ways to create. I also found that librarians used dialogue as a tool and that the children were encouraged to try themselves. Interestingly, in this particular activity, the teacher was asking the librarians to make the whole baskets for the children, instead of that the children would do it themselves. According to the constructivist approach, it is” learning by doing” that make children navigate by themselves in the world and to construct knowledge (Säljö 2014). The role of creativity for children in the library space is appreciated, since many children come every day after school and stay there until their parents come to pick them up:

They don't do creative things at school. It is leisure for them to use their creativity. [...] ...This might be the only place where they can use this. At school they give them the beating, but we don't chase them away.

Informant 6; Community library

The two librarians explain that they use both languages when having the creative activities, but even more the local language; “...So we use Ndebele, that is when children understand more than the foreign language.” (Informant 7, Community library, 2024-03-07). Hence, both children and librarians are agents in the creation activities.

5.2.4. Summing up learning activities

I find that in the learning activities the main components are literacy in various ways, as well as creativity, innovation and leisure. The community members of different ages are all active in the learning process, mostly framed by dialogue (Freire 1993). The literacy on local language might be seen as reenforcing the language capacity, thus creating skills and knowledge on local culture, which is explained to be lacking among children and youths. I also find that literacy in various ways is enhanced by tools, such as books, the creation of study circles, dialogue and the librarians' skills of facilitating and make different activities possible (Säljö 2014). These activities have led to changes in livelihoods and life

situations. However, the information sessions at the hospital, were more similar to traditional learning of top-down model. On the other hand, they are performed when people are in a vulnerable situation. It does not mean that the information on health was not useful and evolving for the community members.

The components of creativity, leisure and innovation are important in making the library an alternative space for learning, compared to the school. I find that the libraries do complement schools in some ways, that may support the high level of literacy in Zimbabwe (Chisita 2011b). The new school curriculum does promote innovation in the STEM subjects, but libraries are doing their part to fill the inequality gaps for students who have difficulties in fulfilling the financial demands, that the curriculum is criticized for (Amh Voices 2023).

5.3. Strategies for community change

The strategies behind the activities concern navigating the challenges for the work itself and strive for community change from different aspects, building on mainly literacy, but also creativity and innovation. I found the strategies of Learning by doing and Facilitation in the practice of activities, and here they will be further developed. Other strategies that I want to raise, identified in the activities and in the interview material are Networking and Mobility. These are documented below by informants and discussed in relation to previous research and theory. Firstly, a table is presented that summarizes the strategies used for activities and community work. With the table, I want to illustrate how they correlate to the contextual challenges and propose the change factors.

Librarians' strategies	Contextual challenges	Change factor
<p>Networking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage and involve community members, schools and teachers, publishers and writers. - Entrepreneurial conversations to involve sponsors and partners. 	<p>Compensate lack of books in local language and literature</p> <p>Compensate lack of funding</p>	<p>Increased literacy in both local language and English.</p> <p>Community networking for sustainability.</p>

<p>Learning by doing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using dialogue and creativity in the activities to community members - Trust in ideas to new ways of fundraising 	<p>Compensate lack of funding</p>	<p>Knowledge creation and innovations for sustainable livelihoods</p> <p>Strengthening libraries' role in society.</p>
<p>Facilitation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitate competitions, groups, WhatsApp groups and study circles - Facilitate access to information and access to local stories - Create conditions for learning in an alternative space through dialogue, creativity and leisure - Back up solutions on electricity and digital systems 	<p>Compensate the lack of material in local language</p> <p>Compensate digital access to information</p> <p>Compensate electricity cuts and lack of digital access</p>	<p>Knowledge creation in local language and culture.</p> <p>Support students' learning in school subjects and contribute to diminish inequality gaps</p> <p>Learning to think out of the box, increase civic and information literacy, emancipation</p> <p>Creation of archives for local stories.</p> <p>Diminishing generation gaps.</p>
<p>Mobility</p>	<p>Compensate all challenges</p>	<p>Creating a reading culture in both local language and English</p>

5.3.1. Networking

5.3.1.1. Networking with actors in communities

To engage and involve the community is important for bringing local language and local literature to the fore, despite the minority it constitutes in the book collections. It can be seen in the activities described above, for example in how storytelling is carried out in local language: The library might invite a poet or a writer from the community. It might also be performed by the older children to the younger ones,

by reading the stories they themselves have translated to Ndebele from English or reversed. One can also find the strategy in the WhatsApp-groups, that encourages community members at rural sites of all ages to write stories in whatever language suits them, or to record their voices if they are not able to write on their phones. In order to establish change, the community needs to be involved from the start. Onaade-Oyo (2023) sees public libraries as the local gateway to knowledge, and for providing resources for lifelong learning, independent decision making and the cultural development of the individual and social groups (ibid., p. 184). He promotes networking with local actors. “Communities should therefore not be left out, and that is why it is necessary for stakeholders in the field of librarianship at all levels to play their roles.” (ibid., p. 185).

5.3.1.2. Networking with writers and publishers

The needs are obvious: Community members ask for more literature in local language as well as local authors. The collections of local language and locally written literature that exists, are in some libraries locked in or is put in the reserve section, due to the risk of it getting stolen. It has happened in the rural areas (Informant 10; Community library, 2024-03-05). Several of the informants mention the possibility to change the situation of lack of the locally written books, through creating networks with publishers and writers. Thus, the strategy is there in some cases, but it is still to be further developed, according to my interviews. It is also a matter of funding. Everyone agrees on that there are writers still writing in local language, but very few publishing houses.

There are different ways to go about it: “We are involving the authors themselves”, one informant talked about two authors who wanted to create a publishing house and about a future cooperation (Informant 12; Community library, 2024-03-07). Another librarian wanted to use the same strategy, and expressed:

We need to partner with our publishers and our writers – we could form a consortium where we find funding for a book that tells a story on this or that. Collaboration works more perfect. You find a scenario where writers write books in local language, sell few copies because they are not relevant. But through collaboration with libraries, you go and write specific things according to the needs of the children. The sales go up; vibrant and functioning publishing.

Informant 8; Community library

Another suggestion came from the experience of another rural site; which even more concerns the engagement of the community as well:

I think of a collection of old folk tales, if we had facilitators sharing that collection. In schools we have clusters [groups of rural schools]. If we could start from clusters, going down to

schools, going down to classes. From there we could find children interested in being writers, then we take it from there. So that we sort of revive our culture, our traditions.

Informant 10; Community library

Thus, the strategy for networking with publishers and writers still needs to grow stronger to establish sustainable change.

5.3.1.3. Entrepreneurial networking

All informants have mentioned the challenge of economy and funds as major and sometimes overwhelming. However, the impression is not that librarians would crouch and surrender for it. Surely there are librarians who need to find other solutions due to the pressure of the economy, and might lack motivation for their jobs because of low salaries (Informant 14; Community library, 2024-03-11). In fact, two of the libraries in the study had recently lowered the salaries for the whole staff due to financial constraints, when I visited in November 2023. I find their strategy for mastering the economic challenges to be entrepreneurial conversations with the business sector to find sponsors, funds and make partnerships. The community city and town libraries use this for many activities, as does the public library, although it is funded from local municipality. Yet the public libraries struggle because the funding is not enough. While the Harare International Book Fair was still going on, the public city council library would always take part in the fair to make themselves visible as a library for different actors in society and do activities and storytelling for the children. (Informant 13; Public library, 2024-03-07). When it comes to digital skills and access, Onaade-Oyo argues that libraries and librarians “as information specialists and brokers, have roles to play in identifying stakeholders who will serve as advocates in encouraging members of the community to embrace the use of libraries, most especially public libraries, in order to discover themselves educationally, socially, politically etc.” (2022, p. 184). This is what librarians are doing, in their networking with actors and sponsors in the communities.

One example concerns a previous activity on having children’s storytelling on radio, together with the children. They got to air the show for free, and in return the local radio station would be promoted by the library.

Whatever project that I have, I try to fundraise it.[...] I always understood the notion that you touch the heart before you ask for a hand. I offer something and in return I get it. Especially in Africa you have to be entrepreneurial, because no one wants to give anything for free.[...] Whenever I’m around people I keep going until I figure out what they like – usually it’s negotiations!

Informant 2; Community library

In this line of work, the library gets known in different sectors of society, and their services. Partnerships and collaboration are important factors, even more so when there is a lack of financial support from the government. “Access to information which is crucial is one of the core needs of society and the librarians/libraries are fulfilling the need through capacity building, partnerships (collaboration), training, and access opportunities for everyone” (Horsfall 2023, p. 115).

Lastly, the lack of funds and the lack of governmental support effects that the professionalism of librarianship is not acknowledged in society, as described by several of the informants. This means that the strategy of entrepreneurial conversation used in the business sector, is of utmost importance in other sectors too:

It’s a new profession. In Bulawayo there was no school for librarians until 1994. We have got a situation where communities out there...if you mention librarianship, they would say; “Do you mean collecting and giving out books is a profession?” When you try to mobilize in the community, it is so difficult, you have to be good at convincing.

Informant 12; Public library

The informant continues to explain the skepticism of teachers when they are about to be trained by librarians, when to receive the micro-libraries. It will be *after* the engagement that the teachers understand the value of the library and of librarianship as a profession. The creative and constructivist part is essential as I see it, and makes the librarians question the knowledge of how librarianship is supposed to be done. However, not all librarians are into that kind of questioning. One informant expresses: “Librarians are stuck up being librarians. They don’t accept change” (Informant 2; Community library, 2024-02-28). But change is needed, when society changes, and the needs of the community with it.

5.3.2. Learning by doing

The saying from Dewey; “Learning by doing” is a constructivist strategy that is used in the activities, as well as among the librarians themselves. One strategy is to trust in new ideas for practicing library work, and to fundraise. One example is borrowed from one of the community libraries in this study. This library does not get any external funding. Among other things they rent out rooms in the building to schools and to print services, to make up for the income. Otherwise, the membership of the community funds a big deal of the costs. However, the building is old, and the roof was leaking and damaged books in the room underneath. To get funding for the roof and other things, the librarians came up with the idea of arranging a marathon: To run for the library, and to fundraise. The activities of

spelling and innovation competitions were ideas that were trusted to be tried in the same manner.

We often start with having an idea. We start with a few people, or a few schools. We start in the city and then go countrywide. We figure out as we go. In the beginning we did not do much of this. But when the new chief librarian came in, we changed. X had ideas but no specific plans on how to do it and gave them to us to figure out. X wanted to do a marathon to fundraise. X took it on herself and did it, now we had it twice. Marathon is a part of being self-sustaining, we had to find ways to keep going. You have to be innovative.

Informant 3; Community library

To believe in the ideas and to dare trying them is a strategy that can be found as well in the creation of WhatsApp-groups to collect stories and poems in the rural community library. Another example is how a community library initiated reading competitions at rural schools just to create interest for the books, or how they put a fridge in the library section to make some of the rural projects of chicken breeding, available to sell in town. However, one of the informants stated that this kind of work is nothing they were taught at the university education; “No one was there to come and show innovations” (Informant 2; Community library, interview 2024-02-28).

Furthermore, I find the library community work to be carried out with a “learning by doing” strategy, in the sense that the community members are encouraged to read, study and also create projects on the topics that interest them and that can be developed to sustain their livelihoods. Moreover, the members of the study circles discuss and read about health issues, inheritance, children’s rights etc., supplied with books from the community library. This equips them with knowledge on a wide range of life areas, such as the informant talked about, when describing the hygiene facilities (above). The foundation for the approach is Community Based Inclusive Development (Informant 9; Community library, 2024-03-06). “This is the line I use; Leaving no one or no place behind” (ibid.). Interestingly, it is the same line that the government, “the Second Republic”, uses as a mantra to their national development strategy (Matema 2024): “Government recognizes that development will only be sustainable if it is inclusive and has embedded the principle of leaving no one behind” (UN Sustainable Development Goals Platform 2021). However, the informants are critical to how governmental development corresponds to community members’ needs of, and access to, information.

The work with study circles, can be related to holism in Ubuntu – bringing in the wellbeing of the communality (Ngomane 2019). One finds the learning by doing-strategy in the innovation competition, in how secondary schoolchildren are making

their own projects and make them valid and sustainable for rural as well as urban children. “We are trying to give even life skills to these children”, one informant said (Informant 5; Community library, 2024-03-01). Once again, a holism can be viewed in that the informant expresses how awareness for the wellbeing of the community, is part of the informative duty of the library. It can also be related to respect and responsibility, that are values of Ubuntu: Responsibility involves: “...valuing that we have a responsibility towards each other and future generations and a responsibility to our environment and responsibility to maintain relations” (Mugumbate 2023, p. 16). There are surely many steps to go, for learners of young ages although they have won innovation competitions, to establish change on a broader level. But change is established through librarians’ initiatives in small steps, remembering that literacy, precedes emancipation (Freire 1993). A learning by doing-strategy, can also be seen in the description of the new curriculum, that was installed in the end of February 2024 (Chikadwa 2024).

5.3.3. Facilitation

The librarians I met work according to the core values of librarianship; to mediate knowledge and information, to the point that they sometimes could be similar to activists. One informant described the use of personal network when creating activities. Another informant told me the story of a long-term project, called the Reading tent. It was a tent brought to book fairs or communities, to bring books to the children.

We asked the people to give us space – we were not charging anything – and to allow us to talk to the children, have a book-fun day. So the community where we pitched the tent, they would come in, talk about reading, we would also have writers there to talk to children whether they were interested in writing, they would even write stories.

Informant 13; Community library

The informant also tells that “No one was paid, that was a voluntary thing.” (Informant 13; Public library, 2023-03-07). It shows a passion to promote literature, literacy and knowledge and it shows Ubuntu values of responsibility “towards each other and future generations” (Mugumbate 2023, p.16). Of course there are stories about that librarians lack motivation too. Especially since the salaries are not enough and the recognition of the profession is low (Informant 5; Community library, 2024-03-01). However, several of the librarians I have met are trained to be trainers of library keepers and teacher librarians to host the micro-libraries. The librarians have a role as facilitators when it comes to organise the framework of training, competitions, study circles and networks. In the very practice of the activities, they are the ones to facilitate competitions or facilitate that the

community gets access to information, both analogue and digital. Due to the lack of digital access, other kinds of information often compensate.

Lankes describes that” the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities” (Lankes 2011, p.31). In the public libraries in the suburbs, they used to have AIDS-information corners in the libraries, up until the time when it was still taboo to talk about it, “as late as 2011” (Informant 12; Public library, 2024-03-07)). The informant wanted to make the same kind of corners on current problems with youth and drug abuse, and claimed that “libraries play a very important role in shaping this society” (ibid.).

This is an example on how we can use the libraries to reach out on drugs. It was a space of information that had to do with AIDS, it was a way of conscious-making or awareness in communities.

Informant 12; Public library

Facilitating library corners for information access, can be seen as improving awareness in society, but also founded in community values of Ubuntu. Furthermore, facilitation concerns access to digital information, but also to systems. The manual Brown system is used in the majority of public and community libraries visited, and one out of five libraries uses the digital Koha system for cataloguing and lending books. Another one is about to start automatisation, but the challenges of internet are also connected to electricity access.

We are already trying to do automatisation, scanning books. We are in the process of doing that. We are trying to put it in a way so that electricity cuts will not affect it.

Informant 4; Community library

Back-up solution for digital systems is necessary. At one community library they already use a digital system for cataloguing and lending books, but there they have the back-up of solar cells. It makes the library keep going many hours even if there are electricity cuts. The community library based in the city runs an internet department, mentioned previously, where community members pay per hour so that the library will be able to manage costs for Wi-Fi.

We are in a tricky area as librarians. We need to be innovative to keep ourselves afloat.

Informant 8; Community library

The comment comes from a librarian at another library, that wants to create the same system of hourly fees for Wi-Fi, to sustain the costs for the internet.

The facilitation includes that librarians create the conditions for an alternative learning space, where components of creativity, leisure and innovation can fit.

According to Freire and Macedo, this learning space is valuable for constructing knowledge and make un-looked for discoveries (1987).

5.3.4. Mobility

The libraries in this study all do outreach work to make the services of the library accessible to as many as possible, even with scarce funds. It means that they use mobility as a strategy, and are not stuck in the physical space of the library building, nor waiting for visitors to come to visit it. The most complex outreach work is made by the organisation that establishes rural community libraries, which is part of this study. The foundation of the rural libraries, that were established to function as community centers, lies in the belief that it is the rural residents who are in the best position to determine their future, and that the best impact on rural development would be if they are managed by the rural people themselves (Chiwere and Hadebe 1992). The same organisation has established donkey-drawn library carts to reach secluded areas, fully equipped with solar cells and Wi-Fi (Informant 1; Community library, 2023-11-17). There are also minor book boxes, carried out by bicycles (Chiwere and Hadebe 1992). The donkey-drawn carts serve remote communities with books, and community members have been encouraged to for example watch documentaries together shown from the cart and form study circles or drama clubs (ibid.). In the areas where there are no established libraries, the mobility have contributed to strengthening networks and cooperation between libraries (ibid.) Chisita urges that the organisation that established the mobile libraries, have inspired teacher colleges to explore mobile libraries for school teachers at remote rural sites (2011a). The mobility strategy is underlying all outreach activities listed above, corresponding to needs of the community members. The mobility is essential when it comes to indigenous knowledge and the collection of it, and demands other means than collecting printed material (ibid). One example is the collection of stories, that may be voice-recorded, in the activity of digitizing stories from elderly. Mobility is necessary and can also be seen as a way of questioning how knowledge is learnt, in the sense of even questioning the idea of a stationary library.

We want to not only be known as a warehouse for books – we want to be known outside the box, as a growing organism – we grow, we are diverse, we are catching up with trends. What else can a librarian do?

Informant 2; Community library

The comment is made by the librarian who has promoted the spelling competition. Thus, the mobility of librarians and of libraries have brought about change in the sense of establishing reading cultures through the access to books, and to

information on various topics, according to interviews and information from evaluation and monitoring tools. “Leaving no one or no place behind”, was stated from one of the informants above, when talking about the library services and the enhancement of knowledge and information. This, also the mantra of the Second Republic, can be reflected in Ubuntu values, concerning the appreciation of community, the value of respect that includes the local environment, the land and the culture. It can also be adhered to values of justice and freedom, not least when it comes to the learning component of information literacy. Mugumbate explains it to concern how to value “being free and independent from colonisation and injustice; valuing just laws and practices in relation to land, the environment, relations, economics and politics” (2023, p. 16).

5.3.5. Summing-up the strategies

The strategies I found for the librarians’ community work, is based on the activities, the interview material, as well as local documents. These are networking, learning by doing, facilitation and mobility. I find that librarians create networks with sponsors and stakeholders to overcome challenges of funding, and with publishers and writers to bring in more content on local language and literature. Outreach activities are used to reach and involve community members through networks, and it goes close together with the strategy of mobility. Mobility is the foundation of all outreach work, most obviously found in the different mobile libraries to remote communities, but also in daily work of for example, library services of the book bus. Networking and mobility are strategies that can be seen in other contexts globally, according to Horsfall (2023), and Harle & Tarrant (2011). Facilitation and learning by doing are both part of the construction of knowledge, according to socio-cultural constructivist theories (Lankes 2011). To facilitate activities such as craft sessions, spelling competitions or access to certain information, includes that dialogue is part of the learning process. Dialogue as it is framed here, creates active agents in the construction of knowledge (Freire 1993). Learning by doing, is a way of using creativity, innovation and trust to construct knowledge, and is used among the librarians both in their own project creations, and in the practice of the activities. To learn while you are doing, seems to be a must when navigating challenges of economy. These strategies can be seen in Ubuntu, such as in valuing respect, community, holism, culture, history and indigeneity. In that way it questions the imposed learning of colonial history, and even the colonial foundation of librarianship itself, which is based on stationary libraries with printed material (Chisita 2011a).

6. Discussion

6.1. "New" librarianship and community

I have found perspectives from David Lankes' American context to be applicable on how the librarians work in the Zimbabwean context. He is a researcher in Library and Information Science, and in the book *Atlas for new librarianship*, his main hypothesis is that "the mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in their communities" (Lankes 2011). I believe that picturing the librarian as facilitator is useful in the Zimbabwean context, and I have used "facilitation" as one of their main strategies for community change. In the described activities, and in the strategies, one can see that librarians are active conversants in dialogue with community members, they are negotiators in dialogue with stakeholders – what they do is to facilitate knowledge creation based on the needs of community members (ibid.). Following this line of thought, Lankes also insists on naming the library users "members", which I have chosen to do as well in this thesis; meaning the users are members of the community – and of the library (2011, p. 65). This indicates that a library is *of* the people, instead of *for* the people. Hence, the librarian is also part of a community and is also one of the people, Lankes argues (ibid.). It thus implies an equality, which is something that I agree with and that can be related to the theoretical aspects of anti-colonialist Freire and the role of mutual dialogue when constructing knowledge (1993). One could see facilitation as a way of engagement, which makes librarianship more of a mission than just a job, according to the argumentation (Lankes 2011, p. 66). This mirrors my personal idea of librarianship. However, seeing it as a "mission" could be dangerous. Missions are too often equal with low salaries and low recognition. The librarians in Zimbabwe experience that they lack recognition in society, as discussed in this thesis. It is based on lack of recognition from the government, and lack of funding for fully creating all library services they would prefer. Being aware of the dangers, viewing librarians as mobile facilitators for the creation of knowledge, is useful for raising the specificity of the professionalism that librarians perform, added to stationary organisers of knowledge.

David Lankes argues that the librarian is the best tool a library has (2011). Whatever tools there are or are not, according to the constructivist approach, it is not possible to impose knowledge and learning on someone, but *to create conditions for learning* (2011, p. 27). In the Zimbabwean context, the libraries are not only spaces for learning, but also alternatives to the educational schooling system, founded in

the English school system, and in the colonial language of English. Being fully aware of the different contexts; the specificity of the Zimbabwean context as pointed out by researchers Chisita and Musevera above, compared to the American one which is Lankes's, I find similarities because it all concerns the field of the library and librarianship. In order to build relevant library service, librarians in general must do more to understand the member's reasons for using it, and also recognize and reward those reasons, Lankes argues (bid.). In for example the spelling competition, children are rewarded for their efforts. This means that when facilitating knowledge, to relate to what it is that motivates community members, is crucial (Lankes 2011, p. 26). I find the Zimbabwean librarians to be aware of, and try to understand, the community needs. However, there might be more ways of doing this. Research is one example.

6.2. Is Ubuntu a subtext to a “new librarianship”?

Investigating library activities and the community needs they correlate to, performed in a space where anyone is free to enter, might help us to understand the importance of libraries in general in the world. But even more so in societies where the access to information is not supported, nor guaranteed by the state, who can rather go as far as to withdraw the access to it (Harle and Tarrant 2011). As we have seen – when information access is limited, the librarians need to find new ways. The librarians in practice, working as facilitators in creating knowledge, inside as well as outside the library for establishing change, as described by Lankes (2011), makes me draw a conclusion that their ways of working with the community are permeated by Ubuntu: ”The foremost important feature of ubuntu is the recognition of humanness among people beyond any forms of social categorization”, writes Waghid & Hungwe (2023). What I have been studying in this thesis, are strategies that melt together with this worldview. Many of the strategies are based on a holistic perspective on the needs of community members. They recognize the needs, and relate to them for their work, as Lankes discusses (2011). There is a willingness to be mobile, in order to enable information access to any community member, to improve literacy, and in the long run, livelihoods: “Leaving no one behind” (Informant; Community library, 2024-03-05). The Ubuntu philosophy brings about a deeper meaning to library and community work, in “that our well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of others” (Ubuntu soul 2024). When it comes to restoring the value of a culture and a language as “a bank of memories of the world” (wa Thiong’o 2017), the Ubuntu philosophy and worldview is part of the healing process. I find that the librarians in Zimbabwe through their learning

activities and strategies, perform a “new librarianship” in a postcolonial context, permeated by Ubuntu.

6.3. Suggestions for further research

While performing this study, it would have been interesting to read more studies on the experiences of community members of all ages and their use of library services in the context. I could not find any of these studies in the databases. It would be of relevance to do more qualitative research on the agency of the library and the factors of change, from the perspective of community members. I would also suggest more research on knowledge creation that leads to change, coming out of fiction, poetry, theatre or book circles – both analogue and digital ones – activities that are organized by actors such as public libraries. Today the digital society creates inequality gaps. Studies such as the one Schmidt (2020) has performed on the low prevalence of, and access to, southern African research in European databases, would need to be more brought up and discussed, to bridge gaps. I would also suggest studies concerning generational gaps and culture heritage, in the digital era. And lastly, studies concerning development strategies by governments and how they relate to information access, in this specific context and others, would be of need.

7. Conclusion

In this study I have seen how the Zimbabwean librarians engage and involve the community members in learning activities, and what strategies they use in their work. Amidst the challenges, I find that the librarians of public and community libraries, can be seen as agents of change when it comes to improving sustainability of livelihoods, strengthening local language and culture and being an alternative space for learning. They might be seen as working in the role of facilitators, with library strategies based in Ubuntu.

7.1. The application of theories

I have come to this conclusion by actively observing, making interviews and looking at local documents. The theoretical tools to help me identifying the ways that librarians can be seen as agents of change, have been a postcolonial perspective and learning theories. The socio-cultural constructivist theory has served as a filter, seeing how the community members are active in the learning processes, as well as the librarians. The librarians guide the groups or individuals forward but are still actively engaged. The knowledge created in the different activities will stay with the community members, since they have actively taken part in constructing it. Opposite to the "banking" model that Freire refers to in a top-down learning model, these activities are performed in a collaborative way between active agents, by the components of literacy, creativity, leisure, innovation.

To bring the Ubuntu philosophy into this study, has deepened my understanding of the context and the practice, and I find that Ubuntu permeate strategies and activities, and how they are shaped and practiced. One way to look at Ubuntu, which is a philosophy of thousands of years, is how it also serves as a postcolonial perspective in questioning and alternating knowledge systems inherited by colonialism. It is opposing values inherited by colonialism, such as that of individualistic capitalism associated with Western societies (Okereke et al. 2018). In the library services, the relations with the community and the wellbeing of it, is a foundation.

7.2. Answering research questions

In the analysis, I have responded to three different research questions. The first one being what challenges there are for librarians and community work. I have identified three main challenges, and I have described how librarians deal with them, in their daily work and with communities. These are economy and funding, local language and literature services and digital access to information. As a consequence, librarians experience a low recognition as professionals in society.

I have described how the learning activities, listed in the analysis, are practiced. They are manifold and complex, and carried out by the help of various tools: Local language and English language, books, competitions, study circles etc. They are framed by dialogue that make community members and librarians agents in the learning process. Lastly, I identified some of the main strategies, and described how they are used to navigate challenges and to create activities. These are networking, learning by doing, facilitation and mobility.

7.3. Agents of change

The practice of the different activities makes changes in the lives of community members. It is stated by informants, and when taking part of outreach work at rural sites, in suburbs and at the physical libraries, I have seen and heard about these change. Informants describe how study circles make a difference and a change in the lives of community members, when it comes to food supply, hygiene and health, civic rights and knowledge. Other changes concern that reading cultures are established, which in the long run makes changes for socio-cultural development and emancipation (Freire 1993). The librarians may be seen as agents of change in strengthening awareness-making in for example civic rights and health. They can be seen as agents of change in strengthening livelihoods.

The strategies of facilitation and learning by doing, imply that librarians create conditions for learning, by means of dialogue, creativity, and innovation. One way that makes this visible, is how the libraries serve as an alternative place for learning. They are well visited especially by children and youths. Here, children are encouraged to use creativity and enjoy leisure, and meanwhile they learn. It differs from how the school system functions, and informants describe that some children do not have the same facilities to create art in their homes. There are also activities that support children in literacy and innovation, to keep up with the demands of the school curriculum, that has been seen making changes for young persons. One can see librarians as agents of change, in creating this alternative space of education (which is free, but for lending books, some libraries demand memberships or a fee).

I find that language is a key factor for library services in general, being the most important tool for developing one's thinking and to construct knowledge, according to Vygotsky (1986). In the southern Zimbabwean context, the English and the local language of Ndebele, are not equally accessible when it comes to literature and lending books. The postcolonial perspective obliges the questioning of why the local language and culture is not represented in the library collections. It is pushed aside because of the position that the colonial language has in society and in the education system. The challenges of economy and funding, complicate the librarians' will to equalize or balance the collections. Here, librarians can be seen as agents of change, in that they compensate the lack of local literature, with networking and facilitating activities based on local language and culture. The strategies of networking with publishers and writers, local poets and storytellers, engage community members to collect stories, are all part of the change in restoring the language that carries a bank of memories of the world (wa Thiong'o 2017). Ubuntu values of culture, indigeneity and history are part of the decolonizing process in the library community work. (And maybe also in the new Local-Heritage-based curriculum.) Making local stories accessible is also a way to change, since it aims to diminish gaps between generations.

7.4. Strategies to be developed

Some strategies need to be strengthened to, for example, overcome digital challenges. However, the lack of support and recognition from the government to libraries as institutions of knowledge and information, is obvious. As long as recognition of both knowledge institutions and digital infrastructures, that enable people to search for information, is missing, then basic needs of the community members as humans and citizens to enjoy their full rights, cannot be accomplished. I agree with Chisita and Chabanda (2019) who claim that librarians must come together even more" to share knowledge and build a united field" (2019, p. 4), in order to have an impact. Partnerships and collaboration are created with actors in the business and education sector. Maybe more of the libraries could partner together as well, as they have started to do through ZimLa on a regional level, to work towards a more inclusive library collection and technological improvement, and in the long run reach a fairer recognition as librarians. I also think that the networking strategy ought to be further elaborated from all suggestions that informants have made, on building structures to strengthen the access to local language and local literature.

However, I find that the community work performed by librarians, contribute to change in several ways, amidst contextual challenges and current infrastructures of society. Librarians and community members ought to continue create knowledge together through dialogue.

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Interviews

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Informant 2; Community library, (2024-02-28)

Informant 3; Community library, (2024-02-28)

Informant 4; Community library, (2024-03-01)

Informant 5; Community library, (2024-03-01)

Informant 6; Community library, (2024-03-05)

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Informant 8; Community library, (2024-03-05)

Informant 9; Community library, (2024-03-05)

Informant 10; Community library, (2024-03-06)

Informant 11; Public library, (2024-03-07)

Informant 12; Public library, (2024-03-07)

Informant 13; Public library, (2024-03-07)

Informant 14; Community library, (2024-03-11)

Fieldwork

Fieldwork with active observations performed at libraires in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, Harare Metropolitan Province, Midlands Province, North Matabeleland Province, South Matabeleland Province, (5th November – 1st December 2023).

Fieldwork with active observations performed at libraries in Bulawayo Metropolitan Province, North Matabeleland Province, South Matabeleland Province, (22nd of February – 16th of March 2024).

Appendix

A.

Interview questions to librarians / library workers

Introducing the informant

Tell me about yourself

Describe your role at the library

Describe your background within library work and education

The community

Please tell me about your users – who are they in general? (If the informant is working for ex. in children's department, he/she could describe the different age groups)

What are their most common needs?

What are their most common activities in the library?

Community work/outward-looking work

Tell me about your outward-looking work – the work of the library towards the community

What activities or programs do you have

a) inside the library

b) outside of the library?

Which activities do you think are successful when thinking of the public library and its purpose?

(How are they successful?)

Which ones are appreciated and well frequented? (Why?)

Describe how you do these activities; (How do you carry it out? What is the content?)

In this or that activity; what is it in the practice that you find most important?

How would you describe how it affects the user? (In the moment? In their daily life? What kind of effects?)

Do you consider the library to be the only actor performing these activities?

Practice of ICT and digital use

How do you work with users when it comes to ICT and digital information?
(Digital literacy)

How would you describe the role of ICT and digital information at your library?

How would you describe the role of ICT and digital information in the daily life?
(Of the users? Yourself?)

How would you like to work with ICT and digital information (A dream scenario?
Anything that is missing?)

Do you think you and librarians in general would need more training in ICT
skills?

Practice of Literacy

How do you work with users on literacy?

How do you work with users on providing information in general? (Seminars,
booktalks, loud reading, brochures, digital information, information literacy)

How do you work with users on literacy when it comes to local literature and
local languages? (mother tongue vs. English)

How do you work with users on local heritage? (local culture and history vs.
Colonial)

Do you have activities specifically for highlighting local literature? (Zimbabwean
writers, Ndebele writers)

Challenges

What are the main challenges you find for performing your work ? (Some are
perhaps already mentioned)

- a) in the specific library
- b) as a librarian in Zimbabwe

What are the minor challenges?

How do you cope with these challenges – big and small? (strategies)
Are you engaged in ZIMLA?

B.

Interview questions to chief librarians or executive managers

Introducing the informant

Tell me about yourself

Describe your role at the library/organisation

Describe your background within library work, your education, how long you were a manager

The community

Please tell me about your target groups – who are they in general?

What are their most common needs?

What are their most common activities in the library?

Community work/outward-looking work

Tell me about your outward-looking work – the work of the library towards the community

What activities or programs do you have

a) inside the library

b) outside of the library?

How are the activities funded? (local municipality, donation, international funding)

Which activities do you think are successful when thinking of the public library and its purpose?

(How are they successful? How do you measure?)

Which ones are appreciated and well frequented? (Why?)

Describe how you do these activities; (How do you carry it out? What is the content?)

In this or that activity; what is it in the practice that you find most important?
How would you describe how it affects the user? (In the moment? In their daily life? What kind of effects? How did you measure?)

Do you consider the library/your organisation to be the only actor performing these activities?

Practice of ICT and digital use

How do you work with users when it comes to ICT and digital information?
(Digital literacy)

How would you describe the role of ICT and digital information at your library/organisation?

How would you describe the role of ICT and digital information in the daily life?
(Of the users? Yourself?)

How would you like to work with ICT and digital information (A dream scenario?
Anything that is missing?)

Do you think your staff would need more training in ICT skills?

Practice of Literacy

How do you work with users on literacy?

How do you work with users on providing information in general? (Seminars, booktalks, loud reading, brochures, digital information, information literacy)

How do you work with users on literacy when it comes to local literature and local languages? (mother tongue vs. English)

How do you work with users on local heritage? (local culture and history vs. Colonial)

Do you have activities specifically for highlighting local literature? (Zimbabwean writers, Ndebele writers)

Challenges

What are the biggest challenges you find for performing your work ? (Some are perhaps already mentioned – costs for local literature? Costs for ICT?)

- a) in the specific library/organisation
- b) for librarians in general in Zimbabwe

What are the minor challenges?

How do you cope with these challenges – big and small? (strategies)

Are you engaged in ZIMLA – does your workplace have other library cooperations?