

# Exploring the Role of Social Imagination in Shaping Pedagogical Practices and Critical Thinking in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the role of social imagination in shaping pedagogical practices and enhancing critical thinking in the Indonesian educational context. Drawing on in-depth interviews with five key informants—including teachers, a curriculum expert, and education practitioners—the research investigates how educators conceptualize social imagination and incorporate it into their teaching strategies. The findings reveal that social imagination fosters student engagement, empathy, and the capacity to question societal norms, all of which are foundational to critical thinking. Educators employ various imaginative approaches, such as storytelling, role-play, and community-based projects, to connect learning with real-world issues. However, the implementation of such approaches is often constrained by rigid curricula, cultural hierarchies, standardized assessments, and limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, the study concludes that social imagination remains a vital pedagogical tool for transformative education in Indonesia, offering pathways to more reflective, inclusive, and critical forms of learning.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing landscape of 21st-century education, the ability to think critically and imagine alternative social realities has become increasingly vital. As societies grapple with complex global challenges—ranging from social inequality and climate change to technological disruption—there is a growing demand for educational systems that do more than merely transmit knowledge; they must cultivate learners who can question, innovate, and engage with the world creatively and ethically. In this context, the concept of social

imagination has gained prominence as a critical component in shaping pedagogical practices that support the development of critical thinking. Social imagination encourages learners to connect personal experiences with broader societal structures, fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues and empowering them to become agents of social change. Creativity and critical thinking, essential for solving multifaceted problems in contemporary society, enable learners to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, thus laying a foundation for lifelong learning [1]. Pedagogical strategies that promote these skills include project-

based learning, collaborative problem-solving, and interdisciplinary approaches [1]. Similarly, the sociological imagination, as introduced by C. Wright Mills, enhances students' critical thinking and social awareness by linking personal experiences to societal contexts, thus fostering inclusive and democratic educational environments [2]. Moreover, critical pedagogy underscores the moral, ethical, and political dimensions of education, pushing students to question and engage with their surroundings critically [3], which is particularly vital in climate change education where students must analyze evidence, navigate complex systems, and evaluate viable solutions for mitigation and adaptation [4].

Social imagination refers to the human capacity to envision different social realities, question existing norms, and imagine transformative futures. Rooted in the work of thinkers such as C. Wright Mills, who introduced the idea of the "sociological imagination," and further developed in educational theory, social imagination empowers both educators and learners to transcend rigid structures and engage with education as a space for possibility and change. Mills emphasized understanding personal experiences in the context of larger social and historical forces, helping individuals feel less "trapped" by impersonal societal changes [2], [5]. This concept has been adapted in educational settings to foster inclusive and democratic classrooms, encouraging critical thinking, empathy, and social awareness among students [2]. It motivates educators to move beyond standardized curricula to address real-world issues and promote democratic engagement [2]. Practical strategies, such as flipped classrooms and active learning, enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in real contexts [6], while helping educators understand students' social positions and adapt methods accordingly [6]. The sociological imagination not only empowers students as agents of social change but has also significantly influenced the thinking of sociologists, feminists, and social workers by highlighting the societal roots of personal

problems and underscoring the need to address issues such as poverty, discrimination, and educational disadvantage through systemic rather than individual change [7].

In Indonesia, where education operates within a diverse and culturally rich society, there is a pressing need to examine how social imagination is manifested in classroom practices and how it influences the cultivation of critical thinking. Despite national education policies emphasizing creativity, critical reasoning, and character development, the implementation of these ideals remains uneven, with traditional teaching methods, rote learning, and rigid hierarchies often limiting opportunities for imagination and inquiry. The manifestation of social imagination in Indonesian classrooms and its influence on critical thinking is shaped by various educational practices and policies, where teachers' understanding and implementation play a pivotal role. However, many educators lack a comprehensive grasp of critical thinking, which affects both teaching practices and student outcomes [8]. A study involving 64 English language teachers revealed that many do not fully understand critical thinking, limiting their ability to foster it effectively [8], while a separate survey of 120 EFL teachers found that although most included critical thinking in lesson plans, the effectiveness of its implementation remains uncertain [9]. Meanwhile, the Merdeka Curriculum's Grade IV textbooks incorporate critical thinking values, but different publishers emphasize varying aspects such as problem-solving and reflection, reflecting the diversity in approaches to nurturing critical thinking in line with the Pancasila Student Profile [10]. This inconsistency underscores the need for curriculum reconstruction to more effectively integrate critical thinking, address social issues, and enhance students' problem-solving capacities [11].

This study aims to explore the role of social imagination in shaping pedagogical practices and enhancing critical thinking among educators in Indonesia. By focusing on the lived experiences and insights of five

educators and education experts, the research seeks to uncover how social imagination is conceptualized, practiced, and potentially challenged in Indonesian educational settings. The study also examines how cultural values, institutional constraints, and teacher agency affect the integration of imaginative and critical pedagogies in daily teaching.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 *Social Imagination: Concepts and Relevance*

The concept of social imagination, first introduced by C. Wright Mills and later expanded by Maxine Greene, plays a vital role in education by linking personal experiences to broader societal structures. Mills' "sociological imagination" helps individuals understand their lives within larger historical and social contexts, highlighting the connection between the personal and the societal [2], [5]. Greene built upon this by viewing imagination as a transformative educational force, enabling both teachers and students to envision alternative social realities and question dominant ideologies [12]. This positions social imagination as a moral and political tool in the classroom, fostering critical thinking and social awareness [2], [5]. Greene further emphasized the need to counteract the dominance of scientism and technicism in education by engaging learners through art and culture [12]. Incorporating sociological imagination into pedagogy can thus promote inclusive, democratic learning environments where students are empowered to analyze societal structures and imagine more just futures [2].

### 2.2 *Pedagogical Practices and Transformative Education*

Transformative pedagogy, as opposed to traditional methods, emphasizes dialogical and participatory approaches that foster critical thinking and empower learners. Rooted in the works of Paulo Freire and expanded by

contemporary scholars, this pedagogical shift incorporates diverse strategies that promote social justice and critical consciousness, aligning closely with the concept of social imagination. It encourages educators to cultivate inclusive learning environments that support student agency, diversity, and innovation. Strategies such as project-based and experiential learning engage students with real-world problems, enhancing critical thinking, collaboration, and practical application of knowledge [13]. Critical pedagogies, including Youth Participation Action Research (YPAR), focus on empowering marginalized voices and encouraging students to interrogate societal structures and enact transformative change [14]. Additionally, blended learning and technology integration support varied learning styles and personalize education, increasing engagement and outcomes [15]. However, challenges remain, such as balancing transformative and traditional methods to ensure content mastery and discipline [13], as well as adapting approaches to cultural and contextual realities to ensure relevance and effectiveness across diverse educational settings [14].

### 2.3 *Critical Thinking in Educational Contexts*

Critical thinking is a pivotal 21st-century skill essential for academic success, personal growth, and active citizenship, involving the capacity to analyze information, evaluate arguments, and make informed decisions. While the Indonesian national curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, its practical implementation faces challenges due to limited teacher training, rigid assessment systems, and cultural norms that value deference to authority [16]. This necessitates pedagogical shifts beyond mere curriculum reform, favoring inquiry-based learning, Socratic questioning, problem-solving activities, and interdisciplinary exploration to foster deeper engagement [17]. Incorporating

technology and collaborative learning further enhances students' abilities to think critically [17], empowering them to assess information and consider alternative perspectives—skills vital for democratic participation and innovation [18]. Moreover, students exposed to such approaches demonstrate improved problem-solving capabilities, reflective judgment, and higher academic achievement, equipping them to tackle complex real-world challenges [19], [20].

## 2.4 Indonesian Cultural and Educational Landscape

Indonesia's cultural diversity provides a valuable foundation for educational innovation but also presents notable challenges. Integrating local wisdom and multicultural education into the curriculum enhances cultural understanding and national identity. Local wisdom, encompassing cultural values and traditions, links theoretical learning to real-life practices and fosters appreciation for heritage [21]. Project-based learning and collaboration with cultural experts help incorporate this wisdom, despite resource limitations [21]. Multicultural education supports tolerance and unity across Indonesia's diverse society, relying on curriculum reform, teacher training, and community involvement [22], with the Pancasila values promoting identity, equity, and justice [23]. Yet, systemic issues like unequal resources and bureaucratic hurdles impede progress [22]. In response, innovative educators apply community-based learning, storytelling, ethnomathematics, and traditional music literacy to boost student engagement, understanding, and social cohesion [24].

## 2.5 Gaps in the Literature

While substantial literature exists globally on critical thinking and pedagogical transformation, studies explicitly examining the role of social imagination in Indonesian education remain limited. Most research tends to focus on policy analysis, curriculum development, or general teacher

competency frameworks, with little qualitative insight into how educators actually conceptualize and apply social imagination in their daily teaching practices, or how it impacts their efforts to cultivate critical thinking. This study addresses that gap by offering an in-depth exploration of how social imagination influences pedagogical choices and the development of critical thinking among Indonesian educators. Through examining their lived experiences and interpretations, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the cultural, institutional, and personal dimensions of transformative teaching in the Indonesian context.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research is framed as an interpretive phenomenological study, aiming to understand how educators perceive and experience the use of social imagination in their pedagogical practices. Phenomenology allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' lived experiences, providing rich and nuanced insights into complex educational phenomena (Creswell, 2013). Five informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience, relevance to the research topic, and willingness to participate. These informants included a high school teacher from a public school in Central Java, a curriculum developer at the Ministry of Education and Culture, a university lecturer specializing in education and critical pedagogy, an education NGO practitioner involved in teacher training, and a private school teacher from a multicultural urban area in Jakarta. They represent diverse educational contexts and are actively engaged in developing or implementing pedagogical practices, with each having a minimum of five years of professional experience and a known commitment to reflective or innovative teaching methods.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted over two months, with each session lasting

approximately 60–90 minutes, either in person or via video conferencing depending on the informant's availability. The interview questions explored educators' definitions and understandings of social imagination, how they integrate it into their teaching, the challenges and opportunities they encounter in fostering critical thinking, and the influence of institutional and cultural contexts on their pedagogical decisions. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, with additional field notes taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps: familiarization with the data, initial coding, categorization into broader themes, and interpretation in relation to the study's objectives and theoretical framework. Coding was conducted manually and reviewed iteratively to maintain reliability and consistency. Member checking was used to enhance credibility by sharing summarized findings with the informants for validation and clarification.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results reveal how social imagination is conceptualized and practiced in educational settings, how it intersects with pedagogical strategies, and how it contributes to the development of critical thinking. The findings are organized into four main themes: (1) Understanding Social Imagination, (2) Social Imagination in Teaching Practices, (3) The Role of Social Imagination in Developing Critical Thinking, and (4) Challenges and Contextual Constraints.

##### 4.1 *Understanding Social Imagination*

All five informants expressed a strong awareness of the concept of social imagination, though their interpretations varied depending on their professional roles and personal experiences. Some understood it as the capacity to envision a more just and inclusive society, while others associated it with reflective, empathetic thinking and connecting classroom content to broader societal issues. For instance, a senior high school

teacher from Central Java explained, "Social imagination for me means helping students imagine a better society—one without discrimination or injustice. It's about connecting the lesson with real life and future possibilities." This view highlights the role of social imagination in linking pedagogy to students' lived realities and hopes for the future.

In contrast, the curriculum developer emphasized a policy-oriented interpretation: "We must integrate imagination into curriculum goals—not just technical skills but also the ability to envision alternative realities and solutions for societal problems." Such a perspective underscores the institutional potential of embedding social imagination at the systemic level. This range of interpretations demonstrates that social imagination is a dynamic and context-dependent concept. Nevertheless, all informants shared the belief that it forms a vital foundation for transformative pedagogy, serving as a catalyst for critical thinking, empathy, and social engagement in educational practice.

##### 4.2 *Social Imagination in Teaching Practices*

The study found that educators who embrace social imagination tend to design learning experiences that extend beyond textbook content, incorporating methods such as project-based learning, role-play simulations, storytelling from diverse perspectives, and open discussions on current social issues. These approaches aim to cultivate empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of agency among students. A university lecturer shared, "I use social case studies, historical injustices, and even fiction to let students imagine the lives of others. This opens space for empathy and reflection," emphasizing how imaginative engagement can deepen understanding and moral reasoning.

Likewise, an educator from an NGO highlighted the impact of

community-based learning: “We take students into local communities to observe and reflect on issues like poverty or environmental damage. They are asked to propose imaginative solutions and present them to stakeholders.” Such practices demonstrate how integrating social imagination into pedagogy empowers students to critically engage with real-world problems and envision transformative responses. By encouraging students to creatively address social issues, these educators foster not only cognitive skills but also a strong sense of social responsibility and participatory citizenship.

#### 4.3 *The Role of Social Imagination in Developing Critical Thinking*

All informants reported that social imagination significantly enhances students’ ability to think critically by encouraging them to question established norms, explore multiple perspectives, and develop independent judgment. A private school teacher from Jakarta explained, “When students imagine how things could be different, they naturally begin to ask: why are things the way they are? This sparks critical thinking.” Such reflective inquiry fosters deeper engagement with content and cultivates analytical skills that go beyond surface-level understanding.

In addition, the integration of emotional and ethical dimensions through imaginative activities was seen as essential to meaningful critical engagement. A curriculum expert noted, “Critical thinking is not just logical reasoning. It’s also about moral imagination—seeing injustice and imagining what justice might look like.” This perspective supports the growing body of literature that positions imagination and critical thinking as interrelated processes, blending cognitive and affective domains to nurture students’ intellectual and moral development.

#### 4.4 *Challenges and Contextual Constraints*

Despite their commitment, informants reported several barriers to implementing imaginative and critical pedagogies in Indonesian classrooms. These included rigid curricula and standardized assessments, which limit opportunities for creative exploration. “Teachers are afraid to deviate from the textbook because of test pressures,” explained a high school teacher. Hierarchical cultural norms also pose challenges, as students are often hesitant to question authority or express dissenting opinions. A university lecturer remarked, “Asking questions is sometimes seen as rude or rebellious,” highlighting the tension between critical engagement and cultural expectations. Additionally, many educators lack professional development in innovative pedagogies and face institutional resistance when attempting to introduce new approaches. Resource disparities, particularly in rural schools, further hinder efforts to support imaginative learning due to limited access to materials, technology, and supportive infrastructure.

Despite these constraints, informants demonstrated resilience and agency by adapting their practices within existing limitations. They emphasized that fostering imagination does not always require advanced tools or technology. One teacher stated, “Even with limited resources, we can ask questions, tell stories, and create dialogue. Imagination doesn’t need a projector—it needs courage.” This perspective underscores the importance of educator initiative and creativity in promoting critical and imaginative thinking, even within structurally constrained environments.

#### 4.5 *Discussion*

The findings affirm that social imagination plays a crucial role in shaping pedagogical practices and fostering critical thinking in Indonesia. Educators who embrace this approach

function not merely as instructors but as facilitators of social consciousness and creativity. By employing imaginative teaching strategies, such as storytelling, community-based learning, and open dialogue, they enable students to connect personal experiences with broader social realities, fostering critical awareness and a stronger sense of agency. This aligns with Greene's (1995) assertion that imagination allows learners to "see what is not yet," making education a space of possibility. Similarly, Freire's (1970) concept of praxis—reflection and action upon the world—finds relevance in the way these educators use imagination to stimulate engagement with real-world issues.

Supporting evidence from various studies further underscores the value of imagination in enhancing educational outcomes. Imaginative learning models have been shown to significantly increase student motivation and achievement, as demonstrated in a study conducted at MI NU Khoiriyyah Kudus [25]. Moreover, curriculum design that incorporates cultural relevance—such as using regional folklore instead of generic fantasy stories—has been found to better engage students and improve learning experiences [26]. Stories targeted at younger learners also foster imagination and creativity, strengthening skills such as vocabulary, narrative structure, and thematic understanding [27]. These findings reflect Egan's theory of "imaginative learning," which argues that students learn more meaningfully when their imaginations are engaged [28].

Systemic reforms. Greater curricular flexibility, more comprehensive teacher training, and a stronger commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy are essential for embedding imagination and critical

thinking across Indonesian schools. In conclusion, while obstacles persist, the dedication and innovation of educators show promising movement toward a transformative pedagogy rooted in social imagination. Their efforts illustrate that meaningful educational change is achievable—even with modest resources—when supported by broader institutional and cultural shifts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significance of social imagination in shaping pedagogical approaches that nurture critical thinking among students in Indonesia. Educators who incorporate imaginative strategies into their teaching create opportunities for learners to explore diverse perspectives, question dominant narratives, and engage meaningfully with complex social realities. These practices not only enhance academic development but also foster empathy and social awareness, contributing to the growth of students as reflective and socially responsible individuals.

The findings reveal that while social imagination is embraced by innovative educators, its broader implementation is constrained by systemic barriers such as rigid curricula, exam-oriented teaching, cultural hierarchies, and limited institutional support. Despite these challenges, the persistence and creativity demonstrated by the informants indicate a strong potential for change from within the educational system. To support the integration of social imagination in Indonesian classrooms, education policies must prioritize curricular flexibility, invest in teacher professional development on critical and imaginative pedagogy, and encourage open, reflective learning environments. In doing so, social imagination can become a transformative force, enabling students not just to navigate society, but to reimagine and actively shape its future.

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