Developing Critical Thinking and Social Awareness through Contextual Learning and Social Transformation: A Systematic Review

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Article Info

Abstract

This study aims to systematically review the literature on the development of critical thinking and social awareness through contextual and transformative learning approaches. The urgency of this study arises from the increasing complexity of global social and environmental challenges, which demand that education go beyond academic achievement to include the formation of reflective, empathetic, and empowered learners. The research employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method based on the PRISMA 2020 protocol. Data were collected from 13 empirical research articles published between 2010 and 2025 that met the inclusion criteria. The selected literature predominantly focuses on educational contexts in Indonesia, although a few international studies were also considered to provide broader comparative insights. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns across the selected studies. The review shows that project-based learning, critical reflection, integration of local wisdom, and dialogical pedagogy effectively enhance students' critical thinking and social awareness. Transformative learning approaches that emphasize multicultural values, social justice, and active participation also foster empathy, tolerance, and civic responsibility. The study concludes that education should move beyond knowledge transmission toward humanistic, participatory, and contextual learning. Key recommendations include strengthening teacher capacity, adopting adaptive curriculum design, and fostering institutional innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Amid an era of disruption and increasing social complexity, education faces the pressing challenge of not only cultivating cognitively capable individuals but also nurturing critical thinking and profound social awareness. The digital revolution, environmental crises, widening social inequality, and tensions surrounding identity and diversity demand a comprehensive rethinking of educational approaches. International Commission on the Futures of Education, (2021), in its global report Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education, emphasizes that future education must serve as a collective force in shaping a just, sustainable, and peaceful shared future. In this context, critical thinking and social awareness emerge as essential competencies not only for personal development but also for meaningful participation in inclusive and democratic societies.

Pedagogical paradigms that position learners as active participants in the

learning process are gaining greater significance (Adriantoni et al., 2025). One particularly relevant approach is contextual teaching and learning, which links academic content to students' real-life experiences. This method makes learning more meaningful by allowing students not merely to absorb information passively but to actively engage in constructing meaning through exploration. This process is believed to enhance critical thinking by encouraging learners to connect abstract concepts with concrete situations encountered in everyday life.

In parallel, education oriented toward social transformation provides space for students to critically examine social realities and develop sensitivity to issues of justice, equality, and diversity (Kurniasih et al., 2025). Such learning models go beyond the transmission of knowledge to foster social consciousness and civic responsibility. As noted by Nurjanah & Mustofa (2024), applying principles of social transformation in education offers students the opportunity to become agents of change who can contribute constructively to society. Integrating contextual learning with transformative values presents a strategic approach to cultivating a generation that is intellectually capable as well as morally and socially resilient (Hanapi et al., 2025).

Numerous previous studies have demonstrated that contextual and transformative learning approaches significantly contribute to the development of higher-order thinking skills and positive social attitudes. However, many of these studies are confined to specific contexts or focus narrowly on either cognitive or affective outcomes without offering a holistic framework. In addition, there has been limited effort to integrate findings across various educational settings, levels, and methodologies. This fragmentation impedes the construction of a comprehensive conceptual model and limits the ability of educators and policymakers to draw generalizable conclusions about best practices in fostering critical thinking and social awareness.

Therefore, this study aims to systematically review and synthesize the literature on the development of critical thinking and social awareness through contextual and transformative learning approaches. By analyzing recent studies conducted in diverse educational contexts, this review seeks to identify key pedagogical strategies, theoretical contributions, and research gaps. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in designing and implementing educational practices that are relevant, inclusive, and socially responsive. Ultimately, this review aspires to contribute meaningfully to the formulation of educational frameworks that are capable of preparing learners for active engagement in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, a method designed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous research findings in a systematic, structured, and replicable manner. This approach is considered the most appropriate for addressing research questions in depth by integrating findings from various published studies to build a comprehensive understanding of the development of critical thinking and social awareness through contextual learning and social transformation. The implementation of the SLR in this study follows the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) as developed by Page et al. (2021), to ensure transparency and accountability at every stage of the literature selection process.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Year	Articles published between 2010 and 2025	Articles published before 2010
Type of Article	Empirical research articles (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods)	Opinion pieces, non-empirical conceptual essays, or conference summaries without data
Topic Relevance	Related to critical thinking, social awareness, contextual learning, or transformative pedagogy	Not directly related to the main themes of the study
Language	Written in Indonesian or English	Written in languages other than Indonesian or English
Accessibility	Available in full-text format	Only available as an abstract or inaccessible in full

The research procedure followed the stages of the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as outlined in PRISMA 2020. In the identification stage, the researcher formulated a document search strategy using a combination of keywords, namely ("contextual learning" OR "pembelajaran kontekstual") AND ("transformative learning" OR "transformasi sosial") AND ("critical thinking" OR "berpikir kritis") AND ("social awareness" OR "kesadaran sosial"). The searches were conducted across several online databases, including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, DOAJ, SINTA, and Garuda.

From this process, a total of 82 articles were initially retrieved and screened based on the relevance of their titles and abstracts, while those that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from further review. Articles that passed the screening stage were then read in full to assess the depth of their methodology, alignment with the focus of the study, and overall academic quality. Finally, the articles that met all criteria were included in the final synthesis, resulting in 13 articles analyzed in depth for this study.
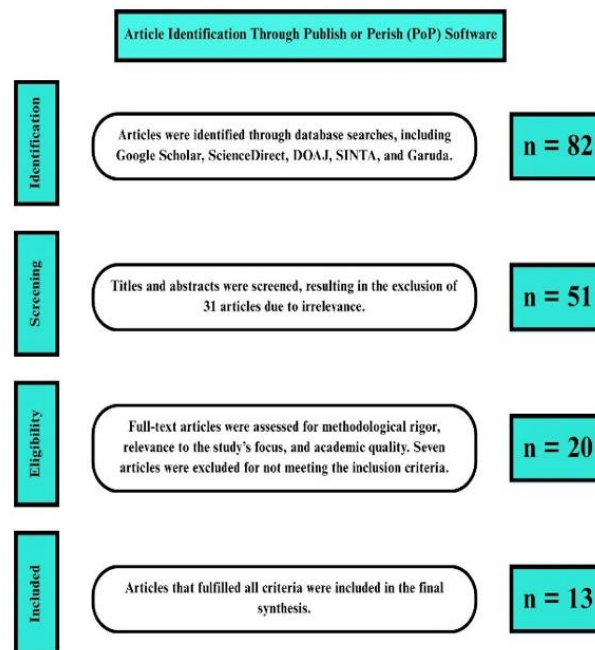
Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of the Literature Selection Process

Data analysis was conducted using manual thematic analysis without the assistance of qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti. The process followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes manually, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. Coding was performed by the researcher using color-coded categories in Microsoft Word and Excel spreadsheets. Themes were constructed based on recurring concepts across the selected articles and organized into a thematic map to identify relationships among critical thinking, social awareness, and the pedagogical approaches examined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic synthesis of the 13 selected articles, four major themes emerged in the development of critical thinking and social awareness: (1) experiential and project-based learning, (2) integration of local wisdom and cultural values, (3) critical and dialogical pedagogy, and (4) multicultural and transformative education. These themes consistently appeared across various educational levels and contexts, indicating a strong convergence among studies despite differences in methodology and discipline focus.

Critical thinking and social awareness are not isolated competencies; they are deeply interrelated. The ability to think critically enables students to question social norms, identify injustice, and analyze societal problems with depth and nuance. In turn, heightened social awareness provides the real-world context and ethical grounding necessary for meaningful critical inquiry. Thus, contextual and transformative learning environments that engage students in reflective, participatory, and values-driven activities can simultaneously foster both abilities in a mutually reinforcing manner.

A summary of the selected articles is presented in the following table, which includes information on the title, author(s), year, relevance to the theme, and key findings of each study.

Table 2. Summary of Selected Articles

Code	Article Title	Author(s) & (Year)	Relevance to the Theme	Key Findings
A1	Integritas Nilai-nilai Sosial dan Spiritualitas dalam Pembelajaran PAI pada Elemen Fikih	Rahmadani & Fadriati (2025)	Contextual, value-based learning for character and social awareness development	Integration of empathy, care, and spirituality (ikhlas, murāqabah) in fiqh learning through social projects, discussions, and case studies made learning more meaningful and applicable. Students responded more contextually to Islamic values, despite challenges related to time constraints and policy.
A2	Analysis of Miller-Seller Curriculum Perspective in Primary School Teacher Education at the Teacher Training	Daga (2021)	Transpersonal and transformative curriculum as part of critical education	The curriculum adopts three Miller-Seller approaches: transmission, transaction, and transpersonal. Findings highlight the influence of social reconstruction

	and Education College of Weetebula, Southwest Sumba			philosophy and local culture, with inquiry- and problem-based learning fostering reflective and critical thinking.
A3	Bringing Sociology Closer to Students: Teachers' Initiatives for Contextual and Meaningful Learning	Mujayapura & Komariah (2025)	Contextual sociology learning for enhancing social awareness	Teachers implemented instruction sensitive to students' social backgrounds, linking sociological theory to real-life issues. This approach fostered participatory, reflective learning and helped develop students' critical consciousness and social engagement.
A4	Application of Project-Based Learning Method to Improve 21st-Century Skills	Sriwulandari et al. (2025)v	PjBL as a strategy for developing critical thinking and 21st-century social skills	Project-Based Learning (PjBL) improved 21st-century skills: communication, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. The approach connected learning to real-world contexts and strengthened students' digital skills.
A5	Relevance of Education Curriculum with Local Culture: Perspectives of Islamic Education Management according to Ki Hajar Dewantara and Paulo Freire	Utami & Nursikin (2024)	Contextualized education based on local wisdom for social awareness	The thoughts of Dewantara and Freire were contextualized in Islamic education. Results emphasized the importance of culturally rooted, dialogic, and empowering education as a foundation for character and social awareness.
A6	The Role of Islamic Religious Education Teachers in Implementing Multicultural Religious Education at SMA Negeri 2 Metro	Sulthoon et al. (2025)	Multicultural education and reinforcement of social values in religious contexts	Teachers instilled values of tolerance and mutual respect through contextual teaching and social activities. Multicultural education in the school helped prevent conflict and foster students' openness to diversity.
A7	Curriculum Transformation Towards Future Education	Edwin et al. (2025)	21st-century curriculum for critical thinking and collaboration development	Future curricula should emphasize critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and creativity through blended learning, debate, simulations, and STEAM. Findings call for systemic reform and teacher training to implement transformative learning.

A8	Design Education as a Medium for Transmitting Social Values	Arifin et al. (2025)	Integration of social values in design education based on local history	A design learning model based on historical narratives fostered historical empathy, multicultural awareness, and social responsibility. The study highlighted the importance of critical pedagogy and participatory design in shaping humanistic education.
A9	Analisis Butir Soal Uraian Bernuansa Etnososial pada Materi IPS Kelas V Sekolah Dasar	Setiyadi et al. (2025)	Strengthening social and cultural values through assessment	Most items showed high validity and reliability, although some had low discrimination. Ethno-social values were well represented, but integration of local culture in assessment still needs improvement.
A10	Curriculum Reform Meets Classroom Realities: Selected Indonesian Teachers' Perspectives on the Merdeka Curriculum	Kumayas et al. (2025)	Teachers' adaptation to the Merdeka Curriculum encouraging contextual education	Teachers supported the curriculum's flexibility and student-centered approach but faced challenges in training, technology gaps, and administrative burdens. The curriculum was seen to foster communication and critical thinking if supported by professional development and collaborative policy.
A11	Reconstruction of Contextual Learning Model Based on Local Wisdom in Enhancing Critical Thinking	Diana et al. (2025)	Reconstructing contextual learning for critical thinking through local wisdom	Meta-synthesis identified five forms of local wisdom integration and four mechanisms for developing critical thinking. The contextual learning model strengthened cultural identity and supported meaningful and contextual critical thinking.
A12	Teacher Perception of Citizenship in Science Learning Tools on Uniform and Accelerated Motion	Putri et al. (2025)	Science tools supporting critical thinking and civic education	Teachers highly valued science learning tools that integrated citizenship approaches and critical thinking development. The tools facilitated connections between physics concepts and civic responsibility, enhancing student motivation and engagement.
A13	Critical Pedagogy in Islamic History Education: Applying Henry Giroux's Framework	Mohamed et al. (2025)	Application of critical pedagogy in Islamic history education	A model based on dialogue, ethical engagement, and social reflection transformed rote history lessons into meaningful, transformative

learning. Critical pedagogy integration fostered socially aware and critically thinking students.

Project-based learning strategies, critical reflection, and real-world case studies consistently emerge across various findings as effective approaches to developing critical thinking. Diana et al. (2025), through a meta-synthesis of 25 articles, revealed that integrating local wisdom into the learning process generates four strong mechanisms for critical thinking: re-contextualization, cognitive confrontation, identity construction, and social transformation. Their research affirms that critical thinking develops optimally when learners are engaged in analyzing their surrounding realities, questioning social structures, and formulating ethical responses to life issues. Edwin et al. (2025) also emphasized the importance of integrating 21st-century skills through methods such as blended learning, academic debate, clinical simulation, and problem-based learning, which enhance students' critical reasoning and analytical abilities in addressing global challenges.

Critical thinking also emerges significantly within the context of religious education, particularly in Islamic Religious Education (PAI). The study by Rahmadani & Fadriati (2025) showed that a contextual approach to fiqh instruction integrating values of empathy and spirituality positively impacted students' comprehension and internalization of Islamic teachings in more reflective and applicable ways. Students not only understood fiqh norms in a formal sense but were also able to situate them within dynamic social realities. Complementing this, Putri et al. (2025) found that the development of science learning tools based on a citizenship approach enabled the integration of scientific content with critical and participatory values, thereby promoting both scientific literacy and social responsibility.

Social awareness was found to develop through educational processes that facilitate intercultural dialogue, appreciation of diversity, and reinforcement of communal values. Sulthoon et al. (2025) illustrated how Islamic education teachers at SMA Negeri 2 Metro not only delivered instructional content effectively but also cultivated a school culture centered on mutual respect, tolerance, and interfaith cooperation. This context highlights that multicultural education must go beyond declarative teaching and be internalized through consistent daily practice. In the study by Mujayapura & Komariah (2025), sociology teachers in Bandung and Cimahi developed inclusive and participatory learning models by linking sociological concepts with students' lived social realities. As a result, students not only grasped academic concepts but also demonstrated increased social empathy and engagement in critical discourse.

Curriculum design also influences the development of critical consciousness and transformative social attitudes. Daga (2021) identified that the curriculum of the Primary Teacher Education Program at STKIP Weetebula applied the Miller-Seller perspectives transmission, transaction, and transpersonal each emphasizing different orientations of learning. The transpersonal approach, in particular, provided space for value reflection and identity formation within broader social contexts. Similarly, Kumayas et al. (2025) in their study of the Merdeka Curriculum, revealed that despite challenges in teacher training and resource availability, this curriculum offers significant opportunities for strengthening participatory and

contextual pedagogies that support character development and critical thinking skills.

Design education that integrates social values also contributes to students' social awareness. Arifin et al. (2025) proposed a design education model grounded in local historical narratives and participatory practices. Their findings showed that this approach not only enhanced students' technical design competencies but also fostered historical empathy, multicultural awareness, and social responsibility. The study recommends a reorientation of the design curriculum toward integrating local values as a means of character education and social transformation. In the area of assessment, Setiyadi et al. (2025) highlighted that ethno-social-based essay questions in social studies effectively reinforced students' understanding of cultural diversity and instilled values of inclusivity and appreciation for local identities.

The implementation of critical pedagogy in the context of Islamic history education, as examined by Mohamed et al. (2025), offers a new perspective for developing learning that is both informative and transformative. Utilizing Henry Giroux's theoretical framework, the study constructed a learning design that emphasized dialogue, ethical engagement, and social reflection. Results indicated that students engaged in this model experienced enhanced understanding of Islamic historical dynamics while developing critical awareness of contemporary social issues. These findings affirm that critical pedagogy can be effectively adapted within Islamic education to foster more equitable social change.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This systematic literature review concludes that contextual learning combined with transformative values significantly enhances students' critical thinking and social awareness. Key strategies identified across the 13 reviewed studies include project-based learning, critical reflection, real-life case studies, and the integration of local wisdom and spirituality. These approaches consistently promote reflective, dialogical, and participatory learning environments, fostering both cognitive and socio-emotional growth.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that educators receive ongoing professional development to strengthen their capacity in implementing value-based and humanistic learning. Education policymakers are also encouraged to adopt adaptive curriculum frameworks and develop inclusive assessment tools to measure the intertwined growth of critical thinking and social awareness. Future research should further explore practical applications of contextual and transformative learning across diverse educational levels and disciplines, particularly within the Indonesian context.

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