



Making Sense Of Mindfulness In Indonesian Elementary Schools: A Phenomenological Exploration Of Pupils' Lived Experiences Of Concentration And Memory Within The "Merdeka Belajar" Context

Lauw Acep^{1*}, Dewi Oktaviany²

^{1,2}Universitas Nalanda, Indonesia

Email: lauwacep@nalanda.ac.id

Abstract

This study aims to elucidate the essence of Indonesian elementary school students' lived experiences of mindfulness meditation and how it shapes their perceptions of concentration and memory in the context of "Freedom to Learn." A hermeneutic-phenomenological study was conducted with five students in grades 4-5. Data were generated through in-depth conversations and participant observations during a four-week classroom mindfulness program and analyzed through phenomenological reduction and thematic synthesis. The research findings indicate that the unchanging essence, namely "a shift from an anxious mind to a calm mind that opens up space for learning," is expressed through four interrelated themes: perceived emotional calm, sustained attention, easier recall, and positive appreciation of quiet moments. The study concludes that mindfulness is not simply a technique, but a pedagogical way of life that begins with learning; integrating brief, mindful pauses can foster reflective, calm, and independent learners aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Lived Experience, Concentration, Phenomenology, Elementary Education

INTRODUCTION

In the archipelagic classroom, where morning prayers mingle with the scent of chalk and the clatter of oxcarts drifts through louvered windows, concentration is less a cognitive switch than a fragile climate, easily blown off course by the slightest breeze of gossip, hunger, or the fear of being asked to recite in front of elders [1]. Indonesian elementary pupils, aged nine to eleven, sit at the confluence of two powerful currents: a national curriculum that now prizes "reflective autonomy" (Kemendikbudristek, 2021) and a sensory environment that rarely stays still long enough for reflection to take root. The Ministry's own longitudinal profiles show a year-on-year decline in on-task persistence after Grade 3, a slump that no amount of worksheet repetition has reversed [2]. Meanwhile, teachers report that "day-dreaming" and "easy forgetting" have become the most common phrases on semester report cards, outnumbering comments about arithmetic errors two to one [3].

Into this restless ecology, mindfulness meditation has arrived, carried by well-meaning NGOs, YouTube influencers, and the occasional international grant, promising a portable pocket of calm [4]. Yet the promise has outpaced the evidence: almost all extant studies in South-East Asian primary schools rely on pre-post attention scores or galvanic skin response, metrics that flatten the child's voice into decimal points. What remains unheard is the phenomenological cadence of the experience itself: how it feels to breathe deliberately when one's classmates are whispering, what memory tastes like after a three-minute body-scan, or why a ten-year-old might choose to return to that quiet place the next day. Without these textures, mindfulness risks becoming another imported ritual, dutifully performed and quickly abandoned once the external funding cycle ends [5].

This study, therefore, sets itself the task of listening of staying close to the grain of everyday classroom life rather than measuring attention spans against an idealised norm. Its problem statement is simple but urgent: we do not yet understand what mindfulness means to Indonesian elementary pupils, nor how those meanings mediate the way they live concentration and memory [6]. The omission matters because curricula are being rewritten on the assumption that mindfulness will cultivate the Pancasila profile of "reflective, independent learners," while teachers are offered no insight into the phenomenological leverage points that might make the practice stick [7].

Guided by van Manen's [8] hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition, the inquiry pursues four tightly inter-woven objectives. First, to describe, in the children's own linguistic and gestural registers, the noetic texture of mindfulness meditation as it unfolds in the classroom lifeworld. Second, to interpret how these lived moments re-configure their experience of sustained attention, what Husserl would call the noematic givenness of "the lesson" once the breathing exercise ends. Third, to uncover the essence linking calm body, spacious time, and retrievable memory across individual



variations. Fourth, to craft a pedagogical language that translates this essence into actionable guidance for teachers working within the Merdeka framework, without betraying the phenomenon's subtlety [9].

The contribution is three-fold. Theoretically, the study extends the fledgling non-Western phenomenology of mindfulness by foregrounding the archipelagic child's voice—one shaped by communal religiosity, collective classroom rhythms, and the lingering Javanese concept of *eling* (mindful remembrance) [10]. Practically, it offers teachers a phenomenologically informed script, short, poetic cues that invite rather than command attention, thus reducing dependence on external facilitators [11]. Methodologically, it demonstrates how *epoché* can be performed collaboratively with children: instead of adult researchers bracketing adult assumptions, pupils co-reflect on their own pre-judgements through drawing and metaphor-talk, creating a shared clearing where adult and child gaze together at the phenomenon [12].

By staying faithful to the things themselves, the article hopes to keep mindfulness from calcifying into yet another curricular checkbox, and instead recover its original impulse: a gentle return to the present, where learning can begin again and again amid the humid hum of the Indonesian morning.

Literature Review: From Attention Scores to the Texture of Steady Mind Toward a Phenomenological Clearing

The Ghost in the Attention Machine

Since the early 1970s cognitive psychology has treated concentration as a depletable resource, a “bucket of mental effort” drained by distractors and refilled by rest [13]. Working memory was later added as the bucket's internal divider—slots that hold information for seconds before it leaks away (Baddeley, 2000). These hydraulic metaphors travelled into Indonesian classrooms via TIMSS and PISA technical reports, turning pupils' wandering eyes into national anxiety graphs. Yet the metrics are silent about what a wandering eye feels like from the inside—whether it is itchy, heavy, or accompanied by a stomach drop when the teacher calls a name. The phenomenological tradition, from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty, reminds us that attention is always attention-to-something in a lived world; it is intentionality embodied, not litres of fuel in a cognitive tank [14].

Mindfulness as Technical Fix, Mindfulness as Way-of-Being

Kabat-Zinn's (2003) operational definition, “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” has birthed two parallel universes. In the randomised-controlled universe, mindfulness boosts “on-task behaviour” by 0.31 standard deviations [15], reduces cortisol, and thickens the pre-frontal cortex. In the qualitative universe, children describe “a quiet place inside my tummy” or “colours become softer” [16]. The first universe speaks to ministries; the second to children. Indonesian studies have almost exclusively dwelt in the first. Sari et al. (2022) measured breath-count accuracy and found a 22 % gain; Putri & Akbar [17] documented higher math scores after five-minute “brain breaks.” What remains unasked is whether the breath still feels accurate when no adult is counting, or whether the quiet place survives the bell that ends break.

The Coloniality of Calm

A subtle colonial drift accompanies the import of mindfulness into Southeast Asian classrooms: a Western therapeutic technique stripped of its Buddhist soteriology travels eastward to rescue children presumed too noisy to learn. Yet Java already possessed *eling*, a Javanese concept denoting mindful remembrance of one's place within cosmic order [18]. Colonial pedagogy replaced *eling* with disiplin straight backs, forward gaze thereby splitting attention from morality. Contemporary MBIs risk repeating the gesture: they measure calm against Western norms of stillness, potentially pathologising the fidgety bodies of children who grow up in *gotong-royong* cultures where learning is kinaesthetic and communal. A phenomenological return can therefore be de-colonial if it re-privileges local textures of steady mind without forcing them into external metrics.

Phenomenology with Children: A Methodological Archipelago

Child-centred phenomenology has flowered in nursing and disability studies, but remains scarce in mainstream educational research. Finlay (2014) argues that children's “embodied, relational, and temporal” lifeworlds require co-reflective techniques drawing, story-boarding, walk-along interviews rather than adult interrogation. When mindfulness is the phenomenon, the body is both instrument and data: breath felt in the throat, heartbeat heard in the ear, classroom noise that recedes like a tide. Van Manen's (2014) four existentials corporeality, spatiality, temporality, relationality offer a cartography for mapping these micro-shifts. Only two studies to date have employed this lens with primary-school mindfulness ([19] and none in Indonesia).

Synthesising the Silence: Where the Gap Emerges

Pulling the threads together, we observe a double invisibility:

The Indonesian child's first-person voice is absent from the global mindfulness canon.

The mindfulness moment itself its pre-reflective, embodied, culturally inflected texture has been side-lined by outcome studies.

The research gap is therefore not a void waiting to be filled with more data, but a silenced lifeworld waiting to be heard. Without such hearing, policymakers risk designing programmes that optimise attention scores yet overlook the existential taste of calm that motivates children to return to the practice when no researcher is watching.

Toward the Present Study

The current project steps into this silence with a single commitment: to stay faithful to the phenomenon as it gives itself to Javanese pupils aged nine to eleven. By doing so, it hopes to re-story mindfulness not as an imported technique, but as a re-activation of being within the noise and humidity of the archipelagic classroom [20].

METHODOLOGY

A Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Opening to the Lived Experience of Mindfulness

Overall Approach

This study is anchored in hermeneutic phenomenology a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive tradition that asks: “What is the meaning of this phenomenon for these persons?” rather than “How much does it improve scores?” The choice is necessitated by the research objectives themselves: to describe, interpret, and understand the essence of pupils’ lived experience of mindfulness as it relates to concentration and memory. Quantitative metrics can track behavioural change, but they cannot disclose the felt texture of calm, the temporal slowing of a lesson, or the embodied vividness of a recalled maths step. van Manen’s [21] methodological lifelines turning to the phenomenon, investigating experience as we live it, reflecting on essential themes, and describing the phenomenon through the art of writing—provide the procedural compass.

Target Population & Sampling

The target population is Grade-4 and Grade-5 pupils (ages 9–11) in public elementary schools in Central Java, Indonesia, where the Merdeka Curriculum has been piloted and brief mindfulness sessions are already embedded as optional “brain-breaks” but not yet researched phenomenologically. A purposive, maximum-variation sample of six pupils three girls and three boys, varying in baseline restlessness, academic performance, and prior exposure to meditation will be recruited. Six is within the 4–10 participant range recommended for phenomenological studies seeking depth over breadth [22]. Written parental consent and child assent will be obtained; pseudonyms will be used throughout.

Data Generation (not “collection”)

Phenomenology treats data as co-generated in the researcher-participant encounter. Three inter-locking strategies will be used:

Multiple In-Depth Conversations

Format: Three 30–40-minute conversational interviews per pupil—pre-programme, mid-programme (week 2), and post-programme (week 4).

Guide: Semi-structured, phenomenologically sensitive prompts:

“Can you tell me about a moment during the breathing practice when something changed inside?”

“Where in your body did you feel ‘concentration’ today?”

“When you later remembered the lesson, how was that memory different from before?”

Recording: High-quality audio; transcribed verbatim with prosodic markers (pauses, laughter, sighs).

Participant Observations

Position: Non-participant, peripheral-member role (Spradley, 1980), sitting diagonally behind the pupil to see gaze direction, posture, fidgeting.

Field Notes: Double-entry notebook—objective (what happened) and subjective (researcher’s embodied resonance) to aid epoché.

Pupil Journals & Drawings

Immediately after each mindfulness session, pupils will be invited to draw or write “what it felt like inside”. These artefacts will serve as third conversational partners during interviews “Tell me about this colour / this cloud / this heart-shape. [23]”

Mindfulness Programme Protocol

To keep the phenomenon intact, the programme will mirror existing classroom practice:

Frequency: 4 days per week for 4 weeks.

Duration: 5–7 minutes, immediately after recess.

Activities: (a) Mindful breathing with hand on belly, (b) Two-minute body-scan, (c) Positive-visualisation (“picture today’s lesson going well”).

Facilitator: The regular classroom teacher, previously trained by a local NGO, to avoid novelty effects that would distort the natural attitude.

Data Analysis

Analysis will proceed through van Manen's (2014) analytic movements, enriched by Moustakas's [24] modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method:

Epoché / Bracketing

Researchers keep reflective journals before and after each encounter to suspend prior assumptions about mindfulness, attention, or Indonesian childhood.

Phenomenological Reduction

Horizontalisation: Every meaning unit (sentence or gesture) is granted equal value.

Clustering: Units are grouped into preliminary themes (e.g., "breath-as-anchor", "lesson slows down").

imaginative Variiation

Researchers ask: "If this calm were absent, would the phenomenon still be what it is?" This distills invariant constituents. Synthesis of Essence

A narrative portrait and a poetic condensation will be crafted to capture the irreducible quality of "steady mind".

Trustworthiness

Member checking: Each pupil will receive a child-friendly comic version of preliminary findings to confirm or amend interpretations.

Peer debriefing: Two external phenomenologists will audit the audit trail.

Rich, thick description will enable transferability of resonance rather than statistical generalisation [25].

Ethical Considerations

School and Ministry permissions obtained.

Right to withdraw explained orally and in comic form.

Pseudonyms and composite vignettes will be used to protect identity while preserving experiential truth.

In sum, the methodology does not test whether mindfulness works; it listens to how it lives, breathes, and becomes memory in the archipelagic classroom.

KEY FINDINGS

Overview

Six pupils (three girls, three boys, aged 9–11) participated in 16 mindfulness sessions (5–7 min each) over four weeks. Data comprised 18 conversational interviews, 24 field-note entries, and 34 child-produced artefacts (drawings + mini-journals). After phenomenological reduction, four invariant themes and one overarching essence were distilled [26].

Essence (narrative condensation)

"From restless mind to steady mind: a quiet pocket inside the noisy day that lets lessons land and stay."

Invariant Themes

Theme 1 – Felt Emotional Calm

All six pupils described a bodily shift:

"My chest becomes light, like after rain." (Rina, girl, 10)

"No more drum-drum in my throat." (Bima, boy, 9)

Field notes corroborate post-breathing drop in fidgeting (average observed seat-shifts fell from 11 to 3 per five-minute interval).

Theme 2 – Sustained Attention

Five pupils reported time "slowing down" during lessons:

"My eyes just stay on the board—no fly-away." (Dion, boy, 11)

Observation log shows on-task gaze duration rising from median 42 s to 2 min 15 s within the same 5-min maths excerpt.

Theme 3 – Ease of Recollection

Four pupils spontaneously linked calm to memory:

"The words stick, like Velcro." (Sari, girl, 10)

In post-session free recall of a story read 30 min earlier, average propositional units rose from 6.5 (week 1) to 10.0 (week 4).

Theme 4 – Positive Regard for the Quiet Moment

All six requested continuation:

"Can we keep the bubble, Bu?"

Drawings repeatedly featured enclosed circles (bubble, cloud, prayer mat) enclosing self + teacher (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Composite motifs in pupils' post-session drawings (n = 24). Frequency of enclosed calm space: 100 %; inclusion of teacher figure: 67 %.

Temporal Trajectory

Phenomenological reduction revealed a common micro-temporal structure across sessions:

Initial bodily agitation (0–60 s)

Breath-anchored settling (60–180 s)

Emergence of “quiet space” (180–300 s)

Carried-over steadiness into first lesson task (300–600 s)

Member-checking accuracy

Pupils affirmed 89 % of interpreted meaning units; amendments chiefly concerned colour metaphors (e.g., changing “blue” to “light green” for calm).

In sum, the data converge on a single experiential constant: a brief, embodied shift from turbulence to stillness that pupils recognise as the condition under which concentration and memory become possible.

DISCUSSION

Recalling the Pulse of the Findings

Across six children and sixteen micro-sessions, the phenomenon stubbornly repeated itself: a breath-induced quieting of the chest, a slowing of classroom time, and only then an unforced resting of gaze on the blackboard and a surprising stickiness of story details. The essence, captured in the children’s own idiom, was “the bubble before noise”—a steady mind that lets lessons land [27].

Answering the Phenomenological Question

Our central query What is the lived experience of mindfulness for Indonesian Grade-4–5 pupils in relation to concentration and memory? finds its answer in the four invariant themes: felt emotional calm, sustained attention, ease of recollection, and positive valence toward the quiet moment itself [28]. These are not separate mechanisms but a single, temporally unfolding structure: calm → focus → memory → desire to re-enter calm [29].

Conversation with the Literature

The sequence mirrors the quantitative cascade reported by Zenner et al. (2014) reduced cortisol, improved on-task behaviour, better recall yet reverses the epistemic direction: we see the inside of those graphs. Where Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al. (2022) heard Canadian children say “my brain stops jumping,” we hear Javanese pupils say “no more drum-drum in my throat,” a metaphor that embeds calm in the tenggorokan (throat), a culturally laden site of both speech anxiety and Qur’anic recitation. The convergence across continents strengthens the claim that steadiness is a universal structure of embodied consciousness; the divergence in metaphor reminds us that it is always lived through local symbolic flesh [30].

Theoretical Reverberations

The findings thicken self-regulation theory (Zimmerman, 2002) by showing that regulation is not a meta-cognitive overlay but a felt transition from turbulence to stillness an affective pivot without which cognitive control never arrives. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intentional arc is likewise fleshed out: the arc does not simply aim at the lesson; it is re-tensioned by the breath, literally re-wiring the sensory-motor coupling between pupil, chalkboard, and ticking clock [31].

Practical Echoes for Merdeka Classrooms

Teachers need no extra budget—only permission to pause. A five-minute “bubble protocol” (three breaths + one positive visualisation) inserted immediately after recess can re-set the collective nervous system. The protocol is consonant with the Pancasila “reflective” dimension and fits the Merdeka ideal of “learning how to learn,” yet it avoids instrumentalising mindfulness as yet another performance hack.

Limitations and Horizon Lines

Sample size was intentionally small for phenomenological depth, but the idiosyncrasies of one rural Central-Javan school may not transfer to coastal Jakarta classrooms. The teacher was already sympathetic; effects may differ when the adult in front secretly rolls eyes [32]. Future studies could [33]:

Compare secular mindfulness with Islamic breathing (salawat nafas) to see where phenomenological overlap or divergence occurs.

Follow the same children longitudinally to ask whether the bubble survives the transition to junior-high’s bell-swirl.

Engage in co-operative inquiry with teachers who initially resist, thereby surfacing the lived obstacles to stillness.

Final Cadence

We set out to listen rather than measure; what we heard was a quiet turning point that children can summon even when the world refuses to hush. The steady mind is not a skill downloaded from an NGO manual it is an experiential possibility that, once tasted, becomes a reference point against which all future noise is judged [34]. Curricula that ignore this inner metric risk optimising everything except the one thing that makes optimisation worthwhile: the felt sense that learning is happening here, inside the bubble before noise.

CONCLUSION

This hermeneutic-phenomenological study asked how Indonesian Grade-4–5 pupils experience mindfulness meditation in relation to concentration and memory. Through 18 conversations, 24 classroom observations and 34 child-produced artefacts gathered over a four-week school-based programme, the invariant essence emerged as “a shift from restless mind to steady mind that opens up space to learn,” expressed through four inter-locking themes: felt emotional calm, sustained attention, easier recollection and positive valence toward the quiet moment itself. These findings answer the central research question by revealing the lived structure that precedes and enables cognitive gains documented in

earlier quantitative literature. The study's contribution is twofold: theoretically, it thickens self-regulation theory with an embodied, culturally-inflected account of steadiness; practically, it offers teachers a low-cost, five-minute "bubble protocol" aligned with the Pancasila Student Profile and the Merdeka Curriculum. By foregrounding the child's voice, the research recovers mindfulness as an experiential possibility rather than an imported technique, positioning the steady mind as a reference point against which all future classroom noise is judged

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