



Playfulness and Playful Work Design Among Early Childhood Teacher : Teacher Well-Being as Mediator

Dearly Dearly^{1*}, Amy Mardhatillah², Setiawati Intan Savitri³, Mimi Fitriana⁴

Universitas Mercu Buana, Indonesia^{1,2,3}
Universiti Malaya-Wales, Malaysia⁴

ABSTRACT:

Individuals across various occupations, including teaching, can incorporate play into their tasks to make their work more enjoyable, and this approach is known as playful work design. Personality traits influence how individuals approach their work, but there is limited research on how positive traits like playfulness relate to playful work design, especially for early childhood teachers. This study investigates the role of playfulness in fostering playful work design, with teacher well-being as a mediator. Data were collected from 358 early childhood teachers using the Adult Playfulness Trait Scale (APTS), the Playful Work Design Scale, and the Teacher Well-Being Scale (TWBS). The analysis used Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with Jamovi software. The results show that teacher well-being partially mediates the relationship between playfulness and playful work design. While playfulness directly affects playful work design, the effect is weak. In contrast, teacher well-being is much stronger in influencing playful work design. These findings highlight the importance of addressing personality traits and well-being to create enjoyable and effective work environments in early childhood educational settings.

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CONTACT Corresponding; Dearly Dearly, Universitas Mercu Buana, Indonesia
Email : dearly@mercubuana.ac.id

1. Introduction

Early childhood teachers play a critical role in the developmental stages of young children, contributing significantly to their cognitive, social, and emotional growth. Early childhood teachers help to build foundational skills in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, which influence a child's ability to succeed in school and later in life (World Bank, 2021). Despite their crucial role in child development, professional development opportunities for early childhood teachers are often limited. Many educators may not receive the necessary training to effectively support diverse learning needs or to incorporate best practices in early childhood education. This lack of training can leave teachers feeling unprepared to address the complexities of their roles (Andriany, 2022). Early childhood teachers frequently experience high workloads with relatively low financial compensation. This situation can lead to burnout and high turnover rates, further complicating the stability and quality of early childhood education (OECD, 2015).

In a challenging work environment, like that faced by early childhood teachers, incorporating playful elements into daily tasks helps reduce stress and prevent burnout, which is a common issue in this profession. According to Bakker et al., (2020) individuals across various occupations, including teaching, can incorporate play into their tasks to make their work more enjoyable. This approach, known as Playful Work Design (PWD), is a relatively new concept. PWD is a concept where employees intentionally incorporate play elements into their work tasks to make them more enjoyable and engaging. Early research on PWD suggests that it boosts employee creativity,

engagement, performance, and well-being (Bakker et al., 2020; Scharp et al., 2023). According to Bakker et al. (2020), PWD may be particularly beneficial for repetitive, monotonous, or generally perceived as boring tasks. The encouraging results from these initial studies highlight that PWD is a valuable strategy for both employees and organizations (Scharp et al., 2023).

For early childhood educators, the PWD approach is especially relevant because their role involves fostering a playful and stimulating learning environment for young children. By utilizing PWD, teachers can enhance their work experience and the learning experiences of the children they teach (Scharp et al., 2023). In practice, PWD allows early childhood educators to creatively adjust repetitive or monotonous tasks, such as lesson planning or classroom management, by integrating playful strategies that increase engagement and satisfaction. For example, they might transform routine activities into games, introduce creative storytelling into instructional tasks, or even make classroom setups more interactive and fun (Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010). This not only helps maintain the educator's enthusiasm but also positively impacts student interaction and learning outcomes. However, studies about playful work design among early childhood teachers remain underexplored.

Research shows that PWD can improve creativity, performance, and well-being (Bakker et al., 2020), making it a valuable tool for educators who often face the challenge of balancing structured teaching with playful learning. In the context of early childhood education, where play is a critical aspect of development, PWD aligns well with the goals of making learning enjoyable and effective for young children, while simultaneously enhancing the educator's job satisfaction and professional well-being (Shen, Chick, & Zinn, 2014). Playful work design allows teachers to be more creative in crafting learning activities, fostering a more dynamic and enjoyable environment not only for themselves but also for the children. With a more interactive and collaborative atmosphere, early childhood teachers can improve their job satisfaction, which in turn positively affects their relationships with students. This approach also aligns with the play-based learning model used in early childhood education, where play is a primary tool for developing children's cognitive and social skills (Sakhiyya & Rahmawati, 2024). Savitri & Widyaningsih (2024) proved that PWD can strengthen grit among early childhood education teachers.

Playful Work Design (PWD) refers to a proactive cognitive-behavioral approach in which individuals incorporate the experiential qualities of play into their work, using play elements to introduce (1) fun and (2) competition (Scharp et al., 2019). This concept combines insights from the literature on play (Barnett, 2017; Lieberman, 1977) and proactive work strategies (Bakker, 2017; Parker & Collins, 2010). Play is understood as a behavioral orientation (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006) that infuses activities with the experiential aspects of play through play elements (Lieberman, 1977), while proactive work strategies refer to how employees take charge of managing their work experience and performance (Bakker, 2017; Parker & Collins, 2010). PWD brings these two research areas together, explaining how employees actively design their work experience by incorporating play elements to foster enjoyment and competition. PWD's structure is built on two types of play elements: ludic and agonistic (Scharp et al., 2019). Ludic elements, such as spontaneity, fantasy, and humor, primarily serve to create amusement and fun (Barnett, 2017; Lieberman, 1977), while agonistic elements, such as goals and rules, focus on creating challenge and competition.

Studies found that individual differences such as creativity, openness to experience, and playfulness personality play a significant role in determining whether a teacher will engage in playful work design. However, the connection between a teacher's inherent playfulness and ability to design work playfully is not fully understood. Teachers who value creativity and innovation are more likely to integrate playful elements into their work, which contributes to greater job satisfaction and student engagement. In recent years, the role of personality traits in shaping workplace behaviors has gained increasing attention, particularly in educational settings. Playfulness, defined as an individual's ability to engage in spontaneous, creative, and enjoyable activities (Proyer et al., 2018), is emerging as a significant trait that influences how educators design their work environments. For early childhood educators, playfulness fosters personal engagement and helps create a stimulating and supportive learning atmosphere for children (Pinchover, 2017).

Research shows that playful work design can increase job satisfaction, creativity, and overall well-being among employees (Scharp et al., 2023). Conversely, research shows that employee well-being affects their creativity, motivation, and engagement in proactive behaviors such as job crafting, which includes playful work design (Bakker

& Demerouti, 2014). Well-being fosters the intrinsic motivation needed to introduce fun and challenges into their daily routines (Tadic, Bakker, & Oerlemans, 2013). It means well-being may mediate this relationship, suggesting that positive work environments might require more than just personality traits (Johnson et al., 2023).

According to Collie et al. (2015), teacher well-being is essential because it directly impacts several critical aspects of their professional life and the broader educational environment. There are 3 factors including work load well-being, organizational well-being and student-interaction well-being.

This study aims to explore the link between playfulness and playful work design among early childhood teachers, with a focus on the mediating role of teacher well-being. By understanding these dynamics, we can better support teachers in creating enriching, playful environments for themselves and their students.

2. Method

This study used a correlational quantitative approach to investigate the interplay between playfulness and playful work design with teacher well-being as a mediator among early childhood educators.

2.1 Participants

The participants comprised a total of 358 early childhood educators from 20 kindergartens located in Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi, Indonesia, used an incidental sampling technique. The data collection was conducted using an online questionnaire through g-forms. All of them are female. Among the participants, it is noted that they had a bachelor's degree (76%) and 67 % of participants had an early childhood education background.

2.2 The Materials

The measuring instrument used is the Teacher Well-Being Scale (TWBS) developed by Collie et.al., (2015). TWBS consists of 16 items that measure three factors, namely workload well-being, organizational well-being and student interaction well-being. The rating scale ranges from 1 to 7 (1=Negative, 7=Positive). The TWBS instrument was adapted into Indonesian by Dearly (2020) and has good psychometric properties. The validity value of the TWBS using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is 0.50 - 0.74 and the reliability value using construct validity (CR) is 0.929 overall.

Playfulness personality was measured using the Adult Personality Trait Scale (APTS) developed by Shen, Chick, & Zinn (2014). APTS has 19 favorable items and consists of three dimensions, the first of which is fun-seeking motivation which includes three subdimensions, (a) fun beliefs (Example: "I think fun is a very important part of life"), (b) initiative (Example: "I am often the one to initiate fun things in a situation"), and (c) reactivity (Example: "When others start something fun, I am happy to follow"), then the second dimension, uninhibitedness (Example: "Sometimes I can do things without worrying about consequences"), and the third dimension is spontaneity (Example: "I often do things that are not planned"). The APTS scale used in this study is a 7-level Likert scale model, which starts from "1 (Strongly Disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Somewhat Disagree), 4 (Undecided), 5 (Somewhat Agree), 6 (Agree), and 7 (Strongly Agree)". The reliability test of the APTS measuring instrument resulted in a Cronbach Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.880$ from 19 items.

Furthermore, to measure Playful Work Design using a measuring instrument called the Playful Work Design Scale (PWDS) developed by Scharpet al., (2023), which has been translated into Indonesian with a total of 12 favorable items. The PWDS measure consists of two dimensions, namely (1) Designing Fun (ex: "I look for ways to make tasks more fun for everyone involved today"), and (2) Designing Competition (example: "I compete with myself at work - not because I have to, but because I enjoy it today"). The scale used is a Likert scale with 5 levels, which starts from "1 (Never), 2 (Rarely), 3 (Sometimes), 4 (Often), and 5 (Always)". A reliability test was also conducted on the PWDS, resulting in a Cronbach Alpha value of $\alpha = 0.893$ from 12 items. The data was analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling with Jamovi.

3. Result

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

	Playfulness	Teacher_Wellbeing	PWD
Valid	358	358	358
Missing	0	0	0
Mean	104.134	97.154	52.609
Std. Deviation	16.525	10.610	4.862
Minimum	46.000	22.000	33.000
Maximum	133.000	112.000	60.000

From table 1, the average playfulness score among participants is 104.13, with a wide range from 46 to 133 and a high variability (standard deviation of 16.53). This indicates that participants exhibit diverse levels of playfulness. The average score for teacher well-being is 97.15, with scores ranging from 22 to 112. The lower variability (standard deviation of 10.61) suggests that most participants have similar well-being levels, though some experience significant challenges in well-being. The average score for playful work design is 52.61, with a narrower range (33 to 60) and lower variability (standard deviation of 4.86). This suggests that while playfulness and well-being vary greatly, playful work environments are more consistently moderate. In summary, participants demonstrate a high average of playfulness and well-being, but playful work design remains relatively moderate and less varied across participants.

Table Direct and Indirect Effects

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Lower	Upper
PLAYFULNESS → PWD	0.025	0.003	9.102	< .001	0.019	0.030

Total effects

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower	Upper
PLAYFULNESS → PWD	0.031	0.003	11.205	< .001	0.025	0.036

	Estimate	Std. Error	z-value	p	Lower	Upper
TEACHER_WELLBEING → PWD	0.313	0.045	6.963	< .001	0.225	0.402
PLAYFULNESS → PWD	0.025	0.003	9.102	< .001	0.019	0.030
PLAYFULNESS → TEACHER_WELLBEING	0.019	0.003	6.353	< .001	0.013	0.025

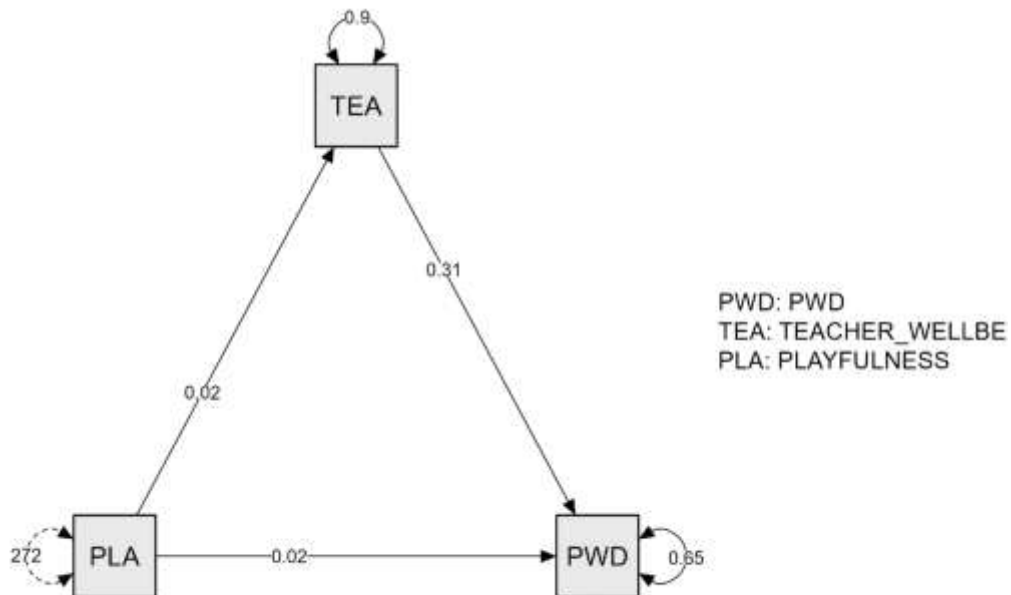


Figure 1. Mediation Model

The path coefficient from PLA to PWD is 0.02, which indicates a very weak direct positive effect of playfulness on playful work design. This suggests that playfulness by itself has a minimal influence on playful work design without considering teacher well-being. The path from Playfulness (PLA) to Teacher Well-Being (TEA) is 0.02, indicating a very weak direct positive effect of playfulness on teacher well-being. Meanwhile, the path from Teacher Well-Being (TEA) to Playful Work Design (PWD) is 0.31, indicating a moderate positive influence of teacher well-being on playful work design. This means that as teacher well-being improves, playful work design becomes more effective.

The combined influence of playfulness on playful work design, both directly and through the mediation of teacher well-being, appears weak overall. The total indirect effect is calculated as 0.0062, which is minimal. Playfulness directly contributes to both playful work design and teacher well-being, although its direct impact on work design is smaller compared to the impact of well-being.

4. Discussion

The results indicate a significant direct effect of playfulness on playful work design (PWD) with a path coefficient of 0.025. Although this effect is statistically significant, the small coefficient suggests that playfulness alone does not strongly influence the creation of playful work environments. However, playfulness also indirectly influences PWD through teacher well-being, which shows a more substantial effect on PWD (0.313). This partial mediation implies that playfulness enhances teacher well-being, which in turn promotes playful work design, a pathway supported by the significant path coefficient of 0.019 from playfulness to teacher well-being.

The results show that teacher well-being is a more powerful predictor of playful work design compared to playfulness alone, with a path coefficient of 0.313. This highlights the importance of focusing on teachers' psychological well-being to foster creative, playful environments in the workplace. The robust z-value (6.963) and p-value (< .001) further strengthen this finding, showing that when teachers feel well and supported, they are better equipped to design and maintain playful work settings.

Previous research has established that playfulness, both as an individual trait and as a characteristic of the work environment, can foster creativity, engagement, and overall job satisfaction. Sandelands (2010) found that playfulness in the workplace leads to more innovative work behaviors, as it encourages experimentation and out-of-the-box thinking. Yu et al. (2019) also demonstrated a positive relationship between playfulness and job

satisfaction, suggesting that playfulness can create an enjoyable work environment that boosts productivity and creativity.

However, the current study reveals that while playfulness has a direct effect on PWD, but this effect is relatively small. This finding aligns with some studies, such as Glynn & Webster (1992), which suggested that the impact of playfulness might be context-dependent, with individual traits and work conditions influencing how much playfulness contributes to work outcomes. Individual traits like playfulness and openness influence employees' engagement and creativity daily. In their study, Scharp et al. (2019) found that employees who are more playful and open to experiences are likely to redesign their work activities in fun and competitive ways. This daily fluctuation in PWD positively affects work engagement and creativity. Their research supports the idea that playfulness, as a personal trait, activates proactive behaviors that lead to enhanced work experiences, allowing employees to inject enjoyment into their tasks. The study also emphasizes that while playfulness can generally influence long-term work behaviors, its impact can vary day by day based on individual and situational factors, reinforcing the dynamic nature of playful work design. This suggests that PWD is not only a stable characteristic but can also change depending on daily experiences and moods, which highlights the importance of maintaining an engaging work environment.

The significant role of teacher well-being in the current study builds on previous research showing that well-being is critical to job performance and work design. Ryan & Deci (2000) found that well-being is essential for sustaining motivation and job satisfaction, positively influencing job performance and creativity. Klassen et al. (2012) showed that teachers' well-being is closely tied to their ability to implement creative and student-centered approaches, often involving playful work design elements. The strong coefficient of 0.313 for the path from teacher well-being to PWD supports these findings, emphasizing the central role of well-being in fostering an innovative and playful teaching environment. This aligns with Hakanen et al. (2006), who found that teachers with higher well-being are more likely to use creative, student-centered methods that reflect playful work design principles.

When teachers feel positive and functioning, they are more likely to approach their tasks enthusiastically and openly, fostering creativity. If teachers perceive demanding tasks as intrinsically valuable or meaningful, it positively affects their emotional response to those tasks. This perception helps them view complex and effort-intensive activities as important or interesting, rather than burdensome. A positive emotional state encourages teachers to explore playful elements in their work, such as incorporating games, humor, and creative problem-solving in their teaching methods. Research shows that employees who experience higher job satisfaction and emotional resilience are more willing to engage in playful work design (Scharp et al., 2023). On the contrary, teachers experiencing high levels of stress or burnout are less likely to adopt playful work design. Burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment, can inhibit the motivation to innovate and experiment with playful approaches. Educators who are overwhelmed by their workload or struggling with emotional well-being may lack the energy and inspiration needed to integrate playful activities into their classrooms.

The current study extends previous research by highlighting the mediating role of teacher well-being in the relationship between playfulness and playful work design. While playfulness is important, its effect on work design is more indirect, largely mediated through teacher well-being. These findings suggest that improving teacher well-being is a key mechanism for enhancing playful work design. Therefore, interventions aimed at increasing both playfulness and teacher well-being may be the most effective in promoting playful work design. This finding is novel but consistent with the work of Salanova et al. (2011), who found that well-being mediates the relationship between job resources (such as playfulness) and job performance. The mediation effect observed in the current study indicates that well-being acts as a bridge between playfulness and work design, suggesting that interventions aimed at improving work design should address both psychological and behavioral aspects. While playfulness contributes to playful work design, the pathway through well-being is a more influential mechanism. These results align with existing literature on well-being and playfulness but add depth by examining their interactions within the context of the educational sector. To foster more playful and

innovative work environments, both playfulness and teacher well-being should be targeted in organizational strategies.

5. Conclusion

These results suggest that playfulness is an important factor that can increase playful work design, both directly and through the mediating role of teacher well-being. This highlights the importance of creating a playful work environment and supporting teacher well-being to achieve better performance. Strategies to improve playfulness in the work environment and teacher well-being can have a significant impact on the outcomes achieved by teachers, and this is relevant for the development of more holistic education policies. These results suggest a two-tiered approach to enhancing playful work design. First, cultivating playfulness among teachers can improve their overall well-being. Second, increasing teacher well-being has a larger direct impact on playful work design. This implies that efforts to boost teacher creativity and innovation through playful work design should focus on both fostering playfulness and enhancing well-being. This is important because teacher well-being seems to amplify the effects of playfulness on work design, making it a crucial lever for achieving a playful work environment.

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