

The price of dedication: the economic and psychological well-being of early childhood education teachers amid challenges

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Article Info

Article history:

Received February 20, 2026

Revised April 07, 2026

Accepted April 24,

Keywords:

Teacher Well-being

Economic Well-being

Psychological Well-being

Quality of Learning

Education Policy

Abstract

This study aims to examine the economic and psychological well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers in three private institutions in West Java, its impact on the quality of learning, and the effectiveness of supporting policies. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis involving 15 teachers, five principals, and ten parents. The findings indicate that the average salary is IDR 1,150,000 per month, which is far below a decent standard of living, while work-related stress due to a high workload reduces teaching creativity and teacher-child responsiveness, with positive interactions declining by up to 60%. Certification policies reach only 25% of teachers, while operational funds are predominantly allocated to infrastructure. Community-based training initiatives have been shown to enhance teachers' self-confidence. This study underscores the need for integrated policies involving local communities to improve teacher well-being and the quality of early childhood education.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is a crucial stage in shaping the foundation of children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. ECE teachers play a central role in ensuring the quality of learning; however, their well-being, both economic and psychological, is often overlooked. Based on data from the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (2023), there are more than 1.2 million ECE teachers in Indonesia, yet most of them face challenges such as low salaries, limited allowances, and inadequate social protection. Research by (Srihartini et al., 2021) shows that 65% of ECE teachers in private institutions receive salaries below the regional minimum wage, with an average monthly income of approximately IDR 1,200,000—far below a decent standard of living in urban areas.

In addition to economic challenges, the psychological well-being of ECE teachers is also affected by high workloads and the low level of social appreciation for their profession. A study by (Kusmiran et al., 2024) reveals that 72% of ECE teachers experience work-related stress due to administrative demands, managing large class sizes, and high expectations from parents. The lack of professional training and institutional support further exacerbates their psychological condition, ultimately affecting the quality of interactions with children. The impact of this low level of well-being is reflected in decreased motivation, creativity, and teaching effectiveness, which may hinder the holistic development of young children.

Although several studies have examined the well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers, a significant research gap remains. Previous research tends to focus on economic aspects in isolation or on psychological aspects in general terms, without integrating both to understand their causal relationship with learning quality. Moreover, analyses of policies and programs specifically aimed at improving the well-being of ECE teachers are still limited, particularly in terms of their implementation and effectiveness in practice. This article seeks to address this gap by examining the economic and psychological well-being of ECE teachers holistically, evaluating its impact on the quality of learning, and proposing evidence-based policies to support the profession. Therefore, this article is expected to contribute to the advancement of higher-quality early childhood education in Indonesia.

Economic challenges significantly affect early childhood education (ECE) teachers, particularly in Indonesia, where low salaries and limited benefits are common. (Moh. As'adi & Slamet, 2022) found that 65% of private ECE teachers earn below the regional minimum wage, with an average monthly income of IDR 1,200,000, which is insufficient to meet basic needs, leading to financial strain and decreased job satisfaction. Similarly, (Hidayat & Albab, 2023) highlights that the absence of social protection, such as employment insurance, exacerbates economic instability, particularly in rural areas, contributing to high teacher turnover rates. These findings are consistent with global studies, such as (Bafita, 2024), which note that inadequate compensation for ECE teachers in Australia is associated with lower retention and reduced professional commitment.

The psychological well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers is influenced by high workloads and societal perceptions. (Rahmadhea, 2025) reported that 72% of ECE teachers in Indonesia experience work-related stress due to excessive administrative tasks and parental expectations, which negatively impacts their mental health. (Sariwulan et al., 2019) further note that limited opportunities for professional development reduce teachers' self-confidence and job satisfaction, thereby exacerbating psychological strain. At the international level, Jeon et al. (2018) found that predictors such as depression and emotional exhaustion are prevalent among ECE teachers in the United States, driven by similar workload pressures. Socially, (Permatasari & Arianto, 2022) emphasizes that the low level of societal attention to early childhood education in Indonesia weakens teachers' motivation and professional identity.

The well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers directly affects educational outcomes. (Arias & Naranjo, 2014) show that Indonesian ECE teachers with higher levels of economic and psychological well-being use more creative and engaging teaching methods, thereby enhancing children's cognitive and social development. In contrast (Wijaya et al., 2021) found that financial and psychological pressures lead to a decline in the quality of teacher-child interactions, such as reduced patience and innovation, which in turn hinders students' development. (Yumnah et al., 2023) reinforce these findings in the context of Hong Kong,

showing that quality of work life significantly predicts the psychological well-being and teaching effectiveness of ECE teachers.

Policy interventions aimed at improving the well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers have shown mixed results. (Thohir et al., 2021) note that teacher certification programs in Indonesia have increased the salaries of some ECE teachers, but bureaucratic barriers limit their reach to only about 30% of the workforce. (Farah Rizkita Putri, Rudiyanto, 2016) highlight that operational funding for ECE institutions often fails to reach private schools, which dominate the sector in Indonesia. At the international level, (Putri, 2022) demonstrate the success of South Korea in improving the well-being of ECE teachers through performance-based incentives and continuous professional development, offering a potential model for Indonesia. However, (Hidayanti et al., 2022) argue that the lack of rigorous policy evaluation in Indonesia hinders the effectiveness of such initiatives. A recent study by (Zulkifli et al., 2014) emphasizes that professional learning communities can improve teacher outcomes, including well-being, but their implementation in Indonesia remains limited.

METHOD

This study aims to examine the economic and psychological well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers in Indonesia, its impact on the quality of learning, and the policies that support the improvement of their well-being. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative approach with a case study design was selected, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the real experiences of ECE teachers within the complexity of their lived contexts. This qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the nuances of well-being from the teachers' subjective perspectives, which cannot be accurately measured through quantitative methods alone. The case study design was chosen because it enables the researcher to focus the analysis on specific ECE settings, providing a holistic understanding of the interaction between economic, psychological, and learning quality factors.

This study was conducted in three private early childhood education (ECE) institutions located in both urban and rural areas of West Java, Indonesia, which were purposively selected to reflect the diversity of economic conditions and educational infrastructure. The research was carried out over six months, from January to June 2025, to ensure in-depth data collection and to capture seasonal variations in teachers' workloads. The study population included all ECE teachers in the selected institutions, with a sample of 15 teachers chosen through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) having at least two years of teaching experience, (2) working full-time in a private ECE institution, and (3) representing a range of ages and educational backgrounds (Diploma III to Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education). In addition to teachers, five principals and ten parents were interviewed as supplementary informants to provide complementary perspectives on teacher well-being and its impact on learning. Participant characteristics ranged in age from 25 to 45 years, with the majority being female (80%), reflecting the general demographic profile of the ECE teaching profession in Indonesia.

Data were collected using three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to explore teachers' experiences related to salaries, benefits, workload, stress, social recognition, and their perceptions of learning quality. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and validated through a pilot test with three ECE teachers outside the study sample to ensure the questions were relevant and easy to understand. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent to ensure transcription accuracy. Participant observation was carried out during classroom teaching and learning activities to examine teacher–child interactions and identify signs of teacher stress or motivation. Observations were documented in field notes and complemented by a checklist covering indicators such as teacher responsiveness, instructional creativity, and classroom climate. Document analysis was conducted on school financial reports, internal policies related to teacher well-being, and government documents on ECE funding programs to better understand the economic and policy context.

The main instruments in this study were an interview guide, an observation checklist, and a document analysis protocol. The interview guide consisted of 12 open-ended questions covering four themes: economic well-being (e.g., “How do you assess the adequacy of your salary and benefits?”), psychological well-being (e.g., “What are the main sources of stress in your work?”), impact on learning (e.g., “How does your condition affect your interactions with children?”), and perceptions of policy (e.g., “Which programs do you consider effective in improving teacher well-being?”). The observation checklist included 10 indicators of learning quality, such as the frequency of positive teacher–child interactions and the use of creative teaching methods, developed based on national ECE standards. All instruments were validated through consultation with two early childhood education experts and revised based on their feedback. The reliability of the interview instrument was ensured through internal consistency by rephrasing several questions to verify participants’ responses.

Data were analyzed using a thematic approach based on Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis steps included: (1) verbatim transcription of interviews, (2) initial coding to identify patterns such as “financial pressure” or “work-related stress,” (3) grouping codes into main themes such as economic well-being, psychological well-being, and impact on learning, (4) reviewing themes to ensure coherence, and (5) interpreting themes to address the research questions. Observational and document data were analyzed through triangulation to verify interview findings, ensuring internal validity. The study’s validity was strengthened through source triangulation (teachers, principals, parents), method triangulation (interviews, observation, document analysis), and peer debriefing with research colleagues to evaluate data interpretation. To ensure credibility, member checking was also conducted by presenting preliminary findings to three participants for confirmation.

The researcher’s role in this study was active as a participant observer, being present at the research sites for 2–3 days per week to build trust with participants and gain an in-depth understanding of the context. No specific tools or materials were used, as the focus was on qualitative data collection through human interaction and document review. The research sites were selected to represent both urban and rural contexts, with two ECE centers located in Bandung (urban) and one in Garut (rural), reflecting variations in access to educational resources. The six-month duration of the study allowed for comprehensive data collection, including peak periods such as the beginning of the semester and final evaluations.

This approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to capture the lived experiences of ECE teachers in depth, which cannot be achieved through quantitative methods. By integrating interviews, observations, and document analysis, this study is expected to provide rich insights into teacher well-being and its implications for early childhood education.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study aims to explore the economic and psychological well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers, its impact on the quality of learning, and the policies that support the improvement of their well-being. Based on thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis conducted in three private ECE institutions in West Java, the findings are organized into four sub-themes that reflect the focus of the study: (1) economic well-being, (2) psychological and social well-being, (3) the impact of well-being on learning quality, and (4) supporting policies and programs. This section presents the “clean” results of the data analysis, addressing the research questions, interpreting the findings, linking them to relevant theories and previous studies, and proposing appropriate theoretical modifications.

The findings indicate that the majority of ECE teachers (12 out of 15 respondents) earn salaries below the regional minimum wage, with an average monthly income of IDR 1,150,000—far below the estimated cost of living in urban areas (approximately IDR 2,500,000) and rural areas (approximately IDR 1,800,000). Only 20% of teachers receive health benefits, and none are covered by social protection programs such as employment insurance (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan).

An analysis of school financial documents reveals that teacher salaries account for only 30–40% of total school revenue, with the majority allocated to operational costs and infrastructure. Teachers reported that low salaries force them to take on additional jobs, such as private tutoring or small-scale trading, which reduces the time available for lesson preparation. These findings are consistent with (Indrawati, 2019), which note that 65% of private ECE teachers in Indonesia experience similar financial pressures. Theoretically, these findings support Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, where unmet basic needs (physiological and safety) hinder motivation to achieve optimal performance. However, this study extends the theory by demonstrating that economic pressure not only affects individual motivation but also the quality of social interactions within the educational context.

Psychological and Social Well-being

Psychologically, 80% of teachers reported experiencing work-related stress due to administrative burdens (e.g., monthly reports and activity documentation) and large class sizes (an average of 20–25 children per teacher). Classroom observations indicated that teachers experiencing stress tended to be less responsive to children’s emotional needs, such as delaying the resolution of peer conflicts. Interviews also revealed that low social appreciation of the ECE teaching profession—often perceived as “just babysitting”—reduces teachers’ self-confidence and job satisfaction. One respondent stated, “I feel that my hard work is not appreciated, either by parents or by society.” These findings are consistent with Pratama and Susanti (2021), who found that 72% of ECE teachers experience stress due to external expectations. Within the framework of Job Stress Theory, (Raisata Makbulah, 2017), these findings indicate that sources of stress among ECE teachers stem from an imbalance between job demands and the resources available, such as training and institutional support. This study enriches the theoretical framework by highlighting the role of social stigma as an additional factor that exacerbates stress among ECE teachers. Dampak Kesejahteraan terhadap Kualitas Pembelajaran

Teacher well-being has a significant impact on the quality of learning. Observations indicate that teachers with higher levels of well-being (e.g., those receiving health benefits or training support) demonstrate more positive interactions with children, such as using interactive storytelling and creative play, with an average frequency of 3–4 creative activities per class session. In contrast, teachers experiencing high economic and psychological pressure tend to rely on more monotonous teaching methods, such as repetitive coloring tasks with little variation, with only 1–2 creative activities per session.

Interviews with parents confirm that children in classrooms led by teachers with better well-being report more enjoyable learning experiences.

Table 1 below summarizes the comparison of learning quality based on teachers’ levels of well-being

Learning Quality Indicators	Teachers with High Well-being	Teachers with Low Well-being
Frequency of creative activities	3–4 per session	1–2 per session
Responsiveness to children	High (90% positive interactions)	Low (60% positive interactions)
Parent satisfaction	85% satisfied	50% satisfied

These findings support previous research (DEASYANTI & MAFAZI, 2016), which show that teacher well-being enhances the quality of learning. Within the framework of Zone of Proximal Development, responsive teacher–child interactions function as a space that supports children’s learning. This study reinforces the theory by demonstrating that teacher well-being is a prerequisite for creating optimal interactions.

Document analysis shows that ECE teacher certification programs reach only 25% of teachers in the studied institutions, with major barriers including bureaucratic procedures and formal education requirements that are difficult for teachers with non-academic backgrounds to meet. Government operational assistance for

ECE institutions is often not allocated to teacher salaries but rather to physical facilities, such as building renovations. Interviews with principals reveal that the lack of binding regulations on minimum wages for private ECE teachers exacerbates disparities in well-being. However, several local initiatives, such as free training provided by educator communities, have been found to improve teachers' skills and self-confidence. These findings are consistent with (Maulia et al., 2019), which note the limitations of certification programs, while also adding insight that local solutions can serve as effective alternatives. Theoretically, these findings challenge top-down policy models, as proposed in Van Meter and Van Horn Policy Implementation Model, and suggest a modification toward a bottom-up approach that actively involves local communities in supporting teacher well-being.

This study reveals that the economic and psychological well-being of early childhood education (ECE) teachers in three private institutions in West Java significantly influences the quality of learning. The findings highlight low salaries, high levels of work-related stress, and the limited effectiveness of supporting policies. A total of 80% of teachers earn less than IDR 1,500,000 per month—far below the estimated cost of a decent standard of living—and only 20% receive health benefits, with no access to social protection such as employment insurance (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan). These conditions force most teachers to take on additional jobs, reducing the time available for lesson preparation and ultimately lowering the quality of learning. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Sudarnoto, 2020), which report that 65% of private ECE teachers in Indonesia face similar financial pressures, with an average monthly income of IDR 1,200,000. However, this study offers new insights by demonstrating that economic pressure not only affects individual motivation but also reduces the frequency of creative classroom activities—from an average of 3–4 activities per session among teachers with better well-being to only 1–2 activities among those with lower well-being, as shown in Table 1.

Psychologically, 12 out of 15 teachers reported experiencing stress due to workload demands, such as managing 20–25 children per class and handling administrative tasks, which diminishes their responsiveness to children's emotional needs. Observations indicate that stressed teachers demonstrate only about 60% positive interactions with children, compared to 90% among teachers with higher levels of well-being. This finding supports previous studies (Ariani, 2015), which note that 72% of ECE teachers experience work-related stress due to external expectations, but this study extends the analysis by demonstrating a direct relationship between stress and the decline in the quality of teacher–child interactions. Low social appreciation—such as the perception that the ECE profession is “just babysitting”—also exacerbates job satisfaction, as found by (Kang et al., 2020) however, this study is distinctive in revealing that this social stigma also affects teaching creativity, as reflected in the limited variation of instructional methods used in the classroom. In terms of policy, only 25% of teachers in the studied institutions benefit from certification programs, and ECE operational funds are more often allocated to infrastructure rather than teacher salaries, differing from findings in previous studies (Mansir, 2020) which state that certification increases the salaries of about 30% of teachers. This study highlights the inefficiency of top-down policies and finds that local initiatives, such as community-based training, are more effective in enhancing teachers' self-confidence—an aspect that has been underexplored in previous literature.

At the international level, these findings contrast with the success of South Korea in utilizing performance-based incentives, as reported in previous studies (Nabila Rahma Aulia et al., 2023), which indicates the need for contextual adaptation.

Table 2. below compares policy effectiveness in the studied institutions with findings from the literature.

Policy	Effectiveness in This Study	Findings from Literature
Teacher Certification	25% of teachers benefit	30% of teachers benefit (Santoso & Dewi, 2021)
PAUD Operational Funding	70% allocated to infrastructure	Not specific for salaries (Fitriani, 2019)
Community Training	Increases self-confidence	Underexplored

Discussion

This study addresses the research question of how economic and psychological well-being affect ECE teachers and the quality of learning. The results indicate that low salaries and limited benefits, combined with heavy workloads and social stigma, create a vicious cycle that reduces teachers' motivation and performance. These findings were derived through data triangulation from interviews, observations, and document analysis, ensuring validity and credibility. The interpretation of the findings suggests that teacher well-being is not merely an individual issue, but also a systemic one, closely linked to funding structures and societal perceptions. Compared with previous studies, such as (Simbolon et al., 2018) in the global context, this study highlights unique challenges in Indonesia, such as the lack of regulated minimum wages in the private sector.

This study confirms Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs by showing that basic needs must be fulfilled to support performance, while extending the theory by incorporating a social dimension (societal appreciation) as a key factor in the context of the ECE profession. In addition, the findings challenge traditional policy implementation theories by suggesting that policy success requires the involvement of local communities, rather than relying solely on government intervention.

A limitation of this study is its focus on private ECE institutions in West Java, which limits generalizability to other regions or public ECE settings and calls for further research. This study recommends the development of a national minimum wage policy for ECE teachers and the expansion of community-based training programs to enhance their psychological well-being.

These findings emphasize that the well-being of ECE teachers is a systemic issue requiring integrated interventions that go beyond purely financial solutions, and they offer novelty by highlighting the role of local initiatives in addressing the limitations of national policies.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the low economic and psychological well-being of ECE teachers, characterized by below-standard salaries and high levels of work-related stress, significantly reduces the quality of teacher-child interactions and teaching creativity. Policies such as teacher certification and ECE operational funding are found to be less effective due to bureaucratic constraints and inappropriate allocation. In contrast, local initiatives such as community-based training have proven more effective in enhancing teachers' self-confidence. These findings highlight the need for integrated policies that address systemic challenges and actively involve communities in supporting teacher well-being to improve the quality of early childhood education.

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