

Reward systems and motivation of students at Taganop Elementary School

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ISSN: 2243-7770

Online ISSN: 2243-7789

OPEN ACCESS

Received: 25 May 2026

Available Online: 23 June 2026

Revised: 20 June 2026

DOI: 10.5861/ijrsm.2026.26525

Accepted: 22 June 2026

Abstract

Reward systems and the motivation of students were investigated in this study. This study employed a descriptive-correlational design to determine the relationship between reward systems and the motivation of IP students at Taganop Elementary School, a last-mile school. The researcher employed a purposive criterion sampling method for both pilot testing and the final survey at Taganop Elementary School. This method was established aiming for reliable and cooperative responses based on two primary criteria: (1) being a student within the kindergarten to grade 6 levels, and (2) being 8 years of age and above. Data were collected using a 4-point scale survey questionnaire to measure the degree of rewards and student motivation, their association, and the significant relationship between the two variables. Based on the findings, the study revealed that students' engagement with the reward system was significantly affected by tangible rewards (stickers and handstamps) and intangible rewards (praise, smiles, and good relationships). Moreover, students' motivation was significantly driven by internal factors (curiosity and achievement drive) and external factors (prizes and social recognition). A strong correlation exists between reward systems and motivation, as students attributed a higher value to internal motivation, which is significantly influenced by tangible rewards. Conclusively, as students' internal motivation holds the highest value, it is actively encouraged by strategic tangible rewards and social reinforcers. It is recommended that Taganop Elementary School implement a blended reward system pairing tangible prizes with intangible praise to stimulate curiosity and achievement drive. Additionally, consider positive reinforcement training for the faculty that aligns with tribal values, while future researchers may investigate how a discovery-based approach complements these reward systems.

Keywords: tangible rewards, intangible rewards, students' motivation, students' engagement, IP students

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1. Introduction

Providing inclusive and equitable quality education is the primary global goal in the 21st century, specifically formalized as Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) by the United Nations (Reimers, 2024). This goal is also supported through the DepEd Mission to protect the right of every Filipino to quality, equitable, and culture-based education in a motivating environment. To achieve this goal, it is crucial to understand effective ways that enhance student engagement through effective motivation. Adapting effective motivation in classrooms is guided by B.F. Skinner's Reinforcement Theory. Skinner (Nurfadillah et al., 2024) (which states that reward mechanisms shape students' behavior) and self-determination theory, founded by Ryan and Deci (2022) (which states that internal and external motivation are important for learning). Employing rewards systems and addressing challenges of motivating students to provide quality education and assistance in remote areas, support the Last Mile Schools Program under the DepEd Memorandum No. 59, s. 2019. It is compelling to explore how evidence-based reward systems function across diverse contexts (Bardach & Murayama, 2025), especially in Last Mile Schools (where empirical data on the design of engaging learning environments are limited).

Students' motivational challenges are evident in the Last Mile Schools (Rone et al., 2023) due to concerns over the sustainability of rewards, the relative weight of internal and external motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2022), and the limited localized data to align strategies with cultural contexts (Bardach & Murayama, 2025). The researcher focuses on how students respond to rewards, whether tangible or intangible, and how these responses increase their engagement. Understanding what motivates the Buhid students is crucial, as this barrier leads to uncertainty about how they experienced rewards.

This study provides data on how students in the "Last Mile Schools" (particularly Buhid students) perceive these rewards, because most studies on rewards focus on urban or private schools with many resources. This study addresses the gap by gathering data from students to determine the effect of reward systems on the motivation of students in Taganop Elementary School." In this study, empirical evidence on students' experiences (Wang & Xue, 2022) will help the educational sector design strategies aligned with the actual needs of Buhid students. As we move toward the 21st century, quality is defined by student-centered engagement. Tailoring motivational strategies to students' feedback is essential for creating inclusive learning environments in Last Mile Schools and for providing the evidence-based insights needed for the Last Mile Schools Program. The researcher aims to determine the levels of reward and motivation to help develop "love for learning" among Buhid students and to measure the significant association between the two variables at Taganop Elementary School.

Objectives of the Study - This study aimed to determine the effect of reward systems on students' motivation at Taganop Elementary School. Specifically, it aimed to (1) determine the level of reward systems in terms of tangible and intangible reward systems; (2) determine the level of motivation of students in terms of internal and external motivation; and (3) determine if there is a significant relationship between the reward systems and motivation of students.

Significance of the Study - The findings of this study will benefit multiple stakeholders. Students will enjoy an engaging and friendly environment as teachers' tailor rewards to their needs. Teachers will be provided with evidence-based strategies to balance reinforcement of rewards. School administrators and developers will use the results to draft effective school-wide policies that support a culture-based education in a motivating environment. Academic coordinators will find this useful for curriculum development and for refining instructional policies in academic institutions, ensuring that motivational strategies are integrated into the curriculum to optimize overall school performance; furthermore, future researchers will use this data as a benchmark for studies on motivation and student engagement.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study - The study was conducted at Taganop Elementary School, including students from Kindergarten to Grade 6 aged 8 and above, during the fourth quarter of the 2025-2026 school year, from February to May 2026. The main goal of this study was to determine the levels of reward systems (tangible and intangible rewards) and students' motivation (internal and external) and the degree of association between the two variables. The researcher employed a descriptive-correlational design using a validated survey questionnaire; however, the study did not include external variables, nor was there a measure of reward systems in relation to students' motivation. Furthermore, the study was limited to an oral reading of the questionnaires to assist qualified students who had strong oral comprehension but struggled with reading text, ensuring that the data collected was accurate. Additionally, the study was limited to data collection during free periods and at the end of school hours, meaning external factors such as hunger, fatigue, or a short attention span due to the anticipation of dismissal may have influenced students' focus while answering.

2. Methodology

Research Design - The study employed a descriptive-correlational design because data were collected through survey questionnaires and analyzed statistically. According to Putri et al. (2025), this design identifies and describes the relationship between variables as they naturally exist without any changes made by the researcher. The design fit the study perfectly because it allowed the researcher to observe how the school's reward systems and student motivation interact in daily classes. It was descriptive in determining the degree of reward systems and students' motivation and correlational in measuring the association and significant relationship between the two variables.

Respondents of the Study - The study employed a purposive criterion sampling method for both pilot testing (n = 30) and the final survey (n = 181). The participants and respondents were from Kindergarten to Grade 6 at Taganop Elementary School during the fourth quarter of the S.Y. 2025-2026. This method was established aiming for reliable and cooperative responses based on two primary criteria: (1) being a student within the kindergarten to grade 6 levels and (2) being 8 years of age or older. The sample size was computed using the Raosoft calculator with a 5% margin of error.

Research Instrument - The researcher employed a researcher-made questionnaire to assess the level of reward systems (Part I) and the level of motivation of students (Part II) among K-6 in Taganop Elementary School. The instrument used a 4-point scale to assess the strength of the relationship by omitting the neutral option. The survey questionnaire was available in English and Tagalog versions for the benefit of the respondents. The three experts have checked the validity of the questions, while the Filipino major teacher reviewed the Tagalog version. To ensure the instrument's reliability, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 respondents, and the results were analyzed using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1
Reliability Analysis Results

Item	Number of Items	Reliability Coefficients	Interpretation
Reward Systems			
1. Tangible Rewards	5	0.725	Acceptable
2. Intangible Rewards	5	0.711	Acceptable
Motivation of students			
3. Internal Motivation	5	0.761	Acceptable
4. External Motivation	5	0.749	Acceptable

Legend: 0.90 and Above – Very High; 0.80-0.89 – High; 0.70-0.79 – Acceptable; 0.60-0.69 – Questionable; 0.50-0.59 – Poor; Below 0.50 – Unacceptable

Table 1 shows that all four variables demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .711-.761$), exceeding the .70 threshold. All 20 items across the four scales are valid and necessary for comprehensive measurement, confirming the instruments are suitable for use in the study. With these results, the questionnaire was then administered to the final set of student-respondents.

Data Gathering Procedure - The researcher prepared the required documents for this study and submitted them to the Division Office to obtain approval for a permit to conduct it. After the approval, the researcher coordinated with the district supervisor, the school head of Taganop Elementary School, and the Buhid community elders. The researcher clearly explained the purpose of the study to the respondents, who cooperated voluntarily. Questionnaires were distributed to respondents and read aloud to them during their free time over a five-day administration period at the school. The data collected in the survey for statistical analysis was encoded, following strict confidentiality maintained for educational purposes.

Statistical Treatment of Data - The data collected was processed and analyzed using SPSS version 27. The mean and standard deviation were used to measure the level of reward systems and students' motivation. In contrast, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationship between variables. This test measured the strength of association between rewards and motivation among the respondents. A significance level of 0.05 was used to test the null hypothesis; p-values below 0.05 led to rejection of the null hypothesis.

Ethical Considerations - The research adhered to ethical guidelines by obtaining a research permit from the Division Office and coordinating with the District Supervisor, School Head, and Buhid community elders. Data collection conformed to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997. It also avoids class disruption; survey questionnaires were administered during free time or after school hours. Respondents were informed of their rights to withdraw without consequence. The research ensured maintaining academic integrity in accordance with APA style for citations. Ultimately, the research aimed to support the education sector by ensuring the safety and confidentiality of all stakeholders at Taganop Elementary School.

3. Results and Discussions

Table 2

Mean Level of Reward Systems in Terms of Tangible and Intangible Rewards Systems

Indicators (Tangible Rewards)	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
1. I receive stickers or hand stamps for completing my work.	3.30	Very High
2. My teacher gives me small prizes like toys or school supplies.	3.14	High
3. I get food treats or candies when I participate in class.	3.02	High
4. I receive ribbons or certificates for my achievements.	3.10	High
5. I work harder when I know there is a tangible prize at the end.	3.25	High
Composite Mean	3.16	High
Indicators (Intangible Rewards)		
1. My teacher tells me, "Good job" or "I am proud of you."	3.40	Very High
2. I feel happy when my teacher smiles at me or gives me a high-five.	3.38	Very High
3. My teacher gives me special responsibilities (like being a leader).	3.20	High
4. I feel motivated because my teacher listens to my ideas.	3.25	High
5. Having a good relationship with my teacher makes me want to learn.	3.35	Very High
Composite Mean	3.32	Very High
Overall Mean	3.24	High

Legend: 3.26–4.00 = High; 2.51–3.25 = Moderate; 1.76–2.50 = Low; 1.00–1.75 = Very Low

Table 2 presents the mean levels of reward systems (tangible and intangible) at Taganop Elementary School. The table reveals an overall mean of 3.24, interpreted as "High," indicating that reward systems are implemented consistently and effectively at Taganop Elementary School, providing a strong environment of recognition for students' academic efforts. Interestingly, the composite mean for intangible rewards (3.32, very high) is noticeably higher than that for tangible rewards (3.16, high). This difference in the level of reward systems suggests that while tangible prizes, particularly stickers and handstamps (3.30), are effective tools, students are more responsive to social reinforcement, such as teacher praise (3.40), smiles/high-fives (3.38), and good relationships (3.35), representing the strongest drivers within the system. Consequently, the implementation of reward systems at Taganop Elementary School effectively utilizes both tangible rewards and social reinforcement, driven primarily by emotional and social validation rather than tangible incentives alone.

This preference for social reinforcement aligns with Yahaya (2022), who views verbal praise as an excellent tool for improving performance by promoting a supportive atmosphere that tangible incentives cannot replicate.

While intangible rewards are primary, the effectiveness of tangible rewards is consistent with Rulona et al. (2025), whose research on the Sticker-based Participation and Reward Key System (SPARKS) demonstrates that structured tangible strategies significantly boost behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Furthermore, Erdogan et al. (2025) argue that a balanced reward approach is most effective for fostering positive behavior and discipline, ensuring that incentives strengthen rather than undermine intrinsic motivation. These perspectives confirm that Taganop Elementary School has healthy, supportive reward systems that strengthen teacher-student relationships and provide tangible incentives to maintain a positive, engaging classroom environment.

Table 3

Mean Level of Motivation of Students in Terms of Internal and External Motivation

Indicators (Internal Motivation)	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
1. I study because I am curious and I want to learn new things.	3.27	Very High
2. I feel a sense of achievement when I finish a difficult lesson.	3.27	Very High
3. I enjoy doing school activities even without a prize.	3.18	High
4. Learning makes me feel good about myself.	3.24	High
5. I like reading or studying even during my free time.	3.10	High
Composite Mean	3.21	High
Indicators (External Motivation)		
1. I only participate in class to get high grades.	2.86	High
2. I finish my work quickly just to get a sticker or a toy.	3.09	High
3. I study hard so my parents and teachers will not be disappointed.	3.07	High
4. I do my best in school mainly to win the prizes offered.	3.20	High
5. I behave well because I want to be recognized in front of others.	3.14	High
Composite Mean	3.07	High
Overall Mean	3.14	High

Legend: 3.26–4.00 = High; 2.51–3.25 = Moderate; 1.76–2.50 = Low; 1.00–1.75 = Very Low.

Table 3 presents the mean level of students' motivation at Taganop Elementary School regarding internal and external motivation. The table reveals an overall mean of 3.14, interpreted as "high," which implies that both internal and external factors play significant roles in maintaining strong and active engagement in students' academic responsibilities at Taganop Elementary School. The data analysis shows that the composite mean for internal motivation (3.21, high) is higher than that of external motivation (3.07, high), suggesting that while students respond to external factors, particularly winning tangible prizes (3.20) and social recognition (3.14), their primary motivation stems from their learning curiosity (3.27) and their sense of achievement (3.27) upon finishing difficult lessons. Consequently, students' motivation at Taganop Elementary School is internally driven but externally amplified, creating a balanced and synergistic academic motivation.

This internal drive aligns with the self-determination theory of Ryan and Deci (2022), suggesting that autonomous motivation leads to better educational outcomes and enhanced psychological well-being. Wang and Xue (2022) further explain that when students perceive high internal value in their learning, their motivation becomes more resilient against external pressures (grades, stickers/toys, parent/teacher expectations, and behavior). Furthermore, Choden and Rigdel (2024) argue that supportive teacher-student relationships are significant in fostering high motivation levels in primary settings. Additionally, Erdogan et al. (2025) conclude that a balanced approach to classroom discipline promotes a high level of motivation without causing dependency on external validation. Thus, the overall condition of students' motivation at Taganop Elementary School characterized a healthy, balanced internal and external drive that sustains long-term academic participation and a genuine love for learning.

Table 4

Correlation Coefficient and P-Value for Hypothesis Testing (Ho)

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Effect Size (r ²)	Critical Value	t-value	P-value	Interpretation
Tangible Rewards → Internal Motivation	0.534	0.285	1.973	8.450	<0.001	Highly Significant
Tangible Rewards → External Motivation	0.426	0.181	1.973	6.300	<0.001	Highly Significant

Intangible Rewards → Internal Motivation	0.495	0.245	1.973	7.622	<0.001	Highly Significant
Intangible Rewards → External Motivation	0.431	0.186	1.973	6.390	<0.001	Highly Significant

Legend: p-value ≤ 0.001 Highly Significant; p-value ≤ 0.05 Significant

Table 4 presents the results of the statistical analysis, highlighting highly significant relationships (p-values < 0.001) across all variables, with Tangible Rewards and Internal Motivation showing the strongest association, with an r-value of 0.534. All the effect sizes emphasized the significance of the relationship. All the t-values are greater than the critical value of 1.973, and the p-values are less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant result. Thus, the findings indicated the rejection of the null hypothesis. Furthermore, findings in Table 4 indicated that rewards effectively stimulate both internal and external student motivation. These empirical findings demonstrate that reward systems are not mere distractions but essential motivational drivers. This aligns with Nurfadillah et al. (2024), who found that structured rewards significantly boost classroom participation. Furthermore, Bardach and Murayama (2025) argued that rewards are not limited to simple dichotomies, suggesting that tangible prizes can internalize a student's desire to excel by providing concrete evidence of their academic success. Thus, the study's findings revealed a strong correlation between reward systems and students' motivation. The respondents place greater value on internal than on external motivation, and tangible rewards significantly influence internal motivation, thereby fostering long-term academic engagement.

4. Conclusions

The findings of the study reveal the following conclusions: the level of reward systems is highly affected by stickers or hand stamps as tools, while teacher praise ('good job' and 'I am proud of you'), smiles/high-fives, and good relationships are forms of social reinforcement. Student motivation is highly influenced by curiosity about learning and achievement drive, while winning tangible prizes and social recognition significantly affect students' external motivation at Taganop Elementary School. Finally, the findings reveal a strong correlation between reward systems and students' motivation. Additionally, it showed the following findings: respondents place greater value on internal motivation than on external motivation, and tangible rewards significantly influence internal motivation, which can lead to long-term academic engagement.

Recommendations - The findings reveal the following recommendations based on the conclusions: Teachers may implement a blended strategy that incorporates tangible reinforcement, such as stickers or hand stamps, alongside intangible rewards like praise, smiles, and strong teacher-student relationships to improve students' motivation within the classroom reward system; educators may also drive students' motivation by designing discovery-based lessons that blend physical prizes and social recognition to support students' desire to explore; school leaders may use tangible rewards, not a bribe or for compliance, but as supportive tools that actively strengthen students' innate passion for lifelong learning. Furthermore, future researchers may investigate how the discovery-based approach complements these reward systems to see which specific classroom management techniques most effectively motivate student interest.

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