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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

# The Relationship Between Rewards and Preschool Teacher Commitment in Sabah, Malaysia

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**Abstract**— This research explores the influence of rewards on preschool teachers' commitment within the educational environment. A total of 516 respondents from various districts of Sabah, Malaysia, participated in this study. Intrinsic reward refers to the motivating forces that are attributed to the work itself, whereas extrinsic rewards are provided to employees for completing specific tasks or duties. Validated scales were used to measure these constructs, and SPSS was utilized for data analysis. The findings indicate that the mean of extrinsic rewards is lower than intrinsic rewards. The results also revealed that the Pearson correlation coefficient between rewards and preschool teachers' commitment is $r$ = 0.412, with a significance value of $p < 0.001$. Overall, the study underscores the impact of rewards on preschool teachers' commitment within preschool settings. Accordingly, the implications highlight the importance of educational institutions prioritizing reward-based interventions to enhance preschool teacher commitment.

**Index Terms**— Rewards, Intrinsic rewards, Extrinsic rewards, Preschool teacher, Commitment

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## Introduction

The Thirteenth Malaysia Plan (RMK13) promotes equitable access to early childhood education and educator training, while also urging the provision of holistic educational interventions for young children. However, despite these policy priorities, Sabah continues to report the lowest preschool participation rate in Malaysia, with substantial disparities between urban and rural areas. Moreover, these challenges are compounded by persistent issues related to child health and foundational academic competencies. These issues affect not only physical access to education but also the quality of instruction and the level of commitment displayed by Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) teachers. Indeed, teacher commitment underpins the success of integrated learning approaches that address literacy, numeracy, health, and nutrition.

Preschools form the foundation of a child's primary education and play a crucial role in physical, intellectual, emotional, and social growth (Fong et al., 2025; Liu & Shin, 2026; Liu et al., 2025; C. C. Ompok & Teo, 2021; Shin & Idang, 2025; Shin, Ni, et al., 2025). Teacher commitment is described as a driving force that shapes behaviors, constrains freedom, and compels individuals to follow a course of action even in the face of conflicting reasons or circumstances. In educational terms, this pertains to teachers' willingness to teach, their loyalty to the school, and their connections with students, the school, and the profession. Commitment is essential to successful teaching and reflects instructors' perceived loyalty to their organization. It predicts learning outcomes, and committed teachers create environments where learners are energetic and motivated, thus promoting student engagement and achievement. Professional Development (PD) activities can enhance teacher commitment, which in turn improves teaching performance and student outcomes (Ping, 2022).

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High levels of teacher commitment are associated with improved teacher performance, innovation, and the integration of new ideas, as well as higher attendance, lower turnover rates, and greater passion for teaching. In addition, committed teachers are more likely to take on challenging assignments. Teacher commitment leads to higher standards in early childhood education and care, and it serves as a key indicator of long-term willingness to remain in the profession (Day et al., 2005; Ibrahim & Aljneibi, 2022).

Emotional labor and well-being are related to career commitment, as teachers who perceive that their well-being is supported by adequate rewards and social support are better able to engage in emotional labor. Furthermore, legal and regulatory actions that guarantee the full implementation of teachers' salazes, social security, and benefits are essential for improving subjective well-being and strengthening career commitment. In this regard, understanding how rewards influence commitment can inform policies and interventions aimed at reducing turnover and improving the quality of early childhood education (Li et al., 2021; S. Zhang et al., 2023). Resolving mismatches between professional investment and rewards is essential to alleviating burnout and fostering sustainable management in early childhood education.

**Background of the study**

The growth of early childhood education in Malaysia has been consistent with national human capital development efforts, and enhanced budgetary and infrastructure investment reflects the government's commitment to ensuring that preschool, especially those in disadvantaged neighborhoods, are accessible, high-quality, and inclusive for all children (Nikolaou et al., 2019; Shin, Mosin, et al., 2025). However, teacher well-being, job satisfaction, and professional engagement have also come under pressure, as evidenced by early retirement and declining motivation among educators. Moreover, several studies indicate that reduced professional interest, excessive workloads, and a lack of reward structures play major roles in contributing to a decline in teacher commitment (Hornyák, 2025). Such findings emphasize the importance of studying motivational indicators and reward structures specifically to retain teachers who are still working in that profession for the long run while maintaining high-quality instruction. Moreover, especially in the preschool setting, where teachers play a critical role in the long-term trajectory that teachers take up in these types of learning systems, understanding what happens with these mechanisms is crucial.

The Deputy Minister of Education stated on 20 August 2025 during a parliamentary question-and-answer session in the Dewan Rakyat, that loss of interest in the profession is the primary reason for teac,hers opting for early retirement. Furthermore, data from the Ministry of Education Malaysia revealed that 67.44% of teachers who applied for early retirement indicated the main reason was loss of interest, while family-related issues (17.43%), health problems (7.69%), workload (5.37%), and personal reasons (2.08%) (Awani, 2025). For instance, loss of interest, job stress, and high administrative workloads indicate the degree of stress and mental strain, whereas health problems and workload signal issues related to teachers' physical well-being. Moreover, family and personal factors also emphasize the need for social support structures to sustain teachers' commitment to the teaching profession.

In addition, national-level study reported 79.1% of Malaysian secondary students involved in bullying as perpetrators, victims, or bully–victims (Sabramani et al., 2021). Physical bullying involves pushing, slapping, or hitting, while verbal bullying involves mocking, insults, and threats. Social media and digital communication platforms have facilitated the rise of cyberbullying as well. This is largely due to peer pressure, inadequate supervision by teachers and parents, unconducive school environments, and weaknesses in values education and emotional awareness. In response, the government has introduced Anti-Bullying Prevention Guidelines, Values Education Modules, counseling programs for children, and nationwide anti-bullying awareness campaigns to establish safer and more supportive schools. A study on refugee education in Malaysia reports that UNICEF has previously identified bullying as one of the major problems contributing to school absenteeism and dropout, alongside poverty and access challenges (Yap et al., 2022).

The need for preschool teacher commitment is undeniably important and has become a growing global concern. According to Nolan et al. (2025), in Australia, inadequate investment in the early childhood education industry has led to high staff turnover rates, which have negatively impacted the quality of service delivery. In response, the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (NWS) has outlined a ten-year strategic plan to recognize pressing systemic changes that need to be made in order to guarantee a high-quality early childhood workforce that is sustainable.

Similarly, Malaysia faces comparable challenges in strengthening and retaining its early childhood education workforce, as issues related to teacher motivation, reward structures, and professional well-being continue to influence commitment levels and long-term retention. Therefore, examining factors that enhance teacher commitment, particularly the role of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, becomes essential for Malaysia to build a stable and effective early childhood education system in supporting national human capital development that begins with children.

This article discusses the rewards provided to the early childhood educators, which have a significant influence on the professional commitment of the teachers, and these rewards are broadly classified into two categories: intrinsic rewards and extrinsic rewards. Intrinsic rewards (psychic rewards such as the value of work to students and society) include the enjoyment of the work itself, seeing the developmental progress of children, positive relationships with students and their respective parents, and a general sense of professional appreciation. In addition, non-financial rewards such as formal recognition, promotions, and career pathways support teachers' motivation and continued engagement in the profession. Extrinsic rewards (economic or material rewards) are tangible external incentives, such as financial incentives, landscape, fixed allowances, and performance-based bonuses.

Rewards have a positive effect on teacher commitment; however, preschools in Malaysia still have some problems with this. For example, low remuneration, particularly at private preschools, is one of the issues in this sector. Subsequently, high attrition rates have also been associated with career advancement and job security. However, teachers often report intrinsic satisfaction and emotional gratification that they draw from their work, and this can counterbalance some of the negative factors associated with their profession, such as high levels of stress, limited autonomy, and poor economic rewards when compared to other professions (Hayes, 2009).

These same issues indicate an urgent need for the provision of more active and stronger support systems and incentive mechanisms to retain the current teachers and ensure the viability of early childhood education in Malaysia. Moreover, early childhood educators, who are currently under considerable pressure, underpaid, and have insufficient training opportunities, are also facing low motivation. Such concerns are directly related to the quality of education as well as the holistic development of young children (Jamil, 2015).

Teacher commitment is the key to career sustainability in the study and job satisfaction. Most preschool teachers believe that their profession is a "calling," despite the fact of constant challenges, and therefore are motivated to stay in the field because of this reason (Fouché, 2015). Furthermore, high levels of teacher commitment can influence engagement with professional growth opportunities, along with their pursuit of growth as lifelong learners. In addition, regular participation in the early years of education fosters long-term career success, but also crucial developmental time in early childhood, commonly known as the window of opportunity for growth and learning; consequently, this contributes to improving the overall quality of early childhood education.

**Research problem**

While the teacher shortage remains a critical global concern (Hayes, 2009; Li et al., 2021), empirical literature within the Malaysian educational landscape strongly validates that this crisis is locally compounded by a direct link between inadequate economic rewards and heightened teacher turnover (Saad et al., 2022). In this context, an important area of concern is early childhood education, where underinvestment in skills development, as well as limited career pathways, has led to high rates of staff turnover and, consequently, has compromised the quality of services provided to children and their families. Although Professional Development (PD) opportunities exist, personal gains from PD activities do not always translate into higher reward satisfaction, and teachers differ in their sources of motivation for PD. Therefore, rewards associated with PD may not be sufficient or equally valued by all teachers (Omar et al., 2022). In addition, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has established initiatives to improve teacher professionalism and satisfaction, yet challenges remain in aligning rewards with teacher expectations and needs (Omar et al., 2022). Moreover, heavy teaching loads, multiple subject assignments, and non-teaching duties can dampen teacher commitment, indicating that non-monetary aspects of the work environment also play a role in shaping commitment (Ibrahim & Aljneibi, 2022). Despite teachers' dedication, large workloads are one of the biggest contributors to job dissatisfaction among teachers, which in turn may lead to reduced commitment. Furthermore, a review of local literature shows that research on organizational support, rewards, and job satisfaction in the early childhood education setting still largely remains scarce, as most available studies concern other sectors or primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels. Consequently, there is a clear lack of research at the preschool level and particularly in local contexts and among specific populations low-income settings (Wells, 2015).

Countries such as the Nordic nations (Toropova et al., 2021) continue to face teacher shortages, along with persistent challenges in attracting and retaining staff across early childhood, primary, and secondary education. Furthermore, research indicates that many teachers leave teaching early in their careers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Prior studies also note the impact of the system weaknesses on staff turnover in early childhood education, including chronic occupational stress (Grant et al., 2019), diminished professional autonomy, and insufficient organizational support.

The Ministry of Education Malaysia acknowledges the essential and challenging role of preschool teachers in the early human capital formation process. Therefore, not only physical infrastructure, but also the quality of teachers must be considered if educational success is to be ensured (Sivalingam, 2020). Moreover, good teachers are the main formative factors in human capital formation, as they are characterized by a clear professional mission, flexibility, creativity, openness, high motivation, and a passion for teaching (Angrist et al., 2021).

Children are the future of the nation. They must be educated to become future leaders in science and technology while also being grounded in strong humanistic values. Nonetheless, Malaysia's continued performance deterioration in international assessments such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) calls into question of the existing educational foundation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2024).

These reductions are attributable to multiple converging factors that have disrupted learning, including inequalities in access to quality education arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this situation emphasizes the imperative for continuous enhancement not only of pedagogy and teacher training but also of educational management, so that Malaysia can remain competitive on the global stage.

While a country's intellectual development begins at home, early childhood experiences prior to formal schooling play an essential role in ensuring that all children have a strong beginning. Therefore, preschool teachers are responsible for providing both academic and non-academic experiences, as well as laying the foundation for lifelong learning. The concept is reflected in the Malay saying "melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya," which means developing human capital from the early years. Thus, the early development of children's cognitive, social, emotional, and character skills is essential for ensuring their future success.

In terms of fiscal support, special allowances, maintenance assistance, and infrastructure funding for public preschools have already been introduced. In Malaysia, public and private partnerships have been further enhanced by the Malaysia Education Blueprint (2013–2025), along with recognition and award programs for teachers' contributions to children's development. Collectively, these initiatives enhance teachers' motivation, commitment, professionalism, and well-being. This demonstrates the ongoing public policy to support the development of early childhood education as a foundational pillar of the national education system.

**Objectives of the study**

The primary objectives of the proposed study are as follows:

- To investigate the mean scores of i) intrinsic rewards and ii) extrinsic rewards.
- To examine the relationship between rewards and preschool teacher commitment.

**Research hypothesis**

The research hypothesis of this proposed study is as follows.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant relationship between rewards and preschool teacher commitment.

**Literature Review**

**The importance of studying preschool teacher commitment**

Commitment refers to a psychological condition in which teachers strongly support the goals of their school and identify with and embrace its values, while also striving to perform their duties to the best of their abilities, reflecting their intention to continue working in the organization. This construct is considered crucial for school reform and continuous improvement at all educational levels, including preschool settings (Zhu et al., 2022). Studying preschool teacher commitment is important because it is closely linked to teacher retention and turnover. Specifically, high occupational commitment among preschool teachers is associated with a lower intention to leave the profession, whereas low commitment increases turnover intentions.

Occupational commitment is one of the predictors of long-term retention in early childhood, and this is also relevant in the context of male kindergarten teachers. Furthermore, organizational commitment strategies, such as greater autonomy, higher job satisfaction, and robust career development opportunities, help decrease turnover intentions while enhancing workforce stability (Li et al., 2021; S. Zhang et al., 2023). In addition, intrinsic rewards for teachers include the pleasure of working with children, the satisfaction of contributing to student learning, enjoyment of teaching, intellectual growth, and a sense of making a positive societal impact. Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, are external factors like salary, workload, recognition, academic credit, financial stipends, and professional advancement opportunities.

Both types of rewards influence teacher motivation and encouragement, although they have different impacts and implications for sustainability. Moreover, the early years have a significant influence on future development, with a particular focus on their role in supporting children's mathematics and reading skills (C. C. Ompok, 2021; C. C. Ompok & Teo, 2021). In addition, the home literacy environment is not only associated with academic achievement but also predicts future employment, emphasizing its enduring impact beyond early education (Doig & Ompok, 2010; C. Ompok, 2022; Qinghua & Shin, 2025; Qinghua et al., 2022).

**Impact of rewards on teacher commitment**

Rewards broadly represent aspects of a performance recognition system that act as motivational support within an organization (Coccia & Igor, 2018). Reward systems refer to both material rewards (e.g., salary, allowances, bonuses, promotions, and benefits) and non-material rewards (e.g., reputation, job responsibility, autonomy, empowerment, and opportunities for self-development and career advancement).

Ningsih et al. (2021) studied the impact of rewards and achievement motivation on teacher performance in public primary schools. Data were collected through questionnaires using a probability sampling method from 100 teachers from a population of 134. The findings indicate that rewards positively influence teacher performance, while achievement motivation serves as a key factor in enhancing teacher professionalism, which is closely linked to teacher commitment.

From a public administration perspective, reward systems are oriented towards two key goals: i) to encourage employee engagement and raise performance, as well as to foster job satisfaction and commitment. Reward systems consist of policies, processes, and strategies designed to promote effective performance among managers and employees while supporting the achievement of organizational goals (Armstrong, 2006). Research suggests the need for intrinsic rewards to have a greater motivational impact than extrinsic rewards as evidenced by F. I. Herzberg (1966), who noted that salary was only the fourth most important motivational element for teachers. Teaching satisfaction remained the biggest motivator. The same trends have also been seen in early childhood educators (Zakšek et al., 2026).

These findings are consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, namely, financial rewards are not primary motivators. Instead, work environment, personal growth, and self-actualization, also categorized under intrinsic rewards, are significant motivating and commitment factors (Bukhari et al., 2023).

Rewards have been found to be positively related to employee commitment (Gaertner & Nollen, 1989; Gregersen & Black, 1992). Employees view rewards as signals of organizational support which reinforce emotional attachment and affective commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1990). Intrinsic rewards include achievement, job variety, challenge, autonomy, responsibility, and professional development (F. Herzberg, 1987). Extrinsic rewards include salary, benefits, job security, promotion, and work environment and these rewards can motivate, but the lack of them may cause dissatisfaction (Rim & Kim, 2024).

Guo et al. (2022) established that there were strong relationships between effort–reward imbalance, burnout, future work perspective, and psychological capital among 2,251 preschool teachers. Similarly, Backhaus et al. (2018) found effort–reward imbalances to be a significant predictor of burnout and somatic symptoms for kindergarten teachers in Germany. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the influence of rewards as it's crucial to sustain motivation, commitment, and well-being, especially among early childhood educators.

More recent study also illustrates the implications of effort–reward imbalance. Intrinsic rewards are linked to higher commitment and long-term retention among teachers (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2025). Intrinsic rewards and intrinsic job satisfaction influence teacher performance and retention more strongly than extrinsic factors (Soto-Pérez et al., 2020). Preschool motivational studies show intrinsic motivators (love for children, desire to teach) play a central role in sustaining motivation and commitment. Preschool teaching holds a distinctive position within the teaching profession due to its specific target group and educational objectives, setting it apart from other grade levels and teaching branches. The study done by Sarı and Gülay Ogelman (2025) aimed to explore preschool teachers' experiences concerning the factors that motivate them to enter and remain in the profession in Turkey. Using a qualitative approach, the research involved 23 preschool teachers from across the country. Participants completed the teacher motivation questionnaire, which included six open-ended questions and follow-up prompts about motivational processes. Their responses were analyzed using content analysis. The results indicated that intrinsic, extrinsic, and altruistic factors all influence the career paths of preschool teachers, although their impact varies. Furthermore, key motivators for choosing the profession included a love for children, encouragement from significant others, a desire to teach, job opportunities, and favorable working conditions.

Once in the field, teachers identified ongoing motivational sources such as interactions with children, professional growth, passion for the work, positive feedback, work environment, and career prospects. While children were a central source of motivation, the quality of working conditions and relationships with colleagues, administrators, and families could either enhance or diminish motivation, and therefore, these contextual factors played a significant role in teachers' experiences. Moreover, all participants stated they would recommend the profession to prospective teachers, acknowledging the personal attributes as well as the challenges and demands associated with preschool teaching. However, there is evidence to suggest that intrinsic rewards are indeed sustainable and adaptive in promoting preschool teacher commitment, while extrinsic rewards merely provide temporary motivation and do not guarantee long-term retention or satisfaction (Plauborg & Petersen, 2025; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2025). The relationship of these motivators makes a very strong argument for balanced approaches both in educational policy and in school management to support teacher commitment.

Extrinsic rewards, such as recognition, certificates, and tangible incentives, can boost teachers' enthusiasm and willingness to contribute more in the short term. For example, external recognition was reported to significantly increase a teacher's determination and enthusiasm to work (Akinlar et al., 2025). However, the effects of extrinsic rewards on long-term commitment are mixed. Some studies suggest that extrinsic motivators like pay are essential for retention, while others indicate that they may have limited or even negative effects on motivation and commitment, especially if they overshadow intrinsic motivation or are not sustained (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2025). There is evidence that extrinsic rewards can sometimes undermine intrinsic motivation, particularly when they are perceived as controlling or when the activity is already intrinsically interesting. This can lead to reduced long-term commitment if teachers become reliant on external incentives (Al-Hoorie, 2024).

Financial reward, praise, promotion, etc., have positive effects on teacher motivation, especially when perceived to have long-term impact and continuity (Akinlar et al., 2025). However, the effects of extrinsic motivation are mixed, as certain factors show positive associations with specific teaching outcomes, while others demonstrate limited or even negative relationships with long-term commitment and job satisfaction (Plauborg & Petersen, 2025). Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, can at times weaken intrinsic motivation if they become the primary focus and can also decrease engagement over time (Al-Hoorie, 2024).

Torquati et al. (2007) proposed a similar conceptual model of early childhood career choice and employed modern assessment tools to investigate the constructs. Telephone interviews with 964 child care center directors in four Midwestern states were conducted. Out of these, 223 participants were examined further through the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) for overall quality, while the Caregiver Interaction Scale was used to measure interaction quality. Across all models tested, motivation to work in the field of child care was the only factor that predicted intention to remain in the profession. However, none of the variables in the structural equation models showed a significant relationship with the quality of caregiver-child interactions. Extrinsic rewards have been shown to influence employee and teacher commitment, based on studies of non-preschool samples, although the underlying motivational pathway may be generalizable.

Combined reward perceptions (total rewards) correlate positively with work engagement in kindergarten teachers. Ji and Cui (2021)

research examined how total rewards perceptions (teachers' evaluations of all organizational rewards) relate to work engagement among Chinese kindergarten teachers, and whether organizational identification (teachers' sense of belonging to their school) helps explain this relationship. Data were collected from 1,014 kindergarten teachers using validated scales for rewards perceptions, organizational identification, and work engagement. Results showed that total rewards perceptions were positively correlated with both organizational identification and work engagement.

**Theoretical framework**

Perceived organizational support, job satisfaction, and rewards jointly contribute to preschool teachers' commitment through interconnected social and motivational mechanisms. Drawing on perceived organizational support theory, when teachers believe their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being, they develop stronger affective attachment and a felt obligation to reciprocate (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 2017), this reciprocal dynamic enhances commitment by fostering trust-based, long-term relationships between teachers and their institutions. Supportive organizational practices also enhance job satisfaction, which has been widely identified as a significant antecedent of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Higher job satisfaction strengthens teachers' emotional bonds with their schools and increases their willingness to engage in discretionary and extra-role behaviors.

In this study, self-determination theory Deci and Ryan (2013) and Deci and Ryan (2000) explains how rewards promote sustained commitment when they satisfy teachers' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Cognitive evaluation theory further clarifies that rewards enhance intrinsic motivation when they are perceived as informational rather than controlling (Deci & Ryan, 2013). Moreover, organismic integration theory explains how externally regulated behaviors can become internalized into autonomous forms of motivation when psychological needs are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When preschool leaders empower teachers in instructional decision-making, recognize their pedagogical expertise, and foster collegial belonging, rewards are more likely to strengthen autonomous motivation and long-term commitment. Together, perceived organizational support builds reciprocal trust, job satisfaction reinforces positive work attitudes, and need-supportive rewards cultivate intrinsic motivation, thereby fostering enduring commitment among preschool teachers.

The study aims to investigate the mean levels of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards and to investigate their relationship with preschool teacher commitment.

**Research Method**

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the influence of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards on preschool teacher commitment in Sabah, Malaysia. This design was selected to collect standardized data from a relatively large sample of respondents, thereby enabling robust psychometric analyses, including reliability assessment (Liang et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2026; Zhao et al., 2025). A previously validated 5- point Likert scale questionnaire was used in this study to gather responses from the participants.

**Participants**

All preschool teachers in public schools in Sabah were invited to answer the questionnaire. In this study, a total of 516 respondents participated, representing a population of 1,407 preschool teachers from various districts of Sabah, Malaysia.

**Data collection**

In this research, secondary data were primarily used to explain and elaborate on the concepts, definitions, theories, and previous studies related to rewards and teacher commitment. These secondary data are generally gathered from various books, articles, drafts, research papers, websites, and other published materials. In contrast, the aim of the primary data in the research was to investigate the means of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, and the relationship between rewards and preschool teacher commitment. To achieve this, a questionnaire was administered, and an overview of the instrument is provided below.

**Measurement of variables**

**Preschool teacher commitment**

Teacher commitment was measured using the teacher commitment scale (Malaysian sample) developed by Thien et al. (2014), which is grounded in the organizational commitment model proposed by Meyer and Allen (1991). The instrument consists of 13 items, with reported reliability coefficients ranging from 0.60 to 0.90. All items were measured using a Likert-type scale, and the instrument demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties for this study.

**Rewards**

Rewards were assessed by an instrument that was adapted from O'Driscoll and Randall (1999). The construct consists of intrinsic rewards (4 items) and extrinsic rewards (7 items). Intrinsic rewards reflect satisfaction derived from the nature of the work itself, including task variety, level of challenge, opportunities to utilize skills, and autonomy at work. Extrinsic rewards, on the other hand, represent the social and tangible outcomes of employment, including salary and financial benefits, job security, promotion, and professional development opportunities, as well as recognition for work performance.

**Findings**

This study utilized item analysis, reliability assessment, and construct validity testing to analyze the instrument adapted by Ligin et al. (2025).

**Research question 1**

Descriptive statistics were conducted to determine the mean scores of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards among preschool teachers. The results indicate that the mean score for intrinsic rewards was M = 4.23 (*SD* = 0.50), suggesting a high level of perceived intrinsic rewards among respondents. In comparison, the mean score for extrinsic rewards was M = 4.00 (*SD* = 0.33), also indicating a high level of perceived extrinsic rewards. Overall, both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards were perceived at a high level, with intrinsic rewards showing a slightly higher mean score than extrinsic rewards. Table I presents the mean scores for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards.

Table I
Mean scores for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards

| Variable | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| Intrinsic rewards | 4.23 | 0.50 |
| Extrinsic rewards | 4.00 | 0.33 |

The findings demonstrate that preschool teachers perceived both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards at a relatively high level. Notably, intrinsic rewards recorded a higher mean score compared to extrinsic rewards, suggesting that internal motivational factors may play a more prominent role in shaping teachers' work experiences.

**Research question 2**

Hypothesis 1 states that there is no significant relationship between rewards and the commitment of preschool teachers in the state of Sabah. To test this hypothesis, a Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted between the mean score of rewards and the mean score of preschool teachers' commitment. The results of the Pearson Correlation analysis are shown in Table II.

Table II
Pearson correlation analysis between rewards and preschool teachers' commitment (*N* = 516)

| Variables | Rewards | Commitment |
|---|---|---|
| Rewards | 1 | 0.412** |
| Commitment | 0.412** | 1 |

Note: $r = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$ Significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Based on Table II, the Pearson correlation coefficient between rewards and preschool teachers' commitment is $r = 0.412$ with a significance value of $p < 0.001$. The significance value, which is smaller than the 0.05 significance level, indicates that the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant. The positive correlation coefficient shows that an increase in the level of rewards received by preschool teachers is associated with an increase in their level of organizational commitment.

In other words, teachers who perceive the rewards they receive as fair, appropriate, and satisfactory tend to demonstrate higher levels of loyalty and attachment to the institutions in which they serve. In terms of the strength of the relationship, the value $r = 0.412$ indicates that the relationship between rewards and commitment is moderate. This suggests that the reward system, whether in the form of financial or non-financial rewards, plays an important role in influencing the level of teachers' commitment.

Although the relationship falls within the moderate category, it remains statistically significant and meaningful in the context of human resource management in educational institutions. This finding reinforces the view that a transparent, fair, and consistent reward system can contribute to an increased level of commitment among preschool teachers. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected as there is a significant relationship between rewards and the commitment of preschool teachers in the state of Sabah.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### The relationship between rewards and preschool teachers' commitment in Sabah

Committed teachers are more likely to establish an energizing and motivating learning environment, seek professional development, and utilize different teaching methodologies on behalf of learners. Furthermore, the commitment of teachers is also connected to professional identity, enthusiasm for teaching, and the ability to create student growth as well as student motivation.

The findings indicate that preschool teachers' commitment is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. However, the intrinsic rewards ranked higher than the extrinsic rewards, and this may indicate that personal satisfaction, passion for teaching, and connection with the children are better motivators than salary or benefits. This suggests that while external rewards are important, what drives the internal motivations to a greater extent is to maintain commitment. These results are consistent with those of other studies that reveal the influence of intrinsic rewards and job satisfaction on teachers' performance and retention more than extrinsic individual factors (Soto-Pérez et al., 2020). In the case of preschool teaching, where there is care for and development of young children at the center, intrinsic motivations like love for children and desire to teach are extremely important. Teaching in the preschool is unique in the teaching profession due to its stance on young children's education and specific educational goals, which require personal dedication. Overall, the results of the study indicate that providing extrinsic rewards that are reasonable and fair and promoting and elaborating intrinsic motivation by enhancing teachers' intrinsic motivation and offering opportunities to formatively and meaningfully engage in children's activities are important to supporting the commitment of preschool teachers. Combining these approaches can help to ensure that there is teacher commitment and that the quality of education in early childhood improves.

However, rewards made up a small percentage of the total commitment of preschool teachers in this study. The scarcity of proper extrinsic rewards, such as competitive salaries and career growth chances, has been found to be challenging in driving the commitment of preschool teachers, making them more inclined to leave (Li et al., 2021). To maintain their commitment, preschool teachers' psychological well-being and motivation can be promoted by structured rewards (Hong et al., 2022). Incentive-based rewards can also serve as an incentive for helping teachers and increasing their institutional commitment, as rewards will address the needs of the teachers, which is one of the key assumptions of managing preschools (Hong et al., 2022; L. Zhang et al., 2022).

In early childhood education administration, teachers tend to stress the importance of internal rewards, such as recognition or awards, for promoting a long-term commitment. This is an emphasis that implies that the supervisors of ECE tend to focus on rewarding the teachers to encourage continued commitment. Moreover, principals are also responsible for addressing the needs and motivation of the teachers and, in return, they support them in fulfilling their professional competency and educational goals (L. Zhang et al., 2022).

Based on the research findings, a lot of recommendations can be made to improve the job performance of an employee through an effective incentive strategy. Reward strategies are essential to employees who work in various organizations. Therefore, management needs to prioritize well-balanced incentive policies for gaining positive results. Moreover, extrinsic rewards affect the perceptions of employees as they tend to compare the benefits the organization is offering with their expectations. However, financial limitations may be a constraint on the existence of such rewards. Consequently, organizations must carefully balance the cost considerations and the expectations of employees so that they can accommodate the preferences of the employees and, at the same time, improve the motivation of the employees so that they perform the assigned tasks.

Furthermore, job design can be modified to offer intrinsic rewards by designing jobs in particular ways to encourage the use of their abilities and provide incentives for attaining higher levels of performance. However, it must be stated that there is no one-reward system that can be applied universally to all organizations. Therefore, a trial-and-error approach is advised to find out the most effective reward policies that fit the specific needs and the context of an organization.

## Declaration Section

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

### Funding sources

This research received no external funding.

### Author contributions

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization, literature review, analysis, and writing of this manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the paper.

**Informed consent**

This study did not involve human participants or animal subjects; therefore, informed consent was not required. Where applicable, ethical guidelines for academic research were strictly followed.

**Use of generative AI**

Generative AI tools were used solely for language editing, formatting assistance, and reference checking. All content was reviewed, verified, and finalized by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the final manuscript.

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