



The Relationship between Reward Giving and Learning Motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Development

Yohana Silvia Rambe

Student, Christian Education, State Institute for Christian Studies Tarutung

*correspondence: yohana.rambe@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between reward giving and learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Development, employing a systematic literature review of twelve peer-reviewed studies published in the last decade. The review aims to clarify how different types of rewards, verbal praise, symbolic tokens, material incentives, and privileges, shape students' motivation and influence their moral and spiritual growth. The findings demonstrate a consistent positive relationship between reward giving and increased learning motivation. Rewards function as extrinsic motivators that stimulate students' engagement, enhance participation, and encourage perseverance in completing learning tasks. In Christian Religious Education (CRE), where abstract spiritual concepts and value-oriented objectives often require additional reinforcement, rewards help create a stimulating learning climate that enables students to better understand and internalize biblical principles. The study also reveals that the effectiveness of rewards depends on pedagogical intentionality and their alignment with Christian values. Rewards yield the strongest impact when used as expressions of appreciation rather than coercion, emphasizing virtues such as diligence, honesty, cooperation, and kindness. When integrated with biblical teachings, reward systems contribute not only to cognitive engagement but also to affective and moral formation, assisting students in developing Christ-like character. However, the literature cautions against excessive reliance on external rewards, which may reduce intrinsic motivation if not managed carefully. Overall, the review concludes that appropriately designed and ethically grounded reward strategies can enhance motivation while supporting holistic character development in CRE contexts. The study recommends further empirical research to explore classroom-based implementations and long-term effects of reward systems on students' moral behavior and spiritual maturity.

Keywords: Reward, Christian Religious Education, Learning Motivation

INTRODUCTION

Learning motivation plays a central role in determining the quality and outcomes of the educational process. In the context of Christian Religious Education and Character

Development, motivation becomes even more crucial because the goals of learning extend beyond academic achievement to include moral formation, spiritual growth, and value internalization. Christian education aims to shape students into individuals who not only demonstrate cognitive understanding of biblical teachings but also practice Christian virtues such as integrity, empathy, humility, self-discipline, and responsibility. Achieving this holistic formation requires instructional strategies that effectively engage students' interest, encourage active participation, and sustain their intrinsic desire to learn. One of the pedagogical approaches widely recognized for strengthening student motivation is the use of rewards. Reward giving, when implemented thoughtfully, can reinforce positive behaviors, enhance learning engagement, and foster a supportive learning environment conducive to character growth. Rewards are understood as external reinforcers that strengthen the likelihood of a particular behavior being repeated. These may take various forms, including verbal praise, tokens, certificates, additional learning privileges, or symbolic gestures of recognition. Within Christian Religious Education, rewards may also be integrated with biblical values, emphasizing the importance of gratitude, diligence, stewardship, and encouragement. Existing research indicates that appropriate reward mechanisms can increase students' attention, improve classroom behavior, and stimulate enthusiasm for learning. However, the relationship between reward giving and learning motivation is complex, influenced by factors such as students' developmental stage, cultural background, teacher attitudes, and the alignment between rewards and intrinsic values. For example, overly extrinsic rewards may shift students' focus away from internal spiritual growth, whereas well-balanced rewards can complement intrinsic motivation by providing affirmation and reinforcing a positive learning culture. The significance of studying reward giving in Christian Religious Education lies in the unique integration of pedagogy, spirituality, and moral development. Unlike general academic subjects, Christian education emphasizes lifelong character transformation rather than short-term performance outcomes. Therefore, understanding how rewards shape learning motivation requires careful attention to both psychological and theological perspectives. From a psychological standpoint, reward systems must be structured to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, three pillars of self-determination theory that contribute to long-term motivation. From a Christian pedagogical standpoint, reward giving should reflect biblical principles, encouraging students not only to pursue excellence but also to cultivate virtues consistent with the teachings of Christ. For instance, rewards that highlight cooperation, kindness, perseverance, and integrity may strengthen character formation, whereas rewards focused solely on achievement may inadvertently promote competition or pride. There remains a lack of comprehensive, research-based analysis examining how reward giving specifically influences learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Development. Existing studies often focus on general instructional strategies, classroom management, or spiritual formation, leaving a gap in understanding the role of rewards as a motivational tool within faith-based contexts. Furthermore, the rise of diverse and technology-enhanced learning environments has introduced new forms of rewards, such as digital badges, interactive feedback, and multimedia reinforcement, that require updated theoretical exploration. As schools increasingly adopt blended or digital learning models, the dynamics of reward giving and motivation continue to evolve, making this research both timely and necessary. This study aims to examine the relationship between

reward giving and learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and Character Development by analyzing existing literature, synthesizing key theoretical perspectives, and identifying patterns of influence across educational settings. By exploring how rewards impact both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, this research provides deeper insights into effective pedagogical practices that support the holistic mission of Christian education. Understanding this relationship is essential for educators, curriculum developers, and Christian institutions seeking to nurture motivated, spiritually grounded learners who embody the values and teachings of the Christian faith.

METHODS

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the relationship between reward giving and learning motivation in the context of Christian Religious Education (CRE) and character development. The SLR method was selected because it provides a structured, transparent, and replicable approach for synthesizing scientific evidence, enabling the researcher to identify, evaluate, and interpret existing studies relevant to the variables under investigation. Through this method, the study aimed to establish a comprehensive understanding of how reward mechanisms influence students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in CRE learning environments, while also exploring the potential implications for character formation grounded in Christian values. The review followed planning, conducting, and reporting. In the planning stage, the research question was formulated using the PICO framework (Population, Interest, Context). The population included students involved in Christian Religious Education; the interest centered on reward giving as an educational strategy; and the context referred to learning motivation and character development within Christian-based or values-oriented educational settings. From this, the guiding research question was developed: *"How does reward giving influence learning motivation in Christian Religious Education and character development?"* During the conducting stage, a systematic search strategy was applied across several academic databases, included publications from 2014 to 2024 to ensure the inclusion of relevant and up-to-date literature. Keywords and Boolean combinations used in the search included: "reward giving," "reinforcement," "learning motivation," "student motivation," "Christian Religious Education," "character development," "values education," and "Christian pedagogy." Inclusion criteria encompassed peer-reviewed articles, empirical studies, qualitative or quantitative designs, and studies explicitly addressing reward mechanisms and motivation in educational settings, preferably within moral, religious, or character-based contexts. Exclusion criteria consisted of non-peer-reviewed sources, studies focusing solely on adult learning, articles unrelated to motivation or reward systems, and research outside the scope of educational or Christian contexts. A total of 62 initial articles were identified, 41 remained after duplicate removal, 19 articles passed the abstract screening, and finally 12 studies were deemed eligible for full analysis based on relevance and methodological quality. To assess the quality of selected studies, the researcher utilized a combination of the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist for qualitative studies and the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) appraisal tool for quantitative studies. Each article was evaluated regarding clarity of objectives, methodological appropriateness, ethical procedures, data analysis, and credibility of findings. Only studies with a high or moderate quality rating were included

in the final synthesis. These categories allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of how rewards influence student engagement and motivation from both psychological and theological perspectives. The SLR method thus ensured that conclusions drawn were grounded in rigorous evidence, enabling a deeper understanding of the pedagogical significance of rewards in fostering motivated, value-driven learners within Christian Religious Education.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the systematic literature review reveal a multifaceted and consistently positive relationship between reward giving and learning motivation in Christian Religious Education (CRE) and character development, although the depth and sustainability of this relationship depend on the type of reward, the pedagogical context, and the ethical foundations supporting the learning process. Across the twelve high-quality studies included in the review, reward giving consistently emerges as a significant factor that enhances students' enthusiasm, persistence, and participation in learning, especially in environments where the subject matter is values-oriented, such as CRE. The analysis shows that rewards, whether verbal praise, symbolic tokens, points, certificates, badges, or privileges, serve as extrinsic motivators that help students experience a sense of achievement and recognition, which in turn strengthens their willingness to engage actively in learning activities. In one set of studies, extrinsic rewards were shown to increase short-term motivation by triggering the brain's reward system, encouraging students to re-engage with tasks that they might otherwise find difficult or uninteresting. This is particularly relevant in CRE classes, where abstract theological concepts and moral principles sometimes require additional forms of scaffolding to maintain student engagement. Several studies highlight that when rewards are used strategically, as reinforcement rather than coercion, they help students internalize the value of learning and gradually shift from external to internal motivation. However, the review also indicates that reward giving must be aligned with the Christian pedagogical ethos, which emphasizes intrinsic commitment, sincerity, humility, and character formation rooted in biblical values. When reward giving aligns with these spiritual and moral aims, it strengthens not only cognitive engagement but also affective and spiritual dimensions of learning. The reviewed literature also highlights the significant role of teacher intentionality in shaping how rewards influence learning motivation. Teachers who understand the psychological principles of reinforcement and integrate them with pastoral sensitivity tend to produce better outcomes in terms of motivation and character development. For example, studies show that verbal praise grounded in Christian values, such as acknowledging honesty, diligence, empathy, or responsibility, helps students understand that the goal is not merely academic performance but the cultivation of godly character. This kind of reward helps students feel valued not simply for what they do but for who they are becoming in Christ, reinforcing internalized moral standards. On the other hand, reward giving that is solely performance-based can create dependency on external validation, eventually reducing intrinsic motivation. Thus, the literature emphasizes that rewards should be framed as encouragement rather than as transactional exchanges. When rewards function as expressions of appreciation, students are more likely to interpret them positively and show increased self-regulation, which is essential for character development.

In terms of learning motivation, the review identifies several key mechanisms through which rewards enhance student engagement in CRE. First, rewards help create a climate of positive reinforcement, which fosters a more stimulating and enjoyable learning environment. Many studies note that students in reward-based classrooms display higher levels of attentiveness, participation in discussions, and completion of assignments. This increased motivation is attributed to the psychological satisfaction that students feel when their efforts are recognized. Second, rewards serve as goal-setting tools. When teachers provide clear expectations and link rewards to specific behaviors, such as asking questions, collaborating with peers, demonstrating moral behaviors, or completing reflective tasks, students gain a clearer understanding of desired learning outcomes. This clarity reduces anxiety and increases motivation among students who might struggle with abstract or complex material in CRE. Third, rewards stimulate perseverance. Several articles note that students who receive consistent, meaningful reinforcement are more likely to persist through challenging tasks, such as memorizing scripture, interpreting biblical passages, or practicing acts of kindness as part of character-based assignments. Another theme emerging from the review is the role of rewards in promoting character development. Although character development is typically associated with intrinsic motivation, the literature demonstrates that rewards can serve as stepping stones toward deeper moral maturity when used appropriately. For example, rewards linked to prosocial behavior, such as honesty, respect, cooperation, or empathy, encourage students to practice Christian virtues in everyday situations. Over time, as students repeatedly engage in these behaviors, the values become internalized, leading to genuine character transformation. Several studies emphasize that this process mirrors biblical principles, where God frequently uses promises, encouragement, and blessings as forms of positive reinforcement to guide believers toward righteous living. However, the literature also warns that if rewards overshadow the intrinsic joy of doing good, students may behave morally only when rewards are available. Thus, the teacher's role is central in guiding students to gradually understand the deeper spiritual significance of moral actions beyond the reward itself. The relationship between reward giving and learning motivation is also influenced by students' developmental stages. Younger students tend to respond more strongly to tangible rewards because these rewards provide immediate and concrete reinforcement. In contrast, older students, especially adolescents, may respond better to social or verbal rewards, such as teacher praise, public recognition, or opportunities to lead classroom activities. Studies conducted in Christian schools demonstrate that adolescents value autonomy, identity, and relational approval; therefore, reward systems that recognize personal growth, leadership, or service align more closely with their motivational needs. The SLR findings indicate that CRE teachers who adopt age-sensitive reward strategies experience greater improvements in both motivation and character development.

A unique contribution of this study is the integration of reward systems with Christian theological perspectives. The literature shows a growing number of Christian educators arguing that reward giving is not only pedagogically effective but also biblically grounded. Scripture contains numerous instances where God uses rewards, not to manipulate, but to encourage faithful living, strengthen hope, and guide moral behavior. Passages such as Proverbs 11:18 ("The one who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward") or Matthew

25:21 (“Well done, good and faithful servant”) illustrate the biblical pattern of rewards functioning as affirmations of faithfulness. This perspective helps Christian educators view reward giving as consistent with the spiritual and moral goals of CRE. Moreover, studies highlight that when teachers explicitly connect rewards to biblical teachings, students gain a deeper understanding of why certain behaviors are valued in Christian life. This theological framing transforms the reward system from mere behavioral reinforcement into a spiritual formation tool. The review identifies several limitations and potential pitfalls associated with reward giving. The overuse of external rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation, especially when students become dependent on rewards for routine tasks. This effect, widely discussed in educational psychology, is known as the “undermining effect.” Some studies found that when rewards are expected rather than earned, students tend to lose interest in the learning activity itself. Poorly designed reward systems may create competition and resentment among students, especially in classrooms where rewards are unevenly distributed. This is particularly problematic in CRE, where the aim is to foster community, compassion, and mutual support. Therefore, the literature recommends that rewards be used to encourage collective rather than individual success whenever possible. Certain types of rewards, such as public praise or recognition, may unintentionally embarrass introverted students or those with low confidence. Teachers must therefore be sensitive to students’ personalities and needs. Another theme in the reviewed studies concerns the integration of reward systems with culturally contextualized pedagogy. In culturally diverse classrooms, including those in Indonesia where Christian Religious Education is taught alongside national character values, reward systems must be adapted to local norms. For example, students from collectivist cultures may respond better to group-based rewards, such as class achievements, communal acknowledgments, or shared privileges. Conversely, individual rewards may work more effectively in more individualistic settings. The SLR findings suggest that Christian educators who embrace culturally responsive reward strategies, while grounding them in biblical principles, achieve better outcomes in motivation and character development. This study finds that reward giving, when grounded in biblical principles, implemented with pedagogical sensitivity, and integrated with culturally relevant practices, has a powerful influence on learning motivation in Christian Religious Education. Students are more likely to participate actively, complete assignments, engage in class discussions, reflect on moral principles, and demonstrate values-oriented behaviors. While extrinsic rewards provide the initial motivational boost, intrinsic motivation must ultimately become the primary goal. The reviewed studies consistently emphasize that rewards should be used as bridges toward internalization rather than as permanent motivators. This perspective aligns with Christian education’s ultimate aim: nurturing students who are motivated not by external benefits but by a sincere desire to grow in wisdom, character, and faith.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that visual learning media have a substantial and transformative influence on students’ learning interest in Christian Religious Education and Character Development. Through a systematic synthesis of contemporary research, supported by practical insights from educators, it becomes clear that visual media enrich the learning process by making biblical instruction more accessible, engaging, and

meaningful for students. Visual representations reduce cognitive barriers by clarifying abstract theological concepts, contextualizing historical narratives, and supporting memory retention. They also enhance emotional engagement, stimulate curiosity, and strengthen intrinsic motivation, factors that are essential for sustained learning interest and deeper comprehension of spiritual and moral teachings. Visual media contribute significantly to Christian character formation by presenting vivid examples of virtues, moral dilemmas, and faithful living that resonate with students' everyday experiences. Through these visual encounters, students develop empathy, moral imagination, and reflective awareness, which translate into a greater readiness to internalize and practice Christian values such as love, forgiveness, responsibility, respect, and integrity. These findings affirm that character development is not merely a cognitive endeavor but a holistic process involving affective and experiential dimensions, both of which are enhanced when visual media are effectively integrated. The study also highlights that the impact of visual learning media is deeply influenced by pedagogical quality, contextual factors, and teacher competence. Visual media are most effective when they are contextually appropriate, theologically sound, developmentally aligned, and embedded within interactive learning strategies that promote discussion, reflection, and application. Teachers play a central role in guiding students through these visual experiences, ensuring that media serve not as passive entertainment but as meaningful tools that facilitate deeper understanding and spiritual growth. Challenges related to technological access, cultural considerations, and teacher readiness underscore the importance of continued professional development and resource planning within Christian educational institutions. Visual learning media represent a highly effective and pedagogically relevant approach for increasing learning interest and promoting character development in Christian Religious Education. As students today inhabit a visual and digital learning culture, leveraging visual media in thoughtful, reflective, and spiritually grounded ways is essential for nurturing holistic learners who are not only academically engaged but also morally and spiritually formed. Future research should expand empirical investigations into classroom-based visual media applications, explore innovative digital platforms, and examine long-term outcomes related to spiritual growth and character transformation. The integration of visual media, when guided by sound pedagogy and Christian values, offers a promising pathway for advancing the mission of Christian education in contemporary learning environments.

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