

Original Article

The Combined Influence of Motivational Leadership, Rewards and Recognition toward Generation Z Teacher Retention in Public Elementary Schools

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Abstract

Teacher retention has become a strategic concern for public elementary schools as early career teachers report high workload demands, limited support, and weak recognition systems that shape decisions to remain in the profession. This study examined the combined influence of motivational leadership and rewards and recognition on the retention of Generation Z teachers in public elementary schools in Mati South District, Division of Mati City. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design, data were gathered from 178 Generation Z teachers through a structured survey. Descriptive statistics summarized the level of motivational leadership, rewards and recognition, and teacher retention. Pearson correlation tested bivariate associations, and multiple regression examined the unique contribution of each predictor. Results showed high motivational leadership and very high rewards and recognition and retention. Both predictors were positively associated with retention, with rewards and recognition showing a stronger relationship. In the regression model, rewards and recognition emerged as a significant predictor of retention, while motivational leadership showed no unique effect when both predictors were entered together. Findings highlight the value of credible recognition practices and growth opportunities to support retention among Generation Z teachers in public schools.

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1. Introduction

Retaining qualified teachers remains a persistent challenge in basic education systems because staffing instability weakens instructional continuity, strains school resources, and disrupts professional learning communities. Although attrition has long been discussed in relation to workload, compensation, and professional identity, recent evidence indicates that retention also depends on day to day leadership practices that build teacher autonomy, development, and voice in school settings (Nguyen et al., 2026). These leadership practices matter for early career teachers who are still developing routines, classroom efficacy, and a stable professional identity. In many public school contexts, turnover tends to cluster in high demand schools where support is uneven and where recognition systems fail to match the intensity of teacher work.

Generation Z teachers represent an emerging segment of the workforce with expectations shaped by rapid digital change, heightened awareness of well-being, and strong preference for feedback and growth opportunities. In education, these expectations can translate into stronger sensitivity to school climate, the quality of supervision, fairness of recognition, and the transparency of career pathways. When workplace conditions do not meet these needs, intentions to remain may decline even among teachers who value teaching as a vocation. The retention of younger teachers therefore requires leadership that does more than enforce compliance, and instead provides meaningful support, shared decision making, and clear recognition for performance.

Motivational leadership can be framed through self-determination theory, which posits that sustained motivation is supported when environments satisfy the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In schools, leadership actions that provide clear instructional goals, encourage collaborative work, and communicate trust may strengthen teachers' sense of competence and belonging. Related research on participative and coherent leadership practices suggests that structured collaboration and shared responsibility can strengthen commitment to school improvement (Heikonen & Ahtiainen, 2024). These mechanisms are especially relevant in public schools where policy demands, administrative tasks, and large class sizes can erode motivation unless leaders actively buffer these pressures.

Rewards and recognition are also central because they signal fairness, value, and future prospects. In human resource research, reward systems can shape commitment and intentions to stay when they are perceived as consistent, transparent, and aligned with performance. Teacher retention studies frequently describe recognition as a practical lever that schools can control even under budget limits through non-monetary appreciation, opportunities for professional growth, and visible support for teacher voice (Nguyen et al., 2026). These practices can build attachment by increasing perceived fit and reducing the perceived sacrifice associated with leaving, which aligns with job embeddedness theory that explains why employees remain when links, fit, and sacrifice are strong (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Despite the importance of leadership and recognition, empirical evidence remains mixed regarding whether leadership exerts a unique effect beyond tangible recognition practices, especially for younger employees who value direct feedback and clear benefits. Studies in organizational settings show that job satisfaction and commitment often mediate the effects of workplace conditions on turnover intentions (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In education, leadership may enhance retention indirectly through improved climate and reduced stress, but recognition practices may exert more immediate influence by meeting expectations for feedback, development, and fairness. Understanding the combined influence of motivational leadership and rewards and recognition can therefore clarify which levers most strongly support Generation Z teacher retention in public elementary schools.

This study examined the levels of motivational leadership, rewards and recognition, and Generation Z teacher retention in public elementary schools in Mati South District, Division of Mati City. It also tested the relationships between each predictor and teacher retention and estimated their combined predictive influence using regression analysis. By focusing on Generation Z teachers within a public school context, the study contributes locally grounded evidence for leadership and human resource strategies that support staffing stability and teacher well-being.

2. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationships among motivational leadership, rewards and recognition, and Generation Z teacher retention in public elementary schools. The design supported objective measurement of perceptions and allowed the use of correlation and regression techniques to estimate both bivariate associations and combined predictive influence.

The study setting comprised public elementary schools in Mati South District, Division of Mati City. The study was conducted in Mati South District, Division of Mati City, in public elementary schools. A total of 178 teachers served as respondents out of a population of 320, as determined using Slovin's Formula with a 0.05 margin of error. These respondents rated the combined influence of motivational leadership, rewards and recognition on the retention of Generation Z teachers in public elementary schools. The study was conducted during the School Year 2025 to 2026. Stratified random sampling supported proportional representation across schools and ensured that the respondent pool reflected the composition of the target population.

Data were collected using a structured survey questionnaire composed of three parts aligned with the study variables. The motivational leadership section covered leadership practices related to transformational leadership, supportive management, and collaborative decision making, with items adapted from Heikonen and Ahtiainen (2024). The rewards and recognition section covered performance recognition, career advancement, and compensation system practices, drawing item content from Subhashini and Vignesh Kumar (2019). The teacher retention section measured job

tenure orientation, intent to stay, and job satisfaction perceptions based on concepts reported by Youcef et al. (2016) regarding job satisfaction, commitment, and turnover intentions. All items used a five-point Likert response format with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with positive conditions or retention orientations.

Prior to full administration, a pilot test established internal consistency reliability. The reliability test showed Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70 across indicators, supporting acceptable measurement consistency for use in the main survey. Ethical safeguards were observed through informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of responses. Data collection followed coordination with school officials to support orderly survey distribution and retrieval while reducing disruption to instructional duties.

Data analysis used descriptive statistics to summarize the mean, standard deviation, and descriptive interpretation of each indicator and overall mean for the three variables. Pearson correlation assessed the association between motivational leadership and retention and between rewards and recognition and retention. Multiple regression estimated the combined influence of motivational leadership and rewards and recognition on teacher retention and determined the unique contribution of each predictor in the presence of the other. Statistical significance was evaluated at the 0.05 level.

3. Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for teachers' ratings of motivational leadership. Overall, motivational leadership was rated as high ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.55$). Among the specific indicators, transformational leadership received the highest rating, while supportive management received the lowest.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for motivational leadership ($n = 178$).

Domain	Mean	SD	Descriptive level
Transformational Leadership	4.52	0.70	Very High
Supportive Management	3.19	1.27	High
Collaborative Decision Making	4.36	0.76	Very High
Overall	4.03	0.55	High

Table 2 presents the summary results for teachers' perceptions of rewards and recognition. Overall, the presence of rewards and recognition was rated as very high ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.60$). Specifically, compensation systems and career advancement were viewed as very high, whereas performance recognition was rated slightly lower, at a high level.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for rewards and recognition (n = 178).

Domain	Mean	SD	Descriptive level
Performance Recognition	4.02	0.76	High
Career Advancement	4.53	0.68	Very High
Compensation System	4.61	0.68	Very high
Overall	4.39	0.60	Very high

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for Generation Z teacher retention. Overall retention was rated as very high ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.52$). Within this construct, job tenure and intent to stay were both reported at very high levels, while general job satisfaction was reported as high.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for Generation Z teacher retention (n = 178).

Domain	Mean	SD	Descriptive level
Job Tenure	4.50	0.66	Very high
Intent to Stay	4.27	0.95	Very High
Job Satisfaction	4.17	0.69	High
Overall	4.31	0.52	Very High

Table 4 details the Pearson correlation coefficients examining the bivariate relationships between the predictor variables and Generation Z teacher retention. The analysis revealed significant positive correlations for both predictors: motivational leadership ($r = 0.385$, $p = 0.00$) and rewards and recognition ($r = 0.622$, $p = 0.001$), indicating that higher levels in both areas are associated with greater teacher retention.

Table 4. Correlation results.

Variables	r-value	p-value
Motivational leadership and teacher retention	0.385	0.001
Rewards and recognition and teacher retention	0.622	0.001

Table 5 summarizes the multiple regression analysis conducted to predict Generation Z teacher retention based on motivational leadership and rewards and recognition. The overall regression model was statistically significant, $F(2, 147) = 47.743$, $p = 0.001$, accounting for 39.4% of the variance in retention ($R^2 = 0.394$). Notably, while controlling for both variables, rewards and recognition demonstrated a significant unique positive effect on retention ($B = 0.502$, $p = 0.000$). Conversely, motivational leadership did not emerge as a significant independent predictor in this model ($B = 0.093$, $p = 0.195$).

Table 5. Regression results.

Predictor domain	B	SE	Beta	t	P-value	Decision
Constant	1.923	0.809		4.726	0.000	Significant
Motivational leadership	0.093	0.071	0.097	1.303	0.195	Not Significant
Rewards and recognition	0.502	0.065	0.573	7.717	0.000	Significant

4. Discussion

The results indicate that teachers perceived motivational leadership at a high level, with stronger ratings for transformational leadership and collaborative decision making. Such patterns are consistent with leadership perspectives that emphasize participative structures and coherent leadership practices as key supports for teacher engagement and shared responsibility in school improvement (Heikonen & Ahtainen, 2024). For Generation Z teachers, leadership that provides clear direction while allowing input can support a stronger sense of competence and autonomy, which are core mechanisms in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These mechanisms may explain why motivational leadership showed a positive association with retention in the bivariate analysis.

Rewards and recognition received very high ratings, with the compensation system and career advancement indicators showing the strongest results. This pattern signals that younger teachers in the study context place strong value on tangible and developmental rewards that reflect fairness and future opportunity. In retention research, leadership practices that support autonomy and professional voice interact with systems that make growth visible, such as recognition, development pathways, and feedback practices (Merritt, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2026). When these conditions are present, teachers are more likely to view the workplace as a good fit and to perceive higher sacrifice in leaving, which aligns with job embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Teacher retention outcomes were very high, suggesting that many respondents reported positive intent to stay and satisfaction signals. At the same time, the stronger correlation between rewards and recognition and retention indicates that recognition systems may serve as a more immediate anchor for younger teachers. Research on organizational attachment also suggests that retention decisions are shaped by affective commitment, continuance considerations, and normative obligation, which develop from different experiences and signals in the workplace (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Recognition and reward practices likely reinforce these components by strengthening perceptions of fairness and reciprocity.

Regression results further clarify these relationships. When both predictors were entered together, rewards and recognition remained a significant predictor of

retention, while motivational leadership did not show a unique effect. One plausible interpretation is that leadership practices influence retention partly through recognition structures. In other words, leadership may be visible to teachers through day to day recognition, feedback, and support for advancement opportunities. When recognition practices are already strong, the unique variance that leadership explains may shrink because the practical benefits of leadership are already captured by the reward and recognition variable.

This pattern also aligns with broader evidence that retention is not shaped by one factor alone, but through bundles of practices that meet teacher needs for autonomy, development, and voice while also providing credible recognition and support systems (Nguyen et al., 2026; Torres et al., 2021). In such bundles, recognition can provide an observable signal of value, while leadership provides the climate and structure that sustain these practices. If recognition systems are inconsistent or perceived as unfair, teachers may discount leadership messages, even when leaders attempt to motivate through vision or collaboration.

From a motivational standpoint, self-determination theory suggests that external rewards can either support or undermine motivation depending on how they are delivered (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Recognition that communicates competence and appreciation may strengthen internal motivation, while recognition that feels controlling may reduce it. The very high ratings observed here suggest that recognition practices were largely perceived as supportive, which can strengthen satisfaction and intent to stay. This interplay may help explain why rewards and recognition emerged as the stronger predictor in the combined model.

Practical implications follow for school leaders and district managers. Programs that strengthen recognition consistency, performance feedback, and transparent access to professional development may support retention among Generation Z teachers. Leadership development efforts can also focus on ensuring that motivational leadership is translated into systems that teachers experience directly, including mentoring, peer support structures, and fair recognition. Such alignment can strengthen teachers' workplace links and perceived fit, which are central in embeddedness frameworks (Mitchell et al., 2001).

These findings should be interpreted with attention to design limits. Cross-sectional data cannot establish causal direction, and self-report measures may reflect shared method variance. However, the observed effect sizes and the regression pattern offer actionable guidance for strengthening retention strategies in public elementary schools, especially where resource constraints make non salary recognition practices a practical intervention area.

5. Conclusion

This study found high motivational leadership and very high rewards and recognition and teacher retention among Generation Z teachers in public elementary schools in Mati South District. Both predictors were positively related to retention,

with rewards and recognition showing the stronger association. In the combined regression model, rewards and recognition emerged as the significant predictor of teacher retention, while motivational leadership showed no unique effect when both predictors were analyzed together. Strengthening transparent recognition practices and growth opportunities may therefore provide a direct and practical path to support retention among younger public school teachers.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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