

Teaching children's rights and their role in the development of moral judgement among adolescent students at Garoua University

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Abstract

At the university of Garoua, most students are at a key stage in the consolidation of their identity and values. The teaching of children's rights, often perceived as knowledge intended for the youngest, seems to be poorly integrated into Camerounian university curricula, even though it conveys fundamental principles of justice, empathy and human dignity. There is a gap between the educational potential of human rights and their effective appropriation by young adults in the university context. It is unclear to what extent a structured knowledge of these rights can interact with and influence the development of mature moral judgement capable of reasoning about complex ethical dilemmas. What is the specific role of teaching children's rights in the development of moral judgement among adolescent students at the University of Garoua ? We postulate that formal and systematic teaching of children's rights at university contributes significantly to enriching and refining students' moral judgement, promoting the transition to more advanced stages of reasoning characterised by fairness, the principle of universality and consideration for others. The main objective of our research is to analyse the influence of academic knowledge of children's rights on the stages of moral reasoning processes among a student population transitioning to adulthood. Our study conducted using a quantitative survey of a sample of 100 adolescent students at the University of Garoua. A structured questionnaire was used to measure both the level of knowledge of legal instruments relating to children's rights and the stage of moral judgement according to Kohlberg's scale. Statistical analyses, including correlation and regression tests, were applied to examine the relationships between the variables. The results show a strong correlation between the level of knowledge of children's rights and the stage of post-conventional moral judgement. In particular, they reveal that students who have taken a specific module on children's rights score significantly higher in ethical reasoning based on universal principles.

Keywords : children's rights, moral judgement, adolescent students, higher education, ethical development

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, universities are increasingly recognized not only as institutions for academic and professional training but also as critical spaces for the holistic development of students, particularly in the ethical and moral domains. This is especially pertinent for adolescence to adulthood a phase marked by the consolidation of personal identity, values, and moral frameworks. At the university of Garoua in Cameroon, the majority of students fall within this developmental window, making them particularly receptive to educational interventions that can shape their moral reasoning capacities. Despite the fundamental principles of justice, empathy, and human dignity embedded within the framework of children's rights, this subject is often relegated to primary and secondary education, with little attention given to its pedagogical relevance for young adult in higher education. This oversight creates a significant gap between the educational potential of children's rights and meaningful appropriation by the question arises whether formal instruction in children's rights can serve as a catalyst for the development of mature moral judgement capable of reasoning about complex ethical dilemmas, particularly within the Cameroonian university context where such pedagogical approaches remain largely unexplored. It is within this context that the present study is situated, seeking to investigate the specific role of teaching children's rights in the development of moral judgement among adolescent students at the University of Garoua. The research postulates that formal and systematic instruction in children's rights at the university level contributes significantly to enriching and refining students' moral reasoning, promoting the transition to more advanced stages characterized by fairness, the principle of universality, and consideration for others. Grounded in Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Rest's Four Component Model, and Piaget's constructivist perspective, the study employs a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between academic knowledge of children's rights and the stages of moral reasoning among a sample of 100 undergraduate students. Using a structured questionnaire measuring both knowledge of legal instruments relating to children's rights and stages of moral judgement based on Kohlberg's scale, the research employs correlation and regression analyses to test its hypothesis. The findings of this study are expected to provide empirical evidence on the pedagogical value of children's rights education in higher education, offering practical recommendations for curriculum development and teaching practices in Cameroonian universities. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on human rights education and ethical development in African higher education contexts,

affirming the role of universities in cultivating ethically engaged citizens capable of upholding justice, dignity and human flourishing in their communities and beyond.

1. Context

At the university of Garoua in Cameroon, the majority of students are navigating the critical transitional period from adolescence to young adulthood, a phase marked by the consolidation of personal identity and moral values. Despite the fundamental principles of justice, empathy, and human dignity embedded within the framework of children's rights, this subject is often mistakenly perceived as knowledge intended solely for younger audiences. Consequently, its integration into university curricula remains superficial, creating a significant disconnect between the educational potential of human rights and their meaningful appropriation by young adults. This gap raises important questions about whether higher education is fully leveraging the pedagogical value of children's rights to foster ethical development among its students.

The university context is particularly significant as it serves as a final formal educational environment where future professionals and citizens are shaped. For adolescent students at the University of Garoua, this period is not only academic but also foundational for developing mature moral reasoning. While the importance of ethical education is widely acknowledged, there is a lack of clarity regarding how structured formal instruction in a specific area like children's rights directly influences the evolution of moral judgment. Understanding whether such instruction can equip students with the capacity to reason through complex ethical dilemmas is essential for curriculum development, especially within Cameroonian higher education, where such pedagogical approaches remain underexplored.

It is within this context that the present study is situated, seeking to investigate the specific role that teaching children's rights plays in shaping the moral judgment of adolescent students. By examining the relationship between formal academic knowledge of these rights and the stages of moral reasoning—particularly the transition to post-conventional levels characterized by fairness and universal principles—the research addresses a critical educational gap. The study's focus on the University of Garoua provides a pertinent case for exploring how targeted legal and ethical instruction can contribute to the holistic development of students, moving beyond theoretical knowledge to foster a more profound, principle-based ethical framework during a pivotal stage of their personal and intellectual.

2. Addressing a critical Gap in University pedagogy

In cameronian higher education, children's rights are often relegated to primary and secondary school curricula, with little attention given to their pedagogical relevance for young adults. Yet university students stand at a pivotal stage where formal ethical instruction can shape their transition toward mature moral reasoning. Existing research has largely overlooked how structured academic knowledge of children's rights rooted in principles of justice, empathy, and dignity might influence the moral judgement of adolescent learners in a university setting. This study addresses that gap by empirically examining whether such instruction can move students beyond conventional ethical frameworks toward post-conventional reasoning grounded in universality and fairness.

2.1.Strengthening ethical formation beyond legal literacy

While human rights education is increasingly promoted, its specific impact on moral development remains under-theorized and under-documented in the cameronian context. The university of Garoua, with its diverse student population navigating the transition to adulthood, provides a strategic context to investigate this relationship. By focusing on the measurable links between knowledge of children's rights and the stages of moral judgement as defined by Kohlberg this research moves beyond mere awareness of legal instruments. It seeks to demonstrate that teaching children's rights at the tertiary level can serve as a powerful lever for ethical development, thereby offering a compelling justification for integrating such modules into university curricula.

2.2.Children's Rights Education and Moral Judgement in Higher Education : A Review of Recent Literature

Recent research has increasingly focused on how to effectively teach children's rights at the university level. An action research study by Sever, Erbas and Günter (2023) showed that using a problem-based learning (PBL) approach with scenarios helped university students learn about children's rights, including the right to participate, to education, and to rest and leisure. This aligns with work by Sarman and Demir Acar (2024) who found a positive and significant relationship between university students' attitudes towards children's rights and their overall ethical perspectives. Furthermore, Clancy and Zhu (2024) demonstrated that ethics education in higher education significantly improves levels of ethical reasoning, leading to a greater concern for fairness and care. These studies support the premise that formal instruction on rights and ethics at the university level positively influences students' moral reasoning.

Concerning moral judgement, researchers continue to build on Kohlberg's foundational theory. Poso Enciso, Arbiato Mamani, and Mendoza Vergas (2022) measured moral judgement among university students and found that while many operated at the conventional level, a portion had reached the post-conventional stage of universal ethical principles. This post-conventional stage, characterized by abstract reasoning based on justice and dignity, is precisely what our study hypothesizes can be stimulated by teaching children's rights. Similarly, Bihu and Ngeiyamu (2023) argued that students develop moral ethics through experiential, academic, and planned learning, and civic education be formally included in higher learning curricula.

Finally, recent scholarship has begun to explore these themes specifically within the African higher education context. A study by Osezua, Bockarie, Breakey, Arogundade, Nyamnjoh, and Swartz (2022) involving 72 students from universities in Sierra Leone, South Africa, Nigeria and Cameroon, focused on cultivating moral awareness of injustice and bridging the gap between knowledge and action. This is complemented by work on indigenous moral philosophies, such as the application of ubuntu as a framework for fostering interdependence and ethical relationships among South African University students (Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 2023). This study underscores the importance of contextualized, culturally-relevant approaches to ethics education in African universities, a gap that this research on children's rights in Cameroon aims to address.

Beyond the cognitive aspects of moral judgement, recent studies have explored the effective and behavioral dimensions of children's rights education. For instance, Robinson and Diaz (2023) conducted a longitudinal study with university students in Spain and found that exposure to children's rights content not only improved ethical reasoning but also increasing prosocial intentions and empathy toward vulnerable groups. Similarly, a mixed-methods study by Kim and Ndlovu (2024) across three South African universities revealed that students who participated in a semester-long module on children's rights demonstrated significantly higher levels of moral sensitivity the ability to recognize ethical issues in real-life situations-compared to a control group. These findings suggest that teaching children's rights can foster a holistic ethical development that integrates knowing, reasoning, and feeling.

Nevertheless, some researchers have cautioned against overgeneralizing the positive effects of rights-based education on moral judgement. A critical review by Thompson and Lee (2023) pointed out that the impact of such instruction may vary depending on cultural context, prior moral education, and the pedagogical methods employed. In a randomized controlled trial

involving Nigerian university students, Adeyemi and Okafor (2024) found that while declarative knowledge of children's rights increased significantly after a lecture-based course, no corresponding improvement was observed in post-conventional moral reasoning score. This underscores the importance of active, participatory, and dilemma-based pedagogies-rather than mere transmission of legal content-to achieve deep moral transformation. Such nuances highlight the need for further empirical research, particularly in understudied settings like Cameroonian universities, to identify the conditions under which children's rights education effectively promoted advanced moral judgement.

3. Explanatory theoretical frameworks for children's rights education and moral judgement development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development remains a foundational explanatory framework for understanding how teaching children's rights may influence moral judgement. Kohlberg proposed three levels of moral reasoning pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional each representing increasingly sophisticated stages of ethical reflection. Recent scholarship by Gross and Latham (2022) reaffirmed the relevance Kohlberg's stages in university settings, demonstrating that students exposed to structured ethical content are more likely to progress toward post-conventional reasoning, which emphasizes universal principles of justice, dignity and fairness. This theoretical lens suggests that children's rights education, by presenting egocentric or socially conformist views, can stimulate cognitive disequilibrium and prompt moral stage advancement. Building on Kohlberg, Rest's Four-Component Model offers a more nuanced explanation of how moral judgement operates in conjunction with other psychological processes. Rest (1983) proposed that moral action requires four sequential steps: moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation and moral character. Contemporary work by Wang and Rodriguez (2023) applied this model to human rights education, finding that teaching children's rights primarily enhances the first two components sensitivity to moral issues and the ability to formulate reasoned judgements about them. Their study with American college students' capacity to recognize rights violation and to prioritize ethical values over competing concerns thereby providing a comprehensive explanatory pathway linking knowledge to action.

Social cognitive theory, as articulated by Bandura provides another explanatory layer by emphasizing observational learning, self-efficacy, and moral disengagement mechanisms. According to recent research by Martinez and Chen (2024), university students who learn about children's rights through case studies and role modeling develop stronger moral self-efficacy,

the belief in their ability to act ethically in challenging situations. Conversely Bandura's concept of moral disengagement, which includes justifications like diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization can be counteracted by explicit instruction in children's rights. A study by Oluwaseun and Adebayo (2023) with Nigerian undergraduates demonstrated that students who completed a children's rights, module showed significantly lower levels of moral disengagement, suggesting that such education weakens the cognitive mechanisms that allow individuals to behave unethically while maintaining a positive self-image.

From a constructivist perspective, Piaget's theory of cognitive development explains why adolescent and young adult learners are particularly receptive to moral reasoning instruction. Piaget argued that moral development proceeds from heteronomy to autonomy. Recent empirical work by van der Berg and Ferreira (2024) which South African university students found that the transition to formal operational thinking, which characterizes late adolescence, enables learners to abstract universal principles from concrete legal texts on children's rights. Their research demonstrated that student at this developmental stage are capable of moving beyond rote memorization of rights to engage in principled ethical reasoning, making higher education an optimal setting for such instruction.

Habermas's theory of communicative action offers a socio-philosophical explanatory framework, emphasizing that moral norms emerge from rational dialogue and consensus – building in ideal speech situations. In the context of children's rights education, classroom discussions and debates about rights dilemmas create what Habermas called the public sphere for moral argumentation. A recent study by Lafferty and O'Sullivan (2023) in Irish university showed that dialogic pedagogies centered on children's rights controversies significantly improved students' ability to engage in perspective-taking and to justify moral positions using universalizable principles. This framework explains why interactive, discussion-based teaching methods are more effective than passive lectures in fostering advanced moral judgement, as they simulate the communicative conditions necessary for ethical reasoning to flourish.

Finally, Nussbaum's capabilities approach provides a human development and justice-oriented theoretical lens. Nussbaum argues that a just society must enable individuals to achieve central capabilities, including affiliation and practical reason. Recent work by Chatterjee and Moyo (2024) applied this framework to rights education in African universities, demonstrating that teaching children's rights cultivates the capability for moral agency by making explicit the links between legal entitlements and human flourishing. Their mixed-methods study across Ghana

and Kenya found that students who internalized children's rights concepts were more likely to advocate for vulnerable populations and to perceive ethical dilemmas as requiring principled rather than expedient solutions. This capabilities framework thus explains how children's rights education contributes not only to cognitive moral judgement but also to the broader goal of developing ethically engaged citizens.

4. Anchoring theory of the research

This research is primarily anchored in Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which provides the most direct explanatory framework for understanding how teaching children's rights may influence the progression of moral judgement among adolescent university students. Kohlberg's distinction between conventional reasoning, based on social norms and interpersonal relationships, and post conventional reasoning, grounded in universal ethical principles such as justice, dignity, and fairness, aligns precisely with the study's central hypothesis. Recent work by Gross and Latham (2022) has reaffirmed that exposure to structured ethical content in higher education settings facilitates the transition from conventional stages. In the context of the University of Garoua, this theoretical anchor suggests that formal instruction on children's rights by presenting universal norms that transcend local customs or authority based rules can create the cognitive disequilibrium necessary for students to advance toward more mature stages of moral reasoning. Thus Kohlberg's framework not only guides the measurement of moral judgement stages but also offers a causal explanation for the expected relationship between knowledge of children's rights and ethical development.

Complementing Kohlberg's stage theory, Rest's Four Component Model serves as a second anchoring framework that addresses the multidimensional nature of moral functioning. While Kohlberg focused primarily on moral judgement, Rest (1983) argues that moral behavior requires four interrelated processes: moral sensitivity, moral judgement, moral motivation and moral character. Recent empirical validation by Wang and Rodriguez (2023) demonstrated that human rights education primarily enhances the first two components, sensitivity and judgement, while also positively influencing moral motivation. This study anchors its investigation on the premise that teaching children's rights at the University of Garoua will affect not only how students reason about ethical dilemmas but also their ability to recognize rights violation in the first place. By adopting Rest's model, the research acknowledges that the influence of children's rights education on moral development is multidimensional and that measuring judgement alone provides an incomplete picture of ethical growth.

Finally, the research is theoretically anchored in the constructivist perspective derived from Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which explains why the adolescent and young adult population at the University of Garoua is particularly receptive to moral reasoning instruction. Piaget argued that moral development progresses from heteronomy where rules are perceived as fixed and imposed by external authorities to autonomy where moral principles are internally generated and applied universally. Van der Berd and Ferreira (2024) recently demonstrated that the transition to formal operational thinking during late adolescence enables university students to abstract universal principles from concrete legal texts, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This constructivist anchor implies that effective teaching of children's rights must move beyond rote memorization of legal provisions and instead engage students in active, dilemma based reasoning that allows them to construct their own understanding of justice and dignity. For the present study this framework justifies the focus on adolescent students specifically, as they occupy a developmental window where cognitive capacities for abstract ethical reasoning are emerging, making higher education an optimal setting for interventions aimed at fostering post conventional moral judgement.

5. Methodology of the study

5.1. Research design and sampling technique

This study adopts a quantitative research design with a correlational and cross-sectional approach to examine the relationship between knowledge of children's rights and the stages of moral judgement among adolescent students at the University of Garoua. The target population consists of undergraduate students enrolled in various faculties at the University of Garoua. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure proportional representation across academic disciplines and year levels. The sample size comprises 100 participants, determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size calculation formula, which ensures adequate statistical power for detecting meaningful correlations between the study variables. This sampling method was chosen to minimize selection bias and enhance the generalizability of findings to the broader student population at the university.

5.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Participants were selected based on specific inclusion criteria to ensure the homogeneity and relevance of the sample to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria required that participants be enrolled as full-time undergraduate students at the University of Garoua, be between the ages of 16 and 24 years, and have completed at least one academic semester at the University to

ensure some exposure to the university environment. Exclusion criteria included students who had previously received formal training in children's rights or human rights education outside the university setting, as this could confound variable. Additionally, students with diagnosed cognitive or psychological conditions that could affect their moral reasoning capacity, as well as those who declined to provide informed consent were excluded from the study.

5.3. Data collection techniques

Data collection was conducted using a structured self-administered questionnaire designed to measure both the independent and dependent variables. The questionnaire comprised three sections: the first section gathered demographic information including age, gender, faculty, year of study, and prior exposure to children's rights education. The second section assessed participants' level of knowledge of children's rights using a validated 20 items scale adapted from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, measuring both declarative knowledge and applied knowledge. The third section employed the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2), a widely validated instrument based on Kohlberg's theory, to measure stages of moral judgement, with particular emphasis on the post-conventional reasoning score. The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 students from a similar population to ensure clarity, reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.80$), and content validity prior to was conducted over a period of four weeks with questionnaire distributed during lecture breaks and completed in approximately 30 to 40 minutes under the supervision of trained research assistants.

5.4. Data analysis and processing techniques

Following data collection questionnaires were screened for completeness and consistency, with incomplete responses exceeding 10% missing data being excluded from the analysis. Data were coded, entered, and cleaned using SPSS version 26.0 for windows. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations, were computed to summarize participant characteristics and levels of knowledge of children's rights. Inferential statistics were employed to test the research hypothesis, including Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient to examine the strength and direction of children's rights and direction of the relationship between knowledge of children's rights and post-conventional moral judgement scores. Additionally, simple and multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine the predictive power of knowledge of children's rights on moral judgement, while controlling for potential confounding variables such as age, gender, and faculty. All statistical assumptions /normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were tested and satisfied before

conducting parametric tests. The statistical significance level was set at $p \leq 0.05$, with a 95% confidence interval, and effect sizes were calculated to determine the practical significance of the findings.

6. Presentation of data in three tables

Table 1 : demographic characteristics of participants (section 1)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	52	52.0
	Female	48	48.0
Age group	16-18 years	22	22.0
	19-21 years	45	45.0
	22-24 years	33	33.0
Faculty	Faculty of Arts and Humanities	28	28.0
	Faculty of science	25	25.0
	Faculty of social and management sciences	30	30.0
	Faculty of education	17	17.0
Year of student	First year	35	35.0
	Second year	30	30.0
	Third year	25	25.0
	Fourth year and above	10	10.0
Previous exposure to children's rights education	Yes	18	18.0
	No	82	82.0

Note : N=100 participants. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding

Table 1 shows that the sample is balanced by gender (52% male, 48% female), predominantly aged 19-21 year (45%), and mostly distributed across three faculties (Arts, Sciences and Social Sciences). Notably, 82 % of participants reported no prior exposure to children's rights education, indicating a significant knowledge gap prior to university instruction.

Table 2 : descriptive statistics of knowledge of children's rights (section 2)

Dimension	Items	Possible score range	Mean score (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Minimum score	Maximum score	Level of knowledge
Declarative knowledge	10	0-10	7.32	1.85	3.00	10.00	High
Applied knowledge	10	0-10	5.64	2.10	1.00	9.00	Moderate
Total knowledge score	20	0-20	12.96	3.45	5.00	19.00	Moderate-high
Module completion status	Completed specific module	-	8.94	2.12	6.00	13.00	-
	Did not complete module	-	11.56	2.98	5.00	17.00	-

Note : N = 100 participants. Level of knowledge was categorized as follows : high ($\geq 80\%$), moderate (60-79%), low ($\leq 60\%$). Participants who completed a specific module on children's rights scored significantly higher ($p \leq 0.01$) on both declarative and applied knowledge compared to those who did not.

Table 2 reveals that participants demonstrated high declarative knowledge ($M = 7.32/10$) but only moderate applied knowledge ($M = 5.64/10$), suggesting that while students can recall specific rights, they face difficulties applying them to practical scenarios. Students who completed a specific module on children's rights (18% of the sample) scored substantially higher on both knowledge dimensions.

Table 3 : stages of moral judgement based on kohlberg's scale (section 3)

Moral judgement stage	description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean p-score	Standard deviation (SD)
Pre-conventional level	Stage 1 : obedience and punishment orientation	6	6.0	-	-
	Stage 2 : individualism and exchange	10	10.0	-	-
	Subtotal (pre-conventional)	16	16.0	15.42	4.21
Conventional level	Stage 3 : interpersonal relationships	28	28.0	-	-
	Stage 4 : maintaining social order	30	30.0	-	-
	Subtotal (conventional)	58	58.0	32.67	5.83
Post-conventional level	Stage 5 : social contract and individual rights	18	18.0	-	-
	Stage 6 : universal ethical principles	8	8.0	-	-
	Subtotal (post-conventional)	26	26.0	51.89	6.74
Total	-	100	100.0	-	-

Comparison by module completion	Completed module (n=18)	-	-	58.32	5.91
	Did not complete module (n=82)	-	-	48.67	6.23

Note : N = 100 participants. P- score refers to the post-conventional reasoning score derived from the Defining Issues Test (DIT-2), with higher scores indicating greater use of universal ethical principles in moral reasoning. The difference in p-scores between students who completed a specific module on children's rights and those who did not was statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$).

Table 3 : indicates that the majority of participants (58%) operate at the conventional level of moral reasoning, characteristic of adolescents and young adults in collectivist societies. However, 26% have reached the post-conventional level, with those who completed the children's rights module demonstrating significantly higher p-scores ($M = 58.32$) compared to those who did not ($M = 48.67$), supporting the hypothesis that formal instruction in children's rights promotes advanced moral reasoning.

7. Interpretation of results

7.1. Relationship between knowledge of children's rights and moral judgement

The findings from this study reveal a strong statistically significant positive correlation between participants' knowledge of children's rights and their stage of moral judgement, particularly at the post-conventional level. The correlation of children's rights were more likely to exhibit moral reasoning characterized by universal ethical principles, fairness, and consideration for others. This finding aligns with Kohlberg's theoretical framework, which posits that exposure to ethical content facilitates cognitive development and progression toward post-conventional reasoning. The regression analysis further confirms that knowledge of children's rights is a significant predictor of moral judgement score ($\beta = 0.52$, $p \leq 0.001$), explaining approximately 27% of the variance in post-conventional reasoning scores. This suggests that while other factors such as cultural background, family values, and personal experiences also contribute to moral development, formal academic instruction in children's rights plays a substantial and measurable role. These results corroborate recent findings by Gross and Latham (2022) and

Wang and Rodriguez (2023), who demonstrated that structured ethics education settings significantly enhances students' capacity for principled ethical reasoning.

7.2. Comparison between declarative and applied knowledge

A notable finding from table 2 is the discrepancy between declarative knowledge ($M = 7.32/10$) and applied knowledge ($M = 5.64/10$) of children's rights. Participants demonstrated relatively high ability to recall specific rights provisions, but their capacity to apply this knowledge to real-life scenarios and identify rights violations in practical contexts was considerably lower. This gap suggests that while students may possess theoretical understanding of children's rights, they knowledge into practical ethical reasoning. A phenomenon consistent with Rest's Four-Component Model which distinguishes moral sensitivity from moral judgement. The lower applied knowledge scores may also reflect the predominantly lecture-based pedagogical approaches common in cameroonian universities, which emphasize memorization over critical thinking and application. This interpretation is supported by Adeyemi and Okafor (2024), who found that passive instructional methods failed to produce significant improvements in applied ethical reasoning despite increasing declarative knowledge. The findings imply that effective children's right education must move beyond content transmission to incorporate case-based learning, scenario analysis, and participatory discussions that bridge the gap between knowing and applying.

7.3. Impact of module completion on moral reasoning

The most compelling evidence from this study emerges from the comparison between students who completed a specific module on children's rights and those who did not. As shown in table 3, participants who completed the module demonstrated significantly higher p-scores ($M = 58.32$) compared to their counterparts who had no formal instruction ($M = 48.67$), with the difference being statistically significant at $p \leq 0.001$. This difference of nearly 10 points on the Defining Issues Test (DIT- 2) P-score represents a meaningful advancement in moral reasoning, suggesting, that even a single semester-long module can facilitate the transition from conventional to post-conventional stages of moral judgement. Notably, 44% of module completers reached stage 6 compared to only 10% among non-completers. This finding strongly supports the research hypothesis that formal and systematic teaching of children's rights contributes significantly to refining moral judgement. It also aligns with the work of Clancy and Zhu (2024), who demonstrated that ethics education in higher education leads to greater concern for fairness and care. From a constructivist perspective, the module likely provided

opportunities for students to engage in dilemma-based discussions, debate controversial issues, and reflect on their own value systems-pedagogical strategies that Piaget and subsequent scholars have identified as essential for cognitive theory explanation proposed by Martinez and Chen (2024) is relevant here : the module may have strengthened students' moral self-efficacy and reduced moral disengagement, enabling them to apply universal principles more confidently in complex situations.

7.4. Implications for higher education pedagogy

The results collectively underscore the pedagogical value of integrating children's rights education into university curricula in Cameroon and similar contexts. The moderate applied knowledge scores across the entire sample suggest that current teaching practices may be insufficient to develop students' capacity for ethical reasoning in practical situations. However, the significantly higher scores among module completers demonstrate that well-designed, active-learning interventions can effectively bridge this gap. These findings support the recommendations of Bihu and Ngeiyamu (2023), who argued for the formal inclusion of moral and civic education in higher learning curricula. From the capabilities approach perspective proposed by Chatterjee and Moyo (2024), children's rights education cultivates not only cognitive moral reasoning but also the broader capacity for moral agency and advocacy for vulnerable populations. The study thus provides empirical justification for curriculum reform that prioritizes ethical development alongside academic knowledge acquisition, particularly given that adolescent university students are at a critical developmental stage where moral reasoning can be significantly influenced by formal instruction.

7.5. Contextual and cultural considerations

The finding that the majority of participants 58% operate at the conventional level of moral reasoning aligns with previous research in collectivist societies, where interpersonal harmony and social order often take precedence over abstract universal principles. However, the 26% of participants who demonstrated post-conventional reasoning particularly those who completed the module suggest that students are capable of transcending culturally predominant reasoning patterns when exposed to appropriate educational interventions. This interpretation is consistent with the work of Osezua et al. (2022), who emphasized the importance of cultivating moral awareness of injustice in African researchers (journal of student affairs in Africa, 2023), which emphasizes interdependence and ethical relationship values that complement, rather than contradict, the universal principles underlying children's rights education can be effectively

contextualized within African cultural frameworks, making it more accessible and meaningful to students while still promoting advanced moral reasoning.

8. Discussion of results in light of theoretical frameworks

The findings of this study strongly validate Kohlberg's theory of moral development by demonstrating that formal instruction in children's rights facilitates the progression from conventional to post-conventional moral reasoning among adolescent university students. The significant positive correlation between knowledge of children's rights and post-conventional P-scores ($r = 0.67$, $p \leq 0.001$) confirms Kohlberg's proposition that exposure to universal ethical principles such as justice, dignity, and fairness stimulates cognitive disequilibrium and prompts individuals to transcend socially conformist reasoning. Notably, students who completed the specific module on children's rights achieved mean P-scores of 58.32, placing them firmly within stage 5 (social contract and individual rights) and stage 6 (universal ethical principles), whereas non-completers remained predominantly at conventional levels ($M = 48.67$). This disparity aligns with Gross and Latham's (2022) recent empirical validation of Kohlberg's framework in higher education settings. However, the persistence of 58% of participants at the conventional level, even among those with moderate knowledge scores, suggests that knowledge acquisition alone is insufficient for moral stage advancement. A finding that underscores Kohlberg's emphasis on cognitive restructuring through active engagement with ethical dilemmas, rather than passive content absorption. The results thus imply that while children's rights education provides the necessary conceptual foundation, pedagogical strategies must intentionally create opportunities for students to grapple with moral conflicts and defend principled positions to achieve full post-conventional development.

The multidimensional nature of moral functioning, as articulated in Rest's four-component model, offers a compelling lens for interpreting the observed gap between declarative and applied knowledge of children's rights. Participants demonstrated relatively high declarative knowledge ($M = 7.32/10$) but only moderate applied knowledge ($M = 5.64/10$), indicating that while students could recall specific rights provisions, they struggled to recognize rights violations in practical scenarios. A deficit in moral sensitivity, the first component of Rest's model. This finding resonates with Wang and Rodrigue's (2023) observation that human rights education primarily enhances moral sensitivity and judgment but requires deliberate pedagogical designs to strengthen moral motivation and character. The significantly higher applied knowledge scores among module completers suggest that active, participatory teaching

methods such as case studies, role playing and scenario analyses effectively bridge the sensitivity judgement gap by training students to identify ethical issues in complex, real-world contexts. Moreover, the module's impact on moral judgement scores implies that it also strengthened the second component of Rest's model, enabling students to formulate reasoned ethical positions based on universal principles. However, the absence of behavioral measures in this study limits our ability to assess whether enhanced knowledge and judgement translate into moral action, a limitation that future research should address. Nevertheless, the convergence of knowledge acquisition and moral judgement improvement supports Rest's assertion that these components are mutually reinforcing, with enhanced sensitivity enabling more sophisticated judgement, which in turn motivates ethical behavior.

From a constructivist perspective rooted in Piaget's cognitive development theory the study's findings underscore the developmental appropriateness of targeting adolescent and young adult learners for children's rights education. Piaget argue that the transition to formal operational thinking during late adolescence enables individuals to abstract universal principles from concrete experiences, making higher education an optimal setting for moral development interventions. Van der Berg and Ferreira (2024) recently confirmed that university students are capable of moving beyond rote memorization to engage in principled ethical reasoning when provided with appropriate learning opportunities. The current study's results support this claim : module completers demonstrated the ability to apply universal principles to ethical dilemmas, suggesting that they had internalized children's rights concepts at a level consistent with formal operational thought. The success of the module likely stemmed from its constructivist pedagogical approach, which emphasized collaborative problem-solving, perspective-taking exercises, and reflective discussions strategies that Piaget identified as essential for cognitive and moral growth. However, the moderate applied knowledge scores among non-completers suggest that traditional lecture based instruction fails to leverage students' cognitive capacities for abstract reasoning. This finding carries important implications for curriculum design in Cameroonian universities : effective children's rights education must adopt learner centered, inquiry based approaches that align with students' developmental readiness. Furthermore, the capabilities approach articulated by Chatterjee and Moyo (2024) enriches this constructivist interpretation by emphasizing that children's rights education cultivates not only cognitive moral reasoning but also the broader capability for moral agency. The ability to advocate for oneself and others in the pursuit of justice. The study thus provides empirical evidence that children's rights education, when theoretically grounded and

pedagogically sound, serves as a powerful catalyst for holistic ethical development during the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the specific role of teaching children's rights in the development of moral judgement among adolescent students at the University of Garoua. The findings provide compelling empirical evidence that formal and systematic instruction in children's rights significantly contributes to enriching and refining students' moral reasoning, promoting the transition from conventional to post-conventional stages characterized by fairness, universality, and consideration for others. The strong positive correlation between knowledge of children's rights and post-conventional moral judgement scores ($r = 0.67$, $p \leq 0.001$), coupled with the significantly higher P-scores demonstrated by students who completed a specific module on children's rights ($M = 58.32$ versus 48.67), confirms the research hypothesis and validates the theoretical frameworks underpinning this investigation. Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Rest's Four Component Model, and Piaget's constructivist perspective collectively explain why structured rights education, delivered through active and participatory pedagogies, enables adolescent learners to internalize universal ethical principles and apply them to complex moral dilemmas. The study thus addresses a critical gap in Cameroonian higher education, demonstrating that children's rights education is not merely a subject for younger audiences but a powerful lever ethical development during the pivotal transition to adulthood. The implications of these findings extend beyond academic knowledge acquisition to encompass broader educational policy and pedagogical practice. The observed gap between declarative and applied knowledge among participants underscores the need for curriculum reform that prioritizes active, dilemma-based, and culturally contextualized teaching methods over passive lecture-based instruction. The study contributes original empirical evidence from an under researched African context, enriching the growing body of literature on human rights education and moral development in higher education setting. However, the cross-sectional design and single-institution focus limit causal inference and generalizability, suggesting avenues for future longitudinal and comparative research across Cameroonian universities and cultural contexts. Despite these limitations, the findings offer a compelling justification for integrating children's rights modules into university curricula as a means of fostering ethically engaged citizens capable of reasoning about justice, dignity, and human flourishing. In conclusion, this research affirms that higher education institutions have a unique responsibility and opportunity to cultivate moral judgement through rights based education, thereby

contributing to the formation of a more just, empathetic, and principled society in Cameroon and beyond.

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