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Ethical Behavior Intervention Through Group Activities in Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

Academic misconduct is common in both secondary and higher education and schools still lag behind in preventing unethical behavior. The present research addressed the effectiveness of formative activities aimed at improving ethical behavior of students in secondary education. The probability of engaging in cheating, harming others, hiding information, and theft was assessed before participants were provided with information about ethical and unethical behavior and engaged in group activities in the classroom. The comparison of pre- and postintervention scores showed that those students with a higher probability of engaging in unethical behavior were less inclined to cheat and hide information, whereas the students who behaved ethically reported a greater probability of engaging in all four unethical behaviors. The implications of interventions based on information and group discussions, as well as the challenges of future interventions on ethical behavior, are discussed.

Academic misconduct is frequently present in different educational levels. A study by Ternes et al. (2019) revealed that 77% of the postsecondary students participating in their study reported having committed at least one form of academic misconduct, with academic cheating being a prominent type of misconduct. Academic dishonesty is, however, not new: Similar percentages were already conveyed decades ago in a study with more than 6000 students, where 76% of the students reported having cheated in high school or college or both, although 90% of them knew that is was wrong (Davis et al. 1992). In line with these results, Harding et al. (2007) specifically asked whether this was true in the context of tests and homework context and found that 55% of the respondents had cheated at least once during the previous term on homework assignments and 29% on in-class tests or exams. Similarly, a survey with college students revealed that 74% of the students had observed cheating and nearly half of the students confessed to cheating at least once and finding it socially acceptable (Smyth and Davis 2004). Although students may be upset when cheating, they still engage in unethical behavior (Lawson 2004). Indeed, students have been reported to have an inclination to cheat and justify their cheating (Naghdipour and Emeagwali 2013).

Despite the prevalence of academic cheating, other unethical behavior is also present in the educational setting. Recently, Alonso and Schweiger Gallo (2022) asked high school and university students about their intended ethical behavior in different situations and scenarios and detected four types of unethical behavior: cheating, hiding information, harming others, and theft. Whereas the first type of unethical behavior includes those situations in which a student may copy to pass an exam or try to obtain the answers before an exam takes place, hiding information includes situations in which a student hides a mistake they are responsible for. Harming others refers to situations in which other people are directly or indirectly harmed, such as threatening others to obtain the notes of a lecture. Finally, theft includes those situations in which one can choose whether or not to take something belonging to others.

Summary

- Students in secondary education with a higher probability of engaging in unethical behavior were less inclined to cheat and hide information after an intervention on ethical behavior.
- Students with a higher probability of engaging in ethical behavior reported a greater probability of engaging in cheating, harming others, hiding information, and theft.
- Education interventions should assess the probability of engaging in unethical behavior and selectively target those dimensions where the students show a higher probability of acting unethically.

1 | Factors Underlying Unethical Behavior

Research addressing the factors underlying unethical behavior has pointed to an important array of factors, including personality, demographic, situational, motivational and social influence domains. For example, it has been argued that marital status and education level relate significantly to ethical behavior (Beekun et al. 2017), as does gender, depending on the cultural dimensions of collectivism, humane orientation, performance orientation and gender egalitarianism (Chen et al. 2016). Over two experiments, Dubois, Rucker and Galinsky (2015) found a differential effect of social class on unethical behavior, suggesting that it is the character of the behavior (self-beneficial vs. beneficial for others) which determines the direction of the effect, with social class positively predicting unethical behavior when it was self-beneficial. Research has also pointed to the influence of peers (Beekun et al. 2017) and the effects of ethical climate on unethical behaviors (Birtch and Chiang 2014; Koodamara et al. 2021). Feelings, and envy in particular, have further been shown to mediate the relationship between unethical social influence and unethical behavior (Thiel et al. 2020).

Focusing on the interaction between situational, demographic, and personality variables, Kisamore, Stone and Jawahar (2007) observed that personality factors accounted for most of the variance in perceiving and engaging in academic misconduct. Moreover, unethical behavior was found to be negatively associated with facets of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Helle et al. 2018; Koodamara et al. 2021), while higher order personal values such as conservation and self-transcendence significantly influenced ethical behavior (Mubako et al. 2020).

In recent years, meta-analyses have enhanced our understanding of the determinants of unethical behavior. A meta-analysis addressing social influences, as well as greed, egocentrism, or self-justification showed significant effects of these variables on unethicality, whereas monitoring of individuals' behavior, moral reminders and the willingness to maintain a positive self-view were negatively related to unethical behavior (Belle and Cantarelli 2017). More recently, a meta-analysis focusing on motivational factors revealed that self-efficacy, mastery approach goals, internal locus of control, utility value, and intrinsic motivation correlated negatively with academic dishonesty (Krou, Fong, and Hoff 2020), while another recent meta-analysis with over 27,000 participants found that the motivational attitude of neutralization and the personality trait of impulsivity were the strongest predictors of academic dishonesty (Lee, Kuncel, and Gau 2020).

1.1 | Intervening on Unethical Behavior

To prevent unethical behaviors, ethical training has been delivered through an ample array of activities, including case analysis (e.g., Cannaerts, Gastmans, and Casterlé 2014; Miller and Springer 2020; Nilstun, Cuttini, and Saracci 2001), group discussions (e.g., Cannaerts, Gastmans, and Casterlé 2014; Liebert 2013), role playing (e.g., Brummel et al. 2010; Thorne LeClair and Ferrell 2000; Liebert 2013; Miller, Shawver, and Mintz 2020) or storytelling (Paton and Kotzee 2021). These activities are executed individually (e.g., Elbe and Brand 2016) or in small groups (e.g., Lin et al. 2010; Miller and Springer 2020; Nilstun, Cuttini, and Saracci 2001), during regular class time (e.g., Sharp and Kuthy 2008), online (Paruzel-Czachura and Kocur 2023) or even in virtual learning environments (Hu et al. 2023).

In the educational setting, interventions have been shown to positively affect ethical behavior. Business students who participated in a treatment group consisting of learning an ethics decision-making technique showed greater ethical awareness and moral reasoning as compared to a control group (Lau 2009). Further, accounting students who were enrolled in more courses with an ethics component were more likely to engage in ethical behavior (Mubako et al. 2020) and business administration and science education students who reported having taken a course on ethics perceived ethics education and corporate social responsibility to be linked (Okechukwu Ugwuozor and Otu 2020). Improvements in ethical decision-making and learning outcomes in students were also observed in a conventional asynchronous learning platform versus a virtual learning environment (Hu et al. 2023), where a control group was compared against an experimental group after engaging in collaborative learning missions and creating a mind map to learn the three ethical topics of utilitarianism, deontological theories, and virtue ethics. Results showed that the contents delivered via the avatars-based digital collaboration platform led to higher learning motivation, academic achievements and ethical decision-making scores than the use of the asynchronous learning platform.

Ethical interventions in working environments are also of relevance to promote employee knowledge, skills, and decision making (Thorne LeClair and Ferrell 2000). In earlier studies, research with employees in organizations who were taking a master's degree course on business and society suggested that ethics education improved ethical judgments insofar as participants were less biased by job performance levels (Cloninger and Selvarajan 2010). More recently, bank employees of an Australian bank were surveyed about ethical leadership, customer orientation, ethical climate, service climate, ethical training and employee in-role performance (Halvorsen et al. 2023). Ethical climate, service climate and customer orientation mediated the relationship between ethical leadership and ethical training on employee performance, though ethical leadership had a stronger influence on the improvement of the

employee performance than did ethical training. Another survey among officers and managers revealed a medium effect of a corporate ethics training on employees' cognitive appraisal processes (Jannat et al. 2022). Importantly, however, the ethics training did not directly influence unethical behavior of the employees. In contrast, a cross-sectional study comparing the knowledge, attitude and practice of medical ethics among medical officers (i.e., graduates who had already completed their internships) who had versus had not received medical ethics education suggested that those who underwent ethical training scored higher on all three variables (Shrestha et al. 2021).

The comparison of three modalities of ethics education interventions consisting of interactive face-to-face ethics teaching, reflective ethics discussion groups and immersive simulation experiences has further revealed that face-to-face teaching intervention exerted a significant effect on work-related moral stress among care-givers, as compared to a control group (Gallagher et al. 2021). Though the efficacy of ethical training in corporations is still subject to debate, a review of 92 studies pointed to the positive impact of business ethics training on ethical behavior in 71% of cases, and to mixed results in 16% of the studies (Kreismann and Talaulicar 2021).

Research has also pointed to the importance of a range of specific variables for the design of ethics interventions. A meta-analysis of 25 business ethics instructional programs (Waples et al. 2009) revealed that the range of effectiveness varied depending on the characteristics of the participants, the quality of instruction, the instructional content, the characteristics of the program and of the instructional methods. In this respect, the individual criterion of moral reasoning produced a medium to large effect and the instructional methods of case-based approaches were more effective than classroom-based instructions. The largest moderating effects of the design characteristics was produced by pre–post-tests with control groups, whereas cognitive approaches were more effective than social interactional approaches. Importantly, shorter instruction periods of less than a month appeared to be more effective than periods lasting between 1 and 4 months or even longer than 5 months. More recently, a meta-analysis reviewing 46 studies on business ethics education and training (Medeiros et al. 2017) further pointed to the importance of limiting the focus, content and objectives of ethics courses; encouraging active participation; using face-to-face courses rather than online courses where possible; and delivering short, focused training.

2 | The Present Research

Given the prevalence of unethical behavior in general, and academic misconduct in particular, the reduction of these behaviors should be a priority for educators (Ternes et al. 2019). This is the more important, as unethical behavior has been shown to unfold over time: Small indiscretions were found to increase gradually over time and led to increased moral disengagement and unethical acts (Welsh et al. 2015). Furthermore, the link between academic dishonesty and unethical behavior in professional practice observed in earlier studies (e.g., Carpenter et al. 2004) has been addressed in a recent meta-analysis, where the association between dishonest behavior in the workplace and dishonest behavior in college was supported (Mulisa and Ebessa 2021).

Because of the far-reaching consequences of unethical behavior at individual (e.g., lower well-being in the transcendental domain; Muñoz-García and Aviles-Herrera 2014; or forgetting of moral rules; Shu and Gino 2012), interpersonal (reduced empathic accuracy; Lee et al. 2019) and organizational levels (e.g., reputation degradation or lower job satisfaction; Cialdini, Petrova, and Goldstein 2004), the prevention of unethical behavior is a great challenge at both the secondary and higher education level. In this respect, as high school cheating has been shown to be a strong predictor of college cheating and intention to cheat (Harding et al. 2007), interventions during secondary education are of particular relevance. In addition, less interest has been devoted to ethical interventions in secondary education as compared to higher education.

The present research aimed at evaluating the efficacy of an information + discussion intervention to improve the probability of ethical behavior of students. Based on previous recommendations (Medeiros et al. 2017), we designed a face-to-face intervention with active participation during a single session within the students' natural educational environment. To set a baseline measure of the probability of engaging in four types of unethical behavior and comparing it to the probability of engaging in unethical behavior after the targeted intervention, we used a self-report scale of ethical behavior in the educational environment (Alonso and Schweiger Gallo 2022) which focuses on four different types of unethical behavior: hiding information, harming others, theft and cheating behavior, which was of particular interest because of its prevalence and relevance in the educational setting.

After assessing the probability of engaging in unethical behavior, we provided secondary-level students with information about ethical versus unethical behaviors. Given the importance of discussions and the active exchange of ideas in the classroom (Felton and Sims 2005), we followed previous research where participants read scenarios depicting ethical dilemmas and indicated their intentions to act ethically versus not ethically (Bairaktarova and Woodcock 2017). Thus, we presented scenarios containing ethical issues (e.g., Bodkin and Stevenson 2007; Shrestha et al. 2021; Vincent and Meche 2001) and asked participants to discuss them in groups (e.g., Miñano et al. 2017). We hypothesized that those participants with a lower probability of engaging in ethical behavior would improve their behavior with regard to hiding information, harming others, theft and cheating behavior. Thus, participants with high ethical scores (i.e., likely to show unethical behavior) were expected to show lower ethical scores. However, given previous studies pointing to the possibility of detrimental effects of ethical training in young athletes who evaluated doping negatively before the intervention but lowered their rejections towards doping after the intervention (Elbe and Brand 2016), we asked whether this observation would also hold true for students in secondary education and for all four different forms of unethical behavior.

3 | Method

3.1 | Participants

The sample of the study entailed 147 students from a Spanish high school (56% females; mean age $M = 13.91$, SD = 1.15) in the region of Madrid in Spain. The students attended either first grade (38,1%), second grade (12%), third grade (21,8%) or fourth grade (27,2%) of compulsory secondary education. Parents were informed about the aims of the activity and required by the school to provide written consent by returning a reply slip to school.

On the day of the intervention, those students who attended the ethics or philosophy class were invited to participate. The students were informed about the aims of the study, as well as about the procedure (i.e., they were told that the study involved completing a questionnaire and working on the ethical dimensions a few weeks later) and gave verbal consent. They were reminded that participation was voluntary and that the data would be treated anonymously and limited to research-related usage.

3.2 | Materials and Procedure

The study used a quasi-experimental design with pretest and posttest intervention. To set a baseline measure of the probability of engaging in four types of unethical behavior (cheating, harming others, hiding information, or theft) we used a recently developed and validated scale, the "Escala Ética en Escenarios Educativos" (EEEE; Alonso and Schweiger Gallo 2022), which describes ethical scenarios in educational settings. The EEEE is formed by 18 Likert items of seven points and has been shown to have adequate reliability and global fit indices.

Two months after assessing their probability of engaging in unethical behavior, participants were invited to complete group activities in the context of their ethics or philosophy class and thus in their educational environment in a single session ranging between 45 and 50 min. The same protocol was used in each of the classes and the teachers underwent a training given by a research team member to ensure a homogeneous implementation of the intervention. During the training, the teachers were given a presentation and handed out a guide. They also participated as observers during an intervention session held by one of the research team members.

During each of the sessions the topic of the session was first of all introduced, and the concept of ethics was thoroughly explained by reflecting on the difference between good vs bad behavior and how good and bad behavior is determined (i.e., by the individual or by society). Further, the difference between ethical and unethical behavior was structured around four standards (Lewicki, Barry, and Saunders 2016): the ethical aspects of the results; the pursuit of appropriate rules and principles; the adherence to norms and values of the community; and personal convictions. With respect to the ethical aspects of the results, the students reflected on how people often want to achieve the best possible result; whether or not this is always worthwhile and if the end justifies the means. When addressing the pursuit of appropriate rules and principles, the focus was on the obligation to adhere to rules and principles and the consequences of choosing a course of action that does not adhere to laws and principles, including the consequences of being caught, as well as the impact of the action on other people. With respect to the behavior on the basis of the norms and values of the community, the students discussed what community members may think about them engaging in certain behaviors; if not behaving as is expected from them equals betraying the community´s customs and whether or not the norms and values of the community have to prevail. Finally, the personal convictions were addressed by focusing on what the conscience tells oneself and the role of the emotion of guilt after acting unethically.

The ethical scenarios extracted from the EEEE scale were then presented to the students, who read the ethical scenario on their own and afterwards listened to the teacher reading it out loud. Each scenario described ethical issues related to cheating (copying an assignment from the internet), hiding information (damaging an old book from the library), harming others (revealing confidential information of a classmate) and theft (picking up a dropped $20 note). Thus, the same four scenarios, corresponding each to a type of unethical behavior, were presented in a fixed order (i.e., cheating, hiding information; harming others; and theft). The same procedure was followed for each of the four scenarios (i.e., the students first read the scenario and the teacher then read it out loud).

Next, the class was divided into two groups and the students were asked to place themselves either on the left or the right of the classroom depending on whether they thought that they would act ethically or non-ethically in the described situation. This procedure, based on techniques of imagery and body awareness (e.g., Furr 2000), represents an interactive and dynamic method of data collection in those group dynamics in which the body expression and imagery are important. The participants on one side formed one group and those on the other side, the second group. They were asked to either defend the proposed ethical behavior or to argue against it depending on whether they expected themselves to act ethically or non-ethically. The two groups took turns defending their positions.

Thereafter, the second ethical scenario was presented, and the same procedure was repeated. The students discussed between two and four ethical scenarios depending on the class time. On average, the introduction phase took about 10 min and each of the scenarios another 10 min. Ten minutes before class time was over, the students completed once again the EEEE to assess changes in the probability of engaging in unethical behavior and thus enabling the comparison of the baseline scores assessed 2 months earlier and post intervention scores. Debriefing was conducted by the same teacher immediately after the intervention. The teacher explained to the students that the intervention targeted the improvement of ethical behavior in the educational setting and that the scores given before and after performing the activities (i.e., the probability of engaging in unethical vs. ethical behavior) would be compared. Finally, the students were thanked and released.

4 | Results

The probability of showing ethical vs unethical behavior was assessed with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) very unlikely to show unethical behavior to (7) very likely to show unethical behavior. Overall, participants scored higher with regard to hiding information both before ($M = 4.52$, SD = 1.73) and after the intervention ($M = 4.71$, SD = 1.51) than with regard to cheating (pre: $M = 4.01$, SD = 1.68; post: $M = 4.27$, SD = 1.61), theft (pre: $M = 3.00$, SD = 1.58; post: $M = 3.40$, SD = 1.63) and harming others (pre: $M = 2.61$, SD = 1.24; post: $M = 2.85$, SD = 1.26). Thus, participants were in general more likely to hide information, followed by cheating.

Further, for each of the dimensions (cheating, hiding, harming or theft) two groups of low (lower than 50th percentile) versus high ethical scores (higher than 50th percentile) were formed. A 2 (Time: pre vs. post) × 2 (Ethical score: high vs. low) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the unethical behavior of cheating revealed a significant interaction effect for time and ethical score, $F(1,145) = 44.19$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.23$; and yielded a significant main effect for the time, $F(1,145) = 13.15$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$; as well as for the ethical score, $F(1,145) = 143,36$; $\eta^2 = 0.50$. Paired comparisons showed that participants with low ethical scores (i.e., who are unlikely to show unethical behavior) reported a greater probability of engaging in cheating after the intervention ($M = 2.64$, SD = 1.02 vs. $M = 3.81$, SD = 1.56; 95% CI [−1.48, −0.86]), $t(82) = 7.47$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.82$ (Figure 1). Participants with high ethical scores (i.e., likely to show unethical behavior), on the other hand, improved their ethical scores with regard to cheating ($M = 5.45$, SD = 0.78 vs. $M = 5.11$, SD = 1.39; 95% CI [0.02, 0.67]), $t(63) = 2.13$, $p = 0.04$, $d = 0.27$. Thus, the intervention was effective in reducing the unethical behavior of cheating in those participants with a greater probability of engaging in cheating but did also increase the probability of cheating of those unlikely to show unethical behavior.

As for hiding information, a 2 (Time: pre vs. post) × 2 (Ethical score: high vs. low) ANOVA revealed a significant interaction effect of time and ethical score, $F(1,145) = 67.14$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.32$. There was also a significant main effect for time and for ethical score, $F(1,145) = 13.28$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$, and

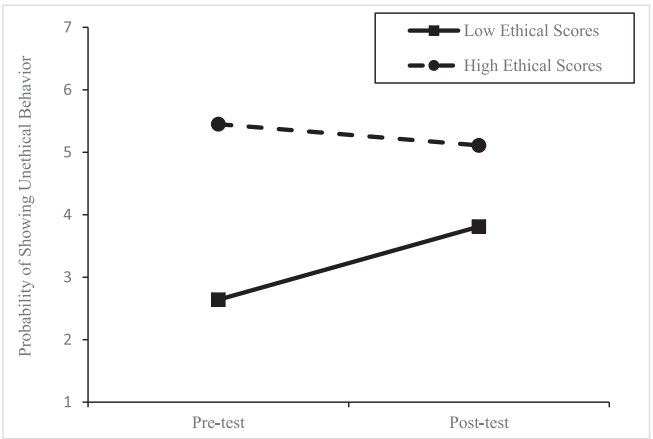

FIGURE 1 | Pre- and posttest means of reported probability of cheating.

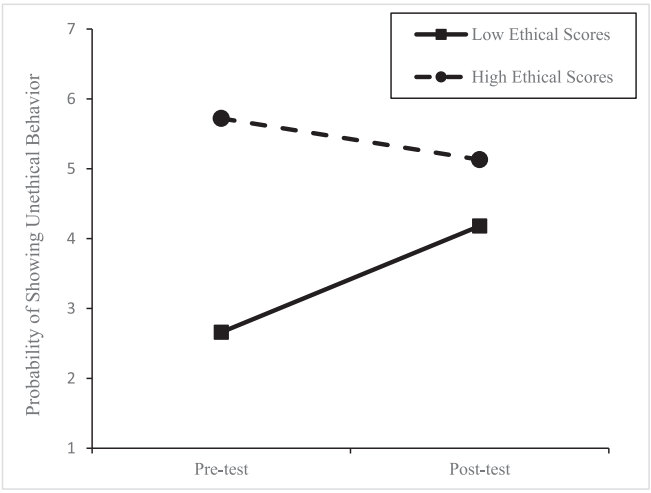

FIGURE 2 | Pre- and posttest means of reported probability of hiding information.

$F(1,145) = 163.98$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.53$, respectively. Indeed, the same pattern was found in both participants with low ethical scores ($M = 2.66$, SD = 0.97 vs. $M = 4.18$, SD = 1.51; 95% CI [−1.93, −1.11]), $t(64) = 7.41$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.92$, and high ethical scores ($M = 5.72$, SD = 0.96 vs. $M = 5.13$, SD = 1.37; 95% CI [0.27, 0.91]), $t(81) = 3.64$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.40$ (Figure 2). Whereas participants who were more prone to hiding information benefitted from the group activities and increased their probability of engaging in ethical behavior, the participants with better ethical scores became more inclined towards hiding information.

We also found a significant time × ethical score interaction on harming others, $F(1,145) = 29.88$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$, as well as a main effect for time, $F(1,145) = 22.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, and for ethical score, $F(1,145) = 168,01$; $\eta^2 = 0.54$. Importantly, however, whereas significant differences were found with regard to harming others in participants with low ethical scores ($M = 1.69$, SD = 0.42 vs. $M = 2.51$, SD = 1.12; 95% CI [−1.08, −0.57]), $t(76) = 6.40$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.73$, no such differences were found for participants with high ethical scores ($M = 3.60$, SD = 0.91 vs. $M = 3.42$, SD = 1.32; 95% CI [−0.16, 0.52]), $t(69) = 1.05$, *ns*, $d = 0.13$ (Figure 3). Thus, participants with a lower probability of harming others were more inclined to harm others after the group activities, whereas the participants with a higher probability of engaging in harming others maintained their scores.

Finally, the analysis of the scores for theft revealed the same pattern with participants with low scores differing between pre and post intervention ($M = 1.75$, SD = 0.60 vs. $M = 2.91$, SD = 1.49; 95% CI [−1.46, −0.86]), $t(78) = 7.65$, $p < 0.01$, $d = 0.86$, while participants with high scores did not, ($M = 4.38$, SD = 0.97 vs. $M = 4.29$, SD = 1.37; 95% CI [−0.26, 0.42]), $t(67) = 0.48$, *ns*, $d = 0.06$ (Figure 4). The time × ethical score interaction on theft, $F(1,145) = 29.88$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.18$, as well as the main effect for time, $F(1,145) = 22.58$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, and for ethical score, $F(1,145) = 168,01$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.54$, were all significant. Thus, as was the case with harming others, participants with a higher probability of theft maintained their probability of engaging in this unethical behavior, while

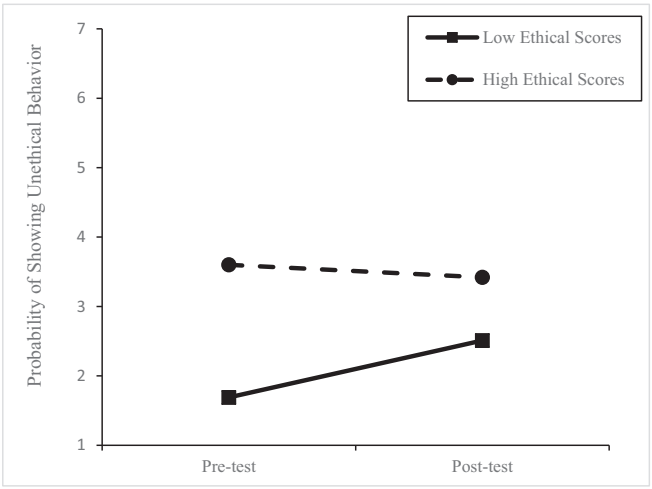

FIGURE 3 | Pre- and posttest means of reported probability of harming others.

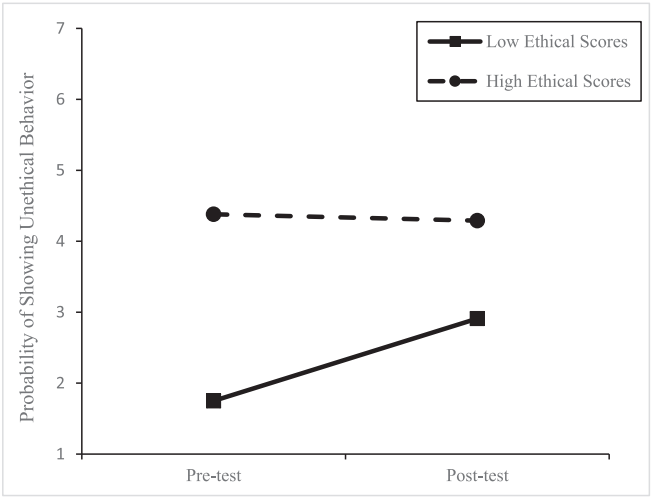

FIGURE 4 | Pre- and posttest means of reported probability of theft.

participants with a low probability of theft increased the probability of theft after the group activities.

5 | General Discussion

Given the relevance and persistence of unethical behavior, more research on the effectiveness of different activities within the classroom is needed. In the present studies, we analyzed the effectiveness of an intervention based on providing information about ethical and unethical behavior, as well as engaging in group activities in secondary education students. Results showed that those students with a higher probability of engaging in unethical behavior benefitted from the intervention with regard to engaging in cheating and hiding information. In contrast, the students who behaved ethically reported a greater probability of engaging in all four behaviors of cheating, hiding information, harming others and theft.

The latter results fit in nicely with past research pointing to a negative effect of ethical decision-making training with regard to doping (Elbe and Brand 2016), where young athletes were either assigned to an ethical decision-making training group, a standard-knowledge-based educational program group or a no-treatment control group. The athletes with low to very low doping attitude scores increased their doping attitude in the ethical training as compared to the standard education group. Thus, these results point to the possibility of boomerang effects of ethical training in participants with low ethical scores.

Importantly, this research highlights the central importance of identifying the probability of engaging in ethical behavior before running an intervention. In fact, it offers the recommendation for future education interventions of selectively addressing those students with a high probability of acting unethically. Those students with a higher probability of engaging in ethical behavior may instead perform different non-intervention activities so as to prevent boomerang effects of ethical training.

6 | Limitations and Future Directions

Though this study sheds some light on the effectiveness of an information + discussion intervention in secondary education, there are also some caveats worth mentioning. First of all, the probability of engaging in unethical behavior was assessed immediately after the intervention. Future research, however, might want to focus on a long-term follow-up and analyze the effects of the intervention over a longer period of time, and even incrementing time with multiple re-measurements (e.g., after 1 month and after 3 and 9 months). This may help address whether the effects hold true in the long term and whether this is the case for all four types of unethical behavior. In this regard, previous research assessing the impact of time has suggested that the ethical perception of students improved after 3 weeks as compared to after only 1 week (Bodkin and Stevenson 2007).

Another limitation refers to the procedural fidelity. Although great care was taken to standardize the procedure and all implementation agents were trained at the same time by the same experimenter, the degree to which the intervention was implemented as designed was not assessed. Thus, future research might analyze whether the observed behavior change is linked to the intervention implementation using, for example, self-reports or direct observations (Barnett et al. 2014).

Further, the differential effects of the information versus discussion intervention might also be of interest to delimit whether or not the observed effects are due to the combination of both the information + discussion activities, or if any of them may also prompt the effects separately. In this regard, interventions based on information are common in the health domain, where they have been provided for example to deliver the short- and long-term benefits of exercising in a control group (Sailer et al. 2015). It remains to be studied whether participants benefitted from the information, the discussion activities or from both.

It has also been recommended that time be allocated for smaller group discussions before engaging in full class discussions (Bodkin and Stevenson 2007). Changing the size of the groups,

varying between smaller discussion groups of 4–6 members and groups of 10–12 students might also be of interest. Another aspect deserving attention would be the length of the discussion periods. In this realm, given that the intervention was performed in the natural setting of a class, the allocated time determined the number of ethical dimensions tackled by each of the groups. These time constraints may, however, be overcome on future occasions by programming a second session or working on only two ethical behaviors during each session.

Future research might also address the effects of group interventions in higher education. As higher chronological age has been related to higher ethical attitudes and behaviors (Suar and Gochhayat 2016) it might be interesting to compare the effects on students of secondary education with students in higher education or even with interventions in the working environment. This might be of special importance in light of the studies pointing to a positive relationship between education level and ethical behavior, such as research reporting that a higher education level leads to more ethical behavior (Kum-Lung and Teck-Chai 2010) or is related to higher ethical attitudes in a study on giving and accepting gifts and favors for personal gain (Perryer and Tsahuridu 2013). In contrast, however, as other research has failed to predict unethical behavior from education level (e.g., Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015) and has pointed to the contradictory or even negative relationship between education level and ethical judgments (Pan and Sparks 2012), future research might address the effectiveness of an information + discussion intervention on the probability of engaging in unethical behavior in higher education students as compared to secondary education students.

7 | Insights and Implications

As compared to other studies, the following contributions of this research can be highlighted. First, we focused on secondary education students rather than on university students, who have often been the focus of studies on unethical behavior; second, we addressed four types of unethical behaviors instead of relying solely on academic cheating; third, we described an ethical intervention which can be applied in a short session; and fourth, we pointed to the differential effects of the intervention on students with a lower versus higher probability of engaging in unethical behavior.

Regarding social validity, we adhered to various of the research values outlined by Fawcett (1991), including the value for collaborative relationships, as well as values for research goals and methodology. On the one hand, a dynamic group intervention was selected to motivate the students, and some of the situations or problems with which they are confronted frequently were chosen. We also formed collaborative relationships with the participants to validate specific aspects of the research. After designing the evaluation and procedure, a preliminary test was run with first-year university students and small adjustments (e.g., asking participants to return to the middle of the classroom between scenarios) were incorporated thereafter. Further, the satisfaction with the activity was assessed by asking the students about the positive aspects brought about by performing the activity. On the other hand, the research findings were also conveyed to the head of the school to provide information on the effects of the intervention and therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the problem, as well as future actions.

Importantly, developing ethical competences is not only relevant in the academic domain, but also in a wide range of other domains over an entire lifetime. Recent research has pointed to the relationship between tolerance for academic cheating and unethical corporate behavior (Brodowsky et al. 2020) and to the link between students' cheating behavior in college and their attitude toward unethical behavior in business (Lawson 2004), with male business students who engaged in dishonest acts being more likely to act in the same way in the workplace (Nonis and Swift 2001). In this regard, as noted with regard to engineering students, instead of merely providing technical knowledge, the transmission of professional ethics is also of paramount importance (Bairaktarova and Woodcock 2017) and helps professionals act according to professional codes of ethics and to understand and consider how their own work impacts the world (Finelli et al. 2012).

Finally, the social importance of the intervention deserves mention. Unethical behavior can extend to multiple domains, causing ethical problems to arise in accounting (Poje and Zaman Groff 2022), healthcare (Gallagher et al. 2021), as well as medical (Firn et al. 2020; Shrestha et al. 2021; Vig and Merel 2019; also in students: Kong and Knight 2017) and nursing environments (Erdil and Korkmaz 2009) and social work (Strom-Gottfried 1999). Indeed, unethical behavior has been observed at all business levels and was reported to be increasing at the beginning of the century (Fassin 2005), motivating authors such as Felton and Sims (2005) to demand that, rather than an option, teaching business ethics be a requirement. We would generalize this requirement from business ethics to any academic realm and educational level. This research provides a necessary step in this direction by addressing the effectiveness of an intervention in ethical behavior in secondary education.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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