



# The Development of the Intercultural Competence in Young Learners in an Elementary School in Miami

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### Abstract

*In 1951, Jean Piaget and Anne Marie Weil analyzed the way in which children perceived foreigners in their article, “The Development in Children of the Idea of Homeland and of Relations with other Countries”. They concluded that only at the age of 11 or 12, did they reach the affective and cognitive development to understand and relate to people from other countries. The results of my work go beyond these studies, unlike what happens in a multilingual society, such as Switzerland where Piaget and Weil’ research is contextualized. Children in a multicultural society like Miami, Florida, develop the cognitive and affective aspects to relate to others at an earlier age. I applied two methodologies to this study. The first method is a questionnaire divided into three parts: 1) the development of the concept of homeland in children, 2) their reaction towards countries other than their own, and 3) the cognitive and affective understanding of others. The second method consisted of didactic lessons designed to foster and enhance students’ intercultural competence and their acquisition of a foreign language.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When Jean Piaget and Anne Marie Weil interviewed 200 Swiss children in 1951 to analyze how children perceive foreigners, they reached the conclusion that only at the age of 12 years old did children acquire the affective and cognitive development, necessary to understand and build relationships with people from other cultures and countries. Furthermore, they examined the way in which the cognitive and affective aspects of children developed concerning the concept of homeland. The research centered on the psychological implications that children go through in childhood to gain awareness of their country.

For their research, Piaget and Weil divided the sample of 200 children into three groups and separated the phases of the investigation into three sections. The first section included children from ages four to seven years; in the second group, from seven to eleven years old; and the third section consisted of pre-teen and teenagers (eleven to fifteen years of age). According to Piaget and Weil, children go through three periods of development: the “self-centered” period where their statements and opinions are arbitrary and based on momentary preferences; the “sociocentric” period in which children express ideas they hear in the environment where they live; and finally, the period of “reciprocity,” where children become aware of the opinions others have of them and at the same time, they realize that they can be seen as

“foreigners” (Byram, Morgan et al. 16). The conclusion Piaget and Weil reached at the end of their research was that:

The child’s discovery of his homeland and understanding of other countries is a process of transition from egocentricity to reciprocity. This gradual development is liable to constant setbacks, usually through the emergence of egocentricity on a broader or sociocentric plane, at each new stage in this development, or as each new conflict arises. (Piaget and Weil. 578)

I do not deny nor contradict these findings, but the results of my work go further. In contrast to the multilingual society contextualized in Piaget and Weil’s research, children who grow up in a multicultural society similar to Miami, they develop the cognitive and affective aspects that allows them to relate to “others” at an earlier age and therefore, are more inclined and ready to be interculturally competent at a younger age. Furthermore, if they have parents who belong to different cultures and also speak different languages, they will be more precocious in relating to foreign people with openness and communicativeness.

The analysis of the cognitive and affective aspects combines two methodologies to examine the extent to which the 16 children in the 4th grade in the Italian Program at Georges Washington Carver Elementary School, in Coral Gables, Florida, possess intercultural competence. As part of the International Studies curriculum for magnet schools specializing in foreign languages, the students are taught the Italian language, culture and geography.

The first method I have used is the same questionnaire that Jean Piaget used in the 1951 investigation an investigation with a group of 200 Swiss children to determine if they were loyal to their country. In my research, I aimed to determine: a) the development of the idea of homeland, b) their reaction towards countries other than their own, and c) the cognitive and affective understanding of others. The second method consists of didactic lessons planned to foster and enhance the students’ intercultural competence as well as to augment their acquisition and comprehension of the Italian language.

During the preparation of the three questionnaires, I decided to add an additional question to the first part of the research inquiring about the nationality of the students’ parents with the purpose to understand the socio-cultural models to which my young learners are exposed growing up. This question did not intend to stereotype their families, but rather to identify sociotypes and to gain a better perspective of the students’ cultural background. The learners were given thirty minutes to respond to the questionnaires during three different lessons.

In the first section, I analyzed the students’ cognitive and affective development on the idea of homeland. The cognitive aspect measured the presence or the absence of the learner’s knowledge regarding the difference between city, country, and nation. Furthermore, it examined whether the students would be able to establish a relationship between the country (The United States) as the whole, the state (Florida) as a part, and the city (Miami) as the part of the state. The affective aspect measured on the one hand, if the learners have a preference for a particular country and the motivations for their choice. The second section gathered students’ reactions to their country and to foreign countries; and the third section records the evolution of the intellectual and affective aspects that would allow the students to possess the ability to understand others.

The first section: The cognitive and affective idea of the development of the idea of homeland

These questions are the same questions Piaget and Weil used in their research in 1951, the students' responses provided the information of the learners' affective and cognitive development. The names of the 16 students have been omitted for privacy reasons. They are identified by number (see table 1) and also by the pronouns "he" or "she". In addition, the table 1 identifies each student based on age, nationality, and parents' nationality.

Table 1. The student's information

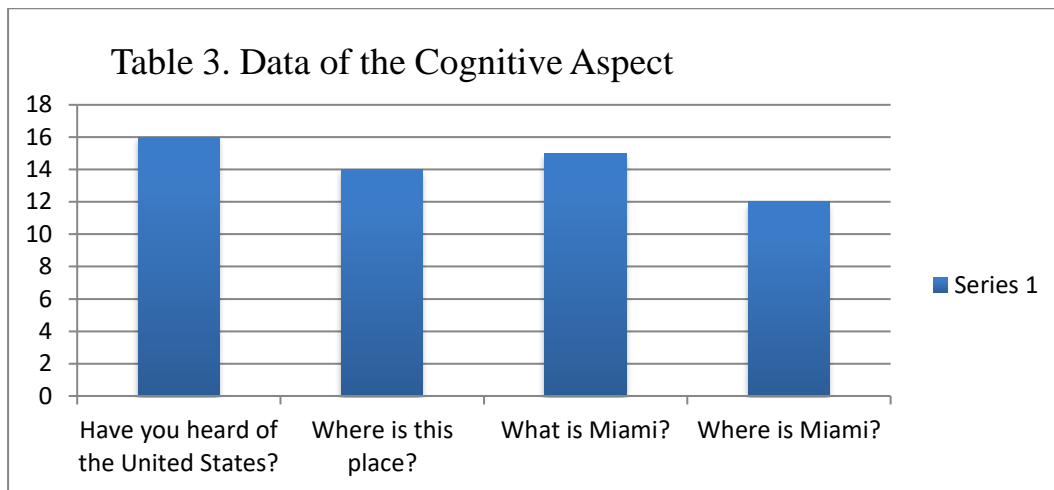
<b><i>Students' age</i></b>	<b><i>Student's nationality</i></b>	<b><i>Father's nationality</i></b>	<b><i>Mother's nationality</i></b>	<b><i>Language spoken at home</i></b>
Student 1-----9 years	American (United States)	Nicaraguan	Nicaraguan	Spanish/English
Student 2-----9 years	American (United States)	N/A	American	English
Student 3-----9 years	American (United States)	American (Nicaraguan descendant)	American (Nicaraguan descendant)	English
Student 4-----9 years	American (United States)	Argentinian	Argentinian	Spanish
Student 5-----9 years	American (United States)	Puerto Rican	Honduran	English
Student 6-----9 years	American (United States)	Cuban	Italian	Italian
Student 7-----9 years	American (United States)	American	Italian	English
Student 8-----10 years	American (United States)	Argentinian	Cuban	Spanish
Student 9-----9 years	American (United States)	Greek	Venezuelan	Spanish/English
Student 10----9 years	American (United States)	Italian	American	English/Italian
Student 11---10 years	Venezuelan	Venezuelan	Venezuelan	Spanish
Student 12---10 years	Swiss	Swiss	American	English
Student 13---8 years	Italian	Italian	Italian	Italian
Student 14---9 years	Italian	Cuban	Italian	Italian
Student 15---9 years	Italian	Italian	Cuban	Italian/Spanish
Student 16---9 years	Italian	Italian	Cuban	Italian

2.

The following, (see tables 2 and 3) analyzes the students’ cognitive aspect about the place they live in, the city, the state, and the country, and to the extent they are able to show how these parts are related to the whole. While Piaget and Weil interviewed their interviewees about the spatial relationship between Switzerland and Geneva, since they were in Switzerland, I decided to question the students’ knowledge on spatial relationship between Miami, Florida, and The United States to contextualize my research.

Table 2. Cognitive aspect

<i>Students</i>	<i>Have you Heard of the United States?</i>	<i>Where is this place?</i>	<i>It is near or far from here?</i>	<i>What is Miami?</i>	<i>Where is Miami?</i>
Student 1	Yes	United States	Near	Miami is a city	Miami is in Florida
Student 2	Yes	Is in the middle of Canada and North America	Near	A city in America	In Florida
Student 3	Yes	In America	Near	A city	In Florida
Student 4	Yes	America	Near	City	Florida
Student 5	Yes	In the U.S.A	Near	A city	In Florida
Student 6	Yes	In the North America Continent	Near	A city	In U.S.A.
Student 7	Yes <i>Sì</i>	U.S.A	Near/ Vicino (Italian)	City (città)	U.S.A.
Student 8	Yes	America	Near	City	Florida
Student 9	Yes	U.S.A.	Near	A city	In Florida
Student 10	Yes	U.S.A.	Near	A state	In the U.S.A.
Student 11	Yes	In the United States	No, because we are inside of it.	A city	In Florida
Student 12	Yes	In the West	Near	A city	In America
Student 13	Yes <i>Si</i>	This place is in America <i>Questo posto è in America</i>	Is here <i>È quà</i>	Miami is a city <i>Miami è una città</i>	Miami is in Florida <i>Miami è in Florida</i>
Student 14	Yes	In America	Long way	A city	In Florida
Student 15	Yes	West	Near	A city	In U.S, FL.
Student 16	Yes, I have	In the United states	Yes, is kinda far	A country with beaches	in Florida



Based on the data, all students responded in affirmative to the question “Have you heard of the United States? However, when answering the question “Where is this place?”, 14 responded in America or provided a similar response. Meanwhile, 2 students (12 and 15) answered “West”. ¿West in relation to which country? I argue that because of the fact that they are from Switzerland and Italy respectively, they considered the United States west to Europe.

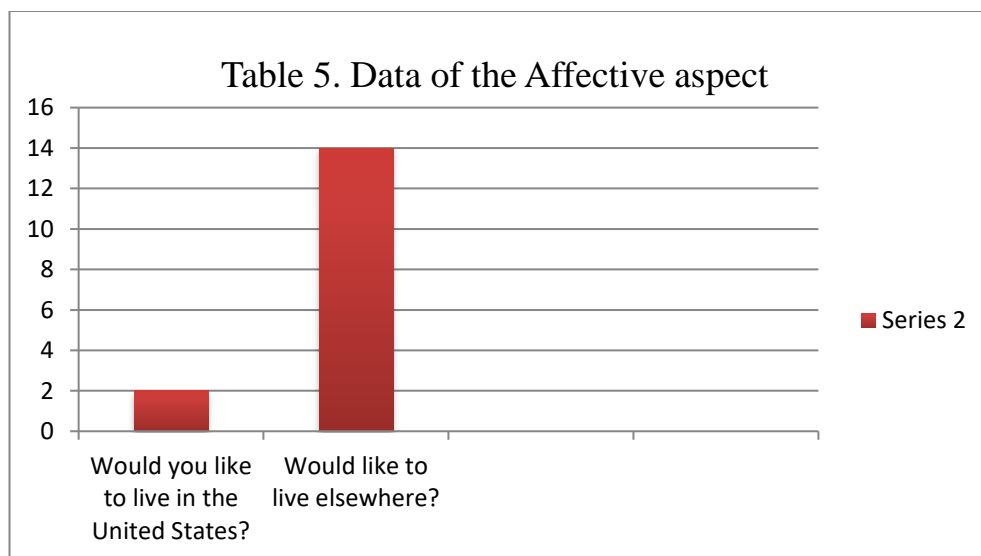
Regarding the responses to the question “What is Miami?”, only one student stated that “Miami is a country with beaches”, and the other students were able to answer that Miami is a city. Interestingly, this one student was born in Italy and moved to Miami some years ago. Can her answer be related to the way people beautify themselves?. In Italy fashion differs between littoral cities and urban cities. The competence regarding the mastering of the rules referring to clothing and fashion in the Italian littoral cities is very similar to the way people dress up in Miami meaning they are very informal, they often wear sandals, and seldom are sophisticated or fashionable dressed as it occurs in the Italian urban cities. So, this lead me to assume this student’s consideration that “Miami is a country with beaches” can inform us that she does not yet possess the cognition for differentiating a part from its whole, and on the other hand, that she has transferred her prior knowledge acquired in Italy about littoral and urban cities outfits to the new reality in Miami. In addition, 4 students did not know that Miami is located in Florida. It was evident they were not able to grasp yet the geographical relationship that exists between a city, a state and a nation.

What affection my pupils exhibit toward their country? Following, in table 4, there is a transcription of their responses related to this subject. Of course, as noted by Piaget and Weil (1951), “the child’s emotions cannot be analysed in the course of a simple question of the kind used for ascertaining his logical makeup. Nevertheless, though no absolute significance can be ascribed to the actual content of his value judgments, and although, in particular, the importance of affection reactions he cannot put into words must not overlooked, it is still possible to draw some conclusion as to both the type of motivation and the real but unexpressed motives”. (565)

Table 4. Affective aspect

<i>Students</i>	<i>What country do you like? Why?</i>
Student 1	United States, because I love it here.

Student 2	Canada, because of the mountains and history.
Student 3	USA, because its where I live and like it here.
Student 4	Jamaica. I like Jamaica because I like the beaches, I like the forest, and I like the hoitels
Student 5	I like China, because I love I can dress up for cosplay.
Student 6	I like Italy, because most of my family lives the and it is a beautiful place
Student 7	<i>Italia, perchè è molto bella e mi piacciono le montagne.</i> Italy because is very beautiful and I like its mountains.
Student 8	I like the U.K. People are very nice and very civilized.
Student 9	I like Italy because my family lives there.
Student 10	Tokio. I like Tokio because it is sooo cute, I have never been.
Student 11	I like Italy, because there are taxis with boats.
Student 12	I like Switzerland because I am Swiss.
Student 13	<i>Mi piace la Francia perchè c'è la Torre Eiffel.</i> I like France because there is the Eiffel Tower.
Student 14	Rome, because its in Italy and I like every country in Italy,
Student 15	I like France because of the food and the Eiffel Tower.
Student 16	England, because there is a queen, they drink tea, and its really cold most of the time.



The results show that only three students (1, 3, 12) demonstrated loyalty to their homeland. By comparing my students' responses to those provided by the same age group in Piaget and Weil's study (7 to 11 years old), I realized that 81.25 % of my students did not express affection toward their homeland, while Piaget's children did demonstrate loyalty to their country. From my perspective, this reaction is related to the multicultural environment where my students are exposed to, the stimuli they are exposed to on a daily basis with other children, teachers, and adults of diverse cultures and with the contradistinct attitudes in their neighborhoods, at shopping centers, in community activities, but especially at schools, where they are part of a disparate, colorful, ethnical, and racial student body.

Most of my students who conveyed a preference for countries different from their own, two students (6, 9) expressed their preference for Italy, since many of their family members still live there. So, expressed in percentage, 31.25 % of my pupils appear to enunciate affective preferences

based on “family loyalties and traditions” which “predominate over purely personal motives” (Piaget and Weil 566). But the results of the motives of the 11 students who expressed liking countries different than their own homeland are much more interesting, considering that for them there is not an established *terra patria*, a land to be devoted to, and they are decentered from an egocentric attitude which characterizes children of their age.

The students the 8 to 10 years old– provided responses similar to those given by the older children Piaget interviewed, 11 to 15 years old. Therefore, it could be argued that my students manifest an earlier awareness in comparison with the Piaget’s same age group. Piaget’s study considers that the child in the age group 11 to 15 years old “go beyond their personal feelings and the motives of family loyalty, he is finally realizing that there exists a wider community with its own values distinct from those of the ego, the family, the town and visible or concrete realities.” (567) Perhaps my students have exhibited a deeper understanding of other people ethics, and moral values and have manifested receptiveness for diverse lands because of the paradigmatic multiculturalism which characterizes the city of Miami. It could be argued that, as the result of the opportunity many of them have experienced in a bicultural family environment, they have become very open to the diversity and therefore are interculturally competent.

The concepts embodied in intercultural competence include knowledge, attitudes, behaviours, and (critical cultural) awareness—the ability to evaluate, critically based on explicit criteria, perspectives, practices and products in one’s own and other cultures and countries. As such, the learner performs the role of intercultural mediator/speaker, someone who is aware of differences and similarities, is sensitive towards others and the culture in which they reside, and has an awareness of his/her own (cultural) positioning, and as a result of this awareness, takes action (Holmes 2014).

**Section 2. Reaction of children towards countries other than their own intellectual aspect and students’s responses**

The purpose of the second questionnaire was to determine the feelings my stundetns have about other countries or people of other countries in order to appreciate to what extent they could be considered interculturally competent at their young age.

Table 6. Intellectual aspect. Reaction toward other countries.

<i>Students</i>	<i>Do you know any foreign country or countries besides the U.S.A?</i>	<i>Where are these countries ?</i>	<i>What are its capital?</i>	<i>Have you heard of any people who are not American?</i>	<i>Are there any differences between the countries?</i>	<i>Are there any differences between the countries you know and the different people living there?</i>	<i>Can you provide an example?</i>
student 1	Yes.	Nicaragua	Managua	Yes	Yes	Yes	My family
student 2	Yes	Europe, Middle East	Jerusalem and Belgium	Yes	Yes	Yes	They don’t allow air conditionin

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student 3	Yes.	Italy	Rome	Yes	They speak a different language	Yes	In Italy they speak Italian and in USA they speak and read English.
student 4	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	In Argentina they speak Spanish and not English or Italian
student 5	Yes	Italy	Rome	Yes	Yes	Yes	The language
student 6	I know Italy	This country is in Europe	The capital is Rome	Yes	Yes	Yes	Italy has a different language
student 7	Yes	Europe	Rome	Yes	Yes	Yes	Their culture
student 8	Yes	In Cuba	Havana	Yes	Yes	Yes	In Cuba they speak only Spanish but here they speak English
student 9	Yes. China	Asia	Shanghai	Yes	Yes	Yes	China and America they talk different languages.
student 10	She was absent	She was absent	She was absent	She was absent	She was absent	She was absent	She was absent
student 11	German	In the world	Belgium	Yes, my cousins	Yes, they are Spanish	Yes	The United States speak English and Spain speaks Spanish.
student 12	Switzerland	In Europe	Bern	Yes	Yes	Yes	North Korea does not have rights.
student 13	Yes	In Europe	Paris	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know
student 14	Yes	Lombardia	Milano	Yes	Yes	Yes	Italy is in Europe and the United



							States are in America
student 15	Yes	Europe	Paris	Yes	Yes	Yes	They way they dress
student 16	Yes, I do know one, Jamaica	Somewhere in the world.	I do not know. I only know USA's capital is Washington	Yes, I have been heard about me	Yes, of course	A lot.	Italy is different from Cuba because they eat different and different people live there.

Analyzing the learner's responses, there were no indications of generalized attitudes that could hide negative or subjective judgments, nor prejudices towards other countries and cultures due to feelings of nationalism or patriotism. Only an Italian learner, student 16, mentioned that in Cuba there are "different people." This statement could be referred to the fact that in Cuba there are people with white skin, like in Italy, but also with black skin. But on the one hand, her answer could be related to other distinctiveness she did not refer to. The Swiss student, (student 12) referring to the diversities between countries, wrote that "in North Korea there are no rights." This statement might convey the fact that he watches the news with his mother (as he has often stated in class), has some cognizance about international politics, has some knowledge of complicated and abstract vocabulary, and has a high cognitive development for his age, demonstrating an intellectual and affective progress which seems to show independence in the formation of logical judgements.

In contrast, the only student in the class with both Italian parents and the youngest of the class (8 years old) was unable to list any differences between the USA and Italy. I am not sure if this lack of ability to compare the two countries is due to the fact that she and her family moved from Italy recently and she needs time to understand the new reality, the new culture, and the new language or she is too young to establish a comparison between the two antithetic nations. While other students had mentioned their preferences for countries different than their own, they nevertheless had not been able to locate these countries geographically. Rather, they responded that these countries mentioned are located "somewhere in the world" which highlights little notion about geography.

One meaningful outcome of the reaction my students demonstrated toward other countries was the perception that between countries there are existing dissimilarities since many of them have personally experienced these contrasts. Intercultural encounters take place when two or more people interact in situations where they perceive each other to have different cultural backgrounds or come from different horizons—they are from different countries, regions, religions, ethnicities—, and when these differences are salient affect the nature of the interaction (Barrett et al., 2013 in Holmes, 80).

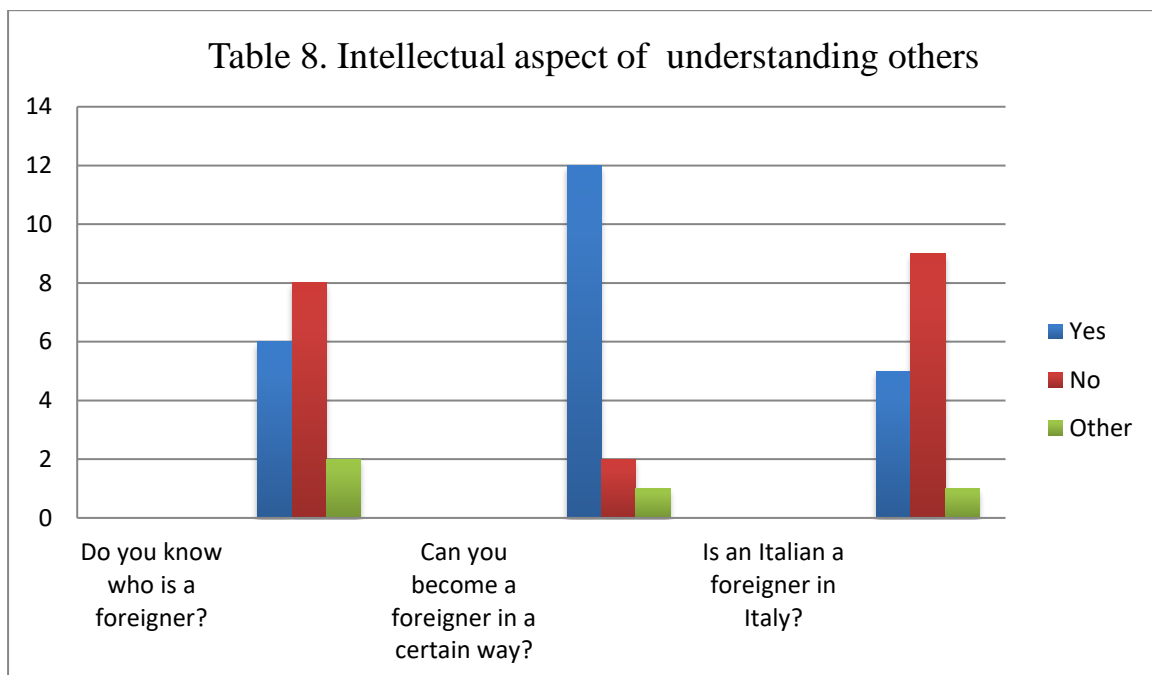
### **Section 3. Cognitive and Affective Understanding of Others Intellectual Aspect and Affective Motivation**

In this section of the research I have investigated both my students' intellectual aspect and the affective motivation of the knowledge and understanding of others. First, I wanted to know whether or not my students had any knowledge of the term "foreigner" and if they were capable to perceive how this vocable has a relative denotation. Following, I analyzed the affective motivation of my pupils in choosing a nationality if they were born without one and would have the opportunity to chose the country of their choice. Following, in table 7, there is a transcription of my students responses related to the understanding the word foreigner, and table 8 collects the data of the intellectual aspect of understanding others.

Table 7. The intellectual aspect in understanding others

<i>Students</i>	<i>Do you know who is a foreigner?</i>	<i>What nationality have you?</i>	<i>Are you a foreigner?</i>	<i>Do you know any foreigners? Who, for instance?</i>	<i>Imagine you are travelling in Italy. Could you also become a foreigner in certain ways?</i>	<i>Could an Italian be a foreigner?</i>	<i>Is an Italian a foreigner in Italy?</i>
student 1	Yes	U.S.A	No	Yes, Jack and Lena *His classmates	Yes	Yes	No
student 2	Absent						
student 3	No	American	Probably	No	Maybe	Yes	Yes
student 4	No	Argentinian	No	Yes, my grandma, grandpa, cousins, and my uncles and aunts	Yes	Yes	No
student 5	No	Florida	I do not know	I do not think so	Yes	Yes	Yes
student 6	Yes	Italiana	Si	Mom and dad	Yes	Yes	Yes
student 7	Yes	America	No	Yes, my mom	Yes	Yes	No
student 8	No	CubanAmerican	No	No	Yes	No	No
student 9	Yes	American	No	Yes, some of my friends	No	Yes	No
student 10	No	American /Italian	No answer	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

student 11	Canada	Venezuelan	No answer	My friend who comes from Spain	Yes	Yes	No
student 12	No	Swiss	No	Yes, Mrs. Ordonez. (*Its' me)	Yes	Yes	Yes
student 13	Yes	Italian	Yes	My friends	No	Yes	No
student 14	Are foreign countries	Italian	Yes	Yes	Yes, when I do not know something	Yes	No
student 15	Yes	Italian	Yes	Mom and dad	Yes	Yes	No
student 16	I do not know	Italian	I do not think so	Yeah, but I am already not a stranger	Yes	Yes	Could be



According to the replies quoted above, the students’ responses depict that only 6 of them know the meaning of the word “foreigner”, which represents 40% of the class. I intentionally did not activate their prior knowledge with the intent to obtain an outcome that truly represented the students’ actual understanding of what it means to be a foreign person. Eventually, I planned a lesson plan named “Am I a foreigner” so they could deepen their knowledge about the concept of being a foreigner and most importantly, they could identify themselves as foreigners. But on the

other hand, Piaget and Weil decided to provide the children they interviewed with the meaning of the word foreigner in order to facilitate their awareness about the vocable. Regarding the responses to the question “Imagine you are travelling in Italy. Could you also become a foreigner in certain ways”?, 80% of the class responded positively. This response is not coherent with the previous response when only 6 students stated to knowing the meaning of the word foreigner. Thus, this contradiction might raise doubt if by any chance, the students had simply guessed. In any case, it might be argued that perhaps the word “foreigner” could have represented a mere verbal misunderstanding for my students. It is not mere chance, then, if relative concepts become absolute in their minds: this is due to the lack of any power of construct logical relationships or to attain reciprocity in practice. However, from this data, can it be affirmed if my students possess intercultural competence or not? To this purpose, I am providing my students’ responses in the following table:

Table 9. Affective motivation

<i>Students</i>	<i>If you were born without any nationality and you were allowed to choose what nationality you liked, which would you choose?</i>	<i>Why?</i>	<i>If I were to give a child from Peru a free choice of nationality, what do you think the would choose?</i>	<i>Why?</i>
student 1	American	Because I love U.S.A	American	Because he or she would have a better chance for life
student 2	absent			
student 3	Italian	No answer	Italian	No answer
student 4	Argentinian	Because my granda, grandma, cousins, <i>tíos</i> y <i>tías</i> live there	Perú	Because maybe he likes Perú and he is already there so yah.
student 5	French	Because I love Paris	Perú	Because that is where he comes from
student 6	Italian	Because most of my family is there	Spain	Because it is nice and they also speak Spanish
student 7	Italian	Because I like Italy	United States	Because it is a nice place
student 8	Argentinian	My dad was born there and my cousins	Cuban	He wants to explore something new
student 9	Greek	Because I like Greece	Peruvian	Because is from that country
student 10	Argentinian	no answer	China	No answer
student 11	Portuguese	Because is a rare language	Spanish	Because is a rare country

student 12	Swiss	Because I am Swiss	Perú	Because he is from Perú
student 13	British	Because my mom has been in England and says that it is beautiful	Russian	I do not know
student 14	Italian	Because I like it	Mexican	Because Mexico is close to Perú
student 15	French	Because I love France	Peruvian	Because he is from Perú
student 16	British	It has good tea and cookies	Peruvian	I do not know. I guess its a chance

Of the 16 students interviewed, 15 responded to the questionnaire. When they were asked which nationality they would choose if they were born without one, three students (students 1, 12, 14) chose their own country, and this result represents 20 % of the interviewees, thus demonstrating their nationalistic feelings. Eighty percent did choose a different nationality from their own. Perhaps because as stated by M.J. Bennett, they “have gained more ability to create an alternative experience that more or less matches that of people of another culture. And people who can do this have an intercultural worldview” (75). My students’ meager feelings of patriotism and nationalism toward their homeland does not suggest they do not love their country. It could be argued they prefer other countries because they are growing up in a city where they meet people of other cultures and nationalities, they experience the charm of being in a city where the whole world converges, where all the main languages are spoken, and therefore they dream of having a different nationality.

Responding to the question about which nationality a Peruvian boy would choose if he did not have one at birth, 60 % of the students stated he would like to choose a country different from Peru. On the other hand, 40% (students 4, 5, 9, 12, 15, 16) answered the boy from Peru would choose to be a Peruvian if he could have the free choice of nationality. These results could be interpreted distinctively and from diverse points of view. Nevertheless, it could be deduced that my learners considered that a Peruvian boy would choose to be Peruvian, on the fact that he belongs to a family composed by Peruvian people and not a bicultural family. Therefore, he would be happier within the limits of his own culture and surrounded by his traditions and customs. Maybe these students considered that “individuals who received largely monocultural socialization normally have access only to their own cultural worldview, so they are unable to experience the difference between their own perception and that of people who are culturally different” (Bennett 74). I would conclude since all of my students go from the mother’s culture to the father’s culture to the American culture, they feel more prepared to live in a different country compared to a Peruvian monocultural boy, thus, they consider themselves (without knowing the word) to have an ethnorelative worldview toward others and not an ethnocentric point of view focused only on their own culture and ethnicity.

My students have not demonstrated negative sentiments toward foreign people and neither rejection of the cultural differences. According to their responses, it can be argued that they have shown to be prepared to become the best version of what it means to be interculturally competent. They “perform the role of intercultural mediator/speaker, someone who is aware of differences and similarities, is sensitive toward others and the culture in which they reside, and is also aware of his/her own (cultural) positioning, and as a result of this, takes action” (Holmes 76).

Claire Kramersch considers that "in this era of emigration, diaspora and internet connections, identification and the ways of belonging have become more important than the unchanging identities linked to fixed places in the map" (2009, 15). My students are multicultural subjects and some of them study the Italian language for the desire to "rediscover" the linguistic and cultural baggage of their ancestors. Others study the Italian culture to have a direct experience about this interesting and ancient country, whereas others were registered in the program because of their parents decision. Whichever reason they might have, all of them have exhibited "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self (Byram 1997, 34), despite their young age. What is more, my students do not claim to know their culture and foreign culture perfectly, but "they were aware of the fact that they are transforming and training themselves" (Roberts et al, 2004, p.30). This is evident on the fact that the idea they have of their homeland was not characterized by emotional or affective motivations which might cause them to prefer their native country to nations they have never lived in or visited, but their preferences transcends the epitome of the nationalist model, and transcends the pronoun "I" for embracing the pronoun "We" considering themselves to be part of the whole Earth and not to a fraction of it.

### **3. Second Methodology. The Didactic Lessons**

The second method of my investigation consisted of didactic lessons planned to first observe my students dealing with intercultural situations, decentering from themselves and understanding the "others", and second, fostering and enhancing their intercultural competence.

The development of intercultural competence involves the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from other cultures and implies "knowledge of others, knowledge of oneself; ability to interpret and understand; ability to discover and to interact, to evaluate other ways of evaluation, other conceptions and behaviors; and relativising oneself, and the linguistic competence plays a fundamental role" (Michael Byram in Deardorff, 2006, p. 247). It is also the general ability to transcend ethnocentrism, to appreciate other cultures and to develop adequate behavior in one or more different cultures (Zafar et al, 2013, p. 566).

During the academic year 2016/2017, my fourth grade students had the occasion to be exposed to intercultural education, intercultural competence and intercultural dialogue during the Italian lessons I taught. The activities developed throughout the school year had as a main objective the understanding and knowledge not only of the Italian culture, traditions, and history, but also appreciation of the multiple diversities they interact with on a daily basis at school, in the neighborhood, and in the community areas of Miami.

### **4. Second methodology. Lessons proposed from the intercultural point of view**

Following, are some of the activities I have taught my students in order to enhance their intercultural competence. At the beginning, the lessons were centered on Italian culture, and then, intercultural dialogue was established with my students' cultures and with the United States.

In the first activity, the students watched four videos from Cuba, Uruguay, India, and an unspecified African country, showing children play the the Hopscotch and the differences in its rules and origins.

The second activity aimed to analyze what it means to be an immigrant, its consequences, its advantages but also the sorrows it can bring. Students observed how African immigrants are welcomed in Italy, and then they could compare the same situation with the way foreign people

are accepted in some parts of the United States. Afterwards, those students who are also immigrants could express their experience in Miami, and the reasons why their family immigrated in the States.

The third activity was dedicated to learning about Easter, one of the most important Italian traditions. My students had the possibility to gain knowledge about the history behind the Catholic Easter and its relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, they learned about the Hebrew Passover and its origin thanks to a Jewish student who lectured them about this important tradition of the Jewish community. Subsequently, the students could share their traditions and celebrations based on their religion beliefs.

The last activity focused on the traditional Italian Sunday lunch, its recipes, the sequence of how the different courses are consumed on this day. Students had the opportunity to share their traditions and reflected on the importance of respecting every culture even though different from their own.

### **Activity**

The title of this activity was “Playing Hopscotch” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?unRDngNywX0>) where children are playing Hopscotch. It is aimed to activate my students’ schema, their emotions related to this game, and the first years of their childhood. A class discussion followed about the game. Some students admitted that they have never played Hopscotch, while others remembered playing it in their homeland. After the discussion, students watched the video two more times but with the audio on. Students discussed the rules of the game, about the fact that it seemed a very fun game, and how free they used to feel while playing it.

Afterwards, we read a passage about the story of the game and its rules. To understand the passage the students worked on activities of the type true/ false questions to have a better idea about the game. I provided feedback to their responses and afterwards, we went to the playground where the Hopscotch pattern was drawn on the sidewalk. Every student grabbed a small stone and what followed was a pure moment of joy and merriment until one of them won the game.

Once in the classroom, the intercultural activities began. I projected four videos of children in different countries (India <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk0z6MeCV0I> , Uruguay <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDiUjo2alA>, an unidentified African country <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a6C5rvS56A> , and Cuba [https://youtu.be/hGg\\_4OMcguY](https://youtu.be/hGg_4OMcguY)) who were playing Hopscotch. The rules were more or less similar, but every country put a different spin. For example, the African children played the game as if they were dancing but shoeless. The main impression my students observed was the fun the children were having. Interestingly, the African children did not use a Stone or have a Hopscotch pattern drawn on the sidewalk. They only jumped from one place to another.

The learners were encouraged to decenter from their world and from their conceptions in order to be sensitive to the cultural differences. They were asked to find similarities and differences of the four games they watched. They were also asked to respect the particularity of every culture represented in the four videos. An intercultural 30 minutes debate followed.

### **Activity**

“Am I too an immigrant ?” is the name of the second activity and took two hours to complete. This lesson is based on the children’s book *La zattera* (The Raft) written by Lucia Salemi. The author discusses immigration and foreigners through five little refugees traveling on a raft, in the middle of the sea. They hold on to their hopes for a brighter future. To activate my students prior knowledge, I projected on the electronic whiteboard three images: in one image there were Italian immigrants who arrived on the coasts of the Americas at the beginning of the twentieth century. Another image portrays African immigrants arriving on the Italian coasts in a boat, and the third image depicts Cuban immigrants arriving on the coasts of the United States. I asked my learners who they believed were these people, and even though the word “immigrant” came out only once, they understood that these people were arriving in another country looking for a better life.

I explained to the whole class the meaning of the word immigrant and reminded them about the meaning of the word “foreigner” from the questionnaires they had completed, and after this introduction, I questioned them about the things they brought to the United States when they abandoned their countries. While answering these questions, I wrote their responses on the board. Their responses of “socks, shoes, clothes, books, hair scrunchies” were very practical. After this part was completed, there was a class discussion. I asked the students what did they leave behind in their homelands. Many of them stated they have left “cousins, grandparents, friends, aunts and uncles” and what followed was a general melancholy and a number of pupils shed tears.

The next task consisted of watching the video “La zattera” <https://youtu.be/T-8RmiftfD4>, after which we read the book. Students completed two types of activities: cloze and true/false for the comprehension of the passage.

Subsequently, a group discussion activity was developed by dividing the class in heterogeneous groups of 4 students according to their nationality. Students who arrived to the United States from other countries had to talk about the dreams they had when they knew they would come to the United States. They were asked to talk about the fears they felt upon encountering a new reality. Student 11 had just arrived in Miami three months ago from Venezuela, literally escaping the country’s dictatorial government and from the harsh economic and social situations in which many of his compatriots were forced to live. This student was crying while talking about the reasons his family had to bring him to another country in search of a safer environment and a better life. Student 15 whose parents belong to different cultures– her mother is Cuban and her father is Italian– was also crying for all of the marvelous things and the people she had left in Italy. She also talked about the years she lived in Spain and how difficult it was for her as a biracial young girl, to achieve her dream to work in a television series only because she was not white. Consequently, her parents decided to move to America for her to pursue her dreams.

The American students were also very active during the discussion by showing a deep compassion for the stories their immigrant classmates were narrating. What is more, they recognized the fact that their ancestors were also immigrants. I dedicated 35 minutes to this task, and while students were in discussion, I moderated the groups to make sure that the activity had a positive impact on the whole class. Based on my observations of the group activity, it was one of the deepest moments of intercultural awareness of my pupils.

For the last activity, students watched two videos about two contradictory ways two countries reacted toward immigrants. The first video was about a protest held in California in 2014 in which



a California town blocks immigration buses <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/02/us/california-immigrant-transfers/index.html>

and the other was about how 1123 African immigrants were accepted and welcomed by the Italian Navy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ql76LhtmgJU> in a town called Augusta. A class discussion was held about the two reactions and the activity aimed to arouse in my students the awareness of cultural differences and the respect for other people's lives and decisions. After the discussion, students were provided a Venn diagram where they were asked to write the differences and similarities in the reactions way Italy and The United States toward a group of immigrants who had just arrived on their coasts.

### **Activity**

The theme for activity 3 was "Celebrating Easter" and the lesson lasted three hours. The first task was watching a few minutes of a cartoon about Easter <https://youtu.be/qhdT0jr9syE> with the audio off for activating students' prior knowledge. A class discussion followed about Easter and whether or not my students celebrated it, and if so, how did they celebrate it and what did it mean for them and their families.

Next, we watched the complete cartoon about the Catholic Church's Easter celebration <https://youtu.be/qhdT0jr9syE>. Then, we watched a video about the Hebrew Passover [https://youtu.be/029\\_uuKYBI](https://youtu.be/029_uuKYBI). A cloze test and true/ false activities followed to facilitate the understanding of both celebrations.

For the intercultural discussion the class was divided into four heterogeneous groups based on the students' beliefs. Its purpose was for the students to share their traditions, if any, in relation to the celebration of Easter/ Passover. The Italian and Christian students each discussed their gastronomic and family traditions when celebrating either Easter or Passover. Through this sharing, they realized how differently they celebrate this holiday.

Agnostic and atheist pupils were very open to the new knowledge they were acquiring. They had had no idea about Jesus Christ, the Crucifixion, or the Resurrection. Through this activity, they learned something new. The only student who is Orthodox explained that according to his tradition, people in Greece paint eggs with different colors and gift them.

The last task in the lecture, by the only Jewish student in the class, was about Hebrew Passover. He supported his lesson with pictures from his first Passover and explained the meaning of this major Jewish holiday in the Hebrew community. He explained that the Jewish Passover is related to the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. In addition, he explained the meaning of the Passover lunch, the meaning of the herbs that are used and the prayers that are said for this meal. To end this lesson, he had brought matza, an [unleavened flatbread](#) the Jewish community eats on Passover Day. He blessed the bread, said a prayer in Hebrew and shared the bread with his classmates.

### **Activity**

The title of the lesson "The Sunday Lunch" was the fourth activity and had a duration of 2 hours. It started with the projection on the electronic board of a series of pictures of food related to the Italian Sunday lunch to activate my students' prior knowledge. Following, the vocabulary

words related to the typical Italian recipes for Sunday lunch were provided in a pictogram. We reviewed them several times, and we read a passage about the Italian Sunday lunch. True/false questions followed to ensure students' comprehension of the passage read.

The Italian gastronomic traditions maybe somewhat complicated for a non-Italian, therefore, we reviewed the sequence of how Italians consume their Sunday lunch. Words such as *antipasto* (appetizer), *primi piatti* (first courses), *secondi piatti* (second courses), dessert, *digestivo* (digestive) were explained in detail. Also, students learned about the established categories of appetizers, first course, second course, and what Italians drink as a digestive.

The next task, was a memory game activity. The class was divided into heterogeneous pairs of students taking into account that one of the two pupils would be Italian. Two sets of printed pictures cards with the vocabulary words were given to each pair of students. They worked on vocabulary such as: *salame, prosciutto, pastasciutta, risotto, arrosto, insalata, crostata, sorbetto* until everyone had mastered the terms.

The following assignment was a role play activity devoted to the intensification of my students' intercultural competence. They were to imagine themselves as journalists. The class was divided in pairs and each student had to interview his/her classmate about his/her Sunday lunch traditions. They took turns, so everyone could participate in the different roles. At the end of the task, every pupil addressed the class and reported what they had learned about the other student's traditions and customs related to the Sunday lunch and its significance in the given culture. Furthermore, they mentioned the common stereotype about the Italian cuisine according to which Italians only eat pasta and pizza. They reflected and evaluated their views and feelings about cultural differences avoiding stereotypical expectations.

## **5. Conclusion**

My students did not demonstrate a particular affection or preference toward their homeland governed by feelings of belonging, loyalty or patriotism. On the contrary, some of them exhibited a predilection for countries they have never visited. They reacted in a positive way toward other nations showing the desire to live in countries different than their homeland. It can be argued, based on the fact that they are being raised in bicultural families and are growing up in the multicultural and multireligious city of Miami they develop the cognitive and affective aspects to relate to others at an earlier age when compared to the children interviewed by Piaget and Weil in 1951.

The learner of foreign languages who is exposed to becoming an intercultural person can offer a "rereading" of habitual signs, has a new perception of what is familiar and what is not (Kramsch, 1998, p. 30). He is aware that being competent, from an intercultural point of view involves a constant process of renewal, a sort of existential intercultural *bildung*, which is being created with the errors committed, with the desire to learn from them and with the conviction of its total transformation. This *bildung* helps the intercultural person to function adequately and effectively in multilingual and multicultural realities, but its real strength lies in the fact that it understands that the meaning of words is relative and depends on the context (Roberts et al, 2001, p. 31).

The advantage of being an intercultural person lies in the ability to move among the various cultures and being able to communicate efficaciously with people from different cultures, religions, philosophical conceptions and worldviews.

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