CASE 1

The Goldfish

As the final school bell rings, most of the students in Ms. Bowman’s first-grade class gather their belongings and hurry out the door. But Amy convinces her friend Lucy to linger for a few minutes while she checks on Ringo, the class’s pet goldfish. As this week’s “animal keeper” for the class, Amy has noticed that Ringo hasn’t eaten any of his food for the past two days. In fact, all he does now is lie sideways on the surface of the water; he doesn’t try to swim away anymore when she touches him. With her friend looking over her shoulder, Amy tries to give the fish a slight push towards a few flakes of food.

“He must be sleeping,” she says. “Usually all I have to do is swish the water around to make him swim. He’s acting really weird. Maybe he’s forgotten how to eat and swim.”

Lucy inspects the fish and then looks back at her friend, “I don’t know, Amy. He’s been sleeping an awful long time. He’s not eating, either. I’ll get Ms. Bowman, and maybe she can fix him.”

Lucy hurries over to her teacher and grabs her by the hand. “Something’s wrong,” Amy declares as Lucy and Ms. Bowman approach the fish bowl. “He’s not moving. He hasn’t eaten for a long time.”

When Ms. Bowman looks in the bowl, she realizes that Ringo has died. She delicately explains the situation and then wraps the fish in a paper towel. She assures the girls that she will give Ringo a proper burial as soon as she gets home. Amy looks puzzled. “But...but...when my grandpa died last summer, he went away to heaven and didn’t come back. Ringo’s still here. If he’s dead, he should be going to heaven.”

“So you want Ringo to go to heaven.” Amy nods, and her teacher smiles. “Well, then, I’ll bet he’ll go there just as soon as he possibly can.”

As the two girls walk home, Lucy poses a question. “Do you have to eat in heaven?”

“I don’t know,” Amy responds. “I suppose so, or else you’d be hungry all the time.”

“Oh, that makes sense.” Lucy pauses for a moment, then asks, “Well, do you have to go potty in heaven?”

Amy rolls her eyes, indignantly puts her hands on her hips, and replies, “Of course not, silly! You know our Mommies and Ms. Bowman make us go potty before we go anywhere!”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot,” laughs Lucy.

Possible questions for “The Goldfish”:

1. How can we interpret Amy’s conclusions about eating and “going potty” from an information processing perspective?

2. How can we interpret these conclusions from a Piagetian perspective?

3. From a Piagetian perspective, how does the dead fish create disequilibrium for Amy?

4. Preoperational egocentrism is the inability to see situations from someone else’s perspective. Identify a possible instance of preoperational egocentrism in this case.

5. How might taking care of pets in the classroom promote students’ development?

6. To what extent should Ms. Bowman have discussed the concepts of death and heaven with the entire class?