

CASE 9

Pollution

Like most of her classmates at Central High, 14-year-old Laura wears the same attire to school every day: stone-washed jeans with torn knees, an oversized T-shirt, and hiking boots. Her first stop when she arrives at school in the morning is the restroom, where she recurls her hair and touches up her makeup. She usually lingers for 10 or 15 minutes so that she can share the latest school gossip with her friends. Laura's extended restroom visits often make her late for her first-hour study hall. When Ms. Watkins, the school counselor, chastises her for her consistent tardiness, Laura replies, "Everyone will notice if I don't look my absolute best. I don't want people to think I'm a geek!"

"Do you like people looking at you, Laura?" Ms. Watkins asks.

"Well, sure. I mean, everybody does, don't you think?"

Ms. Watkins smiles. "Yes, Laura, I think that almost everybody likes to have attention once in a while. Maybe that's just part of being human. And I know a class where you can be the center of attention—a class in which everyone wants to hear

your opinion about things. Let's see if we can find a place for you in Mr.

Marculescu's Debating I class. It meets first hour, the same time as your study hall:

There's a catch, though. If you're late, then you won't have a chance to participate in any debates."

"No problem, Ms. Watki
if I need to."

For something like that, I can certainly be on time

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The following morning, Mr. Marculescu begins class by saying "Today we're going to practice one of the topics that we'll be debating next week in South High Schools Debating I class. The topic is this: How do we solve the nation's pollution problems? We'll begin by having several of you get up in front of the class one at a time, to present your ideas about how to deal with pollution. I'll pretend that I'm Someone from the South High team and challenge each of you. Who would like to be our first volunteer?"

hand.

Not realizing what she might be getting herself into, Laura eagerly raises her "Okay, Laura, you want to give it a shot? Come on up here and stand behind the podium on the right. I'll take the podium on the left."

"Can't I just stay here in my seat?"

"I'd prefer that you stand up here where everyone can see you and hear what you're saying."

As Laura approaches the front of the room, she begins to have second thoughts about joining this class. She decides to put up a good front by pretending that she **knows** what she's doing. She stands behind her assigned podium with the best air of confidence she can muster.

From behind his own podium, Mr. Marculescu addresses the rest of the class.

"Just a reminder about what the rest of you need to do here. As Laura presents her

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position regarding how we might solve the country's pollution problems, you should all be listening carefully for flaws in her arguments. Okay, Laura, go ahead and begin."

Laura hesitates as she looks around the room. "I...uh...I'm not sure I know what

to say about this.”

“Why don’t you begin by talking about what you think the causes of pollution are?” Mr. Marculescu suggests. “I’m sure you have some good ideas, and we’d all like to hear them.”

“You mean that you actually cure what I say?” Laura asks.

“Of course,” her teacher assures her. “What you have to say is definitely important.” Mr. Marculescu looks pointedly at her, waiting for her to begin.

She swallows, then says, “Well, I think the government shouldn’t allow people to sell gasoline. That way, we wouldn’t have any more air pollution from car exhaust or other machines.”

“You mean, people shouldn’t be able to sell gasoline to anyone?” Mr. Marculescu queries. “Not even the mail carriers, the garbage collectors, the school bus drivers?”

“Right. People could take their garbage to the landfills as they walk to work. Some of them could run or ride bikes. Most people in the United States are too fat anyway, so the exercise would do them good.”

“How much time do you think it would take a single mother with an infant and a child in elementary school to get to her job if she had to stop at a daycare center, an elementary school, and a landfill on her way every day?”

“Oh, not too long. She could just put her kids in a covered bike carrier and throw the garbage bag on top of it. Besides, she wouldn’t have to go to the landfill every day, only when the trash piles up.”

“But while the trash is piling up at home, won’t it attract mice and rats?”

“Well, then I guess she would just have to go the landfill more often.”

“But what if her job is miles away from her house?”

“She should move, of course!”

“What about the elderly? How would they get their trash to the landfills?”

“They’d have their children or neighbors do it for them.”

“But wouldn’t the landfill itself cause some pollution?”

“Not really, because we could just have some scientist pour chemicals over it until it dissolves.”

“Wouldn’t the chemicals pollute our air and water?”

“Science is changing every day, and scientists are always learning new things. Maybe someone could find a new chemical that would get rid of all the bad things. It’s possible, you know.”

Mr. Marculescu continues to challenge Laura’s reasoning, but the girl remains firmly convinced that her proposed ban on gasoline sales is a viable solution to the country’s pollution problems, and she finds Mr. Marculescu’s questions more annoying than enlightening. As she puts it so succinctly to her friends while

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restyling her hair in the restroom later that day, “Mr. Marculescu can be so **unreasonable!**”

Possible questions for “Pollution”:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

From a developmental standpoint, how might we explain Laura’s preoccupation with her appearance?

From Piaget’s perspective, in which stage of cognitive development is Laura?

According to Piaget, egocentrism is an inability to see things from another person’s perspective. What evidence do we see of formal operational egocentrism in Laura’s reasoning?

How is Laura’s reasoning affected by what she does and doesn’t know about pollution?

According to Piaget, disequilibrium is the state of being unable to explain new

events in terms of existing schemas. How does Mr. Marculescu create disequilibrium for Laura?

In what ways might a debating class contribute to students' cognitive, linguistic, and moral development?