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Motivating Engagement with Literature: Using the Individual Story Ending (ISE) Method to Reveal Personal Reading Experiences

Juli-Anna Aerila, Tiziana Mascia

Would you like to change literature discussions to be more student-oriented? Would you like to understand students' reading experiences more deeply? If so, the Individual Story Ending (ISE) method can enhance your approach to reading and create shared experience in your teaching practices.

> Whatever the "real event" and experience may have been at one time, once, once upon a time, has been imaginatively appropriated by tellers, who have sought to give it structure and sense. There is nothing in the world more valuable than a story based on personal experience that a teller wants to and needs to share with someone else. Jack Zipes 2017

Introduction

Current theories conceptualize reading as an interactive process, in which experiences are shared and the reader becomes one with the context and characters (Ivey & Johnston, 2015; McCreary & Marchant, 2017). Transforming educational practices into a more reader-centric approach and incorporating creative social activities in reading enhances interactivity, supports understanding of the reading experience, personalizes learning, and makes reading fiction more meaningful (Aerila et al., 2019; Mascia, 2020). Using the Individual Story Ending (ISE) method, educators can encourage participation in the learning process by drawing on students' experiences, attitudes, and values and supporting reader-centric discussions.

The ISE involves predicting a narrative's continuation and crafting a unique ending to the story. The method is already familiar to many educators; in this context, it serves as a means of visualizing the reader's conscious and subconscious thoughts and experiences, by personal characteristics such as worldview, reading skills, values, and previous reading experiences. ISEs are related to aesthetic reading stance and engagement. Aesthetic reading involves reflection on the text, connecting emotionally with the characters, and constructing aesthetic transactions—the attitudes, feelings, associations, and ideas aroused and processed during reading (Rosenblatt, 1982). In engaged reading, on the other hand, the reader enters the narrative's social world and becomes immersed in the lives of the characters, experiencing life as they live it (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). In this way, the role of ISEs in students' personal stories. According to Bruner (1986) and Cunningham (2015), these stories should be at the heart of literacy learning, as they extend beyond the academic and socialize students to deal with emotions and interact with others (Bluck, 2003).

In this article, we describe ISEs as part of a learning process that seeks to engage every student in literary discussion, helping them to trace the connections between a given narrative and their own lives and supporting the articulation of their own interpretations and reading experiences. Our experience of the method suggests that all students—not just the most active readers—are motivated to contribute unique story endings. This approach fosters a vibrant learning environment in which all interpretations

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are welcomed, hence ensuring comprehensive participation beyond the traditional literary discussion.

Why the Individual Story Ending?

What makes the ISE and associated learning processes particularly engaging is its capacity to stimulate students' imagination and promote robust discussion. Instead of concentrating solely on memory-based questions drawn directly from the narrative's world, the ISE process promotes conversations that center on personal interpretations and experiences of the narrative. This approach sets a clear and tangible goal, reinforcing students' focus and engagement while reading. The process is also easy for both students and educators to implement, as it requires only one instruction: "Listen to/read the excerpt from the narrative and create an ending for it."

Interactive reading fosters discussions that concentrate on sharing feelings and perspectives induced by accounts of the situations and conditions of others (Taylor et al., 2003). According to Ivey and Johnston (2017), these more spontaneous and experience-oriented discussions increase student engagement with books and make them more meaningful. ISEs can play a significant role in these discussions, especially for inexperienced students or for those who are reluctant to participate or share their opinions. As well as giving tangible form to the reader's interpretation, the ISE process enables students to reflect on different experiences from a distance (Aerila et al., 2019). Presenting and comparing ISEs also highlights similarities and differences in readers' experiences of a given text and supports both the social dimension of reading and student agency (Ivey & Johnston, 2015).

To be successful, an ISE-centered learning process requires careful preparation by the educator. Before implementing this approach, the educator must determine the learning objectives and select the source text. These objectives, which are often social–emotional-oriented, may dictate the choice of narrative (or vice versa). Additionally, the educator must specify the art form; this may include drama, literacy art, visual art, crafting, or even dance or music. While individual ISEs make personal interpretations or experiences visible, group activities offer valuable opportunities for sharing during the planning phase of the ISE process.

Educators must also organize the subsequent discussion around the learning objectives and the ideas generated by the ISEs. Effective strategies include focusing on endings, the most dynamic characters, or the ISE's origins, whether in the source narrative, the students' own experiences, or popular culture. For example, fairy tales often contain metaphors (such as the apple in Snow White or the shoe in Cinderella) whose meanings and implications can be explored in this way.

The process often culminates in a comparison of the source narrative's ending and the students' ISEs. In so doing, it is important to recognize that all reading interpretations and experiences are equally valid, and the ISEs should not be judged on the basis of how they resemble or differ from the source narrative's ending. From a literacy perspective, it may seem that an ISE that more closely resembles the source narrative's ending indicates stronger literacy skills. However, discussions can be enriched or sustained by activities like debate, animation, or dramatic performance. Figure 1 summarizes the phases of the ISE process.

PAUSE AND PONDER

- How can the ISE method help your students connect more deeply with the narratives they read?
- Do you use fictional narratives as a tool for social-emotional learning?
- How could you involve all students in literature discussions?
- How could you better show students the importance of literature as a tool for human growth?
- Could you use literature as a starting point for an art-based activity?

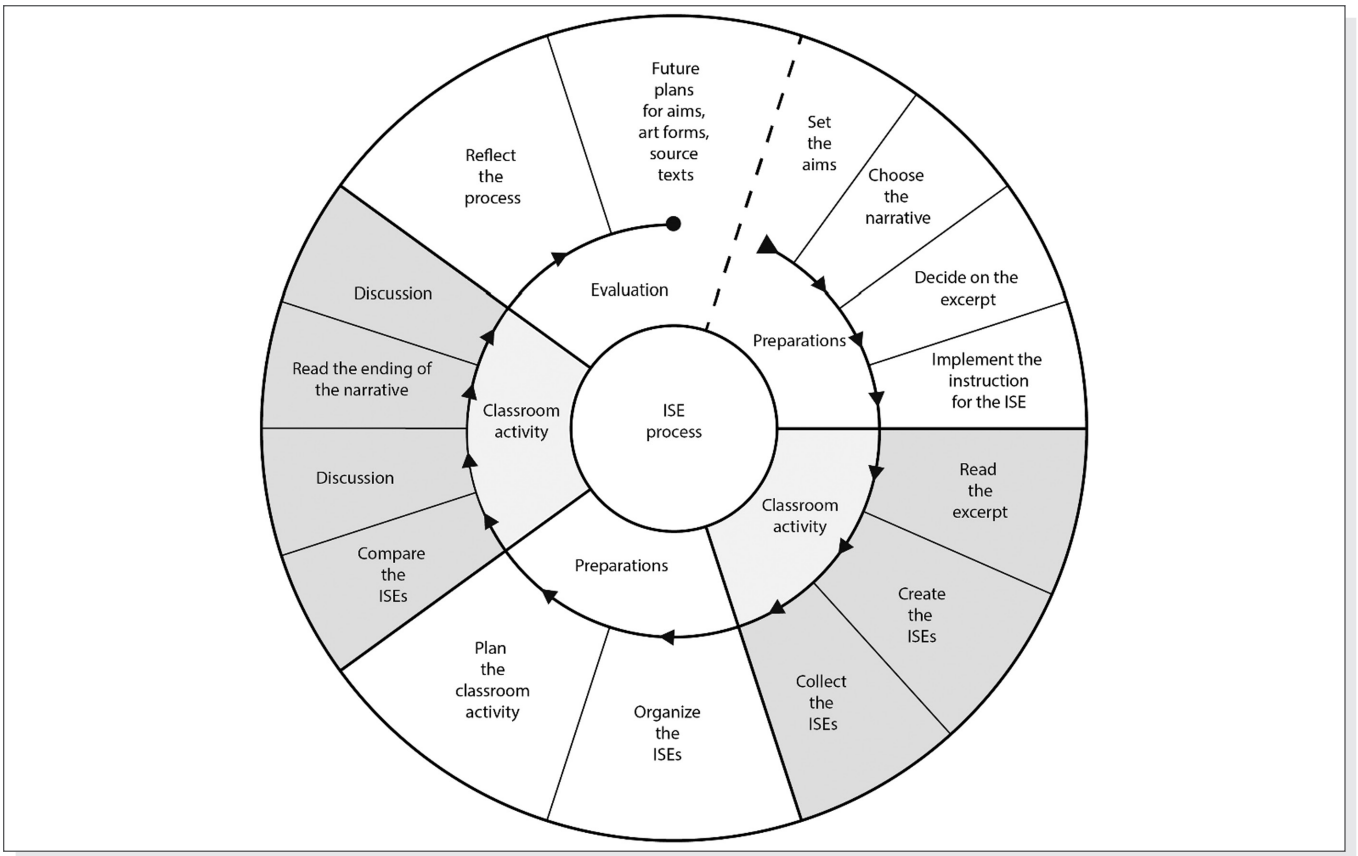
Implementing the ISE Method in Early Years Education

To illustrate the use and adaptability of the ISE method, the following is an example of its application in groups of 6- to 7-year-olds in Finland. This initiative formed part of the "Side by Side" project (2017–2019), which aimed to foster social–emotional learning. In that project, social–emotional learning (SEL) referred to a process through which children acquire and apply knowledge and skills to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, n.d.). To that end, educators selected a narrative that explores the dynamics of peer relationships at school.

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Figure 1
The Individual Story Ending (ISE) Learning Process



Setting Objectives and Choosing the Source Text

The aim of using the ISE process was to foster discussion about helping others, as well as feeling like an outsider and being sad, and to gain insights into students' interpretations when engaging with books about peer relations. The Finnish author Anneli Kantto's picture-book series about "Viisi villiä Virtasta" (Virtanen's five wild children) depicts the daily life of a family with five children. From this series, the educators selected the book *Veera Virtanen ja esikoulu* (in English: *Veera Virtanen and the pre-primary school*) (2013).

Reading the Excerpt and Creating the ISEs

To commence the classroom activity, the educator read aloud an excerpt from the beginning of the chosen book. In this excerpt, Veera attends pre-primary school for the first time. The day begins well but soon takes a turn for the worse, as Veera misspells her name, prompting laughter from another child (Alex). Additionally, the noisy environment overwhelms Veera, who feels increasingly isolated; it is noisy in the group, and nobody seems to notice her. Later, in the yard, Veera starts to feel even worse when Alex does not follow the rules of the game. She is homesick and goes to the restroom to hide her sadness. There, she overhears someone crying.

At this point, the reading was interrupted, and the children were invited to write their own ISEs (or to dictate to an adult if they could not write, as 6- to 7-year-olds in Finland are still in pre-primary school). They were also invited to enhance their verbal stories with illustrations. All participants engaged actively in the task, showing creativity and effort. Afterward, the educators collected the ISEs for review.

Organizing the ISEs and Planning the Classroom Activities

The educators organized the ISEs based on the children's ideas about Veera's actions and who was crying in the restroom. They were impressed by the depth of insight provided by the ISEs into the children's thoughts and their diverse interpretations. For example, while some children thought that the

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other child was upset because she felt homesick, others suggested more humorously that the paper had run out.

One common theme across the ISEs was the children's confidence in the educators' ability to resolve any issues encountered during the school day. The teachers appreciated that all of the outcomes were positive, with conflicts resolved and friendships sustained (including Alex and Veera, who became friends at the end). The following are typical examples.

> Guessing that this is a child [crying], Veera asks: "What is the matter?" The girl says that something has happened, and Veera runs to tell the teacher. When the teacher comes, the girl tells her that some of the other children do not want to play with her. The teacher talks to the other children, and everyone starts playing together.

> All the other children also came to restroom. They opened the door and there was Veera's friend, Kirsti. The children asked her why she is crying. She said, that she is feeling homesick. They hugged her and went to play hide and seek together.

Reflecting on the ISEs, the educators planned their discussion with the children: comparing the different ISEs and highlighting the importance of empathy and the need to understand differing perspectives. They also considered incorporating drama or other conflict resolution methods in future activities to encourage students to address disagreements among themselves and to reinforce the value of adult trust. The educators concluded that the book's theme resonated strongly with the students.

The Classroom Discussion and Reading the Source Text's Ending

During the classroom activity, the educators created an exhibition of the ISE drawings. The students observed the drawings and searched for similarities and differences. In particular, they were encouraged to consider which part of the story each picture represented (whether from the source narrative or an ISE) and to identify the emotions expressed.

The students noticed that while the drawings based on the source text often showed individuals looking sad and isolated, the ISE illustrations depicted people who were together and happy. This led the children to reflect on the idea that the sources of sadness can be addressed and that solutions can often be found by sharing with others. The children were also reassured that the adults at the school were supportive and always available if they needed to talk about their problems. The collective reading of the ISEs further emphasized this issue of "openness" and their peers' differing interpretations. Many of the children shared personal stories of feeling left out or sad during the school day and discussed how these issues had been resolved. At the end of the activity, the ending of the source text was read aloud and compared to the children's ISEs (Figure 2).

Planning for Future Use of the ISE Method

After concluding the ISE process, the participating educators observed that they had successfully involved all of the students in the literary discussion, helping them to make meaningful connections between the fictional events and their own lives. The educators also felt that the students empathized with the characters and situations depicted in the source narrative.

The educators also noted that the ISEs' content generally tended to reflect the students' level of empathy and their willingness to help others, which is a feature of positive peer relations and prosocial development (for more about the development of empathy, see Denham et al., 2014; Dirks et al., 2018).

Figure 2
Students' Drawings of their Individual Story Endings



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Transforming Reading into a Journey of Growth

As Ivey and Johnston (2017) emphasized, the transformative power of engaging with narratives enables students to explore and understand their own identities and the complexities of the social world around them. While learning about the world through narratives, they also learn more about the complexity of peer relations and society (Ivey & Johnston, 2015). The ISE method and associated learning processes enable students to articulate and visualize their interpretations and apply their unique viewpoints to fictional scenarios. Integrating ISEs into designed classroom activities (especially discussions) elevates reading from mere comprehension of the text to a journey of personal discovery. This is what makes the ISE method powerful: the lively and in-depth conversations it generates about how students' personal experiences influence their interpretations of the text and the motives that drive people's behavior in various situations.

Early childhood and primary school educators continue to explore new ways of enhancing students' potential by fostering a positive social environment (Aura et al., 2021) and encouraging them to voice and express their individuality through creativity and collaboration (De Bruin et al., 2018). ISE processes invite students to engage more fully with narratives by empathizing with unfamiliar situations, emotions, and characters, so enhancing their sensitivity to the feelings and behaviors of others (Ivey & Johnston, 2015). According to Ivey and Johnston (2018), engaged readers gain greater autonomy over their lives, make more informed decisions, and experience increased happiness, while failing to engage students in reading poses both academic and health risks.

Examples of Narratives with Social–Emotional Themes for ISE

Picture books by

- Madonna (e.g. *Mr. Peabody's Apples* about lying).
- Tom Percival (e.g. *Milo's Monster* about jealousy).
- William Buckingham (e.g. *The Snorgh and the Sailor* about diversity and friendship).

Books by

- Jacqueline Wilson (e.g. *Best Friends* about complexities of friendships and sadness).
- Louis Sachar (e.g. *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom* about bullying and acceptance of differences).

Fairy tales by

- Grimm (e.g. *Hansel and Gretel* for processing the feeling of fear).

TAKE ACTION

1. Choose your text: select a narrative that resonates with your students' experiences and presents a thought-provoking scenario where characters face important choices. Consider stories with strong emotional or social themes to maximize engagement.
2. Introduce the ISE method: explain the process to your students and provide an example of how to create an Individual Story Ending. Read an excerpt from the chosen text up to the key point and then pause.
3. Engage and create: encourage students to write their own endings to the story, they can also work in group. Allow them to illustrate their endings if they wish, providing various materials for creativity.
4. Organize and discuss: set aside enough time for you to study students' ISEs from the perspective of the chosen social theme and prepare activities/discussions with students from this perspective.
5. Foster Inclusion: ensure that all students feel included during the activity and discussion. It is not necessary to discuss every ISE in detail, but it is important to acknowledge and refer to each student's contribution.
6. Compare and reflect: after the activity, consider how each ending reflects the students' personal experiences. Evaluate which theme and text could be suitable for the next session, which arts-based methods to implement for the ISEs, and how to further engage the students in the process.

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