



Beginning from the Margins: A Conceptual Review of Insertion in the Pastoral Cycle Methodology

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Abstract

This article presents a conceptual review examining how insertion, the foundational first stage of the Pastoral Cycle Methodology, has been conceptualised, practised, and evaluated across pastoral theology, practical theology, liberation theology, missiology, theological education, community development, and transformative learning. The review aims to map insertion as a methodological, ethical, and pedagogical stage of the Pastoral Cycle. It draws on an integrated theoretical framework incorporating liberation theology, contextual theology, Catholic Social Teaching, participatory action research, Freirean critical pedagogy, practical theology, and the theology of encounter. Guided by the research question of how insertion has been understood and applied across disciplines, contexts, and geographical settings, the review synthesises nine peer-reviewed and scholarly sources, including journal articles and a professional doctorate thesis. The nine sources were identified through literature searching across ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and PubMed and selected against pre-defined eligibility criteria, following a purposive rather than a fully reproducible systematic search process (see Methodology). Thematic synthesis identified six dimensions: immersion in lived reality; contextual engagement; praxis; community participation; transformative learning; and solidarity and accompaniment. The synthesis characterises insertion as a multidimensional construct encompassing an epistemological act, methodological stage, relational and ethical commitment, pedagogical process, and spiritual stance of solidarity. The review proposes a synthesised conceptual definition of insertion and identifies critical gaps, including limited empirical documentation across diverse Global South contexts, insufficient attention to gender, race, and

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intersectional power dynamics, and weak integration with formal research ethics frameworks. The article offers a conceptual foundation for future scholarship on insertion within the Pastoral Cycle.

Introduction

Insertion is the foundational stage of the Pastoral Cycle Methodology, one of the most influential action-reflection frameworks in pastoral theology, practical theology, and Catholic social ministry. Rooted in Joseph Cardijn's See-Judge-Act tradition and later systematised within liberation and contextual theology, the Pastoral Cycle begins with insertion: the disciplined entry of pastoral agents, theologians, educators, and practitioners into the lived realities of communities before any analysis, reflection, or action is attempted. Holland and Henriot's (1983) *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice* provided the most influential English-language formulation of the four-stage cycle of insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and pastoral planning, and Green (1990/2009) extended it to practitioners and theological educators beyond the Catholic tradition.

Insertion is not equivalent to social science fieldwork or conventional data collection. It is a relational and spiritually informed entry into the world of the poor and excluded, grounded in what liberation theology terms the preferential option for the poor (Gutiérrez, 1988). It creates the experiential and moral foundation on which the subsequent stages of the cycle depend; without it, the Pastoral Cycle risks becoming abstract, externally imposed, or disconnected from the communities it serves (McGladdery, 2024).

Its underlying logic, that transformative understanding begins with genuine presence in the realities one seeks to understand, resonates across transformative education (Pederson et al., 2022), missiology (Steffen, 2020), and theological formation (Tollison, 2023). Insertion thus addresses a question that transcends any single field: where does legitimate knowledge of social reality begin, and whose experience grounds it?

Despite its foundational status, insertion remains among the least systematically examined stages of the cycle. Definitions vary across traditions, empirical documentation of practice is sparse, issues of power and positionality are underexplored, and the relationship between the depth of insertion and the quality of later stages has not been investigated. This review responds by mapping how insertion has been understood and applied across the relevant literature.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The review is guided by frameworks that emerge from the literature itself as the traditions within which insertion has been theorised and practised.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology (Gutiérrez, 1988) supplies the foundational rationale for insertion: authentic theological reflection begins from the underside of history, and the preferential option for the poor is an epistemological as well as an ethical commitment that treats the margins as a privileged vantage point on social reality and the Gospel (McGladdery, 2024; Smith, 2023).



Contextual Theology

Contextual theology holds that all theology is done from a particular location and that local context is a primary source of theological understanding rather than mere background (Bevans, 2002, drawn on for this general claim rather than for his typology of models). It underpins the claim that insertion must attend to the particularities of place, community, and culture (Chirchir, 2023; McGladdery, 2024; Steffen, 2020).

Catholic Social Teaching: Preferential Option for the Poor

Catholic Social Teaching frames solidarity as a firm commitment to the common good that demands presence and accompaniment with communities experiencing poverty and injustice (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). None of the nine reviewed sources explicitly connects insertion to this tradition; the link is the review's own synthesis.

Participatory Action Research

Participatory Action Research (PAR) treats community members as co-researchers rather than passive subjects (Fals Borda, 1987), a stance echoed in Pederson et al.'s (2022) framing of communities as partners and co-creators. However, PAR's defining feature, community decision rights over the research process, is not demonstrated in the reviewed corpus, so the relationship is treated as analogical rather than as a shared methodological tradition.

Freirean Critical Pedagogy

Freire's (1970/2005) action-reflection cycle of praxis parallels the movement from insertion through reflection to action; the parallel drawn here is limited to this shared structure. Aringo and Odongo's (2025) documentation of dual transformation is consonant with this framework.

Practical Theology

Practical theology, concerned with the mediation of Christian faith in the praxis of contemporary society (Heitink, 1999), treats practice as both the starting point and the destination of theological inquiry. The Pastoral Cycle operationalises this commitment by beginning with insertion before moving through analysis, reflection, and renewed action (McGladdery, 2024; Pierli & Selvam, 2017, p. 9).

Theology of Encounter

Pope Francis's (2013) theology of encounter in *Evangelii Gaudium* holds that pastoral action begins by going out to meet people in their concrete situations. Sebastian (2021) and Smith (2023) connect insertion with this theology of presence and accompaniment, particularly in contexts of poverty and exclusion.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a conceptual review design, appropriate to the interdisciplinary and heterogeneous nature of insertion scholarship. It draws on the orientation of scoping-review methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2020) and is informed by, but does not claim full compliance with, the PRISMA-ScR reporting standard (Tricco et al., 2018). The aim was to chart the range of evidence and identify key concepts and gaps rather than to answer a narrow empirical question, an orientation suited to fields with high definitional variability (Peters et al., 2020).



The review was guided by one general and five specific research questions on the definition of insertion, its practices, its ethical and relational dimensions, its methodological challenges, and its influence on later stages of the cycle. Search strings combined insertion OR immersion OR accompaniment OR “contextual engagement” with “Pastoral Cycle” OR “See-Judge-Act” OR “practical theology” OR “liberation theology” OR “transformative education” OR “community development”, adapted to each database (title/abstract search where supported; keyword search in Google Scholar).

Searches covered ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Scopus, and PubMed, without date restrictions. Searching was iterative rather than a single date-stamped protocol: terms were refined during the review and supplemented by citation chasing. Per-database counts, search dates, and title/abstract exclusion reasons were therefore not logged, and no PRISMA-ScR flow count is reported; this section describes the search logic rather than a reproducible search log.

Grey literature, unpublished theses, and conference papers were excluded. One deliberate exception was McGladdery (2024), a formally examined professional doctorate thesis publicly deposited in Anglia Ruskin Research Online, retained because it meets a standard of scholarly scrutiny comparable to peer review.

Literature was included if it addressed insertion, immersion, encounter, accompaniment, or community entry within pastoral, theological, educational, justice, or community development contexts, whether conceptual or empirical. Functionally equivalent practices were eligible where structurally analogous to insertion, assessed against three markers: sustained rather than one-off presence, relational engagement preceding formal analysis, and explicit attention to the ethical positioning of those entering the community. Uses of “insertion” in unrelated technical, medical, linguistic, or biological senses were excluded. Candidate sources were screened against these criteria and assessed in full text; nine met the final inclusion criteria.

Data were extracted using a standardised framework (author, year, source type, discipline, conceptualisation of insertion, methods, outcomes, and limitations). Given the heterogeneity of the sources, meta-analysis was inappropriate, and the three-stage thematic synthesis of Thomas and Harden (2008) was used.

In Stage 1, line-by-line coding combined the thematic clusters anticipated in the study design (Table 2) with inductive codes; for the four conceptual works or thesis without a discrete findings section (Table 1), the full argumentative text was coded. In Stage 2, codes were grouped into preliminary analytical themes through iterative comparison. In Stage 3, these were interpreted to produce the six themes reported in the Findings. All coding was conducted by the primary author in NVivo 14 without independent checking, and working memos were not retained in auditable form (see Limitations).

Quality was appraised interpretively, considering clarity of purpose, methodological appropriateness, transparency, credibility, and relevance. Appraisal informed critical reading but was not scored or weighted, and no source was excluded on quality grounds. Foundational theoretical and methodological texts (e.g., Bevans, 2002; Green, 2009; Holland & Henriot, 1983; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; Thomas & Harden, 2008) informed the framework but are not among the nine synthesised studies. Table 1 summarises the included studies, and Appendix A maps them against the review objectives.



Table 1: Summary of Included Studies (n = 9)

Included study (country)	Study aim	Methodology	Conceptualisation of insertion	Key findings	Limitations	Contribution to this review
Pierli & Selvam (2017), Kenya	Offer a conceptual framework for understanding and studying social-transformation in Africa	Conceptual journal article	Insertion named, without elaboration, as the first of four steps (Insertion, Social Analysis, Theological Reflection, Action) in the pastoral cycle	Notes that the pastoral cycle integrates empirical and conceptual approaches to social-transformation, with insertion as its starting point	Insertion is mentioned only in passing, in a single paragraph of a broader article on social-transformation methodology	Provides secondary confirmation that insertion is recognised as the pastoral cycle's first step
McGladdery (2024), United Kingdom	Examine collaborative ministry through the See-Judge-Act tradition	Professional doctorate	Insertion as historically grounded collaborative pastoral practice	Demonstrates the theological development of insertion from Catholic Action to contemporary ministry	Single institutional context	Explains the historical and theological evolution of insertion
Aringo & Odongo (2025), Kenya	Evaluate faith-based community immersion in Kenya	Qualitative empirical study	Insertion through structured community immersion	Demonstrates mutual transformation of students and communities	Single programme in one urban settlement	Provides empirical evidence of insertion in practice
Pederson et al. (2022), United States	Develop a field immersion framework for civic education	Educational research	Insertion through experiential field immersion	Immersion promotes transformative learning, civic responsibility and critical reflection	Conducted within higher education	Demonstrates cross-disciplinary relevance
Steffen (2020), Italy	Examine contextual ministry across pastoral institutes	Missiological study	Insertion through contextual engagement	Ministry becomes authentic when grounded in local realities	Limited empirical evaluation	Supports contextual engagement within insertion
Sebastian (2021), United States	Develop a theological framework for immersion programmes	Conceptual theological article	Insertion as encounter and accompaniment	Formation begins through presence and relational encounter	Limited empirical evidence	Supports theology of encounter and accompaniment



Smith (2023), United States	Explore immersive-reflexive praxis within Africa-Diaspora contexts	Qualitative theological study	Insertion through solidarity and immersive praxis	Highlights contextual theology and ethical engagement	Narrow geographical emphasis	Strengthens solidarity dimension
Tollison (2023), United States	Explore embeddedness in theological education	Conceptual educational paper	Embeddedness as formative insertion	Community presence enhances theological formation and flourishing	Mainly conceptual	Supports transformative learning
Chirchir (2023), Kenya	Examine contextual ministry in conflict-affected communities	Case study	Insertion through contextual engagement and reconciliation	Demonstrates contextual pastoral engagement in complex social settings	Single case	Strengthens contextual and ethical dimensions

Note. Country records the institutional affiliation of the source's author(s) at the time of publication, not the geographic scope of the content discussed.

Findings

Some sources explicitly define insertion as the first stage of the Pastoral Cycle (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; Pierli & Selvam, 2017, p. 9); others describe functionally equivalent practices as immersion, embeddedness, contextual engagement, accompaniment, or field immersion. Despite this terminological variation, the literature converges on insertion as the movement through which people enter and engage lived realities before analysis, reflection, and action. Six themes emerged, combining anticipated clusters with patterns from close reading (Table 2).

Insertion as Immersion in Lived Reality

The most pervasive finding, represented in five of the nine sources, is insertion as immersion in the concrete realities of communities. The literature treats such presence as an epistemological necessity rather than a methodological convenience: knowledge of social reality cannot be generated through abstraction alone but must be grounded in communities encountered firsthand.

Aringo and Odongo (2025, p. 65) operationalise this through a five-week immersion programme in Kiambiu, a low-income settlement in Nairobi, where students lived among community members; immersion functioned there as the ground from which analysis and reflection grew rather than as an orientation exercise. McGladdery (2024) historicises immersion through Cardijn's See-Judge-Act methodology and the Catholic Action movement. Pederson et al. (2022) position learners as explorers entering communities facing complex social challenges, while Sebastian (2021) and Smith (2023) emphasise grounded experience as the starting point for understanding in U.S. Jesuit higher education and Africa-diaspora religious contexts respectively.



Insertion as Contextual Engagement

A second theme, in five sources, portrays insertion as contextual engagement: attending to the historical, cultural, economic, and political particularity of each community rather than generic entry into social life.

Steffen (2020) describes how pastoral institutes across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania use See-Judge-Act to ground ministry in local realities, an account that is descriptive rather than evaluative. McGladdery (2024) argues that authentic insertion means learning to see through community members' eyes rather than imposing external frameworks, making local knowledge an authoritative source rather than raw data. Pederson et al. (2022) advocate place-based learning, and Chirchir (2023) shows the importance of contextual engagement for reconciliation between conflicting communities in Northern Kenya, where generic approaches fail to generate adequate understanding.

Insertion as Praxis

A third theme, in six sources, understands insertion as praxis: not passive observation or preliminary data collection but the first movement in a dialectical cycle linking experience, critical reflection, and action.

Pierli and Selvam (2017, p. 9) locate insertion as the first of four steps: insertion, social analysis, theological reflection, and action. This structure implies, though the source does not elaborate, that the depth of insertion shapes the quality of later stages. Aringo and Odongo (2025) show empirically how insertion grounds subsequent analysis and community action. McGladdery (2024) traces this logic through Cardijn, liberation theology, and Holland and Henriot's (1983) framework: insertion is not completed before praxis begins but is its inaugural movement. Pederson et al. (2022) describe a parallel structure in which direct experience generates critical reflection and civic engagement.

Insertion as Community Participation

A fourth theme, in three sources, presents insertion as active participation in community life rather than extractive or merely observational engagement. Aringo and Odongo (2025) describe students learning through collaborative projects with Small Christian Communities, and Steffen (2020) highlights pastoral institutes' emphasis on shared ownership, communal discernment, and community agency. Pederson et al. (2022) require learners to engage communities as partners and co-creators of knowledge, a shift from subject-object to subject-subject relations. This resonates with PAR (Fals Borda, 1987), but, as noted above, the resonance is analogical: the corpus does not demonstrate community decision rights over the process.

Insertion as Transformative Learning

A fifth theme, in three sources, treats insertion as transformative learning that reshapes worldviews, values, and commitments. Pederson et al. (2022) report that students engaging directly with communities develop new perspectives, social awareness, and civic agency, with affective and moral as well as cognitive change. Aringo and Odongo (2025) document dual transformation among both students and community members, challenging the assumption that learning flows in one direction. Tollison (2023) argues that embeddedness in community enables theological formation and flourishing that classroom instruction cannot replicate; theological knowledge is generated, not merely transmitted, through insertion.



Insertion as Solidarity and Accompaniment

The sixth theme, in four sources, frames insertion as solidarity with marginalised communities. This ethical and spiritual dimension most clearly distinguishes insertion from fieldwork, ethnography, or service-learning. McGladdery (2024) traces it through Cardijn and liberation theology, where immersion among the poor is a moral imperative rather than a research technique; this resonates with Catholic Social Teaching's principle of solidarity (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004), although no reviewed source draws that link explicitly. Aringo and Odongo (2025) show solidarity expressed through students' participation in community struggles and initiatives, while Sebastian (2021) and Smith (2023) connect insertion with a theology of presence and accompaniment that resists extractive engagement. Presence, listening, and accompaniment over time are thus themselves a form of ethical praxis.

Proposed Conceptual Definition of Insertion

Drawing on the six themes and, for its ethical marker, on the two sources that substantively address ethics and power (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; Smith, 2023), the following definition is proposed:

Insertion is the foundational stage of the Pastoral Cycle Methodology, involving intentional, sustained immersion within the lived realities of individuals and communities, particularly those experiencing marginalisation, poverty, exclusion, or injustice. Sustained immersion means a continuous engagement of at least four weeks with the same community, or at least three discrete visits over time, as in the five-week Kiambiu programme (Aringo & Odongo, 2025). Ethical commitment means engagement that explicitly attends to power, positionality, or the community's own stated priorities. Insertion is characterised by presence; relational participation marked by reciprocity and shared decision-making over at least one substantive aspect of the engagement, such as its timing, focus, or activities; contextual engagement; and solidarity. It is oriented towards generating experiential knowledge that grounds social analysis, theological reflection, transformative learning, and action towards justice, liberation, and human flourishing.

The definition's dimensions are not equally supported. Its epistemological and methodological dimensions are broadly attested, but only two of the nine sources substantively address ethics and power (Appendix A, SO3). It is therefore an ideal-typical synthesis, combining what the corpus broadly attests with a normative claim drawn from a minority of sources, not a descriptive summary of the typical source. The thresholds for sustained, participatory, and ethically committed engagement are proposed by this review, since no source specifies comparable terms; they are a provisional, contestable floor for future testing, and extending them to the remaining attributes is left for future refinement.

The closing clause describes insertion's intended aim, not a membership test: an engagement that meets the markers but does not yield sound analysis or action is insertion that fell short, not a non-instance. "Authentic insertion" is used in this review for insertion that meets the markers and also achieves the depth, mutuality, or ethical seriousness the corpus associates with it.

Synthesis of Findings Against Anticipated Themes

Table 2 compares the thematic clusters anticipated in the study design with the findings that emerged from the synthesis.



Table 2: *Synthesis of Anticipated and Emergent Findings*

Anticipated Theme	Emergent Synthesis Finding and Key Sources
Insertion as immersion	Strongly represented across the corpus. Insertion consistently conceptualised as epistemologically necessary embodied presence. Five of the nine sources contribute directly to this theme (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; McGladdery, 2024; Pederson et al., 2022; Sebastian, 2021; Smith, 2023).
Insertion as ethical presence	Substantially elaborated as Insertion as Solidarity and Accompaniment. Ethical dimensions foregrounded particularly in McGladdery (2024), Smith (2023), and Sebastian (2021). Tollison (2023) contributes through theological formation through embeddedness.
Insertion and marginality	Represented across multiple findings. The preferential option for the poor is central to McGladdery (2024) and Smith (2023). Aringo & Odongo (2025) provide empirical grounding in urban poverty and exclusion.
Insertion and positionality	Represented only in part. Power dynamics and insider/outsider tensions are implicit in multiple sources but are not systematically theorised as a distinct theme. Identified as a substantive research gap.
Insertion as methodological foundation	Strongly represented, as Insertion as Praxis. The relationship between insertion and subsequent Pastoral Cycle stages is elaborated by Pierli & Selvam (2017, p. 9), Aringo & Odongo (2025), and McGladdery (2024).
Challenges of insertion	Represented only in part. Practical challenges are noted in Aringo & Odongo (2025) and Steffen (2020). Systematic attention to access, sustainability, and evaluation of insertion is sparse. Identified as a research gap.
Additional emergent finding: Insertion as Community Participation	Not explicitly anticipated but emerged distinctly from the synthesis. The participatory, co-generative character of insertion is emphasised by three of the nine sources: Aringo & Odongo (2025), Pederson et al. (2022), and Steffen (2020).

Discussion

The findings show insertion to be conceptually robust and widely applicable yet unevenly documented, consistent with wider participatory scholarship on the difficulty of translating foundational commitments into consistently practised and evaluated processes (Cornish et al., 2023; Wallerstein et al., 2020, cited as external comparative literature outside the nine-source corpus).

Insertion as a Participatory and Empowerment-Oriented Framework

Insertion resonates with participatory and empowerment-oriented traditions such as PAR, community-based participatory research (CBPR), and liberation theology, though analogically rather than as shared membership, since the corpus does not demonstrate the community decision rights that define PAR and CBPR (Cornish et al., 2023; Wallerstein et al., 2020). Across the literature, insertion enables communities and practitioners to co-create understanding and engage in collective discernment (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; McGladdery, 2024). What distinguishes it from more abstract participatory approaches is a concrete, relational, and spiritually grounded entry into lived reality, applicable across ecclesial, educational, and developmental contexts (Pederson et al., 2022; Steffen, 2020; Tollison, 2023).



Importantly, the review suggests that insertion parallels participatory practice through a structured, ethically committed entry into lived reality, functioning as an analogous rather than an equivalent expression of participatory and empowerment theory. This distinguishes insertion from more abstract participatory approaches by providing a concrete, relational, and spiritually grounded process applicable across diverse ecclesial, educational, and developmental contexts (Steffen, 2020; Pederson et al., 2022). The consistent association of insertion with empowerment, solidarity, and transformative learning outcomes further supports its role as both a methodological and transformative framework (Tollison, 2023).

Cross-Disciplinary Relevance and Adaptability

Insertion's reach across pastoral theology, missiology, transformative education, and community development shows it to be an adaptable principle rather than a tradition-specific procedure (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; Tollison, 2023). Yet adaptation often occurs under other names (field immersion, accompaniment, embeddedness) without reference to the Pastoral Cycle, producing conceptual fragmentation and limited dialogue across traditions (Pederson et al., 2022; Smith, 2023). Stronger cross-disciplinary engagement would enhance theoretical coherence.

The Epistemological Priority of Embodied Experience

The literature consistently foregrounds embodied experience as the necessary starting point for analysis and reflection, positioning insertion as the corrective to epistemological abstraction (McGladdery, 2024). This challenges theological institutions that privilege classroom and textual learning: if knowledge of social reality cannot be generated through abstraction alone, insertion belongs at the centre of formation curricula rather than in supplementary placements (Pederson et al., 2022; Tollison, 2023).

Dual Transformation and the Challenge to Deficit Models

The bidirectional transformation documented by Aringo and Odongo (2025) and the emphasis on partnership in Pederson et al. (2022) challenge deficit models that position communities as sites of need into which educated practitioners insert themselves to diagnose and repair. In the Kiambiu case, insertion transformed all parties and affirmed the agency and spiritual depth of community members, although whether this holds more widely remains open, since only one source documents it directly. This matters for formation in the Global South, where colonial dynamics of expertise and dependency persist; insertion is not a gift bestowed on a community but a mutual encounter, and programme design and evaluation should reflect this.

Research Gaps and Directions for Future Inquiry

The synthesis also surfaces five gaps that are priorities for future research.

Limited Empirical Documentation of Insertion Practices

Most studies define insertion theoretically or describe a single programme. Comparative, multi-site studies examining duration, structure, relational depth, programme design, and evaluation are largely absent, limiting guidance for practitioners.

Insufficient Critical Attention to Power, Positionality, and Intersectionality

The literature values presence and solidarity but rarely analyses the power dynamics of insertion: who inserts, from what position of privilege, into whose community, and on whose terms. Frameworks



attentive to race, gender, class, and colonial history are largely absent; only two sources (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; Smith, 2023) address ethics and power (Appendix A, SO3).

Scarcity of African, Asian, and Global South Case Studies

Although Steffen (2020) and Aringo and Odongo (2025) document practice in the Global South, the literature remains dominated by Euro-American traditions, and African, Asian, and other Global South case studies are scarce.

Weak Connection Between Insertion and Research Ethics Frameworks

The literature does not engage formal research ethics frameworks. This gap is inferred from the absence of such reporting rather than coded, since sources were not coded for items such as informed consent or ethics approval. Insertion-specific ethical guidelines addressing consent, power, reciprocity, representation, and potential harm are needed.

Limited Evaluation of Insertion Quality and Downstream Effects

How the depth of insertion shapes the quality of later stages has not been investigated. Longitudinal studies following practitioners and communities through the full cycle would clarify what constitutes genuinely transformative insertion.

Limitations

Several limitations of this review must be acknowledged. First, the final apply. First, the sample is small ($n = 9$), so the six themes may not capture the full range of understandings of insertion. Second, only English-language sources were included, a notable bias given the Latin American, Francophone African, and Asian roots of liberation theology and the Pastoral Cycle. Third, the search is not fully reproducible: no per-database log, duplicate count, or screening record was kept. Fourth, screening, eligibility decisions (including the structural-analogy test), and coding were conducted by a single author without a co-reviewer or inter-rater checking, and no auditable coding trail was preserved. Fifth, the literature is predominantly conceptual or single-site, limiting the strength of evidence for some findings. These limitations define the boundaries of the review's claims and indicate directions for more robust inquiry.

Conclusion

This review examined insertion as the methodological, ethical, and theological entry point of the Pastoral Cycle. Insertion is consistently conceptualised as a participatory and iterative process through which practitioners and communities engage lived realities before analysis, reflection, and action, and it proves adaptable across disciplines and regions. The literature associates it with epistemological transformation, documented empirically by Aringo and Odongo (2025), and with theological formation, articulated conceptually by Tollison (2023). Yet its reflective and evaluative dimensions receive less attention than presence and immersion, and documentation, attention to power and positionality, and engagement with research ethics remain weak. Insertion is a vital methodological commitment whose effectiveness depends on strengthening participatory inclusivity, evaluation, and supportive institutional environments.

The findings reinforce participatory, empowerment, and liberation frameworks for understanding insertion (Cornish et al., 2023; Wallerstein et al., 2020). Insertion contributes a structured mechanism for translating participation into iterative action and reflection. Its overlap with PAR, field immersion, and



accompaniment, however, calls for clearer articulation of its distinct contribution as an ethically committed, spiritually grounded, and cyclically structured entry into lived reality.

Effective insertion requires moving beyond procedural visits to sustained, ethically committed engagement in which communities shape the process (Aringo & Odongo, 2025; Steffen, 2020). Reflection and feedback should be integrated throughout the cycle, and facilitation and ethical discernment skills developed, an implication drawn from Tollison's (2023) and McGladdery's (2024) accounts of insertion's formative demands rather than from documented outcomes. Practitioners should maintain fidelity to presence, participation, solidarity, and praxis rather than treating insertion as a set of isolated activities.

Theological institutions, formation programmes, and development organisations should create enabling frameworks that support long-term presence, local ownership, and flexible timelines, since rigid planning and reporting structures reduce the depth of insertion, and should ensure that insertion is evaluated, documented, and continuously improved.

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Appendix A: Evidence Matrix: Author, Year, Source and Alignment with Specific Objectives

Review: Beginning from the Margins: Insertion in the Pastoral Cycle Methodology Sources included in synthesis: n = 9 | ● = Addressed ○ = Not addressed

Author(s)	Year	Source / Type	SO1	SO2	SO3	SO4	SO5	Themes
Aringo & Odongo	2025	Journal article African J. Higher Education Community Engagement, 1(3), 65-84	●	●	●	●	○	T1,T3,T4,T5,T6
Chirchir	2023	Journal article ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology & Religious Studies, 3(2)	○	●	○	●	●	T2
McGladdery	2024	Professional doctorate thesis Anglia Ruskin University / ARRO	●	●	○	●	○	T1,T2,T3,T6
Pederson et al.	2022	Journal article J. Transformative Education, 20(3), 189-205	●	●	○	●	●	T1,T2,T3,T4,T5
Pierli & Selvam	2017	Journal article African Journal of Social Transformation, 1(1)	○	○	○	●	○	T3
Sebastian	2021	Journal article Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal, 10(2)	●	●	○	●	○	T1,T2,T3,T6
Smith	2023	Journal article J. Ethnic & Cultural Studies, 10(3), 144-155	●	○	●	●	●	T1,T3,T6
Steffen	2020	Journal article Asia Pacific Mission Studies, 2(2)	○	●	○	●	●	T2,T4
Tollison	2023	Journal article Teaching Theology & Religion, 26(1)	○	●	○	●	○	T5
SO1 = Definitions/interpretations of insertion SO2 = Methods of immersion & accompaniment SO3 = Ethical dimensions/power SO4 = Role in social transformation SO5 = Research gaps/future inquiry								
T1 = Immersion in lived reality T2 = Contextual engagement T3 = Praxis T4 = Community participation T5 = Transformative learning T6 = Solidarity & accompaniment								

Note. SO = Specific Objective. T1–T6 = Findings as identified in thematic synthesis. Foundational theoretical and methodological references (e.g., Holland & Henriot, 1983; Green, 2009; Thomas & Harden, 2008) are not treated as primary studies (see Methodology) and are therefore not listed in this matrix.