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Lecturers as redemptive change agents supporting students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at higher educational institutions

Abstract

Teaching diverse students, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), embodies the biblical call to nurture each individual as made in the image of God. This study focused on the lecturer as a redemptive change agent to meet the needs of students with ASD in higher education from a Reformational Christian perspective. Higher education institutions have increasing numbers of students with ASD due to a greater focus on inclusivity, thus necessitating attention to lecturers' roles to support these students. The study adopted a qualitative approach utilising document analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select documents appropriate and relevant to this study. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data. Three themes emerged from the findings: lecturers as prophets, priests, and kings. Theme one focused on lecturers and their institutional preparedness as prophets to support students with ASD. Theme two included lecturers' teaching approaches and adaptation in their roles as priests to support students with ASD. Finally, theme three focused on the institutional support system, where lecturers assume the role of kings to support students with ASD. Based on the findings, the following conclusion is made: As redemptive agents of change, lecturers' teaching approaches should be empathetic, flexible, and adaptable in order to support students with ASD successfully. Lecturers' faith should inspire them to emulate Christ's compassion and grace. Putting Christ at the centre of each lecturer's life will positively influence students with ASD and assist in creating a more supportive and inclusive environment. The findings, obtained by means of a thorough document analysis, can help develop Christ-centred guidelines for supporting lecturers on how to become redemptive change agents in higher education.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder; document analysis; higher education; redemptive change agents; student support

Opsomming

Dosente as verlossende veranderingsagente ter ondersteuning van studente met outismespektrum-versteuring (OSV) in hoëronderwysinstellings

Om diverse studente, insluitend dié met outismespektrum-versteuring (OSV) te onderrig, vergestalt die Bybelse oproep om elke individu, wat na die beeld van God geskape is, te koester. Hierdie studie het gefokus op die dosent as 'n verlossende veranderingsagent om in die behoeftes van studente met OSV in hoër onderwys vanuit 'n Gereformeerde-Christelike perspektief te voorsien. Tans neem die aantal studente met OSV by hoëronderwysinstellings toe weens 'n verhoogde fokus op inklusiwiteit. Dit noodsaak 'n toegespitste aandag op die

ondersteuningsrol wat dosente teenoor hierdie studente vervul. Die studie het 'n kwalitatiewe benadering gevolg deur dokumentalanalise te gebruik. Doelgerigte steekproefneming is aangewend om dokumente te kies wat geskik en toepaslik vir die studie is. Tematiese inhoudsanalise is gebruik om die data te ontleed. Uit die bevindings het drie temas na vore gekom: dosente as profete, priesters en konings. Tema een het gefokus op dosente en hul institusionele gereedheid as profete om studente met OSV te ondersteun. Tema twee het dosente se onderrigbenaderings en aanpassing in hul rol as priesters ingesluit om studente met OSV te ondersteun. Tema drie het ten laaste op die institusionele ondersteuningstelsel gefokus, waar dosente die rol van konings vervul ten einde studente met OSV te ondersteun. Op grond van die bevindings word daar tot die volgende gevolgtrekking gekom: Dosente se onderrigbenaderings moet empaties, buigsaam en aanpasbaar wees ten einde suksesvolle ondersteuning van OSV-studente te verseker. Dosente se geloof moet hulle inspireer om Christus se mededeelsaamheid en genade na te volg. Die sentraalstelling van Christus in elke dosent se lewe sal 'n positiewe invloed op studente met OSV uitoefen en sal tot 'n meer ondersteunende en regverdige omgewing bydra. Die bevindings, wat deur 'n deeglike dokumentalanalise verkry is, kan tot die ontwikkeling van Christosentriese riglyne bydra ter ondersteuning van dosente oor hoe om verlossende veranderingsagente in hoër onderwys te word.

Kernbegrippe: dokumentalanalise; hoër onderwys; outismespektrum-versteuring; studenteondersteuning; verlossende veranderingsagente

Introduction and background

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is characterised by social communication and interaction difficulty, restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, sensory sensitivities, and problems with emotion regulation and flexibility in thinking or routines (Kurtz-Nelson, Beighley, Hudac, Gerdts, Wallace, Hoekzema, Eichler & Bernier, 2020:362). Lecturers may face challenging behaviours when teaching students with ASD, including limited communication, avoiding eye contact, hand flapping, rocking, intolerance of minor changes, and sensitivity to noise / light / tactile stimuli (Maenner, Shaw, Bakian, Bilder, Dunkin, Esler, Furnier, Hallas, Hall-Lande, Hudson, Hughes, Patrick, Pierce, Poynter, Salinas, Shenouda, Vehorn, Warren, Constantino & Cogswell, 2021:3). Higher education is increasingly adopting inclusive practices to support students with ASD. However, challenges remain regarding consistent support and a sense of belonging on campus (Botha & Frost, 2020:26). As a Christian lecturer teaching students with ASD in higher educational settings, it is necessary to fulfil the role of a redemptive change agent. A redemptive change agent is a disciple of Christ who, from a Christian worldview, seeks to alleviate challenges in society or the workplace through redemptive action coupled with personal spirituality (Osburn, 2021:7).

Problem statement

There is an increase in students with ASD in higher educational settings across the world (Bakker, Krabbendam, Bhulai, Meeter & Begeer, 2023:1803). The *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, fifth edition, text revision* (DSM-5-TR) has merged deficiencies in social interaction and communication into a single category of ASD (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). ASD presents unique challenges in higher education, particularly in communication, behaviour, and sensory processing (Maenner *et al.*, 2021:5). The lecturer may be challenged when students present these characteristics during a lesson or learning

process in higher education. Lecturers who teach students with ASD at a higher educational level struggle to accommodate their students' social, academic, and sensory needs (Hillier, Goldstein, Murphy, Trietsch, Keeves, Mendes & Queenan, 2018:21). In light of this increase in students with ASD, lecturers should adapt their teaching styles. These issues are demonstrated by the incapacity to initiate or maintain conversations, read body language, and adjust behaviour based on the circumstances (Cerbo & Rabi, 2019:1152).

Osburn (2021:5) argues that redemptive change agents combine personal spirituality with redemptive action. In other words, they not only live out their private faith. Instead, they engage society with creative, courageous, intelligent, and skilful action to address poverty, corruption, injustice, or lack of education, inspired by Christian principles. This means that Christian lecturers are responsible for supporting students with ASD at higher educational institutions. Therefore, they should support these students and serve as redemptive change agents by mirroring the role of Jesus as Prophet, Priest and King (Osburn, 2021:22).

I saw an increase in students with ASD in higher educational settings, and also became aware of the challenges lecturers face when lecturing students with ASD. I observed the gap in research regarding lecturers teaching students with ASD from a Christian perspective. Furthermore, as a redemptive change agent, I became aware of my responsibility to address societal challenges. Therefore, Christian lecturers should fulfil the role of redemptive change agents and support students with ASD at higher education institutions. On the grounds of this background information, I formulated the following research question.

Research question

How can lecturers as redemptive change agents support students with ASD at higher educational institutions?

Research aim

The research aim of this article is to determine how lecturers as redemptive change agents can support students with ASD at higher educational institutions.

Literature review

The characteristics of ASD

Enduring challenges in social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours characterise ASD in adults. Symptoms often persist into adulthood, albeit in different ways (Bakker *et al.*, 2023:1803). Adults with ASD may struggle with interpreting social cues, sustaining conversations, and forming close relationships; many report social exhaustion or a desire to spend time alone (Lai, Lombardo & Baron-Cohen, 2015:898). Communication tends to be literal and/or overly formal, with challenges in understanding figurative language, sarcasm, or implied meanings (Bakker *et al.*, 2023:1803). Rigid routines and aversion to change are common, as are intense, narrowly focused interests (Hull, Mandy, Lai, Baron-Cohen, Allison, Smith & Petrides, 2018:820).

Many adults with ASD also experience heightened sensory sensitivities, for example, being averse to certain sounds, lights, or textures, which may result in overstimulation and anxiety in everyday environments (Robertson & Baron-Cohen, 2017:672). The adult presentation of ASD can be subtle, particularly in those who have developed compensatory strategies to mask their challenges, a process more often reported by women with autism (Hull, Lai, Baron-Cohen, Allison, Smith, Petrides & Mandy, 2020:353). Many adults on the autism spectrum lead fulfilling lives, particularly when provided with appropriate accommodations

and support, highlighting the value of neurodiversity-affirming practices and inclusive environments (Botha & Frost, 2020:26).

Student support in higher education

Policies supporting students with special educational needs (SEN) at universities have multiplied in the past decade as a result of international commitments to inclusivity and national legislation. At the core of such policies lies the obligation of institutions to provide reasonable adjustments, accessible curricula, and specialised support services to facilitate SEN students' access and participation (Hockings, 2017:46; Moriña, 2017:158). National legislation – such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the US, the UK's Equality Act 2010, as well as institutional policies – have contributed to the development of inclusive practices (Hockings, 2017:47; Moriña, 2017:148).

The Bologna Process in the European Higher Education Area has also emphasised inclusivity in its reform processes, promoting flexible approaches to learning and student-centred teaching (Hockings, 2017:47). In practice, inclusive policies have translated into the expansion of disability support services, inclusive pedagogies, and the use of assistive technology (Kendall, 2017:44; Moriña, 2019:148). However, policy implementation gaps remain, often due to insufficient training of staff, unclear institutional responsibility, and inconsistent adherence to policies (Seale, 2020:189). Inclusive policy development is growing nonetheless, further reinforcing the rights and participation of SEN students at university.

In the African context, policies to support SEN students in higher education have increasingly gained attention. This is particularly due to international and regional commitments, such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016-2025, that have called for such policies (Mutanga, 2017:7). Most African countries have aligned their higher education policies to inclusive education principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to which most are signatories (Mutanga, 2017:7). For instance, South Africa has made strides with policies such as the *White paper on post-school education and training* (2013:3) and the *Strategic policy framework on disability for the post-school education and training system* (2018:3-5), which aim to promote inclusive cultures and access (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2018:4-6).

The implementation of such policies is often inconsistent across Africa due to limited funding, poorly trained staff, and a lack of assistive technologies (Mutanga, 2017:7; Mavuso, 2020:225). Students with disabilities continue to face attitudinal and physical barriers in higher education institutions, pointing to the need for stronger enforcement and monitoring (Mavuso, 2020:225). Nevertheless, disability inclusion in higher education is being increasingly advocated for, which could lead to greater equity.

Students with ASD in higher education

Literature on students with ASD in higher education has increased in recent years, reflecting the growing population of students with ASD entering post-secondary education and the unique challenges they face (Bakker *et al.*, 2023:1803). Research has addressed many of these areas, including academic support, social integration, and institutional policies (Bakker *et al.*, 2023:1803). For example, Scott, Falkmer, Girdler and Falkmer (2015:112) found that university students with ASD were often strong academic achievers, yet they faced social isolation and anxiety as barriers to success.

Similarly, Lei, Calley, Brosnan, Ashwin, and Russell (2020:231) highlighted the importance of structured support services and transition planning for students with autism to promote retention and well-being. Bakker *et al.* (2023:1803) reviewed college programmes designed for students with ASD, emphasising the critical role of individualised support and staff training on inclusive practices. Lei *et al.* (2020:231) also found that inclusive campus environments and peer mentoring programmes significantly improved students' sense

of belonging and engagement. These studies suggest that students with ASD can succeed in higher education, but targeted interventions and institutional awareness are critical to supporting their academic and social development.

In Africa, Sefotho and Onyishi (2021:78) explored the experiences of students with ASD in transitioning to first-year university. Challenges were highlighted, such as peer rejection, social isolation, and a lack of institutional support, which are exacerbated by societal stigma and a lack of awareness. On a continental scale, Sefotho and Onyishi (2021:80) found that while ASD prevalence in Africa is comparable to global levels, diagnosis and intervention are hampered by cultural beliefs, lack of resources, and insufficient numbers of trained professionals. These studies all highlight the urgent need for culturally relevant support systems, professional training, and increased institutional awareness to facilitate fairness and success for students with ASD in African higher education.

Studies of students with ASD in higher education from an African perspective have only started to emerge, albeit with unique findings and challenges. In South Africa, De Jongh and Mapisa (2024:3) found that speech-language pathology and audiology students had knowledge of the core symptoms of ASD and early intervention. However, they were not aware of its prevalence, causes, and treatment, nor were they comfortable working with people with ASD due to a lack of clinical exposure. In light of these findings, this study reinforces the need for enhancing ASD education in higher educational institutions.

Redemptive change agents

In *Developing redemptive change agents: Discipleship that helps nations flourish rather than flounder* (2021), Robert Osburn offers a vision for Christian discipleship, spanning eight chapters. The book “defines, describes, and defends a model of redemptive change agents, the kind of disciple that helps nations flourish rather than flounder” (Osburn, 2021:5). Osburn (as referred to by Sherman, 2016:112) describes a redemptive change agent as a disciple of Christ who aims to address issues in their home, society, or workplace based on a Christian worldview and explains that effective discipleship must include a redemptive engagement in society. Osburn (as quoted by Sherman, 2016:112) identifies “evil systems” as the problems to be addressed, highlighting that these systems hinder the flourishing of society.

Osburn (2021:25) describes these agents as not forcing change but instead using servant leadership, moral courage, and a vision of societal renewal that reflects God’s justice and grace. It is an understanding of a wider missional theology that sees one’s vocation as a part of God’s redemptive work (Sherman, 2016:112; Smith, 2020:32).

Redemptive change agents thus operate at the intersection of faith and public life. They act as prophetic voices against injustice, priestly servants of compassion and reconciliation, and wise kings who steward resources and systems toward the flourishing of humanity (Osburn, 2021:28). Their work is not merely to do good but to restore brokenness in light of the redeeming work of Christ, contributing to the building of a society that reflects the values of the Kingdom of God (Van Duzer, 2019:15).

Consequently, the book seeks to reverse the historical trend of evangelical disengagement from society by critiquing the division between a privatised faith and a secular public square. Osburn claims that this division resulted in a double-mindedness where Christians continue to practise their personal religion while letting secular ideologies dominate public life. The inability to start or continue conversations, read body language, and modify behaviour according to the situation are examples of these difficulties (Cerbo & Rabi, 2019:1156). The author traces this trajectory historically through the rise of religious pluralism, modernism, and the reactionary stance of fundamentalism against the social gospel. The author thereby suggests that this division has led to the privatisation of Christian faith and the abdication of cultural influence. Consequently, Osburn presents a model of discipleship that fills this vacuum by calling Christians to act as agents of redemptive change in society.

Osburn (2021:28) constructs such a model by exploring the meaning of discipleship as a threefold office: prophet, priest, and king. As prophets, redemptive change agents are called to address the significant problem of a broken society and broken systems. As priests, they are called to love their neighbour and remedy that problem. As kings, they are called to lead and govern in order to implement solutions, make things better, and keep them that way.

Osburn (2021:5) maintains that the work of the redemptive change agent is done in the light of the biblical concept of “good works,” which are not a means of salvation, but rather the fruit thereof. He challenges Christians to engage in the work of “courageous good”, that is, the willing and determined effort to perform morally good deeds that will bless the neighbour and advance the common good. Such “good works” are grounded in the cultural mandate to steward the creation and promote the common good. Osburn (2021:6) identifies attributes of the redemptive change agent, including a redemptive, gospel perspective toward the world; an awareness of biblical values for life and society; and a reliance on God instead of self. Furthermore, Osburn (2021:8) calls for Christians to analyse the culture, discern the truth from falsehood, and positively join the networks engaged in redemptive change, all from the posture of a humble and faithful presence.

Methodology

The methodology comprises the worldview, research design, sampling method, data collection method, and data analysis method employed in the study.

Worldview

A Reformational Christian worldview for lecturers supporting students with ASD provides a framework centred in Christ. Based on the biblical narrative of creation, fall (sin) and redemption, the paradigm is underpinned by a Reformational Christian worldview that includes ontology, anthropology, and epistemology (Naugle, 2012:19). It provides lecturers with a Reformational Christian worldview lens to understand their calling (Naugle, 2012:19). The biblical narrative of creation, fall and redemption provides a redemptive vision for lecturing students with ASD.

In creation, lecturers can identify the God-created potential of each student. In sin and brokenness, lecturers can identify the barriers to inclusion and learning. Furthermore, lecturers can acknowledge the struggle with sensory and other sensitivities, emotional and social anxiety, executive functioning, and communication. Lecturers can also respond with understanding, flexibility, and scaffolding that empower students. As redemptive change agents, lecturers can be agents of renewal (Naugle, 2012:19), as they can structure learning experiences that foster inclusion. They can also structure learning experiences that foster renewal, growth, and transformation. In doing this, lecturers are invited to be bridge-builders, reconcilers, and image-bearers. In this way, the lecturer, student and campus are reconciled to God: Their God-given potential and calling are affirmed and renewed. Their dignity is respected. Their brokenness is recognised and transformed. Inclusion is more than an academic and professional duty. It is rather an exercise in theology. Ontologically, reality is created and upheld by the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Van der Walt, 2024:45). Lecturers and students are part of this God-created reality in which each individual is unique and valued.

Anthropologically, humanity is created in the image of God (Van der Walt, 2024:45). Consequently, the lecturer is invited to see their students, including those with ASD, as part of this image-bearing (Naugle, 2012:48). The lecturer is thus invited to respond with dignity and worth. However, humanity is in a state of sin and brokenness, with all having sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), and the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). This truth finds expression in many ways, including parts of the cognitive, social, spiritual, and physical brokenness experienced by all humanity, which also include ASD and learning differently.

Yet, the narrative of the Bible does not end in brokenness (Naugle, 2012:48). God sent his Son to take the penalty of sin. His gift of salvation gives eternal life to all who believe in Him (Naugle, 2012:49). God's truth thus calls the lecturer to acknowledge brokenness and respond to students in ways that reflect God's grace, patience, and redemptive acts. The lecturer is, therefore, invited to reflect Jesus Christ's love in their teaching.

Epistemologically, the biblical truth is that God has revealed Himself to creation through his visible creation and in the written word of the Bible (Van der Walt, 2024:46). God's glory and order can be seen in creation (Psalms 19:1; Romans 1:20). The Bible is God's authoritative word that constitutes the truth of creation and humanity. Thus, for the Christian academic, all knowledge is God's knowledge (Naugle, 2012:62). Seen in this light, teaching is an exercise in stewardship and service. The lecturer is called to be an image-bearer, to tell the truth, and to bridge gaps. Therefore, Christian lecturers can be redemptive change agents when supporting students with ASD.

Research design

The research question is the following: *How can lecturers as redemptive change agents support students with ASD at higher educational institutions?* Based on this question, a qualitative research design was most appropriate for this study. Due to the analysis, a qualitative research design is subjective and constructed according to the researcher's knowledge and construction of meaning (Maree, 2025:45). When the qualitative research technique is applied, the researcher becomes the primary tool of the study, which increases their subjectivity of the design (Schurink, Schurink & Fouché, 2021:293). Qualitative research is employed to gain a deeper understanding of a situation (Van der Walt, 2024:98). Christian lecturers as redemptive change agents have the responsibility to identify social issues and address them based on biblical principles (Osburn, 2021:28).

Sampling method

Purposive sampling was used to select documents appropriate for this study. Purposive sampling is precisely what the name implies: the sample members are chosen to represent the group with the key criterion or typical demographic characteristics (Nieuwenhuis, 2025:110). The purposive sample included documents related to the research question: How can lecturers as redemptive change agents support students with ASD at higher educational institutions? Documents most likely to share in-depth information for the study were selected using purposeful sampling (Maree, 2025:40). The documents collected in this study had to include the following keywords: lecturers, support, ASD, and higher education. Using the included keywords to select the documents purposively, the sample was purposively selected. For this study, the sample was documents relating to redemptive change agents and lecturers supporting students with ASD. The documents included *Developing redemptive change agents: Discipleship that helps nations flourish rather than flounder* (2021) by Robert Osburn and five articles based on lecturers supporting students with ASD in higher educational institutions.

Data collection

Document analysis was used to collect the data concerning lecturers as redemptive change agents who support students with ASD at higher educational institutions. This method is suitable when using documents such as articles and other documents related to the focus of the study (Van der Walt, 2024:115). Document analysis is part of qualitative research where new insights are gained (Van der Walt, 2024:115). The selected documents included one book on developing redemptive change agents and five articles on lectures that support students with ASD in higher education. Christian higher educational institutions were not directly studied in the five articles due to the lack of resources. However, general findings about faculty preparedness and teaching adaptations for students with ASD appear relevant to faith-based settings. I used the book as the faith-based foundation of the documents.

Data analysis

The thematic content analysis approach is used to analyse the raw data to produce and interpret findings (Maree, 2025:44). In this study, the data on lecturers' experiences teaching students with ASD were analysed using thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis helps identify patterns or recurring themes within the data (Van der Walt, 2024:115). The data analysis method used in this study was the thematic content analysis process, as described by Braun and Clark (2006:77). I integrated my analysis of the book *Developing redemptive change agents* with the themes emerging from the analysis of the articles, situating both within a Reformational Christian worldview. I analysed the five articles using the seven phases of thematic content analysis, which will be discussed in more detail below.

The first phase of my research involved becoming acquainted with the raw data acquired from the documents. In the second phase, I generated codes from the information collected from the five articles. I then proceeded to the third phase once I identified the most prevalent topics and assigned relevant codes to provide context. Then, I moved to the fourth phase of thematic content analysis, namely code clustering. This involved grouping related codes into clusters (Niewenhuis & Jacobs, 2025:154). After this was completed, I created themes based on the topics emerging from these code clusters, a process that represents the fifth phase of thematic content analysis. Then I moved to the sixth phase, which involved creating categories by grouping similar ideas into one category (Niewenhuis & Jacobs, 2025:154). These categories were utilised to group the identified subjects. In the seventh and final phase, the data findings were compiled into a report (Niewenhuis & Jacobs, 2025:154).

Ethical considerations

This study examines the ethics in research practice from a Reformational Christian worldview. According to Niewenhuis and Jacobs (2025:163), ethics in research practice is based on moral values. This implies that the value system on which people base their decisions influences their thinking and, subsequently, affects their behaviour. One of the first moral values a Christian should consider is the value of human dignity. "God created mankind in his own image" (Genesis 1:27-28) reminds the researcher to treat every source used in the study with respect. When conducting a document analysis, sources were handled with respect by using open-access sources and referencing the sources used in the study.

Maree (2025:47) argues that research needs to be prepared meticulously and followed by a strict process to conduct quality research. Moreover, Niewenhuis and Jacobs (2025:163) state that giving credit where credit is due is essential in research. The principle of justice is also reflected in Exodus 20:16: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour." The researcher presents false testimony when using documents, data or sources without the necessary acknowledgement. This passage guided me to read documents with integrity and draw appropriate interpretations and conclusions. It means that everything should be written truthfully, including the things I disagree with. In this way, scientific credibility is maintained and Christian ethical responsibility is shown.

Findings

From the analysis of the five articles, I identified three themes based on lecturers supporting students with ASD in higher educational institutions. I further integrated Osburn's view on redemptive change agents by applying Jesus's role as Prophet, Priest, and King to the three themes (Osburn, 2021:22).

Tables 1 to 3 indicate the themes that emerged from the documents analysed. The tables display three themes that emerged from the data, which were then linked to the three roles of a redemptive change agent: prophet, priest, and king. The role of the prophet is to identify a social issue or problem. The role of the priest is to show deep empathy for a social problem. The role of the king is to take action to address the social issue.

Table 1: Lecturers and institutional preparedness as prophets to support students with ASD

Authors' names	General themes based on lecturers and institutional preparedness as prophets to support students with ASD
Austin and Peña (2017)	They reported that exemplary lecturers and higher education institutions drew on their experiences with individuals with disabilities to support students with ASD.
Salleh and Khairuddin (2020)	They emphasised the importance of ASD awareness and knowledge for lecturers.
Lubin (2019)	The study highlighted the need for higher education institutions to understand ASD and its associated challenges.
McKeon, Alpern and Zager (2013)	The study explored lecturers' and higher education institutions' understanding and expectations of students with ASD, noting challenges due to the increasing number of ASD students entering college.
Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014)	They focused on lecturers' and higher education institutions' experiences with ASD students, implying the importance of experiential learning in developing support strategies.

Table 2: Lecturers' teaching approaches and adaptation to support students with ASD

Authors' names	General themes based on the teaching approaches and adaptations of lecturers who act as priests to support students with ASD
Austin and Peña (2017)	They identified strategies, including structured scaffolding, differentiated instruction, comprehensive accommodations, and collaborative institutional support.
Salleh and Khairuddin (2020)	They reported that lecturers with high readiness could help ASD students overcome difficulties in their studies.
Lubin (2019)	The study recommended minimising figurative language, providing step-by-step directions, using task analysis, and making due dates clear.
McKeon <i>et al.</i> (2013)	The study mentioned guidelines for facilitating access to the curriculum for all learners, including students with ASD.
Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014)	They highlighted challenges faced by ASD students, including difficulties with theory of mind, weak central coherence in cognitive processing, and struggles with executive function.

Table 3: An institutional support system to support students with ASD

Authors' names	General themes based on the institutional support system, assuming the role of a king to support students with ASD
Austin and Peña (2017)	They mentioned collaborative institutional support as part of successful support strategies.
Salleh and Khairuddin (2020)	They did not explicitly address institutional support systems in their findings.
Lubin (2019)	The study recommended the use of Universal Design for Instruction to make educational environments more accessible for all students.
McKeon <i>et al.</i> (2013)	The study explored challenges faced by professors due to the increasing number of ASD students, implying a need for institutional-level responses.
Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014)	They did not explicitly address institutional support systems in their findings.

Discussion

As presented in the findings, three themes were identified based on lecturers supporting students with ASD in higher educational institutions. Theme one focused on lecturers and institutional preparedness as prophets to support students with ASD. Theme two included lecturers' teaching approaches and adaptation to support students with ASD. Finally, theme three focused on the institutional support system to support students with ASD.

Theme One: Lecturers and institutional preparedness as prophets to support students with ASD

Building on Osburn's (2021) model of redemptive change agents, the prophet role involves speaking for justice, challenging the status quo, and holding institutions and individuals accountable. In this view, lecturers and the institutions that work with students with ASD must act as prophets by addressing the gaps in their practices, as well as issues of inclusion and justice. The findings of Austin and Peña (2017:17) and Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014:5) indicate that lecturers who share experiences of disabilities or personal encounters have the ability to identify the unmet needs of students with ASD.

Furthermore, these lecturers can challenge the pedagogy by designing and implementing innovative pedagogies that are more inclusive and empathetic (Austin & Peña, 2017:17; Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014:5). This willingness to innovate and personalise practical support for students with ASD can be characterised as the role of the "prophet" whereby the voice calls for a form of redemption of the faith community (Osburn, 2021:22).

The findings from Salleh and Khairuddin (2020:168) and Lubin (2019:88) on the need for greater understanding and awareness of ASD can be further explored in the context of the prophetic calling. This general lack of preparedness by the lecturers to handle students with ASD can be considered as the gaps that call for the voice of the prophet. In this sense, the prophet is the lecturer or academic staff member who raises awareness of this general lack of preparedness among lecturers and calls for greater training and systemic changes that acknowledge the dignity and rights of students with ASD.

McKeon, Alpern and Zager (2013:354) also point to the challenges that lecturers in higher education face due to the increasing enrolment of neurodiverse students. In this context, the voice of the prophet can be seen as that of the institutional change agent who not only acknowledges the demographic shift but also calls for curricular support provision and lecturer development changes that accompany these changes.

From the perspective of Osburn's prophetic view, the lecturers and the institution need to be the voice and conscience that calls for their institutions to move from compliance to genuine inclusion, acceptance, and a culture of belonging. This should be achieved by naming the injustices and speaking up for the marginalised learners, as well as initiating practices that are loving, just, empathetic, and transformative. The lecturers and the institution that are prepared to support students with ASD, therefore, are not simply providing accommodation. Their practice is a form of prophetic calling that challenges the norms, values, and practices of exclusion, calling for systemic change and modelling redemptive action.

Theme Two: Lecturers' teaching approaches and adaptation to support students with ASD

Building on Osburn's (2021) theological conceptualisation of priests as servants, mediators, and evangelists, the role of the lecturer in supporting students with ASD can be reframed as a vocational duty and a type of pastoral care. According to Osburn, the priest is not a ritual functionary, but someone who provides access to the sacred, interprets for others, and draws them into a fuller life in the community. From this point of view, the lecturer becomes the "academic priest", whose vocation is an ethical and pedagogical duty to draw students (who are vulnerable in various ways) further into the academic community. From this perspective, the strategies Austin and Peña (2017:20-21) suggest – such as structured scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and collaborative institutional support – become priestly acts of mediation and interpretation. The priest bridged the sacred and the human. In the same way, the lecturer can bridge the institution's expectations and the experiences of students with ASD by helping them to navigate the often-overwhelming structures of an academic institution. Supportive collaboration among academic staff reflects the priestly ministry's communal and relational features.

Lubin's (2019:93) suggestion to avoid figurative language, provide step-by-step instructions, and use task analysis reflects a priestly attentiveness to the other's capacity to understand and engage. In the past, the priest has translated complex spiritual truths into forms of understanding and activity that others can share. Similarly, the lecturer serves as an interpreter, interpreting complex information into forms that make sense to the learner whose neurodiversity requires concrete and precise communication.

Gobbo and Shmulsky (2014:7) highlight the cognitive challenges faced by students on the spectrum, including difficulties with the theory of mind and executive function. In order to support students with unseen learning difficulties, they propose that lecturers should use priestly compassion and discernment to look beyond the student's outward appearance and address unexpressed demands with patience, flexibility, and care. Like the priest, the minister, with their vocation, is a witness to belonging within the community and compassion. Likewise, the lecturer must also accompany their students to care for their needs and those of the community, so that everyone can learn. In this sense, the lecturer serves as a spiritual leader who creates homes and communities. Thus, the lecturer assumes the role of a teaching priest and remains continuously present with the student community.

McKeon *et al.* (2013:360) advocate inclusive curricular practices, which resonate with Osburn's idea of the priest as a gatekeeper of inclusion. Thus, the priest is responsible for each one's participation in the community ritual. Similarly, the lecturer is responsible for ensuring that learning structures accommodate all students, taking into account their individual capacities and abilities. It requires the lecturer to proactively remove barriers and provide multiple pathways for students to be active and successful participants.

Finally, Salleh and Khairuddin (2020:166) call for the lecturer to be prepared, which is closely related to the priest's continuing formation, training, and readiness to serve. Just as the priest is constantly trained, refreshed, and prepared to meet the community's needs, the lecturer must be committed to professional development, cultivating empathy, good knowledge, and understanding of student needs and characteristics.

If we view the lens of Osburn (2021) – in which priests are seen as servants, mediators, and evangelists – the lecturer's role in supporting students with ASD becomes a profound and ethical vocation. Practical strategies, explicit instruction, curriculum adaptation, collaborative structures, and informed practices are more than technical responses to needs; they are essential components of effective education. They are acts of servant leadership and academic ministry. In this perspective, inclusive education is not just a policy mandate but a vocation of service, wisdom, and care.

Theme Three: An institutional support system to support students with ASD

When viewed through Osburn's idea of "kings", institutional support for students with ASD expands and deepens in its ethical and philosophical call. The "kingly" call on leadership is to create and lead institutions where all can thrive, and the call for collaborative institutional support that Austin and Peña (2017:25) echo reflects this call to lead in such a way that promotes the flourishing of all. Departments, faculty, and support services are all meant to be aligned in support of all students.

McKeon *et al.* (2013:365) stress the pressure academic staff of higher education institutions are under in light of rising numbers of students with ASD lacking institutional support, demonstrating a failure of "kings" to meet the needs of students. In Osburn's view, this is a call for the leadership to remove barriers and outfit their "kingdom" of faculty, curriculum, and services with the support and protection they need to support those people they are obliged to provide for and protect.

Finally, Lubin's (2019:96) promotion of universal design for institutions is exactly Osburn's call for leaders to act in a "kingly" way, providing not reactive, but proactive instruction that makes learning a place that all can access. In Osburn's view, it is the "kingly" leadership role to make learning a place where all, regardless of need, can grow and develop. In Osburn's view of kings, the "kingly" call of institutions on leaders moves from policy and logistics to a call to serve, protect, and advance the interests of all community members, especially those most vulnerable.

This means that as a Christian lecturer, it is a responsibility to support students with ASD at higher educational institutions. We should support these students and be redemptive change agents by mirroring the role of Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King (Osburn, 2021:22). As a *prophet*, a lecturer and an institution should accurately diagnose a problem. The problem the lecturer should identify is that students with ASD present challenges in the classroom due to their characteristics. God created every individual in His image, who is unique and has potential. This potential was eliminated through sin and can only be redeemed through the redemption of Jesus Christ. As a prophet, the lecturer should thus advocate for students with ASD and expose practices where discrimination may occur (Osburn, 2021:22).

As a *priest*, the lecturer should demonstrate deep empathy and care for students with ASD (Osburn, 2021:23). The lecturer should walk alongside students with ASD and support them. Technical solutions to demands are only a fraction of tactics, articulated visions, curriculum adaptation, collaborative frameworks, and informed practices. The lecturer embodies the principles of academic ministry and servant leadership. From this perspective, inclusive education is a vocation of service, intelligence, and compassion rather than a legal mandate.

Teachers and institutions should use their power, steward their resources, and engage in redemptive activity for the king. "Kingly" leadership fosters a safe and supportive

environment for learning, where everyone can grow and thrive, regardless of their needs. Osburn (2021:24) notes that the “kingly” obligation of institutions on leaders shifts from logistics and policy to a call to serve, defend, and promote the interests of all community members, especially the most vulnerable. Hence, this model invites Christian leaders to balance truth, compassion, and wise leadership, all rooted in a Christ-centred worldview. Therefore, as a Christian lecturer, they are a redemptive change agent and should support students with ASD at higher education institutions.

Table 4: Summary of findings

Redemptive Change Agents Framework	Link between the Redemptive Change Agents Framework and findings
Prophet	• As a prophet, a lecturer and an institution should accurately diagnose a problem. • The problem that the lecturer should identify is that students with ASD present challenges in the classroom due to their characteristics. • God created every individual in his image, each unique and full of potential. • This potential was eliminated through sin and can only be redeemed through the Redemption of Jesus Christ. • The lecturer should advocate for the students with ASD and expose practices where discrimination may occur.
Priest	• As a priest, the lecturer should demonstrate deep empathy and care for students with ASD. • The lecturer should walk alongside students with ASD and support them. • Effective strategies, clear instruction, curriculum adaptation, collaborative structures, and informed practices are more than technical responses to needs. • They are acts of servant leadership and academic ministry. In this perspective, inclusive education is not just a policy mandate but a vocation of service, wisdom, and care.
King	• In the role of the king, a lecturer and institutions should use their authority, steward resources, and implement redemptive initiatives. • In Osburn’s view, the “kingly” leadership role creates a learning environment where all, regardless of need, can grow and develop. • The “kingly” call of institutions on leaders moves from policy and logistics to a call to serve, protect, and advance the interests of all members of the community, especially those most vulnerable. • This model invites Christian leaders to balance truth, compassion, and wise leadership, all rooted in a Christ-centred worldview.

The findings answer the research question, namely “How can lecturers as redemptive change agents support students with ASD at higher educational institutions?”. Lecturers as redemptive change agents can support students with ASD in higher education by assuming

the roles of prophets, priests, and kings. This involves the following: identifying the social issue (prophets) involving the challenges that students with ASD may experience in higher education, showing deep empathy (priests) for the challenges students with ASD may experience in higher education, and taking action (kings) to address the challenges students with ASD may experience in higher education by being prepared, adapting teaching approaches, and implementing support systems.

Conclusion

Supporting ASD students in higher education involves faculty preparation, adaptive teaching strategies, and institutional support systems. The studies indicate a need for approaches that address all these levels to support ASD students in their higher education journey. Through their roles as the integrated prophet, priest, and king, the lecturer and the institution are redemptive change agents who can lead students, especially students with ASD, to experience inclusive education through Christ's redemptive love and truth.

As prophets, lecturers discern and report the barriers that prevent students with ASD from accessing an inclusive education. As priests, they accompany and serve by providing adaptive teaching, thoughtful care, and a servant heart to every student with ASD so they can grow to their full potential. As kings, lecturers embody the institution's authority on campus by directing and transforming the environment into a place where students with ASD can enjoy being part of the community, achieve their goals, and reach their full potential. Therefore, as a Christian lecturer, they are a redemptive change agent – assuming the role of the prophet, priest, and king – who can support students with ASD at higher education institutions.

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