scope
Contemporary Research Topics

work-based learning 7
November 2025

Article
https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6007010

FROM GIRMIT TO GROWTH: A JOURNEY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP AND MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

Article https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.6007010

FROM GIRMIT TO GROWTH: A JOURNEY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY, LEADERSHIP AND MATHEMATICS EDUCATION

Ritesh Navin Kumar

OVERVIEW

In the evolving landscape of education, professional identity is no longer a fixed construct, but a dynamic process shaped by continuous reflection, responsiveness to change, and a commitment to personal and professional growth (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). This article presents my journey of professional transformation shaped by lived experience, cultural heritage, and responsive leadership in mathematics education. Framed within the broader context of the Indian diaspora, cultural displacement, and political upheaval in Fiji, this narrative traces how my journey from Fiji to New Zealand not only reshaped my identity but also transformed how I teach, lead, and continue to learn. Central to this narrative is a critical inquiry into the intersection of mathematics anxiety, metacognition, and cultural heritage.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As a person of colour working within an education system shaped by colonial ideologies, I have navigated a career marked by personal, cultural, and professional transformation. As conveyed in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, "The living being is said to be of a particular faith according to the modes he has acquired" (Prabhupada, 1983, 17.3). This verse has been a guiding principle in my leadership journey, reinforcing the idea that our belief is the foundation of becoming. As I reflect on my past and examine the intersections of my identity, I realise how deeply my ancestral roots inform my teaching philosophy and leadership in mathematics education.

Growing up in Vaivai Lautoka, a remote Fijian village without electricity or running water, I experienced hardship firsthand. Walking barefoot to school and studying by kerosene lamp taught me the value of persistence, purpose, and appreciation for learning. Despite material hardship, life was filled with purpose. As a fourth-generation descendant of *Girmitiyas*, the indentured labourers brought to Fiji under colonial rule from India, I carry a deep awareness of historical trauma, intergenerational resilience, and structural inequities that persist today. This history informs not only my personal identity but also how I conceptualise my teaching practice in the classroom and beyond.

Guided by the ancient Hindu scriptures such as the *Ramayan* and *Bhagavad-Gītā*, my parents nurtured in me a respect for moral integrity. These texts explore the challenges of doubt, fear, and decision-making, offering insights into self-awareness, resilience, and leadership that remain relevant in educational contexts today. Principles such as *dharma* (righteous duty), *karma* (ethical action), *gyan* (knowledge), and *seva* (selfless service) were lived practices. For me, *karma* is central to my evolving role as a mathematics leader. It highlights the significance of responsibility and accountability, not just in personal actions but in the broader influence we have on others. Today, these principles ground my research into mathematics anxiety and metacognition, shaping my view of education as a journey of professional growth and shared empowerment.

ANCESTRAL ROOTS: THE *GIRMIT* ERA

The abolition of African slavery led to labour shortages across British colonies, prompting the establishment of the Indian Indenture System (IIS) in 1838 (Mishra, 2009). The IIS was a rebranded form of slavery, marked by deceptive recruitment practices, oppressive working conditions, and inhumane treatment (Lal, 1983; Mishra, 2009). By the time the IIS system was abolished in 1917, over 1.3 million Indians had been transported to colonies such as Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius, and Fiji (Lal, 2012).

In Fiji, the sugarcane industry relied heavily on Indian labour. On 14 May 1879, the *Leonidas* brought the first group of 463 labourers to Fiji (Lal, 1983). By 1916, over 60,000 Indians had arrived (Lal, 1983; Mishra, 2009). Among them were my great-grandparents: simple, innocent villagers deeply rooted in their culture. Their journey was harrowing; herded like animals onto overcrowded ships, they endured a gruelling two-and-a-half-month sea voyage (Lal, 2012), permanently severed from their families and ancestral land. My father often recounted horrific stories of how children, pregnant mothers, and those who died of starvation were tossed into the sea. The colonisers, he said, were barbaric, heartless beings who took innocent lives and looted India. Many, including my great-grandparents, lost all contact with their families in India. Hence, I am unable to trace the exact origins of my ancestors in Northern India.

The term *Girmit*, a phonetic adaptation of the English word "agreement," became a common term to describe the indenture contract (Lal, 2012). Those who served under it in Fiji became known as *Girmitiyas*. They were forced to endure harsh and dehumanising living and working conditions. This exploitation often involved physical abuse, low wages and, at times, the complete denial of wages (Lal, 1985a; Prasad, 2006). Harrowing stories such as that of Kunti, a *Girmitiya* woman who leapt off a cliff to escape rape by a European overseer (Lal, 1985b) reflect the gravity of their suffering. These conditions reflect the deliberate strategies used to control and oppress indentured labourers. Yet, in the face of such adversity, the resilience and strength of the *Girmitiyas* prevailed.

After decades of indentured labour, *Girmitiyas* were nominally offered the option to return to India. However, research suggests that colonial authorities manipulated repatriation policies to retain a steady supply of cheap labour (Lal, 2004). My great-grandparents, like many others, remained and rebuilt their lives in Fiji, unknowingly setting the stage for future generations to face ongoing marginalisation and structural discrimination. The brutal legacy of the *Girmit* system remains underrepresented in official histories but continues to survive through intergenerational storytelling, such as the accounts passed down to me by my father. The courage of my ancestors shapes my commitment to teaching and informs how I confront systemic barriers in education.

GIRMIT LEGACY

Brought to Fiji from different regions of India, *Girmitiyas* formed a new identity as Fiji-Indian. By combining various dialects and cultural elements, they created Fiji-Hindi, a koiné language (Lal, 2012) that was passed down through generations as our mother tongue. Denied access to native land ownership, they survived by leasing land from Indigenous Fijians and cultivating their own farms or establishing businesses. Despite their pain and hardship, the *Girmitiyas* exhibited incredible resilience and laid the foundation for future generations by prioritising education and preserving cultural heritage.

The stories of trauma and resilience passed down through my family are not just historical events but personal legacies that have deeply influenced my worldview. My father's recounting of their struggles and endurance instilled in me a strong sense of responsibility to serve others and honour their sacrifices. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* emphasises, "You have the right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions" (Prabhupada, 1983, 2.47), and continues to guide my approach to leadership, focusing on purposeful action and integrity without attachment to outcomes. The Girmit legacy is not only a part of my family's history but also a powerful source of inspiration in my professional journey. As a descendant of *Girmitiyas*, I carry their pain,

strength, and dreams within me. Understanding Girmit legacy helps ground my identity and strengthens my resolve to lead in ways that honour cultural heritage and promote justice.

WHY MATHEMATICS EDUCATION?

In a setting marked by poverty, spiritual devotion, and communal labour, mathematics provided not only clarity but a glimpse of possibility beyond the sugarcane fields. I recall moments on the farm, drenched in sweat, yet my mind preoccupied by a calculus problem, revealing a profound tension between survival and the transformative potential of learning. It was, in Mezirow's (2000) terms, a "disorienting dilemma," the spark of transformation that redirected my life from manual labour to intellectual pursuit. Higher education was not merely a personal aspiration, but a necessary path out of generational poverty.

Mathematics, once a personal refuge, became a calling and a professional responsibility to uplift others through teaching. I was fortunate to continue my tertiary studies through a government scholarship. However, the racially charged violence during the 1987 and 2000 coups where Fiji-Indians were targeted, looted, and assaulted, ultimately compelled me to leave Fiji. I arrived in New Zealand carrying not only the grief of displacement but also a deep sense of purpose and hope for what could still be built.

A JOURNEY OF IDENTITY AND LEADERSHIP IN NEW ZEALAND

Transitioning to New Zealand brought cultural dislocation and challenges. I carried the weight of my family's sacrifices, hopes, and expectations, yet I was unsure of my own place in an unfamiliar world. During uncertain moments, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* verse "For the doubting soul there is happiness neither in this world nor in the next" (Prabhupada, 1983, 4.40) reminded me that doubt undermines both clarity and action. It taught me that cultivating self-belief was not optional, but necessary to move forward with purpose, just as my ancestors had done in the face of adversity.

The resilience of my *Girmitiya* ancestors who preserved their cultural identity while adapting to a foreign land, mirrors that of my own journey. As a child, I did not fully grasp the significance of this inheritance, but over time, their stories laid the foundation for my professional identity. Experiences of racism in New Zealand have at times, deeply affected my wellbeing, challenging my sense of belonging and identity. These are not isolated incidents but reflect broader systemic issues that many minority learners and educators continue to face (Bell, 2021). Racism has no place in New Zealand, and my cultural heritage instils in me a firm rejection of it. I draw strength from this dual heritage while connecting with diverse learners. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* teaches: "Whatever you do, … and whatever austerities you perform, do that, … as an offering..."(Prabhupada, 1983, 9.27). This philosophy inspires me to lead not for personal recognition, but in service to the communities I belong to. This cultural and spiritual foundation sustains my leadership, both within my school and nationally, through roles such as National Assessment Moderator. Being awarded the University of Auckland's Kalman Teacher Excellence Prize in 2021 reinforced not only my professional impact, but also the values of integrity and service that underpin my work.

My identity as a mathematics educator is still evolving, continually shaped by lived experience. This transformation affirms that our histories are not burdens but guiding forces that inform our becoming. Drawing on autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), I see my personal stories not merely as reflection, but as knowledge that shapes how I teach, lead, and understand myself. The shift from classroom teacher to curriculum leader and researcher has been a journey of ongoing reflection. Each step has pushed me to re-examine my values and responsibilities, aligning with Clarke, Hyde, and Drennan's (2013) concept of "professional becoming."

LOST IDENTITY

Fiji-Indians are distinct from contemporary Indian populations. The misclassification of Fiji-Indians in New Zealand perpetuates a sense of lost identity. As *Girmitiya* descendants rooted in the Pacific, we exist on the fringes of New Zealand's cultural and educational frameworks. Frequently categorised under broad ethnic labels such as "Asian" or "Other," Fiji-Indians are often excluded from Pacific-focused education policies and benefits allocated to Pasifika communities. Macpherson (2016) highlights the negative impact of such misclassification on identity formation, educational outcomes, and access to social resources. It demonstrates that accurate demographic categorisation is essential for ensuring that communities are properly supported in their pursuit of educational and social equity.

Recognising these aspects is crucial for supporting educational inclusion and cultural acknowledgement. New Zealand's policymakers must acknowledge Fiji-Indians as an Indo-Pasifika community. This would reflect our unique cultural and historical legacy, grant appropriate access to resources and cultural supports, and affirm our place within New Zealand's diverse society.

BECOMING A TEACHER-LEADER IN NEW ZEALAND

Moving to New Zealand, I soon recognised the shared legacies of colonisation between Māori and Pacific peoples and my own *Girmitiya* heritage. This awareness deepened my empathy and strengthened my commitment to serve those often marginalised by the educational system. It also reaffirmed my responsibility, as a leader, to uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi: partnership, protection, and participation (Ministry of Education, 2019), in all aspects of my teaching practice.

Mathematics, as a human construct, provides a unique framework for understanding and interpreting the world. For me, it is not merely a subject; it is a lens through which I engage with the world around me. I have long been fascinated by how nature inherently follows mathematical principles, from the spirals of shells and river meanders to the tessellations in a beehive (Devlin, 2000). These patterns are not just mathematical curiosities; they reflect a universal language that mathematics helps us decode, offering insights into the beauty and structure inherent in our surroundings. Beyond its structural presence, mathematics equips individuals with essential skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000), which are necessary to navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century. Yet, for many students, mathematics remains a source of anxiety, fear, and disengagement (Ashcraft, 2002). This disconnect, where a subject so integral to understanding the world can leave so many students feeling alienated and distressed, is the foundation of my doctoral research.

RESEARCH ON MATHEMATICS ANXIETY: A BARRIER TO LEARNING

I am increasingly concerned about the persistent issues of disengagement and underachievement in mathematics. These challenges are compounded when students struggle to find meaning in mathematical content or fail to see its relevance to real-life situations (Kaiser & Schwarz, 2019). Such disconnection often results in negative attitudes toward the subject. Students' sentiments such as, "Where am I going to use this? Do I really need this? Mathematics is hard" or "Why do I have to learn this?" reflect not only cognitive struggles but also deep emotional and cultural disconnections from the curriculum.

Mathematics anxiety is a significant affective barrier that negatively impacts students' performance and willingness to engage with mathematics (Ashcraft, 2002). This psychological phenomenon disrupts working memory, which has a limited capacity for processing and holding information (Ashcraft & Kirk, 2001). When anxiety occupies cognitive resources, it reduces the availability of mental space needed for problem-solving and mathematical reasoning, thereby impairing performance and fostering avoidance behaviours (Ashcraft, 2002). I have noticed

students with high levels of mathematics anxiety often lack confidence and tend to avoid mathematics tasks resulting in academic underachievement. This psychological burden is worrying in the twenty-first century, where mathematical literacy is essential for a wide range of academic and career opportunities (Ashcraft, 2002).

Despite facing cultural disconnection, racism, and systemic barriers, I focus on improving mathematics outcomes by addressing both systemic barriers and the importance of relational, culturally grounded leadership.

This research uses a mixed-methods approach:

1. **Quantitative Survey:** Conducted with 298 secondary students at Henderson High School via Qualtrics, measuring mathematics anxiety and metacognitive awareness using validated scales.
2. **Autoethnography:** A critical reflection of my identity as Fiji-Indian mathematics educator.

Ethics approval was granted by the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics Committee (Reference: 976).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mathematics anxiety

Mathematics anxiety is a feeling of tension, apprehension, or fear that interferes with mathematical performance, often resulting in avoidance of mathematical tasks, reduced confidence, and diminished achievement (Ashcraft, 2002).

Table 1 presents a prevalence of mathematics anxiety across gender, ethnicity and year level among students at Henderson High School. The mathematics anxiety levels were scored between 18 (Low) and 90 (Severe).

		Mathematics Anxiety	Mathematics Anxiety Levels							
			Low (18-34)		Moderate (35-54)		High (55-75)		Severe (76-90)	
		Mean	Count (N)	Table N %	Count (N)	Table N %	Count (N)	Table N %	Count (N)	Table N %
Gender	Female | Wahine	59	3	1.0%	45	15.1%	77	25.8%	12	4.0%
	Male | Tāne	48	27	9.1%	75	25.2%	46	15.4%	0	0.0%
	Other	54	0	0.0%	6	2.0%	7	2.3%	0	0.0%
Ethnicity	Asian, Indian or Other	48	9	3.0%	29	9.7%	18	6.0%	0	0.0%
	Māori, Pasifika	55	5	1.7%	60	20.1%	59	19.8%	6	2.0%
	NZ European/Pakeha	54	16	5.4%	37	12.4%	53	17.8%	6	2.0%
Year	Year 9	52	14	4.7%	49	16.4%	46	15.4%	4	1.3%
	Year 10	57	3	1.0%	26	8.7%	23	7.7%	5	1.7%
	Year 11	53	4	1.3%	26	8.7%	25	8.4%	2	0.7%
	Year 12	50	8	2.7%	17	5.7%	17	5.7%	1	0.3%
	Year 13	56	1	0.3%	8	2.7%	19	6.4%	0	0.0%
	Total	**53**	**30**	**10.1%**	**126**	**42.3%**	**130**	**43.6%**	**12**	**4.0%**

Table 1: Prevalence of mathematics anxiety (N = 298).

Survey results showed a high prevalence of mathematics anxiety, with 89.9 percent of participants reporting some level. The overall mean score of 53 placed most in the moderate category. Overall, 42.3 percent had moderate anxiety, 43.6 percent high, and 4.0 percent severe. Mathematics anxiety affects learners differently. Low to moderate levels can be facilitative (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007), as a manageable amount of worry may boost alertness and encourage preparation, improving performance. In contrast, high to severe anxiety is generally debilitative, reducing working-memory capacity and focus, and impairing problem-solving ability (Ashcraft & Krause, 2007). Teaching strategies should aim to lessen the negative effects of high or severe mathematics anxiety, while helping students use lower levels in a positive and productive way.

Gender differences were evident. Female students reported a higher mean anxiety score (M = 59) than males (M = 48). A substantial 25.8 percent were classified as having high anxiety and 4.0 percent as experiencing severe anxiety. Among male students, 15.4 percent reported high anxiety, with no reports of severe anxiety. These findings are consistent with established research on gender-based variations in mathematics anxiety (Devine et al., 2012).

Ethnic disparities also emerged. Māori and Pasifika learners recorded a mean score of 55, closely followed by NZ European/Pākehā students at 54. In contrast, students identifying as "Asian, Indian, or Other" ethnicities reported lower anxiety levels (M = 48). Among Māori and Pasifika learners, 19.8 percent experienced high anxiety and 2.0 percent severe anxiety. These differences reflect structural inequities and the effects of cultural dissonance in mathematics education (Grootenboer & Marshman, 2016).

Year-level analysis revealed that Year 10 students reported the highest mean mathematics anxiety score (M = 57), with 94.7 percent experiencing moderate to severe levels. Nearly half (49.1 percent) were classified within the high to severe anxiety categories. This notable increase coincides with the rollout of the mandatory NCEA Numeracy Corequisite: Common Assessment Activities (CAAs), typically introduced at this level. While CAAs are designed to evaluate essential numeracy skills through digitally delivered, context-based tasks (New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 2024), they may inadvertently exacerbate stress among students already vulnerable to mathematics anxiety.

Year 13 students reported considerable mathematics anxiety, with 19 out of 28 students (67.9 percent) falling into the high anxiety category and a mean score of 56. While some senior students may develop coping mechanisms, the persistence of elevated anxiety amid the academic pressures of University Entrance requirements, highlight the need for better scaffolding and targeted wellbeing support.

For many, mathematics anxiety stems from cultural disconnection, past negative experiences, and a lack of representation in the curriculum. This emotional barrier undermines engagement and achievement, reinforcing cycles of avoidance and reduced self-efficacy (Beilock & Maloney, 2015; Hembree, 1990).

Metacognition: A key to overcoming mathematics anxiety

This study also investigates the role of metacognition as a mitigating factor in mathematics anxiety. Metacognition is defined as a person's ability to reflect on and regulate their own thinking (Flavell, 1979). The metacognition scores generated from the surveys ranged between 20 (low metacognition) and 100 (very high metacognition).

Descriptives

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Metacognition	Year 9	112	64.68	12.017	1.136	62.43	66.93	22	93
	Year 10	57	62.61	12.106	1.604	59.40	65.83	27	86
	Year 11	57	65.40	10.546	1.397	62.61	68.20	41	95
	Year 12	43	67.47	11.083	1.690	64.05	70.88	47	92
	Year 13	28	69.25	8.763	1.656	65.85	72.65	52	85
	Total	**297**	**65.26**	**11.448**	**0.664**	**63.95**	**66.56**	**22**	**95**

Table 2: Metacognition across year levels.

The overall mean metacognition score was 65.26 (SD = 11.45), indicating a moderate to high self-awareness in learning. A clear progression was observed across year levels. Year 13 students had the highest mean score (M = 69.25), followed by Year 12 (M = 67.47), while Year 10 students reported the lowest mean score (M = 62.61). This trend suggests that metacognitive abilities generally develop with age, experience, and academic maturity.

The broad score range (22–95) reflects significant variation in how students perceive and regulate their learning. Those with stronger metacognitive skills are typically better equipped to manage academic challenges, regulate emotions, and apply effective problem-solving strategies; factors closely linked to reduced mathematics anxiety (Schraw & Dennison, 1994). These findings emphasise the need to explicitly develop metacognitive strategies as a pathway to reducing anxiety and improving mathematics engagement and achievement.

Relationship between mathematics anxiety and metacognition

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between mathematics anxiety and metacognitive awareness ($r = -0.594$, $p < .001$), indicating that students with higher metacognitive skills tend to experience lower levels of mathematics anxiety. This supports previous findings suggesting that metacognitive regulation plays a key role in reducing anxiety and improving learning outcomes in mathematics (Veenman, 2017), thereby reinforcing the view that metacognition serves as a protective factor against such anxiety.

Teaching metacognitive strategies in ways that affirm students' cultural identities can disrupt cycles of disengagement and low self-confidence shaped by systemic barriers. This insight has transformed my practice. I now prioritise tools such as self-questioning, reflective thinking, and cognitive scaffolding; strategies that help learners to become more aware of their thinking and more confident in approaching mathematical problems. These strategies resonate with both Indigenous and my ancestral worldviews. The Māori concepts of ako (reciprocal learning) and whakaaro (reflection) closely align with the principles of metacognitive development. Similarly, the *Bhagavad-Gītā's* teaching, "One must elevate oneself by one's own mind and not degrade oneself. The mind is the friend of the conditioned soul, and his enemy as well" (Prabhupada, 1983, 6.5), offers timeless guidance on self-awareness and inner discipline. For me, helping students think reflectively is not just effective teaching; it is an ethical responsibility, grounded in care, purpose, and equity.

DIGITAL OUTREACH – GIVING BACK

As a teacher-leader, it is my *dharma* to create a level playing field for all students. In response to the widespread mathematics anxiety and inequitable access to resources, I founded Maths Tutor NZ, a free YouTube channel. Since its launch, the channel has grown to feature over 112, NCEA-aligned instructional videos and has reached more than 184,000 views. This platform is not just a digital teaching tool but my way of giving back. Reflecting on my experience as a child without adequate access to resources, electricity, or outside help, I understand the barriers many students face. Maths Tutor NZ was created to ensure that no learner in New Zealand misses out due to lack of resources. It reflects my commitment to culturally responsive teaching and is grounded in the values of manaakitanga (care and generosity), ako (shared learning), and whanaungatanga (building strong relationships).

The Maths Tutor NZ platform is informed by the principles of interactive explicit instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011), incorporates scaffolding techniques to reduce cognitive load (Sweller, 1988), and integrates metacognitive prompts to support students' reflective thinking. It follows the mantra: "I do, we do, you do." By aligning with NCEA mathematics standards, Maths Tutor NZ makes high-quality learning accessible to all students and teachers across New Zealand. This initiative is rooted in my lived experience: growing up in Fiji, where I studied under a kerosene lamp with limited resources. It reflects my commitment to ensuring others do not face the same barriers. The *Bhagavad-Gītā's* teaching, "You have the right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions" (Prabhupada, 1983, 2.47), encourages me to perform my duties without being attached to the results. This principle promotes leadership where I prioritise the process and service over personal rewards, helping to cultivate a culture of integrity and commitment.

CONCLUSION

From humble beginnings in the sugarcane fields of Fiji to a leadership role in mathematics education in New Zealand, my identity has been shaped by the enduring strength of my *Girmitiya* ancestors and transformed through hardship, cultural heritage, and hope. Reflecting on the challenges faced by my parents and ancestors has deepened my capacity to confront adversity with strength and purpose. Guided by my parents' wisdom, I now view teaching and leadership not as roles, but as responsibilities anchored in service and purpose.

Findings from my doctoral research have confirmed that mathematics anxiety is a widespread issue, particularly among Māori, Pasifika, and female students. My research highlights the urgency of addressing mathematics anxiety, which affects nearly 90 percent of participants in New Zealand. Students with higher metacognitive skills consistently reported lower levels of anxiety. These insights affirm that explicitly teaching metacognitive strategies can shift mathematics from a subject of fear to source of empowerment.

From a work-based learning perspective, these insights have reshaped my professional identity as a mathematics leader. My teaching has evolved from delivering content to fostering learner wellbeing. This journey has strengthened my commitment to making mathematics inclusive and empowering. Rooted in cultural identity and self-reflection, my teaching now centres on helping all learners build confidence and overcome barriers to succeed. This perspective aligns with Paulo Freire's (1970) belief that education should be a liberating force, enabling individuals to challenge the status quo and realise their potential.

The teachings of the *Ramayan* and the *Bhagavad-Gītā* have shaped my view of education as an ethical duty that values the journey of learning over its rewards. This transformation affirms that our histories are not burdens but guiding forces that inform our becoming. They offer strength, direction, and purpose. As conveyed in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna: "Let a man lift himself by himself; let him not degrade himself" (Prabhupada, 1983, 6.5). This is a call to all educators: *Know your learners. Know their fears. Know your purpose.* Through this knowledge, you will not only teach but also lead; and in leading, you will transform both mindsets and lives.

AI statement

In the preparation of this article, the author utilised OpenAI's ChatGPT to assist with refining sentence structure. The AI tool was employed to enhance the clarity and coherence of the manuscript. All content generated was based on the author's original reflections about professional becoming aligned with the article's objectives.

Ritesh Navin Kumar is a fourth-generation descendant of the *Girmitiyas*. He currently serves as the Head of Faculty for Mathematics and Statistics at Henderson High School in Auckland, New Zealand. He was honoured with the Kalman Teacher Excellence Prize, recognising his outstanding contributions to mathematics education. As a doctoral candidate at Otago Polytechnic, his research explores mathematics anxiety, the role of metacognition in alleviating that anxiety, and the influence of cultural upbringing on identity formation.

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