Every human being is unique. We are all born with unique strengths and weaknesses, born into a unique family in a specific time space within a particular sociocultural context. We interact with the world and others and we develop our own unique understandings of them. Regardless of the unique qualities each individual possesses, everyone needs to learn and develop. In any well-developed region, the recognition of diversity in learners’ characteristics and the common need for all learners to develop their potential to the fullest undergirds the missions, policies, and practices of education entities. This special issue collected six manuscripts that illustrate the collective efforts of Hong Kong education researchers to understand learner diversity and to address the needs of diverse learners. The following paragraphs build on the contributions of these researchers’ efforts by attempting to rise above the specific research to map out the complexities involved and to point toward potentially promising areas of future research.

The first overarching theme reflected in this special issue concerns the perspectives through which diversity is understood. Yin et al. (2020) investigate learner diversity from the psychological perspective of learning styles which shape junior secondary students’ learning approaches, while Yang and Wong (2020) do so from the perspective of career development. Wong (2020) and Chiu and Lim (2020) each address the issues arising from ethnic minorities, which obviously influence minority students’ learning due to the institutional requirement to acquire Chinese as a second
language and the most common language of instruction in Hong Kong. Another well-established difference that warrants attention is learners’ intelligence, ranging from giftedness to special needs. Cheung et al. (2020) look into the needs of gifted students. The reported perspectives in this special issue are wide and inclusive, and the six articles reflect the substantial efforts that Hong Kong education researchers are devoting to understanding learner diversity. Nonetheless, it is regrettable that special educational needs are not well-represented. More importantly, other than ethnicity, which is inborn and unalterable, most other differences represented in this special issue are, to some extent, malleable. This collection depicts the individual differences that call for pedagogical attention from educators. On the research front, the current collection is apparently representing more established ways of understanding human differences through innate characteristics, psychological traits, and existing human capacity. There may be a need to find new perspectives to understand human differences. Current research may also benefit from the integration of multiple perspectives on human differences.

The second fundamental theme is related to the educational responses to diversity. The international trend of accommodating learner diversity has swung toward inclusive education. Beliefs that support separating learners into different ability clusters and catering for their needs in different schools raise concerns about equity and the possibility of aggravating the differences, which may result in social unrest. In Hong Kong, as described in Cheung et al.’s (2020) article, a three-tiered approach has been articulated by the Hong Kong education bureau as a policy. Gifted students may require differentiated instruction in the classroom (Tier 1), pull-out arrangements within the school (Tier 2), and specialist training beyond the schools (Tier 3). This three-tiered approach can similarly be applied to students with special needs. Following this policy, Cheung et al. (2020) introduce the experiences of helping schools design programs to address the needs of gifted students. To create inclusive classrooms is definitely challenging. Teachers need supports which can be generated in the form of professional learning communities, as reported by Wan (2020). The professional learning community is ideal for supporting teachers since it is usually job-embedded and contextualized within the school environment. Many techniques of addressing students’ localized needs have to be designed or generated as contextualized responses for them to be ecologically valid. Nonetheless, school teachers may lack the expertise required to understand the conditions of students with special educational needs. University–school partnerships are thus another necessary means to increase the epistemic resources that school leaders and teachers can draw upon. Both Cheung et al.’s (2020) and Chiu and Lim’s (2020) research are cases of such partnerships. Furthermore, Chiu and Lim (2020) point to another important dimension in the current education world full of learner diversity. Current advances in technologies could be a double-edged sword. When the design of technology-enhanced lessons fails to look into the issues of learner diversity, the digital divide could be enlarged. On the other hand, assistive technologies
or assistive ways of using technologies in the classroom could be a means of improving education equality. Together, Cheung et al. (2020) and Chiu and Lim (2020) could be synthesized as challenges that educators need to face in creating the technological pedagogical knowledge to address the diversity in learning and learners, perhaps best actualized through university–school partnerships in professional learning communities. Designing solutions to diverse needs would doubtlessly benefit from multiple perspectives and expertise.

Understanding our learners as individuals with unique characteristics and needs is the foundation of good and responsive teaching. In school settings, this would amount to 30 or more different individuals in a class, and teachers seldom teach just one class. Addressing all the individual needs is a challenge that is seemingly insurmountable. The dilemmatic nature of the problem of addressing diverse learning needs is evident. While governmental and school policies are increasingly leaning toward inclusive education with more support provided, tensions are nonetheless experienced by most teachers. We thus advocate that the way forward to deal with this complex problem is to adopt a collective design stance and a humble spirit. This would mean recognizing and responding to the moral imperative to create inclusive classrooms but at the same time the insolvable nature of the problem. This seems to be the essence of many educational endeavors.

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