Differentiation, Accommodation, and Modification

(MNU Definitions in my own words)

We as good teachers need to be constantly aware and sensitive to our students’ changing needs. I believe that learning does not happen solely within the student or as a product of the teacher. Learning happens in the dynamic relationship between the teacher and student. If we only lecture and give end of unit tests, without regard to our students’ learning styles, comprehension, and ongoing need, then we do a disservice to ourselves as teaching professionals and to our students. Differentiation should happen all the time in our classroom. It should be informed by our self-awareness of our strengths and learning styles and the needs of our students that are different than our own. We must learn to not only teach to our strengths, but to teach in a way that makes material accessible to all our students.

As teachers we need to check not only our input of content information, but also students’ comprehension. We can’t really know what our students have learned without ongoing assessments. Part of differentiation is assessing via multiple channels. We need to understand the need for formal and informal, summative and formative assessments. I think that informal assessments like journals, exit slips, teacher observation, conferences, student self-evaluations, are critical for teachers to be able to engage fully in our students’ learning process. We need those tools to inform us on gaps in our teaching method and areas we need to reteach, review, or rethink. Differentiation is what good teachers do in order to give each child the best opportunity to learn.

Accommodation and modification are based on an IEP, or individualized education program. An IEP is an agreement between the student’s family and the school as to what special services will be offered to the student. It forms the basis for educating students with disabilities. Depending on the type of disability, students’ may need different kinds of accommodations or modifications. Students without diagnosed learning or physical disability still need differentiation; however, in the case of a student with diagnosed special needs, we would call that differentiation accommodation and/or modification. As we seek to provide quality education to all our students regardless of disability, we need to keep these things in mind and be ready to make adjustments for our students’ benefit when necessary.