Marshall Street

How-To:

Launch Effective Collaborative Teams

OPENING DOORS TO COLLABORATION

A collection of research-to-impact practices developed with the Networked Improvement Community for Students with Disabilities

How-To: Launch Effective Collaborative Teams

Guidance Document for School and Network Leadership

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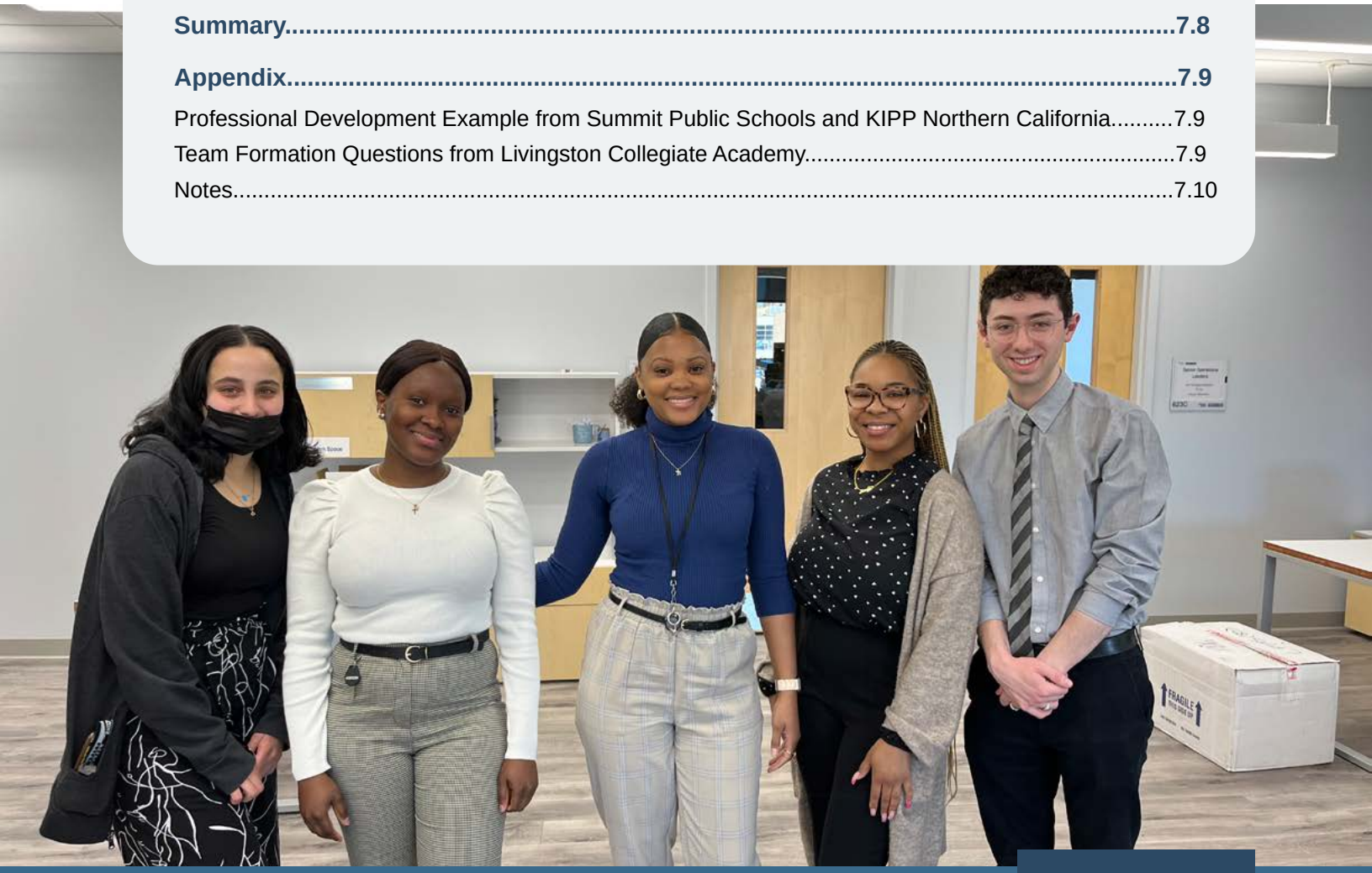
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Introduction

The push for more inclusive and collaboratively planned and delivered instruction for students with disabilities has gained significant momentum over the past 20 years. While the theoretical outcomes of this type of teaching are positive, **research shows** that putting two teachers together and assigning them the task of collaboration without careful attention to their professional dynamic leads to an underutilized partnership.[1] This finding is validated by the experience of the charter management organizations (CMOs) featured in this collection of research-to-impact practices, **Opening Doors to Collaboration**.

Effective teaming is a critical enabling condition for the success of collaboration efforts. School teams within the Networked Improvement Community (NIC) dedicated substantial resources and energy to ensuring that thoughtful attention was paid to the relationships between pairs of educators implementing the instructional practices detailed in the collection. By doing so, the CMOs ensured that the ongoing planning and teaching done by collaborating educators was highly effective and supported by strong, trusting relationships between the two professionals.

Critical to the success of collaborative teams were the supportive mindsets of the leaders, coaches, and staff across school and district offices, and the relationships between these professionals and collaborating educators. The cross-network collaboration and learning within the NIC led school teams to develop resources to refine the structures and routines for collaboration across their organizations to proactively support the formation of their teams. This was, in large part, due to the recognition that the formation of their teams was an essential element of accelerated progress for students. Further, they found team formation efforts were most dramatically effective when led by school leaders, particularly principals, in partnership with other leaders at the school and network level.

School leaders can intentionally support the formation of effective collaborative teams by:

- attending to strategic staffing,
- building shared inclusive beliefs,
- developing trust between collaborating teachers, and
- establishing clear role delineation.

This guidance document provides school leaders with recommendations and resources that have been used to form effective school teams at Collegiate Academies, Green Dot Public Schools, KIPP Northern California, and Summit Public Schools.

Key Definitions

- **Collaborating teachers** are two teachers — one providing general education services and one providing special education services — who work together to support students with disabilities.
- **Co-teachers** are two teachers — a general education teacher and a special education teacher — who are jointly responsible for a course. They co-assess, co-plan, and co-teach lessons to support all students.
- The term **collaborative teams** refers to both types of teaching partnerships.

Common Questions Leaders Face When Supporting Effective Collaborative Teams

How do we create a shared vision of strong collaboration between general and special educators?

ARTICULATE A CLEAR VISION FOR EXEMPLARY COLLABORATION.

Leaders, at either the school or network level, **generate a vision** for exemplary collaboration between general and special educators. Ideally, the generation process includes other school-based staff, particularly general and special education support team members.

ESTABLISH A CULTURE OF STRONG GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION COLLABORATION AT ALL LEVELS OF THE SCHOOL.

School leaders develop inclusive structures at all levels of their school, beginning with their leadership team. Guidance for this collaboration should come from the vision for collaboration discussed above.

At Green Dot's Ánimo Watts High School, the principal's weekly instructional team meeting serves as the incubator for all decisions related to instruction and major school happenings. By including the special education department chair on that team, the top levels of the school administration are dismantling the silos between general and special educators and programming.

ESTABLISH CLEAR ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

Collaborative teams often struggle with a lack of clarity concerning roles and responsibilities in their partnerships, causing confusion and placing stress on their working relationships. This can lead to inefficient collaboration, delays in services and core instruction, and widening of existing gaps in students' learning. School leaders can prevent these effects by explicitly outlining what general and special education teachers are responsible for, individually and collectively, within their collaborative partnership.

Examples of strong guidelines for roles and responsibilities for collaborating teachers include the following:

- **Stetson Associates' Roles and Responsibilities of Collaborative Teachers: A Decision-Making Exercise**
- **Longwood Preparatory Academy's (a Blue Engine partner school) Responsibilities of Co-Planning and Co-Teaching**
- **Collegiate's Livingston Collegiate Academy's Co-Teaching Expectations**

As partnerships are forming, share the roles and responsibilities documents with teams so that they can incorporate them into their team-building conversations. This is also a valuable tool for coaches to apply to initial coaching meetings with teams to confirm how the team members will work together to ensure their collective success for students.

How do we intentionally staff collaborative teams?

HIRE WITH INCLUSIVITY AND COLLABORATION IN MIND.

When hiring, leadership teams have an opportunity to steer their school's culture toward stronger collaboration across departments in service of all students' needs.

When interviewing:

- **Share your team's vision for collaboration,** including your rationale for it. Invite candidates to share their reactions to the vision and what they see as the benefits of this type of partnership.
- **Seek examples of strong, professional relationships** with colleagues across departmental lines. How did the candidate establish those relationships? How did they work through challenges in them?
- **Seek examples of collaboration in service of supporting students with special needs.** Ask for examples of how a candidate has collaborated with general or special education colleagues. What did that collaboration entail? How did they leverage colleagues' strengths to support students?

PAIR TEACHERS STRATEGICALLY.

Gather and use teachers' input to create thoughtful collaborative teams.

Using questions **such as these** (co-created by teams from Green Dot and STEM Preparatory Schools), seek input from every teacher on your staff about their experience with collaboration, their working style, and their content comfort and expertise. Use that information to determine which teachers are best suited to be partnered together.

Prioritize pairing special education teachers in content areas where they feel confident.

Content expertise is consistently cited as a key factor in special education teachers' ability to be and feel effective in their collaborative work. Whenever possible, pair them with content that they are confident with to expedite and strengthen the collaborative process.

Introduce collaborating teachers to one another as early as possible.

Our partner schools found that, whenever possible, early introductions help collaborating teachers establish rapport and get to the heart of their work sooner.

Maintain strong partnerships over multiple years.

Wherever possible, keep collaborating relationships and partnerships in place over a number of years to allow individuals to build skill and develop their collaborative practice. During the 2022–23 school year, co-teachers at Green Dot began to see substantial improvements in their students' classwork scores in rooms where co-teachers had been working together for multiple years. Teams cited stronger professional relationships and an ability to understand and leverage each other's styles and strengths as key components of that improvement. At Summit Atlas, general education teachers cited their multiple years' worth of collaboration with their special education co-planner as a key factor in their willingness and ability to seek and take feedback about serving students with disabilities from their colleagues.

Mindset Matters: Collegiate Hiring Practices

At Collegiate Academies, leadership team members state unabashedly that it is every team member's responsibility to serve and support all students. They are more interested in mindset than instructional capacity, and would generally pass on a candidate with more experience of a subject in favor of someone with a growth mindset and less experience. To help assess candidates' shared mindsets and skills, they incorporate scenario questions like these into their interviews:

The following students come into your class. How do you support them?

- A student reading on grade level?
- A student reading three years below grade level?
- A student who is developing their proficiency with English?
- A student with a learning disability?

In the candidate's responses, the hiring team is looking for insight into the extent to which the candidate expresses feeling responsible for each student's outcomes and experience, as well as the ways in which the candidate anticipates collaborating with team members to supplement their own knowledge and instructional skill.

Co-Teaching Staffing Best Practices

Students in priority populations — such as the NIC's focus on students at the intersection of race, class, and ability — need their schools and classrooms to maximize instruction, particularly in general education courses where they are expected to master rigorous content. Co-teaching requires a particularly deep level of collaboration given that two teachers are jointly responsible for the facilitation of an entire class.

School teams must pay special attention when forming co-teaching partnerships, taking key considerations about mindset, beliefs, and expertise into mind:

- **Willingness to collaborate.** Co-teaching requires a high degree of collaboration and communication across the pair of teachers, which some educators are more naturally inclined to than others. It can be helpful to reflect on teachers' mindsets by asking whether both teachers are actively invested in collaborating with a colleague and sharing responsibility for all facets of the classroom, including the outcomes for all students.
- **Classroom culture skills.** It is helpful for co-teachers to have a similar level of competence with establishing and upholding a strong classroom culture. An imbalance in ability or attitude toward classroom management may create a lead/assistant dynamic, resulting in teachers defaulting to the low-impact "one teach, one assist" model more frequently. Not only does this lead to lesser outcomes for students, it also creates a lack of parity in the classroom, which tends to create feelings of frustration and erodes trust within the relationship.
- **Content and teaching experience.** Ideally, both teachers have a solid handle on the content and on their instructional role. Sometimes, staffing realities mean that two less experienced teachers are paired together as co-teachers. However, whenever possible, administrators should work to pair special and general educators who are both a few years into their craft. This allows for power dynamics to be relatively even as both can equally contribute to their shared work.

Green Dot special education administrators created **this guide** for school administrators to help them think through a variety of other considerations as they staff co-taught courses.

How do we build collaboration mindsets?

ENGAGE IN DIRECT, FACILITATED CONVERSATIONS WITH THE ENTIRE STAFF ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF GENERAL AND SPECIAL EDUCATION COLLABORATION.

All leaders within a school (and at the network level) must communicate their beliefs that every person on a child's instructional team has valuable perspectives and expertise that need to be leveraged and that effective collaboration among pairs of educators is the foundation for strong outcomes for all students, especially those with disabilities. Communication of these principles can be supported through discussions among leadership team members and then the broader staff based on shared readings on the rationale behind and importance of general and special education collaboration. Recommended readings and discussion questions can be found in the **Appendix**.

How do we facilitate relationship-building conversations for collaborative teams?

PROVIDE AMPLE TIME AND DIRECTION TO COLLABORATIVE TEAMS AS THEY ESTABLISH THEIR RELATIONSHIPS.

Collaborative teams need time before the school year starts to establish their relationships. Allot at least three hours of preservice time for team members to get to know one another, ideally consisting of a combination of formal (meetings and structured conversations) and informal (e.g., lunch, coffee) settings.

Provide teachers with tools, such as **Green Dot's Co-Teaching Partner Planning Guide**, **Livingston Collegiate Academy's** Team Formation Questions, or **Blue Engine's Team Formation Resources**, to guide their initial conversations. Well-planned team formation activities will enable collaborative teams to discuss and work through mission-critical components of their partnership in advance of teaching and planning together, specifically each teacher's:

- experiences in education and vision for their work, specifically related to issues of race, socioeconomics, and disability;
- work and communication styles, teaching experience, and instructional expertise;
- roles and responsibilities within their partnership; and
- preferences and commitments when navigating inevitable conflict.

Schools may also consider crafting a scope and sequence for collaborating teachers' team formation, such as this **Co-Teaching Foundations and Planning Guide** used at Collegiate Academies' schools.

CREATE ONGOING OPPORTUNITIES TO REFLECT ON COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS.

The relationship between collaborative teams needs to be cultivated and supported regularly. By scheduling specific points at which collaborative teams reflect on their relationship and by providing teams with **resources** for doing so, administrators and coaches ensure that teams progress in a healthy way through the stages of team development and continue to grow and strengthen.

More formal reflection within collaborative teams should be explicitly carved into the yearly professional development calendar to ensure it happens. For example, a principal can set aside 45 minutes of each quarterly professional development day to allow collaborating teachers to engage in this conversation with the support of their coaches.

ENSURE THAT TEAMS HAVE REGULAR, PROTECTED TIME FOR COLLABORATION.

As discussed in this collection's **overview** and individual chapters, dedicated collaboration time in the school schedule (at least 45 minutes of biweekly co-planning time and at least 45 minutes of monthly student work analysis time) is critical to collaborative teams' ability to build a strong relationship and productively work together throughout the year.



NIC Co-Teaching Learning Tour participants visit partner schools

Summary

For collaboration among educators to successfully address the needs of our most vulnerable students, collaborative teams and partnerships must be intentionally planned and implemented. When teachers are given the time, resources, and coaching necessary to collectively explore their different mindsets, perspectives, and talents, they are able to strategically partner in service of getting their students, particularly those with disabilities, what they need. Research indicates that the level of trust, parity, and mutual understanding in a collaborative relationship has a massive impact on the team's ability to work in service of students, which is only possible when roles and responsibilities have been carefully established and fostered, and routines for collaboration, communication, and coaching have been structured and maintained.

FURTHER LEARNING

"Co-teaching in Classrooms: Literature review of teachers' perspectives, readiness and knowledge"

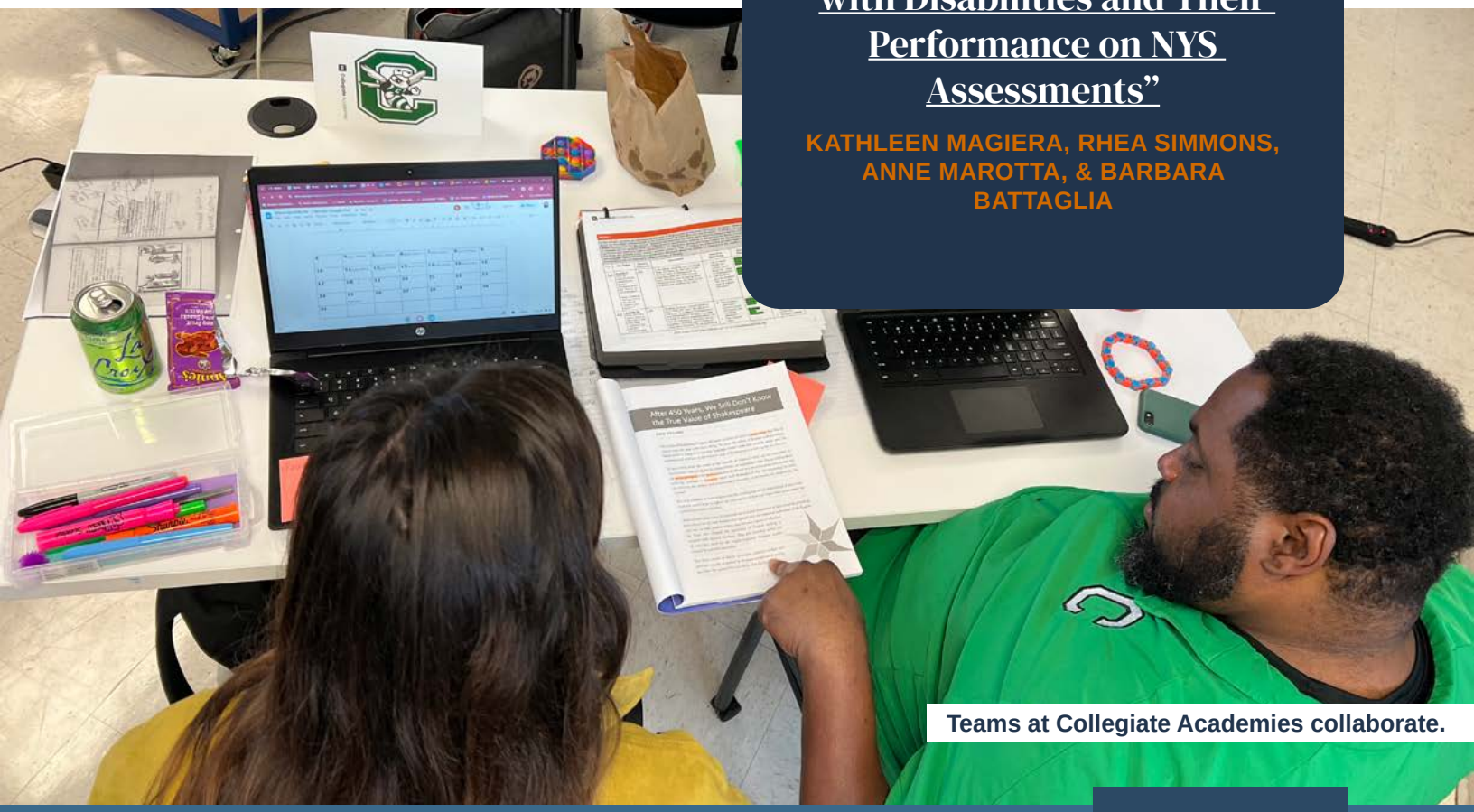
RASHED A. ALDABAS, *JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND PRACTICE*

"Teacher Collaboration in Instructional Teams and Student Achievement"

MATTHEW RONFELDT, SUSANNA OWENS FARMER, KIEL MCQUEEN, & JASON A. GRISSOM, *AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL*

"A Co-Teaching Model: A Response to Students with Disabilities and Their Performance on NYS Assessments"

KATHLEEN MAGIERA, RHEA SIMMONS, ANNE MAROTTA, & BARBARA BATTAGLIA



Teams at Collegiate Academies collaborate.

Appendix

Professional Development Example from Summit Public Schools and KIPP Northern California

In March 2022, the Summit Public Schools team witnessed the power of co-teaching, co-planning, and co-facilitation during site visits to NIC partner schools. This experience prompted the network's director of MTSS to collaborate with the improvement lead at KIPP Northern California to construct a summer professional development session focused on inclusive mindsets. The key principles for strong collaboration underpinning this **PD session** included the following:

- As key stakeholders in the school community, it is our responsibility as leaders to create an environment that enables strong co-teaching (with protected common prep periods, coaching for co-teachers related to co-planning, etc.).
- We value the benefits of a heterogeneous population of students and faculty and build physical and emotional safety for all.
- Every individual deserves respect, and everyone brings unique perspective and expertise to the table in ways that can positively impact students.
- Protected co-planning time must be built into the weekly schedule.
- Strong, trusting teams enable outcomes individuals can't achieve on their own.
- All students are capable of accessing grade-level content with the right support.
- All educators are responsible for supporting all students.

This session served as the launch for the subsequent school year's co-teaching and collaboration initiatives.

Team Formation Questions from Livingston Collegiate Academy

- What's a fun fact related to your background in (subject area) / teaching?
- In your opinion, what is the purpose of cross-department general and special education collaboration? Of co-teaching? Why?
- Review and discuss the network's **co-teaching expectations**.
- What is one thing that you appreciate (about this work)? What is one thing you have a question about?
- When will you plan together? When will you touch base daily?
- How will you, specifically, share the responsibility of supporting all students? How will we hold each other accountable to this shared responsibility?

- What are things that help you operate at your best working relationship with others? Can you give an example?
- What are things that have gone wrong in the past when collaborating with others and how do you think we can avoid them? Can you give an example?

Notes

1 Aldabas, Rashed A. “Co-teaching in Classrooms: Literature review of teachers’ perspective, readiness, and knowledge.” *Journal of Education and Practice* 9, no. 9 (2018).