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Feedback as a Mechanism for Workplace Learning

A qualitative study of employee on-the-job learning in Fast-food, Restaurant and Retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden.

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ABSTRACT:

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are central to employment, economic activity, and local business development in all of Europe. Compared with larger organizations, SMEs often have fewer formal HR routines, limited training systems, and less standardized performance management. In such settings, employee learning frequently occurs through everyday work, direct interaction, observation, problem-solving, and performance-related feedback. This thesis examines how feedback enables or constrains employee on-the-job learning in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in two cities, Umeå and Uppsala, of one European country, Sweden. The purpose of the study is to understand how employees experience feedback in daily work and how these experiences shape learning. Feedback is treated as a potential mechanism for learning rather than as learning itself. The main research question asks how performance-related feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs enable or constrain employee learning while on the job. Two sub-questions guide the analysis: how feedback is provided in these work settings and how employees interpret feedback as supportive or limiting for their learning. The study uses a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with nine employees from the selected SME service sectors. The empirical material was analyzed using the Gioia Method, which supported a systematic movement from participant-centered first-order concepts to researcher-centered second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. The analysis resulted in 80 first-order concepts, 15 second-order themes, and four aggregate dimensions: informal feedback practices in everyday SME work; feedback as a mechanism for learning and role development; social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception; and relational feedback culture in small workplaces. The findings show that feedback in SMEs is often informal, immediate, task-focused, and embedded in ordinary work. Feedback supports learning when it provides clear direction, corrects errors in real time, clarifies role expectations, develops practical skills, and is delivered respectfully by credible sources. Positive feedback and recognition can also strengthen motivation and confidence. However, feedback may constrain learning when it is vague, inconsistent, emotionally discouraging, or delivered by someone employees do not perceive as credible. The thesis concludes that feedback does not automatically create learning. It becomes a learning mechanism when employees understand, accept, and apply it within a supportive and psychologically safe workplace context.

KEYWORDS: Performance-Related Feedback, On-The-Job Learning, Informal Workplace Learning, SMEs, Human Resource Development, Gioia Method, Service Sector Work

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Small and medium-sized firms, SMEs are at the core of the European business economy. As noted by the European Commission, 26.1 million SMEs employed 89.8 million people in the EU non-financial business sector in 2024, which accounts for 99.8% of all businesses in that sector (European Commission 2025, p. 11). Beyond that, they contributed 65.1% of employment and 53.6% of the real value added in the same EU non-financial business sector, so it shows how central they are not only in terms of business activity, but also for jobs and economic value creation (European Commission, 2025, p. 6). Because of that, SMEs form an important setting for studying how staff develop, how workplace learning unfolds, and how everyday feedback practices happen.

At the same time, SMEs are bit different from larger organizations, because their human resource approaches are often less formalized. Smaller firms may have fewer explicit HR policies, more narrow training systems, and less rigid performance management setups compared with bigger firms (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). HRD research in SMEs is, still, relatively fragmented, which suggests a need for studies that are more sensitive to context, especially when it comes to how development unfolds in smaller companies (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). In these workplaces, employee learning is not driven mainly by formal training programs. Rather, it can arise through direct interaction, watching how others do things, working through problems, getting guidance, receiving correction and feedback during the ordinary pace of work.

This thesis focuses on fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden. These three sectors are relevant because they are customer-facing, time-sensitive, task-oriented, and they depend on employees being able to adjust their work in real time. Although fast food, restaurant, and retail work include different assignments they still share a set of practical conditions. Employees must respond to customer needs, sync

with colleagues, deal with time pressure, fix errors quickly, and pick up workplace routines while they do the job. So, feedback turns out to be extra important, because it gives immediate information about task performance, service behavior, role expectations and practical refinement.

The relevance of including retail alongside fast-food and restaurant work is also supported by EU-level SME data. In 2024, retail made up 22% of EU SMEs across industrial ecosystems, so it becomes one of the largest SME ecosystems after construction (European Commission, 2025, p. 14). Fast-food work is often linked to efficiency, predictability, standardization, and managerial control, which creates a need for immediate guidance and correction during the work process (Butler & Hammer, 2019, p. 97). Restaurant frontline work, on the other hand, includes service and emotional demands, where employees are expected to interact with customers professionally even when conditions are difficult (Han et al., 2016, p. 98). Retail work is shaped in a similar way by performance pressure, work intensification, and emotional demands, which influences both employee performance and learning in everyday work (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 370). Together, these three sectors form a relevant setting for looking at how feedback is perceived by employees in small service-sector workplaces.

In these settings, workplace learning is often informal and tangled up with everyday routines. Billett (2001, p. 209) suggests that workplace learning is shaped by what the workplace offers, and by how the person engages with those chances. Eraut (2004, p. 248) likewise argues that a lot of workplace learning happens in an unplanned way through experience, contact, and taking part, rather than formal teaching, or at least not only that. So, in fast-food, restaurant and retail SMEs, employees end up learning just by watching coworkers, getting small corrections, asking questions, handling real problems, adjusting on the spot to customers and then going back to repeating the work tasks again. Feedback can help this learning too, by giving employees a clearer view of what they do well, what should be improved and what to tweak in their behavior, during the day-to-day work.

Feedback is central to this study, because it gives employees information about their performance, how they execute tasks, their service behavior, and what the role expects from them. Feedback can help individuals grasp the distance between their current performance and the level that is aimed for (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). Still, feedback should not be treated as automatically helpful. Its impact depends on the feedback, how clear it is, when it is delivered, how it is delivered, who it comes from, and how the recipient understands it and then applies it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 84). The whole feedback environment counts, because employees are more likely to use feedback when it comes from trustworthy sources, when it is shared in a constructive way, and when it connects to ordinary workplace relationships (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 165). Because of this, in SME service-sector workplaces, feedback becomes relevant not only as performance information, but also as a possible learning mechanism through which employees can learn while working.

The practical relevance of this study is that feedback in small service-sector workplaces can affect a lot of things such as task accuracy, customer service quality, role clarity, employee confidence, and overall little day to day performance boost. If feedback is clear, specific, polite, credible and tied to what people are doing, then it may help employees fix errors, grasp routine standards, and build what are called hands-on competence. When feedback is vague, sometimes inconsistent, too harsh, or just not credible, it can end up discouraging employees or limit how willing they are to learn from it. So, for managers, supervisors, and the employees in fast-food industries, restaurants, and retail SMEs, getting a grip on how feedback helps or blocks learning is then relevant. It matters for improving daily work routines, supporting growth of employees, and reinforcing service performance.

1.2 Problem Discussion and Research Gap

Existing research has built up important insights about performance related feedback, feedback seeking behavior, informal workplace learning, and HRD in SMEs. Feedback research suggests that feedback can help improvement if it delivers useful info about the gap between present and wanted performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). Still, feedback is not always doing the job people expect. Its effects rely on what feedback it is, how it is delivered, who the feedback is from, and what the recipient makes of it, and then uses it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). The feedback environment line of work also indicates that those everyday feedback patterns get shaped by feedback quality, source trustworthiness, delivery practices, source availability, and whether there is support for feedback seeking (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). So, these studies form a good base, but they do not spell out how feedback works inside small service sector workplaces, where feedback is often casual, right away, personal, and right into daily tasks.

Then, there is informal workplace learning research which gives another platform, but it leaves a related void too. Learning at work can show up through participation, watching, interaction, problem solving, and just normal work experience. Billett (2001, p. 209) points out that learning depends on what the workplace makes possible, and how much the person is willing to engage. Eraut (2004, p. 248) adds that much workplace learning runs informally through experience, not through formal teaching or instruction. Informal learning behaviors can include things such as observing others, asking questions, seeking advice, tackling problems, and learning through hands on work (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). But, again, this stream of work doesn't fully clarify how performance related feedback functions as a specific mechanism that enables or constrain employees' on-the-job learning in SMEs.

This gap is important in SMEs, because employee development relies less on these formal HR systems, and more on everyday interaction. Small firms have fewer formal HR policies, and less structured performance management systems than bigger organizations (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). HRD in SMEs is also described as an

underdeveloped and fragmented research area. That still needs more careful, detailed studies on how employee development happens in small-firm environments (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). In these places, feedback may not show up mainly through formal appraisal procedures. Instead, it can arrive as quick verbal remarks, immediate adjustment or correction, peer guidance, customer reactions, practical demonstration, or even informal chats while people are working.

The research gap gets highlighted further when closing in on fast food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. These workplaces are not neutral spaces for learning and feedback. Fast-food work is shaped by efficiency, predictability, and control, so guidance and immediate correction are crucial for keeping the workflow running smoothly and the service standards intact (Butler & Hammer, 2019, p. 97). Restaurant frontline tasks involve customer engagement and emotional pressures, including the need to respond professionally when customer behavior gets difficult (Han et al., 2016, p. 98). Retail work is similar in one sense but also different, because it is marked by work intensification, performance pressure, and emotional exhaustion. All of this can shape how employees experience feedback, and how they learn over time (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 371). Also, EU-level SME data suggest that retail is among the largest SME industrial ecosystems, making up 22% of EU SMEs in 2024 (European Commission, 2025, p. 14). This evidence supports the idea that retail should be treated as part of the wider service-sector SME context rather than focusing only on fast-food work.

So, the research gap that this thesis tackles are this limited grasp of how employees live through performance-related feedback, either as a helper or as a blocker for learning while they are working on-the-job in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. A lot of previous work explains pieces that matter, such as feedback itself, informal learning, and SME HRD but still it doesn't quite show in a satisfying way what happens when feedback gets given, taken in, interpreted, and then acted on by employees inside small service-sector workplaces. This study tries to fill that space, by looking at the conditions where feedback turns out to be understandable, handy, believable, respectful, and doable in

day-to-day practice. At the same time, it also looks at when feedback becomes blurry or discouraging, when it is uneven, or when applying it feels hard, or just doesn't stick.

1.3 Research Purpose

The aim of this study is to investigate the role of performance-related feedback practices in facilitating or inhibiting OJL in fast food, restaurant and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden. The study concentrates on the experiences of employees since the employees are the ones who receive, interpret, accept, resist and apply feedback in their daily work. Thus, the study does not focus primarily on managers' intentions when providing feedback. Instead, it looks at what feedback feels like from the viewpoint of the intended recipients of such feedback. The study explores how feedback is given, received, sought, discussed, and used, in the context of daily work practice. In this thesis, the term performance-related feedback means information, correction, guidance, recognition or evaluation given to employees regarding their work performance, task execution, service behavior, role expectations, and/or workplace standards. This feedback can be from a manager, supervisor, owner, senior colleague, peers or customer. It could be formal, semi-formal or informal – but the study highlights feedback in the context of the work setting. Also distinguished in this study is between feedback and on the job learning. Feedback is not considered as learning. Feedback is, however, interpreted as a potential mechanism that can facilitate or hinder learning. On the job learning involves learning that takes place when working tasks and activities involve social interaction, problem solving, correction, reflection, and behavioral adjustment (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). This is significant because feedback is only going to help if the employees know it, accept it, and apply it. The study targets fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs to explore the nature of feedback in work settings where learning is often informal, immediate, and within daily activities. The purpose is not that the research assess the statistical impact of feedback on learning, but that to develop a qualitative understanding of the ways in which how individuals experience

feedback is beneficial, motivating, discouraging, ambiguous, believable, or immediately applicable in their work.

1.4 Research Question

The core research question that guiding us for this study is:

"How do performance-related feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden, enable or constrain employee learning while on the job?"

To examine this research question, the following sub-questions are used:

1. How are performance-related feedback practices provided to employees in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SME work settings?
2. How do employees experience these feedback practices as enabling or constraining their on-the-job learning?

1.5 Expected Contribution

This study is expected to contribute to research on performance-related feedback, informal workplace learning, and HRD in SMEs in three main ways. First, it contributes to feedback research by looking at feedback as an everyday workplace practice instead of only as part of formal appraisal or performance management systems. Feedback research suggests that feedback can support improvement when it offers useful information about performance and helps individuals figure out how to close the gap between current and desired performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). But, the effect of feedback still depends on its quality , its source, the way it is delivered, and how people interpret it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85; Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). This study continues that line by probing how employees experience feedback in small service-

sector places where it is often immediate, spoken up close, relational and informal, all at the same time.

Second, the study adds to the informal workplace learning literature by treating feedback as a plausible mechanism for learning while working. Informal workplace learning is often tied to participation, experience, interaction, problem-solving and practical involvement with day to day work tasks (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). Informal learning behaviors can show up as asking questions, watching other people, seeking guidance, and learning through ordinary work activities (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). This study contributes by zooming in on how performance-related feedback, either enables or limits role comprehension, skill progress, behavioral tuning, and practical learning in routine service work.

Third, the study contributes to SME HRD research by giving some insight into how people grow in small service-sector organizations, and how that plays out inside the day to day. SME HRD research is still a bit fragmented, and in general it has not developed as far as HRD research in bigger organizations (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). Since small firms often have fewer formal HR policies, and less structured ways of training and performance management, employee development rely a lot on informal interaction and ordinary workplace practices (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296; Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16). By zooming in on fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala this thesis offers a more specific picture of how feedback can work as a practical learning mechanism in customer-facing, time-sensitive, and task-oriented work environments.

In practical terms, this study might help SME managers, supervisors, and employees grasp, more or less, what makes feedback genuinely useful for learning. And it matters, because SMEs are not only numerous they are also quite central to employment, as well as value creation . In the EU non-financial business landscape , SMEs made up 65.1% of employment and 53.6% of real value added in 2024 (European Commission, 2025, p. 6) . So strengthening everyday feedback routines inside SMEs might matter not only for

personal learning, but also for service quality, task accuracy, employee confidence, and the overall performance at work. Even if people do not always catch it right away. Clear, specific, credible, respectful, and task related feedback can support role clarity, cut down on repeated errors, improve service behavior, and help employees adapt in a more effective manner to workplace expectations, which is the whole point in daily operations. On the other hand, vague, inconsistent, harsh, or badly delivered feedback can lower motivation and limit employees' willingness, or ability to take something useful from it. The study, therefore, has practical relevance for upgrading day-to-day feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, where employee learning often happens right on the job itself.

1.6 Delimitations

This study is delimited in a few different ways. First, it focuses on fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala Sweden. Those sectors were chosen because they are customer-facing, fast-paced, task-oriented, and they rely on frequent performance adjustment. The study does not cover every SME sector, nor does it include all regions of Sweden. Umeå and Uppsala are not treated as separate comparative cases, more like they are folded in as part of the broader Swedish SME service context.

Second, the study looks at employees' experiences of feedback, rather than managers' or owners' intentions when feedback is given. This delimitation matters because the aim of the study is to grasp how feedback is perceived, interpreted, used, or resisted during ordinary day-to-day work. Managers, owners, and supervisors may read feedback in a different way, but their perspectives are not the main, central focus of this thesis.

Third, the study narrows in on performance-related feedback practices and on-the-job learning. It does not examine all forms of HRD, nor all types of training, or even wider organizational learning processes. Feedback is treated as a possible pathway or lever that can enable or constrain learning, not as learning itself. On-the-job learning here is

understood as learning that happens through work tasks, interaction, problem-solving, correction, reflection, and behavioral adjustment.

Fourth, the study uses a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews and Gioia analysis. The goal is not to generate findings that are statistically generalizable. Instead, it is about building a rich, contextual understanding of how employees experience feedback in SME service work. So, the findings should be interpreted as analytically relevant to similar situations rather than statistically.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter sets up the theoretical groundwork for looking at the opportunities and hurdles for employees' on-the-job learning in fast food restaurant and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala Sweden, all of this viewed through performance-related feedback practices. The chapter ties together four linked threads in literature,: performance related feedback, feedback environment and feedback seeking behavior, informal workplace learning, and Small and medium sized enterprises, as a distinctive setting for human resource development.

The main theoretical point in this chapter is that feedback should not be assumed automatically beneficial. Feedback is of course known as a forceful influence on learning, however, its value is not automatic, it depends on the type of feedback, the manner in which it is delivered and, also how it is understood and then used by the person receiving it (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 81). This matters because feedback can also lead to negative consequences, for instance when it strikes at the self, when it brings no usable information or when it fails to help improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). So, in this thesis, feedback is treated as a conditional practice in the workplace. It supports learning when it is clear, credible, specific, workable, timely, and given with respect, while it can slow learning when it is too general, emotionally cutting , or simply does not offer practical direction.

This is a theoretical position, and it is especially relevant for the SME context. In small firms, there might not be any real HR systems for training, development, or performance management, and often these things get handled in a rather casual way instead of following a clean, systematic HR structure (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). In those kinds of settings, feedback is not only some HR instrument it is an embedded part of the everyday work routines, the talk between people, and the way learning just

happens. This chapter therefore establishes the theoretical groundwork for the more real empirical part in Chapter 4, showing how feedback operates through informal SME practices, role growth, emotional receiving, and a relationship based feedback culture.

The chapter is organized in this order. Section 2.2 deals with SMEs as settings for HRD and workplace learning. Then Section 2.3 talks about why fast-food, restaurant, and retail jobs matter as service-sector contexts. Section 2.4 looks at performance-related feedback within workplaces. After that, Section 2.5 discusses the feedback quality, timing, source credibility, and also how the feedback is delivered, properly or not. Section 2.6 examines formal, informal, and on-the-job feedback arrangements. Section 2.7 moves to the feedback environment and feedback-seeking behavior. Section 2.8 reviews informal workplace learning and on-the-job learning. Section 2.9 then links feedback with role development and performance improvement. Section 2.10 explains how feedback acts as both an enabling and also a constraining mechanism for learning. Section 2.11 presents the conceptual framing of the study, and finally, Section 2.12 sums up the whole chapter.

2.2 SMEs as a Context of HRD and Workplace Learning

Small and medium sized enterprises provide this specific setting to study and explore feedback and learning, because their HR practices are usually a bit different compared to bigger firms. In general, small businesses deal with resource constraints, they often have only limited HR departments and they depend much more on direct, almost face to face interaction between the owner, manager, supervisor, and the employee (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). These traits matter, because they end up shaping how employee growth happens. In SMEs, learning might show up as non-formal learning activities, or in other words, learning that is not tightly built into a performance appraisal system. At the same time, employee development can just occur through the ordinary flow of work, like guidance , informal correctio, watching others , and -day-to-day interaction.

Cardon and Stevens (2004, p. 295) also note that a large part of HRM literature is aimed at larger organizations, and it does not really capture the real situations of small or emerging businesses. They add that small companies quite often lack theory, plus concrete evidence, regarding training, performance management, and employee development (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 297). That matters for the theoretical side of this study. If there isn't a formal HR system already in place, then feedback may end up being one of those everyday practices where employees slowly learn how to carry out tasks, how to adjust ,and how to make sense of what is expected in the workplace.

Nolan and Garavan (2016) note that HRD practice in SMEs is still a less mature and more disorganized sub-research area than HRD research in general (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). Their systematic review indicates that there are a variety of definitions, contexts and measures used in SME HRD research, which suggests that the field is still underdeveloped and theoretically important, but is yet to be integrated (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). It reinforces the need for research on micro level HRD practices in SMEs particularly HRD practices like feedback which is not formally looked on as training but may influence employee development.

Formalization of HR also varies across SMEs as the size of the business increases. Formal HRM practices in small firms are found to differ in terms of firm size and growth, and in terms of training, appraisal and employee management practices (Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16). Their work has significance in that it implies that informality is not just a problem of SMEs, it is a structural attribute of many small enterprises. With this focus in mind, the feedback in this thesis is not necessarily given through formal performance systems, but is rather provided within the context of daily work.

The work environment also shapes employee learning in SMEs. Tam and Gray (2016, p. 671) show that workplace learning in SMEs connects to how employees carry out their work practices, as well as the firm's life-cycle stage. They also mention that the learning practices of SMEs still have not been investigated in a broad way from the employees' side, even if employees' learning is clearly important for the development and

endurance of SMEs (Tam & Gray, 2016, p. 672). This point feels especially relevant here, since this study is grounded in the staff's own lived experience of getting feedback, making sense of it, and then using it in day-to-day working reality.

This SME perspective is supported by workplace learning theory. Billett (2001, p. 209) suggests that workplace learning relies on opportunities for participation, guidance and support in the workplace, and individual's engagement with these opportunities. This implies that learning is not generated in the workplace and not generated by the individual. It comes from sharing. Feedback as an affordance - in SMEs, opportunities for an employee to see an error, articulate new expectations, and engage in work to improve performance.

Eraut (2007, p. 248) also states that much workplace learning is informal and experiential, happening through interaction and through the course of daily practice, rather than by formal teaching. This is important because sometimes employees do not classify these experiences as "learning". In this thesis, feedback can happen as a mere correction, suggestion, comment or conversation, but can still serve as an important learning mechanism.

SMEs thus offer a rich context for the study of feedback and learning, as employee development may be informal, relational, and integrated with the context of daily work. This does not imply that SMEs are not learning. Instead, learning can lie within natural communication, correction of tasks, peer support, and direct instructions.

2.3 Fast-Food, Restaurant, and Retail Work as Service Sector Context

The study is limited to fast-food, restaurants and retail areas SMEs as they are customer oriented, time sensitive and performance driven. The staff in these environments are required to act promptly for customers, handle stress in projects, coordinate tasks with others and rectify errors at the same time. Feedback is particularly important due to

these qualities, since sometimes work needs to be finished without waiting for a formal review meeting. There should be feedback throughout the task.

Fast-food and quick-service restaurants are especially relevant because they are influenced by speed, standardization, routinized service processes, and managerial control. Butler and Hammer (2019, p. 97) characterize fast-food as a service sector environment where efficiency, calculability, predictability and control are central features. This is important because the work is standardized and fast-paced, which demands immediate feedback. When an employee has made an error in the food preparation, order taking, or service timing, correction must be done immediately to ensure quality and flow.

The front line role of a restaurant also requires emotional and customer service skills. Han et al. (2016, p. 97) find that customer incivility is positively associated with the level of burnout among frontline service employees in restaurants. They state that the restaurant staff is expected to respond politely and be emotionally controlled when encountering rude or disrespectful customer behavior (Han et al., 2016, p. 98). Feedback in restaurant work can relate to more than just technical tasks. It may also involve emotional labor, customer service, service tone and the way that difficult service encounters are handled.

The retail environment is a similar but also different context. Widjaja et al. (2024, p. 370) describe the retail industry as a demanding job situation that includes work intensification, high-performance work systems, emotional exhaustion, creativity, and employee performance, all at once. They also say that work intensification keeps raising workload and pressure for workers to meet the higher productivity requirements (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 371). That seems to fit, because employees in retail often need feedback during interactions with customers, when managing stock, doing sales, waiting on customers, and also dealing with several tasks in parallel or back-to-back.

Overall, the service-sector studies above show that the fast food, restaurant, and retail environments are not exactly “neutral” spaces. They are places where employees’

work experiences get shaped by performance pressure, customer-related interactions, emotional requirements, and task coordination. This is also why the feedback in these sectors tends to be immediate and situational. It shows up after a customer complaint, after a food preparation slip, during a rush hour problem, when stock is low, and in situations where employees need to jump between priorities quickly.

At the same time, feedback is given during worktime or right after a work task, can support learning since it is linked to the moment that needs to correction, meaning from feedback. It is easier to notice what needs attention and how to improve next. But with time pressure, feedback can also turn out to be rushed, unclear, overly critical, or even upsetting. So, these sectors help explain how feedback can both enable and also limit on-the-job learning, depending on the moment, context and the conditions.

2.4 Performance Related Feedback in Workplace Settings

Feedback is one of the big concepts behind employee performance, development , and learning. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 81) define feedback as information given by an agent on aspects of one's performance or understanding. They wrote this mostly for education, but the definition still fits well to workplace learning. In real jobs feedback can come from a manager, coworkers, customers, the results of the job itself, or even from the worker's own reflection on how they performed.

When we talk about feedback related to performance, we mean info employees get about what they are doing and how well they're doing it, plus how it can be refined, and how their behavior or task output might be adjusted. That feedback might be about technical tasks, customer support, communication, teamwork, handling time, role expectations, emotional conduct, or even the overall level and norms of the workplace. So feedback can happen beyond any formal assessment, like not only during evaluations. In practice it also shows up as daily remarks, practical guidance, corrections, acknowledgment, and little recommendations.

Feedback matters because it can help people shrink the distance between current performance and the desired one (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). This “gap shrinking” idea is the main logic in the research right now. If employees get a message that makes expectations clear, and also shows how their current actions line up versus those expectations, then they receive information that supports improvement. Still, it depends a lot on whether employees are willing, and open to accept the feedback ,and take it in and move forward with it.

Employees actively seek feedback because they need information about their performance, but the seeking of feedback depends on a cost-value calculation (Anseel et al., 2015, p. 320). Employees can seek feedback in order to improve, but may also not want to receive feedback if they experience embarrassment, loss or negative impressions. This is particularly significant in SMEs, where feedback is often provided in a close relationship and can therefore seem more personal than in larger companies.

Feedback must also be perceived as a social process. Steelman et al. (2004, p. 166) describe the feedback environment as a factor influencing feedback that includes source credibility, feedback quality, feedback delivery, source availability, and support for feedback seeking. This does not imply that feedback is restricted to the message being sent. It is also around who provides the feedback, how the feedback is provided, whether the employee believes it or not, and whether the work environment is conducive to the use of feedback.

So, this means that in this thesis performance-related feedback is defined as a socially embedded practice at work. It can be used to suggest task improvement, role understanding, and behavioral adjustment, but only if employees believe it is credible, useful, and achievable.

2.5 Feedback Quality, Timing, Source Credibility, and Delivery

Feedback effectiveness really depends on several interrelated factors, like quality ,and also how fast it arrives, source credibility and the way it gets delivered. These traits matter because they shape how useful the feedback is for learning. In other words, if it lands wrong or late, it can lose its value, even if the message is correct.

Feedback quality itself is about how clear specific, relevant, and useful the feedback is. Hattie and Timperley suggest feedback becomes meaningful when it gives information about the task or process, and also supports closing the gap between current performance and where someone needs to be (Hattie & Timperley , 2007, p. 82). In workplace settings, feedback tends to be stronger when it acts like an explanation about what must shift and how improvement will happen. For instance, the phrase “do better” is an ambiguous response, because it does not really provide a concrete route for learning.

Timing matters too, but it can be a bit slippery. If feedback comes in near the job, then the employee can link it to a concrete action or mistake, almost right away. But then again, time by itself is not enough. The effect of feedback shifts a lot depending on the feedback , and also what it is pointed at, because feedback only works when certain requirements are met (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). So yes, giving feedback immediately may help learning , especially when it’s clearly connected to the task, and when it also includes support or direction. At the same time though, it can limit learning if it is said too sharply, or if it shows up without much explanation.

There is another key condition, and that is source credibility. As Steelman et al., (2004, p. 167) explain, credibility is the trustworthiness and competence of the person who delivers the message. In SMEs, managers might feel credible because they help shape the workplace norms; senior colleagues may also be credible since they’re working close to the task and can give hands-on counsel. This point is important because feedback tends to be taken up by employees when they think the giver really understands the work, and that the feedback is delivered in a fair manner.

Van der Rijt et al. (2013, p. 72) also show that colleagues, a coach, and a manager are the kinds of sources from which employees prefer to receive feedback within their professional network. And they add that feedback from those people can be viewed as valuable (Van der Rijt et al., 2013, p. 72). That supports the idea that SMEs' feedback might often run in a top down way, even if it's not always formal. Managers, owners, more senior staff, peers and, in some cases, customers can all assist employees in learning, in one form or another.

Delivery is also one of the highest priority things, in a "it's not only what you say but how you say it" way. Feedback delivery is often treated like just one slice of the feedback environment, because the way the feedback is communicated, ends up shaping how it gets received, (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). Constructive, and respectful feedback can encourage learning , while negative or demeaning feedback may pull focus away from the actual content for employees.

This pattern becomes more obvious, especially in SMEs where people might still be collaborating side by side, even after the feedback session already took place. Quality, timing, the credibility of the source, and how the message is delivered all point to why feedback is conditional. Feedback is not helpful just because it shows up. It only works when workers can make meaning from it, trust it, emotionally absorb it, and then use it in the job.

2.6 Formal, Informal and On-the-Job Feedback Practices

Feedback practices can show up as a formal, informal, or work-integrated thing, depends on the setting. A formal feedback style is more organized, systematic, and it might even be written down. It can be happening at an annual review, inside an appraisal system, during a written evaluation, on a review form, or in a development conversation where people sit and talk it through. Informal feedback is usually more spontaneous, it can be

a quick comment, a direct correction, peer advice, a message, or just a short chat while work is going on.

For SMEs, informal feedback is even more significant, largely because the HR set up is less structured. Cardon and Stevens (2004, p. 296) suggest that small businesses have a less structured approach to HR policies and systems. Also, Kotey and Slade (2005) show that formal HRM practices can shift with firm growth, and in smaller companies they tend to be less developed (Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16). So in the SME context, it points to the idea that feedback might not be consistently part of a formal performance management system in every situation. Instead, it can be found embedded in everyday work interaction, as it's just part of the routine.

Steelman et al. (2004) clearly differentiate between the day-to-day feedback environment and formal performance appraisal sessions (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). This is the main difference that is important in the current study. For fast food, restaurant, retail SMEs, feedback is likely to occur when the employees are doing the work - not just at the scheduled meeting. It might be a manager who corrects food preparation errors, a colleague who says there's a quicker way to do things during rush hour, or a supervisor who shows you how to deal with a customer's complaint.

On-the-job feedback is feedback that is provided during or immediately after work tasks. It is directly related to practice and can support employee behavior change in real time. This is particularly relevant in service industries where work is current, visible and customer directed. In these settings, feedback can function as a learning tool due to the linkage of performance information with real work situations.

There are, however, some drawbacks to informal feedback. It can be informal, vague or rely on specific managers and colleagues. It can also be served under pressure, particularly in fast food, restaurant and retail environments with high time demands and customer needs. Thus informal feedback should not be idealized. It can allow learning to

take place when it is practical and respectful, but it can restrict learning when it is vague, hurried, and emotionally hurtful.

In this study, therefore, formal and informal feedback are not considered to be opposing. Formal feedback can be used to support consistency and documentation, and informal can be used to support immediacy and task relevance. For SMEs, a light combination of both may be useful.

2.7 Feedback Environment and Feedback-Seeking Behaviour

The feedback environment is the overall setting where feedback is given in everyday situations. In addition to formal performance appraisal feedback, Steelman et al., (2004, p. 166) describe the feedback environment as refers to the context of the day-to-day supervisor-subordinate and coworker-coworker feedback processes. The concept is important because feedback can only take effect when employees are willing to use it, and this willingness is related not only to the message of feedback but also to the work context in which it is given.

A supportive feedback environment lets employees, ask questions, get clarification and then use the feedback to improve. But in a weaker setup, people can start to avoid feedback or even resist it. When employees feel, that criticism is coming with embarrassment, or blame, they usually do not take feedback in, even when it could genuinely help them learn and adjust. In small and medium businesses, this matters a lot because feedback is almost like a form of intimacy. Sure, managers and colleagues might be easier to reach, but at the same time employees can feel more exposed, when they actively seek feedback from others.

Feedback seeking is about employees, proactively looking out for feedback info. As Van der Rijt et al. (2013, p. 73) explain, it means a deliberate effort to actively look for informal, day to day feedback cues. Van der Rijt et al., (2013) also found that employees

frequently receive feedback from peers in their own domain, and that they view input coming from peers, a manager, leader, coach, or others as beneficial. That matters because employees are not just passive receivers of feedback, in practice. Instead they can do more, they can actively ask for feedback when it is needed.

Within the context of feedback seeking behavior, Anseel et al. (2015, p. 320) describe this thing as being formed under a cost-value frame-work, like a calculation. Staff generally work out that the benefits of feedback outweigh any possible costs (effort, embarrassment, negative image). In practice, that cost-value equation becomes especially convincing in smaller offices, because everyone tends to see the same manager and the same colleagues over and over. Asking for feedback can help, sure, but it can also turn into a risk for the employee if he or she feels afraid of being viewed as unskilled.

So, whether feedback turns into learning, seems tied to the feedback context and to feedback seeking helps. In a supportive feedback environment, employees are more likely to ask for guidance and apply adjustments. But when the feedback environment is threatening, learning can get blocked, especially if people do not ask for feedback or they do not really handle it well.

2.8 Informal Workplace Learning and On-the-job Learning

Informal workplace learning is learning outside formal training programs and it is woven into daily work. The informal learning is implicit, reactive and deliberative learning, and that it often takes place in the experience, rather than formal teaching (Eraut, 2004, p. 250). He also points out that informal learning is invisible in that the worker may not see informal learning as learning (Eraut, 2004, p. 249). This is particularly relevant to SMEs because the employee might acquire knowledge as a result of feedback, but not necessarily acknowledge it as formal learning.

Billett (2001) claims that there is no distinction between work and learning (Billett, 2001, p. 210). This implies that employees are taught during the process of their work. Learning takes place through a variety of work tasks, workplace interactions, observing others and receiving guidance. In this study, feedback is defined as one such way in which this participation becomes developmental.

As described by Noe, Clarke, and Klein (2014), workplace learning today can involve formal learning, informal learning, and sharing knowledge all in the development of human capital (Noe et al., 2014, p. 245). They also note that feedback about job performance and development opportunities aimed at sharpening workplace skills are especially meaningful for employees (Noe et al., 2014, p. 246). That framing reinforces the idea that feedback is tied to a broader workplace learning thing, not just an isolated moment, particularly when learning is embedded in work, instead of hanging apart from it.

Informal learning behaviors are the non-curricular behaviors and actions carried out to pick up knowledge and skills beyond formal learning settings (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). These process includes observing colleagues, doing problem solving with superiors, asking questions on-the-job, and learning by doing in a hands on way (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). Their meta-analysis also shows that informal learning behaviors connect with knowledge, skill improvement, and performance results outcomes (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 203).

Decius, Schaper, and Seifert (2019, p. 496) also report on informal workplace learning being of great value for work-related continuing education, particularly in the context of solving problems, reflecting, experimenting, and seeking advice from knowledgeable experts in the company. This finding is in line with the current study that feedback is an aspect of informal learning but not a learning itself. If employees do not interpret feedback, apply it, and practice it again, feedback is not learning.

In fast food, restaurants and retail SMEs, on the-job learning can take place when employees learn how to prepare food, serve customers, prioritize tasks, manage workload, deal with complaints, follow hygiene procedures, work with stock and coordinate with colleagues. This learning is often through immediate correction, observation, peer support and repetition. Feedback allows employees to see the need for change, but learning takes place when employees act on the feedback.

2.9 Feedback, Role Development, and Performance Improvement

Feedback can be used to aid task execution , but it can also help an employee figure out his or her role a bit more clearly. In Workplace learning, workers gain knowledge not only in technical skills, but also in norms, expectations, values, and the accepted ways of working. Billett's idea of affordances in the workplace suggests that learning is tied to whether someone has the chance to take part in activities, to receive direction, and to participate (Billett, 2001, p. 209). Likewise, Eraut's (2004, p. 248) research shows that informal learning can happen when it comes from everyday work routines and lived experience.

SMEs might experience role development in an informal manner. Formal onboarding or written procedures may not always be there for employees. Instead, they may be told what they're expected to do by having their actions corrected, by watching others, by asking questions of peers, and by getting feedback from managers. For example, information on food preparation can cover more than just how to do the technique, it can also include quality control. And comments on customer service can teach not only what to say, but the tone, timing, and overall manner of how to say it.

Learning adds value to human capital development, because workers keep acquiring and applying knowledge , skills, abilities, and other kinds of resources while learning happens in the workplace (Noe et al., 2014, p. 246). For service SMEs, you can see this value show up as feedback that helps staff make real life choices. Staff get taught what their

priorities are during rush hours, how to manage customer requests, and how to adjust to local norms.

Also, feedback can push performance forward when it is helpful, meaning it is clear enough to act on. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 82) argue that feedback matters a lot for closing the gap between what people really understand or do, and what the goals say they should achieve. In workplace terms, feedback counts as “useful” when it tells employees what they are already doing well, and what exactly they must refine.

That role-development side is important for this study too, because Chapter 4 shows that working people felt that feedback let them figure out “what is expected.” In practice, feedback was used to straighten out standards, to build employees’ practical know-how, and to raise confidence. So, in this chapter, feedback is not only a simple channel for performance information, but also an informal way to socialize, and learn the role at the same time.

2.10 Feedback as an Enabling and Constraining Learning Mechanism

The relationship between feedback and learning is not exactly linear. Feedback can help learning when it gives clear, specific, credible, and practical information that employees can actually use in their job. But feedback can also end up limiting learning when it is vague, delivered at the wrong moment, spoken in a harsh manner, from someone people see as not credible, or simply not tied to usable advice. This conditional way of understanding feedback is the main theoretical idea behind the study.

Feedback fosters learning when it offers clear, specific, credible, and practical information. Feedback can be powerful but how effective it is dependent on the nature of feedback and the conditions under which it is provided (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). Steelman et al. demonstrate that feedback is more effective when provided in a supportive feedback environment that has credible sources, high quality feedback, and where

feedback is delivered in an appropriate way (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). Cerasoli et al. also present evidence of the connection between informal learning behaviors, knowledge acquisition and performance outcomes (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 203).

Feedback also may limit learning, if it is unclear, infrequent, out of time, unfair or it causes dejection. If the feedback does not clearly say what needs to be altered, employees might not know what to do next in response. Sometimes, people will focus more on emotional discomfort rather than on the learning content, especially if the feedback comes across as negative. And when the person giving it isn't seen as credible, employees can end up questioning how useful it is. So, in that way feedback can end up being missing or just not effective in the learning process.

This difference becomes relatively crucial in SMEs. In many small firms there are no solid HR structures, so the everyday interpersonal play and practice is what tends to get treated as employee development (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). Smaller organizations are also less likely to use formal HRM practices than bigger ones, in particular with regard to training and appraisal (Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16). This informal feedback is powerful indeed, but it is also risky. It might speed up learning within a short time span, yet it can just as easily demoralize employees if it is poorly framed or delivered, like without care.

So the ongoing research is seeing feedback as this contingent mechanism. It can support on the job training if it's immediate, usable, believable, respectful, and tied to actual work tasks. On the other hand, it may also block learning when the feedback is vague, overly harsh, discouraging, or just not specific enough. This way of framing things then really sets up Chapter 4's findings by Gioia, plus the grounded model that will be introduced, suggesting that feedback turns into learning only when the employee understands it, takes it in, and then uses it in practice.

2.11 Conceptual Positioning of the Study

The study falls at the crossroads of four streams of literature namely: performance-related feedback, informal workplace learning, SME HRD, and service-sector work. Each of the literature streams provides a theoretical background, but none of them addresses the particular process investigated in this thesis.

Feedback literature is available that describes how feedback can help performance get better and grow. It emphasizes the quality of feedback, the focus of feedback, the credibility of the feedback sources, the delivery and the feedback-seeking behavior (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82; Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166; Anseel et al., 2015, p. 320; Van der Rijt et al., 2013, p. 73). This literature does not, however, provide a complete account of how feedback works in small service jobs where feedback is informal, immediate, and relational.

The informal workplace learning literature describes learning as occurring through participation, interaction, experience, reflection and practice (Billett, 2001, p. 210; Eraut, 2004, p. 248; Noe et al., 2014, p. 245; Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204; Decius et al., 2019, p. 496). Not all of this literature, however, looks at feedback on performance as a separate process by which learning is allowed or hindered.

The SME literature argues that small firms tend to adopt informal, flexible and relational HRD practices (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296; Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16; Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85; Tam & Gray, 2016, p. 671). But it doesn't pay as much attention to the detailed process by which daily feedback influences employee learning in fast-food, restaurant and retail SMEs.

The service sector literature demonstrates why it is appropriate to consider fast-food, restaurant, and retail work as a context to study feedback. The nature of fast-food jobs is one of efficiency and control (Butler & Hammer, 2019, p. 97). Customer incivility and burnout risks are part of the restaurant frontline work (Han et al., 2016, p. 97). Widjaja

et al. (2024, p. 370) have described the three aspects of retail work that lead to the intensification of work, emotional exhaustion, and performance pressure. These studies, however, do not explain specifically the way in which feedback is used as a mechanism of on-the-job learning in SMEs.

The present study brings these literatures together by looking at the experience of employees in day-to-day service work for SMEs as they receive feedback. Does not presume learning will happen if feedback is given. Rather, it examines how feedback can either be helpful or hindering based on the style and timing of the feedback, its reception, understanding, and utilization. This establishes the theoretical cornerstone of the study, which is that feedback is a conditional-learning mechanism in SMEs.

The conceptual framework of the study is as follows:

- Informal, immediate, and relational context is established in SME service.
- The purpose of performance-related feedback practices is to give employees information, correction, recognition or guidance.
- Employees accept and use feedback through the quality of the feedback, the credibility of the source, how the feedback is delivered, and relational trust.
- Feedback can turn into practical adjustment, role clarification, skill development and on-the-job learning depending on how it is interpreted and applied by employees.
- Feedback can either facilitate or hinder learning by allowing or preventing employees from engaging with the feedback.

This conceptual positioning clearly connects with the research question and sets the groundwork for the analytical basis of the empirical results presented in Chapter 4, based on the Gioia method.

3 Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview and Methodological Focus

This chapter explains the methodological decisions made in this study, to see how performance related feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala Sweden, can enable or limit employees' on-the-job learning. Here the chapter goes through research philosophy, ontological and epistemological stance, the research design, and the way the literature search was done. It also covers the research context sampling strategy, data gathering method, data analysis process, ethical considerations, plus some methodological limitations and why the use of artificial intelligence mattered in this work.

A qualitative research design was chosen, simply because the research question is more about employees' own experiences, their understandings, and what they attach meanings to when it comes to feedback in daily work. The study is not trying to quantify feedback statistically, instead it tries to capture how employees talk about feedback, how they interpret it, whether they accept it resist it, or then use it in real routines. Because of that, a qualitative approach works well, it lets the researcher investigate the context, the relationship, and the emotional side of feedback and learning.

Semi-structured interviews were used as the main data collection method. This helped participants talk about their feedback experiences in their own way but also gave the researcher room to ask follow-up questions about feedback sources, how it was delivered, what emotional reactions happened, and what learning outcomes came out of it. Then the material was analyzed with the Gioia Method, which supports inductive qualitative analysis by first moving from participant-centered first order concepts, toward researcher-centered second order themes, and then to aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20; Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p. 2). In general, this way of linking the evidence connects tightly with Chapter 4, where the findings are presented via 80 first-order

concepts, 15 second order themes, four aggregate dimensions, and a grounded model of informal performance feedback in SMEs.

3.2 Research Philosophy

3.2.1 Constructivist Ontological Position

The ontology used in this study is constructivist. A constructivist ontology assumes that social realities are not simply ready-made things or independent from human interpretation. So, workplace realities are better seen as socially constructed via interaction, communication, shared understandings and everyday practice. In this thesis, feedback is therefore not treated as if it has one steady meaning for all employees. Instead, the meaning of feedback seems to shift based on how it is delivered, who gives it, how employees interpret it, and how it is tied into the practical and relational context of work, because those aspects are connected together with each other.

This role is suitable because the study looks at employees' actual experiences of feedback in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. In these kinds of settings, feedback can be felt as helpful, motivating, discouraging, unclear, respectful, or unfair; it depends a lot on what is going on and also on the bond between the employee and the feedback giver. So, basically the same feedback format might get understood in different ways by different people. For instance, quick correction can help learning when the message is clear and delivered respectfully, but it can also limit learning when it turns harsh when it lands in an emotionally discouraging way.

A constructivist ontology therefore supports the study focus on how employees make sense of feedback in their own workplace contexts, such as how they interpret it in practice, without assuming some fixed reality. It also fits the Gioia Method that was used in the analysis, because the method starts with participants' own accounts first and only

later moves toward researcher-centered themes and aggregate dimensions. Gioia et al. (2013, p. 20) explain that the Gioia approach goes from informant-centered first-order concepts to researcher-centered second-order themes, which makes it suitable for examining how participants understand and describe their experiences in their day-to-day activities at work. In this thesis, this approach lets the analysis stay grounded in employees' meanings while still building a more conceptual account of feedback as a learning mechanism, sort of a mental process that keeps turning over.

3.2.2 Interpretivist Epistemological Orientation

The epistemological orientation of this study is interpretivist. While constructivism explains the study's ontological assumption about the nature of social reality, interpretivism is more about how knowledge about it is brought into reality. An interpretivist epistemology assumes that knowledge about social phenomena gets developed through understanding the meanings that the individuals attach to what they experience. In the research, knowledge is produced by interpreting employees' accounts of how feedback is delivered, received, understood, and actually used in the day-to-day work within SMEs.

This epistemological position is appropriate, because the study doesn't really try to measure the statistical effect of feedback on learning. Rather, it is more about understanding how employees interpret that feedback and also, how those interpretations shape what they feel during on-the-job learning. So instead of looking at numbers, the study focuses on subjective meanings, the workplace context, and the social conditions that determine if feedback becomes useful or limiting. The employees' accounts are treated as core empirical material too, because those accounts give insight into how feedback is experienced in practice.

The interpretivist orientation is also suitable for using semi-structured interviews. The interviews meant participants could explain their own experiences in their words, and it

also let the researcher engage with follow-up questions about feedback quality, timing, source credibility, emotional delivery, and practical use. That mattered because the meaning of feedback could not be assumed so early or in an advanced manner. It had to be figured out through participants' descriptions of what was going on in their workplace experiences.

3.2.3 Implications for the Study

The constructivist ontological stance and interpretivist epistemological orientation guided how the research design was put together in several ways. At first, it led us toward a qualitative research design, since the whole point was to grasp meanings and lived experience and not be locked towards fixed variables to test what happens. Then, it also supported the use of semi-structured interviews, because this style of interviewing let employees spell out their feedback routines and learning experiences with a lot of details. And finally, they supported the Gioia Method, seeing how the analysis went from what participants said in their own words to bigger themes and then toward aggregate dimensions.

This philosophical positioning also influenced how the findings were interpreted. The study does not claim that feedback has one single universal effect in all SMEs. Instead, it argues that feedback operates as a conditional mechanism rather than a straight, same-for-everyone cause. Feedback may enable learning when employees experience it as clear and specific, credible, respectful, timely, and also usable. And it may constrain learning when employees experience it as vague, inconsistent, harsh, unclear, or not credible. This interpretation reflects the study is constructivist, interpretivist stance because it treats feedback as meaningful only through employees' situated experiences and interpretations.

Overall, the study's philosophical stance is coherent enough with what it aims to do and also with the research questions and method. A constructivist ontology lets the study

examine the feedback as a socially made workplace practice, not just something that is being given to the employees. And an interpretivist epistemology helps the study figure out how employees make sense of feedback, particularly in relation to learning that happens in day-to-day activities on the job. So, both angles fit together as a solid basis for the qualitative research design and for the Gioia-based analysis.

3.3 Research Design and Approach

This study uses a qualitative research design because the aim is to grasp how employees experience performance-related feedback in everyday work and how they interpret it, which enables or restricts their on-the-job learning. A qualitative design feels right here, since the whole focus is on meanings, experiences, interpretations, and the workplace context, not on tracking statistical relationships between already predefined variables. So the study looks at feedback the way it is lived and sort of handled by employees in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, where learning often happens through interaction, correction, observation, and practical doing, not just formal training.

The study follows mainly an inductive research approach but with some deductive elements mixed in. The inductive part in how the interview data is analyzed with the Gioia Method, where the empirical material was first coded close to participants' own descriptions, before it was developed into second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. The Gioia Method is suitable for inductive qualitative research because it helps theory building by moving, step by step, from informant-centered meanings to researcher-centered conceptual categories (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). In this study, the coding process therefore made room for the findings to unfold from employees’ accounts of how feedback is delivered, received, interpreted, and practically used during daily work.

At the same time, the study also has deductive elements in it. The existing literature on performance-related feedback, informal workplace learning, the feedback environment, and SME HRD helped shape the overall research focus, the way the research questions

were phrased, and even the design of the interview guide. For instance, the study was theoretically sensitized by feedback research, and it basically points out that feedback can support improvement, especially when it helps people grasp the gap between current performance and what is desired (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). It was also sensitized by workplace learning research, which showed that learning often takes place through participation, interaction, and the run of everyday work experience (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). These ideas did not appear as strict hypotheses that had to be tested. Instead they functioned more like a theoretical background, steering the study while still leaving room for the empirical material to play a role in shaping the final analysis.

This combo means the study is best understood as inductive in its analytical logic but deductively informed when it comes to theoretical preparation. The research does not really test some predetermined model of feedback and learning. Instead, it takes what is already out there in the literature as a kind of sensitizing foundation, and then it develops the findings through a data-driven Gioia analysis process. This line fits the aim of the thesis because the study can stay close to employees' lived experiences while at the same time linking the analysis to established research on feedback, workplace learning, and HRD in SMEs.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was chosen because this study is really trying to grasp how employees experience performance-related feedback and learn while they are on the job, especially in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. The research question needs insight into meaning, interpretation, emotion, and the whole workplace environment. So, a qualitative approach felt appropriate because it lets participants actually describe how feedback was given, how they took it in, and in what ways it shaped their daily learning at work.

A quantitative design was not selected, not because the aim was not to count how often feedback occurs or to test statistical relations between feedback and learning results. A survey could show whether employees receive feedback often or seldom, but it would still not explain how the feedback was delivered in real life, why some feedback ends up feeling supportive, or why other feedback can be discouraging and harder to use. Since this study centers on employees' interpretations and lived experiences, qualitative interviews were more fitting than standardized measurement.

The qualitative design also fits the SME context in a more natural way. In small and medium-sized firms, feedback may show up through informal talks, direct correction, peer help, practical demonstrations, and even quick, short comments during the shift. These things are not always captured in formal HR systems or in written procedures; in fact, sometimes they happen in the moment, and that's it. Because of that, open-ended qualitative data was needed so the study could make sense of how feedback works day to day and how employees link it to learning process.

3.3.2 Inductive Research Approach with abductive and deductive elements

So the study is mostly inductive, in the sense that it tries to build understanding from what shows up in the empirical material rather than just checking out some preset hypotheses. The research question is about how employees experience performance-related feedback in fast food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, and also how they make sense of that feedback as something that helps or blocks their learning while they are on the job. Because those experiences are pretty context-dependent and socially grounded, the study needed a way or an approach where themes and the meanings behind them could emerge from the participants' own descriptions. The inductive logic is pretty visible in the way the Gioia Method gets used. In this approach, the analysis starts with first-order concepts that are meant to stay close to what participants say, or their own terms and meanings. After that, these are developed into second-order themes and then into aggregate dimensions that in turn help to support a more conceptual interpretation of the

data (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). This process was useful because it made it possible to shift from employees' concrete descriptions of feedback practices toward a wider explanation of how feedback can work as a learning mechanism in SME service sector workplaces, which is where a lot of everyday interactions happen in day-to-day work activities.

At the same time, the study brings in abductive parts too, moving back and forth between empirical findings and also what already exists in the literature. That looping lets the researcher sharpen their understanding, connect newly emerging concepts to more theoretical constructs, and keep the analysis tuned in to earlier work on feedback, informal learning, and HRD in SMEs. So abduction helps set up a dialogue between the data and the theory, and in turn it improves the conceptual clarity without constraining the analysis by the preexisting models.

The study also has deductive elements; it borrows from earlier literature to steer what the research focus looks like, how the interview guide is built, and how the findings get understood. For instance, the existing research on feedback quality, timing, delivery, source credibility, and even the feedback setting (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 84; Steelman et al., 2004, p. 167) gave the study a theoretical sensitivity and helped form what to look at, while still leaving some space for new, inductively derived insights from participants' own lived experiences.

Mixing inductive, abductive, and deductive elements means the study stays both evidence grounded and conceptually guided. Induction helps surface patterns straight from participant experiences, abduction supports iterative refinement and then the linking back to theory, and deduction keeps everything aligned with earlier research.

Overall, this inductive method with abductive and deductive elements gives a coherent frame for looking at how employees experience performance-based feedback inside small service-sector SMEs. It also lets the study catch the complexity of informal

feedback practices while still keeping the results analytically solid and also tied into earlier scholarly discussion.

3.4 Research Context

3.4.1 SMEs as the Organizational Context

The study was carried out in SMEs because they offer unique conditions, for looking at feedback and on-the-job learning. If you compare them to bigger companies, SMEs often have fewer official HR systems, and not as many training resources either, plus the relationships between employees and managers can be less formal. Training and development and performance management also tend to stay rather informal in small businesses, mainly because they do not set up formal HR policies and systems (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). HRD research in SMEs is also, in a way, less theoretically developed than HRD research overall, so for that reason SMEs seem a good setting for more research (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85).

Staff training in SMEs may be mostly informal. During work tasks employees can learn through watching other people, problem solving, getting feedback, asking questions, and then adjusting their behaviors. Opportunities for workers to take part in work activities and receive guidance plus support are really crucial for workplace learning (Billett, 2001, p. 209). Also, much of workplace learning is informal, and it can be missed or ignored because workers often cannot label it as learning in their day-to-day work experience (Eraut, 2004, p. 249).

One important concern in the SME context is that feedback methods might be a bit less formally organized than in bigger companies. Feedback may arrive as formal appraisal system, or development meetings in large firms, while in SMEs it can show up as swift verbal notes, straightforward feedback, peer-based input, and short chats that

happen in the moment. So, because of that, researching SMEs lets us look at feedback beyond the classic HR mechanism and more everyday work practice.

3.4.2 Fast-Food, Restaurant, and Retail Service Sectors

The study concentrates on fast food, restaurant and retail SMEs. The sectors were chosen because they have direct contact with customers, require task coordination, have time pressure and are subject to frequent performance adjustment. In such environments, feedback becomes particularly crucial as staff members are required to respond promptly to customer requirements, operational challenges, shifts in workload, and errors.

The employment in fast food and quick-service restaurants is organized in terms of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Butler & Hammer, 2019, p. 97). Front line workers in restaurants are also expected to interact with customers and have emotional service demands. Han et al. discovered that customer incivility and restaurant frontline employee burnout are positively correlated (Han et al., 2016, p. 97). Retail work can be characterized by work intensification, emotional exhaustion, customer facing demands and pressure of maintaining employee performance (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 370).

The characteristics make fast food, restaurant and retail SMEs suitable for the research. These environments can include immediate feedback occurring when preparing the food, serving the food, handling food, cleaning, selling, coordinating deliveries, and during shift work. Feedback can be used during work to help employees correct errors, clarify expectations, and enhance performance. Feedback to these sectors can also be challenging from an emotional perspective if it is given in a stressed state and with little or no practical explanation.

3.4.3 Geographical Context: Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden

The study conducted in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden. These spots were chosen because they gave access to employees working in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SME service contexts. The study is not set up to compare Umeå and Uppsala as separate cases. Instead, both cities get treated as part of the wider Swedish SME service context.

This geographical delimitation fits the purpose quite well, since the goal is not to describe regional differences but rather to grasp how employees experience performance-related feedback and learning while actually on the job in smaller service-sector workplaces. So the emphasis is more analytical than comparative. Umeå and Uppsala work as suitable contexts because they include service-sector SMEs where employees often end up in close everyday interaction with managers, co-workers, customers, and the usual operational pull of the job.

3.5 Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

The study used purposive sampling to find participants who could share quite rich and relevant viewpoints about the phenomenon in focus with employees' own experiences of feedback in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. Basically, purposive sampling is well seen in qualitative research as a way to pick information-rich cases, where people have experience or knowledge that lines up directly with the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 535).

Participants were chosen around their role inside the organization. So this strategy lets the researchers focus on people who can give detailed descriptions of feedback practices and what those practices do for workplace learning, instead of trying to achieve statistical generalizability. As Palinkas et al. (2015, p. 536) state, purposive sampling is about picking participants who can provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon while also considering variation across different contexts.

In this study, the purposive sample covered 9 employees: 1 from a fast-food SME, 7 from restaurant SMEs, and 1 from a retail SME. People were approached one at a time, through personal networks and a few organizational visits, and then the consent form was sent by email. Researchers only moved forward with the semi-structured interviews once the signed consent came back, so ethical compliance stayed intact. Even though there was just one retail SME employee, the sample still manages to offer useful, workplace feedback-type insights across SME sectors, which aligns with the purposive sampling approach as well (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 536).

The purpose was not to get a sample that is statistically representative. Instead, the goal was to gather rich qualitative accounts from employees, where their day-to-day experience was clearly tied to the research question. This strategy felt suitable because the study is more about how feedback is actually experienced and interpreted, not about how frequent feedback shows up across a larger population.

Participants were identified using a mix of personal contact and straight field access at the same time. One participant got reached through an earlier personal connection that already existed. Beyond that, the researchers went physically to contact fast food outlets, restaurants, and small and medium-sized retail shops in Umeå and Uppsala that matched the study's inclusion criteria. The workplaces were approached face to face, and potential participants were spoken to one by one. In those early conversations, the researchers said a few things briefly, such as what the study is actually about. They also clarified that participation is voluntary and that participants have experience of receiving feedback in their work setting, more specifically.

When an employee said, they were interested in joining, the researchers did not just jump straight to the interview. Instead, the participant was sent an email with study details and the consent form in it. The participants were asked to read everything first and then reply by email to say if they agreed to take part in the interview. Only after the participant returned their agreement by email and did the researchers move on to

planning the time and then actually conducting the interview. This approach was used so that participation stays voluntary, well-informed, and properly consented.

At the start, the idea was to do ten interviews, but then there were those access issues, and participant availability, and also time restrictions. So in the end the empirical material ended up being nine semi-structured interviews. When the recruitment phase started, researchers managed to get in touch with two employees in the retail SMEs, but after that only one retail participant was actually included in the completed interview set. Therefore, the final sample came out as nine employees in total across the three service sector areas: one person from fast food/food service, seven people from restaurant/bar service work, and one participant from retail which can be seen in Table 1 ,participant overview.

Even though the sample is not evenly distributed across the three sectors, this is not that big of a deal for what the study is trying to do. The thesis does not set out to statistically compare fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, and it does not attempt to make general claims at the sector level. Rather, the goal is to build a qualitative understanding of employees' lived experiences with performance-related feedback in smaller service workplaces.

The three sectors were picked because they end up sharing several meaningful contextual traits. They are customer-facing , they are task oriented, they are time sensitive, and they rely on quick corrections during normal day-to-day work. So even if the retail group is smaller, the retail participant still helps represent the wider service-SME context, while the imbalance is noted as a methodological limitation in chapter 7.

The way participants are chosen also matches the study's analytical approach. Since the empirical analysis follows the Gioia Method, the key is to build findings based on what participants are actually saying or their own live experiences and then to move from first-order concepts to second-order themes and then out to aggregate dimensions (Gioia et

al., 2013, p. 20; Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p. 2). Because of that, the sample's value is mostly in the relevance and the depth, or richness, of participants' experiences, rather than in something like numerical representativeness.

Participants were picked using four main criteria. They needed to work in a fast-food, restaurant, or retail SME in Umeå or Uppsala. Also, they had to have experiences with getting performance-related feedback at work; also, they needed to be open to taking part in a semi-structured interview, and they had to communicate clearly in the interview language. In a sense, this helped make sure the people involved could share relevant and still meaningful views about how feedback is handled while also keeping the ethical boundaries. By concentrating on these requirements, the study could capture experiences that are directly connected to how feedback works as an on-the-job learning mechanism in small service-sector organizations.

Empirical data is comprised of the nine interviews that were conducted with the participants, and they were anonymized as P1–P9. The sample size seems fine for this more exploratory qualitative study, considering the focused research question and also the specific population of employees with experience of feedback in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs.

The quality of the data was judged by the richness and relevance of what the participants said, not by statistical representativeness or anything like that. Gioia-based inductive research is seen as having qualitative rigor when the accounts the informants share are expressed as first order concepts, second-order themes, and then aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). Overall, the interviews produced enough empirical data to form 80 first-order concepts, 15 second-order themes, and four aggregate dimensions.

3.6 Participant Overview

The empirical material consists of nine semi-structured interviews with employees working in fast-food , restaurant, and retail SME settings in Umeå and Uppsala, more or less. Everyone who joined in had some experience with receiving, interpreting, or using performance-related feedback as part of their everyday, day to day routine. For privacy reasons, the participants are anonymized as P1–P9 and there are no real participant names or organization names in the thesis. The sector and role descriptions are kept on purpose rather broad, so that the workplace and the participants anonymity stays protected , while at the same time there is still enough context for the reader to understand what the study is built on.

The interviewees also came from the three service-sector areas that are included in the thesis. In the material, one participant worked in a fast-food/food-service SME, seven participants worked in restaurant/bar-service SMEs, and one participant worked in a retail SME. The restaurant / bar-service label covers people whose tasks included kitchen work, food preparation, serving, cleaning, plus service-related activities in restaurant or bar environments. The retail participant focused on customer service and shop-related chores, such as talking with customers, handling stock, keeping track of workload, and multitasking at the same time. This split mirrors the final completed interview material. The uneven distribution between the sectors should be taken in light of the recruitment process, even a little loosely. The researchers first intended to do ten interviews, but during recruitment they ended up reaching two retail SME employees. Still, in the end only one retail participant made it into the completed interview material, mainly due to access difficulties, participant availability, and those time limitations that come up too fast. So the study doesn't claim to offer a balanced sector comparison. Instead, it relies on the participants' accounts to look at feedback experiences across small service-sector workplaces that have practical similarities, such as customer contact, time pressure, task oriented work, and immediate performance adjustment.

Table 1. Participant Overview

Participant	Broad sector	Role type	Approximate experience	Feedback experience relevant to the study
P1	Fast-food SME	Kitchen and service employee	Almost one year	Verbal appreciation, peer feedback, feedback during busy shifts, and formal follow-up through messages or emails.
P2	Restaurant SME	Server and kitchen-support employee	Four months	Constructive and critical feedback from colleagues and supervisors; feedback experienced as motivating when respectful and discouraging when harsh.
P3	Restaurant SME	Server and kitchen-support employee	One year	Feedback during rush hours, review forms,

				senior-colleague guidance, and contrasting feedback styles from different supervisors.
P4	Restaurant SME	Kitchen employee	Six months professionally; longer involvement in the workplace	Real-time correction, task prioritization, and learning technical food-preparation routines.
P5	Restaurant SME	Food-preparation employee	Almost two years	Practical skill development, frequent early-stage feedback, and peer-based support.
P6	Restaurant SME	Kitchen assistant / food-preparation employee	One year	Informal post-shift discussions, workplace standards, and guidance from head chef and colleagues.
P7	Restaurant SME	Kitchen employee	Several years	Technical task correction,

				learning through practice, peer feedback, and performance improvement.
P8	Retail SME	Customer Service and shop employee	Nine months	Workload-related feedback, recognition, multitasking, and feedback during customer and stock-handling situations.
P9	Bar/service SME	Cleaning and service employee	Around one and a half years	Situational feedback during demanding service shifts, prioritization, and constructive guidance.

Note: The descriptions are intentionally broad to protect participant and workplace anonymity. Participant labels P1-P9 are used consistently throughout the findings.

3.7 Data Collection Method

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews, which are suitable for digging into experiences that are personal, situational, relational, and very much context-dependent. With semi-structured interviews, participants can say what their "feedback moments" meant to them and how they experienced them in their own words, and at the same time the researcher can ask those extra follow-up questions, such as where the feedback came from, how it was delivered, what emotions showed up, and what kind of learning they thought happened. This approach is common in qualitative research for collecting rich, detailed narratives about people’s experiences (Kallio et al., 2016, p. 2955).

Semi-structured interviews were picked rather than questionnaires because the study wanted to catch the employees' detailed lived experience of feedback, not surface-level impressions. Questionnaires can show general patterns, but they usually don’t reveal the depth and the meaning of feedback as employees actually perceive it. Observation was also considered, but it was not chosen as the primary method, since it would not fully reach employees' interpretations of what the feedback meant or how they then translated it into learning over time.

For better transparency, see Table 2. lays out the interview details, which include the participant ID, sector, interview date, language, mode, and also how long it went on.

Table 2. Interview Details

Participant	Sector	Interview date	Language	Mode	Duration
P1	Fast-food SME	25th April,2026	English	Face to Face	Around 31 minutes
P2	Restaurant SME	26th April 2026	English	Face to Face	Around 30 Minutes
P3	Restaurant SME	29th April,2026	English	Face to Face	35 Minutes
P4	Restaurant SME	29th April,2026	English	Face to Face	32 Minutes
P5	Restaurant SME	30th April,2026	English	Face to Face	34 Minutes
P6	Restaurant SME	4th May, 2026	English	Face to Face	29 Minutes
P7	Restaurant SME	7th May, 2026	English	Online / Zoom Call	35 Minutes
P8	Retail SME	29th April,2026	English	Face to Face	30 Minutes
P9	Restaurant/Bar	6th May,2026	English	Face to Face	32 Minutes

3.7.2 Interview Guide Design

The interview guide was developed from the research purpose, then the research questions, and also the theoretical framework, and it all ties together. It had questions on the workplace context, feedback practices, feedback sources, the overall feedback quality, how the feedback was actually delivered, emotional reactions, and learning outcomes.

In the end, the guide was designed to pull out rich first-order accounts that could later be analyzed using the Gioia Method.

The guide touched on six main areas: workplace context, feedback practices, feedback sources, feedback quality and delivery, feedback and learning, and then also what enables or constrains these feedback experiences. The wording was kept in accessible language so participants could talk about their own experiences, more naturally, instead of answering in some academic way.

For example, instead of asking participants to define informal workplace learning, the guide used questions like "Can you describe a situation where feedback helped you improve your work?" and also “Can you describe a time when feedback was not useful or made learning harder?” This helped participants share real concrete examples from everyday work, not just theory talk. Then later the Gioia analysis was applied during coding, where the interview material was turned into first-order concepts and second-order themes and then into aggregate dimensions.

3.7.3 Interview Procedure

Before each interview, participants were told about what the study was aiming for, the voluntary nature of participation, and that they had the right to stop whenever they want. They were also informed that their names, and their workplaces, would not be pinpointed or used in the thesis. That part mattered because the conversations turned around workplace experiences connected to feedback, criticism, mistakes, managers, colleagues, customers, and also emotional reactions.

The interviews were carried out with nine participants. Depending on who was available, the interviews happened either face-to-face and online. The setting was selected so participants felt comfortable and so they could talk freely about what they had experienced. During the interviews, participants were asked to give concrete examples, not just

general impressions. Then, follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, to dig into specific situations, and to understand how the feedback shaped learning afterward.

When the material was transcribed and later analyzed, it was anonymized. The participants were labeled P1–P9. Any identifying information about workplaces, managers, colleagues, and specific locations was removed or generalized. This was particularly important since SMEs are small workplaces, and in that environment too much detail could easily make people recognizable.

3.8 Data Analysis Using the Gioia Method

3.8.1 Rationale for Using the Gioia Method

The data was analyzed using the Gioia Method. This method was chosen because the study wants to develop, in an empirically grounded way, an explanation of how performance-related feedback enables, or sometimes constrains, employee learning while they are on the job inside SMEs. The Gioia Method works well for inductive qualitative research in the sense that it helps the researcher stay close to participants' own meanings, but at the same time it develops more abstract analytical categories (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20).

In fact, the Gioia Method felt more suitable than a general thematic analysis since the goal was not only to spot themes but also to show how participant accounts were systematically transformed into first-order concepts, second-order themes, aggregate dimensions, and a grounded model. A thematic analysis could have still pointed out patterns in the data, but it would not have given the same solid structure for presenting the analytical movement from the raw empirical material toward conceptual interpretation. So the Gioa method is most suitable for this.

This approach also supported transparency. With the data structure, representative quotations, and the grounded model laid out, the study makes it visible how the results grew out of participant accounts, rather than being imposed by the researcher. Magnani and Gioia (2023, p. 2) state that strong Gioia based studies should contain a clear data structure, a grounded model, and a convincing findings narrative. So, that is why the method fits well for linking the methodology with the empirical findings.

3.8.2 Overview of the data structure

The Gioia data structure gives a transparent overview of how the empirical material got reduced from detailed interview statements into more abstract analytical categories, it's not just a neat summary. The first-order concepts capture what the participants said about feedback and learning in day-to-day work, in that everyday practical sense. The second-order themes then pick up wider patterns across participants, so it becomes less "one person" and more "common thread". The aggregate dimensions finally wrap up the main empirical findings of the study.

The whole Gioia data structure is shown in Appendix 4, as the complete version holds all 80 first-order concepts and it is too much to show clearly in the main chapter. In the main part, Table 2 puts forward the four aggregate dimensions and these 15 second-order themes which organize the findings.

Overall, the data structure suggests that feedback in the studied SMEs cannot be understood only by asking if feedback is present or missing. Instead, the findings indicate that the learning value of feedback hinges on things like how it's provided, who is giving it, how employees interpret it also whether employees can use it in practice.

3.8.3 Stage One: Familiarization with the Data

The first step consisted of familiarizing oneself with the information gathered in the interviews. Interviews were read multiple times to find themes, interesting instances and inter-participant variations in experiences. Through this stage, the researcher familiarized him/herself with the data prior to formal coding.

The initial notes were on issues that were recurring, including informal feedback, immediate correction, peer feedback, manager feedback, positive feedback, criticism, emotional reaction, customer pressure and learning by doing. These notes were used for the subsequent first order coding procedure.

3.8.4 Stage Two: First-Order Coding

The second stage was the development of the first-order concept of things. In the Gioia analysis, the first-order concepts stay fairly near to the words and the meanings used by the participants (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). The intent here was not to push theoretical categories onto the data but to record down how the participants described their feedback and learning. Some of the first-order concepts that came up during discussion included, for instance:

- receiving feedback through everyday verbal communication;
- getting feedback directly while doing the task;
- receiving immediate correction after mistakes;
- receiving feedback during rush hours;
- receiving feedback during customer-facing situations;
- receiving appreciation after difficult shifts;
- receiving more feedback when learning a new task;
- receiving less feedback after becoming more experienced;
- finding feedback helpful when it is clear and specific;

And also, when feedback is negative or lacking, feel discouraged.
During this stage, 80 first-order concepts were generated. What showed up from these ideas is what then became the empirical backbone for the analysis in Chapter 4.

3.8.5 Stage Three: Developing Second-Order Themes

After the first-order coding stage, the next step was to develop second-order themes. While the first-order concepts stayed pretty close to the participants own words and meanings, the second-order themes moved the analysis toward a more researcher-centred level of interpretation. That step mattered, because this study did not only try to describe what participants said about feedback, but it also wanted to grasp how their experiences might be conceptually put together in relation to feedback, learning, and the SME workplace context.

In line with the Gioia Method, the second-order themes involved looking back at the first-order concepts, spotting similarities and differences, and then bundling the related things into wider analytical themes. Gioia et al. (2013, p. 20) describe that the Gioia approach moves from informant centered first order concepts, toward researcher centered second order themes, and that shift is what helps qualitative analysis keep the participants meaning intact while also moving toward a more theoretical interpretation. For this study, the second-order themes were built by asking what those first-order concepts showed about how feedback was given, how it was received or interpreted, and how it influenced employees learning while they were doing their work.

So this process led to the result of 15 second-order themes; they were represented as broader patterns in the dataset. Such as the way informal and immediate feedback shows up, then feedback that works as hands-on skill growth, also feedback functioning as role clarification. There was also the split between constructive and destructive feedback and the emotional effect that comes when feedback is delivered. Beyond that, peer-based feedback was visible, and there was this idea of SME closeness in everyday

work. Overall these themes made it easier to link what each participant described to wider analytic categories, and it laid the groundwork for building the aggregate dimensions and the grounded model.

Representative interview quotations were used to back up each second-order theme. Since the supporting interview data table is really large and somehow hard to keep readable in the main part of the thesis, the full, representative supporting interview data is included together with the Gioia structure in Appendix 4. In the findings narrative below, selected quotations are used to show the central empirical meaning of each second-order theme without drowning the chapter.

Participant identifiers are anonymized as P1-P9. No participant names or organization names are included.

Second-order themes	Representative first-order data
A. Informal feedback practices in everyday SME work	
Informal and immediate feedback practices	"Feedback usually comes through quick verbal comments while the work is happening. If something is going well, the manager or a colleague says it directly during the shift." **(P1)** "Most of the feedback is informal. We discuss the day after the shift, and if something needs improvement, it is mentioned right away." **(P6)**
Situational and task-based feedback	"Feedback happens when the workload changes, such as when the place is crowded or when something specific needs to be cleaned or prioritized." **(P8)** "During rush hours, feedback is connected to what we are doing at that moment, such as serving, handling delivery orders, or managing customers." **(P3)**
Feedback as real-time correction	"When I was doing a new task incorrectly, the head chef showed me the correct way immediately, and I changed how I did it." **(P7)** "If I make a mistake while preparing food, the correction comes directly so I can fix it and do the task properly next time." **(P4)**
Blending formal and informal feedback systems	"There is informal feedback during work, but there are also weekly review forms where we write observations and what can be improved." **(P3)** "Feedback can be informal through calls or messages, but sometimes formal emails are also sent when something important happens." **(P1)**
B. Feedback as a mechanism for learning and role development	
Feedback as practical skill development	"Feedback helped me improve how I make sushi rolls. I adjusted my technique and became faster and more accurate over time." **(P5)** "I learned the correct way to cut fish from feedback. It helped me avoid waste and made my work more efficient." **(P7)**
Feedback as role clarification	"Constructive feedback helps me understand what is expected from me and how I should do the work better." **(P2)** "Feedback clarifies the standard I need to meet, especially when preparing food or interacting with customers." **(P6)**
Feedback as performance improvement	"Constructive feedback makes my work easier because it tells me what to prioritize and how to manage the workload." **(P8)**

Second-order themes	Representative first-order data
	"Feedback helped me become more efficient, especially when I learned how to prioritize tasks in the kitchen." **(P4)**
Feedback frequency changing with experience	"When I first joined, feedback was more frequent because I was learning. Now it is less frequent because the workflow is more stable." **(P3)** "At the beginning I received a lot of guidance, but after gaining experience I only receive feedback when something special happens." **(P5)**
Learning through adaptation and experience	"I can adapt my way of working if someone explains how they prefer the task to be done and corrects me respectfully." **(P2)** "Some feedback can be applied immediately, but mastering the task takes time and practice." **(P7)**
C. Social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception	
Feedback as motivation and recognition	"When the manager appreciated our work after a very busy day, it encouraged us to do our best again in the future." **(P1)** "After managing customers and stock alone, positive feedback made me feel appreciated and motivated." **(P9)**
Emotional impact of feedback delivery	"If feedback is just criticism and not constructive, it affects my mood and can make the work feel more tiring." **(P2)** "When feedback is given through scolding, it can discourage people even if there is something to learn from it." **(P3)**
Constructive versus destructive feedback	"Helpful feedback is clear and constructive. Unhelpful feedback is vague or overly critical without suggestions for improvement." **(P5)** "Constructive feedback helps me improve, but feedback without practical advice can feel discouraging." **(P8)**
Importance of feedback source	"Feedback from the manager matters more because the manager is the person running the place and knows whether I am performing well." **(P2)** "Senior colleagues give useful feedback because they work beside me and can guide me in real time." **(P3)**
D. Relational feedback culture in small workplaces	
Peer-based and mutual feedback culture	"We do not only receive feedback; we also give feedback to each other and appreciate people when they do a good job." **(P1)** "Colleagues also give feedback, and I try to give feedback to them when it is needed." **(P5)**

Second-order themes	Representative first-order data
SME closeness shaping feedback practices	"The workplace feels friendly and informal, almost like home, so communication with colleagues and the owner is relaxed." **(P6)** "In smaller workplaces, people work closely together, and the way feedback is given feels more personal and informal." **(P2)**

Note. The participant labels P1-P9 are anonymized identifiers only and are not linked to names in this table.

Image 1. Supporting Interview Data

3.8.6 Stage Four: Aggregate Dimensions

The fourth stage of the analysis was basically about getting the second-order themes sorted towards aggregate dimensions. These aggregate dimensions are the top level in the Gioia structure, and they show the main conceptual areas that came out of the data. Here, in this study, there were 15 second-order themes, and they got grouped into four aggregate dimensions. The first was informal feedback practices in everyday SME work. Then there was feedback as a mechanism for learning and role development. After that, social and emotional conditions shape feedback reception. And finally, relational feedback culture in small workplaces.

This stage was important because it made it possible to move from a detailed coding structure toward a more coherent, overall explanation of the findings. The Gioia Method supports that shift from empirical specifics to theoretical abstraction by linking first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions in a way that stays transparent in the data structure (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). And as Magnani and Gioia (2023, p. 2) point out, the method is also quite useful for inductive theory building; it helps researchers develop conceptual insight while still keeping it grounded and tied to the informants' accounts.

In this thesis, the aggregate dimensions became the base for the grounded model of informal performance feedback in SMEs. The grounded model was developed by looking at how the four aggregate dimensions connect with one another, and also how they help explain the process by which feedback may enable, or on the other hand, constrain on-the-job learning. So the aggregate dimensions were not treated like separate results. Instead, they were used to show the broader mechanism through which feedback turns meaningful, useful, motivating, discouraging, or even difficult to apply in everyday SME service work or in a word it is conditional, relational mechanisms in terms of employee on-the-job learning.

3.8.7 Aggregate Dimensions and Second-Order Themes

Table 2. Aggregate Dimensions and Second-Order Themes

Aggregate dimension	Second-order themes	Theme codes
A. Informal feedback practices in everyday SME work	Informal and immediate feedback practices; situational and task-based feedback; feedback as real-time correction; blending	T1, T2, T3, T13

	formal and informal feedback systems	
B. Feedback as a mechanism for learning and role development	Feedback as practical skill development; feedback as role clarification; feedback as performance improvement; feedback as frequency changing with experience; learning through adaptation and experience	T4, T5, T6, T12, T15
C. Social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception	Feedback as motivation and recognition; emotional impact of feedback delivery; constructive versus destructive feedback; importance of feedback source	T7, T8, T9, T10
D. Relational feedback culture in small workplaces	Peer-based and mutual feedback culture; SME closeness shaping feedback practices	T11, T14

Note: All 15 second-order themes are included in this table and should also be represented in the grounded model explanation.

3.8.8 Developing the Findings Narrative and Grounded Model

In the final stage, the analysis went into developing the findings narrative and putting together a grounded model. The findings narrative was built starting from the Gioia data structure, and it got organized around four aggregate dimensions, which helped make

the findings feel nearer to how participants actually experienced things. At the same time, this also made it easier to show the bigger analytical meaning of those experiences. The analysis came up with 80 first-order concepts, 15 second-order themes, and then just four aggregate dimensions. That combo of three analytical levels became the starting point for the grounded model that was developed in Chapter 4, and it is also looked at more carefully in Chapter 5. The grounded model itself tries to show, in a practical way, how performance-related feedback works inside fast food places, restaurants, and retail SMEs. It does so by mapping the connection between day-to-day feedback practices, learning together with role development, the social and emotional conditions, and finally the relational feedback culture. So, in the end the model suggests that feedback can function as either an enabling mechanism or a constraining mechanism for learning while on the job.

The term "grounded model" shows up here because the model itself was built from the empirical material. In other words, the model surfaced from the participants' first-order concepts to second-order analytical themes and then to the wider aggregate dimensions. That fits the same logic seen in the Gioia Method, which aims to help craft theoretically meaningful findings from qualitative material, yet still keep the whole process anchored in informants' lived experiences. (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20; Magnani & Gioia, 2023, p. 2). So the grounded model is not a statistically tested model. Instead, it works more like an empirically rooted conceptual explanation for how employees experience feedback as something that can enable learning, or maybe just constrain it, especially in small service-sector workplaces.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were important because participants talked about workplace situations with feedback, criticism, missteps stress, supervisors, coworkers, customers, and emotional reactions. So, the study was intended to shield participants from harm and to not expose information that could identify specific people or workplaces. Ethical

focus was especially necessary, since SMEs are small, meaning workplaces are often close-knit and too much contextual detail could easily make someone recognizable.

3.9.1 Informed Consent, Confidentiality and Anonymity

Before each interview, participants were told about the aim of the study, what participation would involve, and how the interview material would end up being used. They were also told; participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study if they wanted. Participants were asked to give consent before the interview got started.

In the consent process, it was made clear that the study focused on feedback, and on-the-job learning in SME service work. Participants were also informed that their names, workplaces, and anything that could identify them would not be included in the thesis.

Confidentiality was upheld during the whole research process. The names of the participants as well as their place of work were not included in the thesis. Instead, the participants were marked anonymously as P1-P9, and that choice mattered a lot. The anonymity requirement was extra significant because SMEs tend to be small workplaces, where it is easy for small details to somehow make someone identifiable.

For that reason, the sector and role descriptions stayed quite general. That approach lowered the likelihood of identifying participants, and or even their organizations, while still keeping the reporting of the actual empirical findings relevant and usable.

3.9.2 Data Protection and Avoiding Harm

Interview material was only used for the thesis purpose. The data were kept securely, and they were not shared with unauthorized people. Any identifying information was removed during transcription, coding, analysis, and when the writing took place too.

Overall, the study followed responsible data handling principles by keeping identifiable information to a minimum and protecting participant confidentiality. Since participants talked about workplace experiences that included feedback, criticism, and emotional reactions, careful protection was needed to reduce the risk of harm.

Harm minimization was designed as one part of the study, and participants could share their experiences of feedback even if it included negative comments or workplace stress. At the same time, they weren't forced to answer questions that felt outside their comfort zone. They also weren't obliged to answer every question, and they could end the interview.

The thesis doesn't include details that could harm participants' relationships with their employers, managers, colleagues, or workplaces. This aspect was particularly important because some participants reported getting negative or, in some cases, discouraging feedback.

Ethical care mattered a lot, since feedback in small workplaces tends to be relationally sensitive. People described moments where they received negative or discouraging remarks from managers, co-workers, and even customers. So, confidentiality and anonymity were not just treated as formal requirements, but more like necessary safeguards, so workplace identification or other potential harm would not happen.

4 Truth Criteria

The chapter discusses how the nature of the qualitative research process was dealt with in the context of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The following criteria are used to evaluate the trustworthiness of qualitative research and are especially important since the study is conducted based on semi-structured interviews and Gioia analysis.

4.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which participants' experiences are represented in a believable and believable manner. In qualitative research, credibility is related to the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that the findings are rooted in the empirical texts and do not stand out of the picture of what the participants mean (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: 296). Careful data collection, transparent data analysis, participant quotations, and demonstrating the relationship between data and results can help build credibility. In this research, the researchers employed detailed accounts from employees with first-hand experience of feedback and on-the-job learning in fast food, restaurant and retail SME contexts, thereby establishing credibility. The interviews prompted the participants to give specific situations, and not simply opinions. This facilitated the research's ability to reflect the lived experience of feedback in the context of day to day work.

The Gioia Method also helped to establish credibility. The analysis started with the first order concepts that stayed within participants description and then proceeded to second order concepts and to aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20). This process allowed the findings to be demonstrated in terms of how they were constructed from the participant accounts. Selected quotations in Chapter 4 help the reader appreciate the relationship between the empirical data and the interpretations.

The grounded model also adds to the credibility of the findings as it is shared out of the data structure, and was not brought in first before analysis. The model captures the pattern that feedback in SMEs becomes a learning mechanism when employees understand, trust, accept and apply this in practice.

In this study, credibility was supported by keeping a close link between the research questions, the interview questions, the coding process, and then the findings. The interviews asked participants to talk about actual feedback moments from their workplace life, not just to give abstract opinions. It mattered, because the study was trying to understand how feedback is experienced in practice not in theory. When participants described when feedback helped them learn, and when it made learning harder, the data ended up answering the main research question and the sub-questions, in a very direct way.

Credibility got even stronger, in Chapter 4 by using concrete examples from the participants. The findings don't only show the researcher's interpretation; they also include a set of selected quotations where participants describe feedback in their own words. That way the reader can check whether the interpretation feels reasonable, and whether it is grounded in the data. Also, the way the analysis moves, from participant accounts to first-order concepts, then second-order themes, and finally aggregate dimensions, makes the whole analytical process easy to follow.

One more credibility point is that the study did not treat feedback as automatically positive. The analysis stayed open to both enabling and constraining experiences, so it didn't lean to one side. This is important, because a one-sided analysis would have weakened the outcomes. Instead, the study shows that feedback can support learning when it is clear, respectful, credible, and practical, but it can also constrain learning when it is vague, harsh, or emotionally discouraging. This more balanced view makes the findings more credible, because it fits the complexity employees face in their day-to-day work experiences.

4.2 Transferability

Transferability is Reader's ability to determine whether results are transferable to other contexts. The aim of qualitative research is not to generalize statistically, but to offer sufficient context so that other readers can evaluate whether the results could be applicable to their own context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

In this study, transferability was facilitated by making the research context transparent. The thesis describes the study being conducted on fast food, restaurant and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden. These workplaces are chosen because they are customer facing, task oriented, time sensitive, and rely on repetitive performance adjustment.

The participant overview also helps to ensure the transferability by providing information about the wide-spread sector and role type representation of the study whilst still maintaining anonymity. The results are not statistically representative of all SMEs. Rather, they are provided as analytically relevant to other small service-based workplaces that feature less formal, immediate, relational, and personally relevant feedback.

The detailed presentation of the four aggregate dimensions also supports transferability. These dimensions illustrate the circumstances where feedback can positively or negatively influence learning. These dimensions are provided for readers to evaluate if they wish to use them to consider whether similar patterns may exist in other SME context.

Transferability was supported by how the research context was described too. The study names the organizational setting as fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, and that helps the reader get a clearer picture of where the findings were developed. At the same time, it does NOT frame the results as something that works universally for all SMEs. Instead, the findings are placed as analytically meaningful for similar small service-sector workplaces where feedback is informal, relational and task-based, and tightly woven into everyday work.

The participant overview adds to transferability as well. Even if individual identities and workplace names were protected, the thesis still gives enough info about participants' broader work context, so that readers can see the empirical ground behind the interpretations. This balance feels important because the thesis needs to protect confidentiality but still provide contextual detail so the reader can evaluate whether the findings are relevant in their own situation.

Then there are the four aggregate dimensions, they also help transferability since the results are presented at a more general level than the exact interview cases. Other researchers or practitioners can compare their own environments with these dimensions. For instance, they can reflect on whether feedback in their SME context is informal and immediate, whether it helps learning and role development, whether emotional conditions end up colouring how people receive feedback, and whether relational closeness affects the feedback culture. The study gives a practical framework for making sense of similar situations without claiming statistical generalization.

4.3 Dependability

Dependability is related to consistency and transparency of the research process. For qualitative research, dependability can be enhanced by the researcher's clear description of how the research was developed, how data were gathered and how analysis was done (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 317).

For this study, dependability was achieved by describing the research design, sampling strategy, interview method and Gioia analysis in Chapter 3. The thesis explains the reasons for the qualitative approach, the use of semi-structured interviews and how the interview data was analyzed.

The Gioia Method also helps towards dependability due to the fact that it offers a structured analytical procedure. Analysis shifted from first order to second order concept and

aggregate dimensions. This will increase the transparency of the analytical process and make it easier to understand how the results were arrived at by the reader.
Documentation was another factor of dependability. Materials provided in the appendixes include Participant email, Interview guide, Consent form and Gioia Structure. The materials serve to illustrate the organization of the research process and how participants were approached. The data structure and representative quotations also demonstrate the analysis's development from interview material to findings.

Dependability was also strengthened by recording the big methodological decisions that were taken during the whole study. Chapter 3 is where it says why a qualitative design was chosen, why semi-structured interviews made sense, why purposive sampling was used, and why the Gioia Method was picked for the analysis. In general, these explanations help the reader get the “why” behind the research process and judge whether the methodological decisions match the research purpose.

For the dependability of the analysis itself, the staged coding process matters a lot. The study moved from familiarization with the interview material, then into first-order coding, afterward into second-order themes, then aggregate dimensions, and finally the grounded model. This step-by-step pathway lowers the chance that the findings look like unsourced hunches or unsupported interpretations. Instead, the reader can trace how the analysis was built through a more systematic procedure, and not only through assumption.

The appendices, also support dependability because they show key parts of the research process. This includes the participant email, the interview guide, the consent form and the Gioia structure, all of it. These materials add to transparency, by showing how participants were approached, how the interviews were steered, and how the empirical material was organized. With that transparency, the reader can follow the research process more cleanly, and with less uncertainty.

4.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are based on data and not primarily on researcher bias. Confirmability in qualitative research is demonstrated when the researcher can demonstrate that interpretations are connected to participants' accounts and that the research process is transparent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318).

The application of participant quotes, first order concepts, and an explicit data structure according to Gioia, helped to support confirmability. These elements indicate that the findings are generated based on the descriptions of feedback and learning by participants rather than from assumptions.

Positive and negative feedback experiences were also allowed in the analysis. The study was not guided by the assumption that feedback is always helpful to learning. Rather, it explored the nature of how feedback can aid and hinder the process of learning on the job. It helped to minimize the chances of presenting one-sided findings.
Transparency around the use of AI was also demonstrated to support confirmability. AI was only used to refine language, provide structure and support, and help with visual presentation. No AI was used to develop interview data, to develop participant responses, to do coding in replacement, or to make independent decisions about analysis. Empirical analysis, interpretation, theme development and conclusions were the responsibility of the researcher.

The grounded model also aids in the confirmability of the final interpretation, as it demonstrates how the final interpretation was related to the data structure. The model is presented as a conditional learning mechanism, which is based on the empirical patterns that emerge from the participants' accounts.

Confirmability was supported by keeping the analysis close to what participants said, rather than basing everything only on the researcher’s assumptions. The first-order concepts were developed near the interview material, and the selected quotations in

Chapter 4 show how participants described feedback, learning, motivation, discouragement, role clarification, and workplace relationships. That makes it easier for the reader to see how the findings are tied to the empirical material, not just to an idea someone had.

The study also supported confirmability by acknowledging both the positive and negative kinds of feedback experiences. Had the analysis leaned only toward feedback as beneficial, it could have ended up sounding like a preferred theoretical expectation, instead of reflecting the full range of data. Instead, the study identified both enabling and constraining conditions, which is maybe a bit more balanced, and it helps that the findings are shaped by the empirical material, and not only by the assumption that feedback is always useful.

Also, the disclosure of AI use supports confirmability. The AI tools were used only for language refinement, structural support, and assistance with visual presentation. They were not used to generate interview data, replace participant voices, do independent coding, or steer analytical decisions. The researcher stayed responsible for interpretation, theme development, the grounded model, and the conclusions. This clarification helps the reader understand where the technical support ends and where the actual research analysis begins.

4.5 Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Study

AI tools were used as supporting tools throughout this thesis. In practice, the use of AI was limited to language refinement, grammar correction, structural improvement, more academic phrasing, and generally making the text clearer and easier to follow. AI support was also used to help with the academic flow and the overall presentation, including suggestions for better transitions between sections and more effective academic formatting, at least in parts.

Besides that, AI tools also helped with the visual side ,especially for a few conceptual and illustrative figures that appear in this thesis, like the grounded model and the conceptual presentation figures. These figures rest on the researcher's own interpretations, coding schema, analysis, and the empirical data that were gathered. So AI was used to smooth out the visuals and formatting, but it was not used to create the analysis itself or anything similar.

No empirical data were generated using AI, and no interview answers were fabricated. Participant accounts also were not altered, replaced, or swapped out. Likewise, there were no independent research decisions made by AI. The researcher handled the research design and participant selection, the process of interviewing, coding, interpretation, development of themes, and the drawing of the final analytical conclusions. The real interview data that the researcher collected and analyzed is what underpins the empirical findings presented in Chapter 4 of this research.

Every suggestion, edit, and figure generation done with the help of AI was critically reviewed, adjusted where needed, and finally approved by the researcher before it was included in the thesis. The researcher stayed fully responsible for academic honesty, analytical accuracy, transparency and for the proper use of sources during the whole research process.

5 Empirical Findings

The findings are laid out using the Gioia data structure that was shaped through the analysis. First-order concepts were created close to how the participants described things, after that grouped into second-order themes, and then organized into aggregate dimensions. The complete data structure is too large to show in full in the main chapter, so it belongs in Appendix 4. Here, in this chapter, the data structure is compressed into the aggregate dimensions and second order themes and then followed by a narrative explanation of the main empirical patterns.

The analysis resulted in 80 first-order concepts, 15 second-order themes, and four aggregate dimensions:

1.Informal feedback practices in everyday SME work
2. Feedback as a mechanism for learning and role development
3. Social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception
4. Relational feedback culture in small workplaces

The chapter goes first through a rough overview of who took part and how the empirical at is set up. After that it moves on, one by one, to each aggregate dimension and the related second order themes. In the end, the chapter walks through the grounded model from left to right and then it wraps up with a summary of the key empirical findings, not in that exact order all the time but still clear enough.

5.1 Informal Feedback Practices in Everyday SME Work

The first aggregate dimension shows, in a practical way, how feedback is embedded in everyday SME work. Participants talked about feedback as something mostly informal, relatively much immediate, verbal, and tied to specific tasks or work situations. Feedback

was rarely perceived as a separate, formal HR activity. Instead, it showed up as part of daily coordination, correction, appreciation, and communication while people are doing the work.

This aggregate dimension includes four second-order themes too: informal and immediate feedback practices, situational and task-based feedback, feedback as real-time correction, and blending formal and informal feedback systems. Taken together, these themes suggest that feedback in the studied SMEs is very work-embedded and closely connected to the everyday flow of service work.

5.1.1 Informal and Immediate Feedback Practices

Participants consistently described feedback as something that happened through everyday verbal communication, like not really a big thing. Most of the time, feedback got shared quickly and in an informal way while the work was still underway. One participant explained it like this:

> *"Feedback usually comes through quick verbal comments while the work is happening. If something is going well, the manager or a colleague says it directly during the shift. (P1)"*

Another participant described feedback as part of post-shift communication:

> *"Most of the feedback is informal. We discuss the day after the shift, and if something needs improvement, it is mentioned right away. (P6)"*

These quotations show that employees did not experience feedback mainly as a formal evaluation. Instead, feedback seemed to arise through daily interactions, short remarks, direct corrections, quick conversations, and informal discussions with managers or colleagues, all together. The immediacy mattered a lot, because participants worked in service settings where mistakes, customer pressure, and task adjustments often had to be handled right away.

At the same time, the findings also indicate that immediacy alone did not automatically lead to learning. Immediate feedback became helpful only when employees understood what exactly needed to change, and what they could do differently. In that sense, informal and immediate feedback created learning openings, but its real value depended on whether employees received enough practical guidance, not just quick comments.

5.1.2 Situational and Task-Based Feedback

Feedback was also situational. Like participants said, it was usually triggered by some specific things such as tasks, customer pressure, workload changes, small mistakes, or even weird, unexpected moments during the shift. One participant put it like this:

> *"Feedback happens when the workload changes, such as when the place is crowded or when something specific needs to be cleaned or prioritized. (P8)"*

Another participant explained:

> *"During rush hours, feedback is connected to what we are doing at that moment, such as serving, handling delivery orders, or managing customers. (P3)"*

These accounts show that feedback was tied up with what was happening at work, at that moment. Participants linked feedback to customer service, food preparation, hygiene, cleaning, sales, delivery orders, stock handling, prioritization, and customer complaints. So, feedback was not spread evenly across all situations. It became more visible during busy, stressful, or unusual times, while quieter calmer and normal periods often came with less feedback.

This situational character made the feedback feel relevant because employees could connect it straight to what they were doing. For instance, feedback during customer pressure could help employees figure out how to prioritize tasks, manage customers, or tweak how they coordinated with colleagues. At the same time, situational feedback

could also be harder to take in, if it got delivered in a rush, under stress, or with too little explanation.

5.1.3 Feedback as Real-Time Correction

A third view inside this dimension is feedback as real time correction, like instant nudge. Participants described moments where a manager, a senior colleague, the head chef, or a coworker stepped in and corrected a mistake on the spot. In a few cases they even demonstrated the right method right there, not later. One participant said something like:

> *"When I was doing a new task incorrectly, the head chef showed me the correct way immediately, and I changed how I did it. (P7)"*

Another participant described corrections during food preparation:

> *"If I make a mistake while preparing food, the correction comes directly so I can fix it and do the task properly next time. (P4)"*

These examples indicate that feedback quite often worked as corrective guidance. Real-time corrections let employees catch the slip before they turn into a usual pattern. Also, it made it possible for employees to put the feedback to use during the same shift. That mattered a lot, especially when people were learning unfamiliar tasks, or they were still adjusting to workplace routines.

The results also suggest that real-time correction was at its best when it came with demonstration, or an explanation that made sense. Employees did not just have to hear that something was off; they needed to grasp what should be done differently. So, real-time correction backed learning when it went beyond "just checking" and became a usable teaching moment, the kind that you can apply immediately.

5.1.4 Blending Formal and Informal Feedback Systems

Although participants mostly described feedback as informal, they also mentioned formal or semi-formal feedback practices, like a mix that sometimes happens. These included weekly or monthly gatherings, review forms, group messages, written follow-ups, and emails. One participant explained:

> *"There is informal feedback during work, but there are also weekly review forms where we write observations and what can be improved. (P3)*

Another participant stated:

> *"Feedback can be informal through calls or messages, but sometimes formal emails are also sent when something important happens. (P1)"*

These quotations show that the studied SMEs were not completely without structure. Instead, feedback practices combined informal flexibility with some formal or semi-formal routines. Informal feedback gave speed and practical relevance, while more formal feedback helped with follow-up, documentation, or shared understanding. Overall, the finding is that feedback in these SMEs was mainly informal, but light formal routines sometimes supported consistency, and reflection.

5.2 Feedback as a Mechanism for Learning and Role Development

The second aggregate dimension explains how feedback supported employee learning and role development. Participants described feedback as useful when it helped them improve practical skills, understand role expectations, increase efficiency, and adjust to the preferred ways of working in their workplace.

This dimension has five second-order themes. They are feedback as practical skill growth, feedback as role clarification, feedback as performance upgrading, feedback frequency shifts as experience grows, and learning through adaptation along with lived experience. The main outcome seems to be this: feedback helped on-the-job learning when employees were able to turn it into real concrete steps and actions.

5.2.1 Feedback as a Practical Skill Development

Feedback also seemed to help employees understand what was expected from them in their role. Participants described feedback to clear up workplace standards, role expectations, and the preferred ways of working. One participant explained:

> *"Constructive feedback helps me understand what is expected from me and how I should do the work better. (P2)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"Feedback clarifies the standard I need to meet, especially when preparing food or interacting with customers. (P6)"*

These quotations show that feedback helped employees make sense of workplace expectations. It made it clear what counted as good performance, what standards needed follow, and how employees were supposed to behave in situations. Feedback therefore supported role learning as well as task learning.

This theme is still connected to practical skill development, but it captures a different learning pathway. Practical skill development is more about how people refined specific tasks, while role clarification is more about understanding the broader expectations behind those tasks. For example, feedback about food preparation might teach technique but it can also signal expectations about quality, hygiene, speed, and consistency.

5.2.2 Feedback as Role Clarification

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5.2.3 Feedback as Performance Improvement

Participants also described feedback as something that helped them get better at what they were doing, especially in terms of efficiency, prioritization, time management, and coping with pressure. One participant explained:

> *"Constructive feedback makes my work easier because it tells me what to prioritize and how to manage the workload. (P8)"*.

Another participant stated:

> *"Feedback helped me become more efficient, especially when I learned how to prioritize tasks in the kitchen. (P4)"*

These quotations show feedback helped employees make better decisions while they were at work. In quick-paced service settings, employees often had to manage several tasks at the same time. Feedback helped them get a sense of what to focus on, how to arrange their work, and how to react during busy moments.

The findings suggest that performance improvement was strongest when feedback made priorities clearer to employees. Feedback did not only tell employees whether a task was completed correctly, it also helped them choose what to attend to next and manage the situation, in a steadier way.

5.2.4 Feedback Frequency Changing with Experience

Another important finding was that feedback frequency shifted depending on employee experience. Participants said they tended to receive more feedback when they were new and still learning unfamiliar tasks. After they became more experienced, feedback was less frequent, and it became more situational. One participant explained:

> *"When I first joined, feedback was more frequent because I was learning. Now it is less frequent because the workflow is more stable. (P3)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"At the beginning I received a lot of guidance, but after gaining experience I only receive feedback when something special happens. (P5)"*

This finding suggests that feedback played a bit stronger role during early learning phases. New employees needed more direction, correction, and clarification, more often than later. As employees became more familiar with tasks and expectations, the

feedback became more selective, and it was often triggered by mistakes or unusual situations, even by changing work demands.

A decrease in feedback did not always mean that the feedback culture was weak. In some cases, it reflected that employees had developed competence and could work with more autonomy and less back and forth. But the findings also hint at a small risk: experienced employees might get too little developmental feedback if feedback only shows up when something goes wrong.

5.2.5 Learning Through Adaptation and Experience

Participants described learning from feedback as gradual process. Some feedback could be used right away, while other feedback needed repetition and practice before it turned into the employee's normal way of working. One participant explained:

> *"I can adapt my way of working if someone explains how they prefer the task to be done and corrects me respectfully. (P2)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"Some feedback can be applied immediately, but mastering the task takes time and practice. (P7)"*

These quotations show that feedback didn't just automatically turn into learning. Feedback provided information, correction, or direction, but learning only seemed to happen when employees interpreted the feedback, applied it, and over time slowly adjusted their work practices. This finding is important because its kind separates feedback from learning. Feedback is not learning on its own. Instead, it can turn into a learning mechanism only when employees understood it, accepted it, and used it in practice, little by little.

5.3 Social and Emotional Conditions Shaping Feedback Reception

The third aggregate dimension captures the social and emotional conditions that shaped how employees received, interpreted, and used feedback. Participants did not describe feedback as neutral. Feedback affected motivation, confidence, mood, and willingness to improve. Whether feedback was experienced as useful depended not only on what was said, but also on how it was delivered, who delivered it, and whether it felt respectful and credible.

This dimension includes four second-order themes: feedback as motivation and recognition, emotional impact of feedback delivery, constructive versus destructive feedback, and importance of feedback source. The main finding is that feedback became useful for learning when it was perceived as constructive, respectful, credible, and emotionally manageable.

5.3.1 Feedback as Motivation and Recognition

Participants described positive feedback and general appreciation as motivating, like in a real way. Recognition seemed even more meaningful after really demanding shifts, stressful moments, or hard customer meetings. One participant put it like this:

> *“When the manager appreciated our work after a very busy day, it encouraged us to do our best again in the future. (P1)”*

Another participant stated:

> *“After managing customers and stock alone, positive feedback made me feel appreciated and motivated. (P9)”*

These accounts show that feedback was not only corrective. It also functioned as recognition. Positive feedback made employees feel that their effort was seen and valued. That, in turn, supported learning indirectly by strengthening confidence, motivation and the desire to keep improving.

5.3.2 Emotional Impact of Feedback Delivery

So, even if positive feedback helped employees, harshly delivered feedback could do the reverse. Participants said criticism, scolding, and vague negative comments were discouraging. Another participant explained:

> *"If feedback is just criticism and not constructive, it affects my mood and can make the work feel more tiring. (P2)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"When feedback is given through scolding, it can discourage people even if there is something to learn from it. (P3)"*

These comments show that the way feedback was delivered really determined whether employees could use it for learning. Even if the feedback included relevant information, employees still might struggle to apply it if it felt disrespectful, humiliating, or emotionally discouraging. In that case, feedback constrained learning because the emotional impact made it harder to engage with what was said.

5.3.3 Constructive Versus Destructive Feedback

Participants made a clear distinction between constructive and destructive feedback, even if it felt a little slippery at first. Constructive feedback was described as clear, specific, respectful, and practically useful. Destructive feedback was described as vague, overly critical, or lacking any guidance that could help. One participant explained it this way:

> *"Helpful feedback is clear and constructive. Unhelpful feedback is vague or overly critical without suggestions for improvement. (P5)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"Constructive feedback helps me improve, but feedback without practical advice can feel discouraging. (P8)"*

This theme provides one of the strongest empirical insights of the chapter. Employees were not opposed to negative feedback. Rather, they were opposed to feedback that did not give them a usable way forward. Constructive feedback pointed to a problem and offered a route for improvement. Destructive feedback pointed to a problem but did not provide a clear path for learning.

5.3.4 Importance of Feedback Source

Also, the source of feedback shaped how participants understood it, and how they used it. Feedback came from managers, owners, head chefs, senior colleagues, peers, and sometimes customers. Participants seemed to give different weight to each of these. One participant explained:

> *"Feedback from the manager matters more because the manager is the person running the place and knows whether I am performing well. (P2)"*

Another participant emphasized the usefulness of feedback from senior colleagues:

> *"Senior colleagues give useful feedback because they work beside me and can guide me in real time. (P3)"*

These quotations show that feedback source influenced credibility and usefulness. Managerial feedback was important because managers or owners had authority and responsibility for evaluating performance. Senior colleagues and peers were useful because they worked close to the task and could provide immediate practical guidance. Customer feedback was also treated as useful when it helped employees improve service. Overall, feedback source mattered because employees were more likely to use feedback when they saw the provider as credible, knowledgeable, and close to the work situation.

5.4 Relational Feedback Culture in Small Workplaces

The fourth aggregate dimension is about how the small workplace context really shaped those feedback back-and-forth moments. Participants said that in SME workplaces feedback sat in the middle of everyday work, it was close, informal, personal, and very relational. Since people usually worked side by side with managers owners, supervisors, and coworkers there wasn't really a clean split between "feedback as a separate thing" and "feedback as part of working life".

Within this dimension there were two second-order themes. First was a peer-driven and reciprocity-based feedback culture, and second was the way SME closeness directed or steered feedback practices. The main takeaway is that workplace closeness ramped up feedback intensity. It made feedback faster, more straightforward, and more personal, but it also meant that negative or even harsh feedback became emotionally touching.

5.4.1 Peer-Based and Mutual Feedback Culture

Participants also described feedback as something that did not only travel from managers to employees. Employees got feedback from colleagues too, and sometimes they returned it to others. One participant put it like this:

> *"We do not only receive feedback; we also give feedback to each other and appreciate people when they do a good job. (P1)"*

Another participant stated:

> *"Colleagues also give feedback, and I try to give feedback to them when it is needed. (P5)"*

These statements point to feedback as part of peer interaction. Colleagues helped each other correct mistakes, improve the work quality, and handle busy shifts. In that sense, feedback wasn't only top down or hierarchical, it was collaborative as well.

Peer-based feedback felt weirdly more meaningful, mostly because the colleagues were right there near the actual work, task. They could spot little slipups fast, pass along quick suggestions and then support each other when the shifts got heavy. Even so, peer feedback was not automatic at all, not really. It seemed to depend a lot on the tone and the level of trust. If the feedback from peers felt genuinely helpful, then it's reinforced learning. But if it sounded judgmental, or if the message came across as blurry and unclear then it became harder to take in even when the goal was improvement.

5.4.2 SME Closeness Shaping Feedback Practices

Participants also mentioned small workplaces as being close and informal, at least in how they felt day-to-day. That sense of closeness seemed to shape how feedback was given and received. For example, one participant said:

> *"The workplace feels friendly and informal, almost like home, so communication with colleagues and the owner is relaxed. (P6)"*

Another participant explained:

> *"In smaller workplaces, people work closely together, and the way feedback is given feels more personal and informal. (P2)"*

These comments indicate that the SME context shaped feedback in everyday work. Since employees, managers, and owners often worked tightly together, feedback could become faster, more straight forward, and easier to reach. In that environment, employees could ask clarifying questions, or get guidance, because the workplace relationships were less formal.

Still, this same closeness also made feedback feel more emotionally sensitive. When employees have near ties with colleagues or managers, the tone of the feedback matters more. Encouraging feedback could support motivation and the feeling of being included, whereas sharp feedback could quickly seem more discouraging, because it happens

inside an ongoing close working relationship. So, in the end, SME closeness worked as both an enabling and a limiting condition for feedback and learning.

5.5 Summary of Empirical Findings

In this chapter, the empirical findings from the interviews with employees in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala are presented. The findings show that performance-related feedback in these places was mostly informal, quick, task based, and relational in nature.

The first aggregate dimension showed that feedback was embedded in the everyday SME work. Participants got feedback through verbal comments, task corrections, post shift conversations, review forms, messages, and those informal discussions. The feedback became useful when it was connected to specific work situations and when it also gave employees practical guidance.

The second aggregate dimension showed that feedback worked as a mechanism for learning and role development when it helped employees upgrade practical skills, clarify expectations, improve performance, adapt through experience, and learn by repeated practice. In other words, feedback became learning when employees could understand it and then apply it in real work.

The third aggregate dimension showed that feedback reception is shaped by social and emotional conditions. Positive feedback motivated employees and made them feel recognized. Constructive feedback supported learning because it provided direction. Harsh, vague, or destructive feedback then constrained learning, since it discouraged employees or just didn’t offer usable guidance.

The fourth aggregate dimension showed small workplace relationships, shaped feedback practices. Like the closeness in SMEs made feedback faster, more direct, and more

personal. That might support on-the-job learning when those relationships are trustful, and the feedback is delivered respectfully, but it could also make negative feedback a bit more emotionally difficult to receive.

Overall, the empirical findings suggest that performance-related feedback enables work-place learning when it blends proximity, practicality, credibility, and respectful delivery. Feedback constrains learning when it is vague, emotionally discouraging, detached from the task, or not backed up with usable guidance. The following chapter discusses these empirical findings in relation to prior research on feedback, workplace learning, and HRD in SMEs.

The following chapter discusses these empirical findings in relation to prior research on feedback, informal workplace learning, on-the-job learning, HRD and SMEs.

6 Discussion

This chapter discusses the empirical findings in relation to the research question of the thesis: How do performance-related feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden, enable or constrain employee learning while on the job? The chapter also addresses the two sub-questions concerning how feedback is provided in these SME work settings and how employees experience such feedback as supportive or limiting for their on-the-job learning.

This discussion is important because the findings show that feedback does not automatically lead to learning. Instead, feedback becomes meaningful for learning when employees are able to understand, accept, and apply it in practice. In the small service-sector SMEs examined in this study, feedback is often informal, immediate, task-related, and relational. Therefore, the discussion focuses on how feedback operates as a conditional mechanism: it enables learning when it is clear, specific, timely, credible, respectful, and usable, but constrains learning when it is vague, inconsistent, harsh, unclear, or not perceived as credible.

The chapter first discusses the interconnection between the aggregate dimensions and then presents the grounded model of informal performance feedback in SMEs. After that, the chapter connects the findings to the literature on informal feedback practices, feedback as learning and role development, social and emotional conditions, relational feedback culture, and feedback as an enabling and constraining mechanism for on-the-job learning.

6.1 Grounded Model of Informal Performance Feedback in SMEs

Figure 1 lays out the grounded model that was developed from the Gioia data structure and the empirical findings. The model should be read from left to right. It does not frame feedback as a simple straight-line cause of learning. Instead, it shows that feedback turns

into a learning mechanism only when everyday feedback practices pass through relational, social, emotional, and interpretive conditions.

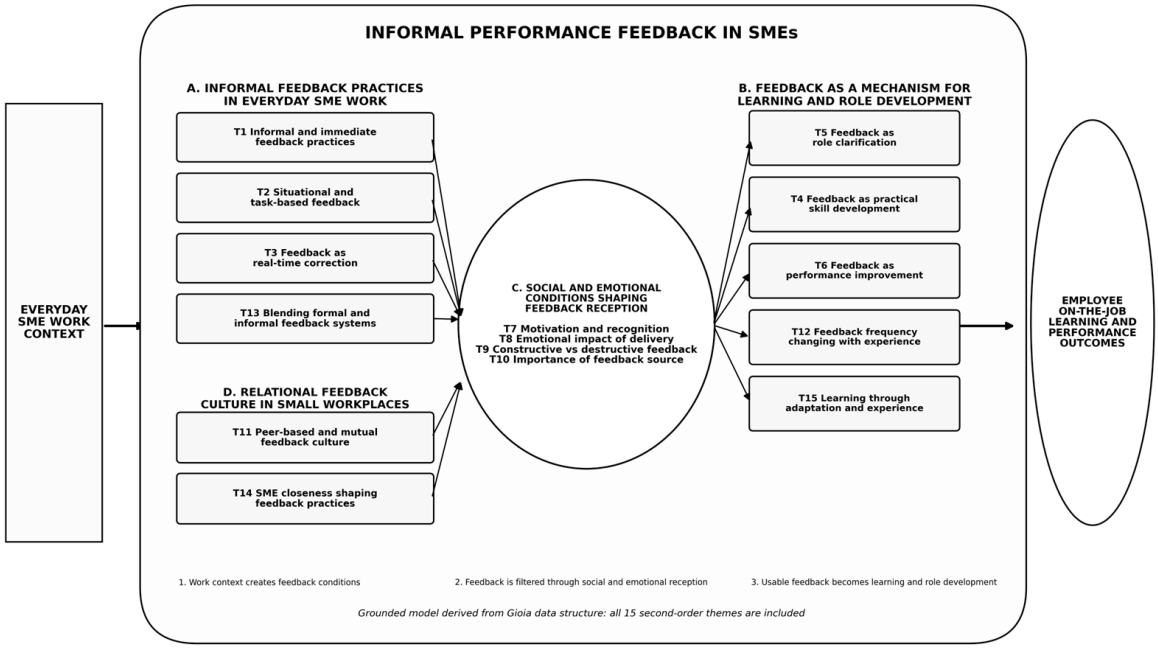

Figure 1 Grounded Model of Informal Performance Feedback in SMEs

The grounded model explains how performance- related feedback ends up being tied to employee on-the-job learning in fast food, restaurant, and retail SMEs. Instead of treating feedback as just one moment, the model shows it as a pathway that travels through the day-to-day work setting, informal feedback routines, workplace relationships, the social and emotional reception, and then only after that, learning plus performance development. So, the model is to be read from left to right.

The first piece of the model is the everyday SME service work context, and it means the fast-moving, customer-facing, task-oriented environment where employees do their jobs. In such places these employees often need to react quickly to customers, sync up with coworkers, fix mistakes, and adjust when the pressure changes. And since formal HR systems, along with structured training routines, can be limited in SMEs, learning usually

happens through the everyday work itself rather than through formal training sessions. This setting creates circumstances where feedback matters, because employees regularly need near-immediate information on how to do tasks, solve problems, and match the expectations in the workplace.

The second part of the model is informal feedback practices in everyday work. That corresponds to Dimension A, and it includes T1: Informal and immediate feedback practices, T2: Situational and task-based feedback, T3: Feedback as real-time correction, and T13: Blending formal and informal feedback systems, even if it sounds a bit overlapping. The findings show that feedback in SMEs is usually embedded into daily work and it often happens during, or shortly after, a task. It can look as quick verbal comments, rapid corrections, advice, instructions, or short check-ins, just in the flow of doing things. So, feedback is not mainly experienced as part of a formal appraisal system, but more like a practical workplace activity that stays connected to the immediate work situation. At the same time, T13 suggests that informal feedback can sometimes be supported by lighter formal practices, such as meetings, check-ins, or more structured conversations. In that sense, the model keeps T13 only under Dimension A because it refers to the form and structure of those feedback practices.

The third part of the model is relational feedback culture in small workplaces. That corresponds to Dimension D, and it includes only T11: Peer-based and mutual feedback culture and T14: SME closeness shaping feedback practices, nothing else. This part of the model shows that feedback in SMEs is shaped by close working relationships. Employees do not just receive feedback from managers or supervisors, but also from colleagues and senior staff who work closely with them, often day to day. The small workplace environment can make feedback more accessible, immediate, and personal too. But that closeness can also make feedback more sensitive, because employees keep working with the same people after the feedback has been given. Therefore, Dimension explains the relational workplace culture around feedback, but it does not include source

The fourth part of the model is about social and emotional conditions that shape how feedback is received. It links to Dimension C and, sort of, covers T7: Feedback as motivation and recognition, T8: Emotional impact of feedback delivery, T9: Constructive versus destructive feedback, and T10: Importance of feedback source. At this stage the key idea is that feedback doesn't automatically turn into something useful just because it is given, people still react based on details. In practice, employees respond depending on how it is delivered, whether it feels respectful or harsh, whether it pushes them forward or pulls them back, and whether the feedback source seems credible. T10 fits here because the importance of who delivers the feedback tends to guide how employees emotionally and socially process it, sometimes even before they understand the content. For instance, feedback from a manager, supervisor, senior colleague, or a peer might be taken more seriously when that person is viewed as knowledgeable, fair, and familiar with the work. So, T10 is placed only under Dimension C.

The fifth part of the model is about feedback as learning and role development. It matches Dimension B, and then there are T4: Feedback as practical skill development, T5: Feedback as role clarification, T6: Feedback as performance improvement, T12: Feedback frequency changing with experience, and T15: Learning through adaptation and experience. So, once feedback is received and interpreted it can help with learning when employees use it to tune their behavior, sharpen their practical abilities, grasp what is expected, and then feel more secure in their role. The results also suggest that feedback is particularly important in the early stage of employment or when tasks feel unfamiliar, because people need more guidance, right then. Later, when employees build experience, feedback may turn into something less frequent, or it can become more targeted. In other words, feedback-based learning is not static at all, it changes as employees get more comfortable with their work, and with those everyday workplace expectations.

Overall, the grounded model shows that employee learning in SMEs gets shaped by a set of linked conditions. The everyday SME service context is what makes immediate,

practical feedback feel necessary. Informal feedback practices then hand in employees' task related information and keeps it circulating. At the same time, a relational feedback culture decides how accessible and personal that feedback turns out to be. There are also social and emotional conditions, and these tips whether employees accept the feedback or resist it, sometimes quietly, sometimes not. In the end, feedback supports learning and role development only when it is understood, trusted, and used in everyday work. So, this is probably why feedback in SMEs can both enable and constrain employee learning, depending on how all those pieces connect, and how they land in daily routines.

6.2 Informal Feedback Practices in Everyday SME Work

The first major finding is that the feedback in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs was experienced as an everyday work practice, not really as some formal performance management event. Participants described it as quick verbal comments, direct correction and peer advice too. There were short conversations, post-shift discussions, messages, and then sometimes review forms. , this supports the SME HRD literature that says small firms often run with fewer formal HR policies or systems, meaning people management becomes more dependent on informal workplace things (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296). It also fits with Kotey and Slade's claim that the formality of HRM practices often depends on firm size, and in smaller firms these practices tend to be less developed (Kotey & Slade, 2005, p. 16).

This matters because it changes what "feedback" means, shifting it away from formal appraisal and moving it toward everyday workplace interaction. In bigger organizations, feedback is usually linked with planned reviews, formal appraisal systems, or structured development conversations. But in the studied SMEs , feedback happened during the work itself. Employees got feedback while preparing food, serving customers, handling the busy periods, cleaning , managing delivery orders, dealing with stock, correcting mistakes, and prioritizing tasks. This aligns with Nolan and Garavan's (2016) argument that HRD in SMEs gets shaped by fragmented, situation specific, and less

formalized practices (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). And it connects with Tam and Gray's (2016) view that employee learning in SMEs is closely tied to the daily workplace practices and the practical conditions of the firm (Tam & Gray, 2016, p. 671).

The finding also extends informal workplace learning literature. Billett argues that learning through work depends on workplace affordances ,like chances to take part ,get some guidance, and really engage with work activities (Billett, 2001, p. 209). Eraut says something similar, that a lot of workplace learning happens informally, through daily lived experience and interaction, instead of formal instruction (Eraut, 2004, p. 248). In this study, we back that up, by showing that feedback works as one of those everyday affordances, through which employees learn. The feedback created learning opportunities when it helped employees notice mistakes, grasp the expected standards and then adjust their behavior while they were still working.

However, the study also adds a more critical insight: informality by itself does not really make feedback useful. Informal feedback was common, but its learning value seemed to depend on if it was clear, task-specific, respectful, and practically usable. This matters because SME informality can be taken as naturally supportive. The findings, therefore, suggest a more careful read, or interpretation. Informality can make feedback quicker and more accessible, but it can also make feedback turn out inconsistent , vague, or emotionally difficult when it lacks structure or when the respectful delivery is not there.

The service sector context helps explain why informal feedback was so prominent in the first place. In fast-food work, tasks are shaped by efficiency, predictability, and control, and that tends to create pressure for rapid task correction (Butler & Hammer, 2019, p. 97) . Then restaurant work adds customer-facing emotional demands too, including customer incivility, plus a real burnout risk (Han et al., 2016, p. 97). Retail work is also characterized by work intensification, emotional exhaustion, and performance pressure (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 370). In settings like these, feedback often has to happen

close to the task, because mistakes, customer interactions, and workload demands require an immediate response.

So, feedback in the studied SMEs should not be taken as there is no order or structure. Instead it a placed structure, somehow. It sits inside the work itself, produced through relationships, and it gets activated by the next task demands that are right there, in the moment.

6.3 Feedback as a Mechanism for Learning and Role Development

The second aggregate dimension suggested that feedback supported learning when it helped employees develop practical skills, clarify role expectations, and even boost performance, plus it supported adaptation to workplace standards. Participants talked about feedback as useful in a more hands on way , like when it helped them correct mistakes, improve techniques, manage time, decide what to prioritize, and understand what exactly was expected from them. This seems to line up with Hattie and Timperley's view that feedback works best when it helps narrow the gap between current performance and the performance that is wanted (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82).

The results show that feedback started to feel learning-oriented as soon as it was able to deliver useful, actionable information. A short and quick correction worked best when it made clear what needed to change and also how the employee could improve. So it extends the whole feedback theory, because it suggests that just timeliness or immediacy by itself isn't enough. When feedback is close to the task, it can open up a learning opportunity, but that opening only turns into real learning when the feedback is specific , and practical too. Like a manager saying "this is wrong" may block an immediate mistake but a manager (or a senior colleague) who explains the right approach helps the employee understand the right way to do the work for the next time around.

This finding links up with informal workplace learning. Cerasoli and colleagues define informal learning behaviors as non-curricular behaviors and activities that people pursue for knowledge and skill acquisition outside the formal learning context (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). In other words, it shows up when someone asks questions, watches how others handle things, talks through problems, and learns via work-based activity.

In this study, feedback ended up inside informal learning, because employees could apply it right away to what they were already doing. Still, they had to make sense of it, accept it, and use it, and they needed repeated practice for that part. So, feedback wasn't "learning" by itself, more like a mechanism that opens up the chance for learning to happen.

Decius et al. explain that informal workplace learning is like doing problem solving, some reflection, trying and adjusting, and also asking those more experienced colleagues for advice (Decius et al., 2019, p. 496). The findings back up this idea because employees talked about learning from feedback via correction, advice, watching others, and then adapting. The feedback did not just help them get better at the task; it also helped them get the workplace benchmark that sits behind that task. So, when they received feedback about food preparation, it wasn't only about learning a method; it also made the quality expectations clearer. And for customer service, the feedback did not merely fix conduct; it also clarified service tone, emotional behavior, and the norms of the workplace.

This role development function is one of the strongest findings of the study; feedback made employees understand what is expected in the workplace. In small service SMEs' role expectations may not always be communicated through formal onboarding or written procedures. Instead, employees seem to learn those role expectations through participation, correction, observation, and then some feedback. Noe and colleagues argue that workplace learning feeds human capital development by helping employees acquire and then also put into practice knowledge, skills, abilities, and other resources

(Noe et al., 2014, p. 246). The present study backs this up because it shows how feedback supports employees in building practical judgment while they are working.

The findings also refine workplace learning theory a bit. Billett argues that there isn't really a clean separation between participation in work and learning, because employees learn through their engagement in day-to-day workplace activities (Billett, 2001, p. 210). Here, feedback was part of that participation too. Instead of employees stepping away from the job to attend some formal training, they learned through ongoing guidance while they were doing the work. So, feedback ended up into work participation, used for task correction, and supported gradual adaptation.

However the findings also show that feedback did not always support learning. In fact, feedback sometimes constrained learning when it was too vague , too critical, or when it seemed detached from practical guidance. That outcome fits with Hattie and Timperley's argument that feedback can vary a lot in effectiveness and it can be less useful when it does not give information that really helps improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007 , p. 85). The present study takes this line of thought into SME service work by suggesting that feedback has to be practically translatable. Employees learned when they could convert that feedback into action , but they struggled when the feedback only signaled dissatisfaction.

The talk about learning and role development so therefore makes the grounded model feel more solid. That model shouldn't be taken as if feedback automatically triggers learning or anything like that. More precisely, feedback turns into a mechanism for role development when it connects real task experience to a practical adjustment , not just a vague response. That's also why in this model, employee interpretation and application sit in between feedback and learning.

6.4 Social and Emotional Conditions Shaping Feedback Reception

The third aggregate dimension suggested that feedback reception was shaped by social and emotional conditions, in a day to day way. Most participants seemed rather willing to take on criticism when it came across as constructive, respectful, and useful, not just sharp. But feedback got harder to incorporate when it was harsh, too general, overly critical, or just emotionally discouraging. This result really sits at the center of the thesis because it clarifies why the same “type” of feedback can help learning in one setting and then restrict learning in another, almost like the context flips its value, or the whole thing turns upside down.

This result aligns with feedback environment theory. Steelman et al. describe the feedback environment as the everyday context of supervisor–subordinate and coworker–coworker feedback routines (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). They treat feedback quality, source credibility, delivery, source availability, and support for feedback seeking as key dimensions in that environment. In this study , the relevance of those dimensions showed up clearly in SME service workplaces. Feedback worked best when employees experienced it as clear, credible, reachable , and delivered in a constructively oriented manner.

Feedback delivery was extra important. Steelman et al. identify it as part of the feedback environment ,because how feedback gets communicated can really steer how it is received (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166). The findings really back up that idea. Participants did not dismiss criticism as such. Instead, they seemed to reject the feedback specifically when it came through scolding, blame, humiliation, or when the message was just not clear, like uncertain criticism. So you can see the emotional register of feedback, it matters a lot for whether employees can take in the learning content.

Source credibility also played a role in how feedback was received. Steelman et al. define source credibility using the feedback source’s expertise along with trustworthiness (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 167). Here, the results indicate that employees were more

willing to use the feedback when the sender was seen as knowledgeable, fair, and somehow nearby to the actual work. Managers and owners came across as credible because they set workplace standards and they held authority, in a straightforward way. Senior colleagues were credible because they worked closer to the task, and could provide hands-on, practical guidance. That split between authority and proximity adds nuance to the broader feedback environment literature by showing credibility in SMEs based on these authorities and proximities.

Feedback seeking was also influenced by these social and emotional conditions. Van der Rijt et al. describe feedback seeking as the proactive search for informal day-to-day feedback information (Van der Rijt et al., 2013, p. 73). Anseel et al. (2015, p. 320) further clarify that feedback seeking follows a cost value logic, where employees weigh the value of feedback against possible social or image related costs (Anseel et al., 2015, p. 320). The results here support that idea. In smaller workplaces, asking for feedback might help people improve, yet it can also expose them to judgement, or at least that feeling. So employees are usually more inclined to seek and use feedback when the surrounding climate feels safe, and not only constructive.

That social and emotional side also fits well with the service sector setting. Restaurant and retail employees, for example, often work under pressure and have to deal with customer demands, emotional labor, and performance expectations. Han et al. show that customer incivility connects with burnout among restaurant frontline employees (Han et al., 2016, p. 97). Widjaja et al. indicate that retail work can include work intensification alongside emotional exhaustion (Widjaja et al., 2024, p. 370). And these conditions matter, because feedback is frequently shared during tense moments of work. When feedback is delivered in that pressure, the emotional tone might come across more sharp, or less supportive, depending on the moment. That, in turn, makes feedback harder to use even when the actual content is still relevant.

So, this present study contributes to the feedback and learning literature by suggesting that feedback reception is not just cognitive. It is also emotional , and somehow

relational too. Employees do not simply process feedback as if it were neutral information. They also interpret the tone, the source, the intent, and the wider relationship that sits behind the message. In other words, feedback becomes useful when employees feel it as guidance. And it turns constraining when employees feel it as judgement without any real support.

This is central in the grounded model. The model points to feedback quality, source credibility, emotional delivery, and relational trust as filtering conditions. These conditions decide whether the feedback can move ahead toward interpretation, acceptance, practical adjustment, and then actual learning. When those conditions are missing, feedback can stay stuck as mere criticism, or as operational control, rather than turning into a learning mechanism.

6.5 Relational Feedback Culture in Small Workplaces

SME closeness shaped feedback in a way that felt informal, personal, and relational, so it became more immediate and easier to use, but it also made things a bit more emotionally sensitive. In many SMEs the everyday workplace dynamics are small enough that managers, peers, and senior colleagues can give feedback really fast. Cardon & Stevens (2004, p. 296), Nolan & Garavan (2016, p. 85), and Tam & Gray (2016, p. 671) all point out that HRD in SMEs is context-dependent, informal, and grounded in relationships. Peer based feedback then added onto the hierarchical guidance, giving advice that was more task-specific, credible, and practical, which also matches Van der Rijt et al. (2013, p. 72) and Steelman et al. (2004, p. 166).

6.6 Discussion of the Grounded Model

The grounded model brings together those four aggregate dimensions and explains how performance-related feedback becomes either an enabling or constraining

mechanism for what people learn while they are actually on the job in SMEs. Instead of treating feedback as a straightforward, direct road to learning, the model suggests more indirect routes. It says feedback travels through a conditional process. First, feedback shows up inside everyday SME work; most of the time it is informal, task-embedded, immediate, and very relational. After that, it gets shaped by social and emotional conditions before employees even interpret it. Then they might accept it or push it back, and from there they decide whether it can be translated into practical adjustments, skill development, role clarification, or even improved performance.

The first stage of the model is really about the place and circumstances where feedback appears. In the studied fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, feedback was not usually divided from the everyday doing of the job by formal HR systems, or some neat scheduled appraisal. Instead, it showed up in very ordinary moments, like correcting a task, dealing with customers, food preparation, handling stock, or when shifts need coordination. So it supports the idea that feedback in these smaller firms is always near to the daily work flow, rather than being placed as a separate managerial routine. That is why the model starts with the view that the SME environment creates conditions where feedback is often close to the task, and timely too, but it is also less structured and more dependent on the specific manager, peers, or supervisors rather than on a fixed process.

The second stage in the model shows that feedback gets pushed through a few conditions before it can actually help learning. These things include the quality of the feedback, how credible the source seems, the emotional tone in the delivery, and the level of relational trust. This matters since feedback doesn’t just magically become useful because someone says it. Employees have to first understand what was said, then decide whether the person counts the feedback as credible, experience the delivered feedback as acceptable, and finally feel the whole point is to guide them rather than blame them. If those conditions are there, feedback is more likely to land as practical

guidance. If they are missing, then the same words might feel like criticism, added pressure , or even emotional discouragement.

So the model helps explain how the same type of feedback can work out differently for different employees. For instance, a correction during a busy shift is learning if it is specific , respectful, and tied to the actual work. Then the employee can grasp what needs changing right away and use the message in practice. But the same feedback limits learning if it comes off vague, severe, or delivered in a way that makes the employee feel a bit embarrassed or is not really backed up. In this view, the model also suggests feedback isn't only a thinking process where employees receive information. It is also more of a relationship and feeling process, where employees are also judging the tone ,who the person behind it, what time it's said, and the purpose or intention underneath the message.

The third stage of the model is mostly about employee interpretation and response. Feedback can only become developmental if employees really make sense of it and then connect it to their own work behavior. So learning depends on more than just who sends the feedback, it also depends on how the receiver understands the message and what they do with it. When employees take feedback as something that is clear and also relevant, they tend to accept it and then actually use it to tune their performance. But when the feedback is vague, or contradicting, or emotionally discouraging, employees might just ignore it, push back against it, or remember the negative feeling more than the actual learning points. The model therefore puts a spotlight on interpretation as the bridge that links feedback to learning.

The final stage of the model is on-the-job learning and role development. When the feedback goes through the filtering conditions successfully, it can help with practical adjustment, skill improvement, a clearer role understanding , and better performance. This part is really quite relevant in SME service work because people often learn via repeated doing , not so much through formal training sessions. Feedback shows them

what s expected, how the tasks should be handled, how mistakes can be corrected, and also how service standards should stay consistent. So in this way, the grounded model ties performance-related feedback with informal workplace learning by explaining how those daily feedback moments become part of employees' learning path.

At the same time, the model also explains how feedback can end up constraining learning. For instance, if feedback is too vague , too harsh , poorly timed, or just not linked to concrete guidance, it may not actually help improvement. In smaller workplaces this effect can feel stronger because the feedback is so relationally near and personally felt. A negative comment from a manager or a senior colleague may not only affect as a task related message, but also it can spill over into confidence , motivation, and even the willingness to ask for more guidance later. So the model shows that SME closeness has this dual outcome. It can make feedback arrive quicker, feel more personal, and end up being more helpful, but it can also make negative feedback more emotionally difficult to take in.

Overall, the grounded model contributes the thesis by showing that feedback in SMEs should be understood as a conditional learning mechanism. It does not really create learning just because it's around or because it's present. Rather, feedback helps learning when it is task-relevant, clear, credible, respectfully delivered, emotionally acceptable, and also backed by workplace relationships. When those conditions are not there, it rather constrains learning. So the model gives this integrated explanation of how informal performance feedback in SMEs moves from the everyday work situation to employee interpretation and then finally either toward learning and development or toward discouragement and limited adjustment.

6.7 Feedback as an Enabling and Constraining Mechanism

The central finding of this study is that performance-related feedback does not automatically produce on-the-job learning. Instead, feedback works more like a conditional

mechanism. It helps learning only when employees can make sense of it, trust it, take it in emotionally, and then use it in practice. But, in the other direction, feedback also can limit learning when it is vague, inconsistent, too harsh, poorly timed, or passed on by someone the employees don't really regard as credible. So it turns out feedback shouldn't be handled like mere information that is given to employees. It is more a socially embedded conditional process that only becomes meaningful when employees interpret it and actually apply it.

This finding supports and extends the existing feedback literature in a more developed way. Hattie and Timperley (2007, p. 82) argue that feedback can foster improvement when it helps people understand the distance between where their performance is right now and where it should be. Still, they also underline that feedback is not always effective and that the impact really depends on the kind, the emphasis, and the actual use of the feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). The results from this study fit with that conditional logic.

In the fast-food, restaurant, and retail SME contexts, employees seemed to experience feedback as enabling when it was specific, timely, linked to the task, and easy to apply in practice. For instance, feedback enabled employees to correct mistakes while working, grasp what was expected from them, adjust customer service behavior, and build practical skills. In those situations, learning was supported because the feedback offered actionable information that could be tied directly to what employees were doing, day to day.

Feedback also showed up as a driver of learning when it was delivered in a respectful way, and it seemed to come from a credible place, or person. That lines up pretty well with Steelman et al. (2004, pp. 166–167), where they point to feedback quality, the way feedback delivery happens, source credibility, whether the source is actually credible, and whether people feel encouraged to seek feedback as key parts of the whole feedback environment. Here, employees tended to take feedback and use it more often when

it came from managers, supervisors, senior colleagues, or peers who were viewed as knowledgeable, fair, and kind of close to the task in practical terms. Feedback from those kinds of sources made it easier for employees to decode workplace standards and the role expectations. So in the end, feedback turned into a kind of learning mechanism not only due to what the message said but also due to the relational setting, in other words, who said it and how it was framed when it was shared.

The enabling role of feedback tied to the informal nature of learning inside SMEs. Workplace learning often happens through being involved, through interaction, and through everyday work experience rather than via formal instruction (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). In the workplaces, feedback showed up again and again in the middle of daily work, for example, while preparing food, handling customers, doing cleaning duties, managing stock, or during those busy service shifts, where everything feels a bit faster. This really points to the idea that on-the-job learning in SMEs is commonly embedded in ordinary work activities. Feedback functioned as a learning mechanism when it made employees notice their errors, fine-tune their behavior, and redo tasks in better, more effective ways. So feedback wasn't learning by itself. Rather, learning began when employees took that feedback and turned it into a practical adjustment.

At the same time, the findings suggest that feedback can constrain learning, as well. Feedback seemed to restrict learning when it was unclear, too broad, inconsistent, or difficult to use in day-to-day work. When employees got vague comments with no real direction, they were unsure about what exactly needed to change. In other words, the learning value of feedback went down because employees could not really convert the message into practical steps. This lines up with the view that feedback works best when it gives information that helps people close the gap between current and desired performance (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). So if the feedback does not spell out the gap, or if it doesn't describe how improvement could happen, then its ability to support learning becomes pretty limited.

Feedback also seemed to constrain learning when it got emotionally discouraging or when it was delivered in a harsh manner. In those cases , employees tended to latch on to the negative emotional experience more than to the learning content of the feedback. This matters because, in small service sector workplaces, feedback is rarely received in a truly neutral setting. Employees often work very close with the same managers and colleagues, so the feedback can ripple into confidence , motivation, and even the day to day workplace relationships. If the feedback feels like disrespect or humiliation, employees might become less willing to ask questions, look for clarification, or just participate in future feedback openly. All of this shows why feedback delivery inside the actual feedback environment is so important (Steelman et al., 2004, p. 166).

The constraining effect of feedback was also connected to source credibility. When the feedback came from someone employees did not see as competent, fair, or sufficiently familiar with the task, it was less likely to be taken onboard. This fits the line of reasoning from Steelman et al. (2004, p. 167), that source credibility really matters as a condition in how feedback processes unfold. In this study, credibility seemed even more central because the feedback was often informal and kind of relational, not neatly formalized through structured HR systems. In SMEs, where formal training and appraisal systems might be more limited, employees likely do more on everyday interactions with managers, supervisors, and even peers for learning. So, credibility and also how the feedback was delivered become especially significant.

So the mechanism that shows up in this study can be summarized like this which is Feedback helps on-the-job learning when it’s clear, specific, timely, credible, respectful, and actually usable. In those circumstances employees can read the feedback, accept it, and then translate it into what they do at work. But feedback can also limit on-the-job learning when it is vague, inconsistent, harsh, unclear, delivered badly, or just not credible. When that happens, employees might get uncertain, more discouraged, or simply less willing to use the feedback. The essential point is that feedback turns into a learning

mechanism only once it shifts from being “a message about performance” to being a real basis for practical adjustment.

This finding contributes to the thesis by clarifying the relationship between feedback and learning. Feedback should not be understood as identical to learning. I mean, instead, feedback is more like a possible pathway through which learning may actually occur. In fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs, this pathway is not automatic; it depends on how the feedback is provided, how it is received, and also whether employees can use it in their everyday work. So the mechanism is conditional, relational, and practice-based, not just some simple cause-effect line. That’s basically the main contribution of the study: it illustrates how everyday feedback in small service-sector workplaces can both enable and constrain employee on-the-job learning, depending on the quality of the feedback process.

7 Conclusions, Contributions, and Recommendations

7.1 General Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to look into how performance-related feedback practices in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala either help or limit employee on-the-job learning. The material is based on nine semi-structured interviews and a Gioia-style analysis, and the result is that feedback in these small service-sector places is mostly informal, prompt, focused on the task, and also relational. In practice, the feedback comes through verbal remarks, direct correction, peer guidance, customer related responses, recognition, and very hands-on advice during the everyday shifts. So, in other words, feedback in these SMEs isn't really felt as a formal HR or appraisal activity; rather it happens as ordinary workplace interaction.

The answer to the main research question is that performance-related feedback can either enable or constrain employee learning, but it does this through a conditional mechanism. In other words, feedback enables on-the-job learning when it is clear , specific, timely, credible, respectful, and also practically usable. In that situation, employees can manage to see what needs improvement; they often accept the input and then apply it more directly to their actual work tasks. Feedback supports learning by helping employees correct mistakes, better grasp role expectations, develop practical skills, improve service behavior, and also feel more confident about their work. And that backs up the idea that feedback helps people shrink the gap between where they are now and where they should be, as long as it delivers information that is genuinely useful for improvement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82). At the same time, the study indicates feedback can constrain learning when it is vague or inconsistent , harsh, unclear, emotionally discouraging, or given by someone employees do not really consider credible. When that happens, feedback can create uncertainty. It can also lower motivation, weaken confidence, or even make employees less prone to ask questions and seek clarification.

The first sub-question was about how performance-related feedback practices are actually given to employees in fast food, restaurant, and retail SME settings. The study suggests that feedback is mostly handled in an informal way. People were told that feedback comes during shifts, after mistakes, when it gets busy, after customer interactions, or through these brief chats with managers , supervisors, senior colleagues, and even peers. It ties into the SME context, where formal HR structures may not be as developed, and development can depend more on everyday interaction than on some standardized systems (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296; Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85). The results also indicate that feedback is tightly linked to the practical pressures of service work because employees need to adapt fast to tasks, customers , co-workers, and what the workplace expects in day-to-day operations.

The second sub-question asked how employees experience these feedback practices as something that enables or constrains their on-the-job learning. The study found that employees tend to experience feedback as enabling when it provides concrete guidance, clarifies what should be altered, and is shared in a manner that feels respectful as well as credible. In that case, the feedback actually becomes useful when employees can link it directly to their own daily tasks and then apply it to make real , workable adjustments. This seems to support the idea that workplace learning usually shows up through participation, small interactions , and everyday work experiences , not only through formal instruction (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). Still, employees experience feedback as constraining when it is vague, feels unjust, gets delivered too harshly , or simply fails to offer a practical direction for improvement. So, the study suggests feedback is not learning by itself. Feedback turns into a sort of learning pathway only when employees make understand it, take it in, and then translate it into concrete actions while they are working, in day-to-day time.

The novelty of these findings is in showing how feedback acts like a conditional thing in small service-sector SMEs, but specifically from employees' point of view. Prior studies have already suggested that feedback can help with performance improvement and also

that the feedback setting seems to shape how people actually receive and then use that feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82; Steelman et al., 2004, p. 167). Still, this thesis goes one step more concrete; it clarifies how feedback functions in fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs, where feedback is frequently informal, very quick, socially oriented, and somehow embedded into the day to day work. So, the study does not just say "feedback matters." It rather argues that feedback matters only when certain conditions line up and that its learning value is not automatic. Instead, it depends on the interplay between what the feedback says, how it gets delivered, how credible the source feels, the emotional reception in the moment, and whether it feels practically usable.

Overall, the thesis land on the idea that performance-related feedback inside small service-sector SMEs should be viewed as some kind of conditional, relational, practice-based learning mechanism. It can help employee learning and role development and also build confidence. It may drive performance improvement, but it can also constrain learning when it’s unclear, discouraging, or simply not trusted. So, this outcome gives the starting point for both the theoretical and practical contributions of the study.

7.2 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the literature on performance-related feedback, informal workplace learning, and HRD in SMEs. It does that by showing how feedback works like a conditional mechanism for on-the-job learning in small service sector workplaces. The main theoretical contribution is not just the obvious point that feedback can support learning, because that has already been shown in earlier research. Instead, what seems new here is the explanation of how, and under what conditions, feedback turns enabling or constraining in fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs.

First, this study contributes to feedback research by widening how people think about feedback beyond only formal appraisal and performance management systems. The feedback literature says that feedback can help people see the difference between what

their present situation is and where they want to reach by learning in day-to-day work (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 82), but it also notes that feedback is not automatically effective. It focuses on where it is aimed, what kind it is, and how it is actually used (Hattie & Timperley, 2007, p. 85). What this present study adds is that, in small service-sector SMEs, feedback starts to become genuinely useful when it is clear, specific, timely, credible, respectful, and usable right in the immediate work context. On the other hand, feedback loses its learning value when it is vague , inconsistent, too harsh, unclear, or simply not credible. So, the study contributes by framing feedback as a conditional mechanism for learning, not as a generally positive managerial routine.

Second, this thesis contributes to the feedback environment literature by showing how relational conditions really matter in small workplaces. Steelman et al. (2004, pp. 166–167) point out that feedback quality, delivery , source credibility, source availability, and support for feedback seeking are key dimensions of the feedback environment. This study backs those dimensions but also brings in extra contextual texture from fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs. In these kinds of places, feedback is frequently shared by managers, supervisors, senior colleagues, and peers who operate side by side with employees during day-to-day tasks. And because the workplace is small, the relationship part isn't just background noise. It means that the credibility of the feedback source and the emotional tone in the way it is delivered become unusually salient. So, the results suggest that the feedback environment in SMEs is not solely an organizational process rather it is equally interpersonal and grounded in everyday practice.

Third, this study also contributes to the informal workplace learning literature because it helps make clearer what feedback is actually doing in on-the-job learning. In general, workplace learning literature argues that people can learn while working through participation, interaction, problem-solving, and those everyday work experiences (Billett, 2001, p. 209; Eraut, 2004, p. 248). Informal learning behaviors might show up as asking questions, watching what others do, requesting guidance, or learning while handling work-related issues (Cerasoli et al., 2018, p. 204). In this thesis, researchers try to connect the

dots so that feedback looks like one of the mechanisms that enables these kinds of informal learning moments. At the same time, though, the study makes another clarification: feedback is not the same thing as learning; rather, it is a learning mechanism. Feedback turns into learning only once employees interpret the message, accept it, and then try it out in practice. That separation between “receiving” and "learning" helps strengthen the theoretical grasp of how informal workplace learning gets produced in day-to-day service work.

Fourth, the thesis contributes to SME HRD literature by giving a micro-level account of how employees develop in small service sector organizations. Previous research says that smaller firms often come with fewer formal HR policies and less organized systems compared with bigger organizations (Cardon & Stevens, 2004, p. 296) and also that HRD in SMEs is still a fragmented and underdeveloped research domain (Nolan & Garavan, 2016, p. 85).This study helps, because it shows that employee development can happen through informal feedback practices that are integrated into everyday work. When there are no strongly formalized HRD systems in place, feedback turns into a real, practical route, and it is also relational, meaning employees learn tasks, make sense of roles, adjust their behavior, and build up confidence.

Finally, the novelty of this thesis lies in linking feedback, informal learning, and SME HRD through the grounded model of feedback as an enabling but also constraining mechanism. The study suggests that feedback in small service sector SMEs is not just a simple message about performance, and it's also not only a formal managerial instrument. Rather, it looks like a conditional process that is shaped by clarity, specificity, timing, credibility, delivery, emotional reception, and practical usability. In a way, this gives a more nuanced theoretical account of feedback in fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs, and it adds to understanding how employee learning shows up in workplaces where development is usually informal, immediate, and highly relational.

7.3 Practical Contributions

This study offers practical contributions to the managers, supervisors, senior employees, and employees in fast-food, restaurant, and retail work environments. The results reveal that feedback should not be used as an item of correction only. It must be viewed as a practical development tool which can be used to learn task, to understand role expectations, to develop service behavior and to develop confidence.

The research also demonstrates that complex formal systems are not necessary for providing useful feedback. Feedback in small service workplaces can be informal and immediate, but it has to be clear, specific, respectful and task related. By effectively communicating to managers and supervisors what needs to change, why it is important, and how the employee can improve, learning can be enhanced. This is particularly crucial in busy work environments where workers might require coaching on task performance rather than only after they have delayed.

Another contribution that is practical is the study emphasizes the importance of feedback source credibility. Feedback that was perceived as being from someone who was knowledgeable, fair and close to the work was more likely to be accepted and used by employees. This implies that managers, supervisors, and experienced colleagues should maybe be mindful that their own credibility affects how useful the feedback is for learning.

Lastly, the study reveals that emotional delivery is important. Feedback is technically accurate, but not supportive of learning if it is negative or unhelpful. Feedback in SMEs should thus not only be attended to, but also how it's communicated.

7.4 Practical Recommendations

First, SMEs should give feedback in relation to the close relationship with the actual work while the work environment is clear. Immediate feedback can help employees link

correction or guidance to the exact action that needs improving. Still, even when it is immediate, it should be explained calmly and respectfully.

Second, feedback should be specific and practical, not just a general judgement. Instead of only saying something is wrong, managers and senior colleagues ought to explain what has to be improved and then also show how the employee can do it differently next time. That way the feedback stays easier to use in future work situations.

Third, SMEs should encourage feedback that stays respectful in tone. Managers and supervisors should avoid comments that embarrass employees, create fear, or end up focusing only on mistakes. When it is constructive in delivery, employees tend to be more willing to accept it and actually use it for learning.

Fourth, SMEs should use peer feedback in a careful way. People with experience can offer solid, task-based guidance because they usually work near the same duties. But peer based feedback should be supportive rather not be judgmental, especially when it is in the small workplaces where relationships keeps ongoing between peers.

Fifth, SMEs can mix informal feedback with small formal routines. Short check-ins, simple review forms, or post-shift conversations can help keep consistency without taking away the flexibility. This balance, maybe, supports learning, and at the same time it avoids turning everything into heavy bureaucracy.

Sixth, SMEs can rely on the grounded model as a diagnostic instrument. If feedback does not turn into real learning, managers can check whether the real problem is unclear feedback, weak source credibility, poor delivery, lack of trust, or limited chances to apply the feedbacks.

7.5 Societal Contributions

Ethical and social implications are exist in result. Feedback practices have an impact on both employee performance and their confidence, dignity, motivation and sense of inclusion in the workplace. Clear, respectful, and practically useful feedback are helpful in employee learning and improving the quality of services. However when feedback is only negative and demoralizing, it can have a detrimental effect on learning and will not encourage employees to seek assistance. Such implications are especially relevant in fast food, restaurants, and retail SMEs where workers are routinely required to work under time pressure and in proximity to their managers, co-workers and customers. In this setting, feedback isn't just a management tool, it's a moral act which can influence the work atmosphere for staff members. Therefore, the responsibility of SMEs lies in building up a culture of feedback which fosters learning yet also safeguards workers from an excess of emotional harm.

The societal relevance of these findings is tied to how crucial SMEs are for local employment and day to day economic activity. Think fast-food, restaurants, and retail small firms—they provide jobs for a lot of people, including young workers, part time employees, students, migrants, and also those who are entering the labor market. In places like that, feedback is not only some managerial habit; it’s also a tool for helping employees grasp expectations, build a bit of confidence, and, in the end, learn how to take part in working life in a real way. When feedback comes through clearly and in a respectful tone, it can back workplace inclusion by letting employees absorb routines, service standards, communication rules, and task expectations sooner.

Also, these findings can matter for society in a broader sense, especially via higher productivity and better use of resources. In service-sector SMEs unclear roles, weak communication, and repeated error patterns can quietly reduce efficiency and raise stress for both employees and managers. But if feedback is used constructively, employees can fix problems earlier. That could result in steadier daily operations, stronger customer service, less waste of time and materials, and generally a more effective

deployment of labor. So, the practical recommendations from this study might support not just single firms, but the wider service economy.

A further societal contribution is tied to employee well-being. Feedback that is vague, or harsh, or emotionally discouraging can create stress, lower motivation, and make people more reluctant to ask for help, even when they really need guidance. On the other hand, feedback that is clear, specific, respectful, and practically useful can end up creating a safer learning environment in a sort of quieter way. If managers and senior colleagues actually follow the practical recommendations in this thesis, then service workplaces may become less emotionally damaging and more supportive of learning. Over time this may show up as lower work-related stress, fewer employee exits, less avoidable conflict, and potentially reduced social costs connected to sickness absence and overall workplace well-being.

The results also suggest implications for sustainable work in small service sector organizations, not just with regard to sustaining the productivity of the business. It's also about ensuring that employees are not worn down or discouraged by regular human interactions in the workplace. Feedback is one of the most readily available tools for employee development when SMEs lack formal training systems. If feedback is done responsibly, it can create learning opportunities that are more equitable, develop employee capacity, and contribute to healthier relationships in the workplace. So, in this regard, the study can help society since it reveals that the seemingly small adjustments in the normal processes of feedback can have a beneficial impact on improving the health, inclusion, and productivity of the workplace.

7.6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. These limitations do not undermine the value of the study, but they define the boundaries within which the findings should be understood. They also provide directions

for future research on performance-related feedback, informal workplace learning, and HRD in small service-sector organizations.

First, the study is based on a qualitative research design with nine semi-structured interviews. This design was appropriate for exploring employees' experiences of feedback in depth, but it does not allow statistical generalization to all SMEs or all service-sector employees. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable to similar contexts rather than representative of a wider population. Future research could build on this study by using a larger sample across a wider range of SMEs. A quantitative or mixed-methods design could also be used to examine whether the feedback mechanism identified in this study appears across a broader population of employees.

Second, the sample was unevenly distributed across the three sectors. The final empirical material included participants from fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs, but the retail sector was represented by only one participant. This imbalance resulted from access difficulties, participant availability, and time limitations during data collection. The imbalance means that the findings may reflect restaurant and food-service experiences more strongly than retail experiences. Future research should therefore include a more balanced sector distribution, with a larger number of participants from retail SMEs. This would make it possible to compare how feedback practices differ between fast-food, restaurant, and retail workplaces.

Third, the study focused only on employees' perspectives. This was consistent with the purpose of the thesis, because the study aimed to understand how feedback is received, interpreted, accepted, resisted, and applied by employees. However, the absence of managers', supervisors', and owners' perspectives means that the study cannot fully explain how feedback providers understand their own feedback practices or intentions. Future research could compare employee and manager perspectives in the same SME workplaces. Such research could examine whether feedback providers' intentions match

employees' experiences and whether misalignment between intention and reception affects learning.

Fourth, the study relied on self-reported interview data. Interviews were suitable because they allowed participants to explain how they experienced feedback and how they connected feedback to learning. However, self-reported accounts may be influenced by memory, personal interpretation, or the participants' willingness to disclose negative workplace experiences. Future research could combine interviews with workplace observation or diary methods. Observation could provide insight into how feedback is actually delivered during work, while diary methods could capture feedback experiences closer to the time they occur.

Fifth, the study was conducted in fast-food, restaurant, and retail SMEs in Umeå and Uppsala, Sweden. These cities provide a relevant setting for examining small service-sector workplaces, but the findings may not apply in the same way to other regions, countries, or organizational contexts. Future research could examine similar feedback practices in other Swedish cities, in other Nordic countries, or in different cultural and institutional settings. Comparative research could show whether the feedback mechanism identified in this study is shaped by national workplace culture, labour-market conditions, or sector-specific norms.

Sixth, the study examined feedback and learning at one point in time. This means that the thesis captures employees' retrospective interpretations of feedback, but it does not follow how feedback influences learning over a longer period. Future research could use a longitudinal design to examine how employees' responses to feedback change with experience, role development, and workplace relationships. Such studies could investigate whether feedback becomes less frequent, more informal, or more peer-based as employees gain confidence and competence.

Finally, the study developed a grounded model of informal performance feedback in SMEs, but the model has not been tested beyond the present empirical material. The model should therefore be understood as an empirically grounded conceptual

explanation rather than a general theory. Future research could refine or test the model in other SME contexts, including different service industries and larger organizational settings. This would help assess whether the conditions identified in the model—clarity, specificity, timing, credibility, respectful delivery, and practical usability—also explain feedback-based learning in other workplace environments.

Overall, these limitations suggest that future research should expand the empirical scope of the study, include more balanced sector representation, compare employee and manager perspectives, combine interview data with observational methods, and examine feedback processes over time. Such research would further develop understanding of how feedback operates as an enabling or constraining mechanism for on-the-job learning in SMEs.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Email to Participants

[Greetings]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my thesis interview.

Please find attached the consent form, which explains the purpose of the study, how your data will be used, and your rights as a participant.

Kindly read the document and confirm your consent by replying to this email with a short message such as: “I have read the information and agree to participate.”

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Kind regards,
Saif Mahabub and Rakeen Farhan Rahman

Appendix 2 - Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Introduction:

Thank you for participating in this interview.

I'm conducting this interview for my thesis, which focuses on how informal performance feedback occurs in everyday work and how it influences employee learning and performance, particularly in SME environments.

Before we begin, I just want to confirm that you have read the consent information and agree to participate in this interview.

Your participation is completely voluntary, your responses will be kept confidential, and you can stop the interview at any time.

Is it okay if I record the interview for accuracy?

Your responses will remain confidential and will only be used for academic purposes. There are no right or wrong answers — I am interested in your personal experiences. You are free to skip any question or stop the interview at any time.

SECTION 1: Background (Warm-up Session)

Can you briefly describe your role and daily work tasks in your organization?

Probe: What does a typical workday look like for you?

How long have you been working in this company?

How would you describe the work environment in your organization?

Probe: How do employees usually interact with each other?

SECTION 2: Understanding of Feedback

In your daily work, how do you usually receive feedback about your performance?

Probe: Can you give a specific example?

Who typically gives you feedback (e.g., manager, colleagues)?

Probe: Does it differ depending on the situation? How does it differ?

Can you describe a recent situation where you received significant feedback?

Probe: What happened and how did you respond?

SECTION 3: Nature of Formal/Informal Feedback

(Core Part)

Would you say that feedback in your workplace overall tends to be more formal or informal? Why?

Can you describe how feedback typically occurs during your daily work activities (e.g., during tasks, shifts, or interactions) and the purpose of the feedback?

Probe: Is it rather planned or spontaneous in certain activities?

How frequently do you receive feedback in your work?

Probe: Does it happen regularly or only in certain situations?

Does the feedback generally help you understand what is expected from you in your role?

Probe: How does the feedback influence your understanding of your tasks?

SECTION 4: Feedback Experience (Most Important)

How do you usually feel when you receive feedback?

Probe: Does it depend on who gives the feedback?

What makes feedback helpful or unhelpful for you?

Probe: Can you give an example of both?

Have you ever received feedback that negatively or positively affected you?

Probe: What happened and why did it affect you in this way?

SECTION 5: Feedback and Learning (Core Theme)

Can you describe how feedback helps you improve your work?

Probe: What changes do you make after receiving feedback?

Do you generally learn from feedback in your daily work? How?

Probe: Is learning immediate or does it occur over time?

Can you give an example where feedback helped you learn something significant or extremely valuable?

Probe: What did you learn and how did it help you?

SECTION 6: Feedback and Performance

In what ways does feedback influence your performance?

Probe: Does it make your work easier or more difficult? How?

Do you change how you work after receiving feedback?

Probe: Can you describe a specific change?

SECTION 7: SME Context (Very Important)

How would you describe communication and interaction at your workplace?

Probe: Overall, does it tend to be more formal or informal?

Do you think working in a smaller organization affects how feedback is given?

Probe: In what ways?

Do you think feedback in your organization is different from larger companies? Why?

Probe: Can you compare based on your own experience or perception?

SECTION 8: Feedback-Seeking Behavior

Do you actively ask for feedback? Why or why not?

Probe: In what situations do you ask for feedback?

Are there situations where you hesitate to ask for feedback?

Probe: What makes you hesitate?

SECTION 9: Final Reflection

What do you think is the most important aspect of feedback in your workplace?

Did the use of feedback (e.g., frequency, type, or style) change over time at your work-place?

Probe: What were the reasons for these changes?

Is there anything else about feedback or learning in your work that you would like to share?

Appendix 3 - Consent Form

Consent form for the processing of personal data and information to data subjects.

Our names are Saif Mahabub and Rakeen Farhan Rahman. We are students at the Department of Business Administration at Umeå School of Business, Economics and Statistics at Umeå University. We are writing our thesis on "Informal Performance Feedback and Informal Learning in SME Work Contexts with the aim of understand how informal performance feedback is enacted in SME work environments and how it influences employee learning and performance". We will conduct semi-structured interviews with employees working in SMEs. The material will be analyzed and the results presented in a thesis that will be published in DivA (https://umu.diva-portal.org/).

In conjunction with the student assignment, the following personal data about you will be collected and processed: Audio recordings of interviews, responses, and general background information such as work role and experience.

You will be able to access the results of the study through "The results will be available in the published thesis on the DiVA portal". Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without providing any reason. If you have any questions, you are welcome to contact us:

1.Saif Mahabub;Email: x0622625@student.uwasa.fi;

2.Rakeen Farhan Rahman;Email: rakeenfarhan@yahoo.com

Your consent is required for the processing of the above-mentioned personal data in this student assignment. More information about the student assignment can be found in this form. Umeå University is the personal data controller for the processing of your personal data. You can contact Umeå University by post on Umeå University, SE-901 87 Umeå, by email on registrator@umu.se, or by phone on +46 90-786 50 00. Umeå

University has appointed a data protection officer. Contact the data protection officer on pulo@umu.se or by phone through the University's switchboard on +46 786 50 00.

By giving your consent, your personal data will be processed until, the thesis has been approved but not beyond,. Your personal data will only be processed by the student or students authorised to do so, and authorised staff at Umeå University. You have the right to withdraw your consent at any time. Withdraw your consent by contacting the students supervisor "Thomas Biedenbach"*,email:* thomas.biedenbach@umu.se. Please note that a withdrawal of consent does not affect the lawfulness of any processing that has taken place prior to the withdrawal of consent.

You have the right to contact Umeå University to learn what personal data is being processed about you and get it rectified. You also have the right to data portability, erasure, or restriction of your personal data. Contact the University's data protection officer via email on pulo@umu.se. For more information on Umeå University's processing of personal data, please go to umu.se/en/gdpr.

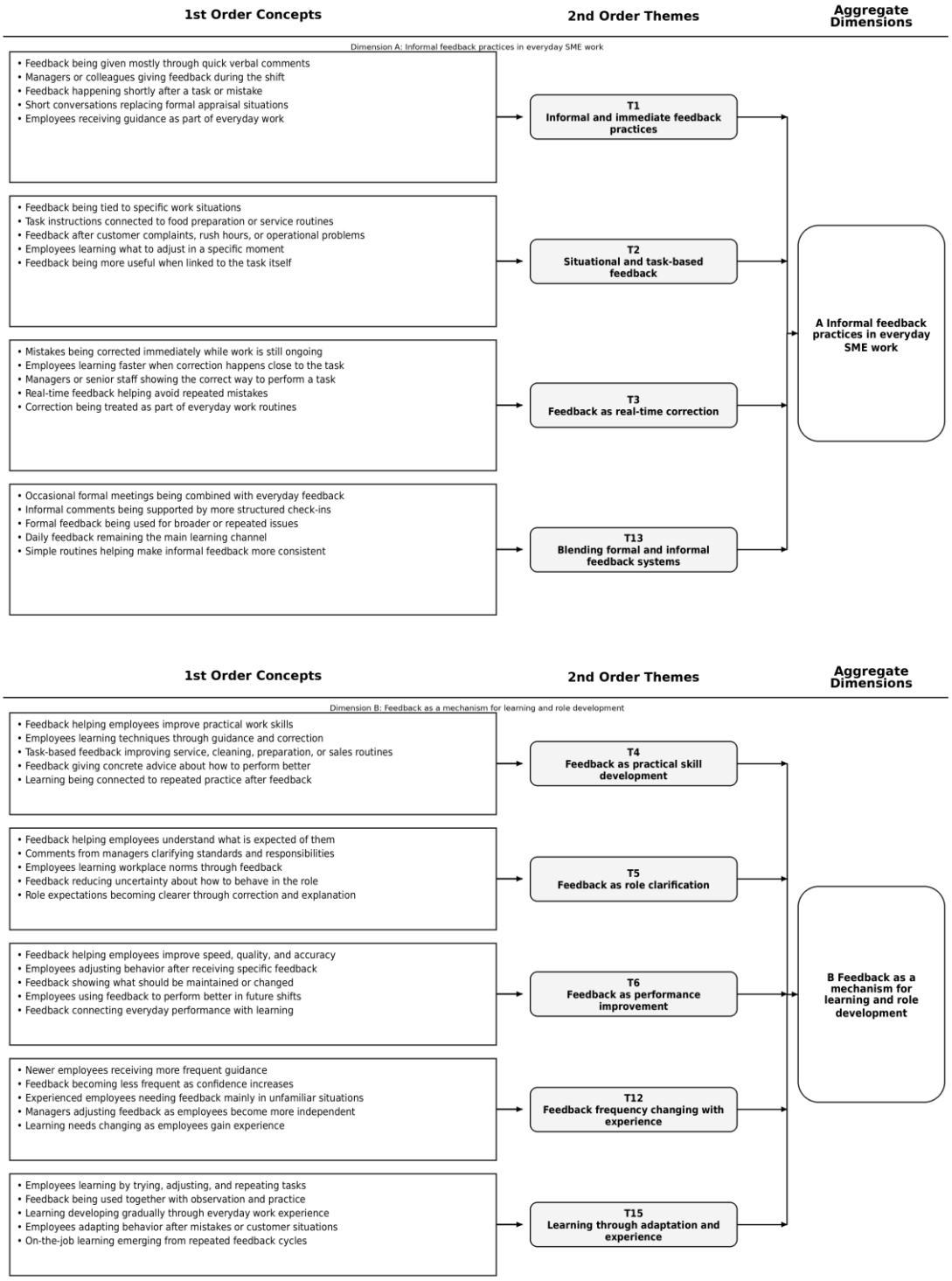
You have the right to file a complaint to the supervisory authority, the Swedish Authority for Privacy Protection, if you find that Umeå University is processing your personal data in a way that violates the General Data Protection Regulation.

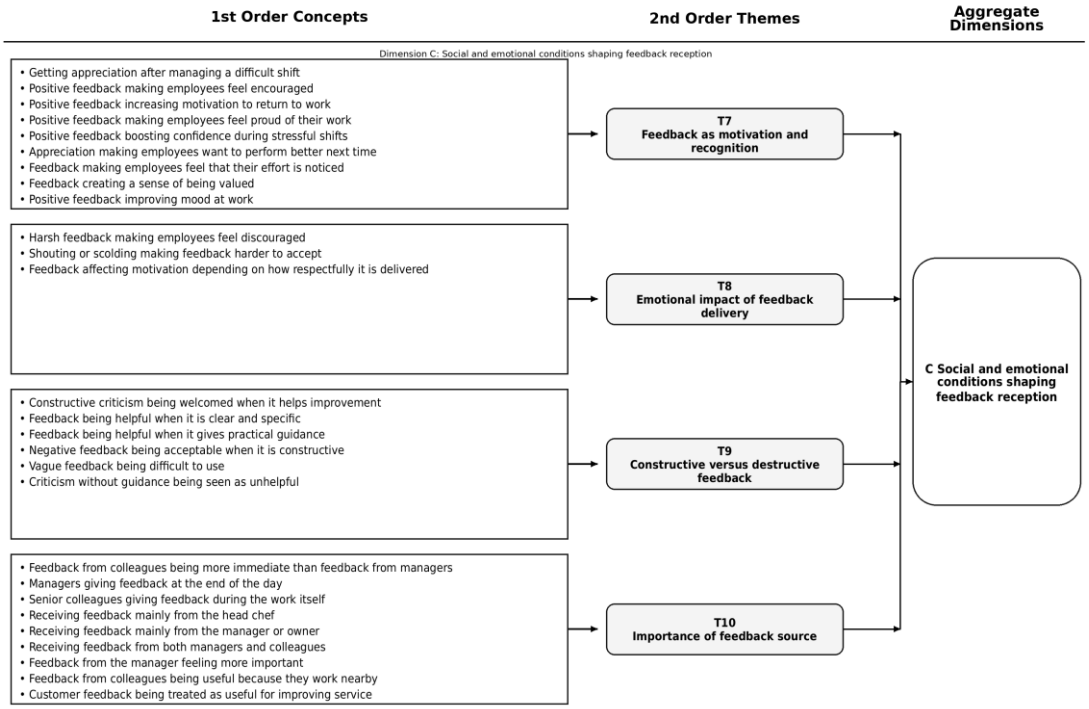
Do you consent to your personal data being used as described above?

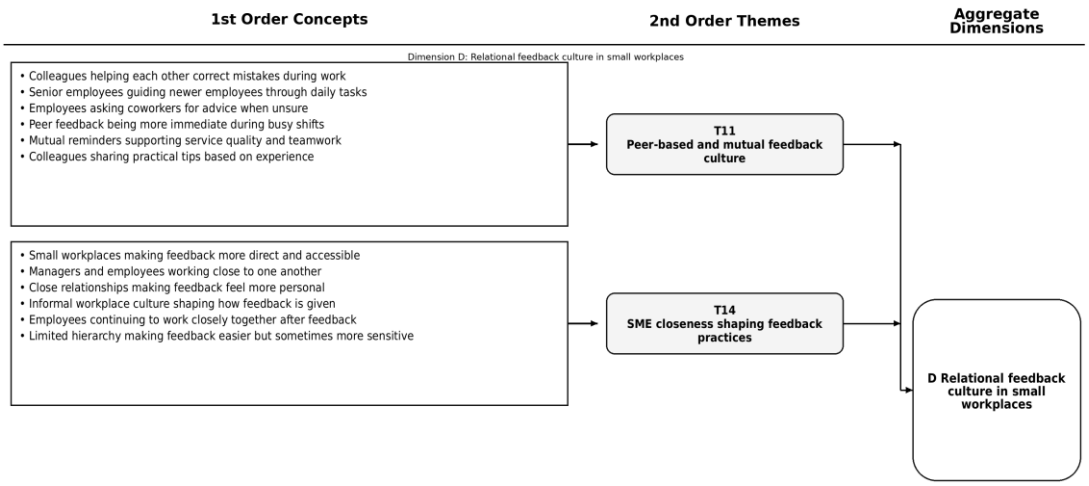
☑ Yes Date: [Insert Date] Name: [Insert Here]

☑ I consent to my personal data being used in the manner described above

Appendix 4 - Gioia Structure




1st Order Concepts
2nd Order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
Dimension C: Social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception
• Getting appreciation after managing a difficult shift
• Positive feedback making employees feel encouraged
• Positive feedback increasing motivation to return to work
• Positive feedback making employees feel proud of their work
• Positive feedback boosting confidence during stressful shifts
• Appreciation making employees want to perform better next time
• Feedback making employees feel that their effort is noticed
• Feedback creating a sense of being valued
• Positive feedback improving mood at work
T7
Feedback as motivation and recognition
• Harsh feedback making employees feel discouraged
• Shouting or scolding making feedback harder to accept
• Feedback affecting motivation depending on how respectfully it is delivered
T8
Emotional impact of feedback delivery
• Constructive criticism being welcomed when it helps improvement
• Feedback being helpful when it is clear and specific
• Feedback being helpful when it gives practical guidance
• Negative feedback being acceptable when it is constructive
• Vague feedback being difficult to use
• Criticism without guidance being seen as unhelpful
T9
Constructive versus destructive feedback
• Feedback from colleagues being more immediate than feedback from managers
• Managers giving feedback at the end of the day
• Senior colleagues giving feedback during the work itself
• Receiving feedback mainly from the head chef
• Receiving feedback mainly from the manager or owner
• Receiving feedback from both managers and colleagues
• Feedback from the manager feeling more important
• Feedback from colleagues being useful because they work nearby
• Customer feedback being treated as useful for improving service
T10
Importance of feedback source
C Social and emotional conditions shaping feedback reception


1st Order Concepts
2nd Order Themes
Aggregate Dimensions
Dimension D: Relational feedback culture in small workplaces
• Colleagues helping each other correct mistakes during work
• Senior employees guiding newer employees through daily tasks
• Employees asking coworkers for advice when unsure
• Peer feedback being more immediate during busy shifts
• Mutual reminders supporting service quality and teamwork
• Colleagues sharing practical tips based on experience
T11
Peer-based and mutual feedback culture
• Small workplaces making feedback more direct and accessible
• Managers and employees working close to one another
• Close relationships making feedback feel more personal
• Informal workplace culture shaping how feedback is given
• Employees continuing to work closely together after feedback
• Limited hierarchy making feedback easier but sometimes more sensitive
T14
SME closeness shaping feedback practices
D Relational feedback culture in small workplaces