Review

# Experiences from employees with team learning in a vocational learning or work setting: A systematic review of qualitative evidence

K. Hannes [a],*, E. Raes [b], K. Vangenechten [a], M. Heyvaert [a], F. Dochy [b]

[a] Methodology of Educational Sciences Research Group, KU Leuven, Belgium
[b] Professional Learning and Development, Corporate Training and Lifelong Learning Research Group, KU Leuven, Belgium

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative evidence synthesis aimed to integrate findings on the experiences of employees with team learning in the context of their work or vocational learning setting. The meta-aggregative approach to qualitative evidence synthesis was used to summarize the findings from original research papers in which the experiential level of employees was investigated. The findings suggest that employees learn for different reasons and in different ways. Three major lines of actions for practice and policy were developed from the synthesis. A first advice is to stimulate communication, boundary crossing and knowledge sharing and establish an enabling learning environment that triggers positive factors for team learning. Secondly, it is important to analyse the authority structures that influence the relationships within a team, minimise the power inequalities that flow from hierarchical differences, and support and enable team leaders to influence the power differences inside their team. Finally, it is recommended to try to recognise the authenticity, the commitment and devotion of employees toward team learning, to stimulate but not to intervene in the natural process of team learning, and to consider the place of reflection and action in this process.

## Contents

* Corresponding author. Address: Methods of Educational Sciences Research Group, KU Leuven, Andreas Vesaliusstraat 2, 3000 Leuven, Belgium. Tel.: +32 16 32 62 20.
    E-mail address: Karin.hannes@ppw.kuleuven.be (K. Hannes).

## 1. Introduction

Effectiveness, efficiency and innovation have become key factors to the survival of modern organisations (Cameron, 1986; Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Teams are increasingly expected to generate effective and efficient results (Sessa & London, 2008). As a consequence, the responsibility of teams for the workload within and the output of an organisation has grown (Devine, Clayton, Philips, Dunford, & Melner, 1999). In order to be competitive in a changing environment, organisations as well as their employees should engage in a process of continuous learning (Edmondson, 2002; Sessa & London, 2008). Apart from stimulating individual learning (Slavin, 1996; Sweet & Michaelsen, 2007), it increases a team's effectiveness (Crossan, Lane, White & Djurfeldt, 1995; Van den Bossche, Gijselaers, Segers, & Kirschner, 2006; West, 1999) and contributes to organisational learning and innovation (Crossan, Lane & White, 1999).

The concept of team learning needs to be considered with caution, as it means different things to different people in different situations. It has frequently been investigated from a conceptual point of view (Decuyper, Dochy, & Van den Bossche, 2010; Senge, 1990; Sessa & London, 2006). Several researchers have defined team learning as a group level phenomenon that generates potential beneficial effects (Dillenbourg, Baker, Blaye, & O'Malley, 1996). The strong focus on effectiveness is mostly driven by the need to think in terms of performance outcomes of team members. It has been criticised by Decuyper and colleagues (2010), who argue that going beyond inputs and outputs, in explicitly focusing on team learning processes, is important in understanding why team learning outputs occur. Establishing a firm causal link between those who have been subject to team learning processes and their actual performance is still challenging. Allen and Hecht (2004), in their study on the romance of teams, showed that teams are not as effective as many perceive them to be. According to the authors, the attraction of team work is not based on actual performance benefits, but rather on psychological ones. First, there are socio-emotional benefits from being involved in a team: reduced uncertainty about the work, increased satisfaction and fulfilment of social needs. Second, managers, employees and lay persons may also gain some competence-related benefits, such as an increased personal responsibility for the success of the team, decreased personal responsibility for team failures and higher self-evaluations of individual and group performance. There are several other aspects that may impact on employee's actual performance: the meaningfulness they assign to team learning, whether or not they believe the learning processes they are involved in are appropriate or feasible etc. This seems to suggest that in order to better understand the 'why' and 'how' of team learning it is important to look into how team learning is experienced by its group members.

Qualitative research evidence on the lived experiences of stakeholders with team learning has not yet systematically been synthesized. It is nevertheless important to consider, mainly because the perceptions of employees can increase our understanding of why certain team learning processes fail or succeed, what employee's value in team learning and what may need to be adapted for a more successful implementation of team learning programs.

### 1.1. Review questions

The main research question we address in this qualitative evidence synthesis (QES) with team learning as our main topic of interest is: How is team learning experienced by employees? We investigate the meaning of team learning, inventory the overall opinions and beliefs about team learning, and identify potential positive and negative aspects of team learning. A secondary question we address is: Which implications for team learning practice and team learning policy can be drawn from the synthesized findings? Our implication for practice and policy section in this review will be grounded in the suggestions for improvement that have been offered by employees in the original studies as well as our own understanding and insights derived from synthesizing the findings of these studies.

### 1.2. Defining the main concepts

One of the important features of a QES is that it attempts to synthesize findings from original, qualitative studies in order to create a new understanding or develop lines of actions for practice and policy. It compares and contrasts the content of